

Scripture Reading: James 1:17-27 (NASB - New American Standard Bible)

¹⁷ Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. ¹⁸ In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.

¹⁹ This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; ²⁰ for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. ²¹ Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.

²² But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴ for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. ²⁵ But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.

²⁶ If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. ²⁷ Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Good morning, everyone. It is good to see you all again. Two weeks ago, I began a series of sermons going through my favorite book of the New Testament – the Epistle of James. I told you that many people love this book because of its focus on practical aspects of how true Christian disciples should be living their lives. In my first sermon, we looked at verses 1 to 18 of chapter 1 and we learned a few lessons. First: that trials in our life are inevitable and that they are a test of our faith. That is a good thing and we should welcome the process because these trials test the genuineness of our faith, bringing us to Christian maturity. Second, we learned that we can pray to God for wisdom in the midst of these trials and He will grant this to us, as long as we ask in faith without any doubting. Doubts undermine faith, so we must ask with confidence – God is a God who desires to hear our prayers and He desires to answer His children. Third, we learned that those Christians who come from a humble background can now glory in the fact that they have a high position as adopted sons and daughters of the Creator of the world, while those Christians from a rich background should glory in their low position, being reminded that they are mere human beings who will one day pass away and who should not seek to acquire more goods and more prestige here on earth. Fourth, we learned of the process of temptation, sin, and death. I ended with a quote of verses 16-18, with an emphasis on verse 16, which reminds us of the deceitfulness of sin. Verses 17 and 18 remind us that all good gifts come from God. Sin is deceitful and it promises pleasure, but in the end, sin is no good thing at all. All good things come from God. It is with verses 17-18 that I will begin today's sermon.

Here is an outline of my message today:

1. Good and perfect gifts

2. QSS (Quick-Slow-Slow)

(Do you know what this refers to: Quick-Slow-Slow?)

I will let you guess, and I'll give you the answer in a moment.)

3. In humility receive the Word

4. Be a Doer of the Word

5. Worthless religion and Pure religion

Part 1: Good and perfect gifts (James 1:17-18).

In contrast to the deceitful promises of temptation and sin, God gives good gifts to us – He is the source of all good gifts. That ought to be an incentive for us to follow God faithfully instead of

veering off into sinful practices. One of my commentaries says there are two basic incentives to live godly lives – one is negative and the other is positive. First, verses 13-15 tell us that yielding to temptation gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully accomplished, it brings forth death. Not only spiritual and physical death, but also eternal death: separation from our Creator forever. I don't want that to happen to me. Second, verses 17-18 give us the positive incentive to follow God: He is a giver of good gifts. He loves us and wants to give good gifts to His creatures.

Let's read James 1:17-18 – “¹⁷Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. ¹⁸In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.”

Every good thing given ... and every perfect gift ... comes from our Heavenly Father above. I am reminded of the creation story in Genesis chapter 1.

Right after God makes mankind, He says this to them in Genesis 1:28-29 – “²⁸God blessed them; and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’ ²⁹Then God said, ‘Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you.’”

God first gave mankind responsibility to multiply and to fill the earth and to be stewards of its resources, ruling over all the animals. Next, God said that He has given them every plant and every fruit so that these may be food for them. God provides them food.

Verse 31a says, “God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good.”

At several points in the creation story, it says that what God had made was “good,” but here at the end of the story, it says that all that God had made was “very good.” This is the good earth that He has made and given to mankind.

Despite the fact that mankind fell into sin, God still provides good things to us all. To all of us human beings. I find the statement that Jesus made in Matthew 5:45 rather interesting. Let me read the second half of that verse in the J. B. Phillips translation – Jesus says this about our Father in heaven: “For he makes the sun rise upon evil men as well as good, and he sends his rain upon honest and dishonest men alike.” Our Father above makes the sun rise for both the good and the bad people of the earth ... he sends rain to both honest and dishonest persons. Every human being experiences God's gracious provision for their lives on earth, no matter if we are good or bad. This ought to make every one of us grateful to our Creator. And if God so loves both the good and the bad people among us, we ought to do the same – that's what the previous verse (verse 44) tells us to do. [Unspoken in the sermon: Matthew 5:44-45 (NASB) – “⁴⁴But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”]

Let's return to James 1:17 – “Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.” Every good thing comes from our Father above. Notice that the verb “coming” is in the present continuous tense: these gifts are continually coming to us. And notice that God is called “the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.” As the earth rotates, we see shadows and we see the sun rising and setting – we perceive the light changing. But God – He does not change, not one bit. There is no variation in Him, no shifting light. This is the doctrine that we call the immutability of God. God does not change. God cannot change. And His love for us does not change, nor do His promises. He remains faithful. All good gifts come from Him and we can have confidence that He will continue to watch over us and provide for us.

