



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone

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“How Deep Do Our Decisions Go?” James 1:22-27

Sharon and I returned the week before last from Washington, D.C. where we got to only a portion of what most tourists come to see. It's such an interesting city—diverse, often young—at least, the government workers and staff. People hustling everywhere, backpack on their shoulder or valise in their hands, cell phones to their ears as they walked. And what a variety of things to see, that celebrate victories and high values, and remember struggle, bloodshed and deception in peace and war. It's really quite a display of our national character. Indeed, we are a tossed salad in the United States of America; all kinds of people with all kinds of backgrounds, one nation, indivisible, struggling for liberty and justice for all. In most instances, Washington is a city of museums—which is ironic, that such a political city has so many things to see that seem disconnected from current problems and solutions. I wonder if we should have “current issues museums” alongside the monuments to the heroes and events of the past. A museum on “stewardship of the earth”, for example, could have exhibits and interactive displays on a gazillion things that would feed into current policy discussions and voter awareness, with several points of view represented with each issue.

If you are a reflective sort of person, taking time to examine our nation's past will inevitably trigger a re-examination of what we think is important. Our Bible text today asks that question about our faith, and the question comes from a significant source—Jesus' brother, named James. Open your Bibles with me to James, chapter one. James is one of those short letters almost at the end of our New Testaments. The last little letters are by James, a couple by Peter, and then three by John, before we stumble into “Revelation”. So find James, chapter 1, and listen with me for God's Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. *[text]*

James seems to talk like your Dutch Uncle—a stern, no-nonsense kind of guy. He wants to break religious people out of their illusions about what they think they are accomplishing in their pious practices. “Get real,” he says.

Let's tune in to James, and try to get in touch with what God may be saying to us. I want to start near the end of these verses and work our way back to the deeper underlying challenge James puts before us.

True religion—“faith with integrity”, might be a better way to say it today—is to put your faith to work by caring for those who are helpless. (Widows and orphans were especially vulnerable in those days.) Are YOU, am I, involved in this care, directly? Are we sure our church, too—in Life Groups and through our Deacons and Elders—is putting our faith to work? The Confirmation kids know, and the men in the Friday breakfast know, the three most important verses in the Bible are Genesis 12: 1, 2, 3—we are blessed by God, in order to be God's blessing to others. So James is not saying something new, or “late” in the Bible's story. This has always been God's intent and call and claim upon those he has saved, and Jesus and the

prophets reminded God's people of that, regularly. That's how we 'get real'—put your faith to work for others.

If what James wrote about doing good to people who need help speaks to our deeds, then what he says about the tongue puts the spotlight on what we say. The tongue can be a problem to many of us; sometimes we have nothing to say, and say it anyway. Some people—and this can be a problem with any of us as we get older—can't censor themselves from saying things that wound others. What comes out is unedited, raw, and not well thought-through. And boy, sometimes that can do real damage. Without taming, the tongue can become grace-less, critical, ornery—more and more selfish and destructive to human relationships, in families, or in a church family. James' brother, Jesus, was onto this, too. For Jesus, the very thought of lust that was as bad as committing adultery; the very feeling of anger and hatred was as bad as committing murder. For some people, there is no thought involved at all; they simply vomit out these hurtful thoughts in words. All of it can be damaging, so when we encounter a critical nag, we know we are face-to-face with someone whose religion is not real.

Now to the first part of our text. I am SO acquainted with the first point James makes here. I AM that guy who looks in the mirror, doesn't really pay attention, and then sails our the door without doing anything about the cowlick in the back of my hair, or the button-down collar that hasn't been buttoned-down.

In fact, when I was a kid, I knew I had a short attention span. (Isn't it interesting that when we get old, we can lose a lot of our short-term memory? To me, that's about the same thing as my short attention span as a child.) Even as a kid back in Detroit, I would think of something I needed from my bedroom upstairs. But in the short time it took for me to bound up the stairs, . . . I had forgotten why I had made the effort. (I don't know what that may portend for my older years. . . .)

Lots of Christians forget God's Word so quickly that it's hard to imagine they were paying any attention at all to what God has been telling us. It reminds me of two psychiatrists who met at their 20th college reunion. One looked as though he had just graduated. The other appeared weary, worn, and much older than his colleague. The aged one asked, "What's your secret? Listening to other people's problems every day for all of these years has made an old man out of me." The spry looking doctor replied, "Who listens?" A lot of Christians are like that.

When we read the Bible, do we hear God's voice? Part of the problem may be that we are reading words from a book. That very act removes the words from the mouth of any human or divine agent, and sets them at a distance. I think just the "reading" of "words" is a problem.

And because it's in a book, again it seems removed from "my life now". I learned long ago that if you want to get some help for a project, you have to ask individuals. It's foolish to think that if you make a general announcement on a Sunday morning, that people will sign up, flood in, call to volunteer. And why? Because we just don't hear a general announcement as somehow pointing to us. Don't you agree? I think it's just human nature. There's a disconnect because we don't see ourselves in this book (Bible).

For about as long as 500 years, since Guttenberg invented his printing press with movable type, the Bible has been the most-published and most-purchased book in the world.

