

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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“Shift”

The first in a Fall sermon series entitled, *The Work We Do*

James 2: 19-27

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When I was 19 years old, I got my first church job. I was the Associate Youth Minister at First Baptist Church of Houston. It was pretty exciting... moving down there to the big city for the summer. They'd just built this monstrosity of a building out on the loop and there were gazillion teenagers.

I spent two summers there and it was a great experience... I learned a lot. ... Saw a lot and some of what I saw disturbed me. The staff didn't like one another. And they pretty consistently put one another down in my presence.

These were good people...

folks of faith,

who'd been on the journey a long time.

Ministers even... but they didn't like one another and gossiped about one another all the time.

After college I took another youth ministry position as I started seminary. I learned a lot... saw a lot... and some of what I saw disturbed me. One night, early on, the deacons had been in their monthly Tuesday night meeting. I was closing down the gym heading to my car when I heard two of them shouting at one another... I literally had to get in between them before one took a swing.

I've been working in churches now for 29 years... and it will come as no surprise to you that I have a collection of stories like this. What I learned is that, in spite of the fact that churches can be wonderful places full of really good people... Being in church doesn't fix everything about you.

I struggled with that observation... and then my observation that good church men and women had done some pretty horrible things throughout history. And being a glass-half-empty kind of guy, I dealt with a good bit of cynicism about the Church and its capacity to change people.

Of course... I didn't have to be on church staffs or read history to get cynical about that ... I could just pay attention to my own life.

Seeing things that I'd like to change...

that needed to change...

trying to change them...

And mostly feeling frustrated that year after year, I still dealt with the same Achilles heels... same fears... same jealousies... same ambitions.

When I was six I went to Randy Fortenberry's birthday party. It was on the Cowboy John show... Sort of the Mr. Rogers of Beaumont but obviously way cooler. And we got to say on TV what we were going to be when we grew up. When Cowboy John got to me, I said, "I'm going to be the President of the world."

That was at 6... and at 26 I hadn't outgrown that ambitious nature and that need to be special... nor had I by 36.

So, see... it wasn't just ministers backbiting or deacons swinging at one another or inquisitions burning folks at the stake... that made me start questioning what was going on. Mainly, it was my own heart and life and a hunger for things to change.

I got hungry... and hungry enough finally to begin nosing around and looking deeper into the life of faith and the Tradition of the Church. And I found things that gave me hope... and I found people that were pointing at a path that had changed them. I found Saints talking about spiritual formation.

So... here we are and you hear me and others talking about this a lot. We have classes about it... books out there in the Narthex... conversations available. We're a contemplative church (says so on the Website). And what that means to me is not that we chant and burn incense and shave our heads (though I might as well).

What it means is that we're trying to encourage folks to intentionally get on the path of transformation.

During the fall I'm going to preach with an eye towards that... I'm planning to be a little less subtle about it all and a bit more explicit about the transformative spiritual path. We'll be using the lectionary but with a big backdrop that says, "The Work We Do."

There is a work we must do... because clearly we don't get there just by hanging around the right place. There is a cooperative work, a union of wills... a synthesis of divine grace and our continual "Yes." If all that happens is hanging around a good place... probably at 46, you'll still want to be the president and living as if you're the center of the universe.

In this month, our thinking will be prompted by James... James is a letter at the end of the New Testament, which has a kind of Jewish quality to it. In fact, it's addressed to the 12 tribes... so these are Jewish Christians.

And in my imagination, here's the situation: It was just like a bunch of moderate Baptists who had been raised in a harsh, hellfire and brimstone faith... And they'd finally heard the gospel of grace and moved beyond the legalism they'd been raised with but now they didn't quite know where the rules fit.

Got it?... these were Jewish folks,

raised on the law

who'd learned about God's grace, that is unconditional...

It's just there... already... just because.

And they still all had those little versions of the Ten Commandments in their homes but weren't sure what to do with them.

You can imagine... that some of them, having been freed up from all the legalism, were really enjoying their freedom.

Eating pork in public...

Going to water aerobics on the Sabbath...

Only saying their prayers 2 times a day instead of 3.

You can imagine that some, having bet the house on grace, began thinking it didn't matter how they lived. You can imagine it... because you've been there... are there perhaps. The pendulum swings, it just has too. Especially if you were raised with a mean religion, centered in rules and guilt and all that...

When you get set free... you are "free indeed"... and then some, usually.

No telling what was going on with these Jewish Christians but whatever was happening seemed to be of concern... so... James writes a letter and basically he's saying, "Behave..."

And you may know that lots of folks along the way didn't want this book in the Bible because it said "behave" so much. And that "if your faith doesn't change you and if there aren't any works, it's dead." So you can see why folks like Luther struggled with it and tried to take it from the canon.

But the Church kept it... and we're reading it this month... And it's inviting us to make another shift. There are shifts that take place.

