

Sermon for Sunday, June 19, 2011
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Hearing to Obey
James 1:19-25

This you know, my beloved brethren. But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. Therefore putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. 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; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. 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 shall be blessed in what he does (1:19-25).

Growing through trials by means of the word (James 1:12-18 revisited)

In *The Healing Path*, Dan Allender describes the day his Boy Scout leader betrayed him. How enthralled he had been that his admired leader had chosen *him* for a deeper relationship. But then a terrible encounter. Allender refused, ran away. Fearful and angry he knew their relationship was shattered. He became suspicious of leaders. They were predators, dangerous, despicable. Years later, Allender became a believer. God used that experience and many healing experiences, to make Allender God's servant, ministering to so many who were abused by leaders. He learned to trust leaders and **become** a faithful leader himself. As James says, trials can make us mature and lead us to the crown of life (Jas. 1:12).

James says we must view the trials of life as a source of joy, not sorrow. Do you have doubts about this? Do you think, "My trials crush me, they don't make me mature! Am I missing something?" Perhaps. Remember, God says we need wisdom in the trial to address it correctly. How so?

You need wisdom to discern if you need to act or to wait. Imagine trials for two men. The first wants children. He and his wife cannot conceive for some months. The second man works for a tyrant who screams, threatens, and says he'll fire him.

The first man may need to be patient, go about life, not rushing to fix his problem. Sometimes it's okay to endure, pray through a season of disappointment.

The second man may need to act. Yes, he can pray and wait on the Lord. But he may need to stand up to the bully and say, "Enough!" And he may do it after he sends his vita to a few folks. God is the Sovereign Lord (1:1; 2:1, 5, 8; 4:12). Nothing happens apart from his knowledge and will. He intends to strengthen us through our trials, but we must be wise to address our trials correctly.

People sometimes rail at God during trials. If he is sovereign, why didn't he stop this? But remember, anything can test us, not just trauma. Even God's good gifts can test us. Moses said, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house... your neighbor's wife" or servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor (Exod. 20:17). So the mere sight of our neighbor's house, land or wife can tempt us. The sight of a strong donkey can stir envy, if viewed with evil desire.

I had a conversation about this with several students. They candidly described some things they covet. They said: "I covet other people's mission experiences, their travels to distant lands." "I covet other people's ability to command attention. Some people simply stand up and everyone listens."

Observe: The ability to command attention and to serve abroad are both gifts from God. If God's gifts to others drive us to covet, whose fault is that? Sadly, we become angry with God because he is good to others, if he isn't good to us the same way. So it's not God's failings, but our sinful desires that cause trouble (1:14).

Of course, God doesn't want his gifts to you to stir up envy in me. He delights to give gifts to his children (1:17). The first gift is life itself, which comes through the gospel. Indeed, if an unbeliever sees his perverse anger at God's goodness rightly, it may convict him of sin and lead to repentance and faith.

James wants us to pass our trials, since they are common, so he adds, "Know this, my beloved brothers" (1:19, English Standard Version (ESV)). We should know that trials are meant to bless us. When we feel temptation, let's not blame God (1:16). We should guard ourselves and turn to the gospel. God will forgive if we repent and trust in Jesus. The gospel gives life, so we can resist temptation and bear fruit for God (1:18).

The word of God is our first resource in trials. It gives us wisdom and knowledge so we can grow. James says:

- If anyone lacks wisdom, he should **ask** God for it (1:5).
- We must **hear** the word of truth, the life-giving gospel (1:18-19).
- We must **receive** the implanted word, which has power to give life (1:21).
- We must be **doers** of the word, not hearers only (1:22).

Letting the word do its work (1:19b-21)

Since the word is effective, we must receive it and let it to do its work in us. Napoleon was a great military strategist. Long before the invention of field radios, he addressed the problem of battlefield communication. The noise and smoke of discharging rifles and canons, the terror and adrenaline of combat, and the ordinary failures of human speech all impaired communication, so commanders could hardly co-coordinate battle plans. Messengers had to convey all commands, which were often garbled in transmission. Napoleon solved that problem a novel way. He kept by him a personal of marginal intelligence – a man who could read, but barely. Before sending orders to his generals by his couriers, he presented them to his marginal man. If he understood the directions, he sent them. If not, he rewrote them until the man did. Napoleon knew it's not enough to tell the truth, someone must receive it and act on it or it does no good.

