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James 1:19-27

Third Message

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A FRUITFUL RESPONSE TO THE WORD OF GOD

SERIES: FAITH THAT WORKS

One of the things I like most about my house is that we have a large side yard. It's just a plot of dirt, but for the last 12 years we have grown a big vegetable garden, enough to share with friends and neighbors. We've had corn, zucchini, squash, green beans, sugar snap peas, and my personal favorite, tomatoes – lots and lots of tomatoes. There is nothing better than a warm ripe red tomato picked from the garden at noon and sliced nice and thick onto a toasted ham sandwich.

Having a garden, though, requires a lot of work: pulling weeds, breaking up and fertilizing the soil, installing irrigation, planting seeds – and that's just the beginning. To keep the garden productive we have to maintain a regular watering schedule, pull weeds daily, and keep a watchful eye for birds, gophers, bugs and snails. It's a lot of work. Maybe that's why we didn't grow a garden this year. We were so busy with other things, it just takes too much time. So, our garden area has been untouched. The soil is hard as a rock now. It's mostly a weed patch. A few little plants have sprouted from last year's seeds, but without our attention and care they have withered and died. The ground just sits there. There is so much potential, but so little growth.

Our life in Christ can be much the same way. The last time we reflected on the book of James we were reminded that though we were once dead in our sin without Christ, the Lord “chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created” (1:18). The word of truth, says James, is not only our sure defense against trials and temptations, it is also that which initiates our new life in Christ.

Today we will hear from James that our nourishment from the word of God does not end once we have sprouted this new life in Christ. If we desire to become full-grown believers, we cannot leave the garden of our heart untouched. Our lives will become fruitful, says James, when we listen to the word, accept the word, and do the word.

My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. (James 1:19-20 NIV)

James begins with a very personal plea, “My dear brothers, take note of this.” He is concerned that his listeners pay special attention to what he is about to say. What he has for them and us is very important.

Though being quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry is sage advice in our dealings with one another, in this context James is directing his exhortation not in how we are to relate to each other, but in how we are to relate to the word of

God. Our growth in fruitfulness begins when we are “quick to listen” to God's word.

There are so many ways for us to hear the word of truth: daily devotionals, weekly Bible study groups, Sunday sermons, worship songs, conversations with friends, Christian radio stations, Internet blogs, podcasts, etc. Our difficulty in this day and age is not in finding ways to hear the word of God but in devoting quality time to truly listen. Our lives are busy – we are pulled in so many ways and distracted by so many things – it is tempting to make spending time listening to God our last priority, to squeeze it in when we have taken care of everything else. But James says, don't do that. Don't make listening to God the last priority; make it the first. Be quick to listen.

In the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel, Samuel heard a voice calling him in the middle of the night. He thought it was Eli, the old priest. Samuel approached Eli about the matter, but it was not Eli who was calling him. After this happened a second time, Eli realized that it was the Lord calling Samuel. Eli told Samuel what to say the next time he heard the voice calling him at night. The Lord called to him a third time, and this time Samuel replied, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (1 Sam 3:10). That is the kind of response we want to have as we read our Bible and as the sermon is being shared: “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

Think of the example of Mary, the sister of Martha. Luke shares an encounter between Jesus and Mary that highlights the primacy of “listening” well to the words of Jesus:

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.” (Luke 10:38-42)

Sure, there were other pressing matters that Mary could have been doing but she made listening to Jesus her first priority.

That is what we are called to do. But it's not always easy, for the word of truth speaks more than just words of comfort and encouragement. When the word of God challenges us and corrects us, our natural tendency oftentimes is not to quietly listen but to defensively rush in with our own thoughts, comments and opinions. We may not like what we hear, so instead of listening to

it fully we prematurely respond with an excuse, a quick rebuttal or an angry reply.

So James says, we must be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. Once we have truly and deeply listened to the word of God we are ready for our next stage of growth.

James tells us what that is.

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. (1:21)

The second stage of responding fruitfully to the word of God is to “accept” it humbly. There is a big difference between hearing the truth and accepting it. James calls us not to resist the word, but to embrace it and allow it to settle deeply into the soil of our heart.

When James speaks of getting rid of moral filth and evil and humbly accepting the implanted word, he has in mind the words of Jesus in the parable of the sower and the seeds (Mk 4:1-9,14-20). This was our Scripture reading this morning, and it ends with these words of Jesus:

“Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop – thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown.” (Mark 4:18-20)

The seed is the word that is planted in us. If the soil of our heart is receptive to the word, it will take root, grow, and eventually produce a bountiful crop of choice fruit. “Moral filth” and “evil” are terms used to describe both impure thoughts and impure deeds. Lust, jealousy, pride and greed are like weeds that are so prevalent in the garden of our heart. They entwine around our soul and entangle us, choking the word and making it unfruitful.