One of them, at least for some of us, is that move away from legalism... away from fear-based and guilt-ridden faith. And if you haven't made that shift... I pray you will. It's not enough... Your own experience, much less the biblical story, will tell you that's so.

Religion that has you afraid of a "tyrant in the sky," is not religion that can save you. It may keep you in line for a while... but it's not enough to make you whole.

"Shame on you" isn't saving. So we shift... and we move away from faith centered in "getting it right, walking the straight and narrow, and coloring between the lines."

That's the first shift and one to be celebrated.

But James invites another shift... It's a different way of understanding the law... a new way of seeing it. No longer is morality a way of keeping you out of the Divine Dog House... It's a path.

The law... doing and keeping the law... being moral... is no longer seen as the end in itself but it's seen as a path that leads us to be more fully human and a path that leads us to God.

James refers to it as "the law that gives freedom." Paradoxically, freedom comes from being bound to the right things. And that's the first thing I want to underline in this series.

There's no such thing as moving forward towards freedom... apart from a journey that is submissive. It seems backward, I know... But bear with me. Freedom comes to the one who has been trained.

Ask any accomplished musician...

Ask any athlete...any craftsman...

Always there is submission. The one who plays brilliant extemporaneous pieces... was first trained on the scales. She was submissive to a teacher... to a program... a regimen...and it eventually created the skill and maturity to be free.

This is "the law that gives freedom..." It takes you someplace. So... here's the idea as we think about spiritual formation... the moral life is the first step. We can't make progress without dealing with it.

The Desert Fathers called it purgation or purification. It's an important stage. So, James is going to say to us...

If you have no control over your body...

If you can't keep from saying things you ought not say...

If you ignore people who are hungry and hurting...

Your faith isn't going to get off the ground... it's dead. If all you do is hear the word and never put it into practice... you're like someone who takes a look in the mirror and then can't remember what he looks like.

If you don't do the faith... you won't know who you are... While you're living life, you'll forget who you really are if you aren't practicing the faith.

So... this is a kind of first step... Not so we can get God to like us... remember! But so we can grow up. We can't skip these first steps of the journey. And while the list surely isn't exhaustive, James wants us to be thinking specifically. He invites us to take a little inventory.

Do I have control over what I say? What about my words? Do I snap in anger? Do I pile on in gossip? Am I opinionated? If so, it means I have no control over my impulses, and if I have no control over my impulses I'm not mature. The spiritually mature have self-control.

Secondly, do I take care of... am I compassionate towards... those who are vulnerable? The widows and orphans... Folks who cannot take care of themselves. Folks that cannot repay me... Do I look after anyone in distress? That's a biggie in James' little inventory. The mature are compassionate.

Thirdly, am I "polluted" by the world? How much has the world, with its assumptions and values, seeped into my life? And a little hint here... the most dangerous pollutants are the ones you don't see. It's easy to look at gratuitous sexual stuff and think we can cross this off the list...(just stay out of the red light district!)

We can do that and smile and not know that our way of thinking, of looking at the world and ourselves, is completely controlled by culture... And not just by Hollywood... But by Wall Street... by the Silicone Valley... by all sorts of "isms"...nationalism, commercialism, rationalism...that are so pervasive. The mature have moved beyond what is "worldly."

The Desert Fathers said we must purify first to make progress. James says we must "Do the word" if we're to be free. And Jesus told a lawyer once, who quoted the Great Commandment to love God and neighbor, that if he did that he would live.

It is doing... but not simply doing for doing's sake. It's a doing that takes you some place. That fashions you...Evagrius said, "Whoever knows the power of God's commandments and understands the...soul is aware of the way in which the former heal the latter..." (the power of the commandments heals the soul).

See what happens...

Watch your words long enough and you might just find that you have actually become a self-restrained... self-controlled person in all areas.

Be mindful of the ways the culture is controlling you... keep waking up to it and renouncing it and eventually you find that you've lost your taste for what the culture is serving up. You don't have the need to keep up with the Joneses.

Act with compassion long enough... act loving towards the orphans and widows and oppressed long enough and you actually become loving.

In other words, as the mystics say, "Your imitation becomes reality." What is done simply by obedience becomes a habit. What begins as practice becomes a part of who you really are. You aren't the same as you once were. And what is more, you have a huge sneaking suspicion that most of the change in your life has happened because of a power and grace that is beyond you. It's a holy, cooperative progression.

Maximus the Confessor wrote,

"Whoever believes finds humility.
Whoever is gentle keeps the commandments.
Whoever keeps the commandments is purified.
Whoever is purified is enlightened."

Well... there's more to say... much more. This is only a place to begin but know that you must begin there. There's no pass on this one.

We must look at our lives and be honest. We must quit lying to ourselves.

Look in the mirror and don't forget what's there.
Listen to God's word...
Go do the word.

This is the work that we must do.

Amen.