

“Hearers and Doers of the Word”
James 1: 17-27
September 3, 2006

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Furthermore, become doers of the word and not just hearers who only deceive themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like a man perceiving the shape of his natural features in a mirror. When he has caught a glimpse of himself and then goes away, he immediately forgets what he looked like. But the one who gazes into that perfect law of liberty, and remains there, and does not become a forgetful hearer, but an effective doer, shall be blessed in his doing.

My attention was captured by the example that James gives us to distinguish between hearers and doers of the word, that of the man looking into the mirror, seeing his own face and forgetting what he sees. At the time in history when this was written, mirrors were not made of highly reflective glass that gave a clear image that confronted the gazer with the detailed perception of himself. They were polished metal and gave a hazy reflection at best. A clear vision of one’s self was not possible.

This mirror gazing is metaphor. We speak of taking a long look at ourselves, as taking a no nonsense inventory of our lives. To do that we need powerfully clear information about ourselves. If not, we will keep on doing what we know and suffering the consequences. According to James, the only clear image of our lives and our person comes not through the old law of Moses which like the polished metal mirror gives a dim reflection at best, or by what the world tells us about who we are, which also lacks clarity, but through the perfect law that is the life and teaching of Jesus. That mirror is crystal clear.

The ability to know the difference between doing anything based on your faith rather than for any other reason is what this short book of the Bible is all about. I have a book title for someone to write, rather than the “Purpose Driven Life “ how about “The Life Called to Faith.” Perhaps a retired pastor and the pastor of a large Presbyterian church could co-author such book.

If we buy into James at any level then James’ plea is direct; if we do believe, then it has to show. Our belief has to make a behavioral difference. Life cannot be business as usual, once we use the perfect law of Christ to gain both perspective and a pattern for our lives.

“Be ye doers and not just hearers of the word.” This was one of the memory verses from childhood, part of our Evangelical United Brethren emphasis on catechism. The entire system was fed by fear. Those who could not recall voluminous amounts of scripture were the devils’ own offspring. For *moi* the distraction quotient has always been low and retention of large helpings of memory material, sometimes even small amounts of memory material, such as names and phone numbers has never been easy. So, in addition to being branded as inattentive, I had to face the dreaded examination in front of the congregation. It was a contest. The sharecropper farm kids against the children of privilege who had white shirts, clip-on neckties and a pair of dress-up real leather shoes instead of my ever-dependable, all-season, all occasion, black, ankle-high Converse All Star gym shoes. The children of privilege seemed blessed with superhuman recall and were bound for the University of Michigan. Our destiny was the business end of a twelve-hundred pound Holstein cow. When the dreaded moment for recitation arrived, I always looked, behaved and felt like Alfalfa, clearing my throat and rolling my eyes. I missed a word or two from John 3: 16 and left out the adultery commandment, not because I forgot it, but because my older brothers told me what it meant and I was too embarrassed to say the word. We had a well-developed sense of shame and Victorian modesty. Sexuality was natural with dairy animals, but not with people.

However, the son of a Protestant Michigan dairy farmer understood doing things; we were born to work, and when it came time to recite James I was primed and ready. I patted down my cowlick, cleared my throat, and mimicking the voice of Edward R. Morrow recited James 1:22 in the King James version. “Be ye doers of the Word and not hearers only.”

The Book of James has always ignited controversy, for those who feel that our salvation is by God’s Grace alone. Human works as a measure of our response to God has no place in the forgiveness scenario. Not so protests James! “Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.” James’ argument is this: That faith should transform us; the world should see a remarkable difference in behavior. James asks this rhetorical question, “Who is wise and understanding among us? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom.”

Today we will receive communion; as Presbyterians we give and receive it because Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Even the sacrament speaks of action not adoration. The power of the sacrament is unleashed by the elements

being prepared by the chancel guild, carried in by the ushers and distributed by the pastors, elders and deacons. From time-to-time much has been made of the sanctity of the elements. Our Catholic friends

struggle with this. For them what is holy is the cup the wine and the bread. In fact, everything associated with communion is also treated as consecrated sacred objects, and at the end of the service the priest eats and drinks any leftovers. I know one very Eucharistic church where the priests are very generous with the communion wafers and even more so, are generous with the chalice wine, because, shucks, I have to drink the unused portion of the wine. For us objects are not sacred. Bread is always and forever just bread. Grape juice is always grape juice.

Then what is Holy about communion for Presbyterians? These issues matter: Who serves the elements, what we do with the elements and that we do this together. Deacons, elders and the clergy serve the communion, not priests only. We break bread and we eat it; we pour the cup and we drink it. Why? Because we have been instructed to do so. Jesus took bread blessed it and broke it and said, "This is my body broken for you." Luke's Gospel tells us that in the first of his resurrection appearances, the disciples could not believe that it was Him. Then Jesus took bread blessed it and broke it and gave it to them and their eyes were opened by the breaking of bread. The bread alone is not sufficient to carry the message. It has no mystical power. What we do with the bread and the cup makes of them Holy. We break the bread, we pour the cup and by our faith that Jesus would empower us whenever we do this, these simple elements become the body of Christ, and we can commune with him. Finally, we do this together, because faith is communal, a family affair. That is being a doer of the word. But James does not stop there; keeping the rituals is not the end of being a doer of the word, your personal behavior is vital. What we do when no one is watching or when we have all the power in our hands, is also of make or break importance. Says James, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the father is this: To visit the orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep one's self unstained from the world. In our words, justice is an inseparable part of being a doer of the word, and by the way says James as a reinforcing afterthought. Do not be snagged on the socio-economic patterns or cultural patters that inhabit your soul and your surroundings. Always work at separating God's word from the world's words. It will not be easy at the beginning, but the more you do this and do it together the clearer it will become and the power of discipleship will wash over you.

Be ye doers of the word not hearers only. Amen.

