



Westminster Presbyterian Church Knoxville, TN
September 1, 2024
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "Does it make a difference?"

James 1:17-27 (NRSV)

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his 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.

You must understand this, my beloved brothers and sisters: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for human anger does not produce God's righteousness.

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. But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

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

If any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

“Does it make a difference?”¹

Do you ever feel like your religion is worthless?

Or, maybe the better question, is, do you feel like your religion makes a difference, in how you act?

I’ll admit, I have my moments, when I’m not so sure.

Like, 5:00, a week ago Thursday, I was at the stoplight crossing Northshore, moving from Lyons Bend to Westland. If you’re new to Knoxville, that’s the intersection right down the road from here. I had been on Lyons Bend, I don’t know, for hours, or so it seemed.

On Northshore and on Lyons Bend, at 5:00, there’s more cars than there is road. The lines get longer as the stoplight gives incremental relief. We inch forward; we stop. We inch forward; we stop. You’ve driven in Knoxville. You know this experience.

Finally, I approach the light. I am three cars from the light. I am not feeling like my best self.

The light turns green. The car at the front hesitates – maybe a fraction of a second too long. On autopilot, I blare on the horn. The cars move forward.

As we start to move forward, I’m realizing, I’m a block away from this church. I’m a block away from where, I don’t know, a hundred church members live. And I’m thinking, every single one of you people probably know what car I drive.

And now that I think about it, that car that I just honked at, looks a lot like the car Linda and Jim Yates drive. But surely, I’m not that unlucky, I think. As I watch the car turn into their neighborhood.

By the grace of God, it wasn’t them. *I don’t think it was them.* But, either way, I caught myself: For all my work, cultivating the image of a patient and kind minister, I could’ve just blared the horn at my congregation.

I was asking myself, does my religion make a difference, when my temper flares?

¹ The title of the sermon is a direct quote from Rev. Ginna Bairby’s interesting commentary last week on James: “Looking into the Lectionary: Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost — September 1, 2024.” *The Presbyterian Outlook*. August 19, 2024. <https://pres-outlook.org/2024/08/fifteenth-sunday-after-pentecost-september-1-2024/>

James asks us these questions, in his first chapter:
Is your religion worthwhile? Does it make a difference?

Notice, when James asks this, he isn't saying anything at all about what we believe.

The name of Jesus comes up only two times in the entire epistle, and in neither case does James say anything about what you should believe about him.² In this way, James is one of the first and still one of the few religious leaders to care less about what people *think* and more about how they treat one another.

Do we care more about what people think or how we treat one another?

The passage today begins by talking about generosity and ends on a note of compassion:

Every generous act of giving...is from above, he begins.

And yes, in-between the talk of generosity and compassion, James talks about God's word in each of us:

Welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But this word is not so much a creed, or about right belief, so much as it is about compassionate action:

Be doers of the word, he says.

The problem, according to James, is that this word, in your heart, gets crowded out, with all the other messages of this world. The heart becomes a garden overgrown with weeds, choking out the fruit of the Spirit.

Rid yourselves of [the] rank growth of wickedness, he says. Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

And here's where I want to stop James and say,

² I'm indebted here and in the following exegesis of the passage to Martha L. Moore-Keish, *James* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019).

‘That’s not so easy.’

You see, there’s a problem with deception – it’s deceiving.

A lie can look like the truth.

And ‘worthless religion,’ as he calls it, still looks like religion.

How do you know when you have deceived yourself?

How do you know, if your faith actually makes a difference, at all?

Starting in just a few weeks, leading up to election day in November, our congregation will be holding a Tuesday afternoon study about Christian Nationalism. In one of the books we will be using, the authors take us back to January 6, 2021.

We know the images of that day: broken doors and windows in the national capital. Gangs of white supremacist militias pushing past and sometimes violently assaulting capital police. Death threats; chants of hate speech; confederate symbols carried inside the house chamber.

All of that is very easy to condemn as a despicable day in our nation’s history. Arrests and convictions have been made. The violence has been condemned, from this pulpit and many others.

One thing, that’s harder to puzzle out, one thing that churches still need to reckon with, is the presence of Christian symbols carried by those who did the violence: Christian flags in one hand. Confederate flags in another. ‘Jesus Saves’ banners beside ‘Don’t Tread on Me” signs. A wooden cross set up beside the wooden gallows, outside the Capital.³

January 6th is perhaps the most recent example in a long and sordid history of Christian symbols used to prop up the false religion of hatred and violence.

It is not alone. We could just as easily name:

- The doctrine of discovery that made European colonialism possible.
- The American church’s complicity in chattel slavery
- The Religious Right’s use of evangelical Christianity to malign and squash the rights of women and LGBT communities, continuing on today.

