

James 1:21-2:13

We are currently teaching through James in the youth group and it has been a rare blessing to be able to stew for so long in a book. I don't get the chance to teach from two different parts of a book at the same time very often and it has opened up James, for me, in an unexpected way.

Because I've been able to spend so much time in this letter, I've begun to notice the loops that exist throughout James' letter.

He talks about rich and poor, powerful and powerless early in chapter 1, at the end of chapter 1, in chapter 2, and then again in chapter 5.

He mentions the double minded in chapter one only to expand on it in chapter 4. He compares our lives to quickly fading grass and vapors in chapter 1 and again in chapter 5. In chapter 1 he says, "be slow to speak," then later, he tells us to bridle our tongue, only to return to how we speak in chapter 3 where he gives it a full treatment.

Throughout the letter, in the midst of all these loops, James keeps returning to our actions in conjunction to our faith. You claim to be a follower of Jesus? How is it affecting your life?

This week we will see him say, if you are a hearer but not a doer of the word, you're deceiving yourself. A little later he says if your religion doesn't change how you speak you're deceived. Next week we'll see him say that your works give evidence of your true faith. He'll later point out that our faith in the wisdom that is from above should remove envy and self-seeking.

Then, in chapter 4, he'll lay out the dual nature battle every person faces as they chose whether or not to follow God or pursue worldly goals.

Because James keeps returning to various aspects of our faith and connecting it to different specific behaviors, like how to speak, how to treat people, and how to face trials, it can be a difficult book to study.

It is helpful to remember two things. First, the main theme to which James continuously returns is heavenly vs. earthly. This can be phrased, as it is in chapter 3, very explicitly when he compares wisdom that is from earthly sources and wisdom that is from above. It can also be implicit in his writing as it is in 1:8 where he uses the word "double-minded," explained later as a person who is struggling, his allegiances torn between heavenly and earthly.

We'll see today this repeating theme in how one way to act is earthly, filthy, selfish, and the other is heavenly, pure, and undefiled.

The second thing that is helpful to remember is that the sin James is using to explain his point isn't necessarily the only sin that applies to that point. How we treat people, how we talk, our temper, our boasting in the future, and the other fleshly impulses James covers in his letter could, to some degree, be re-arranged without changing the overall message of the book. And I believe that is why he continuously loops back on previous ideas, sometimes expanding on them, sometimes just mentioning them.

But because the overall theme of the letter is heavenly vs. earthly, the opening verses of today's passage contain, perhaps, the central argument of the entire letter.

Therefore, verse 21, lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

There are 2 images here that are expressed in several places in scripture. They amount to a phrase we're all familiar with, "put off, and put on." But, the language James uses here is specific and pointed.

The filthiness that we are to lay aside comes from the Greek word *Rhuparia*, and it only appears in James though other forms of the word appear in 2 Peter and Revelation.

Rhuparia isn't just any filth. It's not garbage. *Rhuparia* conveys the idea of medical filth, uncleanness, but the uncleanness that comes from infection. It's also used as the excretions that come from infection. We still use a form of this word today. In Latin it morphed into *Raucum* which was used with the word voice to indicate a hoarse voice. Which got converted to *Roup* somewhere in northern Europe. Today you hear a form of this word whenever someone has a persistent hoarse cough. We call it croup.

James is telling us to lay aside that, the uncleanness that comes from contamination with a corrupt world and all the wickedness that oozes out of us because of it.

After laying that aside, he tells us to receive, with meekness, that means, I have strength to resist, but I submit that strength entirely. Receive with meekness the Word implanted or engrafted, as some versions put it. Grafting is a common and ancient practice.

Paul uses it as an analogy to explain how gentiles were brought into a relationship with Jesus.

If you look up why plants are grafted into other plants, you may be surprised to find out, that it isn't to make hybrids. Cross pollination does that.

No, the most common reason to graft a branch into a root is to protect the branch. Or as a 2008 publication in the American Society for Horticultural Science put it, “The primary purpose of grafting vegetables worldwide has been to provide resistance to soilborne diseases.”

Wineries in America rely on this all the time, as many of the grapes brought over from Europe could not thrive in American soil. But if they plant hearty American vines, let the root system form, then graft the European species in, it receives the nutrients and is, in essence, inoculated from the pests and diseases that would otherwise kill it!

Do you see the picture James is painting here?

Therefore, lay aside the stuff that oozes out of you because of the corruption of the world, and receive, humbly, the Word, that will protect you, feed you, and strengthen you. This concept is the key to understanding so much of James.

