

Every Generous Act

James 1:17-27

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 God's own purpose
God gave us birth by the word of truth,
so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

You must understand this, my beloved:
let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;
for your 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.

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I.

Well, that is quite the scripture reading, huh? So, where would you like to start first this morning? *Sordidness?* A perennial sermon topic. *Rank growth of wickedness?* An oldie but a goodie. *Self-deception?* My personal favorite. *Unbridled tongues?* The unchecked affliction of youth allowed to bolt and grow large. *Deceptive hearts?* Anyone? Anyone? No? How about *worthless religion?* An awful lot of that going around. Or, we could just take the easy way out and politely gloss over all of these and move on to pure and undefiled religion which is the care for widows and orphans in their distress.

II.

The whole thrust of today's scripture reading, however, seems to be found in last part of the last verse: keeping oneself unstained by the world. Now, the whole care for widows & orphans in their distress thing, seems to be more effect than cause; meaning, if you are keeping yourself unstained from the world, this is what your life will look like to one degree or another. But how do we get there? How do we position ourselves, how do we act, how do we live, so that we arrive at such a place in our lives as individuals and as a church. Because it isn't enough to just *do* the right thing, you need to be doing the right thing for the *right reason*. So, how do we keep ourselves unstained by the world?

III.

Now, it may be helpful to understand the circumstances surrounding this passage. The letter of James, in all likelihood, was not written by the James whom Paul met in Jerusalem. The letter is what others have described as an elegantly composed treatise on Christian wisdom, and an effort to address tensions between rich and poor, in the hopes of putting right the relationship between faith and works: that works follows from one's faith and not the other way around. The letter assumes an audience much like all of us gathered here today: a structured Christian Community. Jesus is mentioned only twice in the entire letter of James. There is an assumption that the listeners, as we

do, get the “Jesus thing.” Therefore, the letter of James has moved on to step two: what to *do* about the Jesus thing, and, more to the point, *how* do we do it?

IV.

Now we come to the fork in the road. Because, the only real tool we have in assisting us in taking that all important second step, is the B-I-B-L-E.

The B-I-B-L-E, yes that's the book for me.

I stand alone on the word of God, The B-I-B-L-E.

The B-I-B-L-E, yes that's the book for me.

I read and pray, trust and obey, The B-I-B-L-E.

For over two millennia now, the bible has been used in all sorts of ways; admittedly, and sadly, not always for the good; crusades, witch hunts, persecutions, genocide and war to name just a few of the more unsavory outcomes. And this hangs up a lot of people. But, in my estimation, this is like getting mad at your hammer because you used it to smash your thumb. And yet, even in this day and age, lots of folks still use the bible as a hammer, though often in more subtle ways. People are getting hammered all the time about the sinners they are, the guilt they should have, and the fear they had better cultivate.

V.

The crazy thing, though, is that a lot of people actually enjoy this; they get off on the structure and dependability. They like having clear black and white answers to life's most difficult questions. In some ways, I cannot fault people for this. It just has not worked for me, not in my experience. So, today, I thought we might take a step back, and look, ever so briefly, at the creedal and scholarly history of our understanding of the bible.

So, what do we believe the Bible to be? We turn to Part I of the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) the Book of Confessions. Section 5.001 of the 2nd Helvetic Confession:

We believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of humans.

For God, himself/herself, spoke to the ancestors of our faith, the prophets, the apostles, and still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures.

VI.

Section 6.005 Westminster Confession of Faith:

We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem for the Holy Scripture; and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of human salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts.

Hence, as Presbyterians, girded in our Reformational faith and theology, understand the bible to be the inspired Word of God and a proper authority for our lives, understood through the Holy Spirit at work in our hearts and minds.

VII.

Now, this last part, understanding the Scripture *through* the Holy Spirit at work in our hearts and minds is of *crucial* importance because there is no such thing as “THE” Bible. Both testaments are, beyond dispute, a compilation of a vast number of individual papyri (ancient manuscripts) which very often differ, to a greater or lesser degree due to scribal error or translatorial license. For 20 centuries, scholars have researched, exegeted, and interpreted these manuscripts to arrive at what we simply refer to as “the Bible.” Just as an example, I pulled my Greek NT off the shelf this week and went to today’s reading from James and in just these few verses I found no less than 10 contrasting translations and interpretations going as far back as St. Jerome and St. Augustine.

VIII.

Now, I am not telling you all of this to shake your faith in the Bible; quite the contrary. My purpose here today is twofold. First, to reinforce in you the understanding that the Bible is of vital importance to those who claim themselves to be followers of Christ. And second, to remind us we must use *both* our *hearts* and our *minds*, to really struggle to understand not just what the Bible *said*, way back when; but, more importantly, to discover the truth

that the Holy Spirit is leading us to discover for our lives today. And by “today,” I mean *this* day.

Anytime we turn to an honest exploration of the Bible, we bring to bear the convergent lights of history, scholarship, God’s mystical presence, *and* our current experience. So, although there is certainly an orthodoxy about what the Bible has *meant* (no need to reinvent the wheel) anytime one of these variables changes (and our experience is *always* changing) we have the potential to awaken to a new understanding of what the Bible *means*.

IX.

Now, then, we arrive back at James 1:17-27. Clearly we could spend a great deal of time hashing out the pitfalls of sordidness, evil, self-deception, unbridled tongues, deceptive hearts, and worthless religion. However, been there and done that. Another option would be to extoll the virtues of, and really push ourselves to, care for widows and orphans in their distress. But as we said, this seems more an effect than a cause. So, what, exactly, does this passage mean to us today? How do we keep ourselves unstained by the world? The answer, I would suggest, lies in the first verse: “every generous act.” Faith in Christ is not lived through history, or doctrine, and especially not out of fear. *Real* faith is lived in each new moment of courage, when the Holy Spirit moves us, quite literally, to occupy a position of generosity first toward ourselves, and then to those around us.

X.

The author of James says that every gracious act, each and every one, is a *perfect* gift. However, the gift’s perfection comes not from the one who *receives* the gift, or from the one who *delivers* it; rather, the gift, each perfect gift, comes *first* from above, from whom James calls “The Father of Lights.” When we are generous with ourselves we create a receptivity to all that God has to give us. And when we extend this generosity to others, we can then shower those around us with such perfect gifts. Finally, though, the first gift we must open ourselves to receive, is the gift of Scripture. For in these sacred texts, amid the diversity of translation and interpretation of 2000 years, lies the truth we seek for our lives just waiting to be released to us by the very Spirit of God. Through this gift, and *only* through this gift, will we be able to keep ourselves pure, and unstained by the world. Amen.