That is why we are called on by James to “get rid of” this moral filth and evil. Like removing dirty old rags that no longer fit us, we are to “strip off” our old, corrupt way of life.

The apostle Paul uses the same imagery when he writes, “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:22-24).

How do we get rid of the moral filth and evil in our heart and grow in Christ-likeness? By letting go of our old ways and eagerly receiving the word, says James. We are to take it all in, to welcome it in the soil of our heart. This is how the word saves us. It transforms us from the inside out. As the apostle Peter says, “Therefore, putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation.” (1 Pet 2:1-3)

James desires that we live fruitful and mature Christian lives. That fruitfulness begins when we listen carefully to the word and accept it humbly.

In verses 22-27, James gives the third stage of a fruitful response to the word of God.

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. (1:22)

Ever practical, James is acutely aware that it is possible to hear the word of God without putting it into practice. Obviously, it is not listening to the word that James opposes, but merely listening. It is never enough to passively know the word of God; we are called to listen to it and do what it says.

I remember hearing that kind of call to obedience a few years ago at a pastors conference at Regent College in Vancouver, Canada. Well-known author and speaker Marva Dawn spoke pointedly about how we are the most informed generation of Christians throughout history, yet she mourned the fact that all that information seems not to have led to greater devotion and obedience to the Lord.

She was saddened that we have been exposed to so much Christian knowledge, but how little that information finds expression in our actions. She encouraged us all, especially as Christian leaders, to reflect a higher level of obedience to the Lord. She spelled it H.I.A.R. She encouraged us to be believers with a High “Information to Action” Ratio. It was her desire that for every bit of Christian information we receive there ought to be a correlating act of obedience to the Lord. She warned us that when we do not act on what we hear from the word we demonstrate a Low “Information to Action” Ratio. When we behave that way we become liars to a watching world.

Those acronyms have stayed with me ever since. They serve as a reminder of what James is saying. We cannot be just avid listeners, we must be avid doers as well. If we merely listen to the word, James says, we “deceive” ourselves. If we only hear the word of God, but do not submit ourselves to the Lord and act on his word, then we are on dangerous ground. It is dangerous, because it is easy for us to be deceived that an informed mind is the same as a transformed heart.

C.S. Lewis’s book *Screwtape Letters* has a dialogue between a senior demon, Screwtape, advising his nephew, Wormwood, on how to prevent his clients from becoming Christian, or if they do become Christian from having a vital Christian faith. In one chapter, Screwtape gives the following advice to Wormwood about his new Christian client:

The great thing is to prevent his doing anything. As long as he does not convert it into action, it does not matter how much he thinks about his new repentance. Let the little brute wallow in it. Let him, if he has a bent that way, write a book about it; that is often an excellent way of sterilizing the seeds which the Enemy (God) plants in a human soul. Let him do anything but act. No amount of piety in his imagination and affections will harm us if we can keep it out of his will.¹

This is a powerful warning, and one we all must hear. What a blessing it is that here at PBCC we take studying the word of God seriously. But we must heed this exhortation by James to be doers of the word and not hearers only. If after listening to the word of God we do not take it to heart, and we do not act on what we

hear, then we are in a dangerous position. We believe we have done ourselves some good when in reality we have not.

James illustrates this point in verses 23-25.

Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does. (1:23-25)

James compares the word of God (“the perfect law that gives freedom”) to a “mirror,” and then sets before us a contrast between two men. One man is only a “listener,” the other is a “listener and doer.” The first man only listens to the word. He does not do what the word says. He is like a man who takes a quick glance at his face in the mirror, then goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. He neither takes what he has seen to heart, nor does he do anything about it. He is a man unchanged.

The second man does more than “listen” to the word, he “looks intently” into it. He spends time with it, pouring over it carefully to make sure he sees every detail. He does not give up in doing this; he perseveres, and thus does not forget what he hears. There is more. Not only does he “look intently” into the perfect law of freedom, he “does what it says”.

Now this man, says James, is like a man who takes a long hard look in the mirror and takes action on what he sees. He takes what he has seen to heart, and does something about it. This man comes away a changed man, for he is “blessed in what he does.” To be “blessed” by God is to be endowed by him with an abundant and effective life. We participate in that abundant and fruitful life when we gaze intently into the mirror that is the perfect law of freedom, and do what it says. Like Jesus says in the gospel of Luke, “Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it” (11:28).

James gives a convincing argument for our need to be doers of the word, but what kind of “doing” does he have in mind?

If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (1:26-27)

It is interesting that James chooses the word “religion” in these two verses. This is a term that seldom occurs in the New Testament. It is a comprehensive word for the outward expression of faith. James wants to be clear on the kind of “doing the word” that God accepts, because the “doing” of religion commonly portrayed by the religious leaders of James’s day was not an expression of genuine faith. They were considered righteous by many because their acts of piety were obvious for all to see, but what looked righteous was really self-promotion.

