

“The Integrity of Hearing and Doing”
James 1:19-27
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First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine
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This morning we continue our study of the Book of James, turning to the second half of the first chapter. As I mentioned last week, James is a very practical book, full of wisdom sayings that serve to challenge us to put our faith in practice. In the nine verses we are about to read, I count nine imperatives that James throws at us, challenging us to live faithful lives in a variety of ways. I invite you to join me in reading today’s passage, responding with the parts that are in bold in your bulletin insert. Let us listen now for God’s Word.

James 1:19-27 *Common English Bible*

Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry. This is because an angry person doesn’t produce God’s righteousness.

Therefore, 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.

You must be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves. Those who hear but don’t do the word are like those who look at their faces in a mirror. They look at themselves, walk away, and immediately forget what they were like.

But there are those who study the perfect law, the law of freedom, and continue to do it. They don’t listen and then forget, but they put it into practice in their lives. They will be blessed in whatever they do.

If those who claim devotion to God don’t control what they say, they mislead themselves. Their devotion is worthless.

True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their difficulties and to keep the world from contaminating us.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

I don’t know about you, but I have never been great at spelling. When I was in elementary school one of the classes I remember vividly was spelling. We would have lists of words to learn each day, and at the end of the week we would have a spelling quiz. It seemed like I spent hours with my mom calling out words for me to spell outloud or on the written page. And once the test was over on Friday, I think I forgot most of what I learned. I wonder if

they still teach spelling like that these days? (Let's see what the kids who are here this morning say!)

With the availability of spell check on computers and even on our phone texts, I bet spelling is not as big of a deal as it was in the 1970's. Though we may lament the changes that happen overtime, one thing I have grown to appreciate in recent years is the ability to look up definitions quickly online. I can highlight a word on my laptop or kindle and with a click or a touch on the screen, the definition just pops up!

After reading and praying over this passage this week, the word that kept coming to my mind was this: *hypocrisy*. And though this is a word that I have heard for years, I decided to look it up on an [online dictionary](#). According to Merriam-Webster, hypocrisy is pretending to be what one really is not OR pretending to believe what one does not actually believe; and it especially applies to religious beliefs and practices. Hypocrisy can be expressed by both our words and our actions, and this is something James will focus on time and time again. Perhaps more than any other book in the New Testament, James is concerned about the gap that exists between our "talk" and our "walk" - what we say about our faith and our values, and how we actually live them out. For James, living a life of integrity (and not hypocrisy) has to do with narrowing this gap.

Our passage begins with a call to pay attention to how we use our ears and our mouths: *"everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry"* (1.19b). The instructions are pretty clear: use your ears first to listen, then slow down your mouth, and this will keep you from spitting out words of anger to your neighbor. James will devote almost a whole chapter about the way we use our tongues, the way our speech impacts those around us - that will be chapter 3. Contrary to the children's rhyme "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt them!" James warns us about the misuse of angry words. Expressing anger is not just bad manners - according to James, the real issue is that human anger doesn't produce God's righteousness, God's justice in the world. In other words, when we are quick to speak, when we fail to listen to the other person, and we gush forth with frustration and anger, we witness to a way that is not pleasing to God - and thus we become hypocrites! We may *say* we believe in God's love and peace, that we want our lives to reflect the righteousness of God; we may *say* everyone is born in the image of God and deserves our respect, but our words and our lives may tell a different story. As the leader of the church in Jerusalem, James has no tolerance for hypocrisy, and he believes that our human anger is something we need to watch. This kind of unhealthy anger is not able to bring about God's justice, God's peace, God's will for the world in which we live.

Though these words were written almost 2000 years ago, it appears that people in our world today need to hear this same truth. We are living in an age of anger and rage, and though politicians and social media and other external forces can be blamed, James calls us first to look inwardly. If we truly believe we belong to a loving God who is generous and faithful, One in whom there is no turning or shadow due to change (1.17), and that this God is the One who gave birth to us by the word of truth, then we need to embrace this identity with

all of our hearts, our lives - and this includes the words that come out of our mouths. You see, we need inward / spiritual strength to combat the external forces all around us, forces trying to sell us the lie that human anger is the answer to the world's problems. Whether you watch CNN, FOX, or MSNBC the media works hard to pull us into an "us vs. them" mentality, and every day they give us more and more things to be enraged about. Don't get me wrong - there are many injustices in our world that deserve our attention and are worthy of all the emotions we may feel, including anger. *But in my experience the type of anger that gets stirred in my heart when I hear others rage on in dehumanizing ways is an anger that does not lead me to hope, but instead to despair.* I believe James is right when he calls out human anger that leads not to justice or repair but to more and more brokenness. It's a kind of anger that leaves us empty, as it does not build up but rather tears down. Instead of this destructive anger, James calls us to humility, not feeding the wickedness of the world but instead welcoming God's word planted deep inside us—the very word that is able to heal and to save (1.21).

