

Doers of the Word Not Hearers Only
James 1:19-27
January 21, 2024
Rev. Dave Dorst
CenterPoint Church

Read James 1:19-27

“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”
(Hebrews 4:12)

Introduction

A long time ago, I was getting to know a new pastor at my church. I thought he was a really interesting guy, very knowledgeable, had talent in acting and music, and had a really great family. At some point I was invited over to their house for dinner and I looked forward to getting to know them better in their “natural habitat.” Until I’d been there for a couple hours and what was a generally pleasant dinner conversation was interrupted by the pastor’s sarcasm, biting remarks towards his family, and angry responses when one of his kids questioned something that he said. I felt awkward, his wife was apologetic, he was not, and I could not wait to find a reason to leave. I left there hoping that that conversation was abnormal for that family but feeling that it probably was not. It was disillusioning, and hard to process since my own pastor father rarely got angry and was always loving and affirming with his family. We moved away within two years, and within five years I heard from friends that the couple had divorced and that he was out of ministry, though I do not know the reasons for either of those things.

There are a lot of reasons that pastors leave churches, but one reason that has been surfacing more frequently in recent years is that they are being asked to step down for anger issues, because they bully people in their churches. Ministry can be stressful and pastors should not be held to an impossible standard, but those who blow up in anger at others can easily undercut their many other wonderful gifts and achievements. Some do their best to keep their anger in check or in private, others don’t see any problem with yelling at their staff or occasionally at members of the church, chalking it up to being “authentic.” But it’s a problem when the leaders of the church don’t take seriously the admonition of Ephesians 4:26 - *“in your anger do not sin.”*

But it’s not just pastors and ministry leaders who need to be challenged to grow and change in this area. Today’s passage is one that every Christian should read fairly often. You may not be a ministry leader, so your job may not be at stake, but your Christian witness certainly is. Your friendships and your family relations might be as well. Perhaps even your soul. Today’s passage will speak to this area, as well as a number of other ones, where a believer who has received the transforming work of the Holy Spirit to become a new creation in Christ should be seeing change and growth. But often, we resist that sanctifying work and need to be encouraged, challenged, even rebuked so that our outward witness matches the truth of our inner transformation.

Our first three verses this morning remind us that

I. True Christianity Changes our Speech and Behavior (vv. 19-21)

¹⁹ Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. ²¹ Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

Did you know that the average person speaks enough words in a day to fill a 54-page book, which translates to almost 20,000 pages per year.¹ (Some of you are thinking, “I’m way under the number but my spouse is way over!” We’re going with averages.) Put those numbers in light of Matthew 12:34, where Jesus said that “*out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks,*” and you realize that your inward beliefs are being broadcast through your tongue at a high frequency. A couple verses later, Matthew 12:36-37, goes on to say that, “*I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.*” That is a sobering, daunting thought – Jesus Himself told us how important He thinks our words are that we will answer for them on the day of judgment.

I talked in my introductory sermon on the book of James about how his favorite Old Testament book might have been Proverbs, and verse 19 is an echo of so many different verses from that book:

Proverbs 10:19b – “*Whoever restrains his lips is prudent.*”

Proverbs 15:1 – “*A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*”

Proverbs 15:4a – “*A gentle tongue is a tree of life.*”

If the tongue is not controlled by God, it’s a sure indicator that the heart is not either. Angry outbursts, harsh criticism, complaining, judgmentalism, slander, and gossip reveal hearts struggling to submit to the rule of Christ.

I’m reminded of John McEnroe when he played tennis would just explode with anger at the umpires questioning calls, sometimes at the crowd. It was embarrassing to most people, but it was also fascinating. I saw a documentary on McEnroe and Bjorn Borg, who played each other a lot, and were contrasted as “Fire and Ice” because just as McEnroe was fiery and would explode, Borg would be icy quiet and restrained. Yet when Borg was a teenager practicing and learning the game, he had the same outbursts and issues as McEnroe, he just learned how to channel them. That’s really the key – learning to channel that anger into something productive. My dad used to say (I’m sure he got this from someone famous) “When you’re furious, get curious.” In other words, rather than expressing your anger immediately, spend some time trying to figure out why you’ve become angry. What goals, desires, or idols have been blocked that have made you frustrated and upset?

