

14th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
August 29, 2021

Text: James 1:17-27

Theme: Pure Religion

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Over the last five weeks we read from John 6. Starting today we have five consecutive Sundays when we will read from the *Letter of James*. It is well known that Martin Luther initially called it an epistle of straw because of its emphasis on works rather than on (faith in God) for salvation. Later his remarks were removed from all editions of his German Bible. Works are understood to be an outgrowth of faith and are not to be separated from each other.

After reading from John 6 that included words from Jesus that even the disciples could not understand (he talked about eating his flesh and drinking his blood) finally we have a lesson from Scripture that is clear and concise. James reads like a collection of teachings that are prophetic and provocative and contains very practical advice. It was written for a faith community that hoped to distinguish itself from the rest of the world. With its fifty-nine imperatives James offers quick lessons that describe a way to live together even though many of the instructions seem aimed at individuals.

From many a pulpit today sermons will highlight the need for people of faith to listen before they speak and also to be slow to anger. To the delight of all those who want some kind of to-do list to express their faith outwardly pastors will accommodate them and preach on being doers of the Word (and not just hearers of the Word). We call that faith in action. And there is one more sentence that will inspire preachers today. It is in verse 26 that offers a caution for people to control their tongues.

But what caught my attention was James 1:27 – Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

We are to listen, hold our tongue, and temper our anger so that we can do what God wants us to do rather than walk in the ways of the world. With that single verse in mind we now go back to the start of James 1 to see how we are to approach that to-do list.

Right after he introduces himself in verse 1, James does not waste any time inviting his listeners to think about their struggles. If we view this invitation from the perspective of the last verse (to care for those in distress) then we have a lengthy list in front of us. It is not only our struggles but the struggles of our brothers and sisters all over the world.

For the past two weeks we have walked from a safe distance with the American people (and our allies) in Afghanistan who are desperately trying to leave the country. I bring it up again because once back in the United States our social ministry organizations will need our help. We are already making those connections.

Our concerns for the people in Afghanistan may have shifted our focus away from the people in Haiti where the situation remains grave. And then there was the hurricane that barreled its way up the East coast and the flooding that surprised Tennessee. On top of all that our loved ones are still getting the coronavirus and some are dying. We are back to being unsure of what protocols to follow to keep ourselves and our children safe. It is a lengthy list.

James invites us to face our struggles and the struggles of this world and let our faith produce the endurance we need to act. We cannot solve all the problems of the world but we can use our collective wisdom and resources where they will do the most good and pray that others will respond as well. Under pressure our faith is forced into the open and becomes a strong witness to others. We know that our faith thrives better as a verb than a noun.

James then reminds us that if we are lacking in anything (including the wisdom to know what to do) then we are to ask God (in faith) who gives generously to everyone. We are never to doubt that the hand of God is working alongside us. Doubts make us unsure and unstable. Faith will lift us up as well as lift up the lowly. James reminds us that the lowly can be as far away as Afghanistan and Haiti or they can live right next door to us.

Last month I had a small window of opportunity to make some home visits before I made the decision that I needed to pause for now. I treasured every minute because I could in-person read Scripture, say some prayers, and offer Holy Communion.

Doing those home visits is just as important as being asked to network to help people living halfway around the world to find safety. It is just as important as helping people discover their passions and strengths so they can participate fully in the kingdom of God.

When we can acknowledge that our sufferings do not lead to a dead-end then we are better able to proclaim how blessed we are that we can endure such trials and temptations. James goes on to say that we may not get what we want but that is not a sign that God is somehow testing us. God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. We can trust God. God brought us into this world to be his light and God brought his Son into this world to save us. Does that sound like a God who puts obstacles in our paths? Our temptations come from our own desires or from our own doubts. James pleads with us not to be thrown off course. With joy God gave us birth and God gave us the Word of truth. It is all the assurance we need.

We are now at the point where our lesson picks up for today. It would be wise to make these next words into a poster and put it where we can see them every day. Listen first! Then speak (and make sure to speak softly and with all gentleness)! And let our anger trail far behind.

Be quick to listen: One who does not listen is one who lets the Word of God go in one ear and out the other. Good listeners will act on what they hear. We are blessed in our doing. Faith is made visible in the choices we make every day (both big and small).

Be slow to speak: James goes on to say that we must be careful what we say for our mouths expose our true selves. From our own lips we will be judged by others and (if we claim to represent Christ) then the validity of the message we proclaim is at stake.

Be slow to anger: The righteousness of God will not grow when we are steeped in anger. James suggests that we throw all such cancerous thoughts in the garbage.

Instead we are to welcome with all humility the implanted Word of God that has the power to make us into his garden of love.

Now we come to the end of the first chapter of James and my favorite verse for today – Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Like any mission we cannot do the hard work of true religion alone. We must rely on (and have faith in) one another. James is clear from the beginning that this way of living is in contrast to our cultural values. Our culture says it is all about me. Our life in Christ says it is all about them.

Next week we will read from James 2.

Feel free to read ahead and dwell in the Word of God. Amen