³ This passage is a paraphrase of the opening paragraph of Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

These atrocities were and are done by those who confessed Jesus Christ as Lord. In fact, they were done in the very name of Jesus, himself, claiming his blessing.

It is not hard to see what James means, when he talks about believers deceiving themselves, and worshiping a false religion.

And at this point, we may all be thinking, ‘Well, I didn’t march on the capital. I certainly wasn’t a colonizer. My ancestors were part of the northern church. And I never really liked Jerry Falwell, anyway. I guess James and I are good, right?’

But James does not let us off that easily.

Religion is pure and undefiled before God...is this, says James, to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

In James’s day, the orphan and the widow were the most vulnerable, the most marginal people of his time. What he is saying, is, that our religion has to make a difference, in how we treat the most vulnerable among us.

If our religion allows us to be comfortably numb, to the distress of those, whom our society pushes off to the margins, as if they were not people, then our religion is of this world and not the word of truth, implanted on our hearts.

We don’t have to be extremists to be deceived.

All we really need to do, is to pretend like everything is okay.

When everything is not okay.

Sure, the extremist is more obvious, clearly misappropriating the Christian symbols to carry out the very opposite of what Christ stand for.

But we also can misappropriate these symbols, even here today, if we remain complacent, if we don’t let the word of truth affect us, and move us, in a world of haves and have-nots.

So, when James says, “You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger,” he’s not just talking about our tempers.

He’s saying: let us not assume we already know what the word of truth is. Let’s not just hear the word and let it pass into the categories that already make us feel content and unchallenged.

When we hear about and see the most marginalized people in our time, what James is saying, is that we're not just supposed to shrug, and say, 'Well, I'm doing all I can. And even if I'm not, what are you gonna do? What am I supposed to do? What could one person possibly do?'

What James asks of us is to stop for a moment and ask,
 Not "What are you gonna do?"
 But "What can I do?"
 And, "What can I do more?"
 And even, "What can Westminster Presbyterian Church do more?"

Because, if we're not always, and constantly, letting ourselves be challenged by these questions, then our religion is not making a difference. And James is telling us that we are too comfortable.

It doesn't mean we have to try to save the world this afternoon.
 But what it does mean, is that we should let these questions, and this word from Scripture, linger just a while longer, in our hearts.

If we move on too quickly, after reading this passage. If we let it pass us by, so we can get to the next hymn. So, we can get to the Table. So we can get out of here, then we've missed the point. We've misappropriated these symbols. We haven't let them make a difference.

So, James says, *let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak. Quick to listen, slow to speak.*

And that's difficult, in a world, that seems to have already made up its own mind, about who we are, and what we should do.

After all, this is a world that tells us, that competition is the natural order of things. And accumulation is the goal of this life. After all, resources are scarce, aren't they? So, you better get yours because there's not enough to go around.

What James is telling us, is that, when all the messages around us, tell us that we can't afford to be generous. We can't afford to care. When you hear James, and suddenly you want to speak back to him, and tell him he's not being realistic. James talks back to us and says:

Stop. Stop. Be quick to listen, slow to speak.

In this society of haves and have-nots, where those who 'have not' are blamed for what they do not have, and shamed if they ever ask for what they need. When you find yourself as one of the haves. And when you are tempted to tell James that those pushed to the margins, the modern-day equivalent of orphans and widows, well really, they are actually a lot less undeserving than James may think. What James asks of us, instead, is to

Stop. Stop. Be quick to listen, slow to speak.

And yes, even when you are stuck at a traffic light. And you're waiting and you're feeling impatient. Or you're in a rush to get out and the kids aren't moving as fast as you need them to. Or someone calls at an inconvenient time with an inconvenient need. Or someone stops you, needing to talk, and they go on, and on, and on, and on.

And you start to feel restless. Because this world tells us we've always got to be moving ahead. And if we're not in front, we are behind. And if we're not on top, then we must be at the bottom. What James asks of us, the moment before you blare the horn, is to:

Stop. Stop. Be quick to listen, slow to speak.

Because the Word of Truth is speaking. And James is asking us to slow down, so that we are not simply assimilating that Word to fit into the preestablished judgments, assumptions, and categories of this world. What James asks us, is to not quiet Christ with our complacency, or smother the Spirit with our need for comfort.

In a world so full of noise, and shame, and blame;
In a culture so quick to appropriate Christian symbols for its own gain;
James asks us to *Be quick to listen, slow to speak.*

Be quick to listen, slow to speak.

And when we do that, when we let the Word settle in our hearts, when we give it time and space to grow, when we let it change our hearts and our minds, so that it opens our eyes:

That is when we find, that it makes a difference.
It makes all the difference. Amen.