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James 1:19-27

Fourth Message

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A LONG OBEDIENCE IN THE SAME DIRECTION

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

As we begin our study in the book of James this morning, I want you to consider the following scenarios and ask how would you respond if these things happened to you:

A large limb from your neighbor's tree breaks off during a storm and lands on your gas grill.

You are stopped at a traffic light and an uninsured motorist rear-ends your car.

It's Friday afternoon, you are finishing work and getting ready to go home, and your boss tells you that you will have to work through the weekend.

Your spouse tells you that she has made dinner plans with your in-laws for the third weekend in a row. (You were planning to watch a football game on television.)

You are getting ready to leave on vacation and your shower drain backs up. You spend five hours trying to fix it yourself. Finally, at ten o'clock, you call a plumber. Night-time rates are in effect, of course.

Your family is gathering at your brother's house for Christmas. On Christmas Eve, your parents are loading their car and your dad, who has cancer, passes out. As a result, he has to stay home and you miss having Christmas with him. It is his last Christmas. How would you respond?

I have experienced every one of these things, and I have to say that I responded by getting angry on every occasion.

As we have seen in our opening studies, the theme of the book of James, the New Testament letter written by the brother of Jesus to Jewish Christians who were aliens and exiles of the Diaspora, centers around how Christians should respond to the suffering that is brought on by trials. Trials are designed for us by God to test our faith and mold our character. Typically, however, when we face suffering, our response is counter-productive to God's plan.

In chapter 1, we looked at some of our typical responses to trials. We get discouraged, but James says the proper Christian response is to "consider it all joy." We try to escape the pain of trials, but we should let them do their work. When we are confused about how to handle a stressful situation, according to James, our response should be to pray. We feel embarrassed when we compare ourselves to the rich in this life, but James says we are blessed with the "unfading crown of life." We are tempted to give way to sin, and blame God, but James says that sin is a choice that we make that leads to death. God's choice for us, in contrast, is life and liberty in the Spirit.

Today, we come to a discussion of anger, an emotion that quite often is our first reaction when we are confronted with suffering and trials. In this text, we will analyze James' inspired word on what our response should be. James 1:19-22:

This you know, my beloved brethren. But let every one be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man

does not achieve the righteousness of God. 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 deceive themselves. (James 1:19-22 NASB)

James begins this section with the command, "know, my beloved brethren." While he could be referring to what he is about to say, it is more likely that he is summing up what he has already said. James reminds his fellow Christians, for whom he has great affection, that they "know" the things of which he has written. In particular, they know that God has caused them to be born again to a new life. That having been accomplished, they now must make certain choices that will affect their actions. Part of being a Christian involves making decisions, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to become "doers" of what we know, not just "hearers only." To borrow Eugene Peterson's phrase, God asks his followers for a "long obedience in the same direction."

The problem James addresses is anger. In classical Greek, the word for anger comes from a verb meaning "to be puffed up, to swell, to be excited." In the Old Testament, one Hebrew word for anger is the same term as the word for nose. We can get the picture; we have all seen it: the flaring nostrils, trembling and snorting with anger. At times, anger surfaces in what we call an "explosion" of anger; at other times it comes out indirectly, in the form of criticism, argument, or sarcasm.

In the context of this letter, James suggests that his readers, the Jews of the Diaspora, were angry over the injustice they were suffering at the hands of the rich. They felt life was not fair. We, too, become angry when we feel we are being treated unjustly and taken advantage of. We think life should be just and fair. It is interesting to note that in classical times, the word anger was applied to the actions of a judge in bringing about justice. In the Old Testament, God is often referred to as such a judge. He is a "jealous and angry God." We want to act like God, but we are too selfish and subjective.

If we were merely to look at life, and certainly life as it is portrayed in the movies, we would be inclined to think that anger works. People seem to get what they want when they let their anger explode. Anger seems to work in the department store when you want your money back. It seems to work at business meetings to win a point or put down an opponent. So from the world's perspective, anger seems to work.

