

Easter V
A Sermon by
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“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.” (*James* 1:22–24, ESV)

A man was being tailgated by a stressed out woman on a busy boulevard. Suddenly, the light turned yellow, just in front of him. He did the right thing, stopping at the crosswalk, even though he could have beat the red light by accelerating through the intersection.

The tailgating woman was furious and honked her horn, screaming in frustration, as she missed her chance to get through the intersection. As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands up.

He took her to the police station where she was searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and placed in a holding cell. After a couple of hours, a policeman approached the cell and opened the door. The woman was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects.

He said, “I’m very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, gesturing at the guy in front of you, and cussing a blue streak. I noticed the ‘What Would Jesus Do’ bumper sticker, the ‘Choose Life’ license plate holder, the ‘Follow Me to Sunday-School’ bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk. Naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car.”

“...be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” The story I just told is clearly a story. You can tell that because the police are never around when you want them to be. But it illustrates a point. Too often we hear the word of God, but don’t act on it.

Commenting on today’s Epistle, Fr. Harold Riley notes that last Sunday’s Epistle ends, “Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word [of God], which is able to save your souls” (*James* 1:21, ESV). Then in the next verse, which begins today’s Epistle, James warns “that we are to be *doers*, and not *hearers only*, of this word of God. [James tells us] those whose wills are not moved to action are like a [person who sees] himself in a mirror without paying much attention, so that he *goes away and at once forgets what he was like*; while the doer of the word is like one who peers

closely, studying his reflection. The mirror into which he looks is *the perfect law, the law of liberty*; it is a law in which he can continue.”¹

But what is the perfect law of liberty? James tells us the perfect law, the law of liberty is the good news brought by Christ. The good news is that we are children of God set “free from every kind of servitude, both that of the Old Law and subjection to the devil, to sin and to death.”² The good news is also a law of freedom (liberty) because when we obey it we are expressing our freedom to its fullest extent. “Slavery or divine sonship, this is the dilemma we face. Children of God or slaves to pride, to sensuality, to the fretful selfishness which seems to afflict so many souls.”³

So if we look into the law of liberty we will be hearers who do, not forgetful hearers who do not. In fact we will be blessed if we are doers. “The one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty,...[being]...a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.” This is the kind of passage in *James* that Martin Luther disliked. Luther, in fact, disliked *James* so much that he would have taken it out of the Canon of Scripture. Yet beyond all doubt there is an ethical demand in Christianity. “There is a law of life and a law of living which the Christian must realize and accept and seek to put into action. That law is to be found first in the Ten Commandments, and then in all ethical teaching of Jesus.”⁴

So in verses 26 and 27, James summarizes the law of life and law of living for us. First he tells us we must control our tongues. Controlling our tongues harkens back to verses 19 and 20 of last week’s Epistle. “Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires.” (*James* 1:19–20, ESV). Commenting on this Fr. Riley writes, “St. James adds a searching test of those who *seem to be religious*. A man’s religion should be known first by the self-control by which he bridles his tongue. What he allows himself to say is a real test of what he will also allow himself to think and to do.”⁵

¹ Harold Riley, *The Eucharistic Year*, (London: S.P.C.K., 1951), p. 192.

² James Gavigan, Brian McCarthy, Thomas McGovern, (Eds.), *Catholic Epistles*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1992), p. 43.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter* 2nd Ed., (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 70.

⁵ Riley, p. 192.

Second, James tells us we must be charitable. And James is very practical. He tells us to whom we should be charitable: widows and orphans. Again Fr. Riley writes, “...true religion will result in works of mercy, causing men to *visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction* (cf. *Matt. 25:31–46*),”⁶ This is inline with the Old Testament. The Old Testament refers to widows and orphans as people who deserve special attention and the first Christians made arrangements for the care of widows and orphans. And “concern for widows and orphans is included in the works of mercy which our Lord will take into account at the Last Judgment.”⁷

And third, James tells us we must not let ourselves be stained by the world. “World” in this passage means the enemies of God and of Christians. We must be on guard to avoid being contaminated by the world.

If we do these things—control our tongues, be charitable, and avoid being contaminated by the world—then our religion will be “pure and undefiled.” But what does James really mean by “religion.” According to William Barclay, the word translated as “religion” does not mean “religion” rather it means “worship” especially worship in the sense of ritual and liturgy and ceremony. “What James is saying is, ‘The finest ritual and the finest liturgy you can offer to God is service [to] the poor and personal purity.’ To James real worship did not lie in elaborate vestments, or in a noble liturgy, or in magnificent music, or in a carefully wrought service; it lay in the practical service of mankind and in the purity of one’s own personal life. James was insisting that the most beautiful forms of worship in the world could never take the place of Christian charity. [Unfortunately,] all through history [people] have tried to make ritual and liturgy a substitute for sacrifice and service. They have made religion splendid *within* the Church at the expense of neglecting it *outside* the Church. This is by no means to say that it is wrong to seek to offer the noblest and the most splendid worship to God within God’s house; but it is to say that all such worship is an empty and an idle thing unless it sends [us] out to love God by loving [our fellow-man], and to walk more purely in the tempting ways of the world.”⁸

In other words, in today’s Epistle St. James tells us we must not think that being a Christian consists solely of attending Church and listening to the reading and preaching of the word (or having a fish symbol or a Christian bumper sticker on our automobiles). What is read and heard in the Church must be lived and done in life. Scripture often “exhorts us to put the word of God into practice: ‘Everyone

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Gavigan, p. 43.

⁸ Barclay, p. 72.

who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a man who built his house upon the sand' (*Mt 7:26;...*)."⁹ This is not to say that we can buy our way into heaven. But it does mean that we must do what Jesus says. And Jesus in the parable of the sheep and goats clearly tells us what our duty is and to whom our duty is owed.

“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’” (*Matthew 25:35-40, ESV*).

In today’s Epistle, James talks about faith and works. He tells us that if we have faith it will move us to do good works. We will become people who not only hear the word of God, but people who do the works of God.

The martyr, St. Ignatius of Antioch, who died c. 107 wrote, “Only request on my behalf that I may not merely be *called* a Christian, but may really be found to be one.”¹⁰ May we not be just called Christians, may we really be found to be Christians. Christians who do what the Savior says.

Sources:

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⁹ Gavigan, p. 42.

¹⁰ David W. Bercot, Ed., *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1998), p. 547.