

Listen... Then Do...

James 1:19-27
September 1, 2024

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson

Legend has it that a Christian believer was lost at sea and then washed up on the shores of a remote native village. Half-dead from starvation..., he was discovered unconscious by the people of the village, who slowly nursed him back to full health. And there he lived among the people, for some 20 years.

During his time with them, he lived out his Christian faith. But he never sang a sacred song or preached a sermon. Neither did he recite Scripture in public. In fact, he made no personal faith claims whatsoever – except by his actions.

When people were sick, he visited them When people were hungry, he gave them his own food. When people were lonely, he kept them company.

He taught the children, and always took sides with those who had been wronged. ...

After 20 years had passed, missionaries showed up on the shores of the village and began talking to the people about a man called “the Christ.” After hearing of this “Jesus,” the natives insisted that he had been living among them for the past 20 years. “Come,” they demanded, “we’ll introduce you to the man about whom you’ve been speaking!”¹

“... Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.” For the natives of that village, the Christian believer shipwrecked on their shores embodied the righteousness of God.

In today’s New Testament lesson, James teaches us how to better embody the righteousness of God, reflect the spirit of Jesus Christ in who we are as Christians. And what’s more, James seeks to teach us why that is so important, why we must, for the God’s sake, strive to be better Christians in all we do, in all we say, in all we are.

The James credited with writing the “Book of James” is not the Apostle James, but rather James the brother of the Lord. That’s interesting. It’s interesting that the one teaching us how to best live out our faith in this world is the one who saw Jesus living out his faith in his world, in a world that didn’t yet know or believe that Jesus is our Lord and Savior.

¹ Adapted from a sermon by Rev. Eric S. Ritz, shared on www.homoletics.com by Rev. Douglas Van Aarsten, Ireton First Reformed Church, Ireton, Iowa.

In as much as this is true, we get a first-hand look, through the eyes of James, at what Jesus was like as a boy, as a teen, as a young man in private life. And this is important, because it is in our private lives that we benefit most from embodying godly, Christian practices and dispositions.

I mean, it's easy to act like a Christian when you don't have to live and work and hang out with the other person. But let that other person be your spouse, your children or parents, your coworker or best friend, and that's a whole other story. Too often we treat those closest to us in ways we would never treat a stranger or outside person. So I invite you to take today's teaching from James and imagine applying it to your closest relationships.

James teaches us to be "quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger," and to "welcome with meekness the implanted word" of God, which, says James, has "power to save (your) souls."

We worry so much about our wants and needs that, too often, we neglect our souls. We don't even realize what we're giving up by needing to be right all the time, by needing to have things our way, needing to get what we want even if it does mean someone else goes without.

We live in a world of competition based on the fear of scarcity, there's not enough – not enough time so we become short with people, dismissing them in our rush to get out the door;

not enough food so we load up our plate first; not enough sharing in the workload so we leave it for someone else to do;

not enough money so we resist spending it on anything special; not enough hope of success, so we don't even try, we don't believe things can change, that we can change.

We live in fear of scarcity despite what the Bible says, what it says about the abundance of God's blessings and provisions, what it says about the certainty of God's promises. When we live by the word of God, God promises us and all people blessings and abundance, the blessing of taking time to really listen before we speak, and the presence of mind to speak a word of grace and peace;

the blessing of putting someone else first because God assures us there's enough for everyone; the blessing of always giving 100 percent, so that when you can't there are others like you who can;

the blessing of loving ourselves and others more than we love our money; the blessing of living in hope, knowing that with God, all things are possible.

With God, all things are possible. That's what James is trying to teach us. And not only teach us in that we understand and believe but teach us so that we listen and do. "Be doers of the word," says James, "and not merely hearers who deceive themselves."

We've all heard the definition of insanity: doing the same thing and expecting different results. And yet we, as Christians, too often fall into the insanity trap. We hear God's word in our heart and soul, but we fail to act on it. And then we wonder why God isn't more faithful, why life doesn't get better, why people never change.

It's because we fail to change, we fail to act on what we know would make a difference, or at least on what God says will make a difference.

James says this is like looking at yourself in a mirror, seeing the truth of who you are and what you could be, and then going away and forgetting all about it.

No! says James. When you see and hear the truth, act on it! Act on it in faith. "Look into the perfect law," says James, "the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doer who act," for you "will be blessed" says James, "in (your) doing."

The perfect law, the law of liberty is everything you know in your heart of hearts that you should be doing, and yet somehow you just don't do it, you refuse to do it – out of fear, or greed, or envy, or gluttony, or uncertainty, or just plain bad habits.

God doesn't want you – doesn't want us as families, communities, nations, and a global people – he doesn't want us to be acting out of fear, greed, envy, gluttony, uncertainty, or bad habits. God wants us to fashion our words and actions on the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the perfect law, the law of liberty.

As James says, "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 world." To do this, we have to listen to the word of God and act on it, regardless of our baser instincts.

I'll leave you with this terrible joke as an example of how not to act, even if it is somehow the first thing that comes to mind.

A man was just coming out of anesthesia after a series of tests in the hospital, and his wife was sitting at his bedside. His eyes fluttered open, and he murmured, "You're beautiful."

Flattered, the wife continued her bedside vigil while he drifted back to sleep. Later, her husband woke up and said, "You're cute." Startled, his wife asked him, "What happened to beautiful?"

"The drugs are wearing off," said the husband.

That's terrible. It's a terrible way to act, a terrible thing to say. And yet how many times do we use little jabs like that because we think it's funny. We think it's funny when deep down

inside we're just exercising some hidden demon, some deep-seated hurt that has us act less than Christian.

Instead of living by the law of injury and retribution, try living by the law of liberty, the law of God that frees you to overcome your demons, and instead speak and act from a place of love and grace.

That's where the blessings come from – love and grace – blessings for you, for your family and for our world. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Sovereign God, you alone are worthy of the deepest adoration of our souls, the extravagant praise of our lips, the unbridled love of our hearts – for you alone are God.

There is none other who forgives our shortcomings, who redeems us in this life and the next, who showers us with blessing and grace.

And so it is that we come to offer our hearts, minds, souls and strength, through which we love worship you. Give us singleness of purpose in following you, courage and conviction to be your light in the midst of darkness, and passion to proclaim your Word of truth.

We pray this day for the health and wellbeing of those who are dealing with illness and disease, injury and physical limitations, personal struggles and the struggles of our day. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, joining in singing the prayer that he taught us, singing:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.