But James says, "The anger of man does not work (accomplish) the righteousness of God." Our anger may help us get what we want, but it does not work out God's plans. God's way of bringing about righteousness and justice was through the death of his Son on a cross. Even for Jesus, life was not fair, and yet he accomplished God's righteousness.

The Scripture says that not only does anger not achieve the righteousness of God, it leads to evil and strife. It fuels the fire, making matters worse in our homes and communities. Consider these verses from the Old Testament:

**Cease from anger and forsake wrath;
Fret not yourself, it leads only to evil doing. (Ps 37:8)**

**For the churning of milk produces butter,
And pressing the nose brings forth blood;
So the churning of anger produces strife. (Prov 30:33)**

Anger is frequently our natural response to a crisis. But we become angry over insignificant things, too, to our surprise. I get angry when someone cuts me off on the freeway. I get angry when I have problems with the plumbing in my home. (Once, my son suggested that when I had a plumbing problem, instead of getting angry, I should just call a plumber. He has also reminded me that I play better golf when I don't get angry.) I get angry when I am disappointed. I became angry over missing that last Christmas with my father.

Now in these verses, James shares four practical steps to help us deal with this problem of anger. The first is found in the words of verse 19: We should be “quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger.” When we begin to churn inside and anger bubbles up, the best thing to do is, shut up and listen. Don't say a thing. Count to ten. When we feel under pressure, the way to avoid making damaging statements is be quiet and say nothing. I am not suggesting that we stuff our anger, only that we do not explode or respond quickly while we are out of control emotionally.

The writer of these proverbs offers the same advice:

**A hot-tempered man stirs up strife,
But the slow to anger pacifies contention. (Prov 15:18)**

**Scorners set a city aflame,
But wise men turn away anger. (Prov 29:8)**

The second step is, put aside the garbage. James says, “putting aside all filthiness (vulgarity, moral uncleanness) and abundance of wickedness.” Our anger, demonstrated in our jealous, greedy, self-promoting, vulgar first response to a situation, is contaminated with filth. We need to run this stuff through the garbage disposal. We need to filter out the evil and screen the wickedness. If we don't, then that is what will come out when we open our mouth—filth and evil.

The third step is, “receive the word implanted.” We must listen to another voice that will cue our response. We are to “receive the word implanted,” in humility. Is this referring to something already inside us or something we are to put inside? Here, “implanted” is used as an adjective. The word has already been planted. It is internal to our life, having been implanted in our hearts when we believed in Jesus. This is the life of the indwelling Christ, the word that “became flesh,” planted like a seed in our hearts, one which grows and fills itself out in our lives. The word is not the Scriptures, but the Scriptures feed this seed and cause it to grow.

A seed contains all the genetic information it needs to germinate and grow and mature as a plant. In the same way, the seed that is implanted in us has all the information we need to know who we are and how we should act, especially when we are under pressure. The process of “receiving the word implanted” involves listening to the word of God that is already part of us. We are to receive it and allow it to penetrate deeply, to “hear” what we know, in effect. This is not a mystical experience. We do not operate apart from the Scripture.

On the contrary, the Scripture feeds and confirms the implanted word. When we are in a crisis, we are simply to listen to the word of the Lord: his life, his still small voice. There is a difference between merely reading the Bible and meditating on its truth. If we carved out more time for solitude and listening to God, we would have less of a problem with anger. We rarely take time to listen, because our mouths and our minds are too busy.

Brennan Manning has a word to say about this:

Silence is not simply the absence of noise or the shutdown of communication with the outside world, but rather a process of coming to stillness. Silent solitude forges true speech. I'm not speaking of physical isolation; solitude here means being alone with the Alone, experiencing the transcendent Other and growing in awareness of one's identity as the beloved... In a poem, T. S. Eliot wrote, “It's bad tonight, my nerves are shattered. Just talk to me. I'll make it through the night.” In solitary silence we listen with great attentiveness to the voice that calls us the beloved. God speaks to the deepest strata of our souls, into our self-hatred and shame, our narcissism, and takes us through the night into the daylight of His truth.

