**The Serpent’s Wisdom and The Foolishness of God**

**James 1:19-27**

**Good Morning Beloved,**

- James is a prominent leader in the church.

- He write the first book of our New Testament, the book of James.

- He speaks to a people who are undergoing hard sufferings.

- Probably written after Acts 7-8 when Stephen was stoned to death.

* Now we might not have anyone in our community stoned to death for the gospel this week, but James is aware that everything from
  + mild hardships
    - A sleepless night
    - An upset stomach
    - Nasal congestion
    - Teenage daughter doesn’t share with you any more
  + To catastrophic suffering
    - The death of a loved one
    - The cynical indifference of a once beloved spouse
    - There is a tendency in everyone when we go through temptations.

So he wants the congregation to be aware of a few things

* Vs. 2-4 – Trials are part of God’s plan… not just things to be avoided.
  + Application: when you go through hardships are your prayers
    - “Lord, get me out of this situation quickly.”
    - OR “Lord, help me to learn what you want me to know.”
* Vs. 5-8 – When you feel helpless in trials… cry out to the one who gives wisdom
* Vs. 9-12 – James notes that trials come not just in hardships, but also in “the dew of blessings”.
  + Those in a low estate are tempted to pride just as those in a high estate are tempted to pride.
* Vs. 13-18 – Situations only reveal the condition of your heart. Don’t allow yourself to be deceived that a cynical, stoic approach to hardship is “just way I am” or “how I roll” because the unchangeable Father of Lights has given you life through the word of truth.

So in our passage today, James is calling us to see that we are engaged in a conflict.

* In the midst of every day life in a fallen world**, you will either be ensnared by the wisdom of the serpent or you will be set free by the foolishness of God.[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Reading of God’s Word** – James 1:19-27 (p. 1012 in the Pew Bible)

*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.*

*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.*

*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.*

1. Anger vs. Meekness (vs. 19-21)
   1. James addresses the wisdom of the serpent in verse 19-21.
      1. *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.*
         * **Remember the context… hardships.**
           + When the stress of life bear down upon you, how do you react?

When you have been cut off in traffic, what is your natural response?

When you have a sleepless night and someone makes a joke at your expense the next day at work, how do you think about that co-worker?

You go to the hospital and rather than the first question being “what are your symptoms, you get asked “what type of insurance coverage do you have?”

* + - * + This pastor is coming around his friends… putting his arm around their shoulders and saying

**MY Dear brothers**

When you are hurting or have been wronged by others and the only thing you can do is think about yourself… slow down.

**Be quick to listen to the word of truth.**

**Be slow to speak**

**Be slow to become angry**

* + - * + Doesn’t that just ineffective… don’t you need to get a little “salty”.

Why not use anger if it has helped me become successful in business?

**Because “man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.”**

* + In contrast to verse 19, man’s anger closes the ear because man’s anger is full of self-importance, self-assertion, intolerance, and stubbornness.[[2]](#footnote-2)
    - If you make “your rights” the basis for your relationship with others, you will respond to others in anger.
      * David Powlison notes that our anger can take many expressions…
        + Desire for revenge – you cut me off in traffic, you deserve a ticket.

Cain was angry with Abel without cause, and therefore his anger was sinful and wicked (Gen. 4:5).

Esau had some reason to be angry with Jacob, and yet his anger was not excusable because there was revenge in in it (Gen. 27:41).

* + - * + Fantasies of another’s misery – wrong during junior high… “that’s a shame… it should have happened yesterday.”

Seems sweet… but it will make you sour.

* + - * + Cursing – in marriage… your spouses is running late, so you think it will be helpful to point out proper time management protocol
        + Jealousy – rather than contentment in our own state we are grieved at the good of our neighbor’s estate.[[3]](#footnote-3)

For the sorority sister in the candle lighting ceremony, who has to celebrate her friend’s engagement when she can’t find a date to the upcoming social.[[4]](#footnote-4)

* + - * + Cynical – “That is stupid.” Why are we building a building anyway? What more do you need?
        + Indifference – MEH – I’m just going to play video games…
    - When you are hurting and you get angry, there is a sense in which you want justice. But the problem is
      * WE justify sinful anger in the name of fighting injustice.
      * But how do you fight injustice without being corrupted by it?
        + In contrast to the Wisdom of the Serpent, James calls us to the freedom of God’s foolishness.
  + **Vs. 21 - Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.** 
    - The “Righteous life that God desires”[[5]](#footnote-5) in verse 19 is clarified in two acts: **REMOVING** and **RECEIVING**
    - **Removing** is seen in the phrase – “get rid of” (NIV) or “Put away” (ESV)
      * It was used for “taking off a garment in preparation for vigorous physical activity.”
        + Just as in Zechariah 3:3-4, the high Priest Joshua must remove the sordid clothes before he could receive new ones.
      * What are we supposed to remove?
        + “**all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent”**

James has just called these dear people brothers. He knows that they are going through a difficult time right now, but he says something very hard to them.

* + - * + The “moral filth” (NIV), the “abundant malice”, the “rampant wickedness”… it is not outside you… it is inside you.

