

Christ Community Covenant Church
A 'Word' for Street Level Christianity
James 1:16-25
Pastor Dave Scherrer - October 11, 2015

Famous verses

James is an incredibly practical book . it seems to be made for street level Christianity that we are engaged in in the 21st century. If you have had an encounter with Jesus Christ, James is now answering the question %How would, or even should our lives look like on the ground now that everything has changed - at street level not from some cruising altitude of 40,000 ft. where everything looks soft and approachable and cartoon like. No we need street level, even a back alley awarenessqwhere things are hard and gritty and dangerous. I want to know what Christianity looks like from here. That is what James is all about.

We know now that street level Christianity has at least some suffering. How much kind of depends on dumb luck, our own willingness to risk and of course God's divine purposes. But how am I going to keep that suffering in perspective? How am I going to make sense of it? I need something bigger than suffering itself to measure it against - something that will give it meaning and purpose against an otherwise confusing and brutish world. I want to know that there is purpose in suffering. Suffering for suffering's sake is just pain. But if, as James contends, suffering is empowering me for something bigger, something divine and eternal, something that has a reason behind it . now that gives me a life that has fuel, that has energy. Now we have something. This is now powerful. And James is going to lead us to that but he wants us to understand that the deeper something is God Himself and His purposes. He wants us to know God, to know truth, and He has a direct path to that reality. It's called the Word.

What James is going to tell us is that if you have a new relationship with God you will necessarily have a new relationship with God's word. Let's take a step back just for a moment . . .

We can know God in several ways:

- By being in Nature
- By being with God's people
- By being with God's Word

Being with nature and God's people are good but not enough and just being with them doesn't mean that I have encountered God. I might - but that is no guarantee that you have. And there is a better more direct way. That is by encountering in person the living, revealed character of God shared directly to us as an act of His will so that we can in fact know Him in all His power and love - as personally as we can know each other here in this room, even better.

Perhaps this seems really basic, but God's Word comes in two forms: We know that Jesus was the first Word from the writings of His friend John who opened up his little book on the account of Jesus' life like this:

John 1:1-4, 14, 17-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

So we know that Jesus is this Word, come in the flesh to show us God, that we might know Him and be at peace with Him. And then we also have this . the Scriptures . the living revelation of God, breathed into these pages over thousands of years by dozens of writers. We are told that these words come directly from God, inspiring these writers to document God's law and love.

Hebrews 4:12

¹² For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

We can know God in the mountains, but only in part. We have better. We can know God by getting to know His people, but even the best of us is still finite and fallible. Only Jesus Himself and His Living Word the Scriptures can truly put purpose into the sufferings we all face. This book and this book alone is sufficient for all that I need to know of God to be saved and to align my faith and my conduct to His purposes. With this I can choose to live a life that pleases God . . . or not! So let's get going in our passage because James has some street level advice for us on how to approach this gift of God of Himself:

James 1:16-27

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the **word of truth**, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures.

¹⁹ Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. ²¹ Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted **word**, which is able to save your souls.

²² But be doers of the **word**, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the **word** and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. ²⁴ For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. ²⁵ But the one who looks into the **perfect law, the law of liberty**, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. ²⁶ If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

I saw three things in this passage about the word that I think can help us right here in our day-to-day existence. Those three things are we are to be ***humbled by the word, we are to be shaped by the word and we are to be liberated by the word.***

Humbled – “Receive with meekness the implanted word”

James 1:16-18

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the **word of truth**, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures.

Psalms 1, tells us that a godly man or woman delights in God's law;

¹ Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
² but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.

The Bible is not just another book of good advice. We are not to do what Thomas Jefferson did where we cut a paste the parts we like together and then unceremoniously drop the rest onto the cutting room floor (to mix a metaphor). It is supposed to be the other way around. The Bible is looking down at us saying I like that I don't like that.

The mark of a God changed heart is you like to have God telling you how to live. You are humbled by what you read and the difference you see between this standard and how we actually live, in behavior and attitude.

What this means is that we are running head on to an inevitable collision with our culture which says falsely, "This is a good book not **The Good Book**, we are free to take certain things from it but we don't have to be held to it. The one who should call the shots is me and I don't like it, no matter who you are when you say there is another standard by which we are all held."

But it can't be both can it? Either I am in control or God is. I either have to do away with me or I have to do away with God. The Bible is the perfect law.

Now, some parts offend me, or confuse me . the polygamy of Abraham for instance. I guess one of the reasons that I am so taken with the Bible is it doesn't hold any punches. It tells the story as it is, unvarnished and real. You see, not all the Bible is *prescriptive*, some of it is *descriptive*. The Bible observes Abraham living with more than one wife and lying and treating slaves poorly but that is not to give us permission, it is to show us as if by a mirror how shameful and ungodly such behavior is. And how God can use broken and flawed people in magnificent ways. This is why we need a good habit of deep hermeneutics (the practice of rightly interpreting Scripture).

