

**Sermon for September 20, 2015 (Proper 20 adjusted, Year B)  
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: James 1:17-27; Psalm 1; Mark 9:30-37

Title: Be Doers of the Word

Has anyone here this morning ever gotten into trouble because of something that you said? Something perhaps spoken rashly, without care or forethought? Anyone?

Well, good. At least I am not the only one! In fact, I wonder: has there ever been a human being who did not struggle with controlling the tongue?

Perhaps some of you remember the story reported by the desert fathers and mothers that the great Abba Agatho, one of the spiritual giants of those Christian communities in Egypt in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, - that he struggled so much to control his tongue that for 3 years he decided to walk around with a stone in his mouth until he learned how to be quick to listen and slow to speak!

Now, I do NOT advocate putting rocks in your mouth! But it is impossible to read this Letter of James and not be convicted about how deadly the human tongue can be and how crucial it is to tame it.

“You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness” (James 1:19-20). Seems quite clear, doesn’t it?

But what is the context into which James sends this teaching? What was going on in his community of disciples that demanded such a strong teaching?

When we step into the world of James’ context, remember we are stepping into the life of a minority people within their culture. It is safe to assume that the author and readers of this text are faithful, devoted Jews who have come to the sincere conviction that the long-promised Messiah has come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Now, remember also that this came as a tremendous surprise to them.

NO ONE AT ALL expected the Messiah to look and act as Jesus did – or to die as Jesus died! He did not match up to their expectations.

But, they experienced Jesus as resurrected and alive – as the risen Lord!  
And experience, my friends, always – ALWAYS – trumps our ideas, concepts and thoughts.

So the twelve tribes to whom James writes are a minority group who are under enormous pressure from the authorities and leaders around them to abandon their new-found conviction and to return to the safe and predictable fold of society around them.

Now, in some ways, we have no connection at all with that kind of context. The church in America today continues to have unprecedented and enormous influence in our culture.

This is a simple fact. You can know this by observing how our President and every single candidate currently running for the office of President – with the possible exception of Bernie Sanders – making regular reference to his or her Christian faith!

But while this influence is undeniable, at the same time there is a different kind of pressure in our society against the Church. Our culture is moving more and more to relegate the Church to a place of quaint nostalgia. It reminds people of the holidays and grandma and Christmas and apple pie. It's sweet and nice to go to Church – but this Jesus is not one for whom very many in our nation are willing to sacrifice their own comfort and pleasure and goals.

In the face of great pressure and persecution, James' messianic community was tempted to exact revenge against the authorities with harsh words and acts of anger. They believed that Jesus was establishing his kingdom and they were going to push to bring that about by any means necessary!

At any rate, it seems clear that some were tempted to follow that path, just as some are always tempted to take matters into their own hands rather than to wait on God's good timing.

When justice is denied and perverted, when discrimination is at work, when corrupt leaders in power are undermining your community, it is easy to fall back on the old ways of anger and violence and retribution.

It is much more difficult to persevere in the face of all this and choose instead to walk in the way of Jesus, as the servant of all.

James challenges the community to be doers of the Word and not merely those who hear it and remain unaffected.

It is what we do that matters and it is our actions which manifest – always, clearly and faithfully manifest – what is on the inside.

James here shares the same perspective as Jesus who said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

And this is the same perspective as Paul who wrote, in his letter to the Church in Rome, that “it is not the hearers of the Law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the Law” (Romans 2:13).

“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” (James 1:25).

Now here is something else that we need to remember: whenever we read and hear the term “Law” in the New Testament, we must think of “Torah”.

This cannot be emphasized enough. In fact, it is a far better translation to speak of “those who peer into the perfect Torah, the Torah of freedom”.

Every original hearer of this Letter would have thought immediately of the Torah of Moses, rather than some abstract notion of “law”.

Can you see how this presents the same exact message as the first Psalm?

“Their delight is in the law of the LORD, and they meditate on the Torah day and night...Everything they do shall prosper” (Psalm 1:2).

Part of the sad history of the Church is that these messianic Jewish communities to which James is writing eventually died out. We don't really know how or why.

But it was only after they died out, and once the Church was entirely led by Gentiles, that this deep understanding of and connection to Torah also died. And that is when the foul spirit called anti-Semitism found a home in the Church.

We'll come back to that in a few weeks at the end of chapter 2.

Listen to the Word, my friends! James tells us that those who do the works of Torah are blessed. But what kind of works are those?

He concludes this first chapter with a brief summary, and it's worth a closer look!

"If any think they are religious", meaning observant of Torah, a doer of the works of Torah – if anyone thinks of themselves in this way, but cannot control their tongue, then what they do is worthless!

These are powerful words, but he continues with more.

"Religion that is pure and undefiled (again, the language of defilement is classic Jewish thought) before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27).

Try to imagine it, my friends: what would it look like if this was the measuring stick by which all of our programs and activities were evaluated? How would things change?

And what would our evaluation reveal? How do we measure up to this standard?

The Shepherd of Hermas, another early Christian writing that was widely read among the churches in the second century, shared a similar perspective.

The Shepherd wrote this: "Instead of [buying] fields, buy souls that are in trouble, according to your ability. Look after widows and orphans. Do not neglect them. Spend your riches on these kinds of fields and houses" (in Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude, p. 20).

How would the Church be different – how would Saint Mary’s be different – and how would our lives be different – if we made this teaching the measuring rod for everything that we did?

Instead of buying ski houses and yachts and beach houses and – within the parish – expensive chalices and fancy vestments – instead of buying these material things, what if we invested our money in the poor and the vulnerable?

Not because we hope to have a high, measurable rate of return on our investments, but because we know that life is fleeting and fragile and that the best thing that we can ever do with our wealth is to invest it in the kingdom of God by serving those in need.

My friends: every act of sacrificial compassion is an investment in the kingdom of heaven.

So what does it mean for us to be doers of the Word, according to James?

It means bridling our tongue and eschewing anger in our words.

It means concrete acts of compassion for the marginalized.

It means being a community marked by holiness, by the desire to please God above all else.

And we can do these things, because God has implanted the Word of truth deep within us. And that Word is a powerful Word, with the power to restore us, transform us, and to set us free. Welcome that Word – embrace it! – and you will be blessed. Alleluia! Amen.