

## Marks of a Faith That Works

### *A Faith that Works...* ***Obeys God's Word*** James 1:19-27

I'm reading from the *New International Version* this morning. And that's the translation we also have in the pocket in front of each seat. So if you don't have a Bible with you, I encourage you to take one in hand and follow along. It may be that you're using a different translation today. In the English language, we have more than thirty different quality translations of the Bible. Which one are you using today? Just call it out.

In my own library I have more than 20 different translations that I refer to from time to time. But I'm convinced we need a new one. Any Christian can make this translation: I can, you can, anyone can if they are God's child. Maybe you say: "But I'm not familiar with the original languages. I don't know Greek syntax. I don't know the Hebrew alphabet. I've never been to Bible College!" But you *can* make this translation. Do you know what it is? It's called the "Doer's Translation." (And I'm not referring to David and Paige DeWar in our congregation.) I'm speaking of the *doer* translation. That's the translation James is talking about in 1:19-27 – How to be a *doer* of God's Word. While we may have many different translations of the Bible in the English language, there is often one that is missing – it's the Bible translated into life.<sup>1</sup>

### **Why Should I Obey God's Word**

But maybe you're wondering: *Why should I obey this book, the Bible, anyway?* You and I read all kinds of books. Our city, Portland, is even known as a city of bikes, beer and ... *books*. I believe we have more bookstores per capita than any other city in America. We go to school and read history and science books. But history and science doesn't come right out and tell us how to live our lives. You women (or men) might read a cookbook, but you are under no moral obligation to make a dessert in a particular way. Maybe you love novels, but once you come back into the real world you lay imagination aside and get on with life. So what makes the Bible different from a novel, a history book or a cookbook?

The Bible is different because of what it is. James uses several terms to describe the Word of God. And the first one is just that, the "*word*," or the "*word of truth*" or the "*engrafted word*." Notice what he says in verse 18: "he chose to give us birth through the *word* of truth..." And then in verse 21 he says, "accept the *word* planted in you..."<sup>ii</sup>

Another descriptive word that James uses for the Bible is the term "*scripture*" as in 2:8, 23 and 4:5. This word means literally "the writings" and for James refers primarily to the Old Testament.

But there's a third description that James uses which sets the stage for what he's going to tell us in the passage we're looking at today. It's the description of the Bible as the *law of liberty* or as

the NIV puts it, “the law that gives freedom” (1:25; 2:12).<sup>iii</sup> Paradoxically, if you want true freedom your life, then you need to submit yourself to the directives of this book. And more than that, all that James is going to say about obeying God’s Word is not to be viewed as a legalistic burden, but as the pathway to true freedom and blessing.

For a moment use your imagination with me. Let’s suppose that Jesus Christ himself was going to make a personal appearance at next year’s Super Bowl. His purpose? ...To tell the world how to know God and how to live our lives. The big day arrives. A capacity crowd fills the stadium. All the networks are there and even a world-wide network has been set up via satellite. Jesus walks to the microphone. The world is holding its breath, waiting to hear what will be a word from God. The drama heightens as Jesus stands there before the whole world and says...nothing, absolutely nothing! Instead, he simply holds up a Bible and says, “It’s all in here – I’ve already told you!”

Because what God has to say to us is all here, this book can do some awesome things in our lives. James not only tells us what God’s Word *is*, but what God’s Word *does*. For example, here in verse 21 James says, “Accept the word planted in you, *which can save you*.” Some have a hard time with this book of James, thinking that it teaches that we are saved by our works.<sup>iv</sup>

Here, however, James is very clear. We are saved, not by *our works*, but by *God’s Word*. James says the same thing in verse 18: “He chose to give us birth *through the word of truth*...” Let me ask you: Have you experienced this new birth? If not, you can right now. Jesus told Nicodemus: “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (John 3:3). How are we born again? Jesus told Nicodemus “everyone who believes in me may have eternal life” (John 3:15). Maybe you’re here this morning and you’ve never taken that simple step. Or maybe you’ve never moved from simple intellectual assent to heart belief. All that James is going to say in the following verses is for those who have already been changed inwardly through what the Bible calls being “born again” (John 3).<sup>v</sup>

God’s Word not only saves us, it also *shows us who we really are*. That’s why James compares God’s Word to a mirror in verses 23, 24.<sup>vi</sup> Mirrors don’t lie! They tell us what we really look like. We’ll be exploring this image of God’s Word in a few minutes.

