

## Lead With Your Ears

## James 1: 17-27

Broadly speaking, there are two fundamental categories of Christian theology.

“Apologetics” is Christian theology intended for non-Christians. The word “apologetics” does not mean an “I’m sorry” apology but rather a persuasive discourse. It refers to the branch of theology devoted to the presentation and defense of the divine origin and authority of Christianity. One example of a Christian theologian who writes Apologetics is C.S. Lewis.

The other category is “Dogmatics” or Christian theology intended for Christians. Dogmatic theology seeks to explain what it means to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior; what it looks like to live as Christ’s disciple.

The author of the book of James has given us a work of Dogmatics. One commentator explains that “James wrote to a community of believers, people entirely aware of Jesus. The letter was written not to bring its readers to faith, but to instruct its readers on how to live out the faith they already had.” (David Frenchak; *Preaching God’s Transforming Justice*; p. 378) Many other people have also written excellent Dogmatics through the centuries, but today we are considering what James has to teach us about the shape of Christian life and discipleship; how he seeks to persuade the readers of his letter to live up to the profession to which they have committed themselves -- namely, the faith “in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.” (Luke Timothy Johnson; *New Interpreter’s Bible*; p. 178)

The book of James is extremely popular in some Christian churches and quite disliked in others. While some congregations and denominations regularly turn to James for guidance on both individual and congregational conduct, a lot of Christians would be happy to skip past James when they read through the New Testament or to leave this book out of their Bible altogether. In fact, Martin Luther was emphatic in his criticism of James, calling it “an epistle of straw”. Those who dislike the book -- perhaps I should say “we” since I am one of those folks who has long put it low on my canonical list -- argue that James’ emphasis on human action is in conflict with Paul’s focus on God’s grace; that James’ exhortation to works -- most clearly in his claim that “faith without works is dead” -- is incompatible with the bedrock conviction of Christianity, expressed again and again by Paul in his letters, that we are saved solely and irrevocably in and through Jesus Christ. That it is Christ’s work alone, never our own, which brings salvation. That our role is to respond to this freely-given gift of salvation in Christ with faith.

But a careful reading of his work makes it clear that James does not dispute Paul’s assertion that we are saved through faith alone. Rather he writes to clarify what it means to be a Christian *who has been saved by* “faith alone”. Bible scholar Eric A. Johnson describes James’ argument this way: “While faith alone is sufficient for salvation, it is not sufficient for living out spiritual disciplines or holy habits. We do not labor to be saved; rather we labor because we are saved.” (*African-American Lectionary*). In other words, “James stresses that our faith in Jesus must issue forth in good works.” (Will Willimon; *Lectionary Sermon Resource, Year B*; p. 140)

The emphasis on good works has become over the years James' "greatest hit"; the sound bite for which his epistle is best known, but there is considerably more to be found here. Our passage this morning might almost be considered a grab bag of James' theology, with its rapid-fire introduction of statements about the nature of God, about the characteristics of discipleship, about the contours of community, and about the true form of religion.

If you pick up your Bible when you get home and read through the rest of the book of James, you will see that each of the ideas from the verses we have read today is examined more fully later in the work. Sandra Polaski writes that "The first chapter of James seems to move from topic to topic with little overarching structure. Yet commentators have noted that the major themes of the following chapters of James all appear in Chapter 1." She suggests that, "In a sense, then, this chapter is the overture to James' opera, the place where ideas are introduced that will be more fully developed later." (Working Preacher website)

We could pull out any one of the nuggets of wisdom which James offers us here in these verses and find a lot of substance in it. Each of these verses, each intriguing image or arresting phrase deserves our attention. But since I imagine you would prefer a sermon that did not last from now until Tuesday, we will woefully neglect a great many of the worthy ideas and illustrations here and consider briefly James' statement that Christ's disciples are to "Be doers of the word and not merely hearers". In his translation, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson renders this as "Act on what you hear!"

In order to do that faithfully and well, we must first *hear* that word. We must listen carefully and obediently so that when we act, our deeds are a clear expression of God's grace and a righteous enactment of God's justice, and not simply the implementation of our personal preferences and self-interested intentions.

In her commentary on this passage, Presbyterian Outlook Editor Teri McDowell Ott writes that "James highlights listening as a faithful act. We are to be hearers of the Word as well as doers. We are also to listen well, to be active and present in our listening so we can hear the truth in faith and humility." (Looking into the Lectionary; 8-23-21) Such faithful listening can be applied both to our reading and hearing of God's Word and to our interactions with other people.

McDowell Ott identifies some of the characteristics of listening well.

- Faithful listening does not bring in its own agenda. We don't give half of our attention to a running commentary in our own minds that says, "How can I shape this narrative to fit my own goals and plans?"
- Faithful listening does not seek to use what it hears as simply the prelude to our own story, as if to say, "I hear what you and I understand because I have experienced something similar that I will now tell you about without actually doing anything meaningful in response to what you have said."
- Faithful listening does not look for ammunition to mount a counterattack; it is not the practice of marshalling arguments and thinking, "Ha! At the first opening, I will explain why this person is wrong."

- Faithful listening does not focus on the tone of what is said instead of the content. It does not nurture grievance, thinking, “Well, I heard what she said, but I did not like the way she said it.”

One reason it is crucial to develop the habits of faithful listening is because there are people all around us who are yearning to be heard. There are beloved children of God whose stories have been too long neglected, whose needs have been too long ignored.

James instructs his readers that Christians are to become doers of the Word of God --the holy and compelling word of grace and love, compassion and justice -- which they have clearly heard. And he contends that such doing of the heard word will result in what he calls “religion that is pure and undefiled before God”, which is “to care for orphans and widows in their distress”. Peterson’s *Message* translates that verse as: *Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight.* (v. 27)

That sort of real religion begins with hearing. We hear God’s Word to us in Scripture and pray for it to be brought alive in our minds and hearts by the Holy Spirit. We then, with the ears and minds and hearts of faith, are ready to listen carefully and actively to this world that God so loves. We listen, we hear, we act, we love. We do this not so that we can be saved, but because we have been saved by the grace of our Lord. And so, we live out our whole-hearted, consistent, comprehensive devotion to the God we know in and through Jesus Christ our Lord, which is the holy purpose and the deep joy of our discipleship.

Amen.