

Sept. 16, 2018

James 1: 19-27

Prayer: Dear Lord, Please go with us into the study of your Word. We pray for illumination, for understanding, for clarity. We believe that we need your inspiration in understanding Scripture and that your work is necessary if we are to absorb its meaning. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

'Doers of the Word'

As Vince will tell you, when something gets under my skin, you're going to hear about it. More than once.

So when the epistle of James rolls around in the lectionary every three years, I get riled up all over again about this incident. I was writing religion for *The Greenville News*, and a group of fundamentalist churches advertised a conference on how to evangelize Catholics. When I saw the ad, I thought I must be misunderstanding what they were doing.

After all, the earliest church *was* Catholic, and the Catholics did a pretty good job of keeping Christianity in the road for 1,500 years until we Protestants jumped in.

But it turns out I was understanding the ad correctly.

On the first night of the conference, I went to the large church where it was being held and sat through several seminars on why the Catholics didn't understand this salvation thing. And what the fundamentalist argument boiled down to was this: The Catholics wanted to work their way into heaven. They wanted to feed the hungry, and visit the imprisoned, and care for the sick, as Jesus told them to do in the 25th chapter of Matthew.

And despite what Jesus said, those fundamentalists knew better: Salvation was by faith alone.

The low point of the evening came when one of the ministers told me that Mother Teresa was a classic example of someone trying to work her way into heaven. *And she wasn't fooling anyone!*

Well, I was aghast on many, many levels – the main one being – *If Mother Teresa isn't going to heaven, I don't have a chance!*

But all that wiping of lepers' brows and caring for the sickest and most despised people of Calcutta was all in vain, it seems. God wasn't going to be taken in by her shenanigans. He knew what she was up to.

I couldn't help but think, "Have these people ever read the book of James? Or did they just cut it out of their Bibles?"

Because you cannot read the epistle of James and come away thinking that we have no responsibility to our neighbors. Heaven knows, Jesus tried to tell us that in the gospels. And now, here is James -- whom many scholars believe was the earthly brother of Jesus, the one who headed the church in Jerusalem after Jesus's crucifixion.

And James says, **"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not**

supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” (James 2: 14-17)

Sounds like Mother Teresa may have been on pretty firm footing after all.

Let's turn in our Bibles to today's Scripture passage, and read what James has to say in his opening chapter. What he has to say about listening and doing. **James 1: 19-27.**

19 You 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.

22 But 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.

26 If 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.

As I said, the James who wrote this may or may not be the earthly brother of Jesus whom we learn about in Acts. That James headed the church in Jerusalem, occasionally wrangled with Peter and Paul, and was finally martyred.

This letter writer James is a very practical man who gives us a picture of what living as Christians should look like. First comes this idea: **“Be quick to listen.”** *Be quick to listen.*

For all of my adult life, I have been a professional listener, first as a news reporter and later as a pastor. And when I lost sight of that and began talking, I stopped learning.

We once had a reporter at *The News*, and she had great difficulty getting good quotes and gleaning details for her stories. Her editor would have to send her back again and again to get more information.

Finally, in exasperation, her editor asked if I would go out with her on a story and see what the problem was. Well, it took about 30 seconds to diagnose.

The reporter didn't listen. She was nervous and fast-talking and anxious, and she spewed out questions like a machine gunner. She made her sources feel she was in a huge hurry and they were holding her up.

So they quickly began answering “yes,” “no,” “I guess so,” thinking she needed to get somewhere fast.

Be quick – *to listen*. And then listen slowly, extravagantly. When someone comes into my office to talk, he or she is usually apologetic about taking up my time. I like to tell them, “I have all the time in the world.”

And they rarely abuse it.

Listening to someone is a gift. Today, even more than when James wrote these words, we desperately need to be listened to. So many times, it seems we do not matter, especially if we don't have money or position or power.

But we do matter. We are children of God. We are children made in the image of a holy God. And in community, we matter. If one of us falls out, the community is poorer.

We are worth listening to. We are worth being heard.

Then James warns, **“Be slow to speak.”** I have seldom regretted remaining silent. But I have often regretted speaking before I thought.

In James' view, speaking is related to the expression of anger, and he advises **“Be slow to anger”** as well. Anger in his mind is synonymous with the sordidness and wickedness of our human nature, and we need to tame it as surely as we need to tame the tongue he will talk about later.