Let's read verse 18 again – "In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures."

Here in a single sentence, I see several key aspects of the process of salvation. First, it is by God's will. God is the author of salvation – He is the one who seeks out lost sinners. He sought out Adam and Eve when they tried to hide from Him after eating the forbidden fruit. And He sent His Son Jesus Christ to be the Savior of the world, as we read in 1st John 4:14 – "We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world." And the Gospel of John 4:42 – "They [the townspeople] were saying to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves [from Jesus] and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world'." John 1:13 says we "...were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."

The second thing James 1:18 tells us is that God has brought us forth by the word of truth. It is through the word of God that we are brought forth, that we are born again, that we are saved. 1 Peter 1:23 – "For you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God." We are born again through the word of God, not through physical descent from our ancestors.

The Apostle Paul writes this in Romans 10:17 – "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ." In verses 8-10 of the same chapter, he says this – "⁸But what does it [the Scriptures] say? 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart'—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, ⁹that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; ¹⁰for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation." It is through the preaching of Christian messengers, as well as what we can read in the written Scriptures, that we learn the way of salvation. And it is through our confession and faith that salvation is accomplished.

It is not only the Word of God that brings about our new birth, but this happens in conjunction with the Spirit of God. The Word of God, and the Spirit of God. This point was brought to my attention by one of my favorite Bible commentators, Warren Wiersbe, in his commentary on the book of James. (Wiersbe, Warren W., *Be Mature: Growing Up in Christ*, 1978).

In John 3:3, Jesus tells Nicodemus that a person must be "born again" in order to see the Kingdom of God and in verse 6 Jesus says that we must be "born of the Spirit."

Verse 3 – "Jesus answered and said to him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God'."

Verses 6-8 – "⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

The third thing I want to highlight in James 1:18 is that God saves us "so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures." The "first fruits" are the most special part of the agricultural harvest, as we see often in the Old Testament. James is writing with a mostly Jewish mindset to mostly Jewish Christians, and they would be familiar with the motif of the "first fruits." We are supposed to offer to God the first and the best of what we have.

Proverbs 3:9 (NIV) – "Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops."

Leviticus 23:10 (NASB) – "Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, 'When you enter the land which I am going to give to you and reap its harvest, then you shall bring in the sheaf of the first fruits of your harvest to the priest'."

The last sentence of Revelation 14:4 says this about the 144,000 persons who had been redeemed by God: “These have been purchased from among men as first fruits to God and to the Lamb.” James 1:18 says we are “a kind of first fruits among God’s creatures.” Those of His creatures who have allied themselves to God are extra special to Him.

Let’s move on to the next part of today’s message.

Part 2: QSS: Quick-Slow-Slow (James 1:19-20).

Let’s read James 1:19-20 – “¹⁹This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; ²⁰for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.”

Many years ago, I heard a preacher comment on verse 19 here and he told his audience about the principle of “QSS” – Quick-Slow-Slow. Note that “Slow” is mentioned twice as often as “Quick.” We too often react quickly to things, but we ought to slow down and assess our feelings before making a response. That’s the principle of QSS, said that preacher I heard many years ago, and I have tried to follow his principle. Verse 19 here tells us to be: “Quick to hear ... Slow to speak ... Slow to anger.” Don’t be quick to speak ... don’t be quick to get angry at something.

What is it that we are to be quick to do? We are to be quick to hear ... quick to listen and consider what the other person is saying or doing. Too often, people make a quick assumption about what is being said and they may misunderstand what is being said and may react inappropriately. We do well to pause and consider what that person is actually trying to say ... what it is that he or she wants to express. I think that many unhappy interactions between people can be avoided if we follow this advice.

Verse 20 says, “For the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.” Oftentimes, we can be quick to get angry at something, and oftentimes it is for selfish reasons that we get angry ... selfish motivations. That does not align with the righteousness of God.

I once read a really helpful book entitled *Make Anger Your Ally*, written by a Christian psychologist. It was either in that book or a similar book that I learned about two kinds of anger. One kind of anger is an explosive anger that damages yourself and the people who incur your wrath. When the New Testament speaks against anger, it is usually referencing the explosive type, and that kind must certainly be avoided. But there is another kind of anger – a righteous anger that is rightly upset when God’s honor is disrespected or when we see injustice happening between people, for example. In such cases, a slow anger that results in motivating us to constructive action would be appropriate.

Be quick to listen to people ... be slow to speak a word in reply ... be slow to anger, and if you do get angry, let it not be explosive anger that is destructive but let it be an emotion that moves you to constructive action.

