

James' letter to the church raises the hair on the back of a person's neck. It's direct; he doesn't pull any punches. Tonight, we're going to talk about how his words might impact our walk with God and one another.

OPENING PRAYER

JAMES 1:21-25

Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and *all* that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the Word implanted, which is able to save your souls. ²² But prove yourselves doers of the Word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the Word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴ for *once* he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. ²⁵ But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.

James sets us on our heels with his words: He does NOT say, If you have a weakness, or if you feel that you are being tempted, then do this or that. But he says, **"putting aside all filthiness and *all* that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the Word implanted, which is able to save your souls" (v.21).** In words, he's saying, we are not yet prepared to meet the Lord!

And we're okay with that, for we know that we are in process, that we won't be perfect until our final transformation at the resurrection. But the warning is stronger than that. There's a sense of urgency in his voice, for he's talking about our salvation, that, indeed, our filth and wickedness might lead to our own condemnation despite the fact the Word has already been **"implanted"** in us.

When he commands us to put **"aside all filthiness,"** he's saying we need to cleanse the corruption of our hands, the external part of our lives. And when he says we must put aside **"all that remains of wickedness,"** he's saying we need to cleanse the corruption of our souls, the internal part of our lives.

But maybe this is a teaching for someone else, maybe you and I don't need the warning, the threat.

After he wrote this threat, James made a strange analogy. He wrote, **"if anyone is a hearer of the Word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴for *once* he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was"** (vv.23-24).

The metaphor of a looking at one's **"natural face in a mirror"** only makes sense when we consider the illustration which follows. James wrote, **"But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does"** (v.25)

In the one case a man looks at himself, and he measures his behavior according to his own experience and will.

I'm reminded of a song by Mac Davis. The chorus goes,

Oh Lord it's hard to be humble
When you're perfect in every way
I can't wait to look in the mirror
Cause I get better looking each day
To know me is to love me
I must be a hell of a man
Oh Lord it's hard to be humble,
But I'm doing the best that I can

The man who looks in the mirror and sees his natural self, he is the man who thinks he's already arrived, that he's all that and a bag of chips. God created man in his image, and this man has returned the favor.

But there's the second picture: A man does not look at his own heart to justify himself, but he looks at the **"perfect law"** of God, we read. When we compare ourselves to God's demands, there we see that we are not worthy to receive anything from the Lord. But we see that we are objects of God's wrath, and so we

repent, and thus the Gospel of Jesus Christ does its work, and it heals us from the inside out.

We cannot judge ourselves according to our own morality. If we did, we would never repent, after all, I'm doing a whole lot better than that other guy! James is saying we must judge ourselves according to that which lies outside of us, and that thing is the law of God. In the light of that measuring stick, we see things as they really are.

A church father once wrote that "filthiness and wickedness arise out of anger." As we know, the source of all anger is fear. Brothers and sisters, Jesus, the Son of the Most High God, overcame death with his resurrection, and he poured into our spirits his Holy Spirit that we would know the truth, and that that truth would set us free from every fear, and it would fill our hearts with the peace of God. And in that peace, that joy we could conquer the evils of this world, that we would be liberated from the passions of our hearts.

St. Augustine wrote, "If you don't hear the Word, you can't do the Word, and therefore you build nothing. But if you hear the Word and don't do it, then what you do build will be a ruin."

During Lent let us reflect on our own lives in light of the life of Christ, the Word of God come in the flesh.

During Lent let us look for ways to do the Word, to be like Jesus to each other and to our neighbor.

And during Lent let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.