Being quick to hear but slow to speak and get angry is to be intentionally others-centered. It does not say to never speak or to never be angry, it says to get there slowly and to prioritize listening. But it also says that the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Sometimes we think that if we’re angry, that we need to let it out and “get it off our chest” and that that’s healthy for everybody. I would challenge that – it may feel good to unload it, but that doesn’t mean it’s healthy. Yes, when things bother you, you need to figure out how to resolve them, don’t bottle them up and be passive or passive aggressive. But that doesn’t mean spewing angry words at others – that rarely accomplishes anything except either intimidating them or making them defensive and combative in return. Now I can hear someone challenging me: “Yes, but Jesus got angry and cleansed the temple.” Absolutely, Jesus expressed righteous anger, and there is a place for being upset about the problems in this fallen world – the exploitation of children, poverty, racism, abortion, persecution, all kinds of injustice. There is a place for those that indignation to spur you to action. But until you can guarantee that your motives and emotions are pure like Jesus’ were, think long and hard before you start making a whip with which to cleanse your version of the temple. Besides, James is talking about the “anger of man,” anger that has been produced because human goals, desires, and wishes have been blocked, not that you’re offended on God’s behalf.

¹ John MacArthur, Jr. *James*. (Chicago: Moody, 1998), p. 88.

The admonition to “*be slow to speak*,” can easily be applied as: “be slow to post or text.” In case you’re wondering, things you type online, texts, blogs, tweets - that all falls under “*bridling your tongue*,” even if it comes from your fingers! We have a culture that says if you have a thought, go ahead and share it! A critique? Fire away. A hot take? Let’s hear it, stir up the pot! But James would caution us: being slow to speak and be angry means calming down before hitting the send button. Think through the kind of damage that your words can cause. And if it is at all possible, work it out in person, don’t hide behind a screen.

Verse 21 - “*Put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness*” – that may just be referring to sins of the tongue and sins related to being angry, or it might be much greater, referring to sexual impurity, drunkenness, violent acts, etc. Other ways that the Greek words for “filthiness” and “wickedness” can be translated are: moral filth, dirt, uncleanness, evil, and malice. James urges every believer to shed those things in favor of receiving the implanted word. In other words, the best way to rid yourself of evil thoughts, words, and deeds is to immerse yourself in the Scriptures, to dwell on the things of God, the gospel that saves your soul; the things that produce a meek character and please God.

The next four verses teach us some of the best ways to receive God’s word:

II. True Christianity Puts What It Hears Into Action (vv. 22-25)

²² But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. ²⁴ For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. ²⁵ But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

I talked last week about how we deceive ourselves in two areas: money and sin. This passage shows us another way we deceive ourselves: by thinking that we are being obedient and godly by just knowing what the Bible says without actually putting it into practice. “I read my Bible this morning, check. I went to a Bible study last week and even participated, check. Sat through the sermon without falling asleep, check. What more do you want?” Do you remember the story that Jesus told in Matthew 7:21-27 about houses that are built on rock versus sand? Our lives are the houses and they’re either built on a solid foundation (rock) so that when the storms come we are still standing, or they’re built on a shaky, untrustworthy foundation (sand) that gives way when the storms come. And so the foundation is the Bible and God’s truth, right? But Jesus says that it’s more than just truth, it’s the putting truth into action: “*Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.*”

Obviously you need to read the Bible, study it, and receive teaching about it to know what it says. But if it’s clear that all you’re ever doing is reading, hearing, and thinking, you’ve missed the chance to grow and be blessed by God. I remember a guy in a previous church who took like a decade to join the church because he was “studying the idea.” And that’s OK, we don’t want to rush people. But when he finally came into membership, we were asking him a bunch of questions about his Christian life, and I asked him about prayer. And he said something like, “Oh yeah, I’ve got some really good books on prayer.” “Uh, that’s great, but instead of reading about praying, why don’t you just start praying?” Of course, the one finger pointed out has three fingers pointing back at me - I read tons of books and put a fraction of it into action. May God work on me in that area.

