

James 1:13-27 “Faith Receives and Does the Word”
Job 31
Psalm 1, 82

February 4, 2018

Job 31 is Job’s final statement –
his final defense of his innocence.

There are two main themes that characterize Job’s defense.
“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this:
to visit orphans and widows in their affliction,
and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”

That kind of summarizes Job’s defense!
Job beautifully exemplifies the sort of life that James will call us to live.

We sing of this as well in Psalm 1.

Sing Psalm 1
Read James 1

Jesus said,
“Do not be anxious, saying,
‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’
³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things,
and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.
³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
and all these things will be added to you.” (Matthew 6:31-33)

Do you believe that?

Jesus says that we should not be anxious about
our everyday, ordinary desires for food and drink and clothing.
And rather than follow after our ordinary, everyday desires for food and drink and clothing –
rather than seek after “all these things” –
we should seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

And then *all these things* will be added to you.

Do you trust God to provide for you?
Jesus does *not* promise that God will give you what you *desire*.
Rather, he promises that God will take care of you!
(even if it means the cross!)

If you would understand what the New Testament does with the idea of “desire”
then you must start with Jesus.

The modern idea of desire says that our desires are basically good.

We want food, drink, clothing, sex, friendship – “good things” –

we just need to make sure that we pursue our desires in a “healthy” way.

In other words, the modern world agrees with the Gentiles.

Pursue your desires – “follow your heart” –

just use wisdom in seeking the things that you desire.

Jesus says, No.

Do not be like the Gentiles.

Do not follow your desires.

Follow me.

In the 45 times that the NT uses the word translated “desire” in James 1 (epithumia), more than 40 of those times, it is used in a very negative way:

In Mark 4, Jesus speaks of the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desire for other things,

as choking the word and making it unfruitful for the Christian.

In Galatians 5:16, Paul says, “walk by the Spirit,

and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”

In 1 Peter 4:2, Peter says that we should

“live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human desires but for the will of God.”

In 1 John 2:16, John says “For all that is in the world – the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and the pride of life – is not from the Father, but from the world.”

Think of pretty much any verse you know that uses the word “desire, passion, or lust” – and that’s this word “epithumia.”

And in almost every case, the apostles are saying that these things are *bad*.

But I also want you to know how this word is used *positively*!

There are three positive uses in the NT – and I want you to listen for what they have in common:

Luke 22:15 – at the Last Supper, where Jesus says,

“I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.”

Philippians 1:23 – where Paul says,

“My *desire* is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better...”

1 Thessalonians 2:17 – where Paul says,

“But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly

and with great *desire* to see you face to face....

For you are our glory and joy.”

Jesus’ longing to eat the Passover with his disciples.

Paul’s longing to depart and be with Christ.

And Paul's longing to see his brothers and sisters in Christ.

That's why we start today with Matthew 6:33.

“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.”

All other desires must be set aside.

All other desires lead to death.

Now, let me be clear about something.

I'm not saying this because I'm good at it.

I'm not saying this because I like it.

(I would far *rather* serve a god

who would let me pursue my own desires on the side!)

But Jesus calls me to teach you to observe all that *he* commanded.

I would rather tell you that you can pursue your own desires –
so long as you follow Jesus *too*.

But I dare not tell you that!

Because Jesus and Peter and John and James are all too clear!

Love the Lord your God with *all* your heart.

Not just some of your heart.

Not just most of your heart.

All your heart.

So that there is nothing left of your heart to desire anything else!

Of course, it is important to say

that love for God *means* that you will love your neighbor!

Seeking first the Kingdom of God *means* that you will do what is right and good
for all those around you (including yourself!).

But there is no corner of your life that Jesus will let you keep for yourself.

I will also say that in those few moments

when I have caught a glimpse of what Jesus means by this –

I must say that there is no better way to live!!

After all – what happens when we pursue our own desires?

Well, that's when we get selfish –

we put ourselves and our desires ahead of God and others –

and we wind up making a mess of our lives – and others.

So when James warns us against our *desires* –

he is not a killjoy.

He is opening the only path to joy!

The way of faith.

Will you believe God?
Will you trust him?
Will you listen – will you hear what he is saying?
And then will you do it?

That's what our text is all about today?

Will you believe God?
Will you trust him?
Will you listen – will you hear what he is saying?
And then will you do it?

Because that is the test of genuine faith.

If you believe God, then you will do what he says!

1. What Word(s) Are You Listening To? (v13-18)

a. Temptation and Desire: The Old Birth (v13-15)

¹³ *Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.* ¹⁴ *But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.* ¹⁵ *Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.*

We saw last week that the first part of chapter 1 dealt with testing –
and particularly, the testing of your *faith* –
because if you stand the test – if you endure and remain steadfast –
you will receive the crown of life (verse 12):

¹² *Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.*

The noun translated “trial” in verse 12 uses the same root as the verb “tempted” in verses 13-14.

