

THE REAL THING

SERIES: LOOKING AT LIFE THROUGH THE EYES OF FAITH

By Danny Hall

When a football team gets ready for a game, they prepare a game plan. They look at their own personnel, abilities, and style of play, and they try to dissect the opposing team's weaknesses and vulnerabilities to come up with a plan of action.

I suggest that you and I also need a plan of action, a way to approach life that lets us live out what we've been talking about in the last three messages (Discovery Papers 4677-4679), which is looking at the life we've been given through the eyes of faith.

We've been studying chapter 1 of the book of James, which I like to think of as a book about faith, about what it means to be someone who trusts God in life. In the first message we looked at how God wants to use everyday difficulties to mold us into the kind of people he wants us to be. In the second message we looked at how a person of faith deals with materialism and possessions. And in the third message we dealt with what a person of faith does about temptation.

Today we're finishing out James 1 by developing a game plan for living in a godly way that honors our Lord. Such a plan can be both simple and complex. I don't want to reduce all the hard things we have to wrestle with to simplistic notions. But James does give us a pattern to follow that helps us build a life of faith and live as people who honor God day by day.

Let's read James 1:19-27:

My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

James' game plan for life includes two very simple things. In order for us to live this life of faith, our plan of action should include (1) having a humble submission to the word of God, and (2) living out that life of the word by serving those in need.

Let's go back and look at how James explains these things.

Receiving God's word

If we're going to live with the word of God as our foundation, then we have to prepare ourselves to receive that word. He starts out, "My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires." Does it strike you as odd to start a discussion of how we are to prepare ourselves to receive the word of God by addressing the issue of anger? But there is an important reason James draws our attention to the poison that anger can bring to our relationship with God and our ability to hear the word of God. It has to do with what the roots of anger are for most people.

Why do we become angry? Anger is an emotional, volitional response to frustration that our own personal agenda is not being met in the way things are working. We have expectations and perceived needs that we project onto the world in which we live: our spouse, our children, our colleagues, the person driving in front of us in traffic, the bank teller whose window is not open when the line is too long, and all the other people with whom we interact day by day. When our needs and expectations aren't met, we get frustrated, and anger wells up. For some of us that anger is very deep-seated because we are needy people, perhaps because people who ought to love us are abusive. Sometimes our demands go beyond any rational estimation of people's ability to meet them, but we don't sense that, so our frustration and anger grow.

So what does James say to us? If you ever are going to be disposed to receive the word of God, you've got to confront the issue of anger. Now, Jesus got angry, but notice that he was never angry when someone stood in the way of his own personal agenda or needs, when he himself was mistreated or abused. Jesus got angry when people compromised God's agenda. For example, he got angry in the temple because the religious leaders had developed rules about giving sacrifices that absolutely oppressed and abused the poorest people in society who couldn't afford the full sacrifices, cheating them by making a profit off of their desire to worship their God (John 2:14-17; Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46). Religious leaders developed systems of rules to live by that only they could keep, in their superficial way, so as to oppress the people to the increase of their own religious power.

One of the differences between Jesus and us is that he lived by God's agenda, not his own. When our perspective begins to shift by faith toward God's perspective, and we start asking God, "What is your agenda in my life, in my relationships?" then we'll be able to lay our anger aside and hear the voice of God directing us. We're not going to accomplish God's ways by insisting on playing out our own anger.

James tells us further to "get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you." Our hearts need to turn away from evil; we need to say, "God, I want to be free from that. I'm willing to lay it all aside to hear your word, to find out what your way is."

Notice that he describes God's word as "the word planted in you." God's word comes to live within us; it's not just some writing on a page, it's a living, dynamic thing used by God's Spirit. A few verses earlier James talked about the fact that we were given birth through the word of truth (Discovery Paper 4679). When God's word is planted in our hearts, our new life is birthed out of that through the presence and power of his Spirit. Then that word begins to transform us from the inside out. It gives us guidance and instruction, helping us to see who God is and who we are and how we are to live this life of faith with him.

When we have a disposition of humility, laying aside the anger and the sinfulness that would keep us from hearing God's word, that word can save us. The word "save" here means more than the salvation that brings us peace with God. Here it is used to mean rescue. The word of God planted in us rescues us from all this craziness in life that we are trying to figure out as we seek to be men and women living by faith.

James goes on to enjoin us to be willing to submit to God's word and let it change us.

Letting God's word change us

The word of God was not intended to be studied merely for the purpose of gaining more knowledge. The word of God is the living, dynamic, sword of the Spirit that God wants to use to change us from the inside out. Part of the equation of being transformed by the word is obeying God's voice when we hear him in his word.

Notice how he addresses this problem: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like." If you read, study, or hear the Bible and then just walk away, it's the same dynamic as when you look in a mirror and then turn away and forget what you see there. I know what that's like, particularly on Saturday morning, which is my down time. I remember looking in the mirror on Saturday thinking, "There's nothing important happening today. I don't need to fix this." If I have to do an errand, I put a baseball cap on to disguise the irreparable and head out the door. I

just forget about how I look; I have no idea what impression I make on people. It's the same dynamic when we look at the word for a moment, then walk away, not wanting to think about what it tells us.

