

STUDIES IN THE EPISTLE OF JAMES – PART 2

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Scripture: James 1: 19-27

We're looking at the epistle of James, and last week we looked at the first half of the first chapter. We looked at the way James starts with his opening words that say, "Consider it pure joy, brothers, when you face trials." And if we are honest with ourselves, that's not what we want to hear when we face trials. So, it was a very stark reminder that not only is he saying something that needs our attention, because nothing in the Bible is not without the goodness of God embedded in it. so, we needed to pay attention to see what he was saying and how we can understand it better.

James is a very rational kind of a writer. We saw that he gave us a rationale for how we can reach this place of joy in the midst of trials. And when we finished, we said that the best way to read into "consider it pure joy" is to start from where he ended, which was saying, "If you lack wisdom, ask of the Lord and He will give generously." We said that the only way it makes sense for us in the midst of trials to think about joy is to say, "Hang on! I need to somehow switch to another mode here. I need to connect with God and say, 'Lord, in the midst of this, how can I find joy?'"

He says, "It's only the wisdom of God that will enable us to have joy in the midst of a situation like this." Why? Only God knows everything that is concerned with your situation. He knows far more than you do about what's assailing you. He knows why. He knows how. He knows how long it will last. He knows what He's going to do with it. Everything. And so, we need the wisdom of God as a starting point as we look at trials and tribulations. As the wisdom of God comes upon us, it must lead to patience and endurance. In other words, be patient. Patience is not jumping the gun and trying to do something in our own strength. Patience is saying: I will go through it. Patient endurance! Endure it. Don't try and cut it short by our own wisdom.

Why? Because, during this time of trial, God is doing something good. God is doing something good in the midst of all that is happening to you. And because we understand that God is doing something good, we can have joy. If I tell you that today, God is going to do something good in you, immediately joy comes into our hearts. We want God to do something in our midst, in our lives. And when He does, it's a joyful experience. And James is saying: When you look at your trials, when you look at adversity, when you look at difficult times in your life, remember that God has a way of moving you from that trial, that tribulation, to the place where you can say, 'Lord, I consider it joy, because through Your wisdom, I have found patience to endure. And as I endure this, I know that You are refining me, that You are doing something good.' Just as gold is refined in the furnace, God is doing something good in our lives.

So that's what we looked at last week. Then we also looked at a few other verses that talked about temptation. Temptation doesn't come from God. God cannot be tempted, nor does He tempt anyone. So where does temptation come from? James says it comes from us. It comes from our own desires, our fleshly desires. It can come from within and without, but we engage with it, and the engagement of it is what leads us to sin. Sin then leads to death. And then we left it at that.

But before I get into where we want to be today, which is vv. 19-27, I want to focus on v. 17.

¹⁷ Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the father of lights with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.

Every good thing, beloved; we love every perfect gift that comes to us from God. He continues to be the benevolent Father that He has always been. This verse must make us stop and pause and reflect

on the goodness of God. We don't do it often enough. We take so much for granted. We take a home that we can go back to after this for granted. We take food that comes on our table for granted. We take family for granted. God has given us loving people to be part of our lives. God has given us gifts, wonderful talents that he has placed in each one of our lives, all because He's a benevolent Father. And anytime is a good time to stop and say, "Abba, I want to thank You. I want to thank You for being so good in my life."

Come back always to 1:17. Reflect on it, and then say: I have so much to be thankful for. For God is such a good God. It's a matter of perspective. It's where you stand and look at every situation that faces you. You can stand and look at the situation and focus on that situation and realize that your strength, your resources, your wisdom are not match for what is in front of you. Or you can lift your eyes off of that situation and look to our eternal Father in heaven and say, "This situation is no match for my God." It's a matter of perspective, to be able to look at every situation that confronts you through the grid of God's power and His omniscience, His omnipresence, His omnipotence. That's what we need to do when we walk through dark valleys, or the valley of the shadow of death, difficult situations, to lift our eyes and say: I lift my eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help? My help comes from the Lord.

All of this, I believe, James is trying to put into us things, thoughts that will help us to look at this powerful word that he speaks in the beginning – to consider it joy. So that's where I want to leave us in terms of wrapping up what we did last week.

James 1:19-27

¹⁹ This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; ²⁰ for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. ²¹ Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. ²² But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴ for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. ²⁵ But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.

²⁶ If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. ²⁷ Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

We are going to look at the kind of faith that will enable us to have this place of joy in whatever we face as we go through life. That's what James' epistle is about. He is talking to Christians, believers, and he's saying: Post the fact that you have come to know Jesus, there is an onward trajectory of holiness that must happen in your life. You cannot settle for just saying 'I know Jesus'. There must be a transformation that happens in your life. Your faith must begin to characterize your behavior.

There are 5 or 6 characteristics that I want us to look at in our time leading up to Lent and look at them in detail every week, and today's character is:

A FAITH THAT IS OBEDIENT TO THE WORD.