But the comparison is *not* one of similarity!

Indeed, the difference could not be greater!

The trials of verse 12 are a part of the *test* that leads to life.

The temptations of verses 13-14 result in death.

So what is the difference?

Dan McCartney says it well:

“although testing has a positive effect when endured faithfully,
there is an unfaithful response to testing
that turns it from an opportunity for endurance
to an occasion for sin.” (103)

In other words, the same outward situation can have two entirely different results
depending on how *you* respond to it.

So let's look at how this works:

¹³ *Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God,"
for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.*

God *never* wants to make you fall.
God *never* wants you to sin.

Think of the recent comment by the pope – suggesting that we re-translate the Lord's Prayer.
He doesn't like the phrase, "And lead us not into temptation,"
because people might think that God is tempting us.
I can appreciate that –
but the problem is that "lead us not into temptation"
is *exactly* what Jesus said!!
Many have suggested that James is commenting on the Lord's Prayer here –
teaching us *how* to pray that petition!

Because the whole petition says,
"Lead us not into temptation but *deliver us from evil.*"
The Venerable Bede rightly distinguished between external testing (which God permits)
and internal testing (which comes from the devil or our "fragile nature").

Bede was simply articulating the two-fold distinction found here in James.
God will send testing and trial – in other words,
he will providentially allow temptation to happen –
but he *will not* try to get you to sin!
In Matthew's gospel, we are told that the Holy Spirit *led* Jesus into the wilderness
to be tempted!
Jesus *was* led into temptation!

But he was also delivered from evil!

So, *when* you face temptation – when you deal with the trials of life –
you can be confident that God is not trying to provoke you to sin –
he has led you there, so that you might trust him – and follow Jesus
through the temptation – to the cross – and to eternal glory.

So God does *not* tempt us – he does not *provoke us* to sin.

Verse 14 explains what provokes us to sin:

¹⁴ *But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.*

¹⁵ *Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin,
and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.*

Notice how James focuses on your own responsibility for your own sin.

In the first century, people often viewed themselves as the pawns of cosmic powers.
James will have none of it.

He will not blame Satan.
He will not blame God.
He will not blame circumstances or upbringing.
Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.

Our desires are *not* neutral!
Because of sin, our desires have become disordered.
This is why Jesus said in Matthew 6:33 –
“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.”
Until we love the Lord our God with our *whole* heart –
then our desires are just a hot mess!

We sometimes refer to this as having *inordinate* desires –
where we long for the wrong thing – or for the right thing in the wrong way.

Listen to verses 14-15 again:

¹⁴ *But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.*
¹⁵ *Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin,
and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.*

It's clear here that when James uses the word “tempted”
he is not talking about an external situation – but an *internal* disposition.

As an example,
you are not tempted because a pretty girl just walked by.
You are tempted because of an inordinate desire which lures and entices you.

But it's important for us to see that neither James nor any other NT author
responds by saying, “Oh, you just need to have *proper* desires!”

No, the scriptures respond by saying,
*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength,
and love your neighbor as yourself.*

When someone says,
Pastor, I'm struggling with lust – what do I do when I see a pretty girl?
My reply is *Love God* – and therefore, *love her*.
Think back to the *ordinate* desires that we saw at the beginning!
Jesus' desire to eat the Passover with his disciples.
Paul's desire to be with Christ.
And Paul's desire to be with Christ's people.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart – and love your neighbor as yourself.
Well, what do I do with my desires for food, drink, sex, etc.!!
Put them to death.

Love God – love neighbor – seek first the kingdom of God,
and all these things will be added to you.
Because if you are doing the first things first,

then the other things will be taken care of!

But if you don't - watch where this goes:

*¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin,
and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.*

Here you see the full life-cycle of sin,
from conception and birth, to full growth and death.

The term translated “fully grown” is from the same word translated “perfect” in verse 4.

In other words, in verse 4, James said, let steadfastness – let endurance –
have its perfect work in making you perfect and complete,”
and now in verse 15, when sin is perfectly grown, it brings forth death.

The perfect work of faithful endurance is life.
The perfect work of sin is death.

This is where your disordered desires lead.

James is telling you that your desires are far more dangerous than you think!
After all, why do you want to say that your “desires” are good?

Isn't it because we want a part of our life to be autonomous –
we want a part of our life to be our own –
and we don't want God to tell us what to do or how to live?!

But think about it for a moment:
what does Scripture say?

