

James 1:17-27 | Sermon 'Doing the Word'

Deuteronomy 4:1,2,6-9 / Psalm 15 / James 1:17-27 / Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Preached on 1 September 2024 at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Adelaide by Pastor Tom Pietsch

Heavenly Father, give us your Holy Spirit, so that we may now hear your Word, and then keep it, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Introduction

Both hearing and doing the Word of God is at the heart of our reading from James today. James distinguishes between these two aspects of the Christian life. Hearing the Word of God is one reality, and doing the Word of God is another.

And this is a distinction that Jesus himself is concerned with. Do you remember Jesus teaching about the wise man who built his house on the rock, and the foolish man who built his house on sand? Well Jesus in Matthew's Gospel describes the wise man as being like "everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them", whereas the foolish man is like "everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them" (Matthew 7:24-27). In other words, Jesus is not addressing those who never hear God's Word. Rather He is addressing us, we who hear the word of God, but can either act on it, or not, with significant ramifications. The wise man's house endures the floods and winds, built on the rock of hearing and doing the Word, but the foolish man's house falls, built on the sand of only hearing, but not doing the Word of God.

Or, to take another example from Jesus' ministry, there is a poignant moment in Luke's Gospel when an unnamed woman spontaneously calls out to Jesus from the crowd, saying "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" There is a kind of maternal affection in this woman's acclamation, honouring the Blessed Virgin Mary but ultimately seeking to honour Christ. Listen to Jesus' response: "Blessed, rather, are those who hear the word of God and obey it!" (Luke 11:27-28). Of course, Mary is the great Christian example for us of one who heard the Word of God spoken by the Angel Gabriel, and then obeyed it, saying "Let it be to me according to your Word" (Luke 1:38). But Jesus extends this blessedness to all people, who hear the word of God and obey it.

So when James today gives teaching on this distinction, he is teasing out something that was present in Jesus' own proclamation, and so especially rich for us to meditate on. While James warns about hearing but not doing which we will get to, I want to first look also at what I'm calling doing without hearing the Word of God. We will finally then see how hearing and doing go together.

1. Doing but not hearing

How could we possibly do the Word of God without hearing it? Of course, in one sense this is impossible. We can't do what we haven't heard. But James begins our reading by drawing attention to ways in which we can imagine we are doing God's will, albeit while not actually listening.

Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, ²⁰ for human anger does not produce God's righteousness. ²¹ Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

Here James is speaking to people like us, who can be tempted to use human anger to produce God's righteousness, imagining that because our cause is apparently just, I am right to be angry, and even to use human scheming to advance my cause. Christians have always been susceptible to this, and as our own synod, the Lutheran Church of Australia approaches a potentially divisive Convention, we would be unwise to imagine we could not also be thus tempted; the temptation to employ human anger, or focus on politicking or gossip, to produce God's righteousness.

Instead, James says, rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness. The picture is of taking off a dirty garment, removing the cloak of sinfulness. Or, in the words James uses to conclude our reading, "keeping oneself unstained by the world" (verse 27). How can we do this? By "welcoming with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls" (verse 21). That is, by humbly listening to God, sitting at the feet of Jesus like Mary, and not being always in action like Martha. Subordinating ourselves to God's gracious will, trusting in Him, so that His power – and not human power – may take root in us, and bear fruit.

"Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger." We have two ears but only one mouth, more faculties for hearing than speaking. Hearing each other, but especially here, hearing the Word of God, before acting, before speaking. Being judicious, careful in what we say.

Our words, and our anger can't do much good, but can do some evil. But God's Words are different. Today we together receive again the implanted Word that is able to save, to heal your souls. As when you were first baptised, it is now God's Word and listening to it, which sets the agenda for who we are and what we say and do. That has real power. Not just doing, but first hearing the Word of God with open hearts.

