



DOERS OF THE WORD – James 1:19-27

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You will remember that James is writing his letter about 25 years after the resurrection of Jesus. He is writing to members of the Christian community who had been forced to flee from the persecution of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. It comes out of his concern for them as they find their way as new Christians in a hostile environment.

James shows his feelings for them when he starts this passage with a term of endearment - "*my dear brothers and sisters*". In the past, if you had read it in the King James Version or the Revised Standard Version, it would have been translated as "my beloved brethren". These are not words which are very common today! When they did those translations, "Brethren" tended to be a term used to refer to people with a common cause – sort-of like "comrades" – and it could refer to both men and women. Certainly, the Greek word behind it often referred to a group which included both men and women. But the word "Beloved" gives us the idea that these people are more than just "comrades", they are precious to James. He loves them very much. This is why James is not a formal letter but more like a heart-to-heart talk from an elder brother to his younger siblings.

The passage we are looking at today is sometimes hard to follow because James seems to jump around in what he is talking about. In this it is similar to how we might write to a member of our own family. "This and this happened ... which reminds me to tell you ... but getting back to what I was saying ... and I forgot to mention that ..." It is not a formal lecture, but a personal sharing of what is on James' heart as he thinks of the former members of his community and they help they need as they seek to stay true to the Gospel even though they are far away from the support of the Jerusalem church.

However, if we start where we ended last week and move to the end of the chapter, I think we can group his thoughts this way:

- Knowledge: God gives us new life through His word (v.18)
- Application: Our treatment of others (v.19,20)
- Knowledge: The necessary response to His word (v. 21-25)
- Application: Our treatment of others and personal holiness (v. 26,27)

There is a natural connection between the two knowledge sections and the two Application sections. To help us understand what James is saying, we'll look at the "knowledge" sections first and then see the "application" James makes to their life together and in the world around them. This combination of knowledge and application is what we have called wisdom and is at the core of what James wants to pass on to these believers.

You'll notice that I haven't capitalised "God's Word" as I would if I was talking specifically about the Bible. I think James is talking more loosely about the things that God said and did

through Jesus – His teaching while on earth and more specifically the Gospel as it was enacted through His death and resurrection. This does tie back into the inspired Hebrew Scripture, which we call the Old Testament, but goes beyond that to include the new Gospel truth which the Holy Spirit is revealing to them, and which James' epistle will begin the process of capturing in the books of the New Testament.

KNOWLEDGE: True salvation will show itself in an attitude of submission to God's word.

We finished up last week by seeing that God's greatest gift to us was when *"He chose to give birth to us by giving us His true word"*. (v.18) Through the means of the Gospel, we are born again into a new life in Christ. In verse 21, after a slight digression, James continues His explanation of this new life.

So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls. (v. 21)

This sets out a process:

1. God has planted the word in your hearts – The picture is changed from giving birth to sowing a seed. Both talk about giving new life.
2. Get rid of (strip off) all the filth and evil in your lives – Like one strips off dirty clothes, we are to take off the sin from our old life. This is what happens when God forgives us and gives us a new life in Him.
3. Humbly accept – This is how we must respond to His work in our lives. We can't do anything more than accept what He has done for us.
4. Soul (or life) saved – This doesn't refer to just the spiritual part of us, but the whole of our life. It is all saved through the forgiveness of our sin and the new life which God gives us. James uses several ways to express the outcome of our salvation, including new birth (v. 18) and being set free (v. 25) which all imply a big change in our lives.

James might have been thinking of the Parable of the Sower which we looked at earlier in the year. There we saw different responses people have to the word, likening it to seed which is sown in our hearts. The different soils refer to the different responses people give to God's word – some rejecting it outright, others with mixed results and some accepting it with joy which results in a fruitful life.

This acceptance of the word of God implanted in our heart should affect our on-going attitude to God's work in our lives. If it doesn't, then we must question if we have truly accepted Him. James now changes the picture from a seed sown to a look in the mirror.

But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free (and remain in it), and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it. (v. 22-25)

The two attitudes are as follows:

1. Listen to the word ⇒ walk away and forget ⇒ don't do what it says ⇒ fooling yourself. The picture James paints is of a person who looks at a mirror, sees things which need changing, but decides that they don't care and walks away without doing anything. It's like looking at a mirror before you go out, seeing a big black smudge of dirt on your face and deciding you don't care and walk out the door without stopping to clean it off. You've decided you like the way you are with your dirty face and you don't care what others think. You've decided that you like a particular sin in your life and you don't care if it goes against God's holiness and brings Him disrepute in the eyes of the watching world. This

is rebellion against God, and you are fooling yourself if you think you can have this attitude and really be born again with His life.

