



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Being Doers of the Word

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

August 30, 2009

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

James 1:17-27

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Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment 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.

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the 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 religious, 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.

I'm sure that some of you have read the book from several years back that was written by Robert Fulgham—a book called *Everything I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. In that collection of essays, Fulgham points out that what he first learned about sharing, playing well with others, and a few other common-sense things in kindergarten, still apply in any and all areas of life. His book humorously reminds his readers of what they already know.

For many, the Book of James reads the same way. It's filled with a bunch of pithy sayings that are little more than pious truisms that almost everybody alive has heard a million times. There's nothing real original here, but rather a collection of the wisdom of

the ages, albeit Christianized for the occasion.

That's part of the reason that many folks don't like the Book of James. They say it sounds too much like their mother or Sunday School teacher telling them for the zillionth time what they already know. I can see the look on my daughters' faces when I remind them of something yet again. "Don't forget your best manners, girls." They stop what they are doing, look at me with "the look," and without any words they remind me that I am telling them something they already know.

That's the way the Book of James seems to many people. I mean, do we really need the Bible to remind us of these things from our reading today? "Every good gift is from heaven;" "be swift to listen, slow to speak;" "lay aside wickedness;" "be doers of the word and not hearers only." We know all that, don't we? You don't even have to spend time in church to know that stuff. So why spend any time dealing with what we already know?

That would be a good question—perhaps even a great one—if knowing something was all that Christianity is about. But, as James reminds us of what we know but may have forgotten or dismissed, Christianity isn't interested in information as much as it is in transformation—of individuals and churches and denominations and even the world. Those of you who have taken part in Disciple Bible Study know that—for in Disciple you study the Word not just to get information, but to be transformed into a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ.

There simply isn't any way to escape James's conviction that faith translates into attitudes and behaviors in the midst of our lives, which means that faith is more than a simple agreement with some doctrinal formula. For James, believing or trusting the right things means that you will live the right way. It's the heart of the theological conviction that right belief leads to right practice.

What James is concerned with, then, isn't that we know the information. He wants us recognize that there are people outside the church (or perhaps newcomers to the church) who want to know what difference the stuff we believe makes for our lives. In other words, James wants us to consider what the stuff of Christianity will look like on the streets, in our offices—in all of our relationships—if it were put into practice by those of us who hear and believe. This is a letter that encourages you and me to live as Christians in the world so that others will see what difference the gospel makes.

Unfortunately, some of us in the church have done a terrible job of bearing witness to this difference. And, though there is a lot of room in between, there are usually two extremes of how we corrupt the gospel by the living of our lives.

The first extreme is represented by those who wish to leave little doubt to themselves and the world that they are Christian. In and of itself, that's not a bad thing at all, but taken to the extreme—as too often happens—it shifts from pointing to Jesus to pointing to their own religious beliefs or activities.

I spent a fair amount of time this week trying to get this picture to come alive in this part of the sermon. Ultimately, however, on Thursday night I began to flip through a new book catalog that I had received from Cokesbury—the religious bookstore used by the majority of denominations today. They were advertizing their new offerings, and one

of them caught my eye because of what I'd been writing about in the sermon. It was a book called *Holier Than Thou: When Faith Becomes Toxic*.

Remember, the first corruption we often commit when trying to live as Christians is by drawing the lines too clearly, by setting ourselves up as the perfect examples of what it really means to be Christian. While the motivation is honest enough, there is danger if taken to the extreme. Here's the way the blurb on the back of the book I was reading about describes that first corruption: "No Christian sets out to have toxic faith. At the beginning of their journey, a newborn saint is filled with joy, gratitude, praise and grace for others. They hunger for God and long to enjoy God in their lives. Yet for some, a subtle shift begins to take place. They become critics rather than workers, skeptics rather than servants. Before long, one finds them resistant or seeking to impose their will on others. When faith succumbs to legalism, devotion becomes obsession, and the church can only witness to empty pews."