James 1:21

. . . and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

As a culture we find the mandate on forgiveness in the Bible to be wonderful and transforming but we find mandates on our sexuality and not having sex outside of marriage prudish. It is not because we have become so brilliant and improved. Not that I've seen, but that we bring our culture and experience into our opinions. 100 years from now the ideas that have so much by way of ideas that have traction now will be laughed at. Ideas that have so much traction now will be shown to be foolish, detrimental and even deadly. I said several weeks ago that the way you see things now does not mean that it is the way it is everywhere and always.

Some things in this book offend me and put me off . . . it will offend you and all cultures at some point. At some point God and I are going to disagree and I will be taken back and offended. I am not God! But if Jesus is the Word of God - His only Son risen from the dead, then I have to fall under this authority because Jesus submitted to this authority. We have to humble ourselves under the full authority of the word of God. So not only are we to be humbled but we are to be shaped;

Shaped – "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only"

Let's look back at our passage in verse 22:

²² But be doers of the **word**, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the **word** and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. ²⁴ For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. ²⁵ But the one who looks into **the perfect law, the law of liberty**, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

Verse 23 asks us to do three things .

1. Look '**intently**' (same word as Peter looking intently into the tomb) the tomb is empty - what does that mean thinking of the implications of the contents of Scripture. How deliberate are you? How systematic are you? How committed are you to the imperatives of James to be shaped by the word? There is a rational approach to Scripture but this passage is telling us there is more. There is a personal aspect to this book.

2. Look **'personally'** - Looking into a mirror is personal . you don't primarily read the Bible like a physics text, you must look at it personally with your own face in mind. Indeed, with your heart in mind and with your soul in mind.

The word of God shows you who you are. He exposes you and convicts you and counsels you and directs you. Shapes you! Have you move beyond the rational to the personal . like a mirror that shows you how you are. Finally there is an act of our will that must be engaged. We read it rationally and personally and volitionally.

3. Look **'volitionally'**. You keep after it and you press on and you persevere a sustained effort as an act of your will in the hopes and belief that I will be changed for the better. And when I do that I am blessed and I am set free. There is liberty in the law if we have eyes to see.

Liberated – “the law of liberty”

²⁵ But the one who looks into **the perfect law, the law of liberty**, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

The world wants to tell us that freedom is the ability to do whatever I want whenever I want. No one telling me what to do, no boundaries to hold me back. The problem is that is a formula for suffering without purpose and it leads to hopelessness

So how are we to put it all into perspective? God wants us to have it all. Look in summary at verse 27 with me,

²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Busy and Sanctified– “Visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world”

Theologians tell us that this verse is placed here as a kind of summary of the rest of the book and frankly a summary of the entire book of the prophets. It all seems to come down to two simple things;

1. Take care of orphans and widows and
2. Keep yourself from being stained by the world. This is what a word shaped life and church look like,

Isaiah 1:7

Learn to do right; seek justice.

Defend the oppressed.

Take up the cause of the fatherless;

plead the case of the widow.

Liberal churches tend to focus on issues of society, poverty, injustice and the like while at the same time have gone soft on God's law when it comes to how we are to behave sexually.

Conservative churches tend to focus on behaviors of various kinds that are associated with purity including sexual purity but are often all too silent about the circumstances of the oppressed and the marginalized in society. Personal purity and social caring go together in the Bible and the world tends to separate them. And we mustn't.

One of the ways you can know that our church and you and I are being shaped by the Word is by our willingness to confront **the fruit of flesh and the fruit of pride and the fruit of indifference** and to instead check ourselves for the **fruit of humility and the fruit of generosity and the fruit of**

contentedness. James is inviting us before the mirror of Jesus Christ. When you look in the mirror what do you see. Are you just looking like you or are you looking more and more like Christ every day?

Prayer

Discussion Questions from October 11 sermon

Have you heard some say, %can get all I need of God by being in nature.+

What is wrong with this argument or maybe better what is right in this argument?

What part does the Body of Christ play in knowing God?

What part does the Scripture and the Holy Spirit play in knowing God?

Here is a big question . . . Can we really know God??

Some say that we can know Christ better in suffering. How do you think that this could be true?

Dave shared that suffering has its purposes. What do you think are some of those purposes?

One thing Dave mentioned is that suffering is only understood against the full backdrop of Scripture and by that knowing the full purposes of God. How have you personally experienced this next verse in your life?

Hebrews 4:12

¹² For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Re-read the James passage we studied this past Sunday

James 1:16-27

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the **word of truth**, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of his creatures.

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Dave talked about the challenge of looking in the mirror at yourself as a spiritual exercise. We are to study the face we see and see how it is looking ever more like the face of Christ (hopefully!) We are to look at Scripture with intentionality and in a person centered way.

Then we are to apply this discipline as an act of our will to our lives. Do you do this? Can you give an example of how your study of Scripture has changed your life?

The book of James offers a definition of true or pure religion.

²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Dave suggested that we are to be %Busy and Sanctified.+What does that mean to you?

What does this passage mean to you in a 21st century context?

Isaiah 1:7

Learn to do right; seek justice.

Defend the oppressed.

Take up the cause of the fatherless;
plead the case of the widow.

Is there something your small group could do together to address these kind of issues in our city and culture? What would those be and what would a ministry of your Community Group look like addressing one of these issues?