



THE TRUE TEST
James 1:19-27

Today, we continue in our sermon series on the epistle of James. Last week we learned that temptation is no small matter in our Christian walk and witness. We learned that it is to be avoided at all cost. We further learned that testing and trials often come into our journey of faith as well. Testings and trials often produce character and maturity in our life of faith – so we endure them – and try not to overreact to them.

Today we learn from James ‘The True Test’ of our testimony. Once we have experienced birth as taught in **verse 18** – we journey to grow and cultivate our new life in Christ. To cultivate this new life we must be quick to hear the word of God.

James the Apostle does not seek to flatter us or please us today – but to share a clear word of truth on how to build our new life in Christ.

However, we know that James is speaking to a group of believers that he is fond of because he writes, “**My dear brothers. . .**” James is a wise veteran of life. He knows the battle that takes place between the flesh and the spirit. He shares the ‘but’ word. Whenever I hear a conversation and someone say “but” I know the story is not over. James has more to say. I can remember vividly a Professor at seminary as I was writing my master’s thesis who would say, “Eric, this paper is a good beginning, but” I knew a rewrite was in order – there was more work to be done.

This is exactly what James is communicating to the Christian community. He is saying your understanding of the Christian faith and the word and wisdom of God is not exactly complete. It is so easy to think that we have it all wrapped up – that we do not need to listen and learn anymore. Some people come to church – and if God does not speak in 55 minutes – they lose all their marbles.

They come making lists of all the things they are going to do once they leave church. However, the church's message never takes root inside of them.

In **verse 18** – we learned last week that the word of God was planted in us to give us our new birth. However, once that word is planted – we must grow. The seed that has been planted must bring forth fruit. James knew that one's conversion experience does not produce instant sainthood.

A colleague shared a story about a small, rural, traditional, almost perfect Roman Catholic community. They observed all the laws and traditions. They ate only fish on Fridays. Not too long ago – a Methodist moved to town. Everything went well until the townsfolk realized he loved to barbecue steaks on Fridays. He was a nice enough man, but the Friday menu violated Catholic doctrine. What to do? They thought they would convert him; that made the most sense. Their plan worked. Although it was summer, the church was Easter-filled, with people standing in the back of the sanctuary. At the moment when he joined the Catholic Church, the priest looked at the former Methodist and said, "You were born a Methodist. You were raised a Methodist. Now you are a Catholic!" The church erupted in applause. Everyone was happy.

However the next Friday evening, the neighbors could again smell the aroma of barbecued steaks. They couldn't believe their noses. They got the priest and together

they walked up to the former Methodist's fence. He was looking down at the steak on the grill and said, for all to hear, "You were born a steer. You were raised a steer. Now you are a fish!"

James knew that it was not quite that easy. The only way that the Christian could grow was if we would "be quick to listen" as recorded in **verse 19**. James knew that every church family had a 'jawbone.' However, great talkers are rarely good listeners. This is one of the tests to see if your testimony is true. Are you first listening to God?

Once a young man came to the philosopher Socrates to be instructed in oratory. The moment the young man was introduced he began to talk in an incessant stream. This went on for some time. Socrates finally silenced the man by putting his hand over his mouth. "Young man," he said, "I will have to charge you a double fee."

"A double fee, why is that?"

Socrates replied, "Because I will have to teach you two sciences. First, the science of holding your tongue – and then the science of using it correctly."

Every counselor will tell you that attentive listening is one of the most demanding experiences there is. God designed the human body so we have two ears – but only one tongue. Any medical doctor will tell you that the ear is one of the most complex and fascinating parts of the human body.

James is teaching us in **verses 22-25** that hearing without doing is simply worthless.

Let me explain it in a helpful way in a story told by Gordon MacDonald, an evangelical pastor near Boston, Mass. I will paraphrase it.

“Once a foolish man built a boat. His intention was that it would be the grandest, the most talked-about boat that ever sailed from the harbor of the boat club of which he was a member. That the boat building would come to be known as a foolish man had nothing to do with his ability to build, nor did it have to do with his capacity to work hard. It also was not a reference to his personality, for he was a most pleasant person! It was how he built his boat.