Mother Teresa wrote this excellent word on the benefits of silence:

We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature—trees, flowers, grass—grow in silence; see the stars, the moon and sun, how they move in silence... the more we receive in silent prayer, the more we can give in our active life. We need silence to be able to touch souls. The essential thing is not what we say, but what God says to us and through us. All our words will be useless unless they come from within—words which do not give the light of Christ increase the darkness.

According to James, the attitude required in order to hear the word of God is humility. We must bring ourselves low to hear what God wants to say to us, even if we do not like it, instead of listening to what we want to hear.

If we do this, the result is powerful: this word is able to save our souls and give us eternal life. “Receiving the word implanted” saves us from death and frustration in a time of crisis, and informs us how to respond when life seems unfair.

The fourth step is found in verse 22: “But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.” Once we have heard the word, the decision we must make is whether we are going to obey it or not. Are we going to act upon what we hear? In Hebrew, the notion behind the word “hear” is obedience. We must choose to give up our initial emotional response, which is anger, and obey the word implanted. This is what Christ did. He listened to the voice of his Father in the midst of injustice and became obedient, even to the point of death on a cross. If we are “hearers” only, not “doers,” we are deceiving ourselves. Merely going to church or Bible study with the idea that hearing will make us whole is not enough. Our ears might well be open, but our hearts are frozen.

Our goal should not be to look or talk or act like Christians, but to be Christ-like, to not just tell the story but to be the story. As David Roper says:

It's disconcerting to find so many Christians who are educated well beyond their obedience. I think it comes from our tendency to confuse the means with the end. Many falsely assume that the

purpose of Bible study is mere instruction—the production of biblically literate and articulate Christians—a fallacy particularly characteristic of those of us who take our Bible straight.

The solution to anger then is, be quiet, put aside the filth, receive the word, and obey.

In the next verses, James gives a marvelous analogy that contrasts the hearer and the doer.

For if any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. 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 shall be blessed in what he does. (1:23-25)

According to James, a “hearer” is like a man who looks at his natural face in the mirror, and on going away, immediately forgets what kind of person he is. Have you noticed that no matter how long you gaze at yourself in a mirror, it is hard to maintain a mental picture of what you look like? In this analogy, James is making a statement about the spiritual life. The mirror is the word of God. The hearer looks in the mirror and sees in the person of Jesus Christ a reflection of who he should be like; but then he goes away and forgets what he has seen. His actions are not affected by what he has seen or heard.

Here is how this works out in practice. We hear a word about serving others, but then we go to work with a self-serving attitude. We hear a word about loving, and then we walk by someone who has a need. We hear a word about being patient, and then we get angry at our spouse. These are the responses of the “hearer of the word.”

In verse 25, James contrasts the “hearer” with the “doer” of the word. The doer of the word is one who looks deeply and intently into the Scriptures; when he goes out, he does not forget who he is. The mirror is the “perfect law, the law of liberty.” What an odd juxtaposition of words this is. The law, in the classic sense of the word, would not appear to be freeing or liberating. But James is referring not to the law of Moses, but to the law of Christ, the law of the Spirit, the truth that sets people free from the law of sin and death. When we look deeply into the Scriptures and see what we should be like, and then depend upon the Spirit to allow us to live that way, we actually become free from the habits and patterns that entangle our lives with frustration and death. The law of liberty saves our souls, our emotions, minds, and wills. In a very profound sense, obedience leads to freedom.

The contrast between the hearer and the doer illustrates an interesting phenomenon: We become what we see and fix our attention on. We are so influenced by the images that fill our minds, in the end, we become the image of what we see.

In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s famous short story “The Face on the Mountain,” a young boy stares at a face carved in granite and asks tourists if they know the identity of the face on the mountain. But no one does. Through manhood, mid-life, and old age, the man continues to gaze on the face at every opportunity. One day a tourist passing through exclaims to the once-young boy who is now a weather-beaten old man, “You are the face on the mountain.” The man had become what he had fixed his attention on.

