5-12-24

James 1:19-27 (2)

James has written this letter primarily to the Jewish Christians who have been scattered throughout the known world. As we have mentioned before, his main concern is spiritual completeness; or we might say Christian maturity. A lot of what he says deals with how we act and how we think, but these have a direct bearing on our spirits. We cannot separate our bodies, minds, and spirits; they are all interconnected and affect each other. Our spirits cannot grow if we allow our minds and bodies to live carnally.

If you recall from the book of Acts, for some time after Pentecost, the Christians lived together in a very pleasant community. They shared all things with each other. It sounds very nice. However, once the deacon Stephan was stoned to death for his Christian stand, persecution broke out against the church. Because of this, many left Jerusalem and spread out through the world. We may wonder why God allowed the church to be spread out like this when things seemed to be going so well. I can offer one reason: God doesn’t want His people to be living in isolation from the world. We have work to do; Jesus gave us the task of making disciples and He wants us showing Christian love to everyone we can.

These Christians who had been spread out in the world still needed shepherding. All of us do. So, in this case, the Holy Spirit wrote this letter through James to help guide the church of Jesus Christ as they lived and carried out their God-given tasks. And once more, we see the sovereignty and providence of our almighty God in that these words also apply to us 2000 years later; we who are not Jews.

Although we looked into the issue of anger last week, it is a very important subject because it is so prevalent in society. It is imperative that we as Christians control our anger. We cannot share the Gospel of love and peace and the righteousness of God if we are given to fits of rage; or even if we are just hard to get along with. Anger is dangerous to ourselves as Jesus explained in His sermon on the mount in Matthew 5:21-22, “*You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not commit murder’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.*”

When we read these words, we get an overall view of how dangerous anger is. It can get us into lots of trouble. But these words are also difficult because Jesus got angry and He also called some people fools. How do we reconcile that? Very briefly, what we see here is a progression: anger to character assassination to pronouncement of judgement. And each of these carries an increasing penalty. This is the way it is with any unchecked sin: it gets worse.

Sin never just stays at the same level; it will always escalate. If we become angry with someone and don’t deal with it, we will dwell on it. The longer we dwell the angrier we become and it will become hatred. Unchecked hatred will eventually lead to murder. It is easy to see why the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.

Dealing with anger is difficult but the Christian must do so. That does not mean suppressing it, although we may have to bite our tongue in the moment. Anger is best dealt with through forgiveness in obedience to God and in praying for that person. It’s hard to be angry at someone you are praying for. Ultimately, if things can later be worked out, that is ideal; but it’s not always possible.

James tells us to receive the word implanted. Yes, that is accepting Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour. But it also means reading your Bible. And as you read, let the words you read have an effect on you. Let them sink into your heart and mind; let them change your life. Becoming a Christian ought to be a life changing experience; if it doesn’t change your life, then you need to reconsider your actual standing with Jesus.

With receiving the word implanted, James writes of a man who looks in a mirror and then forgets what he sees. How about if you look in the mirror and don’t like what you see? Most of the time, especially if it has to do with the ravages of age, there is nothing we can really do about it. Now, many times we may look into the Bible and see a reflection of ourselves that we don’t like. Don’t just walk away and forget about it. That is a wonderful thing about God; when we receive His word implanted and allow the Holy Spirit to work, we can be changed. The things we see that we don’t like, the things that are offensive to God, about our inner man can and will be changed. That is the power of God and His word.

In verse 25 James lets us know the benefits of looking intently at the perfect law; the word of God. We will be blessed. Now that phrase “look intently” of course means more than just reading. It means studying, meditating on it; allowing the Holy Spirit to use it to change us. We must see ourselves in it and where it applies to our lives. We must develop eyes to see. Again, the progress comes from the work of the Holy Spirit, but we must cooperate.

This law is perfect because it is from God. But we may get a little confused when James calls it “*the law of liberty*” or “*the law of freedom*”. Our natural instinct is to feel that laws bind us; that they cut down on our freedom. And when we look at all the laws in the Old Testament it is very difficult to see how they are freeing let alone how to keep them all. In fact, if we read Romans 7:5, Paul says this: *For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.* This does not sound like a law of liberty or freedom.

The answer to all this is, of course, Jesus. When we accept Jesus as Saviour in faith, we are at liberty from sin and freed from death. Paul later says in Romans 8:2, “*For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.*” In Christ, we are even free from the confines of the Mosaic Law. At that point, the moral commands of the law, and the commands of Jesus Christ, are no longer a burden to us. We follow them because that is what is pleasing to God. In the law of faith in Christ, we are no longer bound to sin and death and the law, but free to be obedient to Jesus.

Another way to consider this is that outside of Christ, we are under the control of sin. We may be able to resist some temptations but overall we are captive to sin; we are completely subject to a sin nature. In that sin, our spirits are already dead; and our bodies face the just wages of sin which is death. We will be judged under the law of God and found guilty; sentenced to eternal bondage. In Christ, we are now able to resist sin. (Yes, sometimes we still sin but is all cases we would be able to resist it.) In Christ we are freed from spiritual death and our physical death becomes a gateway to eternal life. We are then judged by our good works for reward; and forever free of the influence of sin or death.

