James Lesson 2 (2022)

**THE BLESSEDNESS OF OBEYING GOD’S WORD**

James 1:19-27

Key Verse: 19:25

“But 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.”

 In the previous passage, James 1:1-18, we learned the value of trials we face in our day-to-day life. James said that when troubles of any kind come our way, we should consider it pure joy (2). Because we know that the testing of our faith through trials produces perseverance so that we become mature and wholesome and eventually receive the crown of life in the age to come (3-4, 12). I see many people getting angry and frustrated going through the pandemic while others mature in their character. We become either better or bitter depending on our attitude toward life trials and challenges. But for our maturity and completion of our faith, we need more than just perseverance during trials. In today’s passage, James gives other instructions on how we should struggle with God’s words during problems and difficulties in life. According to James, we need to learn two things: 1) listening to God’s words and 2) obeying them.

Read verse 19. “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.” We tend to respond to trials by complaining about them and becoming angry. *“I am sick and tired of all these.”* James’ earnest advice is that we should be quick to listen to God’s words instead of complaining or becoming angry.

In the previous passage, James already mentioned that we received the gift of God’s salvation through the word of truth (18). Indeed, we are born anew as God’s children through the living and enduring word of God. (1 Pe. 1:23) Yet, God’s salvation in us would not grow or bear fruit without the support of God’s words. God speaks to us constantly, yet we don’t always listen to his words. The consequence of rejecting God’s word can be severe.

For example, in Genesis Chapter 4, Adam’s two sons, Cain and Abel, offered sacrifices to God: Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil, and Abel brought fat portions of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord was pleased with Abel and his offering, but not with Cain and his offering. We don’t know exactly why. Knowing Cain was upset, the Lord came to counsel him by saying, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.” (Ge. 4:6-7) Cain should have listened to God’s counseling and changed his mind. Then he would have been accepted by God. Yet, he didn’t listen to God’s words of counseling. Instead, he remained in anger and killed his brother, Abel (4:8).

Even though we don’t necessarily become terrible murderers like Cain, we often bear the fruits of sin when we fail to listen to God’s counseling through his words. It’s interesting to see how James relates our anger to listening to God’s words. He said, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry because human ager does not produce the righteousness that God desires.” (19b)

Is it always wrong to be angry? What do you think? Anger is our emotional reaction toward something that happens. For example, when we see someone doing wrong, we become angry, which we may call “righteous anger.” If we don’t feel angry at unrighteousness, something is wrong with us. We are angry because we are created in the image of God. Sometimes, we become angry at ourselves. We can also get mad at those who challenge us for whatever reason. Anger is a powerful emotion. Anger itself is not sinful.

Depending on how we manage or direct it, anger can either be constructive or be destructive. However, human anger does not bring glory to God. People express anger in different ways. Some people outburst in rage, screaming and yelling like a volcano. Others don’t necessarily express anger but keep it inside. They may look fine for a while, but they become depressed if they don’t process anger properly.

So what does the phrase “Slow to become angry” mean? It means managing and controlling anger. How can we manage anger? First, we must acknowledge that anger is often a secondary emotion. There is a primary emotion beneath anger. Some people are angry because of their pain through the experience of unfairness, hurt, abandonment, disappointment, betrayals, unfulfilled expectations, helplessness, hopelessness, mistakes, failures, unforgiveness, etc. Anger is just an iceberg of hidden problems.

So what shall we do? How can we overcome anger? If we attend anger-management classes, we may learn valuable tools and strategies, like deep breathing techniques, mindfulness, relaxation, etc. These are practical skills we should have. Yet, we, as Christian disciples, should go one step further. We should turn our attention to God’s word. In other words, we need to engage in personal dialogue with God and wrestle with him in prayer and meditation of his words. In other words, the emotion we experience should never ignore or deny. How we feel about things is the beginning point where we can connect with ourselves and with God our Father. God is not far away from us. He is willing to meet us from where we are now.

Look at verse 21. “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.” Here, James encourages us to go deeper than the emotional level. He said we should get rid of all moral filth and humbly accept the word planted in us. According to James, we cannot say that we humbly accepted God’s words while remaining in moral filth and unhealthy lifestyle. In other words, constant examination of our way of thinking, the desires of our hearts, patterns of our behaviors, and our relationships in light of God’s words is necessary. And we should be willing to change anything impure, immoral and unhealthy, such as pride, jealousy, hatred, anger, envy, destructive criticism, bitterness, etc.

Verse 21b states, “and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.” Accepting God’s words humbly guarantees our salvation in Christ Jesus. But we must remember that it’s not easy or automatic. It requires our intentional and painstaking struggle by being honest, transparent, and willing to be transformed from the inside out. Such kind of Bible study is like spiritual radiation therapy for our soul.

In verses 22-24, James warns against mere listeners of God’s words. Look at verses 22-24. “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 someone who looks at his face in a mirror and after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.” James said that those who merely listen to God’s word and do not obey what it says are fooling themselves. In other words, they are dishonest and insincere before God. So the outcome of their superficial attitude toward God’s word can be deadly serious.

