

May 1-5, 2023 Edition

The Year_(s) Of ^{Following} Jesus Part 70

James On Anger: Deep Calls To Deep

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;O) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday:

Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires. So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls. James 1:20-21 (NLT)

Reflection: Welcome back to James. Whenever I don't have time to write fresh reflections I'm slowly going back through the book of James so let's take a minute just to recap- we talked a bit ago about temptation - the original death trap. Though we may not always know what is best for us, what will ruin us is very straight-forward. It comes quite naturally to us and provides quick and consistent results. Just like in fishing, the steps go from bait, to snare, to chowder. Temptation gets us so focused on something appealing that we fail to notice the hook beneath it. But the hook is always there waiting to snare us and reel-us-in. After a brief ride (where like fish we struggle with all our might but somehow go in the opposite direction of everything we want) we find ourselves in the hands of the fisherman and eventually the skillet.

This feels so ridiculously unfair to us that we often look around for someone else to blame, even God. But He is not the author of our temptations or our ensnarement. It's an inside job. James tells us that as soon as we give in to our appetites, we take the bait that gives birth our own destruction. On Saturday night I said that it's like we are parents of little sin babies with death grand-babies. I didn't say it Sunday because Judy kinda gave me a hard time about it. Later she told me that I might have well have said, "I'm my sin's grandpa." (with apologies to Ray Stevens and his song, "I'm my own grandpa"). Now I'm bummed I didn't think to say that! Avoiding death is straight-forward, though not easy. If we look for the hook whenever we feel a strong desire or temptation, we can learn to side-step the trap. But life is about more than simply avoiding death. James goes on to describe the path of life which we talked about two weeks ago. Unlike the path of sin and death, it is mysterious and hard to define. The path toward the glory of God can't be fully understood and mastered by mere mortals! But Jesus invites us on it all the same.

On this path there are true gifts, the kinds that don't come with strings attached. They are blessings that come from our Father of Light. The feelings of satisfaction and delight we feel when the bliss we look forward to in eternity breaks through into our current reality is something we all love! But James reminds us that it doesn't last. Human beings just don't have that capacity yet! Our feelings naturally shift. Even days of light have shadows in them. But if we turn our face toward the Giver of all true gifts, we can trust His Nature to bring us to the place of perfect satisfaction in our home to come. He will not withhold this perfect reward. We are His treasure!

So how do we cultivate this progress in ourselves and others? Again there are two different approaches: human nature (easy but unrewarding) and God's mysterious transformation. The human path is to grasp for control. The Divine path is to cultivate influence. The first thing that James establishes is what our role is in our Divine family. He begins, "Understand this my dear brothers and sisters..." Like James, we are to be brothers and sisters to each other, not bosses and judges. We have some young people who come to Riverside who are in

a program of intense education and transformation. One of them explained to me that in their process it is considered helpful to encourage your peers, but extremely unhelpful to tell them what to do. For example, it's considered inappropriate to tell a fellow student, "you should" do this or that. Instead they are taught to say, "I would encourage you to ..." It may seem like a simple change in sentence structure, but it acknowledges a profound truth: True growth cannot be forced, only encouraged.

Force or coercion creates additional resistance to the change process, which is already challenging enough! If we want to ignite real progress in ourselves and others we must resist the temptation to get bossy. It may come naturally to us, but it just doesn't work in the long run. This week James will tell us about the tools that really get the job done.

Tuesday:

Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you. James 1:27

You must not exploit a widow or an orphan. If you exploit them in any way and they cry out to me, then I will certainly hear their cry. Exodus 22:22-24

Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the right of widows. Isaiah 1:7

Reflection: This week we'll talk about James' 3 step plan to encourage growth in ourselves and others. But before we consider any plan of action, we must remind ourselves that our role is to be brothers and sisters to each other, not judge or jury or executioner. We can only be peers to each other, we already have a leader. Jesus is the author and perfecter of our journey, not our fellow Christians (no matter how well meaning). Each of us must cultivate a student-teacher (healer, transformer, coach, leader, boss) relationship with Jesus. Many people have plans for our lives. It has always been that way. They had plans for Jesus too, but He didn't fall into the trap of letting people dictate His purpose in life. God's purpose for Him was His sole aim.

