

James

BEHAVING AS WE BELIEVE

1:19-27

“This you know, my beloved brethren. But let every one be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. Therefore putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. 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; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. 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 shall be blessed in what he does. If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion is worthless. This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (1:19-27).

Solomon begins Ecclesiastes 6 with the penetrating words: “There is an evil which I have seen under the sun and it is prevalent among men.” (Ecclesiastes 6:1). It seems appropriate to introduce our study with these words, for sin presently exists and has existed since the days of James within the body of Christ. This evil has crippled our effectiveness in the world around us. It neutralizes our impact and nullifies our influence on the people we know. It is the problem of divorce, not between husbands and wives, but between our theory and our practice, between our

hearing and our doing, between what we believe and how we behave. James has already dealt with the problems of trials and temptations, but now he expands on the basic theme of his epistle: *Faith makes a difference in the way we live and act.*

When we observe those who say that they believe one thing but practice something totally different, we usually call them hypocrites. Our English word “hypocrisy” can be traced to a Greek word which referred to the playing of a part or a role on stage. No one can explain why, but it seems that “hypocrisy” is most frequently found in religion. Almost everyone knows someone who goes to church services on Sunday and participates in every way, yet lives a sinful life the other six days of the week. Jesus told people (Luke 6:46) that affirmations from the lips without any obedience in their lives was nothing but hypocrisy.

The Book of James makes it clear that real faith does make a difference in the way one lives—in his thinking, in his disposition, in his language, in his habits, in his choice of friends, etc. Our claims to spirituality do not matter; what matters is that the control of our lives has been given over to the will of the Lord Jesus.

In 1:19-27, the Holy Spirit through James specifies three areas in which faith ought to make a difference in the way we live.

THE TEMPER AND THE TONGUE

(1:19, 20)

A person’s ability to control his temper and his tongue is one of the best tests to show if his

faith and his life are in sync. Can you control your temper? Do you know when to hold your tongue? An individual who is known for having a fiery temper and a sharp tongue will not enhance his reputation as a Christian. That is why James says, "This you know, my beloved brethren. But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God" (James 1:19, 20).

James is tying all of these attributes into one situation. How often have you seen an individual get angry and start talking when he should have been listening? That failure takes on special significance when it occurs in a religious context. Throughout the centuries, Christians have been subjected to ridicule and sarcasm and have not always responded in a Christlike manner. Think about our own restoration movement and the criticism that is often made concerning it. How do we react when we are the subject of criticism? Does it make us angry, and tempt us to "tell 'em off"? "Blowing our top" and "letting off steam" may be the natural and easy thing to do, but it is not the right thing to do. James says that if our faith really makes a difference we will be "quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger" (1:19).

THE HEAD AND THE HEART (1:21)

When the gospel is preached, varied responses come. The philosophers of Athens "mocked" (Acts 17), but the three thousand on the day of Pentecost accepted and obeyed the gospel (Acts 2). Why is there such a difference when the "Good News" is proclaimed? The difference does not lie in the gospel; but as Jesus taught in the parable of the soils (Luke 8:4-15) it lies in those who hear the Word.

James, in this epistle of "practical Christianity," treats the subject with emphasis on the difference made in the Christian's daily life by the Word. The subject of 1:21 is the reception of God's Word. That Word is able to "save," but only if the Christian allows it to become "planted" (deeply rooted) in his heart.

How do we go about creating a heart that will so receive the Word? In this verse a heart which will receive the Word properly and with good effect is identified as possessing two necessary traits. First, it must "get rid of all moral filth and

the evil that is so prevalent." Some fail to allow the Word to become "planted" in their hearts, because there is no room for it. Their repentance from the old way of life was not complete. The gospel will not have its full effect in producing Christian character and dedication in a person until he discards all the sinful remains of the old life. Second, one must receive the rebuke and counsel of the gospel "humbly." Some Christians get angry when the Bible rebukes some sin they like to commit and resent the preacher or teacher who brought the matter to their attention. A Christian will never be what he ought to be until he gets himself out of the way and allows God to lead his life through the Word. The elements of a good and fruitful heart are purity and humility. Any individual whose heart is characterized by those traits will grow in spiritual strength and stature.