Probably, some Jewish believers in the early century, scattered abroad, might have thought that since they were saved by God’s grace, they didn’t have to struggle to obey God’s words. But according to James, that’s not the case at all. They won’t be able to bear the fruit of righteousness that God desires. It reminds us of Psalm 1:1-4, which states, “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither – whatever they do prospers. Not so with the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.”

Verse 25 summarizes and highlights what James wanted to say in this section. Read verse 25. “But 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.” In this verse, James promises the blessedness of obeying God’s words. One day, as Jesus was teaching, a woman in the crowd called out, “Bless is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.” In response to her remarks, Jesus replied, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.” (Lk. 11:28) We underestimate the blessedness of obeying God’s words. But there is a tremendous blessing in obeying God’s words.

James said, “But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues in it – not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it - it will be blessed by what they do.” (25) We are not sure what the perfect law that gives freedom to us refers to. What do you think? James was not talking about the Ten Commandments. If not, what is the perfect law that gives freedom to us? I wasn’t sure. Yet, it seems clear when we relate it to what Jesus said to his disciples in John 8:31-32, which states, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” Based on what Jesus said, we can say that the perfect law that gives us freedom refers to Jesus’ teaching or the gospel truth. Since Jesus himself became the fulfillment of the law and the prophet through his death and resurrection (Romans 8:4), the perfect law that sets us free is Christ Jesus himself (Jn. 14:6).

What a great blessing of freedom we have in Christ Jesus! We are the children of freedom through Christ Jesus, who loved us and gave himself for us (Gal 2:20). We don’t have to be afraid of anything because there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Ro. 8:1-4).

Recently, I became concerned about what will happen to the world if the pandemic continues, global warming intensifies rapidly, and another pandemic hits us again and again. It’s not something that we, as humans, can control. So I questioned myself, “*What if I die tomorrow? Where am I going to be?”* *“Will my kids and grandchildren be okay?”* “*Do we have a promising future in Christ Jesus?”* *“What if the global economy collapses?” What if?” “What if?”* My confidence in Christ Jesus was tested momentarily.

But when I read and meditated on verse 25 over and over, it renewed my trust in Christ Jesus. “But 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.” I realized that the promise in this verse was not just about peace and freedom in Christ here but also a bright future in the kingdom of heaven. God’s blessing for those who trust and obey his words is beyond our imagination. It reminded me of Romans 8:37-39, which states, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Christ Jesus is not just a personal Savior, but also the Universal Christ.

Many of us are afraid to witness many evil things and uncertainty in today’s world. Some of us are afraid of evil. But we, Christian disciples, should not be afraid of evil. We must trust in God Almighty and His ultimate goodness. Archbishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa (1931-2021), who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984, inspired many people. He said, ***“Goodness is stronger than evil. Love is strong than hate. Light is stronger than darkness. Life is stronger than death. Victory is ours through Him who loves us.”*** You and I are weak. But we are more than conquerors through God our Father who loves us. Until everything is completed in God’s plan of salvation, we should hold firmly on to Christ Jesus and obey his teaching. And we must continue to share God’s love and mercy with those who are in need.

James concludes this section by giving us practical applications in versers 26-27. “Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their 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 emphasizes two things in these verses: 1) Taming our tongue, 2) Caring for the helpless and needy.

The Jewish believers, who were the audience of James’ letter, typically regarded alms-giving, giving tithe, fasting prayers, regular attendance at worship services, and the observance of holy days and feasts as signs of true spirituality. But James said that a superior spirituality was a person’s tongue control. Since we will be studying tongue control in detail later in 3:1-12, today, we will concentrate on verse 27. “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.”

Orphans and widows represent helpless and needy, marginalized people in society. Indeed, taking care of these vulnerable people is necessary and meaningful. However, it’s easy to neglect them because there are too many needy people. We also tend to assume that somebody else will do it if we don’t care for them. Somebody said that only one person out of one hundred makes a difference while the rest, ninety-nine people, are only interested and do nothing. We should not be only sympathetic and do nothing. We should do our best to help the helpless around us. Even though we may do small things, Jesus will never forget or ignore them. He said in Matthew 10:42, “And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.”

 Let me close the sermon. The central piece of the Christian life is listening to God and obeying his words. Throughout history, God spoke to us through the prophets at many times and in various ways. But in the last days, God has spoken to us by his son Jesus Christ, who is the radiance of his glory and the exact representation of who he is (Heb 11:1-3). Through his son Jesus Christ, God reveals himself and blesses those who eagerly look into his words with the tremendous blessings of heaven that money cannot buy, such as the blessing of love, peace, freedom, contentment, joy, hope, and beyond. Knowing that God himself is our shield and great reward, let us persevere and look more carefully into God's words during the trials and difficulties in life. “Blessed are you who listen to God’s words and obey them.”