

Proper 17B 2018 Sermon

Epistle: James 1:17-27

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore 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.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But 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.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion 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.

Gospel: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

At times, the Bible can be difficult to understand.

One of the reasons is that **we** live in a very different time and culture than the people in the Bible, or the first readers of the Bible. Jesus lived in a Middle Eastern culture 2000 years ago. The socio-economic landscape was significantly different from the socio-economic landscape in America today. So, when James writes in his letter that pure religion is this: “to care for orphans and widows in their distress...,” well, “orphans and widows” are in a much different situation in 21st Century America than they were in 1st Century Palestine.

I looked up “widow” in a Bible dictionary, and found this: “...the loss of a husband in ancient Israel was normally a social and economic tragedy... Although the *denotation* of widow referred to a woman whose husband had died, because of the social context the word quickly acquired the *connotation* of a person living a marginal existence in extreme poverty.”¹ Look up the word “*orphan*” in a Bible dictionary, and you’ll read this: “Since the father was the main means of economic support for the family unit in the ancient Near East, his absence left his wife and children in a particularly vulnerable condition (2 Kings

4:1-7). Consequently in the Bible, ... orphans and widows are usually mentioned together as the epitome of the poor and deprived of society...”²

In other words, when James writes that pure religion is “to care for widows and orphans in their distress,” he is using those words not in their *literal* sense, but rather as catch-all terms representing all those in his society and community who were particularly vulnerable, “living a marginal existence in extreme poverty.” And so it is that Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message Bible*, translates that verse about orphans and widows into modern English like this: “Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight...” Peterson realizes that the situation of widows and orphans in the *Biblical* world is very similar to the situation of the homeless and loveless in America in our own day, and that, if James were writing today, he might well have substituted “homeless and loveless” for “widows and orphans.”

So, as you can see, some passages in the Bible require some digging before we can understand what the author is getting at, and how it might apply to our lives today.

But there are other passages which seem as fresh and relevant today as they were in Biblical times. The moral teachings regarding the words we speak to one another are teachings that are timeless and cross-cultural. James writes (and I read from the *Common English* translation): “...let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.”

Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger: these admonishments are as relevant today as they were when James wrote them – perhaps even *more* so, given the seeming lack of even common civility in our world today. In fact, I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that in today's world we are often *quick* to speak, *slow* to listen, and *quick* to anger – behaviors totally **opposite** of what James instructs! [PAUSE]

But what does James mean when he *next* says, “...your anger does not produce God's righteousness”? Here we have *another* reason that the Bible can be difficult to understand: We're not always sure what a particular word means – in this case, God's “righteousness”. The *Contemporary English* translation helps us here by avoiding the word *righteousness*, which just has *way* too many meanings. This translation reads: “If you are angry, you cannot do any of the good things that God wants done.” If you are angry, you cannot **do** any of the good things that God wants done. James emphasizes the *doing*. If the *first* theme of our Epistle reading today is that we should watch carefully what comes out of our mouths (and Jesus says the same thing in today's Gospel!), the **second** theme is that our actions must accord with the faith we profess. In today's Gospel, Jesus calls the Pharisees hypocrites, and quotes the prophet Isaiah: ““This people

honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me...”³ James admonishes us, “... be *doers* of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” How timeless is **that** moral instruction?! We are to “*walk the talk*” and *act* on the faith we profess, because (as James will say later), “Faith without works is dead.”⁴

Indeed, in the Old Testament (Jesus’ Bible), the Hebrew word “*dabar*” means both “word” and “deed.” To separate “word” from “deed” in the ancient Hebrew world was to make the word “*dabar*” self-contradictory and nonsensical. And yet we humans do it all the time. It was a problem in the days of Isaiah (who lived over 700 years *before* Jesus); it was a problem during the time of Jesus (who *quotes* Isaiah and calls the Pharisees “hypocrites”); it was a problem when James wrote his letter; **and** it is a problem in our own time. Too often, we do not *live* according to the faith we *profess*. We are hearers of the word, but not doers of the word.