He says… you are treating your sins like a miniature schnauzer. – A Pet

Even if it’s filthy… It’s my pet.

* + - * + James is saying your heart is not neutral. When comfort escapes you, you are going to be tempted to use wicked anger to feel in control.
      * Illustration: Instruments must be tuned before they can make melody.
        + And what you need to do is tune your heart by
    - **Receiving** the “**the word planted in you, which can save you.**”
      * How do you receive the Word?
        + In the NIV we have the word “humbly”, but the word conveys the idea of “meekness”.

Meekness is a rather “Biblical” word… isn’t it.

Matt. 5:5 – “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.”

Illustration: Andy Griffith Show… The meek get dirt…. The meek are doormats.

What is meekness?

It is “power under control.”

This same word for meekness is translated in Gal. 5:23 “gentle.”

* + - * + James is describing something that every teenage boy should long to be called… He is describing a “GENTLEMAN”.
      * In contrast to the volcanic explosions of an angry man, the meekness of a Christian shows the “first fruits of God’s creation” (1:18)[[6]](#footnote-6) as the Word is planted in you.
    - Notice: You receive the Word, but the Word was planted in you.
      * Yes, you are responsible to “humbly accept the Word”
        + But look what god has done… He has planted the Word in you.

Jesus Christ fulfilled a long expected prophetic expectation in his life, death, resurrection and sending of his Spirit.

He writes his law on the hearts of his people (fulfilling Jeremiah 31).

This means more than reading, studying, or memorizing scripture… it refers to a whole new inner logic of the heart.[[7]](#footnote-7)

* + - James is not calling for a “stiff upper lip”, which is the wisdom of the serpent.
    - He calls them to see that the implanted word will produce a certain type of fruit (in agreement with Col. 1:6). It will produce an **ULTIMATE Salvation.** 
      * **This salvation is seen as we have a picture of two men.** 
        + **One who adheres to the wisdom of the serpent…**
        + **One who practices the foolishness of God.**

1. **Hearers vs. Doers (vs. 22-25)**
   1. *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.*

* The Wisdom of the Serpent is personified by the Man with the Mirror[[8]](#footnote-8)and the foolishness of God is visible in the believer with the Word.
  + The Man with the Mirror
    - Observes (vs. 23-24)[[9]](#footnote-9)
    - Goes Away (vs. 24)
    - Forgets (vs. 24)
  + The Believer with the word
    - Looks into (vs. 25)
    - Perseveres (vs. 25)
    - Acts (vs. 25)
  + Illustration: WTS students – credit vs. audit
    - When you audit a course, you sit in the class the be amused, entertained, enlightened… BUT you don’t have to do any work.
      * WHY? Because it doesn’t count. If you don’t want to pay attention, it’s okay because you don’t have to write a paper or take a final.
    - When you take that same class for credit, you see students act like MEERKATS.
      * All the professor has to say is “ON THE FINAL…”
  + The distinguishing factor between the two students is what they DO with the information from the professor.
    - The Audit – concerned for their own interest
    - The credit – concerned to please the professor
* Similarly, the distinguishing factor between the man with the mirror and the believer with the WORD is OBEDIENCE.
  + James conveys what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount
    - **24** "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. **25** The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. **26** But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. **27** The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."
  + Obedience distinguishes the wise man from the foolish man in Matt. 7
  + Obedience distinguishes the man with the mirror from the Man with the scriptures in James.
  + Obedience sets apart the Wisdom of the Serpent from the Foolishness of God.
    - Notice: Obedience to the “**perfect law gives freedom**” (vs. 25). The “perfect law of freedom” is the same as the word of truth, the gospel.

Pastoral Pause: Generational Difference concerning freedom and Obedience[[10]](#footnote-10)

