

JAMES 1:19-27

FANATICS FOR THE FAITH

“Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

“If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”¹

Christians who take seriously the instruction of Scripture are considered fanatics by those who are casual about the Faith. Tepid faith has become *de rigueur* in too many religious circles. Modern evangelicals are expected to be religious, but they must not be overly committed to the Faith. In fact, those Christians who are openly committed to discovering the will of God and then doing what God wills are considered fanatics by those among us who are of tepid faith and commitment.

Recently, the founding pastor of one of the largest church movements in modern evangelicalism made a stunning admission. This greatly adulated pastor confessed that the “seeker sensitive” movement did not build strong Christians. What this pastor had done was create a setting that brought large crowds into a religious setting where many did, indeed, profess to believe the message of Faith. However, those professing the Faith were incapable of building themselves up in the Faith. In essence, a significant number of worshippers were unchanged other than being entertained in a religious setting.² I am not saying that these people were unsaved, but they give scant evidence of the transformational power of the Indwelling Spirit of God.

James was concerned that those to whom he wrote lived as children of the Living God. He was concerned that they not be merely religious, but that they should be righteous. James’ words are pointed as he confronts the attitudes that are casually dismissed even among God’s professed people, calling all who name the Name of Christ the Lord to practical holiness.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² Multiple articles speak of this confession: e.g. Bob Burney, “A Shocking ‘Confession’ from Willow Creek Community Church,” October 30, 2007, http://www.townhall.com/columnists/BobBurney/2007/10/30/a_shocking_%e2%80%9cconfession%e2%80%9d_from_willow_creek_community_church, Chuck Colson, “Rethinking Church,” December 5, 2007, <http://www.breakpoint.org/listingarticle.asp?ID=1435>

By the standard of this world, James is demanding that Christians become fanatics for the Faith. By the standard of God's Word, however, James calls on Christians to begin living the normal Christian life. In a similar manner, each of us is faced with the call to choose whether we will be complacent Christians that never disturb anyone with our Faith and that are never challenged by those about us to defend why we live as we do, or whether we will be fanatical about righteousness.

CATEGORIES OF THE FAITHFUL — Modern Christians are great for categorising one another. We differentiate on the basis of sex, on economic status, on racial and cultural bases, on educational levels, and any of a number of other criteria. Though the Word of God does not permit us to discriminate or show partiality, it is obvious from even a casual review of our text that God distinguishes between those who are hearers of the Word and those who are doers of the Word.

Understand that we are speaking about Christians—people who profess knowledge of Christ the Lord. We are speaking about people who would claim to have been born from above. And when we speak of hearers of the Word, we are speaking of individuals who may be quite knowledgeable of what the Bible says. They may well have read the Bible through in its entirety—repeatedly! It is quite possible that they serve in various voluntary positions within a church—sitting on boards and making decisions that affect the life of the Body. However, they are hearers, and not doers.

Also bear in mind that James speaks of Christians whose lives are defined by and characterised by a distressing degree of anger. These Christians, unlike those who are following hard after God, are slow to hear, quick to speak and quick to anger. They are so focused on their own wants that they fail to consider what God may desire. Things just never seem to work out as they want, and they grow frustrated, and their frustration quickly turns to anger. Full of anger, they are incapable of producing the righteousness God requires. In the grip of their anger, they are easily contaminated with filthiness and rampant wickedness, because they are unable to receive the implanted Word.

The child of God is under assault at the best of times. Christians are constantly tempted to embrace the attitudes of and to accommodate the actions of this dying world. However, the child of God is equipped to ward off the enticements of the world so long as he is able to hear the voice of God directing his path. However, when angry, we cease listening to the voice of God—or any other voice—so long as we are enraged. Thus, we are unusually vulnerable when we are angry. This is the reason James warns that the “anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” When we are angry, we cease listening to God because our emotions boil over and control us. Thus, the implanted Word has no place in our lives during the time anger controls us.