Scripture does not tell us to lust after things or persons.
Scripture tells us to *love*.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart,
all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.

When you are done loving God with *everything* –
what is left?

Nothing.

And then we are to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Wait.

How can we love our neighbor, if we have already given *all our love* to God?
Well, if you love God – then you will love all that reminds you of God.
And since your neighbor is made in his image – you will love your neighbor.
Likewise, since *every* created thing reminds you of its Creator –
you will love everything that God has made,
and you will use it appropriately.

In other words, when you start thinking about your life in terms of loving God and neighbor, you discover that your “desires” get re-ordered – your desires become re-oriented to Christ and his people!

And notice how James talks about this re-orientation (this rebirth!). After saying that your *desires* are what get you in trouble, he turns our eyes in a different direction:

b. The Word of Truth: The New Birth (v16-18)

¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.^[d] ¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

In verses 14-15, we saw the “old birth” – the life-cycle of desire, sin, and death. Now in verses 16-18 we see the life-cycle of salvation!

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers.

God will never tempt you – he will never try to trip you up and make you fall – rather, “every good gift and every perfect gift is from above” – so therefore, do not be deceived by your desires.

Do not be led astray.

God gives good gifts to his children.

If your heart is set on your desires, then you will be ensnared by sin – but if you are seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, then you will be content with God’s good and perfect gifts.

The “perfect work” of sin is death.

But the Father of lights gives every good and perfect gift.

James has no place for our lusts – for our disordered desires.

They lead to sin and death.

But notice how James points our attention in a different direction:

because with God “there is no variation or shadow due to change.”

As the sun traverses the heavens
the shadows come and go.

But the Father of lights does not change.
He is constant.

And of that constant and unchanging will

“he brought us forth by the word of truth,
that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.”

The language of “firstfruits” reminds us of how God told his people

that the first part of the harvest belonged to *him* –
as a token of the fact that *all things* belong to him.
James writes to the first century church –
the twelve tribes in the dispersion –
the tiny handful of Christians who lived in the midst of the Roman empire,
and he promises them that they are but the *firstfruits* of the harvest.
In those days there were only a few thousand Christians in the whole world.
It took faith to believe that the word of truth
was going to spread throughout the whole world!
But as Peter said to Jesus,
“Lord, to whom shall we go – you have the words of eternal life!”
Two thousand years later, there are two billion people who claim to follow Jesus.
Truly James has spoken – “that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures!”

But this is not merely about the number of *people* that will be saved.
After all, James says, ‘firstfruits of his *creatures*’ –
this is the same point that Paul will make in Romans 8
when he talks about how the creation *groans* as it awaits
the revelation of the sons of God.
What God has begun in us
he will bring to completion in the day of Christ –
when those who persevere will receive the crown of life (1:12).

Because in contrast to the way in which desire conceived and gave birth to sin –
God, of his own will, brought us forth by the word of truth.

The word of truth – the message of the gospel – is what brings this new birth!
After all, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ.

James will say in a moment that we should be doers of the word and not hearers only –
but the place where he starts is with the necessity of *hearing*.

2. Deceptive Hearing vs. Faithful Doing (v19-25)

a. The Importance of Hearing: Receiving the Saving Word (v19-21)

¹⁹ *Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger;* ²⁰ *for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.* ²¹ *Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.*

What saves us?

The Word.

Sure, faith without works is dead – it’s not really faith!

But your *works* are not able to save your souls!

What saves you is the implanted word –

the word that takes root and grows within you!

Here in chapter 1, James is every bit as emphatic as Paul
that only God can save.

“Of his own will, God brought us forth by the word of truth.”
The implanted word is able to save your souls.

Therefore, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.
James is not just giving advice about daily life.
When he says that we should be quick to hear –
he means that we should be quick to hear *the word of truth*.
And thus, we should be slow to speak and slow to anger –
particularly, here, the word is *orge* – meaning *wrath*.

It’s not that we *never* get angry
(just like James is not saying that we should *never* speak!)
Rather, we should be *quick* to hear – eager to listen – to understand –
to make sure that we are hearing the word of truth!

But because we are the firstfruits of the new creation –
we are to bear fruit in keeping with who God has made us to be.
The *implanted* word cannot help but make us think of Jesus’ parable of the seed and the soils –
and how the seed takes *root* in the good soil – and thus *bears good fruit*.

And James contrasts the wrath of man and the righteousness of God.
The wrath of man is very much like the desires of verse 14.
When anger gets disordered it’s a scary thing!
Have you ever seen someone in an angry rage?
Have you ever *been* someone in an angry rage?

It’s a scary thing.
But the anger – the wrath – of man cannot produce the righteousness of God.
You must be quick to *hear* the Word of truth!