We see it all around us, *particularly* among those of us who profess to be Christians: our actions do not follow the words of faith we profess. What is the clergy sex scandal in the Roman Catholic Church about, if not the failure of clergy to act in accordance with what they preach – in accordance with their baptismal vows, let alone their ordination vows. And somehow, the church hierarchy has **acted** to cover this up, while at the *same* time professing a faith that gives special care toward the vulnerable. This contradiction between word and action is shaking the foundations of the 1,700-year-old institution of the Roman Catholic Church. It has certainly shaken the faith of many of its members.

Prominent Jesuit author Fr. James Martin sees the same thing happening with regard to the compassion which the Catholic Church *professes* and the way it *acts* towards its LGBT and divorced members.⁵

We could go on and on. Evangelical Protestants who profess to be “Biblical Christians” turn a blind eye to the desperate plight of refugees fleeing war and violence, and rally to deport immigrants, despite the **Bible’s** *overwhelming* teaching about showing special compassion toward the foreigner and the refugee among us.⁶ And somehow, “Bible-believing Christians” have even justified separating children from their parents, causing irreparable psychological damage to these most vulnerable of God’s children. There is, indeed, a “disconnect” between the faith they profess and the way they act.

And we Episcopalians are guilty, as well. For years I have subscribed to the email bulletins of the Episcopal News Service, which is kind of the “Reuters” or “Associated Press” for the Episcopal Church. A few days ago, the editors of the Episcopal News Service announced a decision they had made, the reasons for which saddened me greatly. They wrote: “When we invited our readers to comment on Episcopal News Service stories nearly seven years ago, we did so in the spirit of generating and encouraging discussion related to our content.

“However, increasingly, some voices have come to dominate the discussion, which at times has strayed from the stories themselves into theological and ideological arguments. We value our readers and we value civil discourse, but we can no longer offer a comment function on our website...

“We are far from alone in this decision. Beginning at least in late 2014 and continuing to now, media organizations far larger than ENS have decided to stop allowing comments on their stories. They range from Reuters and *USA Today* to the *Atlantic* and National Public Radio. We regret this trend and the polarization that promoted it.”⁷ (unquote)

In June, the bishop of the Roman Catholic diocese of Pittsburgh wrote an article titled “9 rules for civility from the Catholic tradition,” in which he states: “We all know that something is gravely wrong with our public conversation in the United States. ...We each have a responsibility to change the game, to treat each other better, particularly when we disagree... When we claim to follow the one who called us to love our enemies but then direct caustic diatribes toward those who are even *mildly* critical of our views, we have no credibility... When we direct insults toward another human being, we degrade **ourselves** even *more* than we degrade that person—*and* we display an impoverished vocabulary... We need to recapture the sacredness of language. It is through words that we express life, that we express all that we love, all that we fundamentally believe.”⁸ (unquote)

To recapture the sacredness of language, the spirit-filled words through which we express life and love and all that we fundamentally believe. I think that James speaks directly to our situation today when he writes (and I read from a different translation): “...with humility, set aside all moral filth and the growth of wickedness, and welcome the word planted deep inside you—the very word that is able to save you.” (*CEB translation*)

It is that word planted deep inside us that can save us, heal us, from the division within ourselves between what we profess as Christians and how we speak and act. May we reunite ourselves with that deeply-implanted, divine word, that we might (in the words of our Prayer Book) “Show forth in our lives what we profess by our faith,”⁹ that others may hear in our words and see in our works the voice and character of Jesus.

AMEN

1 <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/widow.html>

2 <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/orphan.html>

3 Mark 7:6-7

4 James 2:17

5 See, for instance, Fr. Martin's book, "*Building a Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community Can Enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity*"

6 For just one example, see Leviticus 19:34 "Foreigners living among you will be like your own people. Love them as you love yourself, because you were foreigners living in Egypt. I am the LORD your God." (GW)

7 <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2018/08/30/from-the-editors-episcopal-news-service-to-disable-comments/>

8 <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/06/26/9-rules-civility-catholic-tradition>

9 *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 224, Collect for Easter 2