

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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James 1:17-27, Mark 7:1-13
Doers of the Word

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.
(James 1:22, RSV)

This is what we want for ourselves: that people should not only hear our words, but apply them in day-to-day life. Why should not our Maker want it too?

Parents, for example, want their children to listen to them in a *practical* way. Parents do not want to feel that they are wasting their breath, that they are banging their heads against a wall, that they are multiplying words but to no point because the children do not mean to take the words to heart. What a sorrow it is to you parents to feel that you are speaking uselessly to the children! Life has taught you much. You want to pass on what you have learned to the children. You can see danger or heartache looming. You would spare your little ones if at all possible. So you pour out your heart to them in hope that they will not only hear, but *do* your words.

Our words matter to us. We do not want them to futilely go in one ear and out the other, but for the words to find a place in the heart and in the obedience of the ones addressed.

Let me give you another example of the importance of translating words into conduct. This example concerns one of the most important exchanges of words that many of us will ever know. I mean the marriage vow. In marriage, there is great need that the wedding vows be not only spoken and heard, but also practiced. Hearts could be broken and families disrupted if the words of the marriage vows remain only poetry and not practice. On the other hand, love can extend to great heights and depths if the husband and wife remain mindful of their vows and are true to their words day by day.

I knew a young woman once who strayed from her marriage vows shortly after her wedding day. You would not know her. She does not live in these parts. In any case, she soon strayed from her marriage vows, and to everyone's dismay, she did not grieve that she had done so, nor did she mean to repent. She broke her young husband's heart, but did not seem particularly troubled by that. I had occasion to speak with her. Our paths crossed as if by accident. I asked her how she could do these things. She answered that she enjoyed being a bride, but did not want to be a wife. She enjoyed the build up to the wedding, the pretty gowns, being the center of attention, and so on, but she thought that it was boring and restrictive to be a wife.

Preachers are not often left speechless, but I was nearly left speechless by her words. Still, I did manage to stammer out another question: But what about your marriage vows? What about the account you must give to God someday for your solemn promises?

“Just words,” she said. “Just words. They do not matter to me. I want to have fun in life.”

St. James asks that we do not treat the Word of God in such a cavalier way. He wants us to “walk the talk.” He wants us to not only hear the Word of God, but permit ourselves to be transformed by the hearing.

We human beings have the strange ability to understand language, but to remain distant from what we hear. It is possible to listen to a great preacher like Billy Graham, for example, and enjoy his preaching, to agree with it, to wish that more people had heard it too, and yet to go home and soon forget all about it.

I believe we can find in St. James two reasons for *acting* upon the Word of God. One reason is that God has only love for us and therefore it is wise for us to obey him. The second reason is that God’s law is what the apostle calls the “law of liberty.”

A PRELIMINARY MATTER

But there is a preliminary matter on my heart before we get to these two reasons for being both hearers and doers of God’s Word. This preliminary matter is raised by this morning’s Gospel Lesson. I speak of the fundamental question, “Is it really *God’s* Word we are hearing, or is it the word of the world?”

This question is raised by the “Corban” controversy in our Gospel Lesson (Mark 7:1-13). Jesus is in dispute with some Pharisees and scribes. They have journeyed from the great city Jerusalem to this outlying region of Galilee in order to examine Jesus. The Pharisees and scribes notice that the disciples of Jesus are eating with unwashed hands. They challenge Jesus about the conduct of his disciples:

So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” (Mark 7:5, KJV)

This leads Jesus to challenge the Pharisees and the scribes on the difference between the Word of God and human opinions, including those human opinions so honored that they have risen to the level of case law or tradition.

