

**Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23
James 1:17-27**

**Bakersfield, CA
August 30, 2009**

“Do The Right Thing”

“Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” This is one of the noblest theological statements in the NT and is still recited at the conclusion of the the *Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* in Orthodox churches. The pure gift, without any strings attached, a truly unselfish giving, stems from the very character of God our Father; and His character is steadfast, unchanging. He is someone we can always count on.

Some humans make donations and distribute gifts without thinking about it, while others give out of guilt, compulsion, or for self-serving reasons. In the Roman world the wealthy often distributed gifts in order to curry favor with the masses. But those gifts had no lasting value. God gave his own Son for us – an enduring gift – and God’s care for his people is constant. Wouldn’t it be fantastic if we could give like God? Well, the fact is, *God* thinks it would be fantastic, and because His son sacrificed for us, we, through him, are able to develop the generous character of God.

In his encounters with people Jesus always focused on inner character. Good character is not given to us; we’re not born with it. It has to develop within us, piece by piece, through thought, choice, courage, and determination. That’s why good character is more to be praised than outstanding talent. Character is crucial because it colors our perspective. What you *are* determines what you *see*, and what you *see*, determines what you *do*.

Here’s the good news of the gospel that the letter of James shares with us: God, “in fulfillment of his own purpose ... gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.” Through faith in Jesus we are “born again” into a new life – the life we were intended for – as God’s own children, when we believe in the word of truth and accept the gospel in our hearts. (see also 1 Pet. 1:23; Titus 3:5).

In this new life we are enabled to give generously as God gives. That’s what it means “...that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.” Christians are intended to be God’s people, modeling a lifestyle of generosity through a reformed heart. It’s the taking on of the character of God.

We develop that character through disciplined attention to God’s direction found through regular Bible reading and study, worship, true fellowship, prayer, *and taking the right action, making the right decision, when the time comes.*

James writes of some very specific examples of right action and right decisions. The moral life of Christians begins with putting aside all those qualities of arrogance and desire and rage that oppose God’s righteousness, and

putting on the qualities of meekness and hearing that will enable us to be reshaped according to the word of truth.

“...welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.” For James these are not mere words of routine instruction or theory, nor can they be so for us. His words for us mean to receive Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, into our lives as Savior and Director. It takes a certain humility to admit your need of him to make a righteous life. Yet, He *is* the power to save our souls. Last week we read from Paul (in Ephesians) about putting on the armor of God, including the breastplate of righteousness. It takes humility and practice to put on that kind of armor.

“You must understand... be slow to speak, slow anger; ...anger does not produce God’s righteousness.” James warns Christians about being too eager to speak lest we succumb to angry and self-righteous desires. There were in his day those who used the Christian message to thunder against the power of Rome and demand changed economic conditions, even by revolutionary force. We can be tempted in that direction ourselves. James warns them, and us, not to allow the proclamation of the word to become an occasion for showing rancor and wrath against society. He also warned against a solely materialistic interpretation of the gospel. That is why James emphasizes the need for meekness and humility to receive the word of God. Knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ must not be misused in way that puts us above others or even above continuing to listen to God. We have to train ourselves to listen; everyone must be ready to listen when God’s word is proclaimed. With humility and obedience to the word, each one shows his knowledge of the faith.

Anger is sometimes justified when injustice and evil are confronted. But it is an emotion that can lead to much trouble. Whatever you do, don't let those who have wronged you remake you in their image. When three young men were brought to trial in a West Memphis, Arkansas court for killing three eight-year-olds, the father of one of the victims suddenly rushed at the young men screaming, "I'll chase you all the way to hell!" I understand the father's fierce anger, but there is something almost prophetic about his words. If we allow our hatred for those who have wronged us to go unchecked, it will eventually destroy us. We will follow our bitterness "all the way to hell."¹

Anger as a lifestyle is destructive and prevents the growth and use of protective righteousness. When confronted with a trying situation, it is better to pause before “flying off the handle.”

