

## **JAMES 1: “BE DOERS OF THE WORD”**

(06/24/18)

Scripture Lesson: James 1:1-27

*“But be doers of the Word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”*

(James 1:22)

In our Sunday morning worship during these summer months we will be engaging in a sort of abbreviated Bible study. I say “abbreviated” because we just spent two years working our way through the Gospel of Mark in our Sunday morning Bible study, and Mark is the shortest of the four gospels!

This summer we will explore some of the so-called pastoral letters in the New Testament, the letters that were written by apostles or leaders of the early church to the emerging Christian communities. We will begin, not with Paul’s letters, but with the Book of James. We will read one chapter of this pastoral letter every week. I will provide some general information about the letter and its author. Then I will lift up several passages or themes that teach us something about what it means to be a Christian.

The Letter of James is a strange letter, at least compared to the other pastoral letters. While the opening words resemble other letters, the resemblance does not extend beyond the first verse, and even that has its own unique features. Instead of addressing the readers precisely, as Paul does when he addresses “the church of God in Corinth,” we have the puzzling phrase “the twelve tribes in the dispersion.” I wonder if this is a reference to the churches founded by the twelve apostles following Jesus’ resurrection.

We are not sure who wrote this letter. The author gives his name as “James,” which was a common name among early Jewish Christians. He was probably not the James that was one of the original twelve disciples. He description of himself as a “servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” identifies him as a Christian, but it does not tell us much more than this. He describes himself as one of those “who teach,” something that is obvious from the fact that he wrote the letter.

The relationship between the writer and his intended readers is also not clear. He doesn’t mention any personal experiences he has had with them, or any news that he has heard about them, as Paul often does. He sends no greetings from himself or anyone else

to his readers. The letter does not even close with the customary farewell message; in fact, it has no formal ending at all. It simply stops.

Finally, we know little about the timing or the occasion of the letter. The phrase “whenever you face trials of any kind” suggests a time of persecution, but the language of these verses is too general to draw any conclusions. It may simply be referring to the trials and tribulations we all experience in life.

As we heard this morning, James tells us that when we face trials of any kind, we should consider them “nothing but joy.” This seems like a bit of a stretch! I know from experience that our struggles can be an important part of our spiritual journey, partially because they throw a spot light on the inadequacy of our personal resources and lead us into a deeper relationship with God, but I have never been able to regard my trials as “nothing but joy.” When I am counseling a person that is going through a difficult period in his/her life, I have never said, “My pastoral advice to you is to think of the tragedy you have just experienced as nothing but joy.” That strikes me as a little light on empathy!

However, James does have a point. He tells us, as Paul does, that the testing of our faith can produce endurance. It is interesting how he ties our personal trials to a testing of our faith. When we think about it, isn't this often the case, at least for the religious person? The trial, whatever it is, causes us to reflect on life, on the meaning of life, on the role of pain or tragedy or loss in life, and on our expectations of life and of God. The trial may test our faith, not only in the sense of challenging our faith but in the sense of testing our faith as one might test the purity of a metal by submitting it to fire.

James tells us that our trials, if we respond to them properly, should lead us to maturity and to completeness. I totally agree! Our trials, our tribulations, even our tragedies should lead us to a more mature, to a less childish view of life. It should lead us to a more mature, to a less childish view of ourselves. It should lead us to a more mature understanding of God and hopefully to a deeper faith in God.

Let me give you one of my favorite examples of this dynamic. Several years ago, Elizabeth Edwards, the wife of the Democratic senator John Edwards, was asked by an interviewer to explain the role of her faith in helping her cope with her breast cancer and the tragic loss of their teenage son in an automobile accident. Elizabeth replied that before their son's death and her breast cancer, she had what she now regards as a childish

and immature religious faith, a childish and immature understanding of God. She had certain unexamined and untested expectations of God and her relationship with God.

Elizabeth said that throughout her life she had apparently assumed that if she were a good person and a good Christian, if she tithed to the church and was generous in her support of charities, if she were a good daughter, sister, wife, mother, and friend, then God would protect her loved ones.

Then her son died in an automobile accident. This didn't fit the picture she had of God and the kind of care that, at least according to many of our hymns, God extends to us. This is the moment when many people become disillusioned, when they lose their illusion. They become angry with God. They decide that they can never forgive God for either willing what happened or for allowing it to happen. This is the point where they turn away from God and never set foot inside a church again.

