

## **James: Hearing and Doing**

### **August 9, 2020**

These are strange times. I am so thankful that we again have the ability to go to Church and be part of the service Sunday mornings. It calibrates my clock. That is, it is the one event in the week that gives me a sense that, “this is now,” and the rest of the week is maybe some days removed from Sunday. Because, at this time, nothing else really regulates my time – things come up and need to be dealt with. Yes, the trash needs to be put out regularly, but that’s Sunday night, so it is not a separate calibrating event. Recycling goes out Tuesday night but I often miss it. Trips to the grocery store may be any day. It is summer, and I don’t normally have the regular schedule of classes to teach during the summer. But usually during the summer there would be dates, events, around which I’d be setting a schedule. So this sense of being disconnected from normality, even time itself, is particularly acute this summer. Even Bob Zanicky’s “mid-week” message doesn’t help my sense of time because it can be viewed “asynchronously,” any time Cindy and I happen to sit down to view it together. That’s sometimes Saturday night!

I mention this because “what week is it?” is still a problem for me. We started in the book of James last week, and yet on the very first lesson I referred to the wrong page for a “verse to remember” as James 1:22 which was actually part of this week’s lesson! But, all of James is dealing with the issue of how to live a righteous life in the real world. We’ll be seeing those kinds of issues over all of our lessons.

**“But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”**

This is an interesting issue to bring up at this time, for we find ourselves in an isolated world where we still receive a steady stream of news reports, entertainment channels, and other things to “hear”, but we speak, and find nobody else in the room! Our abilities to “do” are curtailed. Those few channels available to us, things like the telephone, the one day a week visit to Church (but then socially distance with no fellowship time), perhaps social media postings, a trip to the store as needed, but again socially distanced, are limited. It is as if present circumstances conspire to silence and immobilize us.

It occurred to me that what we are doing to sustain our class is following this same model – I’m sending out these lesson supplements weekly, but it’s pretty much one way. I very much appreciate the cards, the expressions of thanks, the email messages, and other forms of appreciation you have all expressed. But we

are all missing the dialog around the table. So, what I'd like to do is invite comments back that I can include in the next lesson supplement. Questions, comments, anything that you would like to share with the class. Since we are on James for five weeks, these things will remain relevant to the lessons coming up! I also invite you to look ahead to what is coming and ask or discuss or in some other way share comments. Maybe, doing that, we can help each other manage despite our strange circumstances.

For this week's lesson, I'd like to comment on some of the things the lesson writer says. On the introductory page (p. 55) the proverb "God helps those who help themselves" is quoted. As the author points out, that is NOT from the Bible! There are a lot of these "proverbs" we hear repeated in our day, often with the presumption that they are true just because they are so commonly heard. "Toot your own horn, because nobody else will toot it for you," is another. It encourages self-promotion, rather than helping others first. "God is on the side with the bigger battalions," seems to advocate force, and surrender in the face of an opposition who can wield more power. Our culture is full of such sayings. Some make sense. Others really don't, in light of our Christian faith, when we stop to examine them.

In a similar manner, books and shows of our contemporary culture have a big impact on how we see the world. The author refers to a television show called *The Good Place*. "In the show's universe, every person's actions will be scored after death to determine their ultimate destination. Harmful actions take points away, while acts of generosity add to our score. It is not our beliefs that count, but the things we do." This way of viewing life and the hereafter is not Christian! It leaves no room for God's grace. It is partly true, as are those contemporary proverbs mentioned above. It may be consistent with how a godless culture might view some mechanism for routing people into an appropriate afterlife. But we need to be wary to distinguish what is "interesting and worth thinking about" in our modern culture from what is the "gospel." Our lives rest on the "good news" Jesus has brought to us in his life, teachings, sacrifice, and resurrection, and the work of the Holy Spirit since. (Cindy says that the show has a lot of problems well beyond that issue!)

The author also mentions another contemporary show, *What would you do?* That show (as described) puts real people in awkward circumstances to see what they will do. Long ago there was a show *Candid Camera* that sought to do something similar, but with the goal of amusement. I recall that in one case the show's producer's crafted a "car" that could separate into two halves (each in fact built around a motorcycle) and the car would be going down the street, would split

in half, and each half would go around the policeman directing traffic on a different side, and come together on the far side. The goal was to get amused reactions. This new show sounds more serious, and potentially more ominous. I understand there is now a movement to provoke people to anger while being recorded, so that the person recording can post the embarrassing video on U-Tube (or elsewhere) for everyone's amusement, and to hold up the victim as an object of ridicule. You may have seen such things pop up in the news. It is as if the police practice of spoofing victims to entrap people who are inclined toward sexual crimes or pornography has become a public sport. We pray, as Jesus taught us, "lead us not into temptation." We should not be trying to lead others into temptation, even for our own seemingly righteous purposes. See what James says in 1:12 13: We may be tested, but God does not tempt us.