That is James' point. He says, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. For man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires" (1:19b-20). At first glance, this seems simplistic: We need wisdom, and we learn when we listen. Big talkers are rarely good listeners, and angry talkers may not hear a thing. Therefore, let's speak carefully. Hold the tongue. Wait until a thought grows ripe. Be sure it needs to be said. This kind of care and self-control leads to edifying speech.

Anger does not lead to righteousness. There is such a thing as righteous indignation, but our anger is rarely righteous. We often become indignant about trivial things: a pokey driver making us late for an appointment, poorly synchronized traffic lights, an unskilled referee wounding our favorite team with a

bad call. These things stir our wrath. Meanwhile, we ignore true injustice, especially if it happens to strangers, far away. Our anger is often burdened with "self-importance, self assertion, intolerance, and stubbornness."¹

Anger makes it difficult to get along with other people or to go along with God. Anger makes us slow to listen and receive his word. Godless anger never creates righteousness! My father was talented, lively, a great story-teller and conversationalist, and a very angry man. His anger caused decades of suffering. When he was angry he never listened and never did anything good. Fathers, if you see this in yourself, repent. If you can't control it, get help. Family members, if he won't seek help, you should. I had to say that. Now back to our text.

The order of James' next commands seems baffling. Notice: we should "put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (1:21, ESV). Has James reversed things? James first commands that we put away wickedness, and then tells us to receive the word and its salvation. Wait, we don't reform ourselves first, then hear the word with faith. It's the other way: No one can put off wickedness *before* they receive the word. The word, implanted in our hearts, saves us and enables us to put off wickedness.

Hear James: To put off filth is to put away the old, sinful way of life (Isa. 64:6, Zech 3:3-4). To change clothes stands for conversion, a new way of life (Zech. 3:4-9, Eph. 4:22-24). James commands us to put away spiritual evil in all forms. How do we do this?

God's word, applied by His Spirit, does this. James already said God's word gives us life (1:18). It reveals our true condition and describes our need of God's mercy. It says no one can simply "put off all wickedness." The word of God, implanted in the heart, changes us. So why does James say we should put away wickedness before he says to "receive the word with meekness" (1:21, ESV)?

As far as we can see, a desire to break from sin often precedes an interest in God's word. People often want to clean up their lives and that leads them to the Bible or church. A hunger for a better life starts the quest that leads to true life.

To illustrate: A certain man was vaguely aware that his life was out of order. He was harried, overworked, sometimes tense, sometimes angry. One day he was running late for an important appointment when his car was low on gas. He thought he had just enough to make it, but he ran out about half a mile away. As he got out of the car, his frustration boiled over. He punched the gas tank cap and broke his pinky.

It woke him up. This was not how he wanted to live. He repented, searched the word, examined himself, sought the Lord. The Spirit instilled this repentance, but it began with a desire for a better life, a desire to "put off wickedness."

If you see sin in your life: Do you have courage to be honest with yourself? Stop making excuses, stop blaming others. Admit that your life isn't what it ought to be. Whether you call yourself a follower of Jesus or not: Do you want to "get rid of... the evil that is so prevalent?" Everyone should want a pure life

¹ Motyer 65-66

– believers especially, but everyone. That desire should drive us to God's word, where we find strength and guidance.

James says, "receive the implanted word" not, "work at removing sin." We change when the word takes root deep within us and transforms us. It brings conviction of sin and assurance of mercy. It instills faith and creates new life. Good fruit follows. But this won't be easy. Wickedness is "rampant"; it abounds and grows prolifically.

A few summers ago, I hired a lawn service to wage war against the clover, dandelions, crabgrass, sedge, and chickweed that called my yard home. They applied their chemicals faithfully. Still, by late summer, I had to call:

Hello. I'm happy to report that my yard has never been so green as it is this year. Besides the grass, which is doing reasonably well, the dandelions are particularly vibrant. The clover is blooming continually and the crabgrass is evenly distributed throughout the yard."

