

“Life-Changing Words” James 1:19-25

Introduction:

This morning we are invited to come before the table of the Lord to partake of Communion. It is a special place for we come into the presence of Jesus each time we partake of the bread and the wine. It does not matter if you are taking the bread and wine at home, or here in the sanctuary, Jesus is with us. This is holy ground...

Many years ago the disciples sat at a table with our Lord and as they shared the food that made up the Jewish Passover meal, Jesus took a loaf of bread and broke it, gave it to his disciples and said, “This is my body, broken for you.” At the end of the supper he took the glass of wine and passed it around to his disciples and said, “This is my blood, which will be the guarantee of a new covenant.” It looked like a typical Jewish Passover meal, and it was except for one detail: the host that night was Jesus. He was no ordinary man. He was the Word made flesh, the Son of God, the “I Am” of scripture. The disciples took the bread and wine in the presence of God that night – but did not fully understand that. It would take the ministry of the Holy Spirit to reveal that to them.

But as we come into the presence of Jesus today for Communion, I cannot help but think I want to prepare myself for that royal visit. Yesterday I was doing some painting around the church and I wore a ragged pair of jeans and a paint splattered T-shirt. I certainly would not feel comfortable wearing that in the presence of the King of Kings. Earlier in the week a true friend pointed out to me there was white stuff on my cheek – shaving cream? Icing sugar from a donut? Not sure, but I am glad I was told about it so I could wipe it off before going to my next meeting!

So before we come into the presence of Jesus it would be good to look in a mirror and see if we are ready. That brings us to the verses we read in James this morning. It speaks of looking in a mirror in the context of hearing God’s words and doing what they say.

Walk with me through this passage as it has much to teach us.

Verses 19 and 20 may seem like they do not belong with what follows. What does anger have to do with looking into God’s Word?

The truth is, a great deal. Throughout scripture we find people who are instructed by God and instead of obeying him, they got angry and did their own thing. For instance, King Ahab is preparing to go to war against Ramoth Gilead, and the prophet Micaiah brings a message from God, saying he should not go to war. If he does, he will be killed in battle. Ahab is angry with the prophet and throws him into prison. King Ahab goes to war and he is hit by an arrow and is killed. (cf. 1 Kings 22:17-35) But note: he heard the word of the Lord and instead of doing what God said, he got angry. So did Jonah, and King Saul and many others...

This is what James is speaking about in verses 19-20. God tells us, "Thou shalt not kill" but many people would be very angry if you pointed that out to them. Why? Because in our society we accept killing one another as part of being liberated people. We kill the unborn but call it "removing tissue." We legalize the killing of people who request an escape from life, and call it "dying with dignity." Instead of helping addicts get off drugs we distribute free drugs and drug paraphernalia so we can "reduce harm," but they are still addicts and they are still dying. Remind people that God said "Do not Kill" and watch how angry many become.

This is true in so many areas of life today. For instance, the Bible has much to say about fornication, which is sexual relations outside of marriage. God's Word says it is wrong, but say that today and watch how quickly people get defensive and angry.

Verse 20 tells us, getting angry does not produce the righteousness of God. Obeying God's Word will. James goes on to say, "Get rid of all moral filth, and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word that is planted in you, which can save you."

Doing what God tells us to do will not destroy our lives, but will give us life. Nevertheless, people don't want to hear it. They do not want anyone to tell them how to live their lives. Religious people are judgemental and narrow-minded and old fashioned, they say.

James goes on to say that simply listening to the Word of God is not enough – we must do what it says. In James' day scripture was usually read out loud, because few had the written text of God's Word. People could go to the synagogue and hear the scripture read. They could hear it at the temple in Jerusalem. They could hear it recited by fathers in their homes teaching their children. They could hear it from the lips of children preparing for their bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah. But you can hear all the scripture you want but that counts for nothing. Unless you practice what it says, you deceive yourself.

The Apostle Paul would say he was one who was deceiving himself. He counted himself as a good man. A religious man – he was a Pharisee no less. He was dedicated to his religion, but until he met Jesus, he was not obeying God's Word. He persecuted the church, even casting his vote for the death of Christians, ignoring God's Word that said, "Thou shalt not kill." When he met Jesus, and the Holy Spirit filled his life, he started to live out what he had read in the scriptures. The most radical thing he started to do – as found in the word of God – was take the Gospel to non- Jews. The Old Testament said this was God's desire, so Paul, in obedience to God, committed his life to doing this.

