

“*Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,*” says James (1:19). I would have to say that James says some puzzling things in his epistle, but don’t you agree that this line makes a whole lot of sense? And don’t you agree that James’ instruction couldn’t be more relevant to life in the year 2021?

Martin Luther thought James was dangerous. He thought that James was an “epistle of straw” because of all this listening and doing stuff. See—Luther was afraid that we would read the book of James and come away feeling that it’s all about *doing*, that our faith consists of acts like caring for widows and orphans in their distress, or that our calling was to keep ourselves unstained from the world—meaning that we live purely, keep our promises, respect one another, learn to live in community, guard our emotions, and turn away from things meant to deceive us. Well, Dr. Luther, what’s so bad about that?

Okay, to be totally honest Luther didn’t think that was at all bad. Not at all, even though Luther did have a grumpy side. Forgive me, those of you who might have strains of Lutheranism in your bloodstream. After all, I took church history in seminary. I know that Luther was all about those sorts of deeds of faith. He did them himself—on a regular basis. Truthfully, it wasn’t the actions that worried him; it was the mistaken belief that actions are what actually save people.

Frankly, Luther’s perception can make me wonder if he read the letter of James. I mean, this is just chapter one, and here we have in black and white: “*The word planted in us*” (v. 21) has the power to save us. The word planted—in us? What in the world? Or what beyond this world does he mean?

James, tradition has it, was the brother of Jesus. There is some considerable doubt as to whether James ever sat down and wrote this letter, but in the book of Acts, we see James stepping up to be a leader—some say THE leader—of the fledgling church in Jerusalem. So, I like to imagine that this letter is the result of being the brother of Jesus and of listening to all that Jesus was saying his whole life long, not just during the three years of public ministry the Gospels tell us about, his whole life long, well, James’ whole life long anyway, since he was the younger brother. For James’ entire life, he lived in the shadow of his brother.

Maybe there was a time when James idolized his big brother, Jesus, as is the habit of younger brothers. Maybe there was a time when James began to resent Jesus and the

special treatment Jesus received from his mother, who treated him as though he was a special gift from God, and from his father, who seemed strangely in awe of his eldest son. Maybe James grumbled about the things Jesus would say and about how his sisters and all the neighborhood kids would flock to listen to every word Jesus said, as though he were some Prophet or Rabbi, for heaven's sake! There was that scene in three of the gospels where it says Jesus' mother and his brothers came to "*see him.*" You know, James must have been leading the pack and telling them that Jesus had gone crazy, and they needed to get him help, take him someplace where he wouldn't be an embarrassment to the whole family. James had a practical mind.

James was a *doer*. James was faithful. In Jesus' Luke 15 story, however, James got to be the elder brother, but he didn't come off very well. By now that had all changed. James looked in the mirror and didn't like what he saw. So, when the resurrected Jesus showed up and said, "I need you, bud," James the doer stepped up. If you asked him, he probably couldn't have told you why. He just did. He just did what he always did. He was the helpful one, the calm one, the good one, the pure one. But now, there was something else inside him. Something took root, a *word* that made sense, a *word* that brought life. And he was still a doer. But now he was a doer *because*. He was still a servant, but now he was a servant *because*. He was still pure and good and faithful, but now he was pure and good and faithful *because*. *Because the word was planted in him.*

He humbly accepted the word planted in him. He looked into the mirror and didn't like what he saw. What he saw was emptiness. What he saw was the duty of faith, the burden of purity, the task of service. What he saw was a void where his motivation and his soul ought to be. But when he looked into those eyes, the eyes he knew from his own birth, the eyes that managed to love him even when he didn't want them to, those eyes seemed to call for more and now seemed to give more. When he looked into those eyes, it was as if something took root in him; something was planted: a reason, a purpose, a new beginning, a new soul. Everything he did, he did because of that *planted word*, that hope revived, that soul restored. It has the power to save our soul. That's what he wrote. Not the works motivated by a do-it-yourself salvation, Luther. But instead, the word implanted. The works grow out of that salvation; they don't earn it. James needed that word planted in him, not mere words, or just more *words, words, words!*

There is a progression in James' teaching which goes something like this: First be quick to listen, then slow to speak, and then slow to become angry. Finally, "*Do not merely listen to the word...Do what it says*" (v. 21). Do what God's Word is telling you to do. We must

not merely give lip service, or mental assent, to the truth of God's Word. We must live it out with our actions. The teaching of James, "*a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ*" (v. 1), is utterly simple, but it is remarkably profound.

Our relationship with Jesus is one of great intimacy and utter dependency. We are asked to no longer live for ourselves but rather for him. We are to be in Christ and Christ is to be in us. In fact, apart from him we can do nothing (John 11:5). But through him we can do anything he calls us to do (Philippians 4:13).

If you've been around Ken Mawr for very long you've heard me say to new members answering membership vows or parents answering baptismal vows for their child, "Say what you mean and mean what you say." When it comes to finding a perfect synthesis between words and actions, in no way could we do better than to turn to the life of Jesus. He said what he meant, and he meant what he said.

It's his actions that speak the loudest, like the time a woman caught in adultery and condemned to die was brought before him by the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. They wanted to know what Jesus thought. But, instead of arguing with them, he doodled in the sand, then said, "*Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.*" And when everyone had slithered away, convicted of their own guilt, Jesus turned to the woman and said, "*Then neither do I condemn you...Go now and leave your life of sin.*" (John 8:3-11) Or the time a blind man called out to Jesus, "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*" Jesus asked, "*What do you want me to do for you?*" And the blind man said, "*Rabbi, I want to see.*" And Jesus said simply, "*Go, your faith has healed you.*" And immediately, the man's eyes were opened, and he could see. (Mark 10:46-52)

One of my favorite Gospel stories of Jesus comes on the night he met with his disciples in the Upper Room. Without saying a word, he poured water into a basin and put a towel around him and, one by one, knelt before each of the disciples and washed their feet. To this day, there's never been a more powerful symbol of what it means to be a servant to others in the name of Jesus Christ than washing someone's feet.

Then, of course, there's the Last Supper itself, where Jesus took an ordinary loaf of bread, gave thanks to God, broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "*This is my body given for you.*" And, after supper, taking a common cup, giving thanks to God, and passing it his disciples, saying, "*This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.*"

Jesus was a man whose words and deeds matched in every way, and, though we will never achieve the perfection he did, we can try to. As the RSV translates verse 22, the expectation is to “*Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.*” Take what you know about the love of God and the grace of Jesus Christ, however much or however little that may be, and put it into action. Say what you’ll do, then *do what you say.*

James didn’t earn “*the planted word, which can save*” but he certainly had to accept it, as we also must accept it. He had to welcome it with gentleness—the eighth fruit of the Spirit, the very essence of God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. We too must welcome the Word with gentleness, not because of our weakness but because of God’s strength.

We all have this tendency to say one thing and do another, perhaps to have good intentions, but then not follow through. When that happens, there’s a disconnect that undermines the integrity of our Christian witness. Why should others take us seriously when we constantly talk about such things as love and forgiveness and grace, if we’re not willing to love our neighbors, forgive those who have hurt us in some way, or live gracious lives?

Until we do what we say, it’s only talk—*words, words, words!* But when our words and actions become one and the same, others will take notice and know that we are serious about what we believe and, more importantly, in whom we believe.

Amen.