

James 1:19-27: Listening and Doing

A Bible Study on the Epistle of James

Study Bible Studies Not stated

James 1:19-27

Introduction

We will continue with our study of the Epistle of James. Last week we discussed Chapter 1, verses 1 to 18. We were also given the background related to James — who he was, the estimated time of his writing, and why he wrote the Epistle, and so on. I will refrain from repeating the background. Let us carry on from there and look at verses 19 to the end of Chapter 1 today.

However, in order to give context to what James stated in these verses, we need to quickly revisit verse 18. It reads: "Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures."

James shows that his main aim is to reveal God as the author of all spiritual gifts, and therefore he mentions regeneration. We will look at four key components of his statement in verse 18 — chose, birth, word of truth, and firstfruits.

He (God) chose: This usage clearly indicates that God had no compulsion, nor could anyone compel Him to grant anything. It was merely His good pleasure, or His will, that He chose to give us re-birth through the word of truth. This usage is equivalent to what Paul calls the "natural inclination of God's heart to do His creatures good."

To give us birth: James speaks of this as birth that is through the word of truth. He is talking of regeneration. We will see in the next verse that he uses this to argue that we should be more aware of the duty of listening; therefore this birth implies God's work of grace on our beings. The same metaphor is used elsewhere: "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever" (1 Peter 1:23).

Through the word of truth: Here the instrument is noteworthy. When we connect this verse to creation, we apply it to Jesus Christ, who is the eternal, uncreated Word of the Father, through whom all things were made — remember, in John 1:1 it is stated that "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Clearly, the usage is referring to the Gospel, which is often called "the word of truth." The Gospel is the way, or instrument, through which

Christ brings us to Himself, or grants us to be born again as believers.

The firstfruits of all he created: This could mean that believers and converts among all people were set aside for the purposes of God. The firstfruits of all things were the Lord's — partly to testify to His right in such people, and partly for a witness of their thankfulness, for they had received everything from Him and were to thank Him for this: "Honour the LORD with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase" (Proverbs 3:9).

Here Apostle James is setting the stage for telling believers why the word of truth, or the Gospel, is critical in their journey towards Jesus Christ, and why they should focus their minds towards the Word and live lives according to His will.

Last week we looked at trials and temptations in our lives, and this week we will look at listening and doing what we hear. Let us see how this theme develops in verses 19 to 27.

Listening (Verses 19 & 20)

"Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God" (James 1:19-20).

As seen in the previous verse, James has spoken of the word of truth being the instrument of regeneration, and on that ground he urges diligence in hearing and reverence in speaking about it. Let us observe the honour God has given the Word; through it He bestows His new life. Therefore, be quick to listen — that is, have a teachable mind to wait on God's Word; be slow to speak — that is, do not rashly give your opinion about things concerning the faith; be slow to become angry — that is, do not be angry with those who differ from you.

Anger, a serious impediment to listening: If we take these directions as specific references to the matter in hand, the context is easily understood. We know that it is good to apply Scripture in everything in our lives, and so this teaching extends to private conversation as well. People keep talking and cannot bear to listen to others. We seek private revenge in anger. Such behaviours are commonplace and are even found in Christian meetings and conventions. That aside, the main aim of the Apostle is to direct his readers to the solemn hearing of the Word.

Further, James gives a reason for resisting anger. Our anger stops us from attaining what is righteous in the eyes of God and from doing what God requires us to do in His Word.

James talks of the righteousness that God desires from us. Justice mixed with mercy is the righteousness that the Scriptures ascribe to God. Anger will not let us dispense such intense and pure righteousness.

Unrighteousness can also be interpreted as anger that is borne out of our own malice, or anger that would not execute God's just corrections. Anger is not to be trusted. It is not as just and righteous as it appears to be. Of all the passions, we most often justify anger. Anger, like a cloud, blinds the mind and then rules it. It does nothing to promote the righteous life that Jesus desires. The passion of anger is blind, and when it takes hold of our beings we cannot judge; it is furious and has no leisure to debate, rationalise, or consider.

The worst thing we can bring to a religious controversy is anger. In this context it is anger occasioned by differences about the Word. Usually no passions are as outrageous as those engaged in quarrels about religion. However, this should not be the case for Christians. Christianity, of all religions, is the meekest and most humble. It is founded on the blood of Christ, who is the slain Lamb. It is sealed by the Spirit of Christ, who descended like a dove. Both are emblems of meek humility. Should a meek religion be defended by our anger, or the God of peace served with angry passions? Christ's warfare does not need such ungodly weapons. At the same time, anger is an emotion quite natural to us. But we need to remember the rule of the Word: "Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath" (Ephesians 4:26).