¹⁰For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ ¹¹But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God)-- ¹²then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, ¹³thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you

do many things like this.” (Mark 7:10-13, NRSV)

Perhaps we can understand some of the logic of Corban. I imagine that Corban could serve as protection for grown children -- as a kind of boundary around the Fourth Commandment meant to protect cruel parents from exploiting their children and then justifying their cruelty by claiming that the children are bound by the Fourth Commandment to obey them. Fair enough. It is just that any such boundary rule is capable of being misused, and I guess it was back in the days of Jesus. Apparently some grown children were neglecting their parents by crying “Corban” over the money they could have used for supporting their elderly parents. “Corban” meant “dedicated to God.” Maybe it obligated them to leave that money in their will (if there is any left) to the temple. One way or the other, it left the parents bereft of help from their children, which was a terrible thing in a day when there was neither Social Security nor welfare.

I bet that along with Jesus, other rabbis and priests also protested about the misuse of Corban. And if they did, the theme would all be the same: We need to cling to the Word of God, not to human opinions.

Martin Luther certainly believed that. It mattered nothing to Luther whether false doctrine was being preached by a priest, a doctor of the church, a cardinal in a red coat, or a pope in a golden cope. The chief treasure of the Church is the most holy gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we must cling to the gospel, not to false teaching about the gospel.

St. Paul believed the same thing. To think of the damnation of his own soul could not have been easy for Paul, which is how important the matter is. He would rather be cursed than teach the faith in a way that is untrue to Christ:

⁸But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.

⁹As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.

(Galatians 1:8-9, KJV)

So, that is an important qualification on being doers of the Word. We should be doers of God’s Word, not doers of human words pretending to be divine teaching.

CONSTANCY OF LOVE

So, let us assume that we are dealing with God’s Word. That Word is speaking to us. We are hearing it. We do not doubt that it is the true Word of God because it comes directly from the Bible and is a settled teaching of the Church. St. James, then, would urge us to put that Word to work in our lives, even though it might be hard.

One of his arguments is that the Word comes from the Heavenly Father who loves us -- aye, who has nothing but love for us. There is variability in you and

me, mixtures of good and bad, moods of love and anger. But St. James says that there is constancy in God, and it is a constancy that expresses itself in generosity toward us and good gifts:

¹⁷Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

The Psalmist understood that this is the nature even of God's commandments: though those commandments constrain us, they express the Lord's love for us and therefore should be cherished:

⁹The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.

¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. (Psalm 19:9-10, KJV)

This makes all the difference in the world. If you know that the commandments of God comes from the hand of the one who loves you, then it is rational to both hear and to do that commandment, even in times of stress, weariness, and temptation.

BLESSED HEARERS

The second consideration in favor of doing the Word of God concerns what St. James calls the "law of liberty." He says that those who do the Word of God are blessed in their doing:

²⁵But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act-- they will be blessed in their doing. (James 1:25, NRSV)

Does that sound like a contradiction to you, this combination of law and liberty? It does to me, sometimes. In political theory, I guess you could say that the goal of law is to maximize the liberty of "the people." But law does that by constraining the liberty of individuals. St. James is talking about something else. He is talking about increasing your own personal liberty by doing the commandments of God, even if your obedience affects no one else, even if no one else even knows about your obedience or disobedience.

This idea, the "law of liberty," puts me in mind of, say, a difficult hike up a mountain. This mountain has been scaled before. The park service people have laid out a trail. They have rated this trail as "difficult." Well, by and large the easiest and safest way up that mountain is to stay on the trail. Departures from the trail do not increase ease, but diminish it. The trail constrains you, but at the same time protects you and constitutes some kind of blessing in your life.

Even more so is the Word of God. Though it constrains us, it simultaneously blesses us. That is, it blesses us if we be not only hearers of the Word, but does thereof.

LODGING IN OUR HEARTS

Altogether, what St. James seeks is that the Word of God should find lodging in our hearts. As it was in the beginning of the Gospel, so it is even today: too often there is “no room in the inn” for the Christ Child to be born and to live (Luke 2:7). Let it not be so with you. Let God’s Word find a home in your heart, so that you are changed, transformed, and sanctified by that Word, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.