2. Listen to the word ⇒ remain and don't forget ⇒ do what it says ⇒ blessed by God
On the other hand, someone who has humbly accepted the word of God will want to know how they can become more like God; they will want to change. They will look closely at God's word and, instead of walking away, they will remain in it or keep looking at it in order to know how to change so that they better reflect God in the way they live their lives. Unfortunately, the New Living Translation has left out the idea of "remaining" which is an important contrast to the idea of walking away. It is by often looking at the Word of God with an attitude of submission that God will be able to bless us with His help to become more like Him.

Again, Jesus' teaching comes to mind in the Parable of the Two Builders. (Matthew 7:24-27) Jesus says that if you hear His words and obey them, it will be as if you are building your life on a rock which will stand firm when pressures come. But if we don't obey His words, then we are being foolish for our life will be without a firm foundation and will easily collapse. How can we say that we believe God without coming under His authority and submitting our lives to Him? Like a poorly built house, we will not last.

APPLICATION: Submission to God's word will result in a change in how we live our lives.

Now let's take a look at what James says about how we should be living as God's people. In these few verses he introduces several themes he will look at in more detail in the coming chapters.

The first few verses look at how we should be treating other people.

Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires. (v. 19,20)

The Proverb-like saying, "Quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to get angry", is simple but our reactions in this area reveal our hearts. So often we react to what another person says without really thinking about it. Sometimes we don't even let the other person finish what they are saying before we jump in with our thoughts. And if they say something we don't like, or if we feel threatened by what is said it is easy to respond in anger as a way to protect ourselves. However, if we basically respect the other person and value their thoughts, then our reactions will reflect this. We will want to hear what they have to say and we will take time to really listen to them. One of the most important things you can ever do to show love to someone is to really listen to them.

Just a word about anger – I don't believe that the anger mentioned here is what is elsewhere called righteous indignation. Righteous indignation is what Jesus showed when He cleared the temple of people who were buying and selling for personal profit in the temple courtyard or when he rebuked the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. Righteous indignation is what drives people to seek justice for those being abused or taken advantage of. If we see this world through God's eyes, we should be angry about the sin which destroys people's lives. Righteous indignation acts against sin and brings healing and righteousness. On the other hand, the anger which James talks of is selfish anger which seeks to protect oneself and pull others down. It devalues people and causes pain and brokenness. This kind of anger is sin.

At the end of the chapter, James picks up on these thoughts again and takes them further.

If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless. Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you. (v. 26,27)

This time James starts with the negative. Just as in Jesus' day, some people spent all their time trying to look good – attending all the meetings, praying piously, tithing their wealth and going through all the motions. However, as we observed before, their tongue revealed what was really going on in their hearts. They were trying to be religious without submitting their hearts to God and in the heat of the moment, their tongue let loose and it became obvious that they were fooling themselves – they had not really accepted God's word and submitted themselves to it. They might be "religious" but they weren't righteous.

On the other hand, true and genuine religion or righteousness can be readily seen – not in our religious observance, but in our willingness to humble ourselves and care for the lowliest and the neediest. Our translation says "caring" but the idea is more of coming close to help people. Even the falsely religious can give money, but true religion requires coming close to those in need and walking their difficult road with them. For instance, the main purpose of Crossroads is not to provide a program FOR people with various challenges, but to have fellowship WITH them. We seek to come alongside them and be their friends. We could give money to Panania North for them to provide reading help, but it means so much more to them for us to come alongside the teachers and students and provide help in person. This doesn't mean that money and other physical supplies are not needed. They are and that is why we have been collecting things for Padstow Community Care. By doing this we are supporting those who are coming alongside those in difficulties.

Finally, James says that true and genuine religion is displayed by not giving into the pressure to go along with the world around us but to stay true to how God calls us to live. By doing what is right and not what is easy. If we are to reflect the character of God, then we will be different than the sinful world around us. As Jesus said in Matthew, "*Yes, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions.*" (Matthew 7:20) People should be able to look at us and know that we are God's people – not because we do "religious" things but because we do loving and righteous things.

CONCLUSION

I think it is important to realise that what James is talking about in these verses – the submission to God's word which results in us being doers and not just hearers of the word – is not something which is optional for God's people. It is not just for the "super-spiritual". If we have humbly accepted salvation through the Gospel this is what will be the result. It is an attitude of submission to God and His will that will characterise our lives if we are His. Jesus said,

On judgment day many will say to me, 'Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.' But I will reply, 'I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God's laws.'
(Matthew 7:22,23)

This is sobering indeed. And yet, I am encouraged to know that I don't have to cast out demons and perform miracles to get into heaven! I just have to humbly accept His word and submit myself to Him. And if I listen to His word and am willing to do what He tells me to do, I know that He will enable me to be faithful to Him.