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*The Book of*

Session Four:  
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*James 1:19-21—Being God's First Fruits*

## ❖The Text (NRSV)

*<sup>19</sup>You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; <sup>20</sup>for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. <sup>21</sup>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.*

## ❖What's going on here?

-v.19—James bracketed the previous section (1:16-18) by calling special attention to his readers twice (“Do not be deceived, my beloved,” in v.16; “You must understand this,” in v.19a). He wanted to stress there the steadfast, gracious character of God and our identity as “a kind of first fruits” of the (new) creation that witnesses to that divine character. The ethical commands of v.19, then, are not randomly chosen or stated out of the blue, but are ways of being God’s firstfruit community that both points ahead to the future and lives in God’s service now.

So what does this firstfruit community look like? First of all, it is marked by peace and humility—and those are shown forth in our speaking and listening especially. James will pick up the power (both positive and negative) of human speech in ch. 3, but here he introduces it in light of being a part of God’s new community. Moreover, we witness to the character of God not only by *what* we say, but by *how* we say it—that is, with a humble openness to the other and without the arrogance of anger.

James’ warning against “anger” may seem odd coming from someone who has already unleashed some strong words against the doubter and the wealthy, but several things should be noted about what he says:

(1) The word translated “anger” here is also used to mean “wrath” elsewhere and suggests a fierce outburst. James does not seem to be telling us that intense feelings of indignation are always wrong, but that we need to control the way we act on them.

(2) Being “slow to anger” does not mean that we cannot be passionate or be firm in our correction of others—James is both passionate and unafraid to use strong words to expose sin and injustice done to others.

(3) Being “slow to anger” is a trait often attributed to God’s character in the Old Testament (see Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2)—again, James is grounding the way we act in the way God acts toward us.

-v.20—“God’s righteousness,” whether understood as “the kind of life God wants me to live right now” or “the future, consummated Reign of God’s justice over all the universe” is a commonly held goal for James and his audience. (In fact, in some sense, these are one and the same for James, since as the *firstfruit* people, we are to live now as a witness to the coming Reign of God.) At any rate, James assumes that his readers *want* to bring about this righteousness—there they are all agreed—but the problem is in how to bring it about.

Again, assuming that James is first speaking to life in a turbulent Jerusalem prior to the Zealots’ revolt, James may well have been addressing Christians influenced by the Zealot campaign of violent revolt. Surely, they *all* dreamed of life where the oppressive, pagan Romans would no longer rule them, but James countered that violence and anger were not (and are not) the ways to bring about God’s rule instead. In fact, it may be that we can do very little to *bring about* God’s righteousness ourselves, much as the first sheaves of wheat harvested from the crop can hardly *make* the rest of the crop come up any faster. Like the first fruits of the harvest, the community of God

*witnesses*—as a living promise—to the reality that there is more to come.

-v.21—James sees the anger (and implicit violence?) of 1:19-20 as part of the general evil that accumulates onto us and the way we live. All that “wickedness” and “sordidness” is excess—and not merely unnecessary or cumbersome, but actively stifling the life in us, almost like weeds choking off a seed in a garden. The seed, to extend the metaphor, is the “implanted word” that is able to bring salvation.

Note that after telling us what *not* to do (wickedness and sordidness), he does not exactly give us a recipe of what *to* do in order to bring about our salvation. Rather, like good soil, **all we can do is receive** in humility the “word” given to us. Again, James’ language suggests God’s gracious action on us *first*—we find ourselves with this word implanted in us apart from anything we have done first. (Note, too, though, that James, like God, is not finished with us yet—for him, the question always remains, “Now what?”, or in other words, how will we live as people in whom God has already planted the “word of truth?”

### Connections: Producing God’s Righteousness

-James assumes we all desire to see God’s righteousness produced. Do we? Should we? Why should we care about “righteousness”? What does this “righteousness” look like?

