

“Authentic: Hearing and Doing”

James 1:19-27 • Proverbs 10:6-25

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • March 26, 2017

You may not have seen the story this week but there was a little bit of a controversy in the world of Presbyterians. One of the organizations at Princeton Theological Seminary, the Abraham Kuyper Center for Public Theology, had invited the Reverend Timothy Keller to lecture and receive their annual prize. Tim Keller, who just recently retired, is the pastor who founded Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, a church that now has around 5,000 people in worship each week, mostly people in their 20s and 30s. They have since created a network of similar churches around the country. Keller is also the author of several influential Christian books including, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. It was because of his tremendous contribution to public theology that the Kuyper Center decided to honor Tim Keller.

But there was a problem. Princeton Seminary is a Presbyterian Church (USA) seminary. Tim Keller is a Presbyterian Church in America pastor. So some of the students and faculty and alumni of Princeton Seminary began to protest. They wrote letters. They took to the internet. Some of them got really angry. By the end of the week the seminary had decided that they would not give Keller the prize money after all.

You have probably seen similar things in the news lately at other colleges. Rather than discuss and debate ideas, people have been turning to violence against people with whom they disagree (or think they might disagree). Today, because of technology like the internet, we have the ability to be more connected with one another than at any time in history. With Facebook and Twitter and texting we have nearly instant access to other people or at least to know what they ate for lunch. You can be in contact with your family and friends across town or across the world any time of day or night.

And yet, people who study these things tell us that people are actually less connected than at any time in history. We are disconnected and we are increasingly lonely. One of the things we seem to have lost is the ability to really communicate. Everyone can broadcast. Few are receiving. For the most part we are having what Paul Tournier calls “dialogues of the deaf.” We don’t know how to listen any more. People today are highly distracted. We receive a constant barrage of images and sounds, all packaged in 10-second bites. We are in a hurry to get to the next thought and we don’t listen to understand. And it’s dividing us.

So James says to us, “Know this, beloved, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” You know, I think if we as followers of Jesus would simply put just those two verses into practice, it would be so different from the world around us that people would stop and take notice. If you want a simple opportunity to share the good news of Jesus with someone, start by being quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. The ancient rabbis had a saying, “Men have two ears but one tongue, that they should hear more than they speak. The ears are always open, ever ready to receive instruction; but the tongue is surrounded with a double row of teeth to hedge it in, and keep it within proper bounds.”

That is excellent advice and if that’s the only thing you get out of this message you will still be better off. But the reason James includes these verses here is because he’s talking about hearing the Word of God. Verse 18 that we studied last week says, “Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth.” The word of truth is God’s Word. James also calls it the “implanted word, which is able to save your souls” in verse 21 and in verse 24 he calls it “the perfect law, the law of liberty.” He’s saying that it’s more important to hear the word of God than to speak. Romans 10:17 says,

“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” You and I need to be quick to hear God’s Word. We need to pay careful attention to it by reading it every day and by hearing it read and preached every week.

James also says we should be slow to anger. Last week we talked about how we are often quick to blame when things go wrong and you’ll remember that blaming is merely a discharge of anger. What James wants us to know is that an angry spirit is never a listening, teachable spirit. When I’m angry I don’t really listen. And if I don’t listen I can’t learn. The result is that in the end anger produces an ugly, unrighteous life, a sin-filled life.

That’s why James says, “Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” Now I’m sure you can all think of something that could be described as filthiness or rampant wickedness in your life. If not, I’m sure you can think of something in your spouse’s life that fits that description. But James has something more specific in mind here and he uses a gardening illustration to teach us. He implies that we are to pull out the weeds in our hearts – an unwillingness to listen, a sinful tongue, and unrighteousness anger – so we can have the Word that can save our souls planted in us.

But you know, you don’t plant something in the ground just to bury it. You plant seeds because you want to get something out of it, either food or flowers. It’s the same when God plants His Word in your heart. Verse 22 says, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” It’s not enough to hear God’s Word, you must act. Let me give you a short illustration. Imagine after worship today you go to your favorite restaurant. When you sit down the waiter brings you the menu and you spend some time reading it. Maybe you discuss it with the other people at your table. Maybe you memorize it. That’s great but it’s worthless if you don’t actually order something. It does you no good to read and discuss and

even memorize the menu if you don’t ever order.

God says, “If you hear my Word but don’t act on it you’re deceiving yourself.” One of the main ways we know we have an authentic faith is that when we hear or read God’s Word we are motivated to action. James makes his point by using an illustration of a person who looks at his face in a mirror but when he goes away he forgets what he was like. Some of us get up in the morning and look in the mirror and *wish* we could forget what we saw. But the idea here is more like going to see your doctor when you’re seriously sick. He checks you out and figures out what’s wrong and then prescribes medication. If you don’t take the medicine right away you aren’t going to live. James is saying that hearing God’s Word but not acting is like going to the doctor but never getting the prescription filled.

In contrast, though, James says that the person who hears God’s Word, which he describes as looking into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and then does what the Bible says, that person will be blessed in the doing. If you want to experience God’s blessing in your life, it begins with doing what He tells you. In John 14, Jesus says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

James concludes this passage by giving us three specific examples of “doing the word.” First, “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. This reinforces what he said earlier about being quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. Before you speak it might be helpful to remember the acronym THINK. Before saying something, quickly ask yourself five questions. Is it TRUE? Is it HELPFUL? Is it INSPIRING? Is it NECESSARY? And is it KIND? A growing, authentic faith in Jesus should impact the way you speak to people. As Paul says in Colossians 4:6, “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.”

The second way we “do” the Word is in

verse 27: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction." Orphans and widows represent anyone who has needs. Our study of the Bible should lead us to work to meet the needs of others. We should be working to end poverty and illiteracy and any kind of injustice. Finally, we should keep ourselves "unstained from the world." The Word of God working in your life should

impact the movies and TV shows you watch, the music you listen to, and the websites you visit. Our society has normalized many things that God calls sin and so authentic faith includes being discerning about what you put into your mind and body. Why not spend that time really listening to someone who needs you?

Amen.