

## True Faith Receives the Word and Applies It

There is an old joke that engineers like to tell that goes something like this: A physicist, an engineer and a mathematician are staying in a hotel and a fire breaks out in each of their rooms. The physicist hears the alarm, sees the fire, runs over to his desk and immediately begins doing calculations. He determines the exact amount of water needed to put out the fire, the trajectory required to hit the fire from his current position and the amount of force required to throw the water. He then gets the exact amount of water from the sink, throws it and perfectly extinguishes the fire without soaking his room. At about the same time, the engineer also hears the alarm, wakes up and sees the fire. She grabs an envelope, does a few calculations on the back of it, determines the approximate amount of water needed using standard rule of thumb, doubles it (to cover her engineering approximation), obtains the water from the sink and quickly puts out the fire. At approximately the same time, the mathematician also hears the alarm, wakes up and sees the fire in his room. He also runs over and sits down at his desk and feverishly begins the calculations and also determines the exact amount of water needed to put out the fire from each possible location, but not soak his room. Upon determining a solution, he triumphantly puts down his pencil and proudly declares, "Aha! A solution exists!" and promptly goes back to bed.

OK, you might have to be an engineer to appreciate that joke, but hopefully the point was clear. The joke is built on the stereotype (which may not be fair) that mathematicians may be better at calculations and rigorously solving a problem on paper, but engineers actually *do* things. We may have a looser grasp of the theory but we know how to apply our knowledge in the real world. This may be a bit of excuse-making by engineers as to why they aren't as rigorous with their school work, and may be a bit unfair to mathematicians, but it illustrates the main point made by James, the brother of our Lord, in the passage that we will study this morning.

If you will recall, we are currently in a sermon series on the book of James. Please turn in your Bibles to Chapter 1 of James. As we have learned a couple of weeks back, James is a letter written by James the brother of Jesus to Jewish Christians scattered outside of Palestine. It is towards the end of your Bible, in the New Testament - after the gospels, and after the letters of Paul, right after the book of Hebrews. We have studied the first 18 verses so far. Specifically two weeks ago David Kingston led us through the first eight verses and last week Sandy discussed verses 9-18. In these verses James talks about the trials and adversity that these Christians were facing. As Sandy stated, these believers were "a hated minority within a hated minority" and many may have been far from home. James challenges them to not see these trials as all bad, but to rather consider them "joy" that will lead to a building of their faith. Trials are an opportunity for us to "work out our salvation" as Paul calls it. They allow us to refine and strengthen our faith. They are the workbench that can turn a diamond in the rough to a sparkling jewel. In today's passage, James builds on that idea. Specifically, he talks about the central role that hearing and applying the Word of God has in building our faith.

This brings us to the last nine verses of Chapter 1. Please direct your attention to verse 19 of chapter 1. Let us read together:

<sup>19</sup>This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; <sup>20</sup>for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. <sup>21</sup>Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. <sup>22</sup>But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.

<sup>23</sup>For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; <sup>24</sup>for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.

<sup>25</sup>But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does. <sup>26</sup>If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup>Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Let us pray and ask the Lord's blessing on the reading of His Word.

[PRAY]

Our sermon series on the book of James is titled "A Faith that Works". Today's passage is very closely related to that title. We will go into the details shortly, but the main message of today's passage is this: We cannot be like the Mathematician from the joke who is satisfied with knowledge alone. We must put our knowledge to work. More specifically, we must know God's Word and apply it. This is especially true when one is suffering through difficult times like the Jewish Christians James is writing to.

Let us return to the passage and look specifically at verses 19-20. [READ VERSES] Now, I submit that these verses have a double meaning. There is a specific meaning that speaks directly to the situation of James' readers, and there is a more general meaning. Let's talk about the more specific meaning first. Recall that James' readers were undergoing trials. What is a "natural" response to trials? Anger and complaining. We don't know the full extent of the trials that they faced, but I know from my own life that when things get difficult, it is very easy to be angry. We get angry at people around us, we get angry about our situation and we may even get angry at God. It is also easy to complain. Part of anger is complaining about my situation and how I don't deserve it. James tells us that rather than being quick to complain or get angry, we should be "quick to hear" and "slow to speak and slow to anger". What should be quick to hear? We see down in verse 21, that James is talking about the Word of God. So one of the intended meanings here is that in their trials, the listeners should not be so quick to be angry with God or complain about their situation. Rather they should be quick to listen to the Word of God. What does God's Word have to say? In conjunction with the Holy Spirit, the Word is our source of strength and patience. Hearing and applying the Word is how we can deal with difficult circumstances.

