

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“Attitudes of Faith,
A Series on the Letter of James:
An Active Faith”
Proverbs 3:28-35
James 1:22-27**

**Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 16, 2018**

Proverbs 3:28-35

Do not say to your neighbor, “Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it”—when you have it with you. Do not plan evil against your neighbor, who dwells trustingly beside you. Do not contend with a man for no reason, when he has done you no harm. Do not envy a man of violence and do not choose any of his ways, for the devious person is an abomination to the Lord, but the upright are in his confidence. The Lord's curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the dwelling of the righteous. Toward the scorners he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor. The wise will inherit honor, but fools get disgrace.

Introduction

As I've mentioned before, I love sermon series. And one of my most favorite books of the Bible is the Letter of James. So for the next five weeks, we're going to take a look at selected verses from the five chapters of this Epistle. In his first commentary on James, Martin Luther called this letter “a right strawy epistle.” In subsequent editions he removed that statement, but it is nevertheless telling that he considered this book full of straw, unable to stand on its own. Calvin, too, when discussing the Canon of Scripture—the books that comprise the Bible—was not certain James, along with 2 & 3 John, Jude, and Revelation, should be included. Some of us may be appalled at thinking that these men could even consider removing books from the Bible. But the thing we have to remember is, what we call the New Testament is actually a collection of letters by the Apostles and biographies about Jesus. Many other such letters and biographies were rejected when the Canon was being codified.

Regardless of Luther and Calvin's opinions on James, I do believe this letter has a lot to tell us about the right attitudes of faith. I'm using “attitude” in the dictionary sense of disposition or aspect. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews is right to describe faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” And Paul is absolutely correct when he asserts that justification is received through grace as a gift by faith. But Faith is much more than just an assurance or a gift. It is truly multi-faceted, and, like a brilliant gemstone, is brilliant because of its many facets. All of Scripture reveals to us the brilliance of faith and James is one to help us in looking at and distinguishing the facets or attitudes of our faith. This is the beauty of his letter that reaches to us today. Though Calvin would've struck it from the Canon, he, too, realized the divinely inspired words preserved therein. Without further ado...

James 1:22-27

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

“An Active Faith”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Before diving into our passage, it's appropriate to answer a few logistical questions. Who was James? Both the Gospels of Matthew and Mark refer to a James who is the brother of Jesus, one of the sons of Mary and Joseph. At the time, Jesus' family was skeptical of his ministry, but, according to Paul, one of Jesus' resurrection appearances was to a James, who was distinct from the other Apostles, and he was likely converted at that time. Paul also tells us that James, along with Peter and John, were pillars of the church, with James being a leader of the church in Jerusalem. In fact, Luke reports that it was James who, after hearing Paul and Barnabas speak at the Jerusalem Council of the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles, judged that the Jewish-Christians should not trouble the Gentiles that turn to God. This position is reflected in James' Epistle, for this letter is written to “the twelve tribes in the dispersion,” which is a very Jewish phrase.

If the author of this letter is the James whom I've described, which I do believe it is, then the next question is to whom is he writing? He's writing from Jerusalem, but he is writing to the tribes in dispersion, in this case both the Jews who were dispersed by Rome from their homeland and the churches of Christians, Jew and Gentile alike, that are dispersed around the known world. Because of this connection with the Temple and Jerusalem, there's a Jewish flavor to James' writings. I believe this unique flavor makes the Letter of James important for study in today's context. Today, more than ever, does the environment around the church look like those of the Apostle's diaspora. From James' eyes there are thousands of Jews who are nominal in their faith because they've missed the Messiah. What differs today is there are too many nominal Christians in the world, people who claim to be believers of Christ, yet their lives do not bear the fruit of regeneration. James helps us to see what that fruit looks like and how we can cultivate them in our lives today.