In the lore of boxers there this one about the fellow who was knocked down midway in the third round. Although the punch which had downed him was a light one, he didn't get up until after the ten count.

¹J. Ellsworth Kalas, *If Experience Is Such a Good Teacher*, (Nashville: Dimensions for Living, 1994).

"Whatsa matter, you crazy?" demanded his manager after the fight. "You wasn't hit hard. Whyncha get up in time?"

"I was so mad at being floored by that jerk," explained the defeated pugilist, "that I thought I'd better count to ten before I did anything."²

By now you've figured out that true godly character cannot merely pay lip-service to the gospel. For faith to be real, it must be translated into deeds. Otherwise one's faith is mere self-deception. Being doers of the word – put your money where your mouth is, practice what you preach – is a must if we want to avoid deceiving ourselves. Please understand here. James is talking about being doers of the word in the context of the life-changing power of the gospel. So often we jump to this part – being doers of the word – because we like action and want to have a sense of getting things done. We will want to avoid the pitfall, though, of thinking we always know God's mind as to what to do, and thinking we must do something everytime. It is important to do the *right* thing – not just anything. Doing those things that transform our hearts for Him, like generosity and concern for those who are poor and poor in spirit, must be our aim. What we do in terms of material well-being for others, is connected to their and our spiritual well-being. It is connected to the power to save our souls. A heart truly transformed by the power of Jesus Christ will issue in desire to do the good works God has destined us for.

[From THE LIVES OF THE DESERT FATHERS: Abbot Lot came to Abbot Joseph and said, "Father, according to my capacity I keep my little rule and my little fast, my prayer, my meditation, my contemplative silence; and according as I am able I cleanse my heart of evil thoughts. Now what more should I do?" The elder stood up in reply. He stretched out his hands to heaven and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said, "This: become totally changed into fire."³]

Barb went to see her pastor to volunteer to lead Vacation Bible School. The pastor was aghast. "You're an answer to prayer!" he told her. The previous year, the Vacation Bible School director had nearly burned out. But with Barb's great enthusiasm she could make it work.

The previous director had contacted more than a hundred people to help out at Bible school but only a handful agreed to help. Barb completed her staff well over a month before the program was to begin. The truly amazing thing was that not one person she contacted declined. Was it her personality? Maybe. Was it the way she asked? Maybe. Was it who she asked? Probably not. Many of the same people had been contacted the year before. What made the difference was Barb's approach. She was inviting people to be part of something she really believed in. It was not just a task to be completed. It was a ministry to be done.⁴

²Myron Cohen, *The Myron Cohen Joke Book*, (New York: Gramercy Publishing Company, 1978), 142.

³Anthony de Mello, *Taking Flight*, (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1990), 21.

⁴Eugene Grimm, *Generous People*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 106.

Each one of us adds something to the future of this church. Don't' you want to add value? One of our most precious resources is our next generations. When you give of yourself to teach children or youth about the love and power of Jesus you have impacted the future of this church and community. Touch a heart: teach a child about Jesus! This is an investment that will honor God and pay the church dividends for years to come.

The Bible says God's word is like a mirror. Suppose you look in the mirror and see dirt on your face, or perhaps messy hair. What will you do? You will wash your face or comb your hair. It would be stupid to look and see what you need and yet not do anything about it. Those who hear God's word, but don't do anything about it are what we call "nominal Christians" (that means "in name only"); they're like those who look in the mirror but when they turn away forget what they look like. James reminds us that we are to mirror Jesus in our living. When we look in the mirror we should see someone growing more and more in the grace of our Lord.

Here's our challenge today: to be *genuine* doers of the word. This week I challenge you to begin each day with a very short prayer asking Jesus Christ to come again into your life as director. Ask for his grace for the day. Then listen and act.

Do something generous – take an action to mend a broken relationship, or help someone you know, or perform acts of kindness for strangers all week long, or decide to serve God through your church - think of the upcoming generations here - adjust your spending and giving habits to reflect your desire to be God's own. Pray and follow His prompting so that we may truly become His arms and legs.