There is a powerful role for human leadership in God's family, but it is not as bosses or prosecutors. Leadership in the church is the opposite of leadership in the world. Jesus told His disciples that in His kingdom leaders would not "lord it over" others as those of the world do. Instead, true leadership would be defined by service and self sacrifice. Rather than those with authority giving the tiresome tasks to their underlings, kingdom leaders would be those who roll-up-their-sleeves to do the grimy jobs that support growth. We look the most like God when we serve and encouraged those without the status or power to reward us. Jesus set the ultimate example of kingdom leadership for His disciples just before His death. He washed His follower's feet, telling them that if menial service was good enough for their king and lord, it was good enough for them. I'm paraphrasing a bit.

Later, after the resurrection, Jesus told Peter that he could demonstrate his love for Jesus by feeding His "sheep." Sheep are needy, stupid, unglamorous and usually stinky. Shepherds are not rewarded by their sheep. Sheep always take more than they give. Shepherds are

rewarded by their master, the owner of the sheep. It can be a lot more rewarding to work with people than to work with sheep, but let me tell you there's no guarantee. People can also be needy, difficult and take without giving. Stinky isn't even out of the question. Sometimes the more desperately someone needs help, the more prickly and demanding they can be about receiving it. It is often those who need our love the most who ask for it in the most unloving of ways.

So what is the plan to support growth in ourselves and others? James' go-to tool for encouraging transformation is listening. That is the first step in cultivating positive change. It is this act of setting aside our own preferences and opinions to put ourselves in the position of the one who needs help that ignites tremendous change and growth. Jesus, despite being the perfect representation of God, was imminently approachable. Sinners came to Him because they saw that He wanted to heal them and help them rather than punish them for being stuck and sick on their own. He would ask people questions (even though He already knew the answers to the questions He asked).

Listening is a tool that can yield big results with almost no risk. A doctor's first commitment is to do no harm. No effective medical provider can offer a diagnosis and treatment without first asking about symptoms and listening to the patient. You will often hear doctors ask, "Where does it hurt?" This question helps to track down the origins and causes of illness. Solutions are irrelevant and insulting until there is a true understanding of what has gone wrong. It is so easy for us to hurt and discourage each other without even realizing it. We do this to ourselves and others with our complaints, comparisons and criticisms. These are tools of the world that demand change but drain all the energy we need to make change possible. Listening, on the other hand, makes people feel seen and heard even in situations where there is no solution. Maybe that's why James tells us to be quick to listen. Listening is a service that provides encouragement all on its own, before change is even attempted.

Wednesday:

In your anger, do not sin. Ephesians 4:26 (NLT)

You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires. James 1:20-21 (NLT)

Reflection: Yesterday we talked about listening as the go-to tool for encouragement, leadership and influence. Even when the solution to the problem is beyond us, we add value when we practice the skill of listening. James tells us that if we want to see growth in ourselves and others we will learn to be quick to listen. Why is listening so important? Because, as we build up our ability to listen to each other, we deepen our capacity to listen to God, an invaluable tool in its own right. The second and third tools are things we need to decrease doing. James wants us to strengthen the family by being quick to listen, but also slow to speak and slow to get angry. Unlike listening, speaking and getting upset are high risk, low reward activities. Sadly, they feel so good to do that we often find ourselves lecturing and getting worked up without even trying. We're just naturally good at explaining our own view of things and resenting what/who doesn't measure up to our standards.