Not only does God’s Word save us and show us who we are. It *will also be our judge in the future*. James says: “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom...” (James 2:12).

No human piece of literature does this. No science book can save us, no cookbook can show us who we are (though it may remind us we need to lose a few pounds!), and no novel will serve as our judge when we leave this life. But isn’t it ironic that if we add up the time we spend reading science books, cook books, or novels (or any other book for that matter), and compare that to the time spent in this book, God’s Word...we come face-to-face with our inconsistency.

## How do I obey God's Word?

Given what this book *is* and what this book *does* in our lives, how should you and I respond? James tells us no uncertain terms in verse 22: "... don't merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves; *do what it says*." That is the big idea of all that James wants to tell us in this passage. But *how* do I obey God's Word? How do we produce the "doer's translation" of this book, the Bible?

### 1. Receive God's Word (19-21).

First, we must *receive God's Word*. James tells us in verse 21 "...*accept* the word planted in you." The word means "to warmly welcome." It's used of Simeon who took the infant Jesus up in his arms and blessed God (Luke 2:28). It describes a heart attitude well prepared to receive the Word of God.

My father-in-law, who is a farmer, can take two seeds that are exactly the same and plant them in two different locations and get two completely different crops in fruitfulness. How is that? One soil is prepared and the other isn't. You can take two people, put them in the same service with the same message, and one is blessed and changed, and the other walks away with nothing but additional information. How is that? One heart is prepared and the other one isn't. James says we must receive the Word of God with the right attitude. But how do we do that?

First, we need to be *calm*. James says: "...be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to be angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires" (19-20). Our faith is proven authentic by our acceptance of God's Word, not by the abundance of our words. Too many of us reverse the order. We are slow to listen and quick to speak.<sup>vii</sup>

The servant Messiah in Isaiah 50:4 says, "He wakens me morning by morning, wakens *my ear to listen* like one being taught." Is that your attitude each day? Is that your attitude as you gather with other believers on Sunday morning or at other times during the week? This is a "biggy" for you and me in our activist culture. To what degree did you prepare yourself to come to this service and *listen* to God? Did you take time to pray before you came? Did you come with an expectant attitude?

Medical science tells us that when you listen it actually lowers your blood pressure. When you speak it raises your blood pressure. Maybe that's why James links speaking with anger here in these verses. It makes sense that the original readers of this letter could be struggling with anger. Remember, James has just talked about how authentic faith *grows through difficulty* and *turns from temptation*. These believers, now dispersed through persecution, had their share of hardship. And some were angry, like maybe you are about the difficulties of your life. And this very anger can keep you and me from listening to God and how he wants to speak into our lives.

To effectively listen to God's Word, we must be *calm*. But we also must be *clean*. James says in verse 21: "Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent..."<sup>viii</sup>

We are to lay aside “moral filth.” The term was used in James’ day to refer to that which would make your clothes dirty. In fact, the same word is translated “shabby clothes” in James 2:2. But here, James is not concerned about our clothes, but our person – body, soul and spirit. This same word was also used to refer to ear wax which could obstruct one’s hearing. Any sin in our lives is just that, “ear wax” keeping us from hearing and obeying God’s Word. James tells us that we are to “get rid” of it...to throw it off like we would strip off dirty clothes.

What is the “ear wax” in your life that keeps you from hearing what God is saying to you?

An attitude that effectively listens to God’s Word is calm and clean. But it is also *contrite*, i.e. humble and repentant. James says, “...*humbly* accept the word planted in you...” The Message translation of this verse says this: “In simple humility, let our gardener, God, landscape you with the Word, making a salvation-garden of your life.”

