

James 1.19-27

NB v. 18

In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

Be quick to listen [to the Word]

slow to speak

slow to anger

For your anger does not produce God's righteousness

⇒ Rid yourselves of all sordidness & rank growth of wickedness

& Welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save

your souls (= the Gospel: Rom 10.17; Eph 1.13f.; Col 1.5; 2 Tim 2.15)

But be doers of the word

And not merely hearers who deceive themselves (because they do not truly hear cf. Mark 8.18; Jer 5.21; Isa 6.10; Ezek 12.2

For hearers but not doers of the word = like those who look at selves in mirror -> go away -> forget what they look like.

But those who look into the perfect law of liberty, and persevere

Being not hearers who forget but doers who act –

They will be blessed in their doing.

If any think they are righteous

And do not bridle their tongues

But deceive their hearts

Their religion is worthless.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this:

To care for orphans and widows in their distress.

And to keep oneself unstained by the world.

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- A. Listening to the Word in meekness v's speaking in anger (Norman Mailer story).
 - B. Deceived 'hearers' v's blessed doers.
 - C. Worthless religion (betrayed by unbridled tongue) v's true religion (seen in action).

A. Listening to the Word in meekness v's speaking in anger (19-21)

a. Connection with v.18 and bracket of v.21 make it clear that it is the Word of God which we must listen to and submit to, not debating too hastily or in anger. Clearly leadership rivals in the Diaspora churches which led to unseemly behaviour (see 3.14-16; 4.1)

b. Prov 29.11 “A fool gives full vent to anger, but the wise quietly holds it back.”

c. Norman Mailer @ U of C Berkley

But it is to the Word we must apply this message, not the sort of nonsense Mailer peddled.

d. Meekness v's anger. Jesus' example, esp. at trial – where met false accusations with silence.

Also Matt 11.29, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

Actions driven by any anger other than a righteous anger = detrimental.

Cf. too Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, Matt 5.21-22. Anger has to be contained.

Fruit of Spirit includes gentleness and self-control (the antidote to rage)

e. Sin is a barrier to receiving the implanted Word (= the Gospel: Rom 10.17; Eph 1.13f.; Col 1.5; 2 Tim 2.15)

It is inherently rebellion against God and makes you ill-disposed to receive the Word. Spirit must bring conviction so the Word can truly be heard and take root.

That is for conversion. But here James is addressing believers: pride and arrogance ill-dispose the individual to let the implanted word take root and grow, producing transformation. Harold Coup's painting.

B. Deceived 'hearers' v's blessed doers (22-25)

Have listened, but have you really heard??

Having instructed them to listen, now distinguishes between hearing and taking in/on board what you have heard.

Cf. Mark 8.18 "Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear ? And do you not remember...?"

Jer 5.21; Isa 6.10; Ezek 12.2

- a. True hearing = humbly accepting, allowing the Word to transform and shape your life. Having heard, you are changed never to be the same again. Acts 2.37 – truly heard and cut to the heart (work of HS) => asked "What must we do?" Hearing led to action, and soon see transformation (new believers worshiping, sharing...)
- b. The "perfect law of liberty" is best understood as the Mosaic Law fulfilled in, and interpreted by, Christ (esp. Sermon on Mount)
- c. Contrast between looking intently at oneself in a mirror, an image which is almost immediately lost, and peering intently (sense of stooping down" or "looking by bending over" cf. Narcissus) into God's word in a way that transforms one's life – the truth impacts us and stays with us, having ongoing effect. What is important is the result of the 'looking'/seeing. Just as two ways of hearing, so two ways of seeing. God's word, truly heard and read, should imprint itself on our soul.
- d. Addition of "and persevere" speaks of the ongoing work of transformation as the Word continues to shape and direct
- e. Doing results in "blessing". Ambiguous re whether blessed in the doing, or as a result (i.e. in future – eschatological - sense). Latter = consistent with Paul: "It is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous" (Rom 2.13)

C. Worthless religion (betrayed by unbridled tongue) v's true religion (seen in action).

Religious activities included such things as prayer and fasting, sacrifices, rites and rituals, worship and devotional practice. James says that simply doing these things is not enough. They don't go any way to fulfilling the second great commandment. And if not accompanied by the 3 things he now lists, they are worthless.

- a. These are to be taken as 3 examples which are evidence of true religion, not an exhaustive list:

Bridling the tongue
Concern for the helpless
Avoidance of worldliness

Why these 3? Seemingly because they were 3 areas of particular problems in these Diaspora churches. James visits them all again for more extensive treatment:

Tongue – 3.1-12; 4.11-12
Concern for helpless – 2.1-13, 15-16;
Worldliness – 4.4-10

- b. “worthless religion” – often used to describe idolatry, which is characterised as “vain” or “meaningless” (Acts 14.15; Rom 1.21; Eph 4.17). The religion of those who can’t control their tongues is of no more worth than idolatry.
- c. Support of orphans and widows: imitating God himself – “a Father to the fatherless and defender of widows” (Ps 68.5). See too Exod 22.22; Deut 14.29; Isa 1.10-17.
- d. Must distance themselves from the ways of the world, not the world itself (cf. 1 Cor 5.9-11). What’s important is that the world doesn’t have an effect on the Christian life, staining it. Rather, the Christian life should transform the world (like salt and light).

Suggested Discussion Questions (You will probably not have time to do all 7, so suggest you be selective)

1. Do you ever get angry? If so, what is your natural/normal reaction? Do you ever regret your words/actions later? How might you better heed James’ advice to be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger?
2. What do you think James meant when he wrote “your anger does not produce God’s righteousness”? Did he mean that we should never get angry? What is “righteous anger”?

3. Compare what Paul wrote in Eph 4.25-31. How similar is Paul's advice?
4. What sort of things characterise a mere "hearer of the Word" today? In what ways are we most in danger of being mere hearers?
5. In what ways is sinful behaviour a barrier to God's implanted Word taking root in our lives?
6. In what senses are we blessed by doing God's word.
7. Consider the 3 tests James sets in the final 2 verses. Which do you find most challenging and why?