Being quick to hear must involve an obedient response to God's Word. True hearing is more than just listening. The word must be received and applied. Then, he states a principle in vv. 21-22. He says,

“Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.”

The only way to receive the word of God after hearing it is to put away filthiness and wickedness. In other words, there’s a sweeping that must take place before we can actually receive or hear the word of God. James calls it filthiness and wickedness. Isaiah 6 says, “I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, with the train of His robe filling the temple, and the seraphim were singing ‘Holy, holy, holy,’ antiphonally, and then in the midst of this holiness, Isaiah says, ‘Woe unto me, for I am a man of unclean lips.’” What happened? In the light of God’s holiness, he saw himself for who he was, a person who was sinful.

That’s what must always happen to us in the light of God’s holiness, even as we worship. Our worship leaders do such a wonderful job in taking us to the throne room every Sunday. But, in the throne room, we’re face to face with the holy God. And the automatic response that we have to the presence of God as He faces us is, “Woe unto me, for I am a person with unclean lips.” And this must lead to a realignment. Woe unto me! There’s a confession. Immediately, what happens? The seraphim takes coal from the altar and touches his lips and says, “Now your iniquity has been taken from you.”

Always, in the presence of God, we respond with seeing ourselves in the light of God’s holiness, and how far we are from where He is. We ask for His forgiveness, and He forgives us. Then he heard the voice of the Lord. When? After sin was removed, after wickedness and filthiness were removed, then we are able to let the word of God sink into our hearts. And so, while we read it, we must receive it. And we do this by putting away all filthiness and wickedness.

But he uses another image here. He says – in humility: “Putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted which is able to save your souls.” Implanted or engrafted into us. What does he mean by that? He’s saying that the word of God is like a seed that is being planted in our hearts and in our lives.

Stop a moment and ask yourself – what does a seed need to be properly planted or implanted? Jesus talked about this in the parable of the soils. The seed is sowed, and some of it falls on hard ground. The birds come and take it away. Some seed falls on shallow ground where there is not enough soil for the roots to go down. so when trials and tribulations come, the word is gone. There’s a material aspect, that we are caught up with the cares of this world. That causes worry, and because worry is present, roots don’t develop. Again, there’s no fruit. But then, seed falls upon good soil and it’s able to grow and be fruitful. Beloved, the end path for us every day as we walk in the newness of life is that there will be fruit. That’s the litmus test for us as sons and daughters of the Most High God – that there is fruit in our lives, fruit that comes, as we look at John 15, by being completely tied into the branch and to the root. Because it is out of that, that we get our nutrients, out of the word of God. So, James is saying that this word must be like that – implanted. And the only way that we can receive it is to receive it in humility, because it is something being done. We get rid of the filthiness and wickedness, and then the word gets implanted into our lives.

Then in vv. 23-25, he gives us an illustration. He says: ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the Word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴ for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. ²⁵ But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.”

What is James saying here? When you go and look in a mirror, what is the idea behind looking at yourself in the mirror? It is to see whether everything is okay. You check to see whether you need to adjust your hair, whether your tie is a little out, or something. The mirror tells us exactly how we look, except for the trick mirrors that tell us whether we are fat or tall or thin. James is not talking about those kind of mirrors. He's talking about a mirror that actually tells us how we are. What happens when we see that something is amiss? We fix it. James says: Nobody walks away from the mirror and forgets what he looked like. You look at the mirror to be reminded that there's something that needs fixing.

Similarly, with the word of God. When you look at the word of God, you can't just read the word of God and walk away without saying, "The word of God talked to me about fixing something in my life, but I'm not fixing it. What good is that? It's like a man who is deluded. You walk away thinking: there's no need for me to align with anything. I just read the Bible. It's fine. He says that the one reason we look in the mirror is to be able to see what needs fixing. And it's the same with the word of God. "For one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it." In other words, what it tells you is: listen, here's where you're out of sync with what God wants from you. Here's where you're following your own path. Here's where you've gotten into some addictive behavior. Here's where you need to watch out. Here's where you need to be a good worshipper. Here's where you need to be ardent in your reading of scripture. All of these things come up to us like a mirror when we read the word of God. And James says that, that's how you read the word of God; you cannot read it and walk away saying: okay, I read the word of God.

Dr. Warren Wiersbe says this: "It is not enough to hear the word; we must do it. many people have the mistaken idea that hearing a good sermon or Bible study is what makes them grow and get God's blessing. No. It is not the hearing, but the doing that brings the blessing." So, whatever is your takeaway from a sermon or a Bible study, it is something that you need to put into your life. That must always be the takeaway. It cannot be that you read the Bible because you're committed to reading a chapter every day, and not ask what does this chapter tell me about my life that I need to change about it? He goes on to say, "Too many Christians mark their bibles, but their bibles never mark them!" What a line! We mark our bibles, but does the bible mark us? If you think you're spiritual because you hear the Word, then you're only kidding yourself.

