

## James 1:17-27 Doers of the Word

The interesting thing about the religious life is that people are attracted to it because of what they think it can give them, but almost immediately comes the discovery of its demands, what it requires them to give.

There are cliches that endeavor to communicate the point; “no pain, no gain,” “good things come to those who wait.” It is also a life truth. Think of parenting as an example. Many of the great joys in life come to us because of the children we know and love, yet the demands of parenting are breathtaking. Life without sleep.

I cannot help an example from the world of sports. I once asked a friend of mine who played high school football if he had enjoyed it. It wasn't one of my high school friends but one of the fathers of my son's teammate. He said, “Friday nights were fun.” What he meant to say was that he didn't like practice, and summer camps with two-a-days, all that preparation, but he enjoyed the games.

Most of life is preparation. I have met a few people who enjoyed the preparation and not the games. As a runner I have known people who enjoyed the long runs in the heat or the cold or the wet, but did not like to race. I confess I envied them sometimes, but I never understood them.

The interesting thing about the Christian faith is that people are attracted to it because of what they think it can give them. And that is often the way it is marketed; inner peace, the absolution of guilt, a disciplined life of purpose and meaning, the hope of a better world and of heaven itself. And people are right to expect such things. But almost immediately comes the discovery of its demands, what must be given.

Our text today stands as one of the best expressions of that paradox; a free gift that demands the giving of the self,

“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. God chose to give us birth through the Word of Truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all creation.”

Oh, the good and perfect gifts compel us towards faith in Jesus. But they are only the beginning. It only takes a few sentences before we read;

“Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceiving yourselves. Do what it says. (Be ye doers of the Word and not hearers only KJV)”

And so the demands come. They are not to be seen as requirements to earn something, but as responsibilities that go along with having been given something. There is a difference. Pay attention.

## Paying Attention

Now about paying attention, James makes a very interesting visual aid. He likens this gift, having been given every good and perfect gift, and then going ahead as if nothing has happened to a person who gets up in the morning and looks in the mirror, and then just goes away, forgetting what has been seen.

The easiest way to take the illustration is to tap into the reason we look into mirrors to begin with, to make sure everything is in order. Imagine taking the bother to look and see if there is a need to comb the hair or wash the face, and then having discerned the need, going on without doing it?

But there is a little more here. James says a person who listens but does not act is like a person who looks in a mirror and then forgets what he looks like. Imagine that, not being able to pick yourself out in mirror, not knowing who you are.

Life is a gift. Part of accepting it means living it free without self-awareness. But part of it entails the recognition of the source (the Father of the heavenly lights), which means self-knowledge, knowing who you are.

## Acceptable Religion

So there are three things, according to James, that are associated with authentic religion; the control of the tongue, service to those who are most vulnerable (in their case, widows and orphans), and being kept from the world's "pollution," which means it values and prejudices, greed and materialism.

America has often been thought of as a religious nation, and I think it has been, and still is. If it is judged, however, by the domain of speech, then I am less sure. It isn't just in our public discourse where there is uncontrolled and hurtful and thoughtless speech, but there is plenty of evidence that in our private lives there is careless and vulgar language too, and misunderstanding caused by miss-speech. I think this is self-evident. If the control of the tongue is the result of the practice of true religion, we must keep practising.

And when it comes to the care of the weak and vulnerable, much energy and many resources are spent, rightly so, and one must affirm the efforts made and the resources spent both by the secular and religious alike. Yet all around we find those who are not looked after in their distress.

The point is, that these demands stated in this way, are burdensome. The acceptance of a gift which can't be self-achieved, is fraught with weightiness.

## The Gospel News

But why should we want it to be any other way? “Every good and perfect gift,” just the phrase itself, much less the idea, is an overwhelming affirmation of the goodness of things. In an astonishing way, we are led to the conviction that indeed *every good thing is from above*.

Once we begin to think this way we become aware of all the good things: sunshine, the laughter of children, the colors and sounds of nature, every meal and every good night’s sleep, friendship and family, the amazing array of people we come into relationship with who make us laugh and cry and sometimes disappoint but always enrich our lives.

And triumphs; from the performance of the high school orchestra that sounds near professional to the Super Bowl or the Olympics, people inspire the world through hard work and sacrifice and dedication; we see examples of honor, dignity, skill and dedication, and the triumph of the human spirit, every bit of it comes from God. Be thankful.

The implication is that apart from God’s mercy there would be no such things. Imagine the pictures you have seen of the destruction of war, the WWI battle fields with sawed-off trees and mud; the bombed out cities. But for God’s grace, that is what we would know as “life.”

## The Most Important Thing

But, of course, that isn’t what we know as life. And it is no good to suggest that we should accept all these good things as grace if it is not true, if it is only careless religious dreaming. We are challenged because it is the overwhelming conviction of biblical faith, “every good thing comes from God.”

The result is to live a life of reconciliation, of building up and encouraging people at every opportunity, and to recognize our own part in what separates people from one another and tears them down so that we might be forgiven and healed and transformed.

“To look after widows and orphans is the biblical way of saying that the restoration of relations with those who’ve fallen through the cracks *is* the definition of true and acceptable religion.

In view of what we have been given, it is not too much to ask. Being who we are, we must admit that we are not very good at it, true religion that is.

But the good and perfect gifts are still being given. Everyday. So God’s grace is all around . . . and if attention is paid, in ways great and small, one can see also, the doing of the Word.

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