

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF JAMES

HEARING AND PRACTICING THE WORD!

Read James 1:18-27

Introduction

The theme of this passage centres on God's living Word:

- Being born through the Word (James 1:18)
- Preferring the Word to moral filth (James 1:19-21)
- Letting the Word save us (James 1:21)
- Listening to and practicing the Word (James 1:22-25)
- Experiencing the freedom of the Word (James 1:25)
- Living out the Word's teaching in practical ways (James 1:26-27)

James' readers struggled with the same problem that all of us do. They equated listening to the Word taught in church with living out its implications in their everyday life. We can see this in self-righteous churchgoers, but can we see it in ourselves? Probably not unless God helps us to become very honest with ourselves. Perhaps through this passage He will do so.

Being Born through the Word

“Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of His creatures.” (v18)

We can see God's goodness in our salvation, as He initiated our salvation of His own will and brought us forth to spiritual life by His word of truth, that we might be to His glory as first fruits of His harvest. Our spiritual birth, therefore, was an act of His will first and foremost, and only after that, our will.

Second, we read that the means of our begetting was "the word of truth." How does a person become spiritually alive? Jesus had discussed this matter with Nicodemus, a well-educated, pious Jew, who later became his disciple. "You must be born again," Jesus insisted (John 3:7). In our era, the phrase "born again" is often used in an entirely secular sense to mean renewed or revived or reconstituted. Jesus is completely serious in this conversation. "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but Spirit gives birth to spirit." All of us were born physically, "of the flesh," but according to Jesus, not all have been born spiritually, since this is a requirement to even see or perceive the kingdom of God (John 3:3).

James may refer to his own generation of believers when he calls them first fruits, especially as being mainly written to Christians from a Jewish background. The fact that these Christians from a Jewish background are first fruits shows that James expected a subsequent and greater harvest of Christians from a Gentile background.

Preferring the Word to Moral Filth

“So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” (vv19-20)

We can learn to be slow to wrath by first learning to be swift to hear and slow to speak. Much of our anger and wrath comes from being self-centred and not others centred. Swift to hear is a way to be others centred. Slow to speak is a way to be others centred.

We're angry when we feel wronged. Sometimes it is our selfish pride that has been stepped on. Sometimes it is a violation of our human rights. Sometimes it is even a desecration of all we hold sacred. Nevertheless, James warns, "... for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:20). Lest we be quick to think of our anger as moral outrage and righteous indignation, we need to be careful that we do not operate in anger, since the anger does not bring about a righteous life. Yes, anger is to arouse us to action. That is the Creator's intent for giving us anger, I am sure. But once aroused, we must slow down and listen to God concerning what to do, since we cannot act in anger and do right.

Moral Filth

"Therefore, lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls." (v21)

This has in mind an impure manner of living. In light of the nature of temptation and the goodness of God, we are to lay aside all impurity, putting them far from us. The word translated "filthiness", refers first to "dirt, filth." Then, figuratively, in the ethical field, "a state of moral defilement or corruption, moral uncleanness, vulgarity,"

The phrase translated "overflow of wickedness" is two words: a very common word for evil, modified by a word that talks about quantity: "that which is beyond the regular or expected amount, surplus, abundance." Have you ever marvelled at the evil around you? There's evil everywhere! Of one type and another, some blatant, some subtle, all deadly. Recognize it, says James, and put it aside.

In contrast to an impure manner of living, we should receive the implanted word of God (doing it with meekness, a teachable heart). This word is able to save us, both in our current situation and eternally. The purity of God's word can preserve us even in an impure age.

It is wonderful to ponder. What does it mean that God has given you a "Word-implant"? He has put his thoughts and words deep within you. He has made them part of you. Not only has he put within you a hunger for his Word and his Words, but he has also given you the precious and tender plant to grow within.

Listening to and Practicing the Word

"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." (v22)

We must receive God's word as doers, not merely hearers. To take comfort in the fact you have heard God's word when you haven't done it is to deceive yourself. It was common in the ancient world for people to hear a teacher. If you followed the teacher and tried to live what he said, you were called a disciple of that teacher. We may say that Jesus is looking for disciples: doers, not mere hearers.

