

Tangible Faith

James 1:19-27

Introduction

What we know of James is that he and his brothers did not believe that his half-brother and the oldest of his siblings was all that He claimed to be (John 7:5). It most likely was not until after Jesus' resurrection that James finally did believe. However, based on what we read in these verses, I am curious if James was present when Jesus preached His sermon on the mount? James seems to be the sermon on the mount applied to life.

I can't prove it, but I believe James 1:19-27 is the first four beatitudes applied to life. Think about the first four beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-6):

1. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."
2. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."
3. "Blessed are the gentle, for they will inherit the earth."
4. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied."

Permit me to share some of my initial takeaways from James 1:19-27 and then share how the first four beatitudes fit into these verses.

1. Each of us live with a nature that we wish we did not have to contend with. For some, it is lust. For others, it is anger. If it is not lust or anger, it is something else. When it came to lust and anger, Jesus told us in His Sermon on the Mount to take radical action to fight against such sins that come from within (see Matt. 5:21-30). The apostle John wrote of our struggle with sin: **"If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous, so that He will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness"** (1 John 1:8-9). It would really be great if we didn't have to wrestle and contend with our sin though!
2. God's Word promises us that our fight with sin can be won with the Word of God. In fact, the battle with sin is first won or lost in the mind; listen to 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, **"For though we walk in the flesh, we do not wage battle according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying arguments and all arrogance raised against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ."** James states, **"ridding yourselves of all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is**

able to save your souls” (James 1:21). You cannot win against your sin apart from the Word of God.

3. To believe the Bible to be the Word of God is good, but you cannot progress and grow in your relationship with God if you do not act upon His Word as it is contained in the Bible. The only way to move forward in your faith as a Christian is to hear the Word of God and then act upon the Word of God by doing what it tells you to do. In the case of James 1:26-27, you have not really heard the Word of God if it has not affected your speech (v. 26). You have not really heard the Word of God if you are not looking for ways to love others. It is not enough to believe what the Bible says about the damage your words can do, the only way you will be able to start addressing the problem of your tongue is to, in the words of James, **“bridle his tongue”** (v. 26).

What God Has Said is More Important Than Your Feelings (vv. 19-21)

We live in a world filled with people who are slow to hear, quick to speak, and at the flip of a switch... explode with anger. We easily respond to the wounding of our pride with anger. Ecclesiastes 7:9 says of angry people: **“Do not be eager in your spirit to be angry, for anger resides in the heart of fools.”** If Ecclesiastes is true, and I believe that it is, then we live in a nation of fools. There is a righteous anger that ought to be felt and at times expressed, when necessary, but the kind of anger we see all around us has more to do with feeling triggered, hurt feelings, and whatever entitlements we think belong to us. We will look at James 4:14 later in this sermon series, but for now, we are told: **“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. For you are just a vapor that appears for a little while, and then vanishes away.”**

What is uncomfortable about the epistle of James is that it forces us to consider the simple reality that all of us are here one moment and then we are gone. You may have 76 years like Ozzy Osborne or 71 years like Hulk Hogan, or... you may only have until tomorrow! The question James wants us to ask and that he answers is this: What are you chasing after and why? Why are you so slow to listen? Why are you so quick to speak? Why are you quick to get angry?

This is why Jesus started his sermon on the mount with the first step towards the life you were born to experience: **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”** (Matt. 5:3). To be “poor in spirit” is to recognize just how far short you fall from being right before the only One who matters—namely God. To be “poor in spirit” is to recognize that you cannot help yourself. To be “poor in spirit” is to be fully aware that you need a righteousness that you cannot generate.

If you are genuinely poor in spirit, you will mourn over the sin that offended a holy God, alienated you from Him, and is the reason for the mess that is your life. There is no coming to

God unless you see your sin for what it really is, and if you see it for what it is, then you will come to him with the very keen awareness that your only hope is outside of yourself.

If you really do mourn over your sin while aware that you need God to do the saving, then you will be meek. The choice of the NASB to translate “*praus*” to gentle in Matthew 5:5 was a poor decision by the translators. Every other major version of the Bible translates this word “meek” or “humble.” To be seen for what you really are, and if you see yourself for what you really are, you will not be too impressed with yourself.

So, James states in verse 21, “**Therefore, ridding yourselves of all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility [*prautēs*] receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.**” The word James uses in verse 21 for humility comes from the same root that Jesus used in His third beatitude! If you received the word, you received the gospel. If you received the gospel, you have been born again and the power that raised Jesus from the grave, is the same power that now resides in you in the person of the Holy Spirit who indwells and seals you (see Eph. 1:13-14; 3:20-21).

How do I address the filthiness and wickedness that remains in me? Be quick to hear what the Word of God says about it, keep your mouth shut by accepting it, and instead of responding in anger, respond in humility. Who cares about your feelings, what you ought to really care about is what has God said and why does it matter?

What God Wants to Do in Your Life is Greater than What You Know (vv. 22-25)

If I understand the Christian life and how it is that God brings change in our lives, it seems to me that for God to accomplish what He needs to in my life, He must wound my ego by exposing my thoughts and the intentions of my heart. James exhorts us in verse 22, “**But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not just hearers who deceive themselves.**” The author of Hebrews said of the Word of God: “**For the word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, even penetrating as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart**” (Heb. 4:12).

