

On June 17, 1994, NFL Hall of Fame running back—Orenthal James Simpson—was involved in the most famous high speed car chase in American history. Nation wide, an estimated 95 million people watched as O.J tried to evade the police in his white Ford Bronco; Simpson later surrendered at his home in Brentwood, California.

Simpson was promptly arrested and charged with the murders of his ex-wife, Nicole, and her friend, Ron Goldman. O.J's murder trial was televised with millions watching the proceedings. In spite of the fact that both the police and the Prosecution's legal team made many mistakes, it was a foregone conclusion that Simpson would be convicted of murder.

The key piece of evidence was a pair of bloody gloves. One was found outside Nicole Simpson's town house—the scene of the murders—while the matching glove was found at O.J.'s house. DNA tests would reveal that the genetic material found on the gloves was consistent with both Nicole Simpson, Ron Goldman, and O.J. Simpson. During the trial O.J was asked to try on the gloves; when he did, the gloves fit somewhat awkwardly. O.J's defence lawyer, Jonnie Cochrane, responded with the following quip: "*If it doesn't fit, you must acquit.*"

In the court of public opinion, O.J. was guilty as charged. Everyone *knew* that O.J. committed murder, everyone that is except for the jury. The "not guilty" verdict stunned the nation, and the world. How did O.J.'s legal team get him off? *Reasonable doubt.*

A defendant does not need to prove that he or she is innocent, rather, the prosecution needs to prove the defendant's guilt *beyond reasonable doubt.* The defence team poked holes in the prosecution's

case, casting doubt on nearly every piece of evidence presented, and when the dust settled, O.J. Simpson walked away a free man.

I want you to imagine for a moment that you are on trial, but not for murder; imagine that you are being prosecuted for being a Christian. Here's the question: *would there be enough evidence to convict you?*

You don't swear, drink too much, or cheat on your taxes. You give money to charity, pray before meals, and read your Bible a few times a week; you even go to church 2 out of 4 Sundays. There's evidence to be sure, but is there enough evidence to prove—*beyond reasonable doubt*—that you've pledged your life to Jesus Christ?

James, half-brother of Jesus, and author of the New Testament letter we are studying, uses an economy of words that leaves very little wiggle room. Those who love the letter of James typically praise his direct, no-nonsense, style; those who dislike James do so for the same reason.

If I were to describe this morning's text—James 1:19-27—I might describe it as being a little bit like a punch in the mouth. James has some things to say about faith—both here, and later in the letter—that make us uncomfortable. We tend to think of faith in purely credal terms, in other words, *faith is what we believe about God*, but James's definition is more comprehensive.

For James, **faith = belief + behaviour**. If what we believe about God doesn't affect—and transform!—the way we live, our faith is basically useless. Real faith certainly includes credal statements—what we believe about God is of vital importance—but faith isn't

passive, it's active, which is to say, *faith does something*—it does something in us, and it does something in the world.

If you have a Bible with you, and you're up for a punch in the mouth, let me invite you to turn with me to James 1:19-27. If you are using the Blue Bible from the seat rack in front of you, our text can be found on page 978.

*“My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, **20** because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. **21** Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.*

***22** Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. **23** Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror **24** and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. **25** But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.*

***26** Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. **27** Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”*

¹ John 3:5-7 and 2 Corinthians 5:17 respectively.

² J.A. Motyer, *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of James*, 64.

High Level Summary: We are going to look at this text verse by verse, but first, I'd like to offer a 30,000 foot perspective on what we've just read.

Last Sunday we looked at James 1:12-18 and there we saw two natures at work within the Christian person—the old nature and the new nature. In vs. 14-15, James describes the source of temptation; it's our distorted desires that give birth to sin, and when we let sin grow, sin gives birth to death (separation from God). By way of contrast, in vs. 18, James talks about the “new birth” that comes from God.

“New birth” certainly sounds good, doesn't it? God has wiped our slate clean; we've been forgiven, accepted, and adopted as His daughters and sons. But though we have been “born again” and “made new,”¹ the old (sin) nature does not go quietly into the night; the old and new natures are locked in conflict.²

We have been born again—the old has gone, the new has come (positionally)—but in another sense, *we are in the process of being made new*, and this process requires our participation. The Holy Spirit invites us to put to death old ways of thinking, speaking, and living. Some times this process feels life-giving, at other times it feels painful, and this process takes time—the rest of our lives.

The new birth that James mentioned in vs. 18, is meant to be lived out in a variety of ways, some of which he mentions in vs. 19-27. It's meant to be lived out...

- in our conversation (vs. 19, 26);
- in our emotional responses (vs. 19);
- in personal holiness (vs. 21, 27);
- in our responsiveness to God's word (vs. 21);
- in looking after the weak and vulnerable (vs. 27).

And the key to this new birth playing itself out is none other than faith; faith = belief + behaviour. *Don't merely listen to the Word, do what it says.* When belief and behaviour align—when we listen to God and do what He says—we are transformed and have a transforming effect on our world.

