
Prayers

To God

Weekly theme: the history of God's people

Give thanks for the history of God's people throughout the ages. Pray for those who passed the faith on to you, and remember before God that they received the witness of the faith from people before them, and so on ...

For myself

Ask the Lord to bless your mind. In an age in which many people succumb to mental illness at some point in their lives, ask the Lord God to protect you, and give you wise advice about how to handle such things.

For others

Lord God Almighty, the world can seem a frightening place for many young people, who are vulnerable or disabled, perhaps shy, and more. Bless those who work within schools to help young people who find it hard to express themselves and stand tall as individuals. May we all stand against bullying and anti-social behaviour, so that the world in which we live will be a place where people can overcome problems and not be sunk by them. **AMEN**

Meditation

Some people like to pray generally,
No names, just impressions, feelings,
Wants and pleadings from the heart:
Their God is but an abstract thing,
As real to them as a star in the sky;
Its existence proved only by a theory
Proposed by someone else.

Is your prayer like this, or different?
For no God is God unless He's real
And there for us to speak to, one to one:
No God is God unless He's done
Something to break the barrier
Between Himself and us, and all creation.
And Christ has done just that.

Jesus is the one; He shows us God,
He is God, so open up pray to Him:
Let Him be to you the One He really is,
The One who loves you, to death.
We pray to our God who cares.
We pray to God who speak to us,
We know Him personally.

Bible Passage

James 1:22-25

²² You must be doers of the Word, and not those who deceive themselves by simply listening. ²³ For those who listen to the Word and do not put it into action are like those who look in a mirror; ²⁴ for after looking at themselves they go away, and immediately forget what they have seen! ²⁵ But those who study the perfect law of freedom and keep going, not being listeners who forget but doers who act, will be blessed in what they do.

Review

In these few verses, James comes close to what is probably the heart of the message of his letter. After giving various advice about Christian living, he appeals here to Christians to be a people of action and not just a people who believe in Jesus, as it were, as a philosophy of religion that makes no demands on the soul. In his day, there were many religious practices and beliefs, and despite the general tendency of people to stick together in traditions beliefs, many felt free to try different spiritual pathways. This picture is surprisingly similar to our world today, for then just as now, many people lived their lives as if religion was a spiritual 'add on' designed to enrich life, and many looked down on those who became too involved in any particular brand of belief about God. Far better, it was thought, to be practical and live life as it presented itself and sit lightly to religion. Again, we hear similar things said today, and it is not surprising that the Roman world gave birth to many of the social assumptions behind modern secular society.

James stands against all this. As the brother of Jesus who had first hand experience of his death and resurrection, his faith in God through Jesus was all-encompassing. To believe in Jesus was not merely to have a different way in which to believe in God, albeit the 'right' one, it was to become a different person through Jesus, to live a different life and to give one's time and energy to a completely different vision of things than that held by people of the world in which he lived. James had no time for the Christian who lived like everyone else and expressed faith by turning up to worship God with everyone else; he said, '*you must be doers of the Word, and not those who deceive themselves by simply listening*' (1:22). Without question, these pertinent words deliver a potent message for today.

To explain what he wants to say, James turns to what is probably one of the most interesting illustrations in the later writings of the New Testament. He explains the importance of faith and action with reference to a mirror! In the first century AD, mirrors were made by polishing metal surfaces, and were consequently very inaccurate by the standards of today. To most people, to see an accurate reflection in a mirror was still something of a marvel. Most mirrors

gave rather poor reflections of the true picture, and a good mirror was something of considerable value. Still, most people had some form of mirror and everyone knew what they could do even if their own mirror was rather inadequate! They were used then as now by people when they wanted to make themselves look good and present themselves well.

But as soon as we look at what James says, his picture becomes interesting. He accuses people who do not put their faith into practice as being like those who forget what they look like in a mirror! Think about this for a moment, because although James' main point is easy to spot, it is easy to miss some of its meaning. James is clearly wanting to be critical of people who will not act on what they see. So someone who looks in a mirror and see hairs out of place, or blemishes on the skin, will then quite naturally do something about it, they will not '*go away and immediately forget what they have seen*' (1:24). So obviously, the person who does this is a fool; why look in a mirror in the first place?