What James states in verse 19 is primarily how it is that God uses His word in the lives of His people to live and finish well. Why does God want this for your life? Well, again, in verse 18, God used His word (the gospel) so that we can become born again, “**so that we would be a kind of a first fruits among His creatures**” (v. 18). Here is the thing about first fruits: The Israelites were commanded to give God the first fruits of their crops which was the best of their crops. If you are a Christian, you are God’s first fruits, which means you are of great value to Him, and what He wants for you is to thrive as His child!

If you are a Christian, then it is true that you, at one time, arrived at the cross of Christ as one who was poor in spirit, one who mourned over your sin, and one who died to the any notion that you were able to save yourself by laying down your pride to embrace the cross of Christ as the

only hope of your salvation and redemption. So what has changed since then? Not a thing! The evidence that the gospel has germinated and taken root in your life is that you are still poor in spirit, that you still mourn over your sin, and that you are still aware that it is only by the grace of God that you have been saved, are saved, and will be saved.

In the mind of James, and every other person who contributed to the Bible, those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn over their sins, and those who let go of their pride come to Christ, it is not enough to only hear the word of God! Why? Because when a person is born again, something happened that happens to all people who are alive: you are now hungry and thirsty. But hungry and thirsty for what? Hungry and thirsty for the righteousness of God. After the first, second, and third beatitude, Jesus said, **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied”** (Matt. 5:6).

When you are hungry and when you are thirsty for the word of God, it is not enough to just listen to the word of God. This is the point of verses 23-25, **“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. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. 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.”**

God uses His word to form and shape His people through the power of His Holy Spirit. To listen to His word intently will mean that you must let God’s word challenge your assumptions about who He is, how you live your life, and the world you live in. This is why we must be both slow to speak and slow to anger. What does that mean? Well, if you do not like what God’s word says because of what you would like God’s word to say, you must yield your life, heart, and soul to it. When the word of God confronts you, when it challenges your assumptions, and when it calls you to action, your best course of action is to yield to it knowing that God wants to accomplish His good will in and through your life for your joy and His glory. This is how you address, **“...all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness”** in your life; this is what it means to be a doer of the word, and not just a hearer who deceives his/herself. This will not happen in your life if you are passive about His word.

God Wants to Change Your Heart for Your Joy and the Good of the World (vv. 26-27)

Think for a moment about your life. Are you satisfied and happy with what comes out of your mouth? Are you content with the way things are now? What kind of mark do you want to leave in this world when you are gone? What are you doing now, Christian? What is your “religion” really worth? How much of the world has left or is leaving its mark on you?

If you think that verses 26-27 are only about what comes out of your mouth or to what extent you help those in need, then you have completely missed the point! James is taking something Jesus said and is showing us what that looks like in day-to-day life; here is what Jesus said: **“But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person”** (Matt.

15:18). Against the backdrop of Matthew 15:18, think carefully about what James is addressing in verses 26-27, **“If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. 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.”**

So, how are you doing Christian? What does your speech and how you treat others really say about your faith in Jesus? When Jesus said what He said in Matthew 15:18, He said of the Pharisees of His day: **“You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: ‘THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR FROM ME...’** (Matthew 15:7-8). If James was with us during our worship service today, I think he would ask what the Holy Spirit may be asking you right now, and that question is this: **“How is your heart?”**

Conclusion

Listen to me now, the epistle of James is written to those who identify as Christians. James considered those to whom he wrote his letter as “brothers” and “sisters.” What this means is that as a Christian, it is possible to have an unbridled tongue and to ignore orphans and widows for a season in your life as a Christian. The reason why James warns us of the dangers of being slow to listen, quick to speak, and easily angered is because those dangers exist for the one who has been born again. As a Christian, it is possible to be **“carried away and enticed by your own lust resulting in your own sin”** (v. 14).

It is possible that although you are a Christian, that you have entered a season where your heart has grown far from God because you have been carried away by a desire to sin. If that is you, then Joel 2:12-13 is for you, **“‘Yet even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘Return to Me with all your heart, And with fasting, weeping, and mourning; and tear your heart and not merely your garments.’ Now return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in mercy and relenting of catastrophe.”**

An outward expression of repentance in the Bible involved the tearing of one’s garment. God is not interested in what you do on the outside as much as what you are doing about the inside. To tear your heart is to allow the word of God to speak into your heart, and if there is anything there that needs to be addressed, to address it. It is to take the mirror of God’s word before your heart and to do something about what is seen in the mirror. Dear Christian, what is the mirror of God’s word telling you this morning? What are you willing to do to address what the mirror of God’s word is showing you?

It is not enough to only hear God’s word; you must do something about what it is exposing, because God is for your joy more than you can ever know. The first step is to repent by bringing whatever it is that you see before God and to commit to turning from that sin. The next step is to assess how it is that you got where you are, and to change the pattern of your life to line your heart up more with the things that please the God who saved you. Instead of standing and staring at the things that displease the Lord, turn from your sins to His Son.