But have you ever seen people prepare for a photograph? It's a whole different dynamic. Their grooming and clothes need to be just right. They've got to look their best, because they know that image is going to last a long time. James then calls this word "the perfect law that gives freedom." When we gaze into that law that gives freedom, like someone looking intently in the mirror, it has the power to show us what we are really like, and it begins to transform us.

"The law that gives freedom" sounds like an oxymoron. You can't have law and freedom together, can you? We are often schooled to think that way. But law is not restrictive here. What God is saying to us is, "My law is a description of how I intend for you to live life to its fullest. It shows you how to have the best of this life! It's the blueprint for how I've created you and this world." The very law that for many seems restrictive, when rightly understood as the living, dynamic word of God, not as the set of rules that we've made it, can help us become the people God created us to be. It's liberating, not restrictive. So we want to look deeply into that wonderful word of God and allow it to transform us. Then this law of liberty allows us to become fully human, fully alive.

I want to tell you a little about the place the word of God had in my own life at different stages, because I think it's somewhat reflective of how we can all react to the word. I grew up in a Baptist church in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia, in the Bible Belt. I can't think of anyone from my childhood who didn't go to church. That's just what people did in that environment. So I was in church all the time, being exposed to the Bible. I learned all the stories, and I could answer more Bible questions than anyone else in my class in Vacation Bible School. This book was always around, but I only understood it as stories written down from some ancient time.

When I got into my teen years the Bible seemed far removed from anything real in my life, which was a reflection of both my own heart and the environment in which I lived. Everything about this book and what it meant to obey had been reduced to some formula. In fact, when I was growing up, in our church they had something called the "Ten Point Record System." We'd come in on Sunday morning and check off boxes: I went to church, I studied my Sunday School lesson, I read my Bible, and so on. I did well at all that, and the context told me that was what it was all about. But as I got older it all seemed totally irrelevant to anything that mattered in life. So the Bible went up on the shelf. I still went to church but I never read the Bible for myself. It had no impact whatsoever on my life.

In the summer between my senior year in high school and my freshman year in college, I met Christ. God brought into my life some dynamic high school and college students who were really on fire for Christ. This was around the time the Atlanta version of the Jesus Movement was beginning to peak, and God was doing amazing things among young people. The night that I became a Christian, I remember telling the girl I was dating, "I do not know what happened tonight, but I know that my life will never be the same." I went home and pulled that dusty old King James' Bible off the shelf, sat down, and started reading it. I spent most of the night reading that Bible. All of a sudden all those old stories came alive. There was truth in them that hit me—the truth about who God was. The Spirit of God took the word of God and made it alive to my hungry soul.

When God opened that book up to me on that very first night of my new birth in Christ, I fell in love with it. I started going to every Bible study I could find. I'd spend at least an hour reading it every morning before going to class as a freshman in college. As the Spirit of God made it alive, my life was being changed almost moment by moment.

Then after two years of college, God brought a man into my life who disciplined me. He was a great teacher of the Bible, still one of the best I've ever heard. He had gone to Columbia Bible College in Columbia, South Carolina. I knew that God was directing me at this point toward wanting to serve him full-time. I figured if Columbia Bible College was good enough for this teacher, it was good enough for me, so I transferred there. I was at Columbia Bible College for three years, and something amazing happened to my relationship with the Bible during that time. This book, which had been this incredible source of spiritual nourishment that I was drinking up, all of a sudden became one of my textbooks, something I dissected in class. This didn't happen to everybody, but it happened to me.

In some classes I did exceptionally well, and I became arrogant about what I knew about the Bible. Instead of letting it change me, I changed my approach to it. I showed off to my friends when I went home at break, thinking I was really cool because I knew more about the Bible than anybody else in my old youth group. Out of that arrogance my heart grew colder and colder, and God had to take me, and unfortunately by then Ginger, through a very tough wilderness experience. So the most desperate part of my spiritual life came as a result of my years in Bible college, of all places, because I lost my sense of humility and my desire to obey the word of God.

But God took me out of that. He took me down his own road of discipline to get me to the point where I was willing to confess that arrogance and approach the Bible humbly again. The Bible once again became the source of nourishment of my soul.

Peninsula Bible Church really majors on studying the Scriptures. When we came here a few years ago, I was amazed at how many people here really knew the Scriptures, were actively involved in studying the Scriptures for themselves, were participating in Bible studies and leading Bible studies. The word of God was central in this place. I was thrilled by that. But because we put the Bible in that central place, it is even more important that we hear what James has to say. It's not so we can say that Peninsula Bible Church is a great teaching church or that we know more than people in other churches. It's so we can be changed from the inside out, be doers of the word and not hearers only, be people who are humble before the word of God and who let it do its transforming work in us.