Do not forget what you see when you look into the perfect mirror of God’s word. Let it change you, let it rule your heart and life. If we do not do what the word of God says, it shows that we have not truly accepted Christ as Saviour and Lord. Someone who is our Lord is our Master and by definition we do whatever our Master says. If we don’t, then He is not really our Master. There are many warnings in the Bible to not be deceived. We must not be deceived by false Christ’s and false teachings; but we must not deceive ourselves either.

In the last two verses of the chapter, James gives us three things to do in particular that help us to be doers of the word. He again warns us of self-deceit. Hearing, or reading, the word is necessary, but we mustn’t stop there. We must act on it. Acting on the word is the evidence of true belief in Jesus Christ as Saviour.

James talks here of religion and by this time in history, most of us are uncomfortable with the word or idea of “religion”. And that is because when most people hear the word “religion” anymore, they automatically think of a set of rules that must be followed. Keep in mind here that James does not have this definition in mind. He means religion to be a relationship with Jesus. It is a way of life in happy obedience to Him and full of hope in His promises. And there are certain things and behaviors that are part and parcel of being a follower of Jesus.

Now, any nonbeliever who is careful with their tongue, gives to the poor, and does good things in general, is totally unacceptable to God. None of their good works are acceptable to Him. Only the deeds of a Christian are acceptable to God. Only when we are covered in the righteousness of Jesus can we do anything that is pleasing to God.

First, James tells us to contain our tongue. Later in this letter, he goes into greater detail about what we say and how damaging it can be. But he lets us know now that if we don’t bridle our tongue, our professed relationship with Jesus is not real. If our relationship with Christ is not true, then we are damned.

There is a sequence here too. First, consider what Jeremiah says in 17:9, “*The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it?*” Then in Matthew 15:8 Jesus says: *But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man.* And Jesus says of both good and bad people in Luke 6:45, “*for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart*.”

So, we must bridle our tongues because what comes out of our mouths reflects what is in our hearts; and our hearts are evil. However, once we belong to Jesus, He gives us a new heart and with that we are able to speak good things and suppress the bad. We are in the “already and not yet”, we have a new heart but we are still affected by sin in this life. We must watch what we say. This goes along with James’ earlier advice to be slow to speak. Think about what you say before you say it. It is amazing how many times we can catch ourselves before saying something stupid, or sinful.

If we don’t control our tongue while claiming to be Christian, we deceive ourselves. But we must also watch we don’t deceive ourselves with Christian talk. Just as some may hear the word and do nothing with it; some may speak Christian words and ideas without living them. A person may quote Bible verses and speak of theology; they may attend or even teach Bible studies; they may go to church and talk with high sounding ideas and words. But if there is no real action in their life, they are deceiving themselves, and their religion is worthless.

To think that our profession of faith could be worthless should be a scary thought. Worthless has no redeeming qualities. It won’t get us “close enough”; it is entirely without value. It means that we are not saved. Make sure you are a doer of the word and not just someone who hears it or talks about it.

James tells us that our religion should make us turn our hearts to those who need help. The widow and the orphan are a subset of people in general who are lacking what is necessary for life or who just need help. When James says to “visit”, he doesn’t mean to stop in every once in a while. He means to care for them and tend to their needs. And these are obviously people who can never pay back what they are given; these are the people we are to help. If we have resources, they have been given to us by God for our own lives and to help sustain those who do not have.

Remember what Jesus said to the sheep in the day of judgement. Those who fed the hungry and gave drink to the thirsty; those who gave clothes to the naked and shelter to the homeless; those who tended the sick and visited the lonely: they did all these things for Jesus Himself and He welcomed them into His Kingdom. We are not called to force ourselves into poverty, but we are called to sacrifice; be it money or time or skills or possessions. They have been lent to us by God and we will give an account of how we used them.

Thirdly James warns us to keep ourselves unstained by the world. Each of us here knows how the world is going; it is not improving. It is constantly calling for rebellion against God’s rule and authority. It pushes us to join it. We can no longer simply live our lives quietly; we are forced into standing in defiance of the world if we are to stand with Christ.

In a way, the current times are like Jerusalem shortly after Pentecost. We can no longer simply live quietly as Christians. God is forcing us to make a stand, which should have the effect of winning more souls for Jesus. We are visible and we are different when we live the way James tells us; let the Holy Spirit work through us to increase the Kingdom of Christ.

Prayer

Lord God, what wonderful times we are in. You have forced Your people out of the shadows so that we may reflect the light of Christ into this dark world. We know that whatever pain we experience is worth it if it brings souls to Christ. Use us Lord, for Your glory.

Now we also recognize that we desperately need Your help and strength. The enemy is too strong for us. The pull of the world is overwhelming. Our flesh is terribly weak. But in our weakness, Your glory is revealed. May You be glorified in us.

Holy Spirit, be our constant guide and companion. Restrain our tongue; give us a merciful heart; make sin repulsive to us. Continue Your sanctifying work to make us more like Jesus. He is our blessed Saviour; there is no other. He is our Lord and Master; help us to obey Him.

We pray these things in Jesus’ name

Amen