Scripture is a mirror and we need to let it show us who we are and make those changes. Don’t read it and walk away, putting it out of your mind. You should lean into the tension, the guilt, the

nagging thoughts that reading the Bible puts inside you. Bible study is not complete without a plan to act! If you want to make progress in this area, study the Bible and listen to sermons with a pen and paper in hand, ready to both take notes and make an action list. I read a study a long time ago that followed up with people who had heard sermons on a Sunday to determine how much they remembered just five days later. The results were not very encouraging for preachers because of those who only listened to the sermon, less than 25% of them could even remember the main idea. But if they took notes, that percentage went up to 60%, and for those who tried to apply the sermon, 85% could remember the main idea.² Every Sunday when I close my sermon in prayer, that the sermon's work has only just begun. It has been said but then it must be done.

The last two verses tell us that

III. True Christianity Balances Personal Piety with Helping Others (vv. 26-27)

²⁶ If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Religion is not our favorite word for faith; in fact, most of the New Testament use of the word religion are negative. We like to say, "it's a relationship not a religion," so that we distinguish our faith from just empty rituals. But John Piper points out that when James is talking about religion here, what he really means is faith in Jesus Christ because the very next verse in chapter 2 talks about holding "*the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.*" "There is no break in the flow between 1:27 and 2:1; so there is good reason to think that 'pure religion' is 'faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.'"³ Now, James is not attempting a full definition or describing completely what true religion looks like; he's not saying that the sacraments, prayer, reading the Scriptures, that kind of thing is unimportant. Acts of worship, fasting, and giving are not condemned. But he gives essential elements that the practice of our faith must contain, 3 marks of genuine religion: a controlled tongue, a caring ministry to the needy, and personal holiness.

Psalm 68:5 says, "*Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in His holy habitation.*" God has a heart for those who have lost their parents or their spouses, particularly those who are vulnerable and helpless, and He wants us to reflect His heart. There was no life insurance in Bible times and no government programs to provide safety nets; if a husband died, his wife often lost all means of being provided for unless a family member could take her in. That's why some of the OT laws sound strange to our ears - why would a brother-in-law be commanded to marry the widow and provide children? Because she didn't have other options and that way she wouldn't be vulnerable. The church in the first few centuries became the safety net if a widow's family or community couldn't help, and that should still be an area of emphasis for us.

Orphans have always been some of the most vulnerable and needy in any society. According to UNICEF, there are over 150 million orphans today worldwide.⁴ Let that number sink in, that's more than the total population of the five largest US states. Also, "according to the most recent federal data, there are currently more than 400,000 children (up to age 21) in foster care in the United States."⁵ Not all of us are called to adopt a child or foster, but we can all support the families and ministries who do. How can we practically love orphans and disadvantaged children?

² Dr. David Dorst's sermon "How to Hear a Sermon" from 7/24/05, preached at Northwest Pres, Dublin, OH.

³ John Piper's sermon "Visiting Orphans in a World of AIDS and Abortion" from 1/24/99, found at desiringgod.org.

⁴ <https://www.sos-usa.org/our-impact/focus-areas/advocacy-movement-building/childrens-statistics>

⁵ <https://www.adoptuskids.org/meet-the-children/children-in-foster-care/about-the-children>

While I believe the command is fairly straightforward to visit and help widows and orphans, I think we can safely expand this command to include all of the poor and powerless in society, including the unborn (as we prayed about earlier in recognizing today as Sanctity of Life Sunday). When Jesus was asked “Who is my neighbor?” He essentially replied with the parable of the Good Samaritan, implying that anyone who needs me is my neighbor. Refugees, the homeless, the unemployed, those without a dad, etc. may be just as appropriate today. 1 John 3:17-18 says, *“But if anyone has the world’s good and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and in truth.”*

I love that James puts the caring for others and being unstained from the world in the same verse, the same sentence. We need both the exhortation to love others and to live with personal piety, because it’s easy to only emphasize one of those. John Piper again:

“Notice the two kinds of effects that pure religion or faith in Christ has: 1) practical compassion toward orphans and widows, and 2) personal purity of life. This is important to see, because so many Christians fall off the horse on one side or the other. Some fall off by saying: What matters is personal purity - sexual purity, financial integrity, a clean thought life, and so on; but they are weak in practical deeds of compassion for the poor and helpless. But some fall off the horse on the other side, by saying: What matters is social justice and compassion and helping people, and what you do with your mind and body and your private personal life is not significant.”⁶

May we strive to be obedient to Christ’s lordship in both areas!

