

James 1.19-27

Your religion: doing or just listening?

Amington Church

Sunday 22 April 2018

Wholehearted Devotion to Jesus (3)

Evidence

If someone were studying your life, to see what it means to be a Christian, what would they conclude? Today we are thinking about what *evidence* there should be, of our faith.

A young American engineer was sent to Ireland by his company, on a two-year assignment. He took the job because he would earn enough to marry his long-term girlfriend, who lived back home in Tennessee.

They wrote to each other often, but as the lonely weeks went by, she began expressing doubts that he was being faithful to her, seeing as he was surrounded by beautiful Irish lasses.

He wrote back, declaring with some passion that he was paying no attention at all to the local girls. 'I admit,' he wrote, 'that I am tempted sometimes. But I fight it. I'm keeping myself for you.'

A few days later, the engineer received a package. It contained a note from his girl, and a harmonica. 'I'm sending this to you,' she wrote, 'so you can learn to play it and have something to take your mind off those Irish girls.'

He replied, 'Thanks for the harmonica. I'm practising on it every night and thinking of you.'

Well, the two years passed, and with joy in his heart he packed up his things – including the harmonica – and took the plane home. He landed in Tennessee, and there in the arrivals hall was his girl, looking for him anxiously as the travellers walked by.

He rushed forward to embrace her, but she held up her hand and said sternly, 'Just hold on there a minute, Billy Bob. Before any serious kissin' and huggin' gets started here, let me hear you play that harmonica!'

Words are of little value, without evidence to back them up.

The word

James puts it like this (22): **do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.**

Remember our old friends the cart and the horse? As the saying goes, don't put the cart before the horse.

It's exactly like that with faith and works – faith comes first, but the works *must* follow. We don't earn our way into God's family, but once we are part of it by faith, we should act like it; what we do is important too.

In the Bible there is an important word, 'righteousness'. It means *both* 'being right with God' *and* 'doing the right thing'.

'Being right with God' is not something we can ever achieve by our efforts. Instead, it is a gift – a free gift – which God gives to all who believe. It is ours by *faith*, when we *put our trust* in God.

'Doing the right thing' is how we say thank-you to God for that gift. We might call it 'holiness' or 'maturity'. It doesn't earn us anything, but *proves* or *demonstrates* the genuineness of our faith.

It's this second sense – 'doing the right thing' – that James is trying to get across here. Without faith, 'doing the right thing' is simply 'being a nice person'. But without 'doing the right thing', our faith is shown to be hollow: we need the horse *and* the cart.

Sometimes when it comes to the sermon, our eyes glaze over and we stop really listening – I'm sure that's none of you right now...

But Jesus said, **‘Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it’** (Luke 11.28). When I stand up and preach I usually have my Bible open like this, and I usually encourage you to find the passage in your Bible, to follow along – why?

Because you aren’t here to listen to *me* and obey *me* – you’re here to listen to *the word* and obey *it*.

I have *my* Bible open because I think my job here is to read and explain the Scriptures, to help you hear what God is saying to you *today* through *this* passage.

I encourage *you* to have a Bible open so you can see for yourselves where what I’m saying is coming from. Anything I say only has authority if it’s what the Bible says – everything else, you can ignore. But, if what I say *does* come from the Bible, then by a miracle of the Holy Spirit God is speaking those words right into your heart, and you really shouldn’t ignore *him*.

James says (22), **do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.**

So, what does James have to say to us this morning?

Listen, learn, look, and love.

Listen (19-20)

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness – the ‘doing the right thing’ – that God desires.

James 1.19-20 (NIV)

Listening is hard work – especially when there are smartphones in the room. I read recently about a restaurant that got fed up with people sitting at their table, all of them on their phones, not talking to each other. So, they offered a 25% discount to any table who put all their phones in a box, which the staff would then lock, and not open until the end of the meal.

If you are blessed with a family, how often do you sit at home, with the TV on, not talking to each other? How often do you sit at home, looking at your phones, not engaging with one another?

Listening is hard work – giving someone undivided and focused attention. We want to have our say – we all want to jump into a conversation with *our* story. But, as many mothers have told their children, ‘God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason’...!

James says: **be quick to listen** (19). How does that apply to your prayer life? Are you as **quick to listen** to God, as you are to list what you want from him? Prayer involves both – and to be honest probably in the proportion of ears to mouth that God gave us.

James says: **be quick to listen** (19). And it's interesting, isn't it, that he links speaking with becoming angry. The more we speak the less we listen; the less we listen the less we understand each other; the less we understand the more quickly we become angry.

If more people spent more time listening, and less time speaking, there would be far fewer misunderstandings, and far less anger.

We sometimes like to kid ourselves that our anger is justified. When we have been wronged, we have every right to be angry. The problem is, we wrong others every bit as much as they wrong us – so all that leads to is a whole lot of anger.

James says: **be quick to listen** (19).

This week, you might catch yourself ignoring a friend or loved one as they try to talk to you. You might catch yourself jumping into a conversation to talk about yourself. You might catch yourself getting angry, or listing your needs in prayer – instead of listening.

So maybe this week practise *listening* to God, and to each other.

Learn (21-22)

Some of you may know that Sam is currently learning to drive, and recently passed her driving theory test.

Now, imagine she arrived at her first lesson – this didn't happen by the way – convinced that in the UK we don't drive on the left but on the right. She listens to her instructor tell her she's wrong, but decides to drive on the right anyway – what's going to happen?

Or, imagine you go to the doctor who tells you that you're in imminent danger of a heart attack because you don't eat healthily, you don't exercise, and you drink too much.