-The same Greek word means “righteousness” and “justice”—does “justice of God” mean something different to you than “righteousness of God?” What?

-What would the world look like if it were characterized by God’s righteousness? What would your life look like? (How does it already show forth this righteousness? How does it not?)

-How would James advise us to work toward the vision of God’s righteousness?

### ❖ Themes

*-ends and means*—We have seen repeatedly that for James, integrity of life is crucial—he consistently calls us to find ways for our lives, including our beliefs, our loves, and our actions, will hold together. That also involves a unity of our goals and the ways we work to achieve them. Conventional wisdom often tells us that the ends justify the means. James, on the other hand, seems to think they cannot be so easily separated. Or as 20th-century writer Jacques Ellul puts it, “for Christians there is no dissociation between the end and the means...in the work of God the end and the means are identical. Thus when Jesus Christ is present the Kingdom has ‘come upon’ us.” That is, if we are serious in our belief that God’s ultimate Reign will be one of peace and mercy, then we are to bring it about and witness to it in peaceful and merciful ways. If we claim that God is gracious and forgiving, then we, as the community of God’s people, are to embody grace and forgiveness. After all, *God* has given us birth—how can we do any other?

James 1:22-25—Hearing, Doing, and Being

### ❖ The Text (NRSV)

<sup>22</sup>But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. <sup>23</sup>For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; <sup>24</sup>for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. <sup>25</sup>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.

### ❖ What’s going on here?

-v.22—James picks up this idea of “the word” again and gives it a new twist—in 1:18, it was the agent of believers’ new birth, and in v.21, it was the agent of salvation. Here, this same “word” is now something to “do”—that is, to live in response to. So what is this *word*? For James, it seems to be *both* God’s word of good news (*gospel*) in Jesus that has created us into a

new community *and* an instruction to be followed within that community (one might even use the word *law*). The *word* both makes new life possible and is in itself a new way of life.

-v.23-24—For James, doing the word (of God) is an expression of identity—it is part of who we are; to hear the word but not to live in accordance with it betrays a disconnect within us—a split within ourselves that keeps us from the *completion* James declares God intends for us. For that matter, the idea of not doing what we have heard from God is almost absurd—since this word is already *implanted* in us (v. 21), to be only a hearer is in some sense not to be what God has made us to be.

Again, James does not see his audience at the initial crossroads of decision, choosing whether to start along the path toward God or toward fragmentation; James asserts that they have already been set on the path of God’s intent toward completion. This is part of the logic of the mirror metaphor. When I look in a mirror, I *already* look a certain way—my reflection is a function of the *real* me who is staring into the mirror already. How I act based on who I am is always a response. So being a “doer of the word” is not a prerequisite for earning a new status before God; it flows as the natural outworking of having heard the word already.

Note that for James, there is no choice as such to be *either* a hearer *or* a doer—one can be a doer only if one has first heard, and hearing always presupposes that **God has graciously spoken first**. At the same time, James would question whether we have truly heard if we have not also acted on what we have heard. Hearing and doing belong together. And before we dismiss James’ reasoning as too works-focused or legalistic, we should listen to virtually the same message on Jesus’ lips (see Matt. 7:24; 28:20; John 14:15). To truly hear God’s word—to let it be implanted in us—is to be open to letting it take root in us and to radically change us.

-v.25—Filling out his mirror metaphor, James invites us to look into the “perfect” (again, the same root as “complete” or “brought to fullness”) law, which James also calls the “law of liberty.” That’s right, James’ word of good news for us is to point us to *the law* (and Lutherans reading this begin to cringe).

But what does James mean by “the law”? Coming up in chapter two, James will call the commandment of neighbor love the “royal law” (2:8, cf. 2:13). But James probably doesn’t have a single particular commandment in mind; rather, he seems to understand obedience to God’s “word of truth” as a whole way of life. And this way of life is ultimately freeing as it both finds release in trusting God and offers an alternative to the fragmented lives we would otherwise lead. So the “blessing” in store for the *doers* is in some sense the *doing* itself—it is not just a reward held out for the well-behaved (although we’ve already seen that James believes God has much more in store for us that is yet to come). Rather the blessing is (at least) the ability to partake of life within God’s design—life in its free fullness.