Let’s move on to the next part of today’s message.

Part 3: In humility receive the word (James 1:21).

James 1:21 – “Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.”

After describing the process of temptation and sin in verses 13-15 and discussing anger in verses 19-20, James advises us to put aside any other sin that may be remaining in our lives. He tells us to

put aside every filthy thing ... and put aside any wicked thought or action that still lurks somewhere in our heart or our behavior.

That brings to mind a passage of Scripture that has struck me whenever I read it.

Ephesians 5:1-5 (note especially verses 3 and 4) – “¹Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; ²and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. ³But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; ⁴and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. ⁵For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.”

We Christians are called to be imitators of God. We should reflect the character of our God. Our motivation for this is the love of Christ who sacrificed Himself for us. But you cannot be an imitator of God if, as verses 3 and 4 point out, there is any immorality or impurity or greed in your life ... and any filthiness or silly talk in your manner of speech. The word “immorality” here is the Greek word *porneia*, which means sexual immorality, such as adultery, fornication, homosexuality and such kinds of sexual activity outside of marriage. Such activity is outside of God’s design and it must not be a part of a Christian’s life. I have not engaged in these sins, but I wonder what that second word – “impurity” – refers to. That is the word that really hit me when I read this passage several times in my younger days. Impurity. It’s the Greek word *akatharsia*. It can mean sexual immorality, but it has a broader meaning that covers any kind of sexual impurity, filth, or uncleanness, both in our inner life and in our actions. This same word is used in Matthew 23:27 when Jesus compares the scribes and Pharisees to whitewashed tombs that are full of dead bones and “all uncleanness.” This is a matter of our inner lives, our hearts. Is there any uncleanness in your heart? Any cravings that are immoral? What about some activities which are not in line with a clean manner of living? This verse hit me because when I examined my heart and some of my actions, I found myself guilty of impurity.

All the sins focused on in this passage are incompatible with being a child of God. We must put these things away, forsake them, repent of them, get rid of them so that you can have a clean heart ready for the next step in what James exhorts us to do.

Let’s read James 1:21 again – “Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.”

In humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.

In humility. We must be humble in order to make the most of this benefit. In humility ... receive the word implanted. The word of God ... the word of truth ... the word that saves. When you clean out your heart, you can then receive God’s word and let it transform your life, from the inside out – transform your heart and transform your behavior. This is the goal of Christian discipleship: our spiritual transformation so that we reflect our Lord’s character.

We must move on ...

Part 4: Be a Doer of the word (James 1:22-25).

Let’s read James 1:22-25 – “²²But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. ²³For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. ²⁵But one who looks intently at the perfect law,

the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.”

This is such a crucially important admonition for all of us. We evangelical Christians put a high value on knowing the Scripture and living by it and having correct doctrine. But it is too easy to fall short of our ideals and – because of the weaknesses we still have – it is easy to fall into complacency and even laziness. Or even disobedience sometimes, when we hear something that is too uncomfortable. Oftentimes, we go to church and hear a wonderful sermon and agree with its exhortations, but fail to actually put the lessons into practice. We often dutifully read our Bibles, but after closing the book, we forget what we read and nothing changes in our life. That shouldn’t be.

This passage admonishes us to listen intently to the sermon and to read intently your Bible ... and then to be sure to put the lessons into practice. We must be doers of the word. It is useless to be a mere hearer of the word. In fact, it is worse than useless – to be a mere hearer of the word is to be someone deceiving yourself that you are actually doing something productive and beneficial.

This reminds me of something I heard a famous radio preacher say. In the 1980s, I listened to a lot of Christian radio and one of my favorite preachers was a fundamentalist pastor named J. Vernon McGee, who was one of the pioneers of Christian broadcasting in the 1940s. He was still on the radio after his retirement as pastor and I loved listening to his program preaching through every book of the Bible. He made a comment one day that made an enormous impression on me. He was speaking about the state of the fundamentalist churches in America, which had defended the Christian faith against what was called “modernism,” a denial by modern-day Christians of basic biblical doctrines – today, we call that theological “liberalism.” He and other conservative pastors preached in large churches with enthusiastic congregations. But eventually he noticed that something was not healthy in the churches. I would like to share with you a statement he made that really shocked me. Here it is, as best as I can remember it. He said something like this (this is a paraphrase, not his exact words):

“We fundamentalists had the right doctrines ... we had full churches, fine preachers ... our people were taking notes on our sermons and filling their notebooks. But we were not prevailing over the modernists. We had a weakness and I finally figured out what it was. *There was a profound lack of ethics in the lives of so many of our people.* They were not putting into practice what we were teaching them. Many of them remained worldly. Their lifestyles were not distinguishable from the lifestyles of non-Christians. Many of them had ungodly practices. There was this profound lack of ethics – too many of our people were not living by the Christian standards we taught them.”