Our lives are like a garden.<sup>ix</sup> And what grows in gardens besides plants and flowers? Weeds do! And those weeds need to be uprooted and taken out. It’s not sufficient to mow down the weeds. They need to be taken out by the roots. And that requires humility, repentance and a teachable spirit.

Job, having heard the Lord, says: “I...repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:5-6). Isaiah, having heard the Lord speak, cries out “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips...” When Simon Peter heard and saw Jesus he said, “Go away from me, Lord; for I am a sinful man.”

How are we to obey God’s word? We are to *receive* it. We are to listen. And if we are to listen and really hear God’s word, we must be calm, clean and contrite.

But in verses 22-25 James takes this a step further. Here we move from receiving to reflecting, from listening to looking.

## **2. Reflect on God’s Word (22-25).** Pew Bible page 854

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 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. James 1:22-24

God’s word is like a mirror. If you take a picture of someone (especially a digital picture) and you don’t get an accurate take, it’s fairly easy to touch up the picture so that it looks just like you want it to. But a mirror isn’t like that. A mirror shows us just like we are, warts and all. I understand that many years ago, Queen Elizabeth, who was beautiful in her youth, ordered that all of the mirrors be removed from Buckingham Palace because she couldn’t stand to face the fact that she was growing old. Mirrors don’t lie. And neither does the Bible. It “shoots straight.” It gives us the bottom line. That’s why the writer to the Hebrews says that God’s word is like a double-edged sword that pierces into the very core of our being (Hebrews 4:12).

In a mirror you can either glance casually or look intently. James tells us that the casual “glancer” usually doesn’t do anything about what he sees. He’s like a man – (here he says “man” but I would have thought he would have said “woman,” after all women spend more time in front of mirrors than men do!) – who looks at himself in a mirror and sees that he needs to shave, comb his hair or take care of a pimple...but turns the other way and forgets all about it.

But notice the contrast in verse 25: “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.” Here the word “look” is different from the word “look” in verse 23-24. The one who “looks” in verses 23-24 gives a mere glance. Here in verse 25 the word literally means to “bend over” in order to carefully examine.<sup>x</sup>

There is a great difference between an explorer and a tourist. The tourist travels quickly, visiting only the most important points of interest. The explorer, on the other hand, unhurriedly and eagerly searches out all he can find. Too many of us read the Bible like a tourist, and then complain that we don’t get much out of God’s Word. But we have to take the time to reflect and explore.

We need to mark our Bibles, but more importantly we need to let the Bible mark us.<sup>xi</sup> How many times you’ve been through the Bible is not nearly as important as how many times the Word of God has been through you. And that’s what James talks about next.<sup>xii</sup>

### **3. Respond to God’s Word (22-27).**

James says, “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*” James 1:22 *Msg.*

That word translated “listen” referred in secular Greek to those who would listen to philosophers and teachers, but never became actual disciples!<sup>xiii</sup> The word literally means to “audit,” like those who “audit” a class. Auditors listen to the lecture but do little if any of the work. The auditor takes it easy while the others work hard. But he doesn’t get a grade and he certainly doesn’t walk the aisle on graduation day. The idea is similar to the word “religion” in verses 26, 27.<sup>xiv</sup> Religion is not a bad word. It means simply form or ceremony. There’s nothing wrong with that. But if it is void of heart and obedience, James says it is worthless.

Many people who “go to church” are just like that – religious auditors; people who love to listen and go through the motions, but then walk right out and don’t do anything with what they’ve heard. Some flit from church to church, looking for a new, novel word or insight, as a type of “self-help” remedy for their lives. Some Christians are just “super-spiritual sponges”<sup>xv</sup> But all the while they refuse to obey what they already know. When we are focused on doing the Word of God, we have little time to fuss over petty issues.

James has some very harsh words for “auditors” and for the merely religious. He says that they “deceive themselves” (22, 26; cf. v. 16). James uses a term here that is an accounting term. It means to “miscalculate.” I don’t like it when a cashier miscalculates the amount I owe or when someone charges me too much for something. Even if they do it unintentionally, I could

conclude that they are deceiving me. We don't like to be deceived by others. But the paradoxical thing is that here James talks about those who deceive themselves!

