

## Hearers and Doers

*James 1:17-27*

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If you ever decide to type “contradictions in the Bible,” into Google, well, buckle up, because there are some *very* strong feelings on the topic.

The atheists do a good job of pulling bits of text that seem to contradict each other and put them side by side with pictures of people smacking their heads in disbelief. You can feel the glee in this “gotcha” type of moment. They make it seem like no thinking person could possibly believe Scripture is true.

The fundamentalists go in the opposite direction, with vehement denials that there is any problem whatsoever, and then offer somewhat circular arguments as to why such contradictions can’t possibly exist at all.

Then there are those believers who just try to ignore certain sections of Scripture, and pretend like they aren’t there... Sort of an out of sight, out of mind approach.

Finally there are those who argue that certain sections of Scripture should never have been included in the first place. That’s another route you can take.

These pesky contradictions! What is a good Presbyterian to do?

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Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, encountered this problem, too. You see, Luther had major beef with the Book of James, the source of our Scripture lesson for this morning. In fact, when you read Luther’s thoughts on James, it seems like the book of James had somehow gone out of its way to deeply and personally offend Luther. He once called James an “epistle of straw” that “has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.”<sup>i</sup>

As if that wasn’t enough, Luther thought the book should be excluded from the Bible altogether, and he refused to believe that the letter was truly from the apostles, least of all James, the brother of Jesus.

To sum up his sentiments on the whole matter, Luther once claimed, “I almost feel like throwing Jimmy in the stove.”<sup>ii</sup>

Disregarding the fact that it's pretty hilarious that Luther called the book of James "Jimmy," we have to ask ourselves, "What did poor James ever do to Martin Luther?!"

And then we find out that it all has to do with one of those contradiction issues.

These pesky contradictions in Scripture. What's a good Presbyterian to do?

You see, Martin Luther's hallmark, his claim to fame that still echoes down to us 500 years after the Reformation, is that we are saved by "faith alone."

Luther built his life's work off a conversion experience he had when reading those famous words in Romans. "We shall live by faith," Paul writes. We are justified by faith alone.

And yet in the book of James, we find one of those irksome contradictions. "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?" James asks. "Faith without works is dead."

"You live by faith alone," Paul says.

"Faith without works is dead," James replies.

Sola Fides and Sola Scriptura were the rallying cry for the Reformation. Faith Alone and Scripture Alone are its hallmarks. But what do we do when Scripture seems to contradict itself, and in fact seems to say that "faith alone" is not enough?

Houston, we have a problem!

These pesky contradictions in Scripture! What shall we do?

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Now, I don't think I'm alone in the fact that growing up, my parents had a sort of good cop, bad cop approach to raising my sister and me.

For example,

I remember developing this strategy in middle school where, when I didn't do a homework assignment and my parents found out about it, I kind of worked myself up into tears and said something along the lines of,

"I am so sorry. I was just so stressed. I was completely wrong. Really any punishment you bring will pale in comparison to my current agony, because I'm already so disappointed in myself!"

I figured that if you acted contrite ahead of being yelled at, and apologized, it sort of took the wind out of their sails a bit. I thought I could kind of beat them to the punch if I just looked really broken up about my failure and made a show of self-flagellation.

And my mom would buy it pretty much every single time.

Mom would be like, “You know, if Nathan’s struggling, just think of how hard it must be for all those *other* students. Surely he isn’t the only one!” Gotta love the vote of confidence, mom. Mom gave me a lot of grace. She couldn’t believe her baby boy would have knowingly shirked what he was supposed to do.

*Unfortunately* for middle school Nate, this might have worked a grand total of one time with my dad. Then he wasn’t buying it.

“I’m just really disappointed in myself,” I remember saying, as I tried to work up some fake tears.

“Not yet you aren’t!” was his reply.

“You knew what you were supposed to do, you knew what was expected of you, you had the tools to do it, yet *you* didn’t make it happen!”

He wasn’t about to let me off the hook.

Interestingly enough, my sister could get away with murder from my dad, while my mom never gave her an inch. We could psycho-analyze that one for a while, but I think it’s best to save that for another day.

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In our Scripture lesson we find that James just won’t let us off the hook. James isn’t giving us much grace. James doesn’t want to hear that “we really tried,” when we really didn’t. James doesn’t care.

James says, “You know what you need to do... you better do it.” Your faith is only real if you have the works to back it up.

Let’s listen to James again.

“But be *doers* of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror, and on going away, immediately forget what they were like...”

