

The Second Sunday of Lent

*Pursuing Holiness, Part 2**Obedience in Real Time*

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Let's pray: *Gracious God, please help us listen. Really listen. To tune in, not tune out. Help us to listen, learn, and obey what you say is right. This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.*

In our first week digging into the letter that James wrote to the churches filled with new believers, new *persecuted* believers, we were commanded (imperative voice) to ask for wisdom when we are in the midst of a trial, and God will give wisdom generously to all without finding fault. We were challenged to believe God (without doubting) when he said that he would give us the wisdom we need to endure the trial, and in fact, he told us to consider it pure joy when we face trials of many kinds. Why? Because the reward that comes when we receive whatever God wants to teach us in the trial overshadows the trouble – producing a peace and a joy that cannot be shaken. King David, in a time of trial wrote this in Psalm 62:5-7, *“For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. On God rests my deliverance and my honor; my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.”*

Do you need wisdom in the midst of a trial right now? Get on your knees and ask God for wisdom - ask without being double-minded (Oh, I'll ask God but he probably won't help me.). Believe his promise that he will give you the wisdom you need to apply whatever knowledge you have to make it through the trial with an ever-maturing faith! *“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.”*

Let's look together at our Scripture for today as we continue our Lenten focus on Pursuing Holiness. *“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 that God desires. 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.*

Let's just stop here with the first of two main points. We must accept the Word. To accept means to be convinced of, to rely on. To accept means to believe. We must believe the Word. We must receive the Word. We must accept the Word as truth to live by, to plant our feet on, and to guide and guard our lives. So, here's what was going on in the churches James was writing to that caused him to write what he did:

We have to remember that communication of the gospel message to the early church was primarily through a person reading one of these letters out loud to an assembly of new believers. There was no New Testament yet! This was the New Testament being written in real life! So, a church elder would stand up with no microphone, no screen, no pictures – nothing – except a letter to be read to the church from a far-off leader, and everyone was supposed to listen very, very carefully. Sit still and listen very carefully. But see, some of what was being written to them by these leaders like James was hard to understand. *“Consider it pure joy, brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds...”*. What? And so they'd turn to the person beside them, or behind them, or tap the person in front of them on the shoulder and ask, *“What did he say?”* And the person would repeat it, and maybe the person beside them would correct that person saying, *“No, that's not what he said,”* and the next thing you know no one is able to pay attention because there was so much chatter going on. Some were even getting mad about what they were hearing and were literally standing up to speak out against what was being read. Do you remember that State of the Union address that President Obama gave and someone yelled out *“Liar”* in the middle of it? Well, what if that had been allowed to go on, and then others yelled back at that person, or yelled more at the President? It sounds like this is sort of what was going on in the early church, and it was making it very hard for people to pay

attention long enough to learn anything. So, James lays down the law: *“Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry because human anger doesn’t produce the righteousness that God desires. “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.”* Humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you (from circumstances that become disrespectful and dishonoring to God).

Now, we don’t have this kind of situation in worship today – thanks be to God. But we can certainly apply what James is saying to our own lives. We are often not very good listeners. We are instead just waiting for the pause so that we can say what we want to say. We aren’t often ‘quick to listen and slow to speak,’ are we? And, I dare say that we have become really, really good at rationalizing our anger, calling it ‘frankness’ or saying, ‘that’s just the way I am,’ or attributing it to the stress we are under. But the truth is, an angry spirit is never a listening, teachable spirit. Proverbs 29:11 tells us, *“A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control.”* James explains why we must be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. It’s because our anger does not bring about the kind of life God is calling us to live. Our anger keeps us from pursuing holiness. Our anger and our fast tongues keep us in that tension we talked about last week between our sin nature and the holiness of Christ already placed on us like a new skin. Anger does not bring about the holy, righteous life that God wants for us. We must be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry – which is all possible for even the hottest heads among us, when Jesus is truly Lord of our lives (he has all authority).

Let’s continue with the full text for today which will bring forward our second main point. Remember the first is that we accept, we believe the Word. Listen now for the second: *“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. “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. “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. “Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”*

Allow me to read from Chuck Swindoll’s book *Improving Your Serve* regarding this passage:

“Let’s pretend that you work for me. In fact, you are my executive assistant in a company that is growing rapidly. I’m the owner and I’m interested in expanding overseas. To pull this off, I make plans to travel abroad and stay there until the new branch office gets established. I make all the arrangements to take my family in the move to Europe for 6-8 months, and I leave you in charge of the busy stateside organization. I tell you that I will write you regularly and give you direction and instructions.