James also addresses the Mother Teresa issue we spoke of earlier: **“Be doers of the word,”** he writes. *Be doers of the word.*

I love that. The NIV translation loses the poetry. It reads, **“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”**

That's clear enough, I suppose. But the NRSV opts for: **“Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”**

I like that because a *doer of the word* is an identity. So even when a doer of the word is resting or eating or sleeping or deep sea fishing, he is still essentially a *doer of the word*.

That's who he is. He is a doer – and not just a frenzied doer who does anything that comes along. But a *doer of the word*.

What a magnificent phrase!

“For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror ... and on going away, immediately forget what they were like.” In James' world view, *doing* carries the idea of imprinting.

Educators will tell you that we can learn by hearing and seeing, but when we *do*, when we perform an action, our learning is more permanent, more imprinted in our neural pathways. James goes a step further: **“(Those) doers who act -- they will be blessed in their doing.”**

In the spring of 2000, a little book by Bruce Wilkinson caused quite a sensation and quickly climbed to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list. It was called *The Prayer of Jabez*.

It was a short little book that you could read in under an hour, and it was based on two short verses in the Old Testament book of I Chronicles. Right in the middle of a long listing of the patriarchs of ancient Israel, we read this: **“Jabez was honored more than his brothers; and his mother named him Jabez, saying, ‘Because I bore him in pain.’ Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, ‘Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!’ And God granted what he asked.”** (I Chronicles 4: 9-10)

The subtitle of Bruce Wilkinson's book is *Breaking Through to the Blessed Life*. When I heard about his publishing phenomenon, I assumed he had written a popular book about the health and wealth gospel.

Believe in Jesus and you, too, can be rich and famous.

But that wasn't the case. Mr. Wilkinson accurately read Jabez's prayer as a plea not for personal gain but for God to expand his *ministry*, to expand his *opportunity* to spread the news of God's mighty works.

“ ‘Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me....’ ”

The blessings sought by those who pray the prayer of Jabez are increased opportunities to share Christ. And Mr. Wilkinson warns that when God answers that prayer, it might not be in your self-interest.

In 2007, we learned of letters that Mother Teresa had sent to her supervising priests throughout her ministry. For the last *50 years* of her life, she could not sense the presence of God, and she absolutely agonized over it.

The priests in whom she confided wisely advised her that her blessing was *in the doing*. Her work among the poor and sick and dying of Calcutta, India, *was* the blessing. Her work in leading her Sisters to embrace the poverty of the cross in their care for the world's poorest, most neglected, citizens *was* the blessing.

Laboring day after day, year after year, decade after decade, without the solace of feeling God's presence, was her way of entering fully into the poverty and suffering of Jesus.

When she recognized the wisdom of the priests' counsel, she wrote: "If I ever become a saint – I will surely be one of 'darkness.' I will continually be absent from heaven – to light the light of those in darkness on earth." (*Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*, edited by Brian Kolodiejchur, Doubleday, 2007, page 230).

That is not our picture of sainthood or heaven, is it? Our notion of heaven is eternal presence with God. But to Mother Teresa, that foremost doer of the word, the doing and the blessing had merged to the point she was willing to do it forever – even if it meant forgoing heaven.

After James' profound passage about the blessing of doing, he returns to listening, speaking and doing all at once. He who speaks with an unbridled tongue has a worthless religion, James contends. Control of one's speech is connected to the sincerity of one's religion.

We see this same concern for unbridled speech in Paul. In his famous list of transgressions in Romans 1, Paul includes gossip, slander and boastfulness – all sins of the tongue.

James concludes this passage with a curt explanation of what constitutes religion in its pure and undefiled form. It **"is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."**

Nothing about belief here. Nothing about faith.

There are those who would drive a wedge between the teaching of James, head of the Jewish wing of the Christian church, and Paul, head of the Gentile wing. But Paul knows nothing of Christianity without action. Every letter he writes contains practical material on living as a Christian.

And that is exactly what James is doing here. He may be stating it a little more baldly. But if one's Christianity does not lead one to be a "doer of the word," then that Christianity is suspect at best, "worthless" at worst.

You have heard it said that action follows faith, that one's actions will flow naturally out of a faith in Christ. And I think that's true.

But it works the other way as well. Sometimes the doing, the putting one foot in front of the other, leads to faith.

Sometimes, we have to be Nike Christians: We Just. Do. It.

Amen.