Righteous anger – like righteous desires – are an expression of love for God and neighbor!
That’s why James has the same advice regarding anger that he does regarding desire!
“Put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness,
and receive with meekness the implanted word,
which is able to save your souls.”

These are strong words!
James is speaking to Christians!
He recognizes that we all face these temptations –
because even as Christians our desires are still disordered!
We must continually, day-by-day, put away filthiness and malice,
and receive with meekness – with humility – the implanted word.

Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ!

But don't think for a moment that "hearing" is entirely passive!

Receiving the word with meekness will *always* result in *action*!

b. But Not Hearing Alone: Putting Faith into Action (v22-25)

²² *But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.*

If all you do is hear the word – and you don't put it into practice –
then you are deceiving yourself.

Three times in our passage James warns against being deceived.

In verses 16, 22 and 26.

These latter two uses particularly focus on the danger of deceiving ourselves.

If you hear the word, but you do not do it – you're just lying to yourself!

The idea of deception involves an aspect of intentionality.

To deceive yourself, you must first *already know* the truth –
but seek to persuade yourself that it is not really true.

It sounds absurd –

but we do it *all the time*!

I *know* that my sin will not bring peace, love, and happiness –
but I do it anyway!

Why?

Because sin makes you stupid.

We like to think that we are "rational creatures" –

but, truth be told, we are driven by our appetites.

How can we avoid self-deception?

In verses 23-25, James uses the analogy of a mirror:

²³ *For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. ²⁴ For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. ²⁵ But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.*

If you hear the word, but you do not do it,

you are like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror.

The word, after all, shows you a reflection of yourself.

Just think of what you have seen of yourself today!

Your desires are out of whack.

You tend to deceive yourself into thinking that everything's okay – when it's not!

You have an anger problem.

But if you see yourself clearly, and you don't do anything about it –
then you are one who hears the word, but walks away and does nothing.

That is *not* what genuine faith looks like.

When *faith* hears the word,

faith responds with *action*.

When you look into the perfect law –

the implanted word that saves those who receive it with meekness –

then you will put it into practice.

No matter how intently you study it,

the question is finally *not* how well do you *know* what the Bible says –

but how well do you *do* what the Bible says?!

It's what Jesus said in the Great Commission:

how do we make disciples?

By baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,

and teaching them *to observe* all that I have commanded you.

And James promises a blessing on those who hear and then *do* the perfect law of liberty.

And so James concludes his opening chapter

by giving a simple example of what he is talking about:

3. The Religion of the Tongue vs. the Pure Religion (v26-27)

²⁶ *If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.* ²⁷ *Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.*

There are three things that James wants you to take away from this passage:

First, bridle your tongue.

Be slow to speak – and thus, slow to wrath!

If you are gossiping and slandering –

if you are spreading tales and sowing discord –

your religion is worthless.

It's a good thing to talk together about your struggles –

your need for grace!

Just make sure that you are seeking to love God and neighbor

in the way that you talk with one another.

In other words, *be wise* in your words.

Second, you need to be actively looking out for the widow and orphan –
namely, for those who lack an advocate.

In the Roman world, everyone was part of a patronage network.

Everyone had someone to whom they were obligated.
Orphans and widows were always in danger of slipping between the cracks.
Who will look out for them?

James points out that God has identified himself as “Father.”
He is the Father of the orphan –
he is the defender of the widow.
If you claim to be a child of that God,
then you must reflect his care for widows and orphans.

In our society,
there are a *lot* of widows and orphans.
It’s not just those whose husbands and fathers have died.
You also have to include those who have been abandoned.

Who are the widows and the orphans?
Three years ago this week, I sat listening to Monte and Mihkail
tell us about how there were *no fathers* on the west side.
Over the last three years I have watched and listened to story after story
of young men and women who are trying to figure out
what it means to be a Christian husband or wife –
but they have *no one* to learn from!

There are times when I wonder –
How can I do this?
I don’t know what I’m doing!
But James doesn’t say that you need to figure everything out!
He says that you need to visit them in their affliction.
And yes, that means *visit them!*
Be present!
But also, when the Bible talks about *visiting* –
it’s more than a social call.
It’s about *being there* for them – and helping them in their distress.

And finally, you must keep yourself unstained from the world.
This is the word used of the Passover lamb – the “spotless lamb” –
which Peter also uses to refer to Jesus.

The world wants to conform you to its mold.
The world will tell you that your desires are natural and normal –
just follow your heart – do what you want!

Keep yourself unstained from the world.
Jesus has washed you and cleansed you by water and word.
He has clothed you in white garments!

Do not stain your garments with the ways of the flesh!