James winds up this section by saying that we must gaze intently at the word and then abide by it. do whatever it is asking us to do, and not be like a forgetful hearer. As he says in v. 25, ...then a blessing will come to us. This man will be blessed in what he/she does.

And then, he ends with an application or kind of the result of what must happen if we are in this kind of sync with what he has said till now. He says, ²⁶ If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. ²⁷ Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Three things, James says, must happen as a consequence, as a result of having obedient faith, a faith that means that we are doers of the Word.

1. We will have to bridle our tongue. Be careful of what we say. I won't go into this in depth as James deals with this in ch. 3. But I want to say this: all of us have been party to words that have been spoken to us or over us that have caused us great anguish. All of us have words that have hurt, words that have stung, words that have diminished us – because somebody didn't bridle their tongue.

When I do pre-marital counselling, one of the things I emphasize with the couple is to never use words that will harm, never use words that are cutting. Never use words that will hurt your spouse. Make sure that they know that whatever you say, you will never hurt them intentionally. Those hurtful words are like a wound that draws blood. The wound dries, heals, and there's a scab. The scab falls off and leaves a scar. That scar is a constant reminder that you were hurt. That's what happens when loose words are spoken. You can never take them back. Whatever you say after that can never erase them. So, if each of us here has been hurt by words spoken to us, then think how careful we need to be about the words we speak to others. Let it never be that my words hurt another person.
An aspect of this obedient faith is that we bridle our tongue.

2. We must minister to orphans and widows in their distress. We should be in service to humanity. This past Christmas, our choir was able to go to a home where they had children, the oldest must have been about 13 or 14, all suffering from cancer. Not one of our members came back unchanged. It touched their lives in strong, powerful ways. You can never be the same after you visit a place where they don't have what you have. James says: The kind of faith I'm talking about is a kind of faith that thinks about these kinds of situations. Look for people in distress, whether orphans or widows or destitute, whoever, the service must be outward. Behavior must be seen as holy behavior that comes from people who know Jesus.
3. We need to keep ourselves unstained by the world. As Jesus would say, "Be in the world, but not of the world." We have to be in the world. We have to mingle with people who don't know Jesus. Why? Because He calls us to be salt and light. That's our place. But instead of being influenced by them, be the influencer in this situation. Time and time again, when we read the Old Testament, we see God would tell the children of Israel to be a light, be a city on a hill; be separate. Don't get taken in by the customs of the places where you go. However, instead of being the light, they took the borrowed light from them and became like one of them.

James is telling us to make sure that doesn't happen. Don't let the customs of the world stain you. Let the holiness of God, the values of the kingdom, be what you espouse every day. Wherever you go, whether to school, college, an institution, at work, as you travel, with your family – wherever you are, may the values of the kingdom always be visible.

That's where he ends. So this whole idea of obedience, of faith that must be obedient. 3 things:

- Receive the Word. And a prerequisite to receiving it is to put away all filthiness and wickedness.
- Be doers of the Word. Remember the mirror. You never look at a mirror and then say, "Okay, I'm done." The same thing with the sword of God. Look at it and as you read it, see what it is saying to you.
- There's a service result. How you engage with people around you is important. So, watch the way you speak. Make sure that you have a service for people who need care. Then make sure that as you mingle with people, as you do these things, that you remain unstained by it.

Church, I want to leave you with one verse that kind of came home to me so strong, amidst all that he has spoken to us. Verse 25 says this, that when we abide by the word and become an effectual doer, we will be blessed in what we do. Who doesn't want a blessing from God? Don't we all want God's blessing to rest upon us? I know the word 'blessing' has now become so common. It's replaced

'sincerely' for Christians. And yet, what does God's blessing look like? Think about that! look at the various places in scripture where God has blessed His people, and think that's what He is wanting to place upon you. His blessing – He wants it to rest upon you. If these criteria are fulfilled, if we are doers of the Word, God automatically rests His blessing upon you.

And I want to lay that on you this morning, that we go out and commit to being doers, reading scripture and being informed by it, aligning with it, accepting change and transformation however it needs to happen, and then receiving God's blessing.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, Lord, we thank You for Your Word that You not only invite us to places of joy, but You tell us how to get there. and then, with the Power of the Holy Spirit within us, we are enabled to get there as well. And so Lord, for all of us this morning, we want access to You, Spirit of God, to show us what the word needs to do in our lives. We want to commit to reading the word more interactively from today. Not only reading, but receiving. Not only receiving, but doing as well. and Lord, we come with open hands to receive a blessing from You. And we would even boldly ask, "Would You let Your favor and Your blessing rest upon us even now?" Lord Jesus, it's always in Your beautiful name that we pray. Amen.