Let us therefore use strong arguments but soft words.

Accepting What We Hear (Verse 21)

"Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls" (James 1:21).

The Apostle, having spoken of the power of the Word, and that it should be heard willingly and without a contradicting spirit, and having shown the evil of anger, returns to his main exhortation. Lay aside all wrathful affections, he says, that we might be more fit to welcome the Word with an honest and meek heart. To help us achieve this, "get rid of all moral filth" is what Apostle James is telling us. This duty is to be performed humbly, with submission to the word planted in us. The motive is that it can save us.

Moral filth, the major barrier to acceptance: James uses "moral filth" to stir up greater hatred against all kinds of sin, and is not restricting himself to lusts that are most beastly. The usage may be more generic, implying all sin, and more particularly restrained to filthy and evil speaking.

The word planted shows the purpose and fruit of listening. James shows that by the industry of the apostles, the Word was not only propounded to them but rooted in them by faith. A similar metaphor is used in 1 Corinthians 3:6: "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the

increase."

Preparation to make our hearts reverent: Seen as a direction, this means that our hearts must be purged, faith exercised, repentance renewed, weaknesses reviewed, and God's glory considered. There must be enough preparation to make the heart reverent. God must be served with a joy mixed with trembling. The heart is never right in worship until it is gripped by awe of God. Such preparation will settle the spirit in a heavenward direction. In Psalm 51:10, David pleads with God: "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." We need to engage in preparation that will make us humble and hungry. God's grace is usually given to such hungry hearts.

Christian preparation mainly consists in getting rid of evil frames. Weeds must be rooted out before the ground is fit to receive the seed. In Jeremiah 4:3 we read: "For thus saith the LORD to the men of Judah and Jerusalem, Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns." Those who do not turn from their sins are unfit listeners. What can people who come in their sins expect from God? Their state denies their worship. God will have nothing to do with them.

Remember: a filthy heart and the pure, holy Word do not mix.

Doing (Verses 22 to 25)

"But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: for he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was" (James 1:22-24).

This passage continues from the previous verse. James has spoken of the fruit of the Word and the resultant salvation. In order that this may be obtained, he shows that we should not only hear it but practise it.

The doers of the Word are the best listeners. It is good when we hear things that are to be done and do things that are to be heard. That knowledge is best which is most practical, and that hearing is best which ends in practice.

In Matthew 7:24-25 we read: "Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock."

Self-deception, an obstruction to doing: We are easily deceived into having a good opinion of ourselves because of mere listening, without converting what we have learnt into action. We are prone to latch on to a part of the good in any action and not to take the next step: "I listen to

the Word, and therefore I am doing well." We should watch out for this deceit. Such a weighty structure as the Word of the Lord should not be raised on so sandy a foundation.

The Word is a mirror to show us ourselves; it reveals the hidden things of the heart and all the deformities within us. In Mark 4:22 we read: "For there is nothing hid, which shall not be manifested; neither was any thing kept secret, but that it should come abroad." The Word reveals everything. Our sins are the blemishes that the Word reveals; Christ's blood is the water to wash them off, and is again revealed in the Gospel. It is stated very beautifully in Romans 7:9: "For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died."

Here is a meditation for all of us. When we look into the mirror, think: the Word of God is a mirror; I must look after the complexion of my inner being. Take part of the law and exercise it every day, and we will soon see the deformity of our own inner beings. Do not look in a flattering mirror.

Introspection, a critical aid to doing: I am sure most of us look at ourselves in the mirror almost every day of our lives. How many of us remember what we look like once we are away from it? Close your eyes and try to imagine how you look. When I do that, I see myself the way I was in my youth, and not as the short, grey old man. We like to be flattered; we deceive ourselves into believing what we are not.

This reminds me of something I read a couple of years ago. It may sound a bit morbid, but I assure you it works. Write your own obituary, putting in what you wish others to think and say about you. In our present context, reinforce it with what you want Jesus to think about you. All nice and good to be read out during a memorial service. Then write an honest comparison, point by point. The contrast would become startlingly apparent. It will, however, give us a platform to work on ourselves, to cleanse and correct our inner selves, and to live our remaining lives walking with Jesus, or with the mind of Jesus, if I may borrow from the theme we looked at during the family retreat.

The Gospel, the instrument of doing: "But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed" (James 1:25).

In this verse we have the third reason why we should listen to the Word and practise it. The first was that we would only deceive ourselves if we just heard the Word. The next, that mere listening would be of little benefit — no more than if a person glanced into a mirror and had a fleeting view of himself. And now James is telling us that right listening, and the correct internalisation of it, ends in blessedness.

The Gospel is a law. It is often called by this name. We read in Romans 8:2: "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death." There the covenant of works is called "the law of sin and death," because it convicts the fallen of sin and hands the person over to death.