Just one more historical note. The Jewish historian Josephus records that James was martyred in A.D. 62. Eusebius of Caesarea says that he survived being thrown from the roof of the Temple and subsequently clubbed to death. A stark reminder of the highest cost of the Gospel.

Now to the text. This first chapter of James' letter serves as a table of contents. He's introducing the themes he'll discuss further along. Some of these themes we'll talk about in this series. Though this letter is only five chapters long, it says a lot about faith and more than we could discuss in just five sermons. So I encourage you, no, you have homework: I want you to read the Letter of James. It won't take long, so you can even read it in different translations. This way you can get a grasp of the whole of James' theology.

Our passage this morning comes at the end of this first chapter and is the beginning of the actual content of James' thesis. He strongly demands that his readers "be doers of the Word, and not hearers only." Notice what's going on here. He gives *supremacy* to doing the Word, but *primacy* goes to hearing the Word. This means, hearing and receiving the Word must happen first. Without a reception of the Gospel there is no possible way for someone to live it out. This is reflected in the old adage, "putting the cart before the horse." In modern terms it'd be more like putting the bush hog before the tractor. You could put that bush hog in front of that tractor all day, and the only thing you're going to get is a crushed bush hog and hours of frustration. Well the same is true with the Gospel message. You could attempt to live out what you *think* is the Gospel all day, every day, but without actually *knowing* the Gospel, all you did was move air around. When we receive the Gospel and it truly impacts the deepest recesses of the heart, *then* can we be doers of the Word. Remember what Jesus said last week to the Pharisees? It's not what goes into a person that defiles him, but what comes out from the heart. If the Gospel is not in your heart, then what comes out can never be the Gospel truth.

Having said that, James is absolutely right to remind us that we cannot be simply hearers of the Gospel. Actually, it is impossible to truly hear the Gospel and *not* respond to it. To think so is nothing more than self-deception. When the Gospel is rightly preached and truly heard, it *will* move us to activity. As James illustrates, not responding to the Gospel and thinking that is okay is just like looking at yourself in the mirror and then immediately forgetting what you looked like when you walk away. Think about this illustration. For the most part, you know what your face looks like. You might have a spot of dirt or a bit of salad in your teeth, but overall, you know the features of your face and body. If something is out of place, all it takes is a passing glance to notice. Usually we respond to this intimate knowledge by removing whatever it is that's amiss. To not respond to the Gospel is to walk past my reflection and not even recognize that that's me. We can't even know ourselves if we don't know the Gospel. If we truly have the Gospel in our hearts, we know it intimately. Now I don't mean we need to know every verse of every chapter of the Gospel. What I mean is, the Gospel message, the truth of Jesus Christ and our salvation through him, ought to be so intimately known that we never forget it and can recognize it when we hear it.

In the same way, faith without action is an easily forgotten faith. It's a lot like a foreign language. I grew up speaking Spanish, in fact, it's my mother tongue, meaning I spoke it before I spoke English. The thing is, I am super rusty in my Spanish because I haven't used. The same can happen to faith. As a remedy, James provides the perfect law of liberty. This is one of those instances where James' Jewish heritage comes forth. He makes use of the term law because he knows that's what his audience understands as the Scriptures. God's Word, which is perfect, unstained, and uncorrupted, liberates us from the bondage of sin. And through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, we are liberated from the covenant of works and adopted under the covenant of grace. Moreover, when we persevere in this knowledge of God, we are blessed. We can't just drop that perseverance off. Blessings come to us through our continual working at and in this knowledge of God, and not in mere hearing.

Simply hearing and not producing an active faith leads people to a hypocrisy that is *the* definition of false religion. The church universal is constantly plagued by hypocritical leaders and members. Catholic cardinals and bishops who preach the sanctity of life and take a vow of chastity are sexually abusing and exploiting their flock. Protestant pastors and leaders who preach peace and nonpartisan politics are violently spreading political agendas. Congregation members who know that God requires *both* piety and charity limit their participation and spiritual growth to one over the other. James tells us these hypocrisies happen when the tongue goes unbridled.