Think about how many Bibles you own, or share with the family. How many of you have a Bible? How many of you have two? Five? Ten? Twenty?

Having any number of Bibles doesn't mean we ever pick up the Bible and read it. (I won't ask you how many of us don't pick up a Bible in a typical week.)

And even if we read it, that doesn't mean we think it's talking about us.

Do we hear God speaking to us when we read the Bible?

Luke Timothy Johnson puts the challenge of James this way:

As wisdom literature, James challenges readers more directly than do narratives about Jesus or discussions by Paul. Readers are presented with commands that are supported by warrants. Their response cannot stop with an analysis of what the command might have meant back then. They must ask, "Do we really think this warrant to be true? Is this how we view reality?" And then, more than that, readers must go beyond the testing of the text against theory, to the testing of their lives against the text: "Will we now see and think and speak and act in this way?"

Readers who so respond to Jas 1:22-27 should experience some real difficulty, for James is so uncompromising in forcing a choice where most people would prefer a compromise. James's earlier call to consider all the various trials into which people fall as a matter "entirely of joy" flies in the face of a hedonistic culture that equates suffering with evil and seeks every means possible either to avoid trials or to anesthetize the self against them. It also challenges a longing for a faith that is secure from trial and test, by insisting that faith only matures by what it endures.

The contrasting evaluations of suffering derive from fundamentally opposing perceptions of reality, and it is here, above all, that James challenges present-day readers. For those living under the influence of modernity, the intellectual atmosphere shaped by the Enlightenment, "the world" is what is most real and obvious. It is a closed system of cause and effect and of limited resources. Humans are defined by their place in this system, and the system is defined by the capacity of human reason to measure it. What seems least real or obvious is "God," a name that has increasingly been reduced to a concept, and one that people must struggle to take seriously.

For James, the opposite is the case. "God" appears as the subject in these verses some eight times--not as a remote or remnant concept, but as the One who is most real and defines reality. . . .

The real challenge of chapter 1 to the readers of James is whether this view of reality is really one they "know" (1:3, 19) and seek to live by (1:22-25), or whether they are "self-deceived" (1:22, 26) by trying to live with a divided consciousness (1:8). Do they really believe that those who endure in faith until death will receive a crown that is life (as James wrote in 1:12)? If so, then they can, with simple hearts, dispose of themselves joyfully in generous giving. But if they do not, then it makes sense for them to be self-protective, to husband their

resources. Do they really think that God's implanted word is able to save their lives (as James wrote in 1:21)? If they do, then they will turn in every circumstance to pray for the wisdom so to live by that word (1:5). But if they do not, then they should abandon humility and meekness in favor of a "human anger" by which they can gain security for themselves. It is almost as though, before developing the implications of these convictions, James insists that readers pause and ask: Do we really believe this? Is this the understanding of reality to which we are committed? (*New Interpreter's Bible* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003 ff], vol. 12, pp 189-190)

This is a major confrontation of world views. Most of us were raised in the culture of "modernity", and because it's our culture, we have incorporated it into our lives without examination, uncritically. James comes against that. He sees that as "being polluted by the world", like a child drinking bad water in some Third World country, but that's all he knows, and though he's always sick, he doesn't worry about it because everyone around him is sick, too.

It boils down to this: Do we choose to cling to our assumptions about life over what God says, or do we know God enough to trust God enough to step over into God's world, God's reality? Will our defensive coolness and detachment triumph (which makes us functional atheists)? What is your answer? Are you sure that's "your final answer"?

How deep do our decisions go? Who is in charge—God, or us? To me, this is the issue that determines whether we look into the Bible and go on with OUR lives (like the man looking into the mirror and they going about his day), or whether we are arrested by the God we meet in Scripture, and take HIM, cling to HIM, love HIM. How deep do we live—just skimming the surface, content in our own happy solo dance? Or do we long for a Partner in life, a Partner who insists on leading in the dance of life, and who will lead us to take steps and spins and maneuvers we would never have thought to try?

Erik Erikson, the human development psychologist, taught us that the earliest most basic issue in life is "trust vs. mistrust". He was thinking about an infant's relationship with her parents, but the same conflict gets raised in our relationship with God. Do we really TRUST this God? Or, are we AFRAID that by giving the lead to God, we will disappear, or we will be damaged, or OUR dreams will be denied?

How deep do our decisions go? Do they go deep enough, back into the dark of our "inner child", to coax a new trust for God out of what may have been early pain of neglect, abuse, or frustration? You see, when we do not trust God, we are not free. We are chained to ourselves and our own thoughts, feelings and desires. We become self-centered, concerned about our security, we live in worry over the future because in the past we were chained up. This is what I think James is talking about when he speaks of the "law of liberty". God's Word, when heard by someone who trusts God, is a call to freedom from the tyranny of self, which is based on fear.

Today's Word from God is not an easy one. Take a moment of silence now to speak with God, if you have the courage. Ask God to show you where you have excluded His lead from your life--and then to show you why you might have had good reason to do that, based on experience you had with family or people who claimed to be Christians. Then take His hand and

let him lead you back into that deep place, WITH HIM, to claim that fearful experience for Him, with Him. . . . that He may heal that memory, and more of you is free, indeed. . . .

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California

on May 17, 2009, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]