But the Gospel, or covenant of grace, is called "the law of the Spirit of life" of Christ, because it joins us to Christ, whose life we are enabled to live by the Spirit.

The Gospel is called "the law of life" because every rule by which Christ expects us to live our lives can be found in the Gospel. The Word of God is a perfect law. It is perfect because it is so in itself, and those who look into it will see that they need no other word to make them people of God, perfect. It is called liberty because of the clearness of revelation; it is the counsel of God. It spares no one, but deals with everyone freely. It calls us into a state of freedom and perfection.

It is perfect in various ways:

1. The nearer we come to the Word, the greater is the perfection of our spirits. The goodness and excellence of the creature lies in conforming to God's will.
2. It directs us to the greatest perfection — to God, to the righteousness of Christ, to perfect communion with God in glory.
3. It concerns the whole person. It influences the conscience.
4. It is a perfect law because of its changelessness; it does not need to be changed. A perfect rule needs no amendment.
5. It is pure and free from error. No human laws are without some blemish in them.
6. It is a comprehensive rule. Whatever is necessary for knowledge, for regulating life and worship, for confirmation of true teaching, and for refuting false teaching, is all in the Word.

Well, then, look upon the Gospel as a law and rule, according to which:

1. Our lives must be conformed — that is, we should live according to the directions of the Gospel.
2. All controversies and disputes must be decided by it.
3. Our state is judged by it: "In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel" (Romans 2:16). The Gospel itself is a law, partly because it is a rule, and partly because of the prevailing power it has over the heart. It is "the law of the Spirit of life"; so those who are in Christ have a law. In 1 Corinthians 9:21 we read: "To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law" — that is, under the rule and direction of the moral law, as a part of the Gospel.

Applications of Doing (Verses 26 & 27)

"If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridled his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world" (James 1:26-27).

The Apostle, having shown the blessedness of those who are doers of the Word, now shows who are only listeners and do not put the Word into practice — people who allow themselves any known sin — and he gives as an example the evils of the tongue.

This is usually the hypocrite's sin. Hypocrites, of all people, are least able to bridle their tongue. Those who seem to be religious are the most free in censuring others. They are aware of the guilt of their own selves, and so are most prone to suspect others. Censuring is a trick of the devil, which excuses indignation against their own sins. Gracious hearts reflect most on themselves. They do not look for things to reprove in others, but things to lament in themselves. When a person is aware of his or her own failings, that person is far more sympathetic in reflecting on the weaknesses of others.

And in the last verse James talks of the positive part of the test. We should not be content with simply removing evil, but must be concerned about what is good. There should not only be an abstinence from sin, but care taken to maintain communion with God. Some people are not drunkards, but are they godly? Is there any power in their religion? Are there any feelings of the spiritual life within their beings?

James is not setting out the whole nature of religion, but only some particular evidence of it. Religion also requires faith and worship, but the truth of these is seen in charity and a holy life. He speaks of looking after orphans and widows, to comfort them in their misery and to relieve them in their necessities. This one charitable act includes all duties to our neighbour. We must understand here that, though orphans and widows are specified, others are not excluded — a better interpretation being "neighbours" more broadly. True generosity is when we give to those who are not able to reciprocate.

Let us become more and more weary of the world. In our heavenly home above, "there shall in no wise enter into it any thing that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie: but they which are written in the Lamb's book of life" (Revelation 21:27). It is foolishness to think that because power is from God, we therefore have no responsibility.

Learning from Our Deliberations

Trials (from last week): - Count it as joy. - It produces character and

quality. - Crises can be turned into opportunities. - Stand firm to the end.

Temptations (from last week): - God does not tempt. - Watch out for evil desires which can entice you and lead you to sin and death. - Being regenerated, we are called to be examples of the firstfruits. - We are never alone — the Spirit of God is with us.

Listening (to the word of truth, or Gospel): - We need to listen to the Gospel with intent and reverence. - Anger, being a serious impediment to our endeavour in careful listening, must be controlled and avoided. - When we listen with intent and reverence, we must be prepared to accept what we have heard — in other words, we must have a teachable disposition. - Moral filth is a major obstruction to accepting what we have heard; we need to cleanse our hearts of all filth. - We need to prepare our hearts to be reverent to the Gospel, and to make them conducive enough for Jesus to reside in.

Doing what we have listened to and accepted: - Self-deception is a major obstruction to doing. - Introspection is a useful tool in doing. - Following the Gospel is another critical instrument which helps in doing. - Looking after our neighbours, to comfort them in their misery and relieve them in their necessities, sums up the application of listening, acceptance, and doing.

Amen.