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Better: Life

James 1:5-11 & 19 - 27

⁵If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. ⁶But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; ⁷for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up, ¹⁰and the rich in being brought low, because the rich will disappear like a flower in the field. ¹¹For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the field; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. It is the same way with the rich; in the midst of a busy life, they will wither away.

¹⁹You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. ²¹Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. ²²But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵But 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. ²⁶If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

(Slide 1: Better.Life)

I thought I was going to have to run back into the church and call 911. It's not his real name, but I'll call him, "Dan" to make the story easier to tell. "Dan" was a large, angry man and he was having a toddler-worthy melt down in the church parking lot. He was screaming at his step-children and threatening to beat them if they didn't get in the car, right now! To be fair, "Dan" had a lot to be angry about. He had moved across the country to take a job at the naval shipyard in Bremerton, and had been laid off shortly after arriving. He had just found out his new wife was pregnant with a child he didn't know how he was going to support. And he had been forced to move in with his formidable mother-in-law to avoid being homeless.

Dan's formidable mother-in-law was one of the grandmother's of the church, so she quietly spoke with the Pastor and some of the older men in the church and they invited Dan to come to their morning men's group.

I didn't go to the men's group, for obvious reasons, so I don't know exactly what they said or did. I just remember seeing the changes in "Dan." Gradually, as the months wore on, he stopped yelling at his stepkids and started listening to them. He got another job and kept it. The big angry man was slowly being transformed into the man with the big smile.

Then one day Dan stood up during the prayers and gave thanks to God. With tears running down his face he said he never knew his Dad, so he really wanted to be a good Dad, a good husband and a good provider. But after growing up without a father, and with an addicted mother, how to do these things was like some kind of secret code that nobody ever taught him... until he joined the church.

He thanked God that he was celebrating being employed for 8 months in one job -- his longest ever, because the men's group had talked him through how and when to call in sick, how to always show up a little early, and how to follow orders. He used to hate being told what to do, because he thought a "real man" is always in charge, until the retired Navy officers in the group coached him on how to obey orders with dignity. He said he used to be frustrated that his wife and kids didn't seem to respect him enough until he learned in Bible study that the first duty of a husband and father is to love his family. (Eph 5:25) Then he turned to his wife and said, "I wasn't worthy of your respect, honey, but with God's help, I will become a man you can be proud of."

People clapped and shouted out encouragement to him. I don't think there was a dry eye in the house!

A man named James, who lived sometime in the late first century, wrote,

“If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.” (James 1:5)

and

“9

Let the believer who is lowly boast in being raised up,” (James 1: 9)

And that’s exactly what “Dan” did. He sought wisdom from God for living a better life and then he boasted, not about his own accomplishments, he boasted about the way God had changed his life for the better.

James understood that the gospel isn’t just something to believe in, it’s something that has the power to change our lives, if we let it.

Following God should make our lives better

and

following God should make the world a better place.

(Slide 2: Religion that is pure and undefiled 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))

James challenges the false dichotomy between what we Methodists call,

Personal Holiness -- which refers to how we conduct our personal lives -- our relationships,

- our personal responsibilities,
- our personal morality, and
- our personal faith life of prayer and worship

which James describes as, “to keep oneself unstained by the world”

And

Social Holiness -- which refers to how we engage in public life --

- Do the companies we purchase from treat their workers fairly?

- Do the politicians we vote for support policies that care for the least of these?
- How am I participating in creating a better life for people like “Dan”?

Which James summarizes as caring for “widows and orphans in their distress”

And we see the results of this false dichotomy -- in the United Methodist Church denomination resulting in arguments over either/or thinking:

There are Methodist churches who claim that the gospel is all about personal holiness – so we only need to worry about orthodoxy and morality

And there are Methodist churches who claim that the gospel is all about social holiness – so we only need to worry about social justice work.

But John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement preached both personal holiness and social holiness.

If you want a better life you need both.

We need to seek God's wisdom to live our personal lives with integrity.

And if we claim to love God and love our neighbors we need to,

“be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.”

(James 1:22)

...and do the work of making life better for our neighbors.

I am genuinely disturbed by our current public Christian discourse.

I am disturbed by public figures who claim to be Christians who credit their faith and personal holiness as the key to their success and in the next

sentence proclaim that they have no obligation to care for the poor through working for social holiness.

I am equally upset by public figures who claim to be Christians who work tirelessly at social holiness, but are unwilling to share the faith that motivates their work!

People, like “Dan” need both.

The concrete help of social holiness that “Dan” received –

- the job skills he learned,
- the person who sat down with him and taught him how to write a resume and
- the guys who were willing to be on his reference list, and
- the food stamps that kept his family fed while he was working to improve their lives

was help that “Dan” really needed to make his life better.

The spiritual help of personal holiness –

- knowing that people were praying for him during his job interview,
- the softening of “Dan’s” heart as he experienced God’s love,
- being supported in *becoming* the responsible and moral and gentle man whom God had created him to be, by his church community who loved him before he was lovable

was essential to making “Dan’s” life better.

People who ask whether Christians should focus on personal holiness *or* social holiness are asking the wrong question.

If we want a better life, a better community, a better church, a better world,

the answer is always that we need to pursue both

personal holiness and social holiness.

For the next few weeks I'll be preaching through an overview of the book of James. Exploring how personal and social holiness makes our own lives and our community, church and world better. Next Sunday I'll be on vacation, and I've invited a representative from Eccumenical ministires of Oregon to come and talk about living out social holiness through faith based advocacy.

Children's Message: Doers of the Word

Game: Jesus says.

Our bible reading today tells us to "be doers of the word not just hearers"

So we're going to play a game of "Jesus says"

The rules are the same as Simeon says,
When I say "Jesus says" then do what I tell you to
When I don't, don't do anything.

Jesus says shake hands with someone you haven't met (gently)

Jesus says tell another person, "God loves you."

Jump up and down 3 times!

Do 5 jumping jacks!
Pat your head while rubbing your tummy!

Jesus says, tell a person who got out, "you're back in the game." ... because God forgives us.

Jesus says, come back up front.

Jesus says, pray like this: (repeat after me)

God, help us to, do justice, do mercy and be humble, in Jesus' name, Amen.