If we fix our eyes on the world, then we will become like the world. But if we fix our eyes on Jesus, if we look intently at the mirror of the word of God, we will become like him, being transformed

into his image. This is what the apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:18: “But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord the Spirit.”

If we desire to become a doer of the word, we must look intently at the life of Jesus. And we must remain there. It is not enough merely to look quickly, or hear cursorily. We must abide in the truth and make the small, moment by moment choices to be obedient and faithful to what we see. If we do not, we will be deceived into becoming forgetful hearers. Brennan Manning writes: “Contemplation is gazing at the unveiled glory of God in the risen glorified Christ.” Another author writes: “Contemplative prayer is, above all else, looking at the person of Jesus.”

This is why we read and re-read the gospels—to look intently at Jesus. How did he live? How did he respond to difficult situations? We do not re-read the gospels because we don’t know the stories; rather, we read them so that we might become the story; we are transformed by the story.

The result is that the doer of the word will be “blessed in what he does.” This is not necessarily referring to a physical blessing. Doers of the word will gain the wisdom to respond to the struggles of life as Christ responded. They will have joy, peace, and love that cannot be taken away by the trials of life. Obedience, no matter how difficult, always carries with it freedom, wholeness, and eventual blessing. This is what Jesus promised in the Sermon on the Mount:

“Therefore, everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock. And everyone who hears these words of Mine, and does not act upon them, will be like a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and it fell and great was its fall.” (Matt 7:24-27)

Finally, in verses 26-27, the hearer and the doer are compared:

If any one thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion is worthless. This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. (1:26-27)

The religion of the hearer is a dead religion. None of his religious activities has any value. They merely convince him that he is doing good things for God. He talks a lot about what he believes, yet his lifestyle does not reflect what he says. Specifically, this one cannot “bridle” his tongue. The word is used for the piece of tackle that controls a horse. The “hearer” cannot control his speech, i.e. his anger. He is slow to listen and quick to speak. Our speech is a reflection of our spirituality. If you want to learn where a man is spiritually, watch him when he is under stress and listen to what he says. The hearer is deceived. What he thinks is fantasy, not reality. This type of religion is worthless, empty and fruitless. This is not a life being transformed into the image of Christ.

The doer, in contrast, does not talk about what he should be doing, he does it. True worship, true religion, demands obedience. And, according to James, there are two characteristics of true religion: compassion and purity. The doer is compassionate. He looks

out for orphans and widows and cares for them. When he sees the poor and the needy, the oppressed and disadvantaged, his heart is moved. Rather than being concerned about his own distress, he is concerned about theirs. Brennan Manning says, “The essence of the divine nature is compassion, and the heart of God is defined by tenderness.” The doer of the word, the one who is being transformed by looking intently at Christ, demonstrates the nature of Christ and the heart of God.

And second, the doer of the word keeps himself pure and holy, unstained and unblemished by the world. He does not fall prey to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, or the boastful pride of life. He isn't entangled in unhealthy relationships. He maintains integrity in his dealings, no matter what the cost. In his private finances, he is debt-free. He holds material things loosely and values what is truly valuable.

Notice the balance here. Doers of the word care both for others and for themselves. True religion isn't centered solely on the social gospel. One can be concerned for social action to the neglect of the spiritual life. Nor is true religion centered merely on pietism, which can lead to a feeling that we are too good to associate with anyone else. True religion involves looking so intently at Christ that we become like him.

I think these words by David Roper are an excellent summation of our text today:

And so our purpose is clear. Bible teaching (as well as everything else we do—programs, buildings, choirs, et al) is subservient to this greater purpose—to produce living reminders of Christ. This is the purpose for which all other purposes exist. To the extent that we work toward that goal our activity is valid; to the extent that it does not, church and church-going is a monumental waste of time and money—a conclusion to which a lot of sensible people have already come.

If we would be like Christ, God is calling us to a “long obedience in the same direction.” Trials and suffering may tempt us to respond with anger at what we deem to be an unfair world, but they can be the means by which we are transformed. If we keep looking, listening, and doing, God will give us the grace to follow him and become like him.

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