We come next to the verses that get to the heart of James' message about hypocrisy: "Be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead (or deceive) themselves"(1.22). Who could think of a better slogan against hypocrisy than these words from James? "Be doers and not just hearers!" Hearing and doing belong together, and between the two there should never be a gap. To illustrate this truth, James gives us not only a catchy slogan but a short parable for us to consider. "Those who hear but don't do the word are like those who look at their faces in a mirror. They look at themselves, walk away, and immediately forget what they were like" (1.23-24). In the ancient world, looking into a mirror was a common way of imaging how people would make moral self-improvements (Luke Timothy Johnson, [New Interpreter's Bible Volume XII](#), p. 189). And for James, the hypocrite is like one who looks into the mirror, sees what's wrong, but when they walk away they immediately forget what they saw. They fail to make the change necessary to live a life of integrity. In contrast to this person are the ones who study the perfect law, the law of freedom, and they continue to do it. Instead of listening and then forgetting, they put the law of love into practice in their lives. These are the ones who live lives of integrity - they will be blessed in whatever they do because they are living whole, undivided lives.

In trying to understand this analogy of the mirror, I want to point us to a rather unusual source, the late singer and pop-icon Michael Jackson. In January of 1988 Michael Jackson released [Man in the Mirror](#), a song that would top the charts later that year. The refrain goes like this: *"I'm starting with the man in the mirror; I'm asking him to change his ways; And no message could've been any clearer, If you wanna make the world a better place, Take a look at yourself and then make a change!"* The change that James calls for is remembering what we see in the mirror, and then going on to make the change that is needed. For example, if we look into the mirror of God's law and see that we fail to love our neighbor as ourselves - perhaps by holding on too tightly to our possessions, or gossiping about someone we dislike - whatever sin we may become aware of when we look into God's perfect law, this becomes an invitation for us to repent, to change our ways. And according to James, when we change, we break out of the grip that hypocrisy has on our lives. We no longer are saying one thing and doing another. We are walking the talk, living lives of integrity.

John Calvin, the founder of our Presbyterian/Reformed faith believed that when we looked into the mirror of God's Law we could see two things. One was the truth about our imperfections, how we miss the mark time and time again to be the people that God has created us to be. That's very similar to what Michael Jackson sings about, the need to make that change to be kinder or more generous, to speak words that build up instead of tear down. But Calvin believed that the law did something else, too. *Not only did it reflect back to us our imperfections but it also revealed to us the goodness and mercy of God's unfathomable love for us* (Kim Wells, ["Hearing and Doing with Integrity" sermon 8/19/18](#)).

In many ways this is what we do everytime we say our prayer of confession each week. We are invited to look honestly at our lives, to see where we may have missed the mark and failed to be the people God intends for us to be. We do this in both spoken and unspoken prayer, together and individually practicing radical honesty before one another. And then, when the water is poured into the font, just ordinary water from the tap in the kitchen, we hear the Good News of God's love, the water symbolizing God's forgiveness washing us clean, giving us a new start and a new life. Calvin then invites us to see our image in the reflection of this water, too - the water of God's covenant love for us, reminding us that there's no sin we can commit that can ever separate us from God's love.

Yes, the mirror of God's law both convicts us of our failures, but it also sets us free to live lives of gratitude and service, especially to those most vulnerable in the world. When we put into practice the law of love, loving our neighbor as ourselves, we are set free to be the people God has created us to be. Whenever we practice this law of love - serving spaghetti to neighbors who are hungry, quilting garments to witness to God's healing presence, stocking cans in a food pantry, sending cards to those who are grieving loss - no matter what form our service takes, when we act in love we become more and more whole, more and more like the people God created us to be, persons of integrity.

To God be the glory, now and forever. Amen.