We do have the responsibility to ask ourselves, "What would I do?" We would like to "Be Prepared!" This is a matter of training. When I was in the Navy, in Damage Control School, we trained at putting out fires, plugging holes water was pouring through, and such things. The idea was that, if the need arose, we would not have to ponder, "What should I do?" We would know what to do. And, without stopping to think, we would do it. That's what training is about. We would like to be ready to act that way. But, things can come up for which we are not prepared. "What do I do?" is a real, legitimate, question. There is no way that we can be prepared for everything that can happen. We must trust God to help us. And pray, if in hindsight we find we could have done better, that God will grant us grace. So much of society, these days, seems to have forgotten that God is forgiving, and loves us, and seeks us, even when we err.

The kinds of errors James is talking about here, angry retorts made in haste, and not acting consistent with our beliefs, are not sins of rebelliousness. Christians normally do good rather than evil, not out of fear of going to Hell, but because they really do want to be and do good. It is like most people do obey the law, not because they are afraid of going to jail, but they behave that lawful behavior in accordance with what is expected for civility, and is good practice that benefits all.

The matter of giving to the poor, talked about by James and the lesson author, is one of those troublesome circumstances things. When I was working at "Friendship House" in New Orleans as a volunteer, I was given explicit instructions, not to give money, to anyone who begged. There were beggars aplenty. Each had a story. One man had to have money to take a bus to the other side of the river. One couldn't walk across the high vehicle bridge, after all. Well,

I did find out later that the ferry across the river was free for foot passengers. Taking that ferry would have been shorter than going to take a bus. Others didn't bother with an explanation. "Give me a dollar!" Such demands are not limited to the poor quarter of New Orleans. How do I know what to do now no longer under the "rules?" Is there a limit to what can be demanded from me?

The lesson writer talks of the dilemma faced by a friend who has a job with an agency that is only supposed to give to the "deserving" poor. Apparently the friend resents those rules and, most of all, those who impose them. It sounds like an untenable position. The best solution might be a different position, working for some agency that puts fewer restrictions on their generosity. The friend seems to be measuring the righteousness of herself against the righteousness of the donors. They are at least making donations to help someone other than themselves, even if not as liberally as the friend would do. This way of viewing things in comparative terms leads us back toward some sort of points system, again, denying the saving grace of God's love.

The story of the Morehouse College gift by a billionaire to pay the student loans of the graduating class (the author says about \$40,000,000), and the criticism it received, are the kinds of thing we see in our culture widely now. Any who would be philanthropist, beware! If you have ever done anything the guardians of our media culture disapprove of, measuring you by the standards of the day, your name will be stripped from buildings, reviled, and repudiated. How many of us can stand such scrutiny? Again, we depend on God's grace. We won't receive such grace from contemporary culture, and things are likely to become worse in this country before they get better. But remember Jesus's words in Matthew:

**11 Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matt 5:11,12)**

We cannot go wrong in seeking to follow Jesus, and do what we believe he would want us to do. If that brings the contempt of the world, then it is something that we can live with; look how Jesus was treated.

But, we are studying James; let's get back to that. What James is telling us in the first part of our scripture reading is to guard what we say, and not to unthinkingly speak in anger (James 1:19-21) This is a special application of the verses preceding (1:16-18) where James tells us that things that are good are a gift

from above, from God, and definitely not from below. In the King James, the first word of verse 19 is “Wherefore”, translating a Greek word that connects this scripture in 19-22 to that of 16-18. The Greek word can also be translated, “Know this ...” The RSV and NRSV simply drop the connection, and indeed verses 19-22 can stand by themselves. Notice that what is heard is general – it can be from God, or from one another. It is in our reaction to what we hear that we need to take care. There is a place for anger; it is necessary sometimes. Even Jesus expressed anger, such as when he was confronted by the buyers and sellers and moneychangers in the temple. But as with other things we do, care and consideration is needed.

Verses 22-25 are the heart of the lesson: be doers of the word, and not just hearers. This is especially difficult in today’s world. Even before the virus crisis, we have been afflicted by parasites who would take advantage of our generous natures by asking, even demanding, that we give money to some cause or another. They would have us “do” by giving them money. With our actions limited by seclusion due to the virus, these channels may seem more necessary and appealing. But we do need to be wary. We do have a responsibility to be good stewards of what we have been given. Quite a few charities seem to spend most of their money on making solicitations. They are very, very skilled in crafting messages and images designed to further their appeal. (Jeanne Magda passed on to Cindy and me some years ago a document that rated various charitable organizations on how they used their money. I was amazed at how many are not good stewards of the donations given! It seemed that many organizations supposedly supporting veterans were unusually bad. Some others with big names seem very troubling.)

There ARE things we can do besides give money. Communication is important – try to stay connected as best you can to family, friends, and others you are not able to see so often. (And, I’ll add, try to keep patience with those you now see more often than normal!) I am so very grateful for the cards and messages sent to Cindy and me. I should do more of that myself!

We hope that the virus emergency stays bounded and doesn’t get out of hand as schools prepare to open. There is still no vaccine, but a lot has been learned about this virus, and treatment outcomes have been improving. More people are surviving it, and mass outbreaks seem to be declining. Let us give thanks to God, and continue to pray for each other and our world.

*Prayer: Saving God, help us to see the difference between our beliefs and our actions. Amen.*