

Sunday February 20, 2022
Lesson 12: Informing, Transforming Faith
Scripture: James 1: 19-27

Context:

The winter Adult Bible Studies Curriculum continues its focus on engaging the world with the unit entitled “Wonder.” This set of lessons in the season of Epiphany will focus on how we are called to a sense of wonder in our faith. As we look to the glory of God, we are transformed and can engage in the world in new ways as disciples of Jesus. Today we explore how there is a connection between belief and practice.

The scripture lesson today is found the book of James, a book in the New Testament. Of all the instructional books in the New Testament, James is perhaps the most concrete in terms of connecting belief to practice. Behavior is of great concern to the author of the book as there is a connection between what Christians believe and how they treat and interact with one another. Wisdom is extremely important in this regard. The first example James gives of how Christians can exhibit wisdom is in their attention to speech and the words they use.¹ This is tied to how Christians experience anger and how they are to address their feelings.

An important note is the author does not criticize or deny anger, but instead addresses how the anger should play a role in listening and speaking. In this case, no one should ever use their anger to deal with situations in a derogatory or harmful manner. The implanted word should act to help people process what they should do and be healthy in dealing with the feelings and actions anger can bring out of them.

Instead, the author urges the readers to think about wisdom and how the implanted word can help them address their feelings and anger. They are called to look in a mirror and to remember the counsel given to them. They are to remember the law of liberty in Jesus Christ and to see how the laws and counsel of Jesus are to give them strength for the journey.

Some of what they need as Christians is to focus on what they are called to do instead of focusing on the anger and the wrath it produces. The religious activity pleasing to God requires putting a bit on the tongue and caring for the widowed and orphans.² While James encourages his readers to keep themselves unstained from the world, he is not encouraging them to cease from ordinary life and pull themselves away from the secular world. Instead, it is meant in a metaphorical sense of a reorientation of values so that the individual no longer lives according to the standards of the world.³ They are to live according to the standards of God and find their values in the Christian community.

James closes the reflection with an invitation to the church to take care of the widows and orphans. Those individuals are to be their focus and they should dedicate their time to showing compassion to those in need. As they engage in mission, they are transformed and can be the doers of the word.

¹ Perkins, Pheme. “First and Second Peter, James, and Jude.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 103.

² Ibid. 106.

³ Ibid., 107.

Application

Of all the New Testament writings, James is perhaps the most practical in terms of connecting belief to practice. Once the author addresses a behavior or a transgression, they offer a way to correct belief and practice. There is no timidity in the writing when it comes to addressing what Christians should and should not do.

The phrase which continues to stick out to me in this passage is “to keep oneself unstained by the world.” What does this even mean? How do we discern what is worldly and what is holy? It seems to be the ongoing struggle of the church in every day and age.

And yet the answer is there. We are to focus on the tangible ways we can love our brothers and sisters in need, and we are called to watch our tongues so we do not cause division or sordidness wherever we may go. We are called to dwell in God’s word and seek the ways we can love God and others more deeply.

I think we know how the world responds to this kind of mentality. If there is anything I have noticed in both the secular and increasingly in the Christian world, it is the power of the unbridled tongue. For some reason, we have moved to a place of because everyone has opinions, it means they should be shared for the world. Or because someone says something or predicts something, we clamor to get our anxiety all notched up and figure out a way to argue or fight. We do not look to the scriptures for guidance, and we do not love one another because it would mean surrendering to our Lord instead of going about our own way.

In this day and time, right belief and practice means fully engaging with reflection on our words and our actions to see what true religion means. Just the other day, I saw someone use social media to all but say they wanted to exclude other people from the body of Christ who did not believe the same way they did. Their tongue was completely unbridled as they used their positional authority to disparage others and then twist the words of someone else to justify their actions which were divisive and could cause irrevocable damage to the church.

As I seethed in my anger over their words and actions, I read the scriptures for my upcoming sermon series and came to Jesus’s words on praying for your enemies in the gospel of Luke. I initially mumbled, “Thanks Holy Spirit for that stepping on the toes. But have you met so-and-so?” And yet the more I prayed and reflected, the more I had to name the anger as grief over how we in the Christian church continue to fail in how we love one another.

There is not a lot I or those reading this commentary can do when others let their tongues loose and cause damage and harm. You can say something, or you can try to intervene. Usually, the Holy Spirit will give you the nudge when it’s needed. And yet this text reminds us of how we can do something by focusing on our own walk with Christ and seeking how we can take care of those in our midst, the widows, and the orphans and those in need. We can dwell on the Word for when we feel scared, worried, or overwhelmed. We can love deeply drawing closer to the ones who encourage us and praying for those we see as enemies or doing harm. We can watch our tongues, discerning when we are speaking in love or when we are speaking through a lens of hate or prejudice. Throughout it all, we learn how to lean into God and the implanted Word to remind us of what true religion looks like in the here and now.

How have you seen an unbridled tongue cause harm and damage? What do you do when you feel angry and need to process your emotions? What do you think it means to live unstained by the world? What ways can you help those in need around you? How does the Word both challenge and encourage you?

Rev. Dr. E. Hunter Pugh

Pastor of Brantley – Brunson Chapel Charge
PO Box 71
Brantley, AL 36009