As hearers of the Word, we are able to go through the motions of being religious. We can perform all the rituals, perhaps even expecting that we will continue to be called upon to lead in conducting those rituals, though they cease to be worship. We can sing the songs that were written to glorify the Lord, though inwardly, our hearts are dark and contaminated by the choler that marks our life. We can continue to say prayers, and they may even sound quite pious, but we fail to communicate with the Father. As hearers, we are moving toward the most damning form of hypocrisy imaginable—that in which we are utter pretenders. As mere hearers, we seethe as we hear the Word because it exposes our hypocrisy, but we dare not let anyone see the contaminated condition of our soul.

When James commands us to “put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness,” he uses a Greek word that means “to strip off soiled clothing.” This idea of stripping away what is dirty or soiled is a common theme in the New Testament. Consider a few instances in the Word where we are commanded to rid ourselves of that which contaminates. In a passage that is reminiscent of James’ command, Paul writes, “Let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light” [ROMANS 13:12].

This is not the only time Paul issues such a command to Christians. In fact, he becomes quite specific as to what contaminates in both the Ephesian encyclical and in the Letter to the Colossian Christians. In the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes, “Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

“Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbour, for we are members one of another” [EPHESIANS 4:22-25].

To the Colossians, he warns, “You must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth” [COLOSSIANS 3:8].

The author of the Letter to the Hebrew Christians urges his readers, “Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” [HEBREWS 12:1].

These commands are echoed by Peter in his first letter to Christian of the Diaspora. Peter urges the saints to, “Put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander” [1 PETER 2:1].

The filthiness and rampant wickedness that James has in view likely refers to attitudes and actions deemed acceptable by inhabitants of this world. Those attitudes and actions would include, though they would not be restricted to: anger; wrath; malice; slander; obscene talk; deceit; hypocrisy; envy; slander; failure to stay the course. Attitudes and actions such as those listed contaminate; and the angry individual is liable to succumb to the temptation to adopt these attitudes as advancing the cause of Christ.

Refresh your memory of the situation confronting those to whom James was writing. These Jewish Christians were experiencing severe persecution because they confessed faith that Jesus was the promised Messiah—the Son of God. Because they would not deny their faith, they had lost their social and cultural support networks, their possessions, their ability to earn a livelihood, and in many instances they had lost their freedom and some had even lost their lives. Under such conditions, we can imagine that it would be quite normal to be angry at the situation or at life in general; and the anger experienced could readily be directed toward those who made life miserable.

What I am about to say is not mere theory; it is truth that each of us is called upon to embrace daily. ***When you are unjustly accused and when you are slandered, when you are wronged, you must not succumb to the temptation to retaliate in kind; neither may you permit yourself to grow angry and remain angry.*** For to do so is to stumble into the miasma of situational ethics that has utterly contaminated the world in which we live. When those around you cheat and deceive in order to advance their own interests, you must not permit yourself to imagine that you can employ the same techniques to the glory of God. You must be godly, for the implanted Word that you have received is able to save your souls, and it is necessary if you will honour the Father.

Hearers of the Word listen to what is said. They likely even give assent to the words that are presented. However, they justify ignoring what the Word teaches and act as though God's Word has no validity in their particular circumstance. Hearers of the Word often insist that others must apply what is written, but they appear convinced that they can ignore the Word. Nevertheless, they ignore this Word to their own grief.

The other category James identifies is **Doers of the Word**. Doers hear the Word, and they endeavour to do what they hear. Just as hearers justify acting like the earth dwellers with whom they identify, so doers of the Word make every effort to discover what honours the Lord and they endeavour to do those things. They take control of their lives and of their emotions. I do not mean to suggest that they have no feelings, but I do say that they subjugate their emotions to the will of God. They bring their sorrows and their joys to the Saviour, making every effort to walk in knowledge of what pleases the Lord instead of walking according to the fleeting feelings that drive much of the world.

Although he does not use the specific term "doers of the Word," the Apostle Paul identifies the actions of doers of the Word in the Letter to the Romans. He commands, "Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour" [**ROMANS 12:10**]. Every honourable action that we associate with "doing church" flows from "lov[ing] one another with brotherly affection," and from "outdo[ing] one another in showing honour." To be certain, Christians own honour to everyone [see **1 PETER 2:17**], but the fellow believers especially are to be honoured.