The customer service representative did not argue. "Yes," he said, "it's been a bad year for weeds." As with weeds, so with sin: It's been a bad year for sin. Every year is a bad year for sin. It abounds, so we must wage war against it.

Our weapon in this war is the word "which is able to save our souls." The saving work of the word extends to our day. In the New Testament, salvation has three aspects:

- Salvation is a **past** event, for Christ accomplished our salvation in the past. We receive that salvation the day we believe (Luke 19:9, Acts 4:12, 2 Cor 6:2).
- Salvation is a **future** event. Our deliverance is never complete until Christ returns, judges men and angels, sends evildoers away, and restores the heavens and the earth (Matt 25:31 ff., Rom 5:9-10, Heb 9:28, 1 Pet 1:5).
- Salvation is a **present** reality. We work it out day by day (Phil 2:12).

James knows this, but his concern is salvation in the present, as God's word empowers daily growth. He says the word does three things.

- 1:18: it gives us birth, so we become God's first fruits, dedicated to him.
- 1:20: It promotes righteousness.
- 1:21: It saves our souls, from the day of salvation through all eternity.

We emphasize small groups at Central, but it's good, in this context, to remind ourselves that small groups and relationships are not ends in themselves. Whether a group focuses on Bible study, service or caring for each other, the goal is not relationships per se, but growth together, by knowing and practicing the word.

The church isn't Facebook, where it's a bit of a game to accumulate 1,000 friends. The goal isn't a great quantity of relationships, but high quality relationships exhibiting openness and honesty. We are to hear and live the word together.

It's entirely possible for church folk to have pleasant relationships that make no difference in this world. It's possible to have happy church relationships and remain alienated from God. The word of God,

applied to our spirit by the Holy Spirit, saves lives, changes lives. The word saves: It saves from past sins, it saves in the present battle with sin, and it saves for a future life with God.

Hearing and doing the word 1:22-25

The Bible says we must "be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 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 and at once forgets what he saw" (1:22-24, ESV). If we truly hear the word, we obey it and bear fruit (Rom. 2:13, Ja. 2:24). Careless listening, that never leads to action, is self-deception.

James says, "Become a doer," for he expects us to turn a profession of faith into action. Faith must lead to practice, to deeds (2:24). We show wisdom by our life (3:13). If we know the good we ought to do and don't do it, we sin (4:17).

If we fail to connect creed and conduct, we deceive or defraud ourselves. We deceive ourselves if we say we hear the word, but do not follow it. We defraud ourselves if we fail to heed the word and gain maturity through it.

If I tell a teenage child to be home by eleven o'clock, but she arrives at midnight for trivial reasons – watching a movie she already saw five times - I might say, "Didn't you hear me say, 'Home by 11:00'?" If she replies, "I heard, but I was watching a movie," I could say, "If you didn't obey me, you didn't really hear me." She deceives herself if she thinks she heard me if she casually ignores me. By her action she also defrauds herself of a strong relationship with me. Thus she deceives and defrauds herself.

James says that if anyone hears the word without doing it, he is like a man who peers into a mirror but immediately forgets what he looks like. Scripture is like a mirror to our souls. Just as we gaze in a physical mirror to inspect and improve our physical appearance, so we should gaze into the spiritual mirror to inspect our spiritual condition.

Scripture shows us our sin, the need for repentance, and the promise of grace. Therefore, we should remember what we see so we can mend it. We can beautify our souls by dispatching our sins and vices. It's foolish to see our flaws, then forget them at once.

Humans peer into the mirror momentarily each morning. Occasionally, we pause. Is our hair turning gray? Receding? Are wrinkles developing? Is it time for a haircut? A new skin care regime? But time rushes on. We organize our hair and shave our face or apply makeup as the standards of grooming require. Then we leave and forget, since it has little effect on the day's work.

This is sensible, but it can cause embarrassment if we fail to remedy a flaw. It's awkward when someone points out a button that is undone on our shirt. We think, "I knew that button was undone. I was going to fix it in the car."

