

¹⁷Every good and perfect gift is from God. This kind of gift comes down from the Father who created the heavenly lights. These lights create shadows that move. But the Father does not change like these shadows. ¹⁸God chose to give us new birth through the message of truth. He wanted us to be the first harvest of his new creation.

Listen to the Word and Do What It Says

¹⁹My dear brothers and sisters, pay attention to what I say. Everyone should be quick to listen. But they should be slow to speak. They should be slow to get angry. ²⁰Human anger doesn't produce the holy life God wants. ²¹So get rid of everything that is sinful. Get rid of the evil that is all around us. Don't be too proud to accept the word that is planted in you. It can save you.

²²Don't just listen to the word. You fool yourselves if you do that. You must do what it says. ²³Suppose someone listens to the word but doesn't do what it says. Then they are like a person who looks at their face in a mirror. ²⁴After looking at themselves, they leave. And right away they forget what they look like. ²⁵But suppose someone takes a good look at the perfect law that gives freedom. And they keep looking at it. Suppose they don't forget what they've heard, but they do what the law says. Then this person will be blessed in what they do.

²⁶Suppose people think their beliefs and how they live are both right. But they don't control what they say. Then they are fooling themselves. Their beliefs and way of life are not worth anything at all. ²⁷Here are the beliefs and way of life that God our Father accepts as pure and without fault. When widows are in trouble, take care of them. Do the same for children who have no parents. And don't let the world make you impure.

(New International Readers Version, James 1:17-27)

August 30, 2015 (Ordination/Installation)

“What We Hear, Say, and Do”

James 1:17-27 (NIRV Translation)

Kerra Becker English

I really like this particular translation of these verses from James. James has always been the Biblical book of doing things right. Martin Luther and others among the Protestant Reformers did not like its emphasis on being saved through works and actions, but preferred Paul's writings on faith and grace as primary means to God. There's a balance in there somewhere, and as with any balance, when one side gets out of whack, it takes forward thinking reformers to start to tip the balance back toward the other direction. Observing that pendulum's swing of religion was something my staunch Lutheran religious studies professor from college spoke of nearly as often and almost as proudly as he spoke of his big game hunting trips. Our passion for discovering and disseminating religious truth can take us out to the edges of the acceptable circle that keeps us within that realm of loving our neighbor, so there will always be a voice calling us back toward one another if we start to love “the truth” more than we care about other people.

Maybe I have found a fondness and appreciation for the book of James because I think our actions are pretty important in living the Christian life. In the translations of this passage that we're more accustomed to, “Be ye doers of the Word and not hearers only,” has always been a Biblical precept that spoke to me. It's probably because I've witnessed too many Christians who claim belief in Jesus and his love and still do pretty awful things to their neighbors. James himself seems to be seeking a balance that must be held in check.

In this version, he says, “Suppose people think their beliefs and how they live are both right. But they don’t control what they say. Then they are fooling themselves. Their beliefs and way of life are not worth anything at all.” What we believe, *and* what we do, *and* what we say are all important if we plan to take our faith seriously and not wind up the fool. I’m sure that you’ve met people that don’t match up in one or more of those categories. James goes on to say that there are clear signs of getting it right, and they involve things like caring for widows and orphans, and not getting sucked in by the corruption of our world. Easier said than done! We know that. That’s why it’s imperative that what we say and what we do are congruent.

Some Catholic theologians, Franciscans like Richard Rohr especially, are reminding their Protestant counterparts that what we do really does make a difference. It’s not the requirement of money put toward getting your relatives out of purgatory that got the Reformers knickers in a twist long ago. They are pulling us off the edge of making certain doctrines more important than the care of widows and orphans. This time in history, they are reminding us that we can get too worked up about doctrinal correctness, and that people are what’s important. Rohr says that’s what’s always kept the Franciscans on the edge of Catholicism. They were committed to right action – things like living simply and nonviolently, honoring the poor, and caring for God’s created world, and they were committed to right thinking – the value of all beings, freedom of conscience, silent prayer, and non-judgment. All those things bring us into the balance, into the center of the circle rather than out there on the edges for the purpose of following the one true way.

But if we look to our own longer tradition, Presbyterians also have a commitment to saying, and believing, and doing what seem to be the “right” things. We ask church members to make a profession of their faith – with the understanding that faith is more than just assent to a

bunch of words and beliefs, faith is a life lived toward following Jesus. And specifically, we ask those who would lead in the church, our trusted elders, to make some pretty specific commitments to the Christian life. Answering the Constitutional Questions can become fairly routine. We ask those being ordained and installed to go through and answer them EVERY year, even when they've been ordained before. Do we really think about what they mean? Do we expect our elders to live by their promises? Does the walk match the talk?

Oooh, that's a scary thought, even for this pastor. There's a lot in there, much of which is hard to live up to. We certainly don't want a church scandal over bad behavior of speech or action, and we try to exercise some rigor about belief under certain circumstances. But we know that failure can happen. Just this week, the front page of the Chesterfield Observer had another story about a fallen pastor. If we don't really think about our limits and our boundaries from time to time in a human way, in a merciful way, in a loving way, then we probably will miss the mark more often than not.

Jesus, in the 7th chapter of Mark's gospel, in the lectionary reading we haven't read yet today, has to remind his disciples and the religious leaders, that they quibble over the rules and miss the much bigger points. They argue about whether or not eating with unwashed hands is something that will defile a person. Jesus reminds them that it's not what they eat or don't eat that makes them defiled, it's what comes out of a person that defiles him or her. It's words said in hate; it's hateful actions covered up with flowery words. It's an interesting chapter where he describes some behaviors as being worthy of flushing to the sewer. Jesus can be quite colorful in his approach when he wants to be. I encourage you to go home and read Mark 7.

But this morning, I'd like us to look briefly at these Constitutional Questions together. What are they getting at? How do they seek to bring us toward the center, toward one another,

into a closer relationship with God? How does saying “yes, we do, or we will” affect us? Does it change the person making those assents?

I’d like to think that we say these things so we will do these things, but it usually goes the other way, we live ourselves into our beliefs. It’s in the doing that our behaviors become more a part of who we are. So let’s take a look at the questions, shall we? They are in your bulletins today.

Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word to you?

Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God?
d. Will you fulfill your office in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions?

Will you be governed by our church’s polity, and will you abide by its discipline? Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry, working with them, subject to the ordering of God’s Word and Spirit?

Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors, and work for the

reconciliation of the world?

Do you promise to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church?

Will you seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?

Will you be a faithful elder, watching over the people, providing for their worship, nurture, and service? Will you share in government and discipline, serving in governing bodies of the church, and in your ministry will you try to show the love and justice of Jesus Christ?

Do we, the members of the church, accept (names) as elders or deacons, chosen by God through the voice of this congregation to lead us in the way of Jesus Christ?

Do we agree to encourage them, to respect their decisions, and to follow as they guide us, serving Jesus Christ, who alone is Head of the Church?