THE WALK AND THE WORK (1:22-27)

The truths of the gospel must be translated into concrete actions to be beneficial. Attending a worship service and listening to a sermon by giving brief attention to some important truth are of no value if a difference is not made in one's actual behavior as a result. In one congregation where I served as a minister, I met a man who liked the sermons that were loud, direct, toe-stomping, and of the "hell-fire and brimstone" nature. He would come to the back door and proclaim how much he liked that kind of sermon even if it was one that confronted him directly. It often crossed my mind, "Why does he like that kind of sermon especially when he never exhibited any evidence of change?" One day I figured it out; he thought if he could bow his neck and take that kind of sermon, he must be all right. That is exactly why James says, "But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves" (1:22).

In expressing the necessity of our obedience to the Word, James makes three points. First, in verses 23 and 24 he illustrates the nature of the man who hears and forgets. Can you imagine an individual looking in a mirror and then "immediately" forgetting what he looks like? James would have difficulty imagining someone hearing the Word and then immediately forgetting it. The hypocrite listens, nods approvingly, and even professes his agreement with the truth, but

he then goes on his way to live precisely as he pleases, even if in doing so he must defy the truth he has just heard. Second, in verse 25 James says a blessing is promised by God to those who are obedient to the Word. It would seem obvious that the blessing would be the salvation that is mentioned in verse 21. Finally, James closes with two areas of obedience—two challenges for their hearing and doing. First, in verse 26 James asks, “Do you keep a tight rein on your tongue?” James knows of the problem that the tongue caused them and causes us; therefore, he repeatedly emphasizes that our faith must do something for our tongue. Second, he wants to know, in verse 27, if we are actively caring for the needy. Our fellowship has argued so much about the “how” and the “why” of helping others that we have forgotten the *need*! We would be the very worst sort of hypocrite if we neglected those in need, because our God has always been concerned about them. We have to follow the example of Jesus in meeting the needs of people. Jesus loved people and went out

of his way to meet their needs. His love in action gained a favorable hearing for the message He preached—we can do no less.

CONCLUSION

One of the great sins of ancient Israel was the reducing of their religion to ritual and ceremony. They neglected the practical matters and simply went through its external forms. Micah, the prophet, gave Jehovah’s impression of it all:

With what shall I come to the Lord and bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, with yearling calves? Does the Lord take delight in thousands of rams, in ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my first-born for my rebellious acts, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8).

God’s attitude has not changed; He still hates hypocrisy. He expects us to live our faith.

—Bill Hooten

Applying the Book of James to Life

Two Sides to the Gospel

An old preacher once said, “My brethren, there be two sides to the Gospel; there’s the believing side, and there’s the behaving side”!

The Habit of Cheerfulness

It is everybody’s duty to be cheerful, whatever the battle and burden. Whatever the sorrow and suffering, whatever the question and the perplexity. All about us there are people fighting their battles, climbing their hills, facing their questions, grappling with their tasks, and we will make their tasks harder if there is absent from our lives the reigning note of cheerfulness. We owe it to every human being about us to go our way singing, even if we have to

sing through our falling tears. You have no more right to unload a nasty temper, a pessimistic, wailing, grumbling temper on your brother or sister—battling alone with big tasks—than you have the right to bring the garbage can and dump its contents on your neighbor’s front porch. . . . Everybody owes it to the people around to exercise the constant habit of cheerfulness.

George W. Truett,
Sermons from Paul

Faith Expressed Through Love

Some Americans were on a world tour. Visiting a leprous area, they observed a missionary stooping over a wretched leper covered with open, oozing sores. As the

missionary gently wiped away the infectious, stinking, yellow-white liquid, one of the Americans watched for a few minutes and then walked away: “I wouldn’t do that for a million dollars.”

The missionary heard him and replied, “Neither would I.”

But he would do it because he believed in Christ. He was simply expressing his faith through love.

Caring in Action

An old story tells of a boy who drops his basket of eggs on the way to market. Many people gather around to bemoan his loss and express their pity. Someone in the circle, rather than simply offering pity, hands the boy a dime, saying “I care ten cents; how much worth do the rest of you care?”