

A Faith for Bottom-Line Believers (James 1:17-27)

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James 1:17-27, The Message

16-18 So, my very dear friends, don't get thrown off course. Every desirable and beneficial gift comes out of heaven. The gifts are rivers of light cascading down from the Father of Light. There is nothing deceitful in God, nothing two-faced, nothing fickle. He brought us to life using the true Word, showing us off as the crown of all his creatures.

19-21 Post this at all the intersections, dear friends: Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear. God's righteousness doesn't grow from human anger. So, throw all spoiled virtue and cancerous evil in the garbage. In simple humility, let our gardener, God, landscape you with the Word, making a salvation-garden of your life.

22-24 Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. Act on what you hear! Those who hear and don't act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea who they are, what they look like.

25 But whoever catches a glimpse of the revealed counsel of God—the free life! — even out of the corner of his eye, and sticks with it, is no distracted scatterbrain but a man or woman of action. That person will find delight and affirmation in the action.

26-27 Anyone who sets himself up as “religious” by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.

The message of James is written for those who live and work in the workplace. James is a streamlined, pocket-version of the Christian life meant to be carried with you outside the walls of this church to a world that needs to feel the heartbeat of God through the lived experience of a committed believer in Jesus. Put simply, James is a Bible book for bottom-line believers. It's an epistle for the left-brained thinker. On the spectrum of belief and action, James makes it clear that both are engaged and both are essential.

You might ask, how does this section of James have anything to do with our work lives? James argues fiercely against the fragmentation of living a split life and insists the outer life of work and relationships must find a common ground in which to meet the inner life of faith. The book of James is deeply interested in what happens in our lives whenever we try to separate our Christian faith from the routines of daily life.

- Some of you love the poetry of the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly when it's read from the King James Version.
- Some of you love the epic saga of the Bible with all its family intrigue and mystery.
- Many of you are drawn by the stories of the gospels about Jesus' three-year ministry.
- A few of you are laser focused on the end times and the mystery of what's going to happen just over the horizon.

But others of you are drawn to the bottom line. And so, for the next few weeks, we will soak ourselves on James' practical advice for living the Christian life.

This is not an intricately written theological defense of Christ as God's incarnational hope. The Book of James is not an obscure defense of the Christian message against some ancient theological viewpoint that no longer touches our lives.

It's a practical teaching on the main issues of the Christian life. Scholars suggest James is the beginning of the beginnings of Christian ethics.

When we read these words and seek to incorporate them into our daily experience, we realize we are hearing from someone who was pragmatic to the core and understood that the challenge of living the Christian faith was what Søren Kierkegaard called "a long obedience in the same direction."¹ That phrase, "a long obedience in the same direction," is Kierkegaard's notion of simplicity so the believer can will one thing over and over again as an act of spiritual intent.

In order for faith to be determinative, we must take our faith with us to work. Most would call the work we do our vocation. The notion of a vocation comes from the Latin, *vocare*, which we interpret as our calling in life. Frederick Buechner claims we know our calling to the work we do as (a.) the work we need most to do and, (b.) the work the world needs us to do. To put it in other words, he says, "The place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."²

In our Scripture reading today, James warns us to be prepared for the coming of temptations. It's not unusual, he warns, for us to get confused about what to do or where to go. Temptations

¹ Kierkegaard, Søren, from *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*.

² Frederick Buechner, "Vocation," *Wishful Thinking, A Theological ABC*, New York: Harper and Row, 1973, 95

cause us to lose our way and get confused about how to live. Under the pressure of trials and temptations we become disoriented and unsure of what to do. And so, James tells us to remember that God never changes. To assure us of the unchanging, immovable presence of God, he uses the language and images of the poet: *Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*³

In order to live with confidence, we need to realize God never changes and whose light we can trust to lead us. James understood that in the darkness of nighttime, it was difficult to keep our orientation steady and true. It's an old wisdom lost to us urban dwellers that in earlier times one looked to the stars for orientation in the darkness. God has flung markers in the heavens as the lights that help us know where we are and which direction to travel.

But there's more. In order to live the Christian life out in the workplace, we are given practical advice: *You must understand this, my beloved: Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.*⁴

The reality is that we must find ways to merge our inside faith world with our outside work world. James makes much of the ultimate sense in which we have no faith unless it's incorporated into our inner, spiritual world. But that interior faith must also be lived in our outer daily experience. The two must be in sync with one another.

The issue of how to live the Christian life outside the walls of this Sanctuary is based solely on how you answer the issue of Christian integrity. Are you willing to let your identity as a believer in Jesus soak into every pore of your being? Is it possible to become so Christian that you can no longer distinguish between your inner and your outer worlds?

James paints a strong picture for us to consider by asking, *"What do you see when you look in the mirror?"* One whose life is not committed to Christ looks in the mirror, and after just a few brief moments, cannot remember what his or her image was. It's a haunting image to consider.

Wisdom literature always connects possession of wisdom with its practice as specified in the law. In this passage, wisdom is described as a spotless mirror that reflects God. Thus, by looking into the mirror of God, one can determine whether their life is being lived according to the practice of the wisdom of God.

Professor Ralph Martin helps us pull all these pieces together into a coherent message that you can pack away into your pocket and take with you throughout the next week. He claims the Book of James involves all the parts of the body in the schema of Christian maturity:

³ James 1:17, NIV

⁴ James 1:19-21, NRSV

- The tongue speaks rarely and never in anger.
- The ears hear the word and obey.
- The eyes see and remember the images reflected in the law of wisdom.
- The hands and other parts of the body will carry out the deeds that are practical evidence that a person knows the law of freedom.⁵

There's that old adage from the preacher who was asked why he kept preaching week after week the same old message. He replied that he recognized that the problem with most of us was that there were still parts of us that hadn't heard the gospel yet.

Francis of Assisi advised, "Share the gospel always, and if necessary, use words."

James would say, "Amen!" to that kind of wisdom.

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⁵ Ralph Martin, *James*, Word Biblical Commentary, Word Books, 1988, 54-55