

Actions Speak Louder Than Words
By Reverend Litton Logan
September 2, 2018

Scriptures:

¹⁷Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

Hearing and Doing the Word

¹⁹You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. ²¹Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

²²But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

²⁶If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

James 1:17-27 (NRSVA)

Introduction:

A man was being tailgated by a stressed-out woman on a busy boulevard. Suddenly, the light turned yellow just in front of him. He did the right thing, stopping at the crosswalk, even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection.

The tailgating woman was furious and honked her horn, screaming in frustration as she missed her chance to get through the intersection, dropping her cell phone and makeup.

As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer.

The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands up. He took her to the police station where she was searched, finger printed, photographed, and placed in a holding cell.

After a couple of hours, a policeman approached the cell and opened the door. She was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects.

He said, "I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing the horn, flipping off the guy in front of you, and cussing a blue streak at him. I noticed the 'What Would Jesus Do' bumper sticker, the 'Choose Life' license plate holder, the 'Follow Me to Sunday School' bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk. Naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car."

Sermon:

We've all heard the old sayings, "Actions speak louder than words," or "What you do speaks so loudly, I can't hear what you are saying". Well, these old sayings are a good introduction to the little book of James.

The book of James, a circular epistle, was named in honor of James the Just, the brother of Jesus. James assumed dynastic leadership of the early Jerusalem Jesus movement, displacing Peter as its leader. Many if not most scholars doubt whether James wrote the little epistle given its very sophisticated Greek grammar and syntax, but it could have been transcribed from earlier Aramaic text, the language of Jesus and James, by a highly educated, Jewish-Greek speaking follower of Jesus. Other scholars attribute the letter to the Alexandrian Jewish Jesus community in Egypt around 70 C.E.

At the very least the epistle may contain some of the earliest exhortations from the Jerusalem Jesus community by James to other Jewish Jesus-believing communities. If James dictated his epistle for transcription and editing, then it would have had to be written earlier than 62 C.E., since this is believed to be the year he was killed by Ananus, the high priest. Ananus seized upon an opportunity during a time when Judea was without a Roman procurator to have James stoned to death. The Elders of Jerusalem castigated Ananus for this execution of a pious and just man and sent word to Rome requesting Ananus' actions be curtailed. A delegation of the Jewish elders met with the new Roman Procurator even before he reached Jerusalem about Ananus and his high-handedness. Once the new procurator was on the scene, Ananus was summarily dismissed by the procurator.

The overarching message of James is that faith, prayer, and abstaining from worldly values that are contrary to God's will and laws along with good works are the positive proofs of a person's relationship with God. It is this aspect of the epistle that Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, took great exception to, since it seems to undermine his understanding of salvation by faith alone, *sola fidé*.

The little book of James may have in fact been an attempt to stem a form of radical Paulinism that threatened the more traditional Jewish Jesus communities within the author's purview. However, James understood the Laws of Moses and its demands for works to be more than religious activities, but as encompassing all of aspects of a person's life. As David Stern says in his Jewish New Testament Commentary: "The entire letter emphasizes deed over creed, action over profession; and this is the usual Jewish approach to religion, morals and life."¹

The author tells Christians that as new creatures, the first fruits of the wisdom of God, they must be quick to listen to one another under the Spirit's power of discernment if and when they disagree; that is, listen with an intent to understand not form a rebuttal or criticism. They must be slow to speak in commentary or criticism, and even slower to take offense in anger or indulge in hurtful speech toward one another during their sorting out and discerning processes. The author tells us that angry, vicious, or thoughtless speech reflects unbridled passions and spiritual immaturity, indicating that a person lacks the characteristics of a new creature in God. In chapter 3, James says we humans may be able to domesticate all sorts of wild creatures but seem unable to tame our tongues.

In addition, the new creatures of God should prepare their souls to receive and give residence to holy truths by weeding out the filthiness and defiling values of this world. If a

¹ Stern, David H. Jewish New Testament Commentary (Kindle Locations 20505-20510). Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc. Kindle Edition

person does the work of weeding out the filthiness, unbridled passions, and all that is contrary to the holy, their life will have room to reflect the presence of the royal law, the law of love, which leads to moral and ethical works of compassion, charity, and a life of prayer and spiritual depth as well as avoiding the temptations of the world and its values.

In James, it matters little that a person professes belief in God if that person does not strive to make apparent God's presence in their life through their personal actions - walk the walk and talk the talk. Faith must have holy works if it is truly to reflect God's power and presence in a person's life.

James, I don't think disagrees with Paul's understanding that we are restored to an honorable and eternal relationship to God through our faith in Christ and not by religious works. We must remember that the "works" Paul addressed and took exception to were those portions of the Jewish Law which required Gentiles and maybe non-traditional or non-observant Diaspora Jews to comply with strict Sabbath keeping, Jewish dietary laws, and circumcision. Paul nowhere says that a Christian must **not** comply with the moral and implied ethical dimensions of the Mosaic Laws. In other words, faith produces justification; that is, restoration before God and true restoration produces holy works. However, for James, the definition of salvation is a hyphenation: faith-works.

James particularly cites the Old Testament injunctions of caring for the needy - the orphans and widows in the church as a proof-model that a person is a new creature in God. The widows and orphans are also symbolic of all those people without social or economic power due to circumstances beyond their control. One does works or acts of compassion, mercy, and caring not as payment or the means of restoration to God but because being a caring, merciful, and compassionate person is what the new creatures of God are because the truths of God have taken root in their lives.