Listen to what the Apostle says! "Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour." This command is not optional; neither may we excuse ourselves if we choose not to do what is commanded. Christians are to be tenderly affectionate toward one another; we are to honour one another. In the context of the message for this day, this means that we refuse to permit ourselves to be overcome with anger. It does not mean that we will not be disappointed in ungodly conduct, nor does it mean that we will never be angry. It does mean that we will honour one another by treating one another as members of the Family of God. In practical language, the Word of God teaches us to treat one another with respect—refusing to think the worst of one another, speaking well of one another, and preferring one another.

Perhaps it would be good to review a portion of the covenant we adopted as a congregation. In the penultimate paragraph of that document, we state, "We ... promise to watch over one another in brotherly love; to remember each other in prayer; to help each other in times of trouble; to be not easily offended and always ready to forgive and settle differences, remembering Christ's command to do so quickly."

How do we honour one another? By refusing to hold onto our anger. By refusing to be overcome by malice. By refusing to slander one another. By eschewing obscene language. By refusing to act deceitfully or hypocritically. By not surrendering to despair. These are all negative actions, but just as light is the absence of darkness, so righteousness is the absence of ungodliness. By refusing to give in to rage, we equip ourselves to hear the Word when it is declared and when we read it.

Let me be practical, helping you to seize this truth. You honour others by becoming a servant to those you seek to honour. Honouring others means treating them with your words and with your actions as though they were worthy of your service. We are to cultivate the attitude of honouring others instead of seeking to be honoured. We are to learn to love honouring those with whom we share this holy faith.

Doers of the Word are concerned both to know the will of God and to do all that God commands. Such people seek to honour Him through obedience to what He teaches. Through being a servant to His people and through ruling over their own emotions they honour Him who is their Master. They are careful to avoid being contaminated with the attitudes associated with this fallen world. Doers of the Word are not perfect, but they know that they are responsible before God who is perfect; they know that they must give a full accounting for their actions and for their attitudes. That knowledge is sobering for them, and they make every effort to keep short accounts with God.

Perhaps Doers of the Word are angered on occasion by the actions of others, but they take seriously the command of the Apostle who teaches, “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil”

[EPHESIANS 4:26, 27]. Did you notice that Paul is saying much the same thing that James has said? James wrote, “The anger of man does not produce the righteousness God requires.” The reason this is so is that holding your anger “give[s an] opportunity to the devil.” When anger controls our lives, we are vulnerable to succumbing to every kind of filthiness and rampant wickedness that infiltrates the world.

The Christians to whom James was writing were hurting; and in their pain they were susceptible to being overcome by sin. They could give in to anger and employ the tactics of the world to strike out at those who were injuring them. Perhaps you wonder why God permits His people to experience pain and disappointment. Even as I prepared this sermon, word came that some within our community have maligned my good name, repeating and embellishing insinuations that were made at a church meeting some time back. Even though the individual making the insinuations retracted any hint of what was inferred, the damage has been done, and gossips and slanderers have picked up her intimations and broadcast them throughout the community. Why does God permit such things? What is accomplished when God permits such evil against His people?

Let me say that believing in God does not protect anyone from experiencing disappointment or pain. However, believing in God does give focus to our experience and our faith sets boundaries to our grief. It is a good thing for us to be focused on pleasing the Lord rather than on defending ourselves. Otherwise, we might *truly* strike out at those who wound us. However, we know that we serve God, and not the expectations of fallen man. We make no concession to the flesh, but we strive to honour Christ the Lord in every way. We are a servant to all, though we know that we will be maligned and treated meanly by those who do not know the Saviour. Nevertheless, we are convinced that we are responsible to be doers of the Word and not hearers only.

It is germane to this issue to make a significant observation in order to equip you for the assaults and injuries you will eventually experience because you are a Christian. In His messages to the Seven Churches of Asia, the Risen Son of God addressed the Church in Smyrna with sobering words. Listen to what the Lord of Glory says in **REVELATION 2:10**. “Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

The Master does not intend to protect us from trouble. However, we are not to live in fear. The ultimate source of our trials is in many instances the devil himself. Tribulation is limited by God’s permissive will. Our responsibility is to be faithful, even to the point of death. We are assured that there is a crown awaiting us if we are faithful.