I leave and you stay. Months pass. A flow of letters are mailed from Europe and received by you at the national headquarters. I spell out all my expectations. Finally, I return. Soon after my arrival I drive down to the office. I am stunned! Grass and weeds have grown up high. A few windows along the street are broken. I walk into the receptionist’s room and she is doing her nails, chewing gum, and listening to her favorite disco station. I look around and notice the waste baskets are overflowing, the carpet hasn’t been vacuumed for weeks, and nobody seems concerned that the owner has returned. I ask about your whereabouts and someone in the crowded lounge area points down the hall and yells, “I think he’s down there.” Disturbed, I move in that direction and bump into you as you are finishing a chess game with our sales manager. I ask you to step into my office (which has been temporarily turned into a television room for watching afternoon soap operas). “What in the world is going on?” “What do ya’ mean?” “Well, look at this place! Didn’t you get any of my letters?” “Letters? Oh yeah – sure, got every one of them. As a matter of fact ...we have had letter study every Friday night since you left. We have even divided all the personnel into small groups and discussed many of the things you wrote. Some of those things were really interesting. You’ll be pleased to know that a few of us have actually committed to memory some of your sentences and paragraphs. One or two memorized an entire letter or two! Great stuff in those letters!”

“Okay, okay – you got my letters, you studied them and meditated on them, discussed and even memorized them. BUT WHAT DID YOU DO ABOUT THEM?”

“Do? Uh – we didn’t do anything about them.”

It’s absurd, isn’t it? But this is what many of us do with God’s Word. We hear it without having the slightest intention of obeying it.

James uses the example of two men who look in a mirror. The mirror represents God’s Word. The first man looks in the mirror, (looks at God’s Word) – looks carefully in fact – and sees the truth of his sinful condition and God’s gift of salvation. However, after looking, this man goes on about his business without giving the Word a second thought. There’s no real effect of the Word on his life.

The second man looks intently into God’s Word. In fact, the grammar shows us that the man looks and keeps on looking. He looks into God’s Word and keeps on looking. The same Greek word is used to describe Peter as he bent over and looked into the empty tomb. He looked and kept on looking. It is an absorbing look. The man looks into God’s Word and sees how truly needy in spirit he is, how desperate he is, ‘I need you, O I need you. Every hour I need you.’ He knows he is lost and wretched without Christ. But at the same time, he sees the all-sufficient love and grace of God. He sees the reality of his freedom to live for Christ! – And what is the result? The working out of his faith. The working out of his faith. The doing that comes after the believing. The applying that comes after the understanding. He cannot just see. He cannot just hear. He must do. There must be action towards others that springs from his love and gratitude for God. If God’s Word hasn’t made a change in our lives, we should ask ourselves if we have truly accepted it as the Word of Truth it claims to be.

James tells us that if we act on what we hear – we will be blessed in what we do. This doesn’t mean our lives are all nice and pretty, all packaged up with a neat little bow on the top. No, it means just what it says. We will be blessed. We will be content. We will be at peace. We will be satisfied in our souls that we are being and doing what God wants us to be and do.

Obedience is a word people like to use when it comes to their dogs. We have certificates that proclaim our dog graduated from obedience school. But go around and invite your friends to go to obedience school with you and you’re probably not going to need a waiting list. Obedience means we are in compliance with an order, or a request, it means we are submitted to another’s authority.

The truth is that we all rebel against obedience – from infancy to senior adulthood. We rebel against it. We want to do what we want to do, what feels good, what comes up, what strikes us to be right at the time. But, pursuing holiness means we are working towards diminishing the tension between what’s going on on the inside of us and the holy skin of righteousness Christ has laid on us. That means we have to practice obedience to God’s Word in real time. We have to look carefully at it, listen to it, be quick to listen in fact, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry (because anger thwarts a teachable spirit) – and in so doing – find our lives blessed by the One who made us and who loves us with an unconditional, everlasting love.

I want to conclude the sermon this morning with a prayer we found written by my dear mother in law, Genevieve Ely Boozer. Genny was a child of God and was a really good listener. She was hit with Parkinson’s Disease over 20 years ago and lived in the nursing center of Penn Hall for the last 6 years. She died on Friday morning surrounded by those she loved and who loved her. She understood about trials, about listening, and about obedience as she wrote and prayed this prayer:

Dear Lord, we thank you for your understanding, concern and love. Lead us now to do the things you want us to do. Help us to share our faith in a loving way. Give us the strength to never give up. We will cross any mountain and go where you want us to go. This we pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.