Elizabeth Edwards's response was different. With a sparkle in her eye she told the interviewer, "This was the moment when I realized that God doesn't protect people, even good people." So, like Job, she grew through her pain and suffering; she had a different, a more mature understanding of God at the end than she did at the beginning.

This is what James might have had in mind when he says that our trials can lead to a more mature and complete faith. However, it doesn't always happen that way. Some people cling to their childish beliefs. When tragedy hits, they throw away not only the opportunity to grow in their faith; they throw away their relationship with God.

The second part of the first chapter of this letter that I would like to lift up this morning is the statement,

*Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.*

This verse teaches us that the act of giving, when it is done in an unselfish matter and "with a cheerful heart," is a divine or sacred act. The act of giving shapes the soul of the giver. Receiving doesn't do this. In this sense, it is more blessed to give than to receive.

James reminds us that the spirit in which the gift is given is important. It needs to be given freely, just as God gives to us freely. We should feel good about the gift we give. For example, we should reflect on the amount we pledge to our church or the

amount we put in the offering plate from that perspective. If we pledge or put in little in relation to what we have, it is probably an indication that the gift is not given in a true spirit of generosity and therefore will not shape our soul in a Christ-like way.

By the way, I am well aware that I am “speaking to the choir” here! As you may know, the average weekly pledge in this church is \$39.90. The *average*! So, for every individual or family that puts \$20 in the offering plate every Sunday, someone else puts in \$60. That is absolutely amazing and inspiring for a congregation of this demographic!

At the conclusion of the first chapter, James make a distinction between hearing and doing the word. He says,

*You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. Therefore, rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.*

I love that last line: “welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your soul.” It reminds me of Christmas and how if we, like Mary, welcome with meekness the implanted word, the Logos, if we make room for it in the crowded inn of our life, it has the power to save our soul.

James tells us that our religion should make a difference in our life. Mahatma Gandhi once said that Jesus’ teachings are magnificent, and Christianity is a wonderful religion. He then said that it should be apparent from looking at a person whether that person was a Christian. Unfortunately, when Gandhi looked at most people who declare themselves to be Christian, he couldn’t tell from the quality of their life that the teachings of their magnificent religion made the slightest bit of difference! I find this to be sad.

How could this happen? The person’s religion may be compartmentalized, confined to an hour a week in a designated sacred space, but it does not permeate the person’s life. I think of people who declare themselves Christian but who have no compassion for refugees, who have no compunction about separating immigrant children from their parents, who conspire to deny certain groups of people their constitutional rights, and who would destroy our environment if it would to a greater profit margin. I agree with Jim Antel, the President of the Massachusetts Conference of the United

Church of Christ, that we should not allow people to mistakenly believe that the beliefs and politics of these people are truly Christian beliefs.

James challenges us. James asks us how we can say we are Christians when we withhold from those in need. He asks us how we can claim to be Christians when we respond with anger in our relationships with others. He tells us that being a Christian involves more than hearing the word or even believing the word. It has to do with living the word! He challenges us to “be doers of the word and not hearers only.”

I don't know how we could declare ourselves to be Christian and also be racist. Do we not understand that the Parable of the Good Samaritan applies to us? I don't see how we can declare ourselves to be Christian and not be compassionate as Jesus was when he encountered people in need. I don't see how we can declare ourselves to be Christian and believe that the world centers around us, around our needs. No matter how often we go to church and how often we hear the words of scripture, if we do not take them to heart and let them become the yeast that will fill our lives, we will, as James said, be hearers of the word and not doers.

James closes this letter with a powerful statement. He tells us to take an honest look at how we relate to others. He says,

*If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the word.*

We may not have occasion to reach out to any orphans or widows, to immigrant or refugee families in the week to come, although we may, and that certainly would be a good, a Christian thing to do. But there will be many opportunities when we could do or say something caring, compassionate, helpful, and perhaps even healing, or when we could at least refrain from doing or saying something hurtful. James tells us that when we do this, we allow our religious beliefs to shape our life and then to shape the world.

He tells us this is what it means to be a Christian. And his message is just as true for us in our time as it was for him and the churches to which he wrote in his.

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