

Some Highlights from James' Letter
James 1:19-27

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James is a lovely little book that the reformed Martin Luther hated so much he called it a “gospel of straw.” Luther, most argue, misunderstood what James meant when James said “be doers of the word.”

Luther thought James was saying something like, “You are saved by your good works.” Luther’s understanding of the gospel was that we are saved only by the grace of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; our salvation, according to Luther, is not based at all on *our works* but solely upon *God’s work* in Jesus. Most believe that James is simply arguing that with belief comes action. And if our faith isn’t backed up by actions, then our faith is not faith at all. Without actions, our faith is “worthless.”

The Letter of James is a great read, but it doesn’t read like a letter very much at all. There is no specific controversy or issue addressed. There are no specific people or situations mentioned. No talk of the weather, and, except for the opening, no personal touches. Maybe more than a letter, it is a Greco-Roman diatribe, or a paranesis, or a form of protreptic discourse (*fancy words*). Whatever it is, many of us love James because it is full of practical wisdom about living a Christ-centered, godly life.

James says, *turn away from the wisdom of the world and, instead, always turn to God’s wisdom—“Welcome with meekness the implanted word of God that has the power to save your*

souls.” Everything James write supports this general thesis: Don’t be wooed by the way others do things, do things God’s way as we understand that way through the Torah-law, especially as we understand that law through Jesus.

Finally this: James is not a book about manners. It’s a book about morals. Live a moral life. And it is not a self-help book for individual, personal improvement. James’ letter is written with the whole Christian community in mind.

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To make up for last week’s *pointless* sermon (ha, ha), let me lift up the 7 points James seems to be making in this brief passage from chapter one. They are all commonsensical, and important enough to be reminded of.

1.) Be quick to listen and slow to speak. At the country revival service the preacher invited people to come forward for the laying on of hands and prayer. A young man came forward.

The preacher asked, “What do you need prayer for?”

The young man said, “I want you to pray for my hearing . . .”

And the preacher jumped right in, grabbed both of the man’s ears, and started praying for the man’s hearing. After the prayer, the preacher asked, “How is you hearing now?”

The man said, “I haven’t had it yet. It’s on Wednesday downtown at the courthouse.”

He was worried about his hearing, before a judge, at the courthouse. But the preacher didn't listen long enough or well enough to hear the young man.

Be quick to listen and slow to speak. When you are talking to me and I'm trying to think of what I'm going to say next, I'm not listening to you.

Listen, listen, listen. How can we serve one another, how can we know one another, how can we love one another if we do not listen?

2.) Be slow to anger. Anger does not produce "God's righteousness" (Love does). James could say more about anger here. He could talk about how we don't so much control our anger as we control what we do when we are angry. James could talk about what Paul said in Ephesians(4:26), "**Be angry** but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger." James could talk about self-righteous anger, prophetic anger, anger at injustice. He could explore how anger is one of many God-given emotions, and how, as Plato said, it must be harnessed or it will stomp us and others. James could make the distinction between *feeling angry* and *lashing out at other in anger*. James could talk about how "sin" and "anger" are not the same thing, about how mad-isn't-bad.

But no. James is keeping it real simple, letting us to ponder the blanks. He simple wants to make it clear: be slow to anger. He knows anger is dangerous. He's telling the church, "*Be careful.*"

3.) Orient yourself to the power of God's word. Enough said.

4.) Be doers of Word not just hearers. A good teacher knows that after she teaches her kids about fractions, it's good to eat pizza. You start with a whole, you share a piece. And a "piece" is a "pepperoni

fraction.” A good teacher, when she teaches about subjects and verbs, knows that she must give her kids time to write in the journals about dragons and summer vacation. “Doing” reinforces what we “hear.”

Be doers of the Word. Go to Triune Mercy Center to meet the neighbor you read about in the story of the Good Samaritan. Give money to your church so that you can begin to get an idea of the sacrifice we read about in scripture.

With “doing” comes “blessing.” Be doers of the Word, not just hearers.

5.) Watch your tongue. Be careful what you say. James knew that this saying is not: “Sticks and stones may hurt my bones, but words will never harm me.” Words *do* hurt. Words create whole realities; if you don’t believe that just ask somebody who has been told, you’re fat, you’re stupid, you don’t matter. Watch your tongue.

6.) Practice “pure” religion. “Pure” and “undefiled” religion has feet. You don’t just talk the talk, you walk the walk. Specifically, walking the walk will take you to where human need is. Go there and help to fix it, in God’s name. Touch it. Pray over it. Sit with it.

In other words, when we practice “real” religion, we get our hands dirty.

And, when we practice “real” religion, we meet other brothers and sisters: the widow, the orphan. “Real” religion is not private. And it doesn’t draw us into ourselves but out—out in service to the world.

7.) James warns us that the ways of the world are crooked. He could tell us more about what he means by keeping ourselves “unstained”

by the world. But he's hitting the high points and doesn't have time to spend a week talking about that. His meaning is plain enough on the surface: Focus on God, look at the world through heaven's eyes, and cover lots of ground as Jesus did. Doing this—doing God's work—will keep us out of trouble.

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James pack a lot into this little book. One thing he doesn't say that I wish he did: talking about these wise sayings is easy. Doing it is difficult.

Let's help each other. And may God help us all.

AMEN.

James 1:19-27

19You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. 21Therefore 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.

22But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 24for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25But 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.

26If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 27Religion 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.