You listen to the doctor, nod sagely, get into your car, drive home via McDonald's, and settle down on the sofa with a couple of beers to watch the TV – what's going to happen?

Listening is not enough. James says,

Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

James 1.21-22 (NIV)

All Christians are given new birth, we are ‘born again’ – not like a baby, but given a new life and a new identity in Jesus. Last week we heard that God **chose to give us birth through the word of truth** (18) – this week we hear that God has **planted the word in** us, and it **can save** us (21) – if we listen to it, *and learn* from it (22).

Like with a driving instructor and a doctor, it isn’t enough simply to listen to what they say – if we don’t act on it, we may as well have stuck our fingers in our ears and gone, ‘La, la, la, la, la!’

When we become a Christian – which sometimes happens bit by bit, and sometimes happens overnight – we are born into a new family: God’s family. **The word is planted** (21), deep within us, as we turn away from our old life, and turn towards God, as his beloved daughter or son.

And as I say at a baptism service – *that’s what Christians do every day*. It isn’t something we do once, and never again. *Every day* we need to turn away from what James calls **moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent** (21), and do our best to live out our faith.

The Bible teaches us what to turn *from*, and what to turn *to* – how to live as a child of God. That means we need to read it, *and learn from it*, so we don’t **merely listen – we do what it says** (22).

Look (23-25)

I have a confession to make – I’m not very good at looking. I will stand and stare into a fridge, trying to find something and not see it – even if it is right there! I was once in the vestry, standing under the fluorescent light, asking Geoff why we had a spare fluorescent tube, because, I said, we don’t have any in church. My Dad shaved his beard off having had one my entire life, and I didn’t notice.

Looking is not my strong suit, so I fully get James’ point here:

Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

James 1.23-24 (NIV)

In the world of crystal-clear mirrors and selfie-sticks, it’s hard for us to imagine forgetting what we look like. We look in the mirror, perhaps to wash our face, put our make-up on, comb or style our hair, brush our teeth – we look briefly and move on.

James says, it’s like that with those who listen to the word and don’t do what it says – they listen, and move on. They’ve combed their hair, so to speak, so they stop, put the comb away, and move on.

But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues in it – not forgetting what they have heard but doing it – they will be blessed in what they do.

James 1.25 (NIV, emphasis added)

Instead, when we look at **the perfect law** – by which James means **the word of truth** he has been talking about – we shouldn't move on but **continue in it**: reflect on the words, remember them, think about how we should act differently because of what we've heard.

Looking at Scripture isn't about a fleeting glance on a Sunday, but a long, lingering look – like lovers gazing into each other's eyes. Look, James says, and continue in what you see – don't forget it or ignore it or minimise it, but *look intently* into it, every day..

How can you read the Bible, so that you don't put it down, move away, and forget all about it? Perhaps you could read a different version? Perhaps you could draw what you read or how it makes you feel? Perhaps you could write a short summary of each paragraph, or a prayer inspired by what you read – I don't know!

There are all sorts of ways of reading the Bible, to help us look properly, and not simply ignore it – in one eye and out the other. Please keep trying, continue in it – and talk to me if you get stuck.

Love (26)

I heard about a man who was really lonely, so he posted an ad on a popular website. The ad said, simply: ‘Wife wanted.’

He was surprised the next morning to find he had over a hundred replies in his inbox. Unfortunately, they all said the same thing: ‘You’re welcome to have mine.’

Harsh words are the enemy of love, and of loving relationships, whether it is friends, family, colleagues, or lovers. Why? Because although there is no biological connection, there is a direct line from our heart – our deep thoughts and feelings – to our mouths.

Jesus said it himself, **‘the mouth speaks what the heart is full of’** (Matthew 12.34). So James tells us:

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.

James 1.26 (NIV)

I don’t like the word ‘religious’ – but it simply means worshipping God inwardly *and* outwardly. Ceremony without faith is empty and in vain; faith without outward expression is hollow and futile.

James expands his teaching about the tongue, and how dangerous it is, in chapter 3, which we'll come to in a couple of weeks.

For now, I think James is making a simple but vitally important point. Are you listening?

If life were all about the big decisions, we probably wouldn't go far wrong. But the thing is, they don't come around very often. Instead, life mostly consists of dozens of small decisions every day – almost all of which involve what we say, or don't say.

That is where the battle-ground for our heart is – not in the big decisions, but in the every-day, the humdrum, and the mundane. A kind word is as full of love as a wedding day.

How do you speak to your friends, your family, your children, your parents, your spouse, your colleagues? How do you speak to our about this church family? Do you speak words of love, or words of bitterness?

Words can crush, and words can build. The little phrase 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me' is idiotic, unbiblical, and patently wrong. Words have great power – how do you use them?

True worship (26-27)

If you consider yourself to be a true worshipper of God, yet don't watch your tongue, you are deceiving your own heart – your worship is worthless. The pure and true worship of God is this: to care for those in any kind of need, and to make sure you don't become polluted by the world.

James 1.26-27 (my translation)

This is *true* worship: speaking love and life to people, not gossip and put-downs; caring for all those who need our help and support; living a holy life, turning away from worldly pursuits and desires, and towards God, towards prayer, towards a life of listening *and* doing. This is *true* worship, James says, the outward evidence of our faith.

There is no 'middle ground' for a 'moderate religion' in James.¹ He calls us to be not *half*-hearted but *whole*hearted as we follow Jesus.

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. May we not be deceived, but listen to the word, learn, look, and *love*, every day and in every way. That is true worship.

¹ Motyer, *The Message of James (BST)*, 78.