God’s Word, meaning Jesus, the Logos. Because Jesus lived His life according to God’s word, perfectly, and Jesus was the manifestation of God’s word, physically, on earth. God’s word also means the gospel. The good news that Jesus gave up his life, after living a perfect life so that we could be presented Justified before God. He who knew no sin became sin that we could be the righteousness of God. And the Word also means the teachings of Jesus and the writings of the apostles.

That word, implanted in you, is able to save your souls. And it’s able to protect you from the corrupting influences of sin

But as we’ll see several more times in James, if the word is implanted in you, it should change how you act. Look at the next passage. Verses 22-25

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.

If the Word is truly ingrafted or implanted in you. If you’ve truly received it with meekness, then there will be, necessarily, a change in your behavior. If you’re not doing, you are deceiving yourselves. James will expand on this later on in chapter 2, when he says “show me your faith without works and I’ll show you my faith by my works.”

But look at how this “doing” comes about. James uses two different focuses, one, a person is looking at himself in a mirror, and the other, a person focusing on the law of liberty.

You may be getting the wrong idea here, when you hear James talk about mirrors. We have mirrors everywhere, and our mirrors reflect an almost perfect representation of what stands in front of them. In fact, really good mirrors’ reflections are indistinguishable from reality.

This was not the case when James was written. The first glass mirror, that we know of, was made in Asia around 100-300 AD and the technology was carried back west. Ancient Roman and Egyptian mirrors, both of which we have discovered, were smaller than probably any mirror you have, unless you still use that little round powder case. They were made of polished metal and were expensive.

There were still natural mirrors such as water or a polished rock. But not only did they generally give a disfigured and darkened view of the beholder, you also wouldn’t look at them as often. I think the best example for most of us to understand is your voice.

If you hear a recording of your voice for the first time, what is your reaction. “I don’t sound like that!” And it can take quite a few times, hearing your own voice before you become comfortable understanding, that, yes, that is actually what you sound like.

That would have been what it was like for people during James’ day when it came to their reflection.

So, with that in mind, let’s take it back to the text. If anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer he is like a man observing his natural face . . . when he goes away he immediately forgets. Not only that, he is deceiving himself. That’s a dangerous phrase. There is a big difference between “being deceived” and deceiving yourself. When you deceive yourself, you build up defenses, callouses that protect you from having to constantly defend the previous deceit.

The person who hears the word and doesn’t allow it to change their behavior has to make an excuse, has to rationalize their behavior. Each time, they are forgetting a little bit of what they are truly like and deceiving themselves. And each time it becomes harder and harder for them to see the truth.

Let that sink in. Every time you hear the word there is a chance that your conscience will be pricked, you will be exhorted to make a change in your life, and every time you say no, you build up a small bulwark, a small defense against that truth. Every time scripture

is read or spoken there are listeners who are digging deeper fox-holes and higher walls just because of the truth they are hearing!

So listen, if you're convicted from scripture, don't just hear. Do something about it! If you don't know what to do, tell someone and ask for prayer. It's a great thing to hear a brother or sister say, I've got this problem and I have no idea what to do, but I want to please God! Will you pray for me?

If you know what to do, don't hesitate. Leave your offering at the alter and go. God prefers a broken and contrite heart to our offerings.

And beware, not, doing something, doesn't mean you're doing nothing! You are doing something, just. . . the wrong thing, and you're building up deceptive walls that will fool you, make you forgetful, and give you a false image of yourself.

But if you're a doer; if you hear the word and apply it to your life. You're not so busy gazing at yourself. Look at the text:

He who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does

Notice the difference? Rather than giving the occasional long, searching look at your own reflection, you're looking into God's Word. Rather than looking at yourself, your gazing at God Himself. This is the Word that is to be implanted in you. This is the word that is able to save your souls. This is the word that is able to inoculate you from the earthly infections. It points you towards the deeds of the spirit which battles against the deeds of the flesh.

Then you'll be blessed. It reminds me of Joshua 1:8

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.

Has God's word changed? Or is God the same yesterday, today and tomorrow!

Keep in mind, what James is doing throughout his entire letter. He's not saying that you need to implant the word in you and then you need to be doers of the Word.

James is saying that if you have the word implanted in you, you will be doers of the word. . . if you're not you're deceiving yourselves. James is going to continue giving

example after example of how you should be acting if you actually are who you claim to be, a believer with faith in your Lord and savior, Jesus Christ.

Look at his very next comparison:

If anyone among you thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless.

Last week, Vic said something about religion, and I thought, "oh, man, I'm going to disagree with Vic from the pulpit!" No, not really, we don't disagree, but he said, "religion is simply man-made systems whereby I can do good deeds that make me feel good about me" and I was like, I'm going to have to talk about. . . James talking about, pure religion! I can do this.

