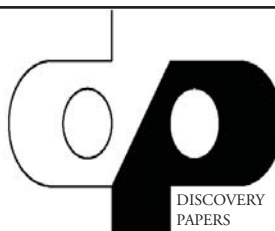


FACE IN THE MIRROR

SERIES: WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN



Catalog No. 101114
James 1:19-25
4th Message
Steve Zeisler
November 14, 2010

Leslie and I recently traveled to Southern California to visit my parents. While driving them to a medical appointment our car's GPS screen went blank. When we had the car checked later the dealer reported that the battery had leaked and the leak corroded wires attached to it—and the corroded wires ruined the GPS unit (and we had difficulty driving to a clinic). A step-by-step process: leaking, corrosion, ruin, confusion. The service writer admitted that the problem should have been detected during routine maintenance, but then insisted “no one was really to blame.”

There are similarities between battery acid and sin. As we recall our previous study, James 1:13-15 describes the progress of moral decline (temptation, enticement, sin, and death). It is similar to electrical failure in a car. The serious consequence—system failure/death—often seems to spring up suddenly even though the process of decay had been long in place. God intervenes with ‘good and perfect gifts’ (v.16). Sin gives birth to death. The Father of lights gives birth to us, by ‘the word of truth’ (v.18).

The text we’re going to consider here calls us to focus on this life-giving Word.

James 1:19-21:

¹⁹My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. ²¹Therefore, 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.

Of course, James didn’t know anything about GPS devices or corroded batteries. He uses a different word picture. He talks about the word of truth, the gospel message, as a seed that is planted in us. Verse 21 says, “accept the word planted in you.” We might remember

Jesus’ story of the sower who scattered seed onto four different types of soil. James, like Jesus, focuses on the readiness of the soil to receive the life giving seed. “Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent.” That is, prepare the soil (our hearts) to receive the seed (God’s word).

You can plant a vineyard in a toxic waste site, if you first remove the poisons and the chemical contaminants. We must clear away what inhibits the Word from penetrating us and changing us—patterns of selfishness, layers of hardness, and well nourished resentments.

The poison that seems to concern James most here is a pattern of impatient arrogance. In verse 19 it says, “Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” In this letter James repeatedly sounds an alarm against sinful speech—words that hurt, deceive, puff up, and twist. In this verse he addresses thoughtless zeal. Be quick; be slow.

What are we to learn here? Be quick to listen. The word ‘Quick’ means eager in this phrase because rapid listening is impossible. We should anticipate meeting God as he speaks, eager, open, and longing for ‘the word of truth ... the word implanted.’ We must care enough to reflect and go deep and not settle for a surface perception or simple platitude.

Our age is one of instant information and aggressive multi-tasking. Everything is urgent and no one can keep up. James says, if we are going to be quick (eager) about anything, let it be the slow business of listening to the truth; listening and reflecting, wondering and learning, and wrestling with the word of God.

Being ‘slow to speak’ is also important. Technology makes it easier all the time to record an immediate impression. Advertisers want us to act on a gut impression, to leap before we look. For many, being heard is more important than having something to say. James has no

use for shallow opinions. Followers of Jesus should have convictions, not empty slogans. They should become men and women who take a stand; whose character is formed by truth.

Further, we are called to be ‘slow to anger’. Empty chatter is one problem, uninformed outbursts are another. It is easy to get riled up in discussions of religion. We can easily reject ideas and judge people—flabby liberals, shallow fundamentalists, irresponsible youth, cranky seniors, etc.—without taking the time to understand them.

I remember as a young Christian being incensed by ‘Xmas.’ I was convinced that the X was a deliberate attempt by secularists to take Christ out of Christmas. Some friends and I made a pact, refusing to shop in stores that displayed Xmas in their advertising.

I later found out that there is more to the story. It may be that some retailers were such serious secularists that they were willing to drive away customers with christless signage, but I discovered that X is also the Greek letter ‘chi’ and is an ancient symbol for the word ‘Christ.’ The expression ‘Xmas’ in advertising was and is mostly a matter of convenience (fewer letters required). There are good reasons to object to advertising at Christmas, but my anger at a secular conspiracy was not helpful.

Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger. Listening and learning can occur in a regular quiet time, a pattern of scripture reading/reflection, weekly worship, a small group. Words of truth may be spoken, printed, displayed electronically, embedded in our memory, but we must choose to give attention to them. It is always easier to chatter or yell than to learn.

After being called to listen, consider the challenge of verse 22.

James 1:22-25:

²²Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴and, after looking at himself, goes

away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

If failing to listen well is one issue, listening without action is the second problem that concerns James. We do not read the Bible for the mere acquisition of data. It is not a source for sentimental sayings or fodder for scholarly debate. The Word of God is a sword. It is sharp on both edges. It is the power of God for salvation and calls on us to obey.

Verse 22 is not subtle. “Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” Is there some truth that the Spirit of God has put his finger on in your life—one that requires a response right now? Some action to start or stop, a relationship to reconcile, a decision that should no longer be avoided? If so, you should stop reading at this point and “do what it says.”

In verses 23-24 James uses the imagery of a mirror. He says, the problem with those who know and don’t act is similar to someone who looks into a mirror, sees what is displayed yet walks away and forgets about it. Having once discovered what is in the mirror and dismissed it, the pattern becomes easier the next time. Selective amnesia is an addicting behavior.

Imagine you’re from a family disposed to melanoma. One day the mirror reveals a discolored patch of skin on your cheek. Over time the same mirror informs you that the spot is spreading and growing darker, yet no action is taken until the cancer becomes deadly and it is too late to act.

The choice to see and walk away has consequences. We cannot claim ignorance of the truth. James warns against allowing a gap to exist between what we know and how we live. The stakes are very high.

There is an alternative—looking “intently into the perfect law.” The phrase “perfect law” could refer to the commandments. It could refer to the books of Moses.

Here, I think he probably means the entire Bible, which has the gospel of Jesus Christ at its core. In this case we do not turn complacently from the looking glass. “Not forgetting what has been heard, but doing it,” we are made new and “will be blessed in every activity.”

The law “gives freedom” because the heart of the Bible is the message of the saving work of Christ. We can see ourselves as we are (acknowledging the melanoma) because we are offered grace not condemned or tossed aside. We can be honest because we have hope. We can take action instead of choosing amnesia because the Lord has promised to make something beautiful of us. “Not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.”

To summarize, there are two big ideas. James has instructed us to be both eager listeners and those who don’t “merely listen”. God’s word is more important than our favorite platitudes or emotional outbursts. Having heard the beautiful news of Jesus’ love and our value to him we take action; we trust and obey. The gospel makes us new, makes us free.

Jesus’ words in conclusion:

In John 8:31-36 it says: “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³²Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” ... “Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.