Now, there is an aspect to what James is saying here that can be applied more generally to our relationships. Scholars sometimes call James the "Proverbs of the New Testament". This is one pair of verses that does indeed sound very much like a proverb. How often in our lives do we get into a

situation with someone (perhaps even our spouse or children) where we react not by listening, but by yelling and getting angry. Our anger, James tells us, will not achieve God's righteousness. In fact James calls it (in the next verse) wickedness and filthiness. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians (chapter 4:26-27) writes: "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry,<sup>27</sup> and do not give the devil a foothold." He tells us that not only does our anger *not* achieve God's righteousness, but more explicitly our anger leads to sin. I like the expression "do not give the devil a foothold". We are in a struggle with sin our entire lives and when I get angry I can feel the temptation to sin getting stronger. I can feel the devil getting that foothold and pushing me closer and closer. Other related verses include

**Proverbs 10:19** – "Where there are many words, transgression is unavoidable. But he who restrains his lips is wise."

This is especially true when a disagreement is breaking out. Any of you who are married are probably aware of this. The more you talk, the less you listen and the more likely you are to say something that is unintended or easily misinterpreted.

Another related (and well-known) proverb is

**Proverbs 17:28** - <sup>28</sup>"Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise." When he closes his lips, he is considered prudent.

I am not saying that communication is bad. Clearly you want to talk and communicate when there is a disagreement. Rather what the Bible is saying is that you first need to listen to the other person and only then carefully choose your own words.

Now let us turn to verse 21. If we are not to respond in anger or with complaining, what is it we are supposed to do? James tells us that we are to put aside filthiness and wickedness (our anger and complaining) and rather "receive the word implanted that is able to save your souls". What exactly does James mean here? Well apparently, despite the fact that James apparently did not believe that his brother was the Messiah prior to the resurrection, he must have been paying attention to Jesus' teachings. Recall the parable of the soils. In the parable of the soils, Jesus compares the Word (God's message to us – this could be the gospel message or His Word in general) to seed being scattered by a farmer. Further, He compares a person's response to the Word to different kinds of soil. Our response to the Word is different depending on the condition of our heart. James is using this analogy and imploring his hearers to receive the Word implanted like a good soil receives seed and produces crop 10-fold, 60-fold or even 100-fold.

Why is receiving the Word useful for their situation (putting aside complaining and anger)? Because it is powerful. It has the power to save their souls, so clearly it can aid in their sanctification. "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any **two-edged sword**, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (**Hebrews 4:12**) "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness." (**2 Timothy 3:16**). James is saying to these Jewish believers, "The Word has saved you, now let it transform you."

We now come to the main point of the passage. Turn your attention to verses 22-25. James encourages these believers to receive God's Word, but they must do more. They must be doers, not just hearers. Hearing/reading the Word is a privilege and a blessing. But someone who only hears the word, but doesn't apply it, only deludes themselves. You may come and hear a sermon and think, "That was a good sermon" or may even be convicted. But if you don't apply it, if you don't DO what the Word is convicting you to do, you delude yourself into thinking that you have done something when you haven't. You feel good that you were convicted, and that you identified things that God wants to change in your life, but you haven't really changed anything. James likens this to the person who looks into a mirror notices that his hair is messed up, but walks away without combing it and forgets about it. They now can't see their hair, but go on behaving as though it were combed. Or perhaps they see that there is mustard on their face, but don't bother wiping it off. They walk away begin talking to others, who immediately notice the problem, but they have deluded themselves into thinking their problem is fixed.

You see the Word is very much like a spiritual mirror. It will convict you and show you where sin is in your life. But you must apply it in order to make effectual changes. Otherwise you simply delude yourself. You go on with your life under the mistaken impression that you have actually done something when you haven't.

I will give you another example that hits home for me. How many of you are planners? I am. I like to make detailed schedules to help me accomplish the things that I need to get done, both at home and at work. I suppose it is the engineer in me. I will make detailed plans for work, detailed plans for home projects, for coaching, even for working out. Perhaps you have done this as well. You feel like you need to get in better shape or go on a diet, so you sit down and work out a plan to improve your eating habits, or get yourself in shape. "...run three times a week, 75 push-ups before bed, ....". Now the danger in this (at least for me and I suspect for many of us) is that we get so gratified by making the plan that we never execute it. I will feel very convicted to get X,Y, or Z done but as soon as the plan is in place to accomplish it, I feel so good about it, that I lack the conviction to actually execute the plan! That is what James is trying to communicate here. We can't be satisfied with simply hearing the Word of God. We must implement it. Yes, in my example it was a very good and important first step to make the detailed plan, but I can't let that be a substitute for actually executing the plan. Similarly, hearing or reading God's Word is an important first step, but if we don't let it penetrate our hearts and change our behavior, we have missed the point. As the Apostle John states:

**I John 3:18** - Little children, let us not love with word or with **tongue**, but in deed and truth.

How can we do this? I was speaking with Sandy about this passage the other day and we were discussing this very question. First of all, to apply the Word, we need to read the Word. Application begins with reading the Word. We need to read God's word regularly, ideally on a daily basis. But how do we keep from forgetting what our spiritual mirror shows us? I recommend keeping a notebook. Whenever you read the Word, pull out your notebook. Some of you like to journal or keep a diary and will do this naturally. For others will be more difficult. Anyway, each time you get into the Word jot down a few things where the Spirit is convicting you. It need not be long and detailed. A couple of bullet points will suffice. Then, a couple of times a day (say noon while you are eating lunch and later around 3pm) pull

out your notebook and quickly review the items from your notebook. This will serve as a reminder of what you saw in your spiritual mirror. In this way, we can continue to remind ourselves and give us a better chance to be doers, and not just hearers.