#### **Connections: Learning to Love the Law**

-What do you think of when you hear the word “law”? Is it a positive or negative term? Why?

-James commends to his readers the “law of liberty”—what do you think this law is? How can a law (a restraint) give freedom?

-As Luther read James’ positive statements about the law, he couldn’t help but hear them as a formula to do something to earn God’s favor; thus, Luther didn’t particularly care for these passages. Do you think this is what James intends to say? Why or why not?

-Psalm 119 (all 176 verses) is about delighting and loving God’s law. Can we still claim these words as our own? How?

-What “word” might God be calling us to specifically hear and do in our setting? How do we know? What are ways to discern what God’s word is for us?

## ❖ Themes

-*law*—As we've noted, Lutherans often view the *law* (God's law) as a negative thing—holding back evil and exposing our sin. To be sure, Paul, too, is often critical of the demands of the law, and he wants to make it clear that obedience to the law does not lead to earning God's favor. Rather, God's gracious favor leads us to obedience. James stands in agreement with this line of thinking, and so was much of classic Old Testament faith and 1st-century AD Judaism. This perspective understood God's law not as a way to earn points with God but as a way to live out their identity as God's people. The *Torah* was not understood so much as "law" but as "instruction."

We will see that for James, the heart of the law is neighbor love (which itself arises out of love for God); nowhere in the book do we hear a discussion of circumcision or keeping food laws. These may have been non-issues for James' community, or James may be reflecting the influence of his brother Jesus, who also famously taught that the whole law hangs on the commandments to love God and neighbor. In any case, James uses the phrase "law of liberty" almost interchangeably with "the word of truth"—both refer to the gracious gift of God that also calls us to a new way of life.

James 1:26-27—Authentic Religion

## ❖ The Text (NRSV)

*<sup>26</sup>If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup>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.*

## ❖ What's going on here?

-v.26-27—When there is a disconnect between our speech and our actions, we live fragmented, broken lives. This is especially the case with our religion—with our practice of faith. If faith stops with things I say *about* God, then my voices drowns out the word of God that calls me both to hear and to do. This echoes Jesus' recurring criticism of the Pharisees, whose problem was not their lack of pious speech or intent, but a disconnect between their statements of belief and how they lived. The Old Testament prophets, too, said that religious speech and ritual apart from genuine love for neighbor was meaningless. So what should the faithful do to live out their faith? James points to the care of the defenseless of his society. And once again, he grounds our action in the character of God—God is repeatedly named as a champion for widows and orphans in the Old Testament. We are called to witness to *this* God.

**Clarifying Terms with Luther and James—Law, Gospel, and the Word of God**

Classically, Lutherans *love* to make the distinction between *law* and *gospel* within the Word of God. For Luther, the law restrains evil and accuses us, showing us our sin and our desperate need for forgiveness. In response to this need is God's word of good news—the gospel—that there is free mercy and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. James doesn't seem to want to make so sharp a distinction—**both** are the Word of God, like two sides of the same coin. Lutherans tend to get antsy when it sounds like law and gospel are getting blurred together (and rightly so—the gospel is never dependent on us fulfilling the law first). But it is helpful to remember several points:

-even for Luther, the word of instruction (law) in the 10 Commandments is not only important, but a central part of the life of faith; Lutherans must remember that **both** law and gospel are the Word of God—it's just that the law's condemnation doesn't have the last say

-Judaism and James' Jewish Christianity understood the Word of God as both a gift of grace *and* a responsibility to live out at the same time; for both James and Luther, the whole life of faith from beginning to end is God's gift.