When I was in seminary, my pastor had unruly hair. It was so wild, he said, that his wife had him use pins and barrettes to tame it. One morning he put a large silver barrette in his hair, forgot to remove it. He and I were to visit an older woman in a nursing home that day. I was surprised to see a barrette in his hair, but said nothing. I guessed he had to tame his hair for a big event later that day.

Alas, no. At the end of a long day, he got home. His wife stared and asked, "John, what are you doing with that thing in your hair?" John reviewed the day and realized about two hundred people had seen him with that barrette in his hair.

What had happened? John looked in the mirror, saw the problem, but forgot about it. He was embarrassed, but no one suffered real harm. But spiritually, it's foolish and dangerous to gaze into the word, see our sin, and fail to remedy it.

As a mirror shows physical flaws, so the word is a mirror for the soul. It shows moral and spiritual flaws, so we can remedy them. But we must remember what we see and act on it. James says: "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" (1:25, ESV).

The blessings of doing the word

The contrast: One man observes his face in a mirror, goes away, and forgets what he looks like. Another observes the perfect law, remembers it, and acts upon it. The first man deceives himself. The second man is blessed.

We can't read the Bible and rush away. Scripture deserves our attention because 1) it is perfect and 2) it gives liberty. It also gives us dignity, integrity. The law is perfect because it reflects God's perfect character:

<u>God's law</u>	<u>God's character</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> Do not murder	God gives life
<input type="checkbox"/> Do not commit adultery	God is faithful
<input type="checkbox"/> Do not steal	God is generous; he gives good gifts
<input type="checkbox"/> Do not bear false witness	God tells the truth, keeps his promises
<input type="checkbox"/> Be kind to orphans, widows, aliens...	God is kind to orphans...

God's word is also perfect because it's perfectly suited to this world. When we follow the law, we flourish. When God gave the law, He said, "I have brought you out of bondage," not, "I bring you into bondage."

James describes the law as "the law of liberty." He means the law is a source of liberty. Yes, the law limits our freedom in a way. The law restricts our speech: we can't say whatever we please, whenever we please. We can't lie and gossip. But the law also gives freedom. If children tell the truth, parents are free to trust them and let them do more. If a child says, "I'm playing soccer; home at 7:00," it's liberating to know the child is playing soccer and will be home at 7:00. It's misery for everyone if trust is lost, so parents have to check all the time.

When we know someone's word is true, it frees us from oaths and contracts. Give your word and let that be enough. That's liberating when people live by it.

This applies to public life, to business, government. At work, how liberating to know your superiors intend to treat you fairly. If there is injustice, you can keep working, because you know someone will try to set it right.

By contrast, we see how our staggering national debt restricts and restrains our nation. The Bible discourages debt. It says "the borrower is servant to the lender" (Prov. 22.7). When the government owes vast debts, debts we cannot now repay, even to unfriendly foreign nations, it binds us.

The law is liberating because it's perfectly suited to human life. We thrive when we rest and reflect one day a week instead of toiling day after day. We thrive in faithful, committed marriages. A woman has

peace when she need not wonder, "What if my husband abandons me? Should I nurture my career, just in case?" What freedom men and women have when we know our spouse is unconditionally committed to us.

God blesses those who gaze into the law, remember it, and do it. So, do you know God's will – and do it? Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (Luke 11:28). Not perfectly. No one can. Jesus also said, "No one is good but God." Indeed God is so good that he gladly forgives if we repent of our sin, believe in him and strive to follow him – not to gain his favor, but because we know we have it.

James questions us: Has the word been implanted in you? Has it saved your soul? Do you want to walk with God and obey his word even when it chafes a bit? When a command seems too hard, do you ask God's Spirit for strength to obey or shake your head and walk your way? If the word is implanted in you, let it show.

Obedience isn't easy. In a way, it's beyond our reach. We need faith, the Spirit, and the implanted word (1:18, 21). That is the word of Christ, the gospel and grace. Hear his call to receive the word, heed it, and live in the freedom He provides.