Jesus, John and James all say the same thing. Our obedience to God's word is the litmus test of the authenticity of our faith. Jesus said, "Whoever has my commands and *obeys* them, he is the one who loves me" (John 14:21). John says, "'We know that we have come to know him if we *obey* his commands. The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not *do* what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:3-6).

Let me ask you this morning. Are you "auditing" the Christian life? Do you "audit" the Sunday morning service? Or are you for real? Or are you merely religious? Are you making your own translation of the Bible...translating it into real life? In these two verses (vv 26-27) James gives us three "litmus tests" that help us answer that question.

If anyone considers himself to be religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself. James 1:26

The first litmus test is this: *a controlled tongue*. I don't think it is a coincidence that we have *two* ears and *one* mouth! Solomon tells us "When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise" (Proverbs 10:19).<sup>xvi</sup>

We can do three things with our tongue: we can blast, boast or bless. What do you spend the most time doing? Love controls the tongue.

The second litmus test of an obedient faith is *a compassionate heart*.

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after<sup>xvii</sup> orphans and widows in their distress... James 1:27

The Bible talks about the care of widows over 90 times and orphans more than 40 times. But I believe that James here is referring to the orphans and widows simply as an example of all those who are poor, oppressed, exploited and in need.<sup>xviii</sup> Did you know that there are over 2,000 verses in the Bible that talk about the poor and oppressed? The psalmist describes God as "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows" (Psalm 68:5). And the Proverbs say: "He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God" (Proverbs 14:31).<sup>xix</sup>

We are the Body of Christ, but for far too long we have been one big mouth! Far too often we are long on words, but short on compassion. Our hands and feet have been amputated. We can cry out against abortion, but until we are willing to reach out and care for the impoverished unmarried mother, we cannot claim to be "doers of the Word."

As you know, seven of us visited Rwanda this past summer, a country where over 20% of the population are orphans. But you don't have to go across the world to show compassion to orphans, widows, the poor and the oppressed. I believe that God wants to challenge our church in

this area. How are we the hands and feet of Jesus Christ in our culture, in our neighborhoods, in our city? How can we better care for the widows within our own congregation?

True religion is marked by a controlled tongue, a compassionate heart, but also a *consecrated life*. “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure is ... *to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*”

A faith that works is not removed from surrounding culture, but keeps oneself pure *in* the surrounding culture. In Jesus, the holiness of God boldly moved into the mire and muck of our impoverished human existence. And we are to do the same.

In all of this, James leaves you and me with a promise. It’s found in verse 25: “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.*” The verse literally reads “he will be blessed in his doing.” Obedience brings blessing into our lives. Disobedience brings the grief and sorrow of the consequences of sin. Do you lack joy in your life? Jesus says, “If you know these things, happy you are *if you do them.*” John 13:17

What is God asking you to do in response to His Word? I want you to take your communication card and write it down. Here’s the challenge: *In obedience to God’s Word, I desire to...* Maybe God has spoken to you today about receiving his Word by listening. Or maybe God is speaking to you about reflecting on His Word by looking more intently into the Scriptures. Or is He calling you to respond to His Word in a specific area of your life? Just write it down on your communication card and I and the leadership will be in prayer for each of you individually.

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<sup>i</sup> James has a lot to say about this book, the Bible; and understandably so. Though until after the resurrection James was an unbeliever in his half-brother, Jesus, he nevertheless was brought up in a home where the Scriptures were taught and obeyed. But in his typical fashion, he doesn’t simply leave us with information; he calls for transformation of life.

<sup>ii</sup> In verses 18-22, James refers to Scripture as the “word” four different times. Of course, Jesus Christ too is called the word of God (John 1). And this written word and the incarnate Word (the “word made flesh”) are inseparable. Both the written Word (the Bible) and the living Word (Jesus Christ) must be the final authority in your life and mine. And to try to separate the two is like asking which blade of a pair of scissors is more important or which leg in a pair of pants is more necessary. That is why Paul calls the New Testament “Word of Christ” (Colossians 3:16; Romans 10:17).