In chapter three, he has a whole discourse on taming the tongue. He likens its small size within the body to the small size of a ship's rudder. Such large vessels are turned about by very small rudders, likewise, the small tongue has mighty power within and without the body. Another analogy he uses is that of a forest fire. All it takes is a single, tiny flame and a whole forest can be set ablaze. "The tongue is a fire," he says, "a world of unrighteousness" in its own right. If left unbridled, the tongue can wreak havoc in the owner's life and in the lives of others. A perfect example is cyberbullying. Kids aren't throwing spitballs, stuffing others into lockers, or pulling wedgies. Not that those are good behaviors. However, the things they say online have far reaching implications, even to the point of bringing their victims to suicide. That is the terrible, horrible power of the tongue. Defiled and worthless religion is when "we bless our Lord and Father, and with [the same tongue] we curse people who are made in the likeness of God." This cannot be so. And it happens when we don't have the Gospel in our hearts and when we don't activate our faith through that same Gospel.

But James doesn't end there, so neither can I. The Apostle closes his first chapter with this verse, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." The phrase orphans and widows can be taken in two ways. One is literally. James is saying that true and pure religion seeks after the welfare of the orphan and the widow. That may be fine, but I don't think James is so narrow in his interpretation. Remember, he's using Jewish phraseology, statements that will resound with his Hebrew audience. To speak of the orphans and widows *is* to speak of those who lost a father or a husband, but it's *also* much more than that.

True and pure religion seeks after the welfare of *all* the afflicted, regardless of their age, gender, race, status, employment, or station. Who are the widows and orphans among us today? Modern-day orphans are still in our neighborhoods. Many have not lost a father or mother to death, but more likely to the prison system, to rehab, or abandonment. The orphans around us are foster kids or children from broken homes. We can help these orphans through foster care or supporting foster families or finding ways to help reorient their parents to the right track. As it so happens, later this month we are hosting a foster parent information session. Who are the widows among us? Certainly we have wonderful, life-long Christians like Janet, Essie, and Dean. They are widows who can't always be with us and thankfully this congregation does a good job of supporting them. But there are other so-called widows and widowers in this community. People who are elderly without families nearby. People who reside in nursing homes whose children live

hours away. The homeless transient looking for a bite to eat or the elder living off of social security; these are our modern-day widows. True and undefiled religion is a faith set in motion that doesn't just pray for people in need but actually does something to help.

But James doesn't leave it at that, so I can't either. Our denomination and others like her are happy to quote the first part of that verse *ad nauseam*. But the latter is equally important, otherwise James would never have said it. Pure and undefiled religion is also "to keep oneself unstained from the world." Paul says we are not to be conformed to this world, "but transformed by the renewal of your mind." Because of Christ, we are regenerate beings. The old is cast off to take on the new. Too many Christians in this age want it both ways, they want to have their blessed cake of salvation and eat at the table of iniquity. As James says in chapter three, a fig tree cannot bear olives nor can an olive tree bear figs. A Christian cannot live in the same iniquity as the world. We are to be set apart for God's service. Not as holier-than-thou, for that is still hypocrisy, which is anathema to God, but as servants of a holy and sovereign God. If we truly believe that the Gospel changes lives, then lives need to be changed, we cannot go on living under the same intentional patterns of sin. Piety *and* charity are what define pure and undefiled religion.

Let us pray. Jesus, you teach us that the greatest commandment is to love God with our whole selves and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. This is the very definition of an active faith. Far too often we let our faith go stagnant. We are not pricked by God's proddings and provisions. And more often than not, when we do activate our faith, we fall in hypocrisy. Help us, O Spirit, for we are weak and in need of guidance. Help us to implant the Gospel deep into our hearts through regular study and regularly meditating on the Word. In this way, may we bear the fruit of our deliverance until Christ comes again in glory. Amen and amen.