Most scholars suggest that our text can be subdivided into three smaller sections: vs. 19-21, 22-25, and 26-27. We're going to look at each section in turn, beginning with vs. 19-21.

1. Hearing and Receiving God's Word (vs. 19-20): The first instruction James gives is to be "*quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.*" At first glance, these words seem somewhat generic; they are at home here in the Bible but just as easily they could be the centrepiece of a seminar on active listening, negotiation, or conflict management.

And while these words certainly have value when it comes to the way we relate to one another, I want to demonstrate that these words

connect with James' central concern, namely, a faith that transforms. Note how many times he makes reference to God's word. Vs. 18 speaks of our new birth being brought about by *the word of truth*. In vs. 21 we are told to receive the *implanted word*. In vs. 22 and 23, James talks about not merely hearing God's word, but doing what He says; vs. 25 highlights a phrase—*the perfect law*—that refers to the whole of Scripture.

We are to be "quick to listen" but who, or what, are we to listen to? To one another? Yes, of course, but at a more basic level, the call to listen is a call to tune our ears to God's word. Jesus was fond of saying, "*If you have ears to hear, then listen to what I say.*"³

Think for a moment in terms of the gift of salvation. Jesus died on the cross for our sin, and through Him we are welcomed into God's family. We don't earn salvation through impeccable spiritual performance, God speaks this word of forgiveness, we hear it, receive it, and are welcomed in.

In the words of John Wimber, "The way in is the way on". God reached out to us, it's His word of invitation that makes our response possible. God is still speaking, and it's just as necessary to listen now as it was when we first believed. Consider a hearing aid—it needs to be in the ear and turned on if it's to enhance one's ability to hear. When it comes to God's Word—the Scriptures—and His voice—the Holy Spirit—*are we listening?*

We are to be quick to listen and *slow to speak*; often we reverse the order—we are quick to speak and slow to listen. One author writes,

³ I.e. Mark 4:9, 23; 8:18; Luke 8:8; Revelation 2:7, 11, etc.

“The great talker is rarely a great listener, and never is the ear more firmly closed than when anger takes over.”⁴ The Apostle Paul says, that *if anyone is in Christ, he, or she is a new creation; the old is gone and the new has come.*⁵ James says the same thing but in a slightly different way—Jesus came to give us new birth (vs. 18), and this new birth, with the Holy Spirit’s help, expresses itself in new behaviour.

When we first began to pray, it’s likely that we did all the talking, but over time we discover a growing desire to quiet before the Lord—to listen to His voice. Where once—in conversation—our priority was to be heard, we begin to find joy in listening to others. Anger is the typical response to an unmet expectation, but James reminds that anger doesn’t produce righteousness—anger gets in the way of a right relationship with God and others.

In vs. 21, James talks about humbly accepting the word that has been “*implanted*” in us. What does he mean by this? In the *Parable of the Sower*, Jesus connected personal fruitfulness to our willingness to hear and receive His word. But for our lives to be fruitful, we need to deal with the “moral filth” that is resident in our lives. James’ words—*moral filth*—evoke the image of shabby, dirty clothing.

illus: A number of years ago, Naomi and I travelled to Southern Manitoba; her cousin was getting married and I was asked to officiate. We arrived a few days early and visited with Uncles, Aunts, and cousins; we had a great time. On the one of the days we had the

opportunity to visit one of the largest and most productive farms in the area. The technology involved in the operation was incredible!

But nothing could have prepared us for the sensory experience of walking into the pig barn. By a show of hands, have you ever been in a large pig barn before? If you have been, it’s not something one forgets. The smell is overwhelming, and not just when you’re inside the barn—the smell clings to your clothes and penetrates your pores long after you’re gone.

Uncle Glen warned us in advance: “*Wear clothes that you don’t mind throwing away.*” He wasn’t kidding. When we got back to the house, we left our clothes by the back door and never reclaimed them. When I had a shower, I had to scrub the pig-barn-smell out of my hair, out of my skin—I have never been so happy to have rubbed-raw-skin as I was that day.

When James speaks about moral filth, I think of that pig barn and the clothes I left behind in Southern Manitoba. The new life God calls us to, requires a new wardrobe.

After speaking about hearing and receiving God’s word, James turns his attention to the integration between belief and behaviour.

2. Belief + Behaviour = A Faith That Transforms (vs. 22-25):

In vs. 22, James writes, “*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*”

⁴ Motyer, 65.

⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:17.

His emphasis in this verse—and what follows—is on listening and doing; we must be *hearers and doers* of God’s word. What James says here sounds an awful lot like something that Jesus once said. Matthew 7:24, “*Everyone who hears these words of mine **and puts them into practice***” Jesus said, “*is like a wise man who built his house on the rock...But everyone who hears these words...and does not put them into practice is like a [fool] who built his house upon the sand.*” In Luke 6:46, Jesus said to the crowds—no doubt with some exasperation—“*Why do you call me Lord but not do what I say?*”

Belief + Behaviour = A Faith That Transforms.