<sup>iii</sup> See Galatians 5:14; Matthew 22:37-40.

<sup>iv</sup> In fact, Martin Luther thought that, calling James an “epistle of straw.”

<sup>v</sup> Salvation in James and in the New Testament is not only viewed in the past tense (i.e. “we have been saved”) as in Romans 8:24-25, but also in the present tense (“we are being saved” 1 Corinthians 1:18) and in the future sense (“we will be saved” Romans 8:21-23).

<sup>vi</sup> In the Bible, God’s Word is compared to many things: a lamp (Psalm 119:105), a fire and hammer (Jeremiah 23:29), water (Ephesians 5:26), a sword (Hebrews 4:12).

<sup>vii</sup> There is a story about a would-be disciple who came to Socrates. But before Socrates could say a word, the young man began to talk incessantly. After the man had talked on for about ten minutes, Socrates told him, “I will take you as a student, but I’m going to charge you twice as much.” The young man asked, “Why are you going to do that?” Socrates replied, “I will have to teach you two sciences: The first is how to hold your tongue, and then how to use it!” Here James talks about being calm enough to hold our tongue. Later in this passage he’ll talk about using it. J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee* Vol. 5 1 Corinthians – Revelation (California: Thru the Bible Radio, 1983), 638.

<sup>viii</sup> The same development of thought is also found in 1 Peter 1:23-2:3: For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever." And this is the word that was preached to you. Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

<sup>ix</sup> The same image is developed in Jesus' parable of the soils in Matthew 13:3-8, 18-23. But also here in James 1 we see the idea introduced in the idea of "firstfruits" in verse 18. It is interesting that James emphasizes the planting of the Word in our hearts *before* he talks about doing the Word. Again, he is very careful to avoid any hint of legalism with his emphasis on obedience.

<sup>x</sup> The same word is used in John 20:11 "...but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she *bent over to look* into the tomb." It also describes the "other disciple" in John 20:5, 8 who looks into the empty tomb. The same word is used of the angels who "look into" the grace of God (1 Peter 1:12).

<sup>xi</sup> Quote from Rick Warren.

<sup>xii</sup> Put in other terms, we are to *listen* – receive God's word. We are to *look* – reflect on God's word. And we are to *love*, that is respond to God's word. And it's in verses 26-27 that James tells us what true love – what he calls "true religion" – looks like. I use the word "love" rather than "obey" or "do" because that is what Jesus says: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind." And that's also what James says, "If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right" (James 2:8).

<sup>xiii</sup> Harold D. Foos, *James: Faith in Practice* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1984), 57. The word is used only here and in Romans 2:13 in the New Testament.

<sup>xiv</sup> The word is used only four times in the New Testament (Acts 26:5; Col 2:8; James 1:26, 27). It comes from a Latin word meaning "to bind back" and carries the basic idea of ritual, form or ceremony.

<sup>xv</sup> The description comes from O.S. Hawkins, *Getting Down to Brass Tacks* (New Jersey: Loiseaux, 1993), 58.

<sup>xvi</sup> See also "Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him" (Proverbs 29:20; cf. 13:3; 15:1; Eccl. 7:9). Jesus said: "But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken" (Matthew 12:36).

<sup>xvii</sup> The same term is used in Luke 1:68, 78; 7:16 for God who visits his people in the incarnation.

<sup>xviii</sup> Some examples are: "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. 10:18-20); "Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (Isa 1:16-17); "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8); "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other'" (Zech. 7:9-10); "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything" (1 John 3:17-20).

<sup>xix</sup> The idea that the poor are in that state because of their own decisions and therefore we are not responsible to help, is a decidedly American opinion and reflects the values of our surrounding capitalist culture and not the values of the Bible. "The central thrust of the justice of God is to create an egalitarian society in regard to basic human rights (Ps. 113:7-9)." Nystrom, *James* in the NIV Application Commentary, 102.