Wow. Dr. McGee’s words really hit me. But, yes, I had begun observing some of these things already. Although I had attended some good Christian groups in college and attended some good evangelical churches, I had noticed numerous church-goers who were attending church more out of habit (and a desire for socializing) than a desire to grow in their spiritual life. His observation of a profound lack of ethics in the lives of many people who claimed to be Christian was hard-hitting for me, and I resolved never to be the type of lukewarm or nominal Christian that he was lamenting.

We need to read God’s Word, to read good Christian books, to listen to sermons from evangelical preachers ... and we need to make it a habit to always be open to being challenged by what we read or hear and then to make needed changes to our lives. We need to be doers of the word and not merely hearers. When we listen to a sermon or read our Bible, we ought always to be ready to examine ourselves to see if there is something in our life that we need to change in order to be more conformed to living the way God wants us to live.

Today I entitled my message “Be Doers of God's Word, not merely hearers.” Christians are loved by God and they know how much God has done for them. And so, because they love Him, they

desire to obey God's Word. However, they also know that sometimes it is difficult to put God's word into practice in their own strength. So we must be filled with the Holy Spirit and continue to seek God's power for living. We know that sometimes we fail, but we know that we can return to our loving God. May we be those who do not fear failure, but constantly look up to His face. 1 John 1:9 – “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Let us now move on to the last part of today's message.

Part 5: Worthless religion and Pure religion (James 1:26-27).

Let's read James 1:26-27 – “²⁶If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. ²⁷Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

Verse 26 tells us something more that we might deceive ourselves about: the Christian who does not take care about what kinds of things come out of his mouth. He might think of himself as a good, religious Christian, but if his words tear people down instead of build people up, it is worthless religion. There are a number of ways we could speak unwisely. We need to be really careful about the words we say.

Ephesians 4:29 – “Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.” This is how our relationships in church should be: giving edifying words to each other that will encourage one another.

Ephesians 4:31-32 – “³¹Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³²Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” Forsake the bitter words. Be kind, loving, forgiving.

James 1:27 is one of my top favorite verses of Scripture, one of the anchors of my Christian life. This verse tells us what true religion is supposed to look like – “Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

How does your Christian faith work itself out in your lifestyle? In verse 26, we saw how a loose tongue can be destructive and leads to worthless religion. In verse 27, we see what pure, undefiled religion is supposed to look like. When it says we “visit orphans and widows in their distress,” the picture I get is that we must care for the most vulnerable members of society. I don't actually visit orphans and widows, but I do sometimes contribute to Christian organizations that seek to meet the needs of various types of disadvantaged people.

1 John 3:17-18 – “¹⁷But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? ¹⁸Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.” How you behave when you see those in a needy situation shows what kind of heart and what kind of faith you have. We are exhorted here to not just profess kindness with our tongue but to act with deeds that actually help meet practical needs.

I am impressed with a story I read in Galatians chapter 2. There we read about a discussion between the Apostles Peter and Paul about evangelism to the Jews and to the Gentiles, to the circumcised

and to the uncircumcised. Paul writes this in Galatians 2:7 and 9-10 – “⁷But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised ... ⁹and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas [Peter] and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. ¹⁰They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do.”

It impresses me that both of the great apostles Peter and Paul, while recognizing the importance of evangelism, also thought that ministry to the poor was something that must not be neglected. In my younger days, I felt that the evangelical churches of which I was a part downplayed ministry to the poor – that was something liberals did, I was told, but the church must be about the work of saving souls, not charity work. But through my repeated readings of Scripture, I found that God cares a great deal for the poor and disadvantaged, and our hearts and lifestyles ought to reflect that. James 1:27 and numerous other verses teach me that.

Let’s look at some Old Testament passages. The prophets criticized the people of their day for two great sins: one was that they were forsaking worship of the true God, and the second was that they were ignoring injustice in society. Micah 6:8 – “He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?” In my eyes, that parallels James 1:27. Also Isaiah 1:16-17 – “¹⁶Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, ¹⁷Learn to do good; Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow.”

Wash yourselves and make yourselves clean.

This leads me to the last phrase of James 1:27 – if you wish to follow pure and undefiled religion, be sure to keep yourself unstained by the world. I return to a point I made earlier today when I commented on James 1:22 and Ephesians 5:3-4 – Christians ought to be imitators of God, living God-honoring lives that reflect His character.

Keep yourself unstained by the world.