So in summary, step 1 in that game plan James gives us is to be men and women who live on the foundation of the word, preparing our hearts for that by laying aside our own agendas and our own sin that keeps us from hearing God's voice, and then humbly coming before that word and letting it transform us.

In step 2 James gives us a little more concrete information about becoming obedient doers of the word.

Becoming doers of the word

"If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight reign on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless." I love that verse, because what happens even in Christian settings is that we always turn things into a religion. There is always a culture, a particular expression of Christianity, that surrounds any spiritual community. That's not necessarily a bad thing, and it may even be noble, yet there is a tendency to crystallize it into the code of life. So we start to feel good about ourselves because we are living up to this little code that we created. We're in church on Sunday morning, we're going to Bible study, and we're putting money in the plate. We have a sense that we're doing what we ought to do.

But lest we feel proud about our religion, James stops us in our tracks and says, "Let me ask you this: does your religion help you with the way you use your mouth?" Nothing reflects so much of what's going on inside of us as what comes out of our mouth. We express a lot of the desires and thoughts of our heart. We've already talked about anger. We use our tongue as a weapon. Farther on in this letter James will get into a deeper discussion of the tongue, how it can at one moment spout blessing, and the next moment spout curses and rip people apart. So he is saying, "Wait a minute-you can feel as good as you want about doing your religion right, but is it changing you on the inside? Is it controlling your tongue? That's a good measure of whether or not your religion works. And here is what real religion is: when was the last time you helped an orphan or widow?" Real religion that counts before God results in a lifestyle that has the same heart for people that God has.

The widow and the orphan are always used in Scripture as examples of the people who are most marginalized, disenfranchised, and oppressed. They are people who have no advocate or guaranteed sustenance. They are the people most dependent on outsiders for their life and safety. So James is saying to us, "God's heart breaks for those people in need. Does yours? If you are a real doer of the word and not just a hearer, how is it changing your life from the inside out-and is it leading you out into the streets to help those in need?"

He closes by saying that in addition to helping the widow and the orphan, we need to keep ourselves from being polluted by the world. I think he's simply saying, "Don't live by the world's value system. Don't let that pollute

you. Live by God's value system, and that will include a heart of compassion for those in need."

Do we recognize that God loves not only us but other people? Think about a person you find it difficult to love in your life, and remember that they are created in the image of God and he loves them like a child. Christ died for them as well as for you. Can we get out of ourselves and see the people in the world as God sees them?

Now, the sacrificial service and caring for others that James is talking about doesn't have to be spectacular. Sometimes we can't resist that old American urge to make everything big. "I'm going to sell everything I have and go off to some dark corner of the world, never to be heard from again, and sacrifice everything for God!" That could be what God is calling you to do, but the way we often react is to think, "I could never do that, so how can I serve?" I suggest that the right approach is not to think about grandiose schemes, but to ask yourself what impact you can make in the simple, small world that God has placed you in.

Philip Yancey has an incredibly pertinent observation in his book *Reaching for the Invisible God*. He talks about an experience that Richard Mouw, the president of Fuller Seminary, related:

"Mouw recalls being in a meeting with sociologist Peter Berger. He is speaking as a seminary president should. Mouw said that every Christian is called to engage in radical obedience to God's program of justice, righteousness, and peace. Berger responded with the observation that I was operating with a rather grandiose notion of radical obedience. "Somewhere in a retirement home," he said, "there is a Christian woman whose greatest fear in life is that she will make a fool of herself because she will not be able to control her bladder in the cafeteria line. For this woman, the greatest act of radical obedience to Jesus Christ is to place herself in the hands of a loving God every time she goes off to dinner."

"Berger's point was profound. God calls us to deal with the challenges before us, and often our most radical challenges are very little ones. The call to radical micro-obedience may mean patiently listening to someone who is boring or irritating, or treating a fellow sinner with a charity that is not easy to muster, or offering detailed advice on a matter that seems trivial to everyone but the person asking for the advice." (1)

You see, we don't have to think in terms of big schemes. We can think of little daily things like interactions with our roommate, our neighbor, relatives who are hard to love, and the poor and the needy in our immediate neighborhood. And yes, we can extend that out as far as God lets us. But let's not be paralyzed into no obedience at all because we can't conceptualize a great obedience. Instead, let's let God change us from the inside, moment by moment, into men and women of God in this world to extend that love and care.

I know that this is a difficult thing to do. But we have a gracious, loving, and wonderful God, and he never calls us to do things that we're not equipped to do. He asks us to trust him that he is good, that he is the giver of good gifts, that he is the God who will take his word and transform us, who cares deeply about the people in our world and wants us to care about them too. By trusting in his gracious provision for us, in his very presence within us, and in the power of his word that changes us, there is hope for you and for me to live above our own agendas and to live for God's, to truly become the people of God.

NOTES

(1) Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God*, © 2000, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI. Pp. 180-181.

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Fourth Message
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January 28, 2001

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