His driving passion was to build a sailboat that would be so wonderful that it would draw the praise and accolades of his fellow yacht club members. In his quest, he paid great attention to the details of the boat that were visible, above the water line. The things that drew the oohs and ahs of others. But he reasoned, ‘why spend time and money on that part of the boat that’s not seen, that which is below the water line.’ You know the story.

Sure enough, on launch day everyone was impressed with his beautiful creation. Sails were brightly colored, brass gleamed, teakwood was luxurious. Everything was wonderful until he set sail and encountered a storm. Suddenly his failure to give adequate regard for his keel and ballast proved his undoing. The boat capsized when others with proper ballast would have righted themselves. In his vanity and attention only to what was seen above the water line, all was lost.

“Only when the wreckage of the ‘Persona’ was washed ashore did the frowned man’s boat-club friends discover all of this. “‘Look,’ they said, “this boat lacks an adequate keel, and there is far more weight above the waterline than below.’

“They said more! ‘Only a fool would design and build a boat like this, much less sail in it. A man who builds only above the waterline does not realize that he has built less than half a boat.’¹

James knew we needed to develop an obedient heart – to be doers of the word – to build our lives to please God – and not the applause of man. The words of our lips eventually reveal if we have built our lives properly.

Now the paraphrase **“Slow to anger.”**

There is a scene I have never forgotten in the movie **FORREST GUMP**. Forrest and Jenny come upon the house that Jenny had been raised in. The house is falling down. The house holds many broken promises and painful memories for her. She had been sexually abused by her father here. She is overcome by rage. She begins to pelt the house with rocks. Her anger is intense. She finally falls to the ground from exhaustion. Forrest Gump shares: **“Sometimes there just aren’t enough rocks.”**

When I took psychology class so many years ago, it was popular to say “vent you anger.” The problem most of the time with that theory is that you beat and bruise yourself. You see, anger is not a pure emotion. When you are angry you most often close yourself off to help from anyone, especially God. I know some of you have heard the biblical phrase “righteous anger or indignation.” However, unless you are a Mother Theresa, James Dodson, or Billy Graham you don’t have the spiritual gift to use it for the work of God.

Almost 1600 years ago, St. Augustine wrote “Correct interpretation of the Word of God always increases the love of God and neighbor.” Only a very gifted spiritual leader could use anger to do that. Drop the rocks from your hands – fold them in prayer

and take your anger to God. This is where seek the wisdom to overcome anger – so that we can get back to listening to God. God’s word cannot live in a heart as hard as a rock.

The whole reason we are quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger is so in hearing the implanted word of God, we can put away all filthiness and wickedness. We are getting rid of all the dirty was in our ears – in order that we can be receptive to a greater and better word – that comes from God – rather than from the Tempter.

Now **verse 27** gives us a description of one who practices his faith by putting it into actions – with those who need it most. The tongue is often not used but love is given in large doses.

Eric Butterworth tells the story of a “college professor who had his sociology class go into the Baltimore slums to get case histories of 200 young boys. They were asked to write an evaluation of each boy’s future. In every case the students wrote, “He hasn’t got a chance.” Twenty-five years later another sociology professor came across the earlier study. He had his students follow up on the project to see what had happened to these boys. With the exception of 20 boys who had moved away or died, the students learned that 176 of the remaining 180 had achieved more than ordinary success as lawyers, doctors and businessmen.”

“The professor was astounded and decided to pursue the matter further. Fortunately, all the men were in the area and he was able to ask each one, “How do you account for your success?” In each case the reply came with feeling, “There was a teacher.”

“The teacher was still alive, so he sought her out and asked the old but still alert lady what magic formula she had used to pull these boys out of the slums into successful achievement.”

The teacher’s eyes sparkled and her lips broke into a gentle smile. “It’s really very simple,” she said. “I loved those boys.”² She knew how to use her tongue – the right way. I think James would like her.

She passed the test of a true and trustworthy testimony.

She was a hearer and doer of the word.

May we go and do likewise!

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
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ENDNOTES

¹ Gordon MacDonald, **THE LIFE THAT GOD BLESSES**, Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1994, the Preface Section, pages xix-xxiii.

² **CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE SOUL**, 101 stories compiled by Jack Canfield and Mark V. Hanson, Health Communications, Inc., 1993, pages 3 & 4.