

That's Just Sorry!  
James 1:18-27

If you are a cadet at a military school you are always supposed to look sharp. The uniform has to be worn correctly, and you have to have a short haircut, at least in theory. Oh, and you have to be clean-shaven.

I remember one cadet who had a terrible time with the shaving requirement. His hair was so thick and dark, he could shave before morning formation and by lunchtime he already had five-o'clock shadow. That means that what he saw in the mirror in the morning just wasn't accurate even just a few hours later. Most of the time, he thought he didn't need a shave when he really did.

James says that's the way it is when someone just hears God's Word and doesn't put it into practice. If all we do is read our Bibles during our quiet time and listen to the preacher on Sunday morning, if we never meditate on God's Word, if we never allow it to invade our reality and convict us of our sins, it's like taking a quick morning glance in the mirror. No, somehow, it's the doing of God's word that really helps us see ourselves as we really are. It's the application of God's Word to our lives that truly challenges us to change.

Why is that? Because in order to apply God's Word to our lives, we must first start to see ourselves the way God sees us, instead of according to our own self image. For let's face it – most of the time, most of us think we are in pretty good shape. Oh, we might admit that we need a little tidying up around the edges, but we certainly wouldn't characterize ourselves like verse 21 does – as filthy. We wouldn't think of ourselves as wicked or depraved, which is the meaning behind that King James word “naughty.”

No, we know what filthy, wicked behavior looks like – the sorts of activities that my mama used to call “sorry.” Lying, cheating, being lazy, not trying to improve your situation, not being able to control yourself, failing to take responsibility for your actions – that was “sorryness” of the worst sort, according to mama.

But you know, everyone doesn't define “sorryness” in the same way. Everyone doesn't have the same list of socially unacceptable behaviors. To many young folks, for example, the worst thing anyone can be is judgmental. They think it's “hateful” to criticize anyone's behavior or beliefs, and they shun as a bigot anyone who tries to uphold absolute truth. In short, they would say that all of us Evangelical Presbyterian types are “sorry,” if they were to use that term.

So, how do we know who's really “sorry?” James has already told us, hasn't he? Verse 18 speaks of the “word of truth,” and in our responsive reading from Psalm 19, David has the same idea. He says that the testimony of the Lord is what makes the simple wise. No, whatever our millennial friends may think, absolute truth exists, and God has spoken it to us in the Scriptures.

And both David and James agree that following God's Word isn't optional for anyone. James calls God's Word the “law of liberty.” But that doesn't make sense to us. How can following any law bring liberty? How can it be freeing to do what the law dictates?

Let's think back again to what David told us in Psalm 19. The law of the Lord, he says, is perfect, reviving the soul. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart. The commandment of the Lord

is pure, enlightening the eyes. It turns out that the only way to find true joy, true light, true life, true freedom is not to give ourselves over to spontaneity and sincerity, not to do whatever seems right to us or whatever feels right at the time, but to govern or circumscribe our actions according to the truth we find in Scripture.

Okay, so what does this “law of liberty,” what does the Scripture tell us we should do? How should we put our faith in God into practice? Verse 27 breaks holy living down into two broad categories: taking care of the helpless and keeping ourselves unspotted from the world. Now, we’ll spend quite a bit of time on how to help the needy when we get to chapter 2, so for now, let’s focus on that second category of lawkeeping – how to avoid being spotted or stained, or as verse 21 would put it, how to avoid being filthy and wicked, or as my mama would put it, how to avoid being “sorry.”

So, what does avoiding the stain of wickedness look like? We could come up with quite a list of “sorry” behaviors, couldn’t we? But isn’t it interesting that James doesn’t start out by condemning all the sorts of socially unacceptable sins we tend to look down on. Instead, he points his finger directly at us oh-so respectable Presbyterians and says that the first problem we need to deal with is wrath, or anger.

Of course we want to object. Is being angry really so bad? Why is anger so much worse than the laziness or irresponsibility or loose living that seem to be so much more serious problems for our society? Well, look at verse 20. The wrath of man has nothing to do with the righteousness of God. In other words, when we become angry with other people, we are completely out of step with the way God wants us to live our lives. After all, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that being angry with someone was as worthy of judgment as murdering him.