Religion is about a man-made system. Hopefully, that system is based on Biblical truth. . . in which case it should cause you to act more in accordance with that Biblical truth. There are lots of religions out there that tell you to do good for false reasons.

James is talking about a religious system derived from reading the Bible and discovering that you should act a certain way, like, tithing, being a good father or husband. James is about to hit on five areas of life and say, "if you're belief hasn't changed your actions in such and such a way you are lying to yourself. You have immediately forgotten what you look like. You are deceiving your own heart, and your religion is worthless!"

Verse 26 If anyone among you thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless.

Again, James will reinforce this argument next week when he talks about faith and works, but follow what he is saying here.

If you are cleaned up from the filth of the cursed and broken world. If you are avoiding contamination. And if you have the word implanted in you, the spirit and the truth, teaching you and protecting you from the sinful corruption of the world.

If you are saved, a son of God and one who Jesus would call brother, sealed for the day of redemption. . . and that doesn't change how you speak? You are deceiving your own heart.

Oh, you're doing all these things, good things, religious things, but you can't put a bit in your mouth and direct what you say, but are always bounding off in every direction. Those good things are an indication of something, but not the word, implanted.

Then he gives an examples of pure religion

Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

I totally get it if you are reading along and thinking, “What in the world does bridling your tongue have to do with taking care of the helpless in society?”

What does what I say have to do with how I treat orphans and widows?

Well, our words are almost exclusively used for communicating with other people. I say almost because we talk to pets, we talk to God and sometimes we talk to ourselves, the sky, or occasionally we talk to that imaginary sit-com camera we suspect is off-stage somewhere.

But mostly we talk to other people. We can tear down, build up, demand, plead, or yell. So how we talk is really how we are treating people.

Also, giving up my time and resources to orphans and widows is a kindness. I’m helping them when they need it, and they, at least in this place and time in history, would get very little help apart from a kind soul.

But that leaves the addition of “keeping oneself unspotted from the world.” I mean, we kind of have that as a repetition from putting away all filthiness because the connotation from the previous verse was contamination from the world, so unspotted from the world is very similar, but lets look at the next section to see if we can follow James’ logic here.

Chapter 2:1-7 (Read it)

My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality. 2 For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, 3 and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, “You sit here in a good place,” and say to the poor man, “You stand there,” or, “Sit here at my footstool,” 4 have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

5 Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? 7 Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called?

It seems as though James is building cases in which it would be totally natural to behave in one way, but a follower of Jesus, if he has been cleansed by the Word and calls himself a believer, should behave another way.

The unnatural tendency from the perspective of the world, should be the growing natural tendency of the believer.

It's natural to say whatever is on your mind in the exact emotion you are feeling it. It's unnatural to restrain your speech, speak with kindness when you're raging inside, or encourage a person with whom you compete.

It's natural to ignore the poor, after all, what can they do for you. And aren't they poor for a reason? Orphans and widows can do very little for me and whatever I do for them will be "wasted."

The rich can do so much for me, so why wouldn't I pay more attention to them? I can learn more from them, gain more opportunities, and meet more influential people.

I actually think we have more trouble understanding this passage, much like we have more trouble understanding the "mirror" analogy, because we live in a very different culture than the one described here in James.

In the ancient Mediterranean areas. . . to my knowledge every early church that received this letter, would have existed in the midst of slavery, rigid class structures (meaning, you're parents were slaves, you have almost no chance of being rich. . . maybe a merchant), early aristocracies, and even a belief in divine rulers.

Throughout the history of our world, these attitudes were the norm. It's still the norm in much of the world.

But there are moments, captured in history, portrayed in scripture where we get to see this "religion" of equality in Jesus play out in the real world. In the letter of Philemon, Paul writes a slave owner that he is sending back his slave, who has accepted Christ as savior, and see how he closes the letter.

Philemon 1:15-16 For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave – a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

You see, it is natural to hold class structure rigidly, if you're at the top. It's natural to reach towards the top if you're somewhere below, and that creates a pyramid of everyone looking up; everyone looking to someone higher than them for a boost, an elevating help.

It is very much an, “every man for himself” system which causes people to be wary of those just below them, at competition with those equal to them and subservient to those above them.

That’s the world, corrupted by sin. That’s how we act when we are showing the fruit of selfish ambition. James will really go into that in chapter 4 where he literally calls it the reason for all fighting, murder, and wars.

What should change us from this behavior? Look at the next passage.

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

What stops the corruption from oozing out of us? The perfect law of God, and here the royal law, probably called so because Jesus Himself said that it was the summary of the entire law, Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.”