James says that hearing God's word, or more likely in our context, reading God's Word as we all have access to Bibles, but not obeying it is like the person who looks in the mirror, sees her face, but walks away and forgets what she saw. It is implied that they want to forget what they look like.

Scripture has an amazing way of showing us our faults. As we read the scriptures we discover we are impatient, or unforgiving, or jealous. As we read the Bible we sometimes see ourselves

as very selfish. We read the Bible and we realize we are not very loving, or generous, or compassionate. Because of this many people simply close their Bibles and avoid them. They do not want to look in the mirror of God's Word.

But others will read God's Word and be convicted of something. They know there needs to be a change in their life, but they do not want to make that change. So they walk away from the mirror. They still look the same but because they cannot see it they can pretend everything is all right. It is like the toddler who covers their face and thinks you cannot see them because they cannot see you. People think that because they do not see their sins because they are ignoring them, they are gone. They are not.

As I read this passage I could imagine a scene from the story "Beauty and the Beast." The beast looks into a mirror and what does he see? An ugly, hideous beast. So he smashes the mirror, or covers all the mirrors with clothes so he cannot see himself. Has this changed anything? No. Though he does not see himself anymore, he is still a beast.

And James says that about us. We can walk away from the mirror of God's Word – and many have – but that does not mean we have changed. We are still sinners needing God's forgiveness. This is why faith and repentance go together throughout scripture. Many claim faith in Jesus, and that is good. But there must be repentance, a turning away from the old life of sin by the help of God's Holy Spirit. 2 Corinthians 7:10 says, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death."

But those who are willing to look into God's Word, and let that Word look into their lives and reveal who they really are, asking God to forgive their sins and failures and instead fill them with his grace and love, they will find life. God's Word is life changing. James says it leads to freedom! (verse 25). Those who listen to God's Word and obey it find their life is far more free and exciting than it was before they started to truly follow Jesus. James wants us to know that a true Christ follower is one who listens to God's Word, studies it and knows it well, and who obeys what God says through that Word.

God's Word is powerful. Hebrews 4:12 tells us:

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Of course, that is why some people are afraid of God's Word. It is our desire as a church to really know God's Word, but not to stop there. We want to be people who obey God's Word. We want our lives to be shaped by what is said in the Bible. When people of faith in the past like Martin Luther and John Wesley declared they were people of one book – meaning the Bible – it meant scripture was what determined their priorities, values and agendas.

How powerful is the Word of God? It changes lives completely - when it is heard and obeyed.

Luis Palau tells the story of Raul from San Jose, Costa Rica. He grew up in the poorest part of town, in a large family with brothers who constantly bullied him. His dad drank heavily and his parents were always fighting. It was a common occurrence to hear them yelling at each other, which encouraged Raul to stay away from home.

It appeared no one cared about the people from the poorest parts of town, so Raul and his brothers partied continuously to numb the pain. They drank and smoked and did anything they could to cause trouble. Deep down Raul knew this was all pointless, but he knew no other life. At 21 years of age his life was meaningless and going nowhere.

Then one day he saw a poster on the wall as he made his way towards home. The face of the man in the poster staring back at him grabbed his attention, and he could not move on. He read the poster and discovered it was about some kind of a rally in the bullring. People were sharing something called the Gospel.

Raul knew nothing about the Gospel, but he felt compelled to go to this meeting. He had no money for the bus so he ran the several miles to the bullring. He did not know what to expect, but he was open.

The man on the poster was Louis Palau, and he was holding an outreach meeting. Lois read the scriptures and explained the truths of the Gospel. Raul heard how we are all sinners who need a Saviour, and Jesus came to be that Saviour. As Raul heard the scriptures explained that day he recalls thinking, "Luis, someone told you all about my life! Who told you? How do you know these things?"¹

Of course, that is the power of God's Word. It held a mirror up to Raul and Raul saw himself as he really was – as God saw him. And that night he went forward at the invitation and started his journey as a follower of Jesus. His past was forgiven; he was a new creation in Christ. Today, Raul pastors the largest church in San Jose, Costa Rica with over 10,000 people gathered each week to hear the Word of God passionately explained by this man who is sold out for Jesus.

Be doers of the Word, and not hearers only.

So as we prepare to come to the table of the Lord, I think it is fitting to look into the mirror – the mirror of God's Word – and see if we are ready to enter the presence of a holy God. We will come not in our goodness or works, but cleansed and shaped by the Holy Spirit within us.

Maybe you would like to pray with me the prayer David prayed in Psalm 139:23-24:

Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. Amen.

¹ Luis Palau, Changed by Faith, (Tyndale House, 2011), p. 137.