Obviously, that book is talking about that corruption in the extreme. And it's important to remember—in case you're wondering—that your faith can be toxic at any point in the tired liberal/conservative spectrum. Any time we seek to show the difference our faith makes in our living by way of pointing to our own religious efforts (or pointing out the lack of faith on the part of others), we have thoroughly missed the mark, perhaps becoming too religious for our own good—or any one else's.

But the other extreme is just as bad. There are plenty of us in the church who have a strong grasp of what Christians believe about the way of life Jesus invites us to live, but who have failed to translate that into any noticeable difference in our lives.

As an English major in college, I had to take several classes in English literature, and I particularly enjoyed studying the writings of Jonathan Swift, the great satirical writer who penned biting sarcastic words about his government, as well as for the church of his day. In response to the political posturing in England at the time, he wrote a classic essay called "Against Abolishing Christianity in England," in which he pointed out that there was no need to consider getting rid of the church because it only practiced a nominal Christianity, having traded its birthright for a bowl of pottage.

In the essay he mused that if the church were to be closed, there would be no preachers, and, if there were no preachers, who would the wits of the day make fun of? He went on to say that what preachers do is to spend one day out of the week talking against what everybody is doing the other six days of the week. In other words, the preacher was preaching words that people heard in worship, only to ignore them when they walked out the door.

That seems to be the particular danger to us in the Presbyterian Church in our country today. We tend to feel at home in the American culture, and we find it easier to get along if we go along. So, even though we may know everything Jesus ever said about forgiveness, we are as likely to hold onto a grudge as anybody else.

Or, we may know that Christianity calls us to put the kingdom of God above all earthly kingdoms, and yet our lives will display a blatant nationalism at the expense of those outside our borders.

Or, we may be able to recite all the times the church has reminded us, as James has

done today, that we should be quick to listen and slow to speak, and slow to anger, but our conversations end up looking exactly like the arguing heads passing for debate on the cable news.

Two extremes—those who are so religious that they shut everyone not like them out, and those who blend in so well that there is little evidence of a life commitment to the way of Jesus Christ. Most of us fall somewhere within these extremes, and James has a word for us there.

James, you see, boiled Christianity down to a very practical core: If you want to be truly religious, then care for the widows and the poor and the orphans in their distress. That's James concern—what our religion looks like in the midst of a broken and fearful world. As important as it is that we be here—and that we know the things that make for the Christian way—it is imperative that we perform this word in the real places of our lives where the broken are longing to be made whole.

James didn't give us an easy prescription, did he? If he'd asked us to recite our memory verses or to tell how many disciples Jesus had or to show our Sunday School perfect attendance pins, then we might pass the test. But this is a much more difficult test than that, for Christianity can't be memorized. It's not a bunch of right answers that have been passed down from generation to generation. No, Christianity is a way of life that stems from the answer we give to Christ's call to follow him. It's a way of life that calls us to love the unlovable, to serve the lowest of the low, and to offer grace to all people.

What we are talking about is a life of discipleship, and a disciple's life bears distinctive marks—it shows forth certain attitudes and behaviors in the midst of day-to-day living by which we grow in the practice of our faith.

Those marks of discipleship will be our focus the first six weeks of the Wednesday night study for adults which will begin on September 9th. While we won't be focusing on the book of James in that study, James no doubt would agree that the Christian life bears distinctive marks. In our study together we'll look at how a disciple's life will be marked by daily prayer, by weekly worship, by reading and studying the scriptures, by serving (both here in the congregation and outside the church as well), by being in relationships with others that encourage mutual spiritual growth, and by giving of our time, talent, and resources.

In worship, we gather around the Word to be transformed into a people who get swept up into the way of the One who goes before us. The hope, you see, is not that we will simply hear it, but that we will be spurred to live it in this world that God loves. That's why, when we get to the end of the service today, we won't just leave, but rather we'll go as the people that God is sending to be doers of this Word that we have heard.