But if we stretch the illustration further, it has more to say, but we must be careful, or we will get mixed up. James is not really interested in people's attempts to manicuring their own spiritual egos, and I would argue that there is sometimes a little too much of this going on today. His illustration is not about Christian people discovering their faults and then spending time putting them right, like someone preparing themselves in the bathroom before the day begins! In James' mind, when a person looks in the mirror that is Christ, what they see is a sinner, and if someone has truly perceived sinfulness then action is required! A sinner is not saved by looking in the mirror and seeing Christ, but by responding to Him in practical and demonstrable faith!

The last verse of this brief passage indicates that the appropriate action for the sinner is to do two things. Firstly, James says that '*the perfect law of freedom*' should be studied, but he does not mean that salvation is found through study! The term the '*Law of Freedom*' is James' language for the Gospel message. For him, the '*Law of Moses*' is replaced by Christ's '*Law of freedom*' (1:25)! Nowhere else in the Bible do we find this great and confident Christian description of the Gospel, and it sounds to us perhaps like a contradiction in terms, because the very notion of 'law' to us sounds like bondage. But James uses this word in the classic Old Testament sense of law as the revelation of God, and his words ask us to make it our business to get to know the liberating power of God's salvation through Christ. God has revealed Himself in the world through His Son Jesus Christ, and liberated all those who will believe in Him!

Secondly, James makes his typical call to God's people to be not '*listeners who forget but doers who act*' (1:25). Some say that it was only in the twentieth and twenty first centuries that people discovered the truth that words heard are mostly ignored, but things seen or done count for infinitely more. This is a maxim of modern education of course, which rebels against the didactic methods of teaching of past generations which lined children up in rows and spoke to them endlessly for hours. Why will we not learn the truth about this from James, in the New Testament? Why do we continue to believe that the spoken Sermon is the main form of communication for the Gospel? When will we learn that although we love to hear fine speeches and sermons, the power of the Gospel is foremost in the Word spoken one to one from friend to neighbour, and in the deeds we do to help each other.

You will have your own feelings about how to preach the Gospel of course, and the subject is broader than this passage. But I hope to have convinced you that James has some powerful things to say to us even today. We need to hear his message that the Gospel requires us to do God's will.

Discipleship

Application

Doing God's work

Scripture continues to challenge us to do God's will and not wallow in blind opinion. Pure faith in Jesus is a wonderful thing, and the fact that we are saved by God because of our faith in Jesus is a source of our utmost joy in the mercy of God the Father. But I reckon I am right behind James when he says that in everyday life, without the evidence of this faith witnessed to in people's deeds, we are entitled to ask what such faith means for any individual.

Jesus did not preach an abstract faith, He lived a real faith in which being obedient to His Father meant going to the Cross. Moreover, He asked all who followed Him to do the same! The more people who are willing to be exposed in faith within every arena of life, the quicker the Gospel is declared to the whole world, and God's will is done on earth.

Looking in a mirror

James asks us to look in a mirror and learn from what we see. This is an interesting challenge because it asks us to look at what other people see in us. We may find that when we look in the mirror, we do not like what I see, so we become self critical and concerned to change. That may well be for the best.

The real question is this; how do we really find out whether our lives are truly what we think they are? The only way this may be possible is to ask other people to comment to us on various aspects of our lives and whether we achieve the aims of a godly life. They are our mirrors, and they will look at us in different ways and give us pictures of ourselves that we might well not want to see! This is extremely daunting, but potentially very valuable.

Ideas for what to do

- Look in a mirror and assess what you see. Do you really display the evidence of faith in your life? If you were to try and find out about whether your life shows faith, whom would you ask? Try doing this, but if it is not possible, seek the Lord in prayer about this.
- Observe what other people do, and assess what this says about the kind of faith they display. Try not to be 'judgemental', but take the exercise seriously. Pray for the person you have observed

Questions (for use in groups)

1. When you read this passage initially, did it seem to you to be a passage that commended faith by works, as Martin Luther so objected? Discuss this issue.
2. Is the mirror a helpful example of faith? What does it help us with, and what does it not say about Christian faith?
3. Is it right to insist that people study God's Word themselves? Who are the 'listeners' who forget (1:25), today?

Final Prayer

Lord God, make us wise in our judgements and loving in our actions, ever conscious of the presence of Your guiding Holy Spirit and the judgement of Almighty God which rests upon us as well as all people. Save through Jesus Christ, and bring us into His glory we pray; AMEN