This human compulsion to judge is the bitter fruit left over from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We like to use our own judgement. It always seems so right to us, even when it's leading us astray. Our judgements, just like our desires, are often used as bait to nudge us into doing things that can only make things worse. Putting our faith in our own judgement brings a whole new set of temptations. We easily become ensnared by the need to be right. We find ourselves trapped in the prison of our own negative reactions. We become consumed with trying to get others to see things our way. We HATE the idea of being wrong. Jesus tells us that we must first remove the log from our own eyes before we can see clearly enough to try to fish the speck of dirt out of someone else's eye. I used to wonder how Jesus knew that there was a log in the would-be corrector's eye. Now I believe that the habit of judging IS the log that prevents us from seeing clearly! If we have to be right, have all the answers, or be the authority then we've already fallen for the trap that obscures our vision. Judgingness must be removed before we can open our eyes to new information and support changes in ourselves and others!

This doesn't mean that there is no place for teaching, correcting or even expressing anger. The Bible tells us that if we have the gift to teach, we should teach, but to be mindful of the burden of teachers. Those who instruct others are automatically held to higher standards. Loving parents know that both training and correction are important to support growth in our children. We need the discomfort of feedback to help us see the benefits of trying another way. And Jesus Himself expressed anger when it was appropriate. At one point He scolded Peter saying "Get behind me Satan." That seems pretty harsh, but Jesus needed to show Peter just how dangerous looking at things from the world's perspective can be. His clear frustration got Peter's attention when the lesson needed to be learned.

The advantage that Jesus had on us (well, one of many) is that He could see into people's hearts. He knew what was truly best for them. He knew when the most loving approach was acceptance, and He knew when the most loving response was correction. We don't have that super-power. We just feel like we know what's best for everyone... like we know exactly what's in each others hearts! But James warns us that human anger does not produce right living. A critical approach is more likely to encourage resistance, even when we do know best. It's also quite likely to lead to an enticing snare that if we're not careful will lure us in, trap us and drag us away... anger has a habit of doing that. I guess that's why the Apostle Paul warned us:

In your anger, do not sin. Ephesians 4:26 (NLT)

Thursday:

Jesus entered Jericho and made his way through the town. There was a man there named Zacchaeus. He was the chief tax collector in the region, and he had become very rich. He tried to get a look at Jesus, but he was too short to see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree beside the road, for Jesus was going to pass that way. When Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. "Zacchaeus!" he said. "Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today." Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy. But the people were displeased. "He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner," they grumbled. Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood before the

Lord and said, "I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!" Jesus responded, "Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost." Luke 19:10 (NLT)

Reflection: Yesterday we closed with James' challenge to recognize that anger does not produce the changes we desire. So what does? Well, I'm glad you asked. The key is found in humbly taking action and changing the things that are going haywire IN MY OWN LIFE. James goes on to instruct us to actively weed out anything that doesn't belong in our own lives. The garden we are supposed to get to work on is our own. It's amazing how motivating a positive example can be! It's also understandable that when we are faced with the daunting challenge of following Jesus and working on our own anger, weakness, relationships, arrogance and anxiety (just to name a few) we are tempted to take a look around and see what else we might be able to do a little work on before getting started on our own seemingly endless list of character upgrades.

Jesus' approach to human transformation was the opposite of what religious people expected (and were comfortable with). Take Zacchaeus, for example. I'm sure the whole town held its breath waiting for Jesus to confront Zacchaeus, the man who built his fortune selling out and cheating his own people. But Jesus broke through Zacchaeus's walls not with accusation or judgement, but with attention and acceptance. After being honored with Jesus' presence - Zacchaeus WANTED to change! He himself proposes a plan to give away (sacrifice) what he has always treasured (his wealth and power) in order to be more like Jesus!

Like most people, Zacchaeus already knew that what he was doing was wrong. But it was only after spending time with Jesus that he found the courage to do anything about it. Jesus followed the pattern James encourages us to follow, He was quick to listen to Zacchaeus, but slow to speak or get angry at Zacchaeus. As it turns out, Zacchaeus was ready to weed out the false gods in his life but wasn't sure He could do it. When he felt loved, seen and cared about by Jesus he found the inspiration he needed to actually do some work on his own life. That is the result of encouragement, it gives us the courage to take action. We feel safe to make changes and take risks (and new behavior always involves risk, discomfort and courage) when we know that we are cared about. We can only take the truth if it is delivered in love. It's like the old saying goes, people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.