WHAT GOD EXPECTS — God expects His people to be in control of their feelings. It should be obvious from reading the Word of God that each Christian is responsible to discover what the divine will is in any situation or in any relationship, and then to fulfil that will. Beyond this, according to the text, God expects His people to be pure and undefiled in the world. These three aspects of godliness are important to each of us if we will honour the Lord. In the time remaining I want to consider these commands.

God expects those who are born again in His image to assume responsibility for their feelings—to rule over their emotions. I have already mentioned this, but there is more that needs to be said if we will thoroughly explore the mind of the Father. In stating God's expectations for His people, I am not suggesting that we become automatons without feelings. God does not expect us to become stoics who never express sorrow or who never speak of joy. God expects us to be real! We are not plastic. However, we must understand that there are consequences to our actions; and when we are ruled by our emotions, we become susceptible to every sort of evil, as we have already seen.

Join me in exploring this concept of being ruled by our emotions a bit further. Contemporary popular music is excessively focused on gratification of sexual desire or on expressing rage. In modern rap, others (usually young women) are reduced to objects to be used for the gratification of the thug grunting the words. Modern country and western music strives to justify surrendering to one's desires. "How can this be so wrong when it feels so right?" croons the singer to justify his or her lust. The overarching theme in contemporary music is that our own rage justifies hurting others, or that our lust justifies using others. When we are ruled by our feelings we are demonstrating that we have situated "self" on the throne of life, and there is no room for Christ as Lord.

Tragically, that attitude of being led by one's feelings has infiltrated the churches, filling the pews with people who give no evidence of regeneration. Such people are impulsive and impetuous, making decisions based on how they feel as they act out their impulses. Though these individuals proclaim themselves to be saints of the Most High God, there is scant evidence of relationship to Him whom they profess to worship. Singing songs and reciting prayers is meaningless if the life fails to reflect the presence of God who is just. There is no biblical justification for being led by our feelings.

Those who know God are commanded to be responsible for ruling over their emotions rather than being ruled by those same emotions. Let's admit that our emotions are powerful. Teaching teens how to have "safe sex" is like taking gasoline to a bonfire. Something is bound to burn. Likewise, telling people that gratifying sexual appetites outside of marriage can be justified focuses on one aspect of human existence without regard for the remainder of all human interactions. Perhaps we need to hear again the Word that teaches us, "Let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous" [**HEBREWS 13:4b**].

The highest good is not whatever panders to our feelings. Feelings change, and sometimes they change quite rapidly. Right is determined by a fixed standard and not by how we feel at the moment. God is righteous, and He commands His people to reflect His parentage by being righteous. We will do well to hear Peter's word on this matter. "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct" [**1 PETER 1:14, 15**].

Just as the emotions of personal desire are strong, so the emotions identified as anger—rage, choler, fury—are equally powerful. In the grip of rage, we become susceptible to ever-greater sin against God and against man. There is only one antidote for the child of God, and that is to accept responsibility for his or her own feelings, submitting them to the reign of the Lord Jesus and refusing to permit himself or herself to be brought into subjection to personal feelings.

Obviously, in order to fulfil the divine will, we must know what that will is. Contemporary Christians often claim to have received a “word from the Lord,” seemingly through every means except that which God has established to communicate His will! Christians say they “feel” what the Spirit wants them to do, or they have “prayed about” whatever it is that they think they should do. Such assertions are nothing less than following feelings. It is not uncommon for those who have “prayed about” what should be done to ignore what is written in the Word. I can say with absolute certainty that the Spirit of God will never contradict what He has caused to be written. God gave us a perfect revelation with the Bible. If we neglect this book, seeking wisdom in the ruminations of fallen man, we err and open ourselves to ever-greater error.

Have we forgotten the testimony of the Apostle to the Gentiles? Writing the pastor of the Church in Ephesus, Paul testified, “From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work” [2 TIMOTHY 3:15-17].

Peter referred to his experience on the Mount of Transfiguration. He saw the Master glorified. Yet his testimony denied that he would rely on what he saw and heard. Instead, he confessed, “We have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” [2 PETER 1:19-21].