Now let us turn to the last two verses. James ends this passage of scripture with some excellent examples of how we must apply our faith: bridling your tongue, serving others and personal holiness.

I don't want to spend too much time with the first application (bridling your tongue) because James spends much more time examining this issue in Chapter 3. However, I will say that if you have ever been married, have children, or have had a relationship of any kind with another human being, you can understand the significance of verse 26. There are well over 100 verses in the Bible concerning the tongue, half of which come from Psalms and Proverbs. Some speak of the good our tongues do:

Psalm 66:17 - I cried to Him with my mouth, And He was extolled with my tongue

And others speak of the ill that our tongues can do:

Psalm 10:7 - His mouth is full of curses and deceit and oppression; Under his tongue is mischief and wickedness.

And still other verses speak of the both the good and bad:

Proverbs 12:18 - There is one who speaks rashly like the thrusts of a sword, But the tongue of the wise brings healing.

As James says later, it may seem like a small organ, but the tongue is very, very powerful. The right word at a good time can raise someone's spirits while the wrong word at the wrong time can cause anger or despair. One thing I try to emphasize to my children is that they don't understand how powerful their words can be, especially to their younger siblings. They must wield that kind of power with caution and care.

Further examples of applying our faith are loving others and personal holiness. More specifically, James wraps up this section by defining "pure and undefiled religion" which is comprised of two things: (1) to visit orphans and widows in their distress and (2) and to keep oneself unstained from the world. It is interesting to note that most churches today are good at one or the other. Many of the old mainline churches are very good at stressing social issues (helping the poor and disadvantaged), but fail to fully address personal holiness. On the other hand many conservative churches are strong on in teaching and preaching personal holiness but fail to address issues related to the poor and needy. Loving God and Loving others, is another way of viewing this. Of course James is telling us that both are very important. I would like to stress to you that BCF has opportunities to serve our community as James emphasizes here. We have deacons and deaconesses that are dedicated to helping those in distress both in the church body and in the community at large. If you would like to find out how you can help in one of these areas, please speak to Pat Hilt, Vern Simpson, Becky Koontz or Loren/Becky Rees. See we know how to love and care for others, but so often we just don't do it. This could be the people around us in church or people in our community. Finally, James calls us to be unstained by the

world. The world is a powerful influence and nearly all of that influence is bad. We need to really examine how we are influenced by the world and whether or not we do things because of the world's influence and not God's.

In closing, let me share an experience with you that illustrates the difference between knowing and applying. I have been coaching soccer for about seven years now. I only played one season of indoor soccer growing up. Like many Americans of my generation, I thought that soccer was a sport played by other countries because they didn't know about good sports like basketball, football or baseball. Much to my surprise all of my kids love soccer. Since I love my kids, I decided to learn and coach the sport that they love. So, like many soccer-dads-turned-coach I spent a lot of time reading about soccer, watching soccer videos, going through soccer websites, etc. I learned a lot about the game both technically and tactically. After a couple of years of coaching, I thought that it would be fun to play, so I put together a team in the local club's adult league. The first time I played, I must have made every single mistake that I had scolded my players for. I kicked the ball with my toe, I passed the ball in front of my own goal, I stabbed at the ball when defending, I forgot to mark the opponent, etc. You see, I *knew* how to play soccer, but I had never *applied it*. I had coached for two years and gained much head knowledge, but *knowing about soccer didn't make me a soccer player*. Once I began to apply the knowledge that I had gained, only then did I begin to learn what it meant to play soccer. So too in our Christian walk. Knowing about Christian faith does not make one a Christian. Following Christ makes one a Christian. This is because knowing what we should do is not the same as doing it. Knowing that I shouldn't gossip isn't the same as not gossiping. Knowing how to be patient is not the same as being patient. Knowing how to love my neighbor is not the same as loving my neighbor. We must be doers, not just hearers. So my prayer for both you and me is that going forward we can choose just one aspect of our lives where we know how God wants us to live, but we simply aren't doing it, and actually start applying it. Let us not be like a coach who can't play or like the Mathematician from my opening joke, but rather let us *apply* our faith and be doers of the Word, not just hearers.