

The Ancient Siri

James 1:17-27

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17 Every 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. 18 In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

19 You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. 21 Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

22 But be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. 23 For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; 24 for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. 25 But 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.

26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 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.

With our point of emphases, this year being our stories of faith and our journey of faith you would imagine I would start off with a series about biblical roads or stories of the Bible.

Throughout the year we will preach intentionally the stories told about Jesus and stories Jesus told, as well as often referencing Biblical roads, but as we begin this journey, we surrender our Sunday morning scripture selection for a while to the guidance of the Common Christian Lectionary, allowing the lectionary to pick our

texts and guide our journey. The lectionary forces the preacher to face scripture he or she often sidesteps. This year the lectionary takes us in September through the book of James.

James is not a storyteller. James is a summarizer “rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness.” You see what he did there. There’s a story, a story of some of the recipients of the letter and how they behaved “sordidly?” Maybe it was an orgy, perhaps it was stealing someone’s property, but it was wicked, but instead of naming them, he summarizes what needs to be changed.

James is not a storyteller. James is a list maker.

First be quick to listen.

Second be slow to speak.

Third be slow to anger.

Probably a story here. One member’s son was dating another member’s daughter, and he brought her in real late, after curfew and the daughter’s father didn’t believe the explanation, so he flew off the handle and said some “sordid” things about the boy. It turns out the boy had stopped to fix his sister’s flat tire, and that’s what caused him to be late. So James says---in the future –listen, don’t be quick to speak and be even slower to get angry.

Of course, I would tell the story, but not James.

However, consider this, every journey has some directions, and if you follow the instructions, you arrive somewhere worthwhile. Journeys may involve stories, but they begin with Siri saying in 800 feet take a left on Pelham Road, and if you follow the directions it will work out. Consider James like the ancient Siri; he’s telling us how this journey of faith can best be navigated.

While there is a lot in these ten verses, I’m going to point out the essential lefts and rights.

FIRST

You know that gift you have, yea that one, it’s from God. Maybe it’s some talent but it could be wonderful parents or being born in the twentieth century. It could be a child or a business you opened at the perfect time, but understand this it came from God, you received it, but God provided it. First, let’s get this straight, and the journey will be much easier, this God is a generous and gracious God, not mean and punitive.

SECOND

I can't think of anything positive when it comes to anger. Anger does not look good on any of us. It does not make us healthy. If you feel anger produces God's righteousness you are sadly mistaken. So don't go around saying "God hates this or that" or worse walk around with signs saying "God hates this or that." The more we use our mouth, the more likely we are to become angry, so listen first and often. Sit there quietly, use those ears, pray if you can, but don't hate or despise what you do not understand.

Anger will not solve the problem. Anger will not balance the books. Anger will not fix your marriage. Anger will not heal a relationship. Instead of rage try meekness. You could be wrong, say "I'm sorry." Say, "I forgive you." Say, "Please forgive me." You'd be surprised how much these little words can do, spoken from the heart.

THIRD

Following Jesus is about practice or doing. Some will say it's not, but it is. Now, this doesn't get you to heaven; God's taken care of that. The doing makes the world God wants.

Do you know what a thought and a prayer are? Well, it's nothing, if it is not followed by doing. James says we deceive ourselves when we stop before doing. If we hear, that can't be the end. If we pray, that can't be the end.

People love Bible study. If we said come Tuesday we are going to study the Bible; we have a crowd. People love learning, but if we said come Tuesday we are going across the street, and we are going to read to the children (and let the children read to us) who are below grade level. We'd have half as many.

There is no reward for hearing. One of Jesus primary complaints was religion in his day offered plenty of explanations, reading, and hearing but that was not the point of faith in God. The point was to do, to act, to create the world God wants, not to hear the good news, but to live the good news.

FOURTH

Religion is not about knowing, believing, wearing this, not wearing that, it's not about ritual or tradition, it's not about eating certain foods or belonging to specific groups. Religion is not about being right or saying the right things. True religion, undefiled before God, in James style, is a list.

It's taking care of orphans. The orphan is the one without. Without parents, without guidance, without someone to watch over them. Good religion doesn't

argue over why she or he is alone or in need. Good religion stands up for those who have no one in their corner.

Second, it's about paying attention to the widow. The widow was the unattached woman. Not a wife, not a daughter, the widow would be the most vulnerable in their culture. Religion pays attention to the vulnerable, those that are pushed to the margins. Religion is about DOING for the vulnerable and the ones without.

And lastly, James writes Religion at its best is to keep ourselves undefiled by this world. This world breeds fear, abuse, hate, bitterness, impulsive behavior, and unvetted action and beliefs. To be undefiled by the virus of sin is to practice self-control, to respond in love, to reject fear, and walk humbly with God.

God calls us to undefiled religion, religion that "looks after the orphans and widows in their distress" and avoids being "polluted by the world." James 1 is critical of religion that hears without doing, sees without helping, and is as polluted as the world it is suppose to transform.

These days, there is less emphasis on helping those in need and more emphasis on scapegoating the vulnerable and the ones without. Attacks on the vulnerable have become commonplace. When people of faith are silent, and allow the vulnerable to be blamed this is not true religion before our God.

James offers a no-nonsense approach to our journey. Developing a meaningful relationship with God is as simple as listening to Siri but as difficult as following instructions. Organized religion and this world team up to make this relationship look complicated. They labor to confuse us, distract us, make us think it is about the correct words or opposing the correct issues.

Don't be distracted. Listen to the instructions.

God is generous and giving.

Use your ears not your mouth.

Don't worry about interpreting the faith instead practice the faith.

Take care of and work for the care of those most vulnerable.

It's not complicated, but it is challenging.