Jesus used this same point to conclude His great Sermon on the Mount. He said that the one who heard the word without doing it was like a man who built his house on the sand, but the one who heard God's word and did it was like a man whose house was built on a rock. The one who both heard and did God's word could withstand the inevitable storms of life and the judgment of eternity (Matthew 7:24-27).

Forgetting What the Mirror Shows

"For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was." (vv23-24)

The person who only hears God's word without doing it has the same sense and stability as a man who looks into a mirror and immediately forgets what he saw. The information he received did not do any

good in his life. The ancient Greek word translated “observing” has the idea of a careful scrutiny. By application, James had in mind people who give a careful scrutiny of God’s word; they may be regarded as Bible experts, but it still doesn’t result in doing.

A healthy person looks in the mirror to do something, not just to admire the image. Even so, a healthy Christian look into God’s Word to do something about it, not just to store up facts that he will not put to use by being a doer of the word.

Experiencing the Freedom of the Word

But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.” (v25)

In the ancient Greek language, the word for “looks into” spoke of a penetrating examination, so that a person would even bend over to get a better look. Though James stressed doing, he did not neglect studying God’s Word either. We should look into God’s Word.

Twice in James’ Letter we find the phrase “the perfect law of liberty” (James 1:25) and “the law of liberty” (James 2:12). It is a strange phrase for a Jew who was called “James the Just” because he kept the Jewish Law. What did he mean by it? How does the Law bring liberty?

It is important to note that James led the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 to conclude that keeping the ceremonial law, such as circumcision, was not obligatory for Gentile believers (Acts 15:19-21). This decision was made in place of the position of some Christian Pharisees who contended that “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5). So, the “perfect law” is not the Mosaic Law, at least in its entirety.

Rather this perfect law is what James calls the “Royal Law” in James 2:8, that is, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (quoting Leviticus 19:18). It is perfect because it sums up, as Jesus had taught, “all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:40). It is one of the two great commandments proclaimed by King Jesus: “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

Living Out the Word’s Teaching in Practical Ways

“If anyone among you thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion is useless. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.” (vv26-27)

This perfect, liberating law of love, then, governs what James considers pure religion. Sometimes Evangelical Christians are offended by the use of the word “religion”; they much prefer a more specific word, such as “Christianity or Believer” or “Christian faith.”

But here in verses 26-27, James uses a general word for religion, both an adjective and a noun. The adjective is *thrēskos*, “religious.” James isn’t trying to put other religions on a par with Christianity. But he is asserting that if we would consider ourselves authentic worshippers of God, then we must live out this liberating law of love in our everyday lives.

James mentions three tests of pure religion:

1. A tongue that is kept under control (verse 26)
2. Looking after orphans and widows (verse 27a), and
3. Keeping oneself from being polluted by the world (verse 27b).

Your walk with God is useless if it does not translate into the way you live and the way you treat others. Many are deceived in their own heart regarding the reality of their walk with God.

Widows & Orphans

We'll look further at the tongue issue later since James expounds on it at greater length in chapter 3. I find it curious, however, that he selects caring for orphans and widows as one of the tests of true religion. The reason, I am sure, is that orphans and widows have no power or money to benefit us.

True religion does not merely give something for the relief of the distressed, but it visits them, it takes the oversight of them, it takes them under its care. It goes to their houses and speaks to their hearts; it relieves their wants, sympathizes with them in their distresses, instructs them in divine things, and recommends them to God. And all this it does for the Lord's sake. This is the religion of Christ.

Unspotted from the world

The idea is not that a Christian retreats away from the world; instead, they interact with orphans and widows in their trouble and others such in their need. The Christian ideal is not to retreat from the world; they are in the world; they are not of it; and remain unspotted from the world.

James says that keeping from being stained by the anti-God world's standards and pollutions and greed and sensuality -- this is part of true religion. Character, someone said, is what we do when no one is looking. If we let spots from the world set in our lives and hearts, they can and do become permanent stains on our character.

We must watch our hearts lest they become stained with cynicism and unbelief, bitterness and unforgiveness.

"Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life." (Proverbs 4:23)