Jesus warns against such self-serving and hypocritical acts of righteousness.

“Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” (Matt 6:1-4)

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean.” (Matt 23:27)

Religion that God our Father accepts is not like a whitewashed tombstone that looks good on the outside but is dead on the inside. “Pure and faultless” religion is alive. It is love expressed as God loves. If we are truly God’s children, our character will reflect his character.

James gives three examples of authentic obedience to the word of God. These are examples of genuine obedience and worship by one who has been saved and changed by the word.

The first example of authentic obedience is controlling our speech. Our tongue can be as uncontrollable as a wild stallion, so we must keep a tight rein on it. The desires and intentions of our heart are expressed in our speech, so our speech is an accurate reflection of who we are at our very core.

In the words of Jesus,

“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.” (Luke 6:43-45)

Nothing reflects so much of what is going on inside of us as what comes out of our mouth. If the presence of God is within us, our speech will be controlled, loving and truthful. If not, then our religion is worthless, says James.

A controlled tongue is the first expression of an authentic obedience. The second is “looking after orphans and widows in their distress.” In specifying orphans and widows, James is prescribing nothing new or innovative for the Church. He is recalling a theme often expressed in the Old Testament. God has always been committed to caring for the powerless and defenseless, including the poor, the alien, the fatherless and the widow. The needs of such people are on God’s heart, so they are to be on our hearts as well.

Deuteronomy describes the character of the Lord this way:

“For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and

clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.” (Deut 10:17-19)

This is our motivation. As the people of God we show mercy and generosity to the poor, the defenseless and those in distress, because we have been shown mercy and generosity by our loving Heavenly Father. We love, because he first loved us.

A controlled tongue, generous care for those in distress – these are the authentic ways of doing the word.

James gives one more. The third mark of an authentic worshipper is “to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” James picks up the theme he presented earlier about getting rid of moral filth and evil that is so prevalent. Our eyes, ears, thoughts and imagination are constantly bombarded with worldly values and convictions that are contrary to the ways of God. James is encouraging us to turn our backs on that in the world which pollutes us, and instead embrace with open arms that which saves us and frees us.

Authentic obedience demonstrates itself in self-control, compassion and purity. This is evidence of the sweet aroma of Christ’s presence in us.

An individual who clearly demonstrates to me the truth of this passage is my dear sister in the Lord, Concha Ramos. I have been visiting Concha in Mexicali for the last 13 years. She is a pastor, a widow, and mom to a 26 year-old son and 18 orphans under the age of 16. I recently spent time with Concha, her family of orphans and her church community, because a few weeks ago, their orphanage and church were destroyed by fire. What has touched me so deeply is how her love for the Lord is humbly demonstrated in her dedication to Scripture and passion to help those in distress. She is familiar with tragedy, heartache, poverty and all kinds of obstacles, but that has not deterred her from loving as God loves. She is a true inspiration to me.

James has shown us the path to grow in fruitfulness in the Lord. He entreats us to be authentic Christians who listen to the word of God, accept the word, and do the word. It is not the intention of James to put us under the law or add a heavy burden, but to encourage us to draw near to Christ and find our fruitfulness in him. It is an invitation that Jesus welcomes:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matt 11:28-30)

The good news is that our fruitfulness is not based on our self-effort or self-discipline, but in the Spirit of Christ who transforms us from the inside out through the implanted word. His word is not just ancient writings on a page, it is the living and dynamic presence of Spirit of Christ. The joy of the gospel is that God’s word comes to live within us. Jesus Christ fulfills the promise of God to put his law within his people, to write it on their hearts (Jer 31:33). It is in him and through him and by him that we are made new creatures.

God will use his word to set us free from the bondage of sin and the lies of this world if we allow him. Like a double-edged sword, his word can penetrate deeply into our heart and break the chains of our pride, jealousy, anger and lust. He can set us free from our dark thoughts, evil actions and buried secrets.

Looking intently into the mirror of the word of God can be difficult for us. The word gives us an accurate reflection of ourselves and we see clearly the depth of our depravity and sin. But we must also remember that when we look into that mirror we see God clearly as well. We see not only our face, but the face of Christ. We persevere in looking into this mirror intently not because of vanity, with deep affection for ourselves, but because of our deep affection for the One who sees us just as we are and loves us still.

Our meditation on the word of truth, our humble submission to it, and our faithful obedience are not an effort to gain God’s approval and love, but an expression of his love within us and our love for him in return. There is power in God’s word. Without him we can do nothing, but with him all things are possible.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (HarperSan Francisco: Zondervan Publishing House, HarperCollins Edition 2001), 121.

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