The Apostles and those who laboured with them relied upon the written Word. Their experiences were great—greater, perhaps than any experience to which we might appeal in our collective experience. However, they were of the conviction that God has given a perfect revelation in this Word. Those who penned Scripture were “carried along by the Holy Spirit,” providing us precisely what the Spirit desired us to have. Why should we imagine that we will receive something different from what has been written?

As the unknown author of the Letter to the Hebrew Christians begins to write, he reminds his readers of the manner in which we received knowledge of the will of God. “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” [HEBREWS 1:1, 2].

The earliest converts to the Faith, having received the message of life and obeying what the Master commanded, “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” [ACTS 2:42]. The Apostles, like the prophets who preceded them, committed themselves to the written Word, providing exposition of that Word as they taught the mind of the Master. They did not teach what they felt or what they thought was right, but they taught the Word of God.

Perhaps Mark Twain spoke for many of us. He is reputed to have once said, “It is not what I do not understand in the Bible that troubles me; it is what I do understand.” This is the issue precisely! We are perturbed by what we read in the Word and do understand rather than not having enough information concerning the will of God. God has revealed all that is required for godliness, but we don’t like what we do know. Among the truths that we do read is that God demands purity.

God warns us to “put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness” even as we “receive with meekness the implanted word.” Shortly, the Spirit of God through His servant James will warn us that “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is ... to keep oneself unstained from the world.” God expects His people to be pure, to be holy, to be unsullied by the attitudes and actions of this world.

I understand that some among us will undoubtedly complain that they cannot do this. They are absolutely correct! We cannot be perfect. We cannot be holy. This is the reason God declares us holy and pure before Him. You will no doubt recall that God “chose us in [the Lord Jesus Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” [EPHESIANS 1:4]. In Christ, we are pure and unblemished. However, we are fallen creatures that cannot please God in our own strength.

And though we will be perfected at His return, being at last fully in His image, at this present time we struggle against our fallen condition. Therefore, there is but one way in which we can obey this injunction, and that is to rely utterly on the power of the indwelling Spirit of God. That is the reason we have just learned that we are responsible to refuse to surrender to our feelings, discovering instead what the will of the Lord is in a given situation. Then, knowing the will of God and refusing to surrender to our own feelings, we will be able to bring to bear the power of the Spirit.

Let me draw the message to a conclusion by returning to the thrust of the text. God expects us to be fanatics for the Faith. This does not mean that we are to be nut bars, dressing in weird clothing, acting strangely and drawing attention to our peculiar eccentricities. Rather, God expects us to make a constant, concerted effort to be holy—to avoid allowing our feelings to rule over us and to make every effort to keep ourselves pure and uncontaminated by the attitudes of this dying world. We must not appeal to the methods of the world as we seek to do God’s world. Neither may we justify wickedness by saying that we cannot help ourselves. Rather, we must treat one another with respect, refusing to retaliate as the world does when we are injured, always seeking to find what pleases the Lord.

This is not merely a religion that we have joined; rather this is the Body of Christ into which we were placed! We have been saved, adopted as sons of the Living God with the inheritance reserved for His own people. Therefore, we cannot treat this Faith in a casual manner, as though the commands of our Father were somehow optional. We must not allow ourselves to embrace that perverted strain of popular religion that focuses on a few “big commands” which ignoring righteousness and holiness. We are called to be holy, beginning with holiness toward those with whom we interact on a daily basis.

The commands of God are impossible to obey, as I have already stated, except for the power of the Spirit of God who lives in us and enables us to please the Father. Have you faith in the Son of God? Does the Spirit of God live within you? Have you been born from above? Do you have the confidence that He has forgiven your sin and that He accepts you as His beloved child?

The call of God is for all who are willing to receive the life that is offered in Christ the Lord. The Word of God declares, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” That passage continues by citing the Prophet Joel, “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13**].

And that is our invitation to you. Receive the life that is offered to all through faith in the Living Son of God. Believe this message and live. For all who are children of the Living God, take to heart the instruction of the Word to rein in your feelings, refusing to depend on the caprice of the moment. Commit yourself to discover the will of God, and to courageously fulfil that will as you glorify Him through a life that is pure and holy. Do this today. Do it now. Amen.