This has been our war cry at Riverside since we began here over 16 years ago. The result is that in a lot of ways Riverside is like the Island of Misfit Toys from Rudolph The Red Nosed Reindeer. We end up with some extremely quirky individuals who are looking for the power and support they need to make the changes they so desperately need. But they aren't all cleaned up and presentable when they show up. Often they are so suspicious of us (because of experiences they've had with other churches) that they'll do everything they can to get us to reject them before they let their guards down. I remember once WAYYYYYY back not long after I started at Riverside. A lady had been coming to church for several weeks and eventually her husband started coming with her (we get that a lot... an advance party is sent in behind enemy lines to check and see if it's safe to bring a husband or children with them). After they had been here a few weeks the husband came up to me after church and said, "I'm

an atheist, but I love my wife and feel like this would be a good way to support her, by attending church with her." Then he gave me a funny look like he was waiting for me to yell at him, "BE GONE INFIDEL!!!!" But instead I just welcomed him and told him I was glad he was here. He talked with me for a few minutes but I'll never forget when he said, "I'm not sure why but your messages make me want to be a better man, and I like that." I can remember thinking, "I know why... and it's not me," but I didn't say anything to him... just thanked him.

He continued to attend Riverside with his wife and about a year and half later he came to me again and said, "hey Pastor Ed, I'm not really a believer... I'm an agnostic and I'm still trying to figure out what I think about all this Jesus stuff, but I really like what you're doing here and wanted to know if it would be alright if I supported Riverside financially. Would you take my money?"

Ummmmmm... YEAH!

The thing that most intrigued me in our conversation was his label of himself. The first time he introduced himself to me he told me he was an atheist (absolutely believing there is not God) and this time he says he's agnostic (unsure about the existence of a God). That's a big jump in my book. He continued to come to church religiously (pun intended) and after a few more years he came to me and told me that the Air Force was shipping them out. He told me how much he had enjoyed Riverside and expressed his fears that he and his wife would be able to find a church in their new duty station that spoke to both of them the way Riverside did.

Now if that's not enough of a miracle for you, a couple of months after they left I received this note from him:

First off thanks for podcasting your sermons I really appreciate being able to hear them and they've given me a lot to think about (which is why I'm writing). Could you please call me? I'd like to talk more about what following Christ means and how to do so. Through your recorded sermons (and your singular way of spreading God's word) you have helped me to see that there's been something missing in my life.

I know you and I have talked about faith when we lived in Eagle River. Then I wasn't ready to take a leap of faith. Well now things are different. I am realizing and accepting the fact that I can't "do it all" myself. I've prayed to God and opened my heart to him. I have asked for help and forgiveness. I want to learn more.

And to this day that man is a Facebook friend of mine and he is one of the most amazing examples of Jesus' love on my friends list. How did that happen? We followed James' advice- "be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to get angry." It works every time.

Friday:

So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls. James 1:21 (NLT)

Reflection: Ok, today we're going to talk about James' process of growing in the new life that Jesus offers to each of us. Two weeks ago we talked about that new life and pointed out how life always begins as a baby- both physical and spiritual. When we are born again into Jesus' family we are spiritual babies. But James says the way to mature is by "humble accepting the word God has planted in your heart." What does that mean?

Well, let's start by talking about the concept of planting. The concept is used throughout the New Testament. Jesus talks about it quite a bit with His farming parables. A farmer going out to plant seeds. Paul talks about it in Galatians and 1 Corinthians. James will even go on to talk more about planting later in his book. And yet with all those allusions to planting, this word that James uses here is what scholars call a "hapax legomenon" (I know... gesundheit! A what?!?!? What does that weird word even mean?). A hapax legomenon is just a fancy word that means a particular word in the New Testament is found only once in the entire Bible. There aren't that many of them so when they crop up it's interesting to notice if what you're trying to do is study the Bible. This word that James uses for "planted" is different than the word that Jesus and Paul used when making farming illustrations. It's even different than the word James will use later in his own farming illustration. This word wasn't used for mechanically planting a seed in the soil. The idea here was that it was something organically implanted by God. Something that was naturally intrinsic in a tree or animal or even a human in this case.