In the closing verses of the first chapter, James returns to the theme of keeping oneself unstained by the sordidness or wickedness of the world. Christians cannot escape the demands of ordinary life; we cannot simply withdraw to caves. Christians are expected to live in this world for God's purposes by holy values, which are often in opposition to the world's values.

We cannot serve two masters at once. A Christian must decide if they will allow their lives to be guided by God's moral and ethical precepts, or live by the world's values, or try some hybrid World-God value set. This latter choice produces a form of spiritual schizophrenia often call hypocrisy.

The author spells this out when he says:

³You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry. [*Gentiles used here most likely means those unregenerate outsiders, non-Jews.*] ⁴They [*meaning these outsiders*] are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme. ⁵But they will have to give an account to him who stands ready to judge the living and the dead. (James 4:3-5)

In addition, James remarks hint that Christians should not even play around the edges of sin indirectly through the associating with wicked, profane, and unholy people. To do so is to be guilty by only a lesser, non-actionable degree.

To this point, I am still amazed at people's fascination with the sexual exploits of the rich and famous - don't people ever get their fill of such stuff? I actually know lifelong Christians, who can give you the low-down, and I mean the low-down, on Paris Hilton, the Kardashians, Madonna, Lil' Kim, Lady Gaga, and the Ashley Madison accounts, which I accidently learned is an

online dating site for people who are married or in relationships. And, what is this interest in wardrobe malfunctions? It seems to me, given how little some of these performers wear, there should be less to go wrong. Not surprisingly, many of these Christians who keep up with such trash cannot tell you how many gospels there are or find John 3:16 in the New Testament. No wonder many people's faith doesn't work for them - it is stunted, it's childish.

Furthermore, America's preoccupation with pornography on the internet, TV, and movies and its impact on business productivity is estimated to be \$16.9 billion annually, not to mention the social, mental, and spiritual influences upon this nation's youth and families.²

Isn't it a shame that various and sundry sexual, financial, and social peccadilloes of the leadership or would-be leadership of this nation and other nations, many of whom identify with some faith expression, at least during election time, are common fodder for the crass and vulgar news media, and this nation just loves it. Isn't it sad that we have an industry that tells us *what we need to know* and that *we have a right to know* all about the depths of human perversion in our society? To what purpose? Moral change? Show and tell that lets us know we are not as bad as we thought? Worse yet, simply voyeuristic and vicarious experiences of other people's sins. Folks I will go out on a limb here - Hollywood, TV, and the so-called news media industry in its current manifestation and biases are the major enemies of the American people and a good and decent national way of life.

What is even more amazing is how we justify, excuse, or explain away the immoral behaviors of our favorite sports figures, political candidates, or celebrities. Such justifications or excuses as, "Well they all do it; he/she had a troubled childhood, poor people tend to steal, don't they? Abused children grow up to be abusers." Every time people put forth such stupid rationales, they not only slap in the face every good person who overcame bad childhoods, socio-economic depravations, and distorted social or family situations, but they also water down and compromise the moral codes of conduct and laws that form the fabric of society.

Folks we cannot take into our minds - our souls - the filth and lowest common denominators of human behaviors offered by the world as entertainment and so-called news and expect the truths of God to operate effectively in our lives. We cannot be silent about or uninvolved in the plight of the oppressed and victimized of the world, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ, and call ourselves new creatures in God. We cannot walk around spring loaded to take offence or find fault with other brothers and sisters in Christ and enjoy the power and presence of God in our lives - it just will not work. God's Holy Spirit cannot live and work effectively to bring about the kingdom of God on earth through the lives of angry, bitter, faultfinding, foul mouthed, prurient, and existentially frustrated people. We cannot partition our lives into a religious section, a secular section, a political section, or a secretly indulgent section - we must be new creatures of God at all times, in all places, with all people, in every aspect of our lives.

The author of James goes on to give us some very good insights in such matters:

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

¹⁸ But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith without works, and I by my works will show you my faith. ¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well.

² <https://www.webroot.com/us/en/resources/tips-articles/internet-pornography-by-the-numbers>

Even the demons believe - and shudder. ²⁰Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith without works is barren? ²¹Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. ... ²⁶For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead. (James 2: 14-22, 26)

Another old saying comes to mind, the "proof of the pudding is in the eating." Well intended people may profess Jesus as the Christ of God in a thousand different ways, but until their faith is turned into action, good works, as the writer says, all they have is a dead, self-serving mortuary religion, or at best, a psychological placebo against the day of their death. I believe, no, I know, based upon the book I hold in my hand and the legacy of the Holy Spirit across the ages reflected in these pages, if Christian people would put into action their faith, there would be standing room only in the churches, cathedrals, and Christian meeting halls around the world. People would be eager, clamoring, to hear and learn the words of grace and salvation and its practical application in their personal lives and the life of the world. The physically, mentally, and spiritually sick and afflicted would be receiving food, shelter, and treatment. The military industrial complex in this nation and around the world would be producing plow shares and tools for peace. The hateful would no longer have anything to hate because what Christians say and what they do would finally become congruent and overpowering.

My friends, brothers, and sisters in Christ, the book of James tell us our actions in and for Christ speak louder than all our words, but as the Canadian rock star Matthew Good said, sometimes inaction speaks louder than both of them.

Bibliography:

Johnson, Luke Timothy, The Letter of James, Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections. Vol X of the New Interpreters Bible. Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1994 online, Ministry Matters.com

Levine, Amy-Jill, March Avi Brettler. The Jewish Annotated New Testament, 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2011, 2017.

Stern, David H. Jewish New Testament Commentary. Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc. Clarksville, Maryland, 1992, Kindle Edition.