2. Hearing but not doing

Which brings me to the second point, the temptation to hear God's Word but not do it. Let's listen again to James:

22 But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.

Imagine a boy watching a movie on the couch, when his Dad asks him to help outside. The son agrees, but goes on watching. The father reminds him 10 minutes later, with the same result, so that when the father returns a third time he chastises his son for not obeying. Imagine the boy said this: "You're right Dad, I've done the wrong thing. I'm a sinner and I ask for your forgiveness." And then, the boy turns, and goes on watching his movie. (See also Matthew 21:28-32, the parable of the two sons)

It may sound preposterous as a story, and yet as an analogy for our temptation as Christians, and perhaps Lutherans especially, the story has some power. Lutherans can be well versed in the language of sin and forgiveness, and rightly so, but James today cautions us against just giving lip-service to God's Word, he says such a thing is deceiving ourselves. Hearing the Word on one level, but not seeking also follow God's ways.

He says that when we hear, but don't do, we're like people prone to forgetfulness, glancing in a mirror and then immediately forgetting what we saw, forgetting even who we are. When we look at the law of God, like a mirror, we can acknowledge it is good, that it suits us, that love and adoration of Christ is

the way, but when it comes to living that life we can find it too difficult and so quickly forget it. Today is an opportunity for repentance.

3. Hearing and Doing the Word

An opportunity for repentance, and also forgiveness and renewal in Christ. For today as we together look to Christ, you also are looking into a mirror. For by baptism and faith, you are in Christ, and if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. Christ, the one who died for you, who shares with you his righteousness, who has made his home in you. When you look in the mirror, you can see God's law embodied also in the merciful Christ. This is what James says about those who both hear and do the Word of God:

²⁵ But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

That is, as we stare steadily today at Christ, who fulfilled the law, we are being transformed from forgetful hearers, into doers who act – who act on God's commands, and who also act on God's promises. So that by looking to Christ, we can be daily renewed in our baptismal identity, casting off our sinful selves, and being renewed by the implanted Word within us, letting it bear fruit in our life. This is how James puts it at the beginning of our reading:

¹⁸ In fulfillment of [God's] own purpose he gave birth to us by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

God has given new birth to you, by the Word of truth, the Word that put God's holy name on you, and that is leading you to bear good fruit. It's the same Word. The God who saves, is the same God at work in you to keep the Word He has given.

And this is good news. James says in our reading that such a person will be blessed in their doing.

Think about it this way. We are all on a journey towards the heavenly city where we truly belong, where Christ has gone to prepare a place for us, where tears are wiped away, where the saints and angels sing praises, and where Christ's presence provides the eternal light for our everlasting joy. But in our journey, we can take a different path, tempted by a different goal, a goal of human origins, perhaps temporarily attractive but not lasting. We choose the wrong fork in the road. God's gracious act of forgiveness when we repent from wandering down these false paths, is when God no longer counts our straying or wandering against us. But his forgiveness also involves putting us back on the way to the heavenly city. Putting us back on the good path of love, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Leading us not just to hear his Word, but walk in its ways. And that's Good News. We will be blessed in our doing.

Conclusion

So, imagine if we gave up our excuses. What if we listened and took to heart everything Jesus says. What if instead of treating it as information, we received it as marching orders from the God of grace to whom we bow the knee as our Lord? What would it look like in your life, to let the Word bear its full fruit in your heart and thoughts and deeds. To stop just hearing about prayer and instead to pray. To stop just hearing about love, and instead to love. To stop hearing about fasting or giving, and instead

to fast and to give. To stop hearing about being quick to listen and slow to speak, slow to anger, and instead to do those things.

What would it look like? It would look like someone who was blessed by God in the doing. Stepping out on the words of Jesus will not make you the loser. He ventured everything and trusted His Father and He is crowned the King of Heaven. He triumphed over the grave, because He too heard and He obeyed. In the Book of Hebrews we hear that Christ himself said to the Father ““See, I have come to do your will, O God”” (Hebrews 10:7). Christ kept the Father’s will perfectly, so that his righteousness and power is now yours.

Let us not forget who we are in Christ, and let us not forget his invitation to walk in his ways to our heavenly home, hearing and doing his Word, so that the word he has implanted in us by grace may bear much fruit. And by so doing we will be blessed.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.

And may the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.