The way I think about it is like an acorn. I think it was Charles Spurgeon who held up an acorn one day while preaching and said, "within this acorn's cup lies everything needed to cover this entire planet in trees!" What did he mean by that? Well, one acorn could grow one oak tree. But that one oak tree would produce thousands of acorns over its life time and the oaks grown from those oaks would produce thousands of acorns each and the oaks grown from those thousands of acorns... well you get the drift, right? So tell me... how was the ability to reproduce oak trees "implanted" in the oak? Did somebody teach the oak to create acorns? Does the oak have to think about what its doing to produce acorns? Does the oak have to mechanically plant the acorns it produces in order for a new oak to be born? No. If you're going with the thinking of the Bible (which I believe is a great idea) then you'd say that God "implanted" that seed in the oak trees genetic code. The oak tree doesn't have to think about reproducing... it just happens as the oak tree goes about being an oak tree. That's the concept that every first century Greek reader would have seen James weaving into this part of his letter. The "word" that James says can save us was "implanted" in us. It wasn't a mechanical planting of the word like Jesus refers to in his parable of the Farmer and the seeds and that Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians and Galatians. James choice of words here seems to be saying that God implanted His word deep within us. It is part of our genetic code. I'm thinking that's why Paul says in Romans chapter 2 that there are people in the world who have never heard the word of God, and yet because of something within them they organically have the capability of "instinctively" obeying God's law:

Even Gentiles, who do not have God's written law, show that they know his law when they instinctively obey it, even without having heard it. They demonstrate that God's law is written in their hearts. Romans 2:14-15 (NLT)

I used to wonder how that was possible. The thought comforted me because Paul seems to be hinting at the idea that the people in deepest Africa or South America who never had the opportunity to hear about Jesus are not without hope (which is what I was taught growing up... I have to admit... that bothered me a lot.). This week as I studied on this word that James uses for "planted" that verse started to make a whole lot more sense. How did the instinctively obey something they'd never heard before? Because God planted that word deep in their hearts. This week I've started thinking of that "implanted word" as a sort of wifi receiver. It's always on, whether we know it or not. And every once in a while it will connect with the wifi signal- the Bible. I may be oversimplifying this but bear with me for a minute.

The Bible also contains the word of God. It's much clearer there than it is in our hearts but every once in a while the two will sort of "link up" and create a connection. I see it happen at Riverside all the time. I'll be preaching along and notice somebody in the audience is almost glowing. Not like they're radioactive... it's got to be a spiritual thing but they are standing out. I always used to wonder what was going on when that happened. It was obvious God was connecting with them but I never really gave much thought to the process. Until this week. There's another confusing (at least for me) passage of scripture in the Psalms:

Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me. Psalm 42:7 (NLT)

I never understood that verse. What does "deep calls to deep" mean? I've had lots of people share their understanding with me but it never made any sense to me. Until this week. Now I am sure I'm oversimplifying and it probably means a lot more than just this (God loves to do that... fill a word or verse with so much overlapping meaning that we will never get to the bottom of it- it's one of the things that mystifies me most about the scriptures) but this week as I was thinking about the word implanted in me and the word implanted in the Bible it hit me like a bolt out of the sky- sometimes when everything is just right, the word planted deep within the Bible "calls" to the word planted deep within us. Deep calls to deep.

And when that happens, if we listen. If we take that word implanted within us which is fairly vague and murky, and connect it to the word planted in the Bible which is SO much more detailed and clear. Sure, humans can instinctively obey God's law with nothing more than the word planted within them by the Father Himself, but when we pair that with the word planted in the Bible, miracles happen. Babies born into a new life in the Kingdom of God grow up and become powerful men and women of faith. They find themselves able to do things they never dreamed they'd be able to do. They find themselves changed by the word and in the process they find the world changed by their individual lives. But we've got to "humbly accept" this word planted within us. What does that mean? The mind boggles! Maybe that would be a good thing to think about today.