There are hearers and doers, James says. Your works matter. Just believing the right stuff won’t get you anywhere.

Faith verses works. Contradictions!

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You may already know the story that led to Martin Luther’s conversion, but it’s worth remembering. I think it sheds some light on why he has such a bone to pick with James.

Luther began his early adulthood planning to be a lawyer, when one day he was caught in a horrendous storm. As the lightning and thunder crashed around him, Luther feared for his life. He promised to give his life to God, to become a monk, and that's what he did. He quit the law and joined a monastery. Still, he was in constant fear for his eternal soul. He felt certain he would go to hell, and that he would never be good enough.

Historian Bruce Shelly writes that "Luther pushed his body to health-cracking rigors of austerity. He sometimes fasted for three days and slept without a blanket in freezing winter... No amount of penance, no soothing advice from his superiors could still Luther's conviction that he was a miserable, doomed sinner."<sup>iii</sup>

Luther once said "I kept the rule so strictly that if I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work." He wasn't exaggerating.

The man had been in torment for years over the state of his soul and whether he could ever be good enough. The man worked as hard as he could to save himself through his actions. He just realized it would never be enough.

Friends, we can see the Bible as a book full of contradictions.

*Or*, we can see it as the collection of stories and poetry and letters that the Living Word, The Holy Spirit, uses to tell us *exactly* what we need to hear.<sup>iv</sup>

What Martin Luther most needed from God was a Word of Grace, and by the Grace of God, that's what he found in Scripture. The Word of God was speaking something true to him—that he *was* good enough, that he *was* loved, and that his saving *was not* up to him.

When Martin Luther encountered the words of Paul- that we are saved by faith and not by works- that was *exactly* what Luther needed to hear.

Sometimes we need that reassurance.

Sometimes, though, we can get a bit too complacent in our faith and are resting on our laurels. For some of us, we need a fire lit under us. We need to "straighten up and fly right," as my Grandfather Sell used to say.

We know what we are supposed to do and have everything we need to do it. We just aren't making it happen, like a middle-schooler not doing his homework.

What we need, in these moments, is a little James in our life.

We need James to remind us that we can't just be hearers of the word, but we have to be DOERS, too.

We've seen the public's disgust in tragedies when Christians say "you'll be in our thoughts and prayers", but we don't lift a finger to help.

James isn't having any of it. He writes, "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?"

Can faith alone feed an empty stomach? Can faith alone make us love our enemy?

James is a book that motivates us to action.

And it might be *exactly* what we need to hear right now.

"Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger," James writes.

Can you imagine what our world would look like if everyone who said they were a Christian actually did this? If we "bridled our tongues?" as James says? If we didn't just *believe* in civil discourse, but modeled it?

Facebook would be about posting pictures of your dog again.

Can you imagine if we all were "hands-on" about caring for the vulnerable, "for the widow and the orphan," as the text says, rather than just offering our thoughts and prayers? It would be a whole new ballgame.

I'm just as guilty as the next guy of being the armchair theologian offering my critiques of the world, but James demands we take quiet, consistent *action*, rooted in our faith.

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These pesky contradictions might not be pesky contradictions at all.

The truth is, we don't always need to hear the same thing.

God uses the myriad of voices in Scripture to reach us where we are, and that's part of the miracle of it all.

The Christ we follow is always shaking things up, always pushing us, always calling us to a deeper call to follow and trust Him. He makes the humble proud and the proud humble. To the weak and the weary he says "come to me, for my burden is light and I will give you rest for your souls."

To the comfortable and complacent he says, "Pick up your cross and follow me."

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So, if you're in a place where you are worn thin and feel like it's all too much, that you'll never be good enough and you have nothing left to give, remember this:

God loves you just as you are, and nothing, nothing, nothing in all of creation can separate you from the love of God found in Jesus Christ.

It's not up to you. Paul promises us that, and he's right.

But if you've gotten a bit too comfortable, if you've gotten a bit too complacent, remember that you are called to so much more.

We have work to do- no excuses. We must be doers of the word, and not just hearers. James is right, too.

May the Living Word find us wherever we are this week, and may we find *exactly* what we need to hear.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://taylormarshall.com/2006/02/chasing-down-luther-quotes-about-james.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://taylormarshall.com/2006/02/chasing-down-luther-quotes-about-james.html>

<sup>iii</sup> Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 203.

<sup>iv</sup> Daniel Migliore, explaining Karl Barth's view on Scripture in *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 46.