Conclusion

As we think over this passage as a whole, it’s clear that James has thrown a lot of things at us that we need to do to live out authentic Christianity. Some of you are revving up for the challenge and have your first three action items all ready: “I’m going to listen to my spouse better, I’m going to take notes during my devotions, and I’m going to offer to babysit for that family with a foster kid.” But some of you might be sitting there going, “This is a little overwhelming. I can barely keep up with all the things I need to do every week; I don’t give my family enough time, I’m physically and emotionally spent when I actually do get to sit down.” It’s a lot, I get it. The Christian author and speaker, Beth Moore, wrote an autobiography recently. In one section of it, she talks about finding a journal that she kept as a teenager. She lists a sample of the entries that she had written at that age:

“Help me keep up my enthusiasm so I’ll be a better Christian.”

“Forgive me for being too bossy.”

“Forgive me for talking about other people and for gossiping too much.”

“Help me not to be a repeat offender.”

“Help me conquer these feelings I have.”

“Forgive me for talking so much.”

“Don’t let me hurt anyone else.”

“Help me to be a good Christian and not give in to temptation.”

“Forgive me for losing my temper.”

“Forgive me for not being the Christian I should be 100% of the time.”⁷

Now, I was never a journal keeper, but if I had been, I would have had very similar entries when I was a teenager, and probably similar ones today. Hopefully, you’ve had similar prayers at different times. We all want to make headway in our Christian lives, we want to stop sinning and be more godly and more Christlike. I can’t let you off the hook because Scripture has commanded you to

⁶ Piper’s “Visiting Orphans” sermon

⁷ Beth Moore, *All My Knotted-Up Life* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2023), p. 108.

avoid anger, wickedness, hypocrisy, apathy, and using our tongues poorly. But the problem is that we will never have complete victory in this life. And if you focus on being “the Christian I should be 100% of the time,” you’re going to be constantly in despair when you fall short and don’t achieve that standard. You can never find any grace for yourself and you stop believing Jesus that His yoke is easy and His burden is light. And you run the risk of focusing so much on behavior that you miss the true riches of the gospel.

(In fact, someone came up to me after the first James sermon two weeks ago and said something to the effect of: “Don’t let us think that if we just obey everything in James that we’ll be right with God. Because I already tried that – I read that book, tried to do everything it said, but I was missing Jesus and grace.”)

Ligon Duncan sets us straight here:

“The Christian life is not an endless series of resolutions to do better. The Christian life is not turning a new leaf. The Christian life is not just the latest and greatest of self-help remedies. The Christian life is a recognition that we do not have within ourselves the energy, the power, the ability to change ourselves, we need to look somewhere else. And the only ‘somewhere else’ to look for that is in Jesus Christ and at the cross. It’s when we renounce our own ability to try and change ourselves and we run to Him for grace to change us that we find salvation and grace to change.”⁸

Never overlook the fact that your faith, your salvation is a gift of God accomplished by Jesus’s perfect life of obedience and His death on the cross in your place. Bringing our lives into conformity with God’s will and working on the areas of behavior that we struggle with are done with the Holy Spirit’s power and as a response to the saving work that God has done inside of us. May God meet us in our weakness, and may no one be able to say that our “religion is worthless” as we live out lives of both hearing and doing God’s word and will. Amen.

Benediction

Ephesians 3:14-17a – *“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.”*

⁸ Ligon Duncan’s sermon “The Essence of Christian Living,” from 8/18/02, found at fpcjackson.org.