Okay, so why is that? Well, why do we tend to get angry with other people? Oftentimes, it’s because we are proud, in one way or another. You scream at the driver in front of you because you think you would do a better job if you were sitting in his driver’s seat. You stew about your boss’s dumb decision because you know you wouldn’t do things that way if you were in charge. You blow up at a politician’s platform because you are confident that your judgment or experience is superior to his.

And how do we usually express this anger? It’s often by what we say, isn’t it? Jesus says that it’s out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks, and our mouths are only too willing to show how little we think of others – and thus how much we think of ourselves.

Okay, so what if we refuse to bridle our tongues? What if we continue to express arrogant anger at other sinners? James has little good news for us in verse 26. Instead he condemns those who go on saying things out of anger and hatred. For however religious we might seem on the outside, however godly we may seem on Sunday mornings, with our mouths full of songs and hymns and spiritual songs, our angry words during the rest of the week give the lie to our profession of faith.

In short, if we go on exploding in our anger, spewing hateful words at others, we are a lot like that cadet who thought he was clean-shaven after glancing in the mirror in the morning – we are deceiving ourselves about our own spiritual condition. However respectable we might be in the sight of others, such religion is in fact vain, empty, worthless.

So how can we fight against the tendency to anger that pride so easily produces within us? How can we keep our hearts unspotted, unstained? James has some rather severe medicine for us in verse

19: We must be swift to hear and slow to speak, if we want to keep our anger from boiling out of control. If we want to say fewer angry words, James says we need to do more listening.

But how will that help? Well, think about it. If we'll listen to what others have to say instead of just thinking about what we are going to say next, if we'll really listen to those with whom we disagree, to those with whom we've become angry, we might discover that most shocking of all truths – that they might be right and we might be wrong! If we take the time to find out why others think what they think and do what they do, won't we be much more likely to sympathize than to condemn? And even if we don't end up agreeing with their conclusions or approving of their behavior, chances are we'll have less room for arrogant anger if we really try to get to know folks.

And that's because of what James tells us in verse 21. We should lay aside the filthiness and wickedness of pride and instead receive with the Word of God with meekness, with humility. And if we really do this, if we really humble ourselves before God's Word, acknowledging how we ourselves have failed to follow God's law of liberty, if we truly admit to ourselves and others that we are nothing more than sinners saved by grace, what room will be left in our lives to be so angry with anyone else's mistakes or shortcomings or even downright sorryness?

And so we see that if listening, really listening to others will make it hard for us to go on being angry with them, then listening, really listening to God's Word will make it hard for us to go on being proud. And if we will not be satisfied with a cursory glance at the Scriptures, if we are willing to gaze intently into God's Word, submitting ourselves completely to God's authority and seeking to obey Him in everything we say and do, we'll find that God's truth not only convicts us of our sin, but provides for us the Savior that we need.

David knew this need – remember how he prayed, “Who can discern his errors? Clear thou me from hidden faults. Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me!” David didn't trust himself to keep himself straight – he knew He needed God to cleanse him and save him. And in verse 21 James reminds us that God is in fact the One Who saves us – engrafting, implanting His word into our hearts so that we might truly believe, so that we might truly trust in Christ. In verse 18, he says that God is the One Who has begotten us, Who has given us new life by this word of truth.

And why has God done all this? Verse 18 goes on to tell us: so that we might be firstfruits to God, so that we might joyfully and completely offer ourselves to Him. And how else can we do this, how else can we love and serve God except by loving others, abandoning any angry pride and patiently hearing their stories, admitting our own sins and calling others to love and trust the Christ Who has saved us by His truth?

So, how about it? Will we take, not just a passing glance, but a good long look into God's Word? Will we let God's word challenge us and change us? Will we take a good, long look at ourselves? Will we let go of whatever pride and anger is standing between us and others? Will we embrace God's law of liberty? Will we live by God's law of love? Or will we be sorry?