

## James 1:19-27 Sermon

Today we're going to start a series where we think in more detail about how our faith affects the way we live in our world. And to do that we're going to be working through the letter of James in the New Testament. In theological history, this is one of the more controversial letters, described as an 'epistle of straw' by the reformer, Martin Luther, because of its lack of talk about Jesus. But James, is actually really valuable, since our faith isn't really faith if it doesn't affect the way we live, and James is really, really practical.

Written by the brother of Jesus himself who lived in Jerusalem, the letter is addressed to Christians dispersed throughout the world. Its basic message is that just because you live in a world which doesn't recognise Jesus, you don't have to compromise with that world's way of being and behaving. Even though the world may oppress you, you do not need to bow to its demands. Instead, we place our faith in Jesus, and produce works that are in keeping with our faith, instead of worldly compromise and an easy life.

The letter of James, is probably best described as 'wisdom literature' rather than a 'normal' letter, and it's worth just understanding this before we start. In the Ancient Near East, Wisdom was a subject, a bit like Philosophy is now. Sages stroked their beards and contemplated the order and creation of the world under the banner of Wisdom. For Jews of the time, Wisdom was very much tied to a creator God who made an ordered world, and therefore reflections upon the world were reflections upon God himself. If you like, the Wisdom traditions as they are written down, sought to be a spotless mirror to reflect God, and to connect these reflections to practical life. James's letter is probably best thought of in these terms.

This brings us to today's reading. James has introduced his letter and talked about obedience to God and now he addresses some practical issues related to listening to God and in particular anger and speech. Much of this isn't new, but perhaps remembering that Wisdom is perfectly reflecting God in our dealings with the world might help us as we revisit familiar territory.

James starts talking about exhibiting wisdom in speech by being quick to listen and slow to speak or be angry. For James, angry speech demonstrates a lack of wisdom and cannot produce rightness with God. James isn't actually talking about frustrated snapping, like I might do at my children; instead he's talking about a deep-seated anger that eats at us and controls us. He's talking about those malicious gossipy moments when we bad-mouth someone, or those times where we discuss revenge, or even just daydream or joke about it. He's talking about those times where we get eaten up with our anger at politicians, or Brexiteers or Remainers, or anti-vaxxers, or pro-vaxxers, and so on and so on. Instead of these things which in James's opinion demonstrate our lack of wisdom, we should welcome the implanted Word of God that saves us. What he means here is the divine wisdom of God that comes with being disciples and faithful followers and is a sign of the Holy Spirit's work in us. If anyone is feeling uncomfortable already, you are in good company – many of us, myself included, who thought we were fairly wise, will now be sitting uneasily.

But James isn't all about talk. He's about actions too. People shouldn't just hear God's word and then forget it. They must act on it and will be blessed in the process. This isn't just about listening to sermons, though if you felt like a sermon pulled you up short, and then just went home and ignored that, then this is certainly for you. This is about every time that we expose ourselves to God, through prayer, bible reading, and so on. If we simply go away and nothing changes, then we are the people who look into the perfect mirror of God's wisdom, and forget what we look like a second

later. The metaphor here is that we tend to look in the mirror to check our appearance for flaws – things stuck in our teeth, hair sticking up the wrong way, eye gloop, and so on – but what’s the point of looking in the mirror for remedial work, and then simply ignoring what we see? What’s the point of looking for flaws and then failing to deal with them? For James, as we approach God, we see our own flaws, and then the wise person addresses these.

Obviously this applies to those who don’t even look in a mirror – if you manage to go from one week to the next without gazing at God – without reading your Bible, without praying – then in an odd way, James doesn’t apply to you – but that’s only because James doesn’t even consider not being dedicated to God throughout the week to be a possibility! For a Christ-follower, to not spend time with the story of Christ is beyond his comprehension! Please here me, I’m not saying that it’s easy, but how do we know how we are meant to live if we don’t look to God? Put another way, will you recognise Jesus when you meet him at heaven’s gate, or will it be really embarrassing as you can’t pick him out in a crowd because you simply haven’t got to know him while here on earth?

Moving on, James goes back to the question of speech, saying that all ‘religion’ – all worshipping activity, turning up to church, reading the bible, pastoral visiting, mission and evangelism; all of it – is worthless if we can’t reign in our own passions and therefore can’t control our tongue. What comes out of our mouth is a real picture of what is inside – our words betray us. Interestingly, not only does our language give a picture of what’s going on inside, but there is evidence that our language forms us too. So what comes out of our mouths actually changes us – for better or for worse – by moulding our imaginations. So when we mock politicians, we show ourselves to be people who mock others, but we also make ourselves even more people of mockery and hypocrisy. Language is important – it makes us and reveals us at the same time.

As a side note, this makes our prayers, our liturgy, our reading of the Psalms in times of need, for example, all very important as it is giving us language that shapes us even as we pray. It’s why the Israelite prayers about God’s power are most often shouted in moments of danger and suffering – it was precisely then that they needed to affirm God’s power to save. And by affirming it, perhaps even when they didn’t feel it, they enabled God to mould their imaginations and grow their faith.

All this is why, for James, real religion is the care of those who are in precarious situations, and keeping oneself unstained by the world. He most definitely doesn’t mean that we should become detached from the world, but that we should live our God-mirroring, wise, lives within the world rather than just compromising.

So what do we do with this reading? It’s a really hard message. None of us, I’m guessing, will come out looking good. But in lots of ways, that’s the idea. Jesus didn’t call disciples as finished products – he called ordinary people and worked with them. For us, none of us are perfect, but God isn’t finished with us. We look today in the mirror of God’s perfect wisdom and see all the flaws that make our reflection of God in our world uglier than it should be. The challenge then for us is to go home, remembering the image, and to prayerfully work on what we saw. Aspiring for Wisdom was an ancient obsession, but for us it is simply aspiring to be like Christ. What better obsession can there be than to be formed by the one who gave himself for the sake of the world.

So please do not be down-hearted. As we approach Lent, James will continue to be hard-hitting. It’ll be uncomfortable. But so it should be. We are not yet fit for heaven. Let us strive to mirror the face of God in our words and our actions this week, let us commit to regularly looking and reflecting upon the face of God in the scriptures for ourselves, and let’s be humbly honest before God in prayer as we invite him to send his Spirit to mould us more and more each day. Amen.