* + Generation Above Me
    - What defines right and wrong?
      * There is Moral Law
    - Problems in life
      * People are not living as they should
    - Prescription
      * Duty / “That’s the way we were raised” / “Good Works”
  + My Generation
    - What defines right and wrong?
      * Acceptance / Tolerance
    - Problems in life
      * OPPRESSION – people are not allows to live their own lives
    - Prescription
      * Freedom / self-discovery
  + James
    - What defines right and wrong?
      * The Father of Lights
    - Problem of Life
      * People are living as their own lord rather than seeing Jesus Christ as Lord (vs. 1:1, 2:1)
    - Prescription
      * GRACE
  + Only in the Gospel will you be able to understand the union of freedom and the law.
    - As Martin Luther wrote in *Concerning Christian Liberty*, “A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all and subject to everyone.”
      * In a paradoxical tension, we see that a law gives freedom.
        + As the Apostle Paul declares, “Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life sets me free from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:2).
      * This law of the Spirit of life comes from the King, who brings you in to his kingdom so that you can be free (John 8:36).
* How are we made free by a law?
  + Through the foolishness of God in the Gospel
    - In 1 Cor. 1:21-25
    - God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. **22** Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, **23** but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, **24** but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. **25** For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.
  + The foolishness of God is Christ crucified.
    - So how do you from being an angry man to a meek Gentleman?
    - How do you go from being consumed with your own sense of injustice to caring for others to receive justice?
    - How do you get the power to remove the abundant filthiness in your own heart to cultivating the seed of the implanted word?
  + You go back to the gospel.
    - You go back to cross where God was so angry at injustice that he let the full justice of his holiness fall on Christ so that you might receive mercy.
    - You go back to go back to Golgotha and see the most powerful man in the world, in the moment of darkest hour, look down for and tell his disciple John to care for his widow mother.
    - You see the meekness of the Lamb who did not leaving you as an orphan but sent the Holy Spirit so that you might be called a brother.
  + In the gospel, we don’t just have a law to tell us how to live… we have a freedom to joyfully obey the word planted in you.
    - That is why it is so much better to be a Christian and read Psalm 119:105.
      * “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.”
    - You had enough knowledge to know what the path was for you to walk down, but since it was not written on your heart you had no desire to follow the way of this King.[[11]](#footnote-11)
      * Now we have the Spirit. As Thomas Manton notes, “Previously there was light in the commandment to guide our feet, but not fire to burn up our desires.”[[12]](#footnote-12)
    - But oh, how sweet the ways of our king are.
      * As Thomas Manton notes
        + God might rule us with a rod or iron, but he woos the soul with constraints of love…. The motives of the Gospel are mercy and grace; and the obedience of the Gospel is an obedience performed out of gratitude.
  + But what does it look like to be a “doer of work” (vs. 1:25) as we receive the implanted word?

1. Worthless vs. Faultless (vs. 26-27)
   1. *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.*

* In the History of the Church, some have seen these verses as calling for solitude and silence.[[13]](#footnote-13)
  + Here James combines two elements not often kept together
    - #1 – a concern for holiness and spirituality, often seen in separatist movements
    - #2 – a paradigm of social concern, seen in so-called activists.[[14]](#footnote-14)
* James wants us to the fruit who listen and obey the Gospel written on their hearts.
  + They are concerned for holiness and spirituality.
    - First – the wise use of speech
      * Those who have the word of God written on their heart will honor the Lord with their tongue because out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks (Luke 6:45).
    - Second – keep themselves from being polluted by the world.
  + They are concerned for social justice.
    - Just as your Heavenly Father has not left you as orphans (John 14:18), but adopted you into his family. We are to reflect his care by looking after orphans and widows.
      * By the way, the term “look after” doesn’t mean talk, it means visit as a friend. It not just a financial contribution. It is a familial tenderness.

In conclusion, my dear brothers, “your affections were made for nobler purposes that the be wasted on your desires.” The Wisdom of the serpent seeks to enslave your heart by making this life about you. The Foolishness of God liberates you by the act of your King, who gave his life for you. In appreciation of his grace, listen to his word, as faith works through love.

1. This statement is adapted from St. Augustine’s phrase “we were ensnared by the wisdom of the serpent; we are set free by the foolishness of God.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Motyer, “The message of James”, p. 66 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 148 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Augustine – “[Love](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Love) all men, even your enemies; love them, not because they are your brothers, but that they may become your brothers. Thus you will ever burn with fraternal love, both for him who is already your brother and for your enemy, that he may by loving become your brother. ... Even he that does not as yet believe in Christ ... love him, and love him with fraternal love. He is not yet thy brother, but love him precisely that he may be thy brother.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I am taking this phrase as an objective genitive in agreement with Dr. Moo’s conclusion that “to work the righteousness of God is simply to do what pleases God.” Paul will use a similar phrase in Rom. 5:17 and Phil. 3:19 and in those passages the context leads us to see the phrase as genitives of source that should be translated “the righteousness that God gives”. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In “Reformed Dogmatics”, Vol. IV, p. 48-49, Bavinck will see this implanted word as connecting the gospel to the Spirit giving new life to believers in calling and regeneration. Christians are the firstfruits of God’s creation, as the true Israel, who will establish the firstfruits of the kingdom that God will establish throughout his creation (Rom. 8:19-23). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For more on this idea, read David Powlison’s “Suffering and Psalm 119”. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Alec Motyer’s breakdown of this paragraph was incredibly helpful. See “The Message of James” p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Hort notes this as a “cursory glance”. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ed Clowney and Tim Keller spelled this difference out in more detail in “Preaching the Gospel in a Post-Modern World” at Reformed Theological Seminary in 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “While the externalized from of the Mosaic covenant may be superseded by the internal realities of the new covenant, the central essence of the covenant of law enters vitally into the life of the believer today.” – O. Palmer Robertson, “The Christ of the Covenants”, p. 184 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Manton, “James”, p. 106 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The Augustinian hermit Thomas á Kempis commends such practices in his seminal work *The Imitations of Christ* (cs. 1420-1427). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. “James echoes the numerous OT and intertestamental Jewish references to the woman who lost her husband and the child without parents as those in need of compassion and justice.” - Craig Blomberg, *Neither Poverty nor Riches: A biblical theology of possessions,*  p. 151 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)