James goes on to compare and contrast two kinds of people. The person who listens to God’s word but doesn’t do what it says is like a person who looks at herself, or himself, in the mirror, and then walks away and forgets what they look like. James uses this analogy to speak to a deeper meaning. This forgetfulness extends beyond mere appearance, the Christian who hears God’s word but largely ignores it, has forgotten who they are and who they belong to.

But, vs. 25, blessed is the one who hears God’s word, humbly receives it, and lives in obedience to it. Whoever hears God’s word, not forgetting what they have heard, but putting it into practice, will experience transformation and have a transforming effect on our world.

⁶ New Living Translation.

⁷ Matthew 12:34; Luke 6:45.

In the time remaining let’s turn our attention vs. 26-27.

3. Examples of Transforming Faith (vs. 26-27): Here, James offers three practical examples of transforming faith, and once again, by transforming faith I mean belief working itself out in behaviour.

Vs. 26, “*If you claim to be religious but don’t control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless.*”⁶ This is one of those punch-in-the-mouth moments in James. In essence James says, “I don’t care about theologically correct statements of faith; if you go around running your mouth and cutting people down, all your God-talk is worthless.” The word “worthless” means “empty, vain, futile, useless.”

Jesus once said, “*the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.*”⁷ The mouth—our words—are a window into our heart. Words spoken in anger reveal a heart in which anger dwells. The one who speaks fearful words reveals a heart in which fear dwells. When we speak words of contempt, or pride, or praise, or love, we reveal what is in our hearts. What’s in your heart? What’s in mine?

If our belief in, and experience of, God’s loving kindness doesn’t affect—and transform—the way we speak to others, then something has short-circuited. Real faith isn’t passive, it’s active, which is to say, **faith does something** in us, and it does something in the world. *Are we speaking words of life?*

In vs. 27, James speaks once more about what “new birth” looks like when we live it out. *“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”*

In 1985 I was 12 years old, and Christian singer, Scott Wesley Brown, penned a song entitled “I’m Not Religious, I Just Love the Lord.” He was pushing back against the way the word “religious” was being used at the time; it was being used to describe a system of beliefs, or alternatively, as a list of rules. I’m not religious, but I do have a relationship with God.

When James uses the word “religion,” it’s in the following way: pure religion, religion without shadow or fault, is one in which belief and behaviour are aligned. He’s talking about a relationship with God, founded upon what we believe, and acted out in the way we live. Life with God is meant to shape our life with others. James provides two examples that showcase the transforming effect faith can have on society, and on ourselves.

(a) Caring For the Vulnerable: If you’ve ever wondered why Christians refer to God as “Father,” it’s because God uses this image to describe Himself. And frequently, when God names Himself as “Father,” it’s because a person (or persons) are in need of His protection, provision, or love.

Psalm 68:5 says, *“Father to the fatherless, defender of widows—this is God, whose dwelling is holy.”* Psalm 82:3, *“Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.”*

It’s entirely possible to look at the world’s refugee crisis and feel compassion, but our concern for our own need outweighs any sense of responsibility for our global neighbours. Ironically, the people of Israel, who were themselves once refugees in Egypt, felt similarly, but God spoke to them saying, *“The [refugee] residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were [refugees] in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.”*⁸

Is our faith merely a list of truths we subscribe to, or is our faith having an effect on us and the world? Can we love God authentically and ignore the vulnerable in our midst (the orphans, widows, and refugees)? We might for awhile, but not for long. When we listen to God’s word, accept it, and then respond, we find our lives being molded in His image and likeness. What He loves we begin to love; what concerns Him begins to concern us.

Pure religion isn’t reserved for Sundays, or private devotional times, it shows up visibly, and sometimes loudly, in the middle of everyday life. Pure religion shows up, uninvited, when we’re stuck in traffic and someone cuts us off; will we curse or will we bless? Pure religion shows up when you get your tax return and you’re thinking about all the ways you could spend it, when you remember that someone from your small group member is out of work. James reminds us: *where there is no love for the poor and vulnerable, there is no faith.*

The final example comes in the second half of verse 27; James talks about the corrupting influence of the world. Every day each of us has

⁸ Leviticus 19:34.

a decision to make about who we are living for. Who are we? Who do we belong to? Is our faith real in the way that James defines it? Is it a transforming, belief + behaviour, kind of faith?

I want to conclude this morning with quote taken from one author's summary of James' words.

“It is possible to assume that we are ‘religious’ when we are not; to profess and practice a vain religion or one which...is impure and defiled in the estimation of the Father. We need to examine ourselves; we need to know, we must be sure. A thing as potent as the new birth, if it has taken place, cannot be hidden; it cannot fail to make its presence felt. To have the life of God in us and to remain unchanged is unthinkable. Well, then, have we the evidence to prove it?”⁹

Prayer

Worship

Benediction

⁹ Motyer, 78.