And now we get to the reason the law is able to transform us like it can.

if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10 For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. 11 For He who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12 So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty. 13 For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

How you treat people, how you talk to people, why you would give up your time and resources for someone who can’t help you, and why you stand in the pyramid and, instead of looking and reaching up, you begin to look around and help those who you could call, “neighbor,” in essence, why The Word is so powerful in changing our actions towards others is captured in this short passage.

Which of us show *no partiality*? Yet, if I stumble at just one point in the law, I’m guilty of all of it? What hope do I have. James even goes on to list two particular sins, adultery, and murder. If you’ve done either of those you’re a transgressor. And those two are interesting choices, because Jesus had something to say about those two sins during his sermon on the mount.

In Matthew 5:21-22 Jesus said

21 “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and

whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment.

And in 27-28 He said

**27 “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’
28 But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.**

Over the years I’ve heard too many Christians elevate one of those and ignore the others, missing the whole point of what Jesus was saying.

Jesus’ intention on the sermon on the mount wasn’t to elevate how easy it was to commit a sin like murder, or to elevate how easy it was to commit a sin like adultery. The point Jesus was making was our utter and complete inability to keep the law! We are hopeless before the law.

What did Isaiah say? All our good deeds are like filthy rags?

What did Paul say in Romans 3:23, for all have sinned, we’ve all fallen short of the glory of God

When James brings in the same two sins Jesus elevated, he is reminding his hearers that they are all guilty of the law! And if guilty of a part of the law, they are guilty of all of it.

That’s why he says, in verse 12, “So speak and so act as those who will be judged by the law of liberty”

Because it’s true, what Isaiah says, We like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way;” But Isaiah also says, “and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

What was our debt? Beyond measurement

What was the payment, The death of a God. Not just any god, But The Word, God’s son. When we are saved we are ransomed, cleansed, and moved into a completely new category of existence. Heirs

Heirs of God’s kingdom and joint heirs with Jesus Christ. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, they referred to God as the “God of my fathers” we get to refer to God as God, my father, abba father.

Now see it from James’ perspective, because he speaks pretty forcefully in this letter.

What he's saying is, You were freed from an impossible debt, you were elevated from fallen human to God's family, heirs in the royal Creator of the universe's family, and you're still treating each other differently because of a little money? Or clout?

If so, how can you say you've been changed?

If you can't bridle your tongue, if you can't give up your time, money, and talents to those who can't pay you back, if you are still grappling for human wealth, power, influence, or connections, are you not, still the same corrupted, filthy stream that is polluted by the world?

So put away that filthiness, receive the word grafted, then make sure you're being . . . a . . . doer of the word.

How do we apply this in our own lives?

I can understand how to work on what I say.

But we have very little interaction with widows and orphans. All the widows I know are actually doing pretty well, we have savings, insurance, foster care, adoptions. . . America has some pretty robust tools in constant operation for the care and protection of our weak and unprotected. It's a blessing, and traceable, through history, to the influences of Biblical application of passages just like this over the centuries. But it does make it a little more difficult for us to apply.

And what about how we treat rich and poor? I would say there is a little bit of the still lingering natural tendency in each of us to be star-struck if a person is famous or powerful, and to be a little more acquiescent if the person is extremely or obviously wealthy, but not like during the days of James. You must understand, for them it was a difference of class and rights.

Like I said we may have a natural tendency to be a little different, but again, largely because of the very influences passages like this have had on the formation of our culture, many of us would cognitively react against those natural impulses. In fact, I have seen and believe I will continue to see people in this church go out of their way to be *in-discriminant* when it comes to wealth and clout.

So, are we off the hook? Steady as she goes?

Not quite,

When you extract the essence of what James is saying, it's not necessary that it has to be all about wealth or power.

It has more to do with your personal gain and comfort.

Remember that image of the pyramid where everyone is stepping over everyone else, looking up? There are lots of pyramids. There are lots of areas where I think I can benefit, socially, economically, relationally.

Remember, in February, when we talked about the definition of love. What does it mean to love one another? It means to esteem them higher than you. Can you imagine what that pyramid would look like if everyone, instead of grappling up, were helping their neighbor? (Picture 4)

You may not know a widow. You may not favor the wealthy, but ask yourself. Who do you favor? Who could benefit from your gifts and abilities, but can't really give anything back? Who would you be "wasting" your time and talents on if you helped them?

Who do you gravitate towards and favor, because you admire them or can benefit from them?

How can you, Like Jesus, Leave the place that, you may have a right to be, submit yourself to the lowest station in life, and put your brothers and sisters ahead of you?

Where are you a hearer, and where can you be a doer?