



MORRISON ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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September 9, 2012

Pentecost 15

Sermon Text: [James 1:17-27](#)

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: [Deuteronomy 4:1, 2, 6-9](#)

Psalm of the Day: [Psalm 119c](#)

Second Lesson: [James 1:17-27](#)

Gospel Lesson: [Mark 7:1-8, 14, 15, 21-23](#)

Be Quick To Listen

So you can focus on God's perfect gift
So you can live according to God's perfect gift

In Christ Jesus, dear Christian friends:

Did you ever talk to someone and you're discussing something in depth, something you're both concerned about, some issue, some point of life, whatever it might be, and you're both really interested in it and it's obvious, but you find yourself as you're talking looking at the other person and you see that they're not really listening to anything you're saying? They aren't hearing the points you are trying to make because you can see the wheels turning in their eyes that they are thinking about what they are going to say. As they are focused on what they are going to say, they don't hear anything that you're saying. Did you ever have that happen to you? How does it make you feel? Do you get a little irritated at that person because they aren't listening? Do you just want to stop and say something completely ridiculous to see if they even hear it? I've done that from time to time. It's fascinating when they don't hear something you say that is completely foolishness and ridiculous.

The next question is, which is probably a little harder to answer, have you ever noticed yourself doing that? Do you ever catch yourself when someone else is talking to you and you're busy thinking about what you're going to say and you realize "I don't know what the last three sentences they said are"? Do you get just as irritated at yourself? My guess is probably not.

In our Second Lesson today from James, the Holy Spirit has James give us good advice that fits for all areas of our life. "Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." I'll grant you it's great advice for all of life, but the question we have to answer today as we look at this section from God's Word is what exactly is he telling us to be quick to listen to? Is he just talking about our daily conversations? Or is he talking about something else, something that really has much greater bearing on life than what I think or what you might think?

If you look at these words from James 1:17-27, and if you look at them in their context, I think you are going to find he is talking about being quick to listen so that you can focus on God's perfect gift. That's what he is talking about. That's what he is telling us to be quick to listen to. We aren't always good at that. As is the focus of the whole Book of James, which tells us that faith without works is dead, faith is never alone, faith is

always accompanied by action, and faith acts on God's perfect gift, so we want to be quick to listen so that we can live according to God's perfect gift. That's the whole thrust of his Book.

In the beginning of James 1, shortly before what I read to you, it was written to the Twelve Tribes who lived in the dispersion, those who were spread out all over. Already in about the second or third paragraph of the Book, he's talking about facing trials of every kind, facing persecutions. Evidently these people that were dispersed throughout wherever he was writing to were Jews that had become Christians, and they were suffering. They were being attacked. They were being persecuted because they were living their faith.

He had just talked to them about where the bad things come from. He said when you are tempted or when evil comes your way, when you are tempted to evil, don't say God is tempting me, because God doesn't tempt us to do wrong. In that setting, he says "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Heavenly Father, who doesn't change like shifting shadows." The God who, as he says, "chose to give us birth through the word of truth," has given you the gift of salvation through that word of truth. That's what James tells his readers. He's not like shifting shadows. He's not changing his mind. And he's not torturing you now, like a little kid might torture a fly, just because he's God and you're human. God gives good and perfect gifts. God doesn't give gifts that are evil or bad for us. They might not be fun to go through. We'll see that in a couple weeks as we look at how even trials are a good and perfect gift from our God. But to these people who are suffering, he's telling them "God gave you the gift of salvation through faith in Jesus. He gave you Jesus. He gave you the good and perfect gift, the best gift that could possibly be given. And every gift he gives to you is just like Christ. It's the best gift for you at that time."

To these people who were going through suffering, put yourself in their shoes. When he comes to them and says be quick to listen and slow to speak and slow to get angry, do you think they might have been getting angry at God because God was letting difficulty into their lives? "We now know who Jesus is and we're worshiping Jesus and we're suffering for it, God. That isn't right. You shouldn't be letting that happen to me!" Be slow to speak. Do you think they might have been telling God an awful lot on what God should have been doing?

Do you ever find yourself doing that? What do you spend more time doing, praying to God or listening to God in his Word? What do you spend more time doing when things are going horribly bad in your life, telling God what he should be doing, or listening to him in his Word?

Think for a minute again to what I talked about in the beginning. Do you know how you feel when someone is so busy wanting to figure out what they want to say to you that they don't listen to you? You know how that makes you feel? How do you think God in Heaven feels when the answers to your struggles are there in Scripture already and you're spending all your time being angry at God and chewing God out, even in your

prayers, and shaking your fist at God in your prayers about why he is letting this happen to you? How do you think God feels?

He's already given us the answers. So often the answers to our prayers are there in Scripture, but so often we fail to go back to that word of truth which he gave us birth through. We fail to listen to the Word and then as he says do what it says, believe it, put it into practice. We fail because we are filthy rotten sinners.

This is the amazing thing about our God...we fail him again and again and again and yet he is always there. He does not change like shifting shadows. If you failed me the way that I have failed God and that you have failed God, I wouldn't keep going back to you. I wouldn't have time for you anymore. But look at our God. He doesn't change like shifting shadows. He says, "Listen to my Word. Be quick to listen to it because in it you are going to find that I love you and I have taken away every one of your sins. I will never withdraw that love from you. You might withdraw from me and you might lose the blessings I have won for you because you chase after something else, but I will never leave you nor forsake you" he tells us.

Isn't that absolutely amazing? Doesn't that boggle your mind? Why would you not want to get closer to and know better someone that loves you that perfectly and that much? Why not hang on his every word and get to know it better so that he can sustain you and help you through difficulties? I don't know why not. There really is no good answer, right?

The more time we spend in God's Word, the more we'll see his good and perfect gift, the more we will be drawn closer to him, and the more we will have his comfort and his peace. It's the peace that we often say passes all understanding. It can't be grasped by our intellect alone. It has to be grasped by faith, and faith is strengthened through Word and Sacrament. The more time you spend with Word and Sacrament, the more blessed you will be. That's God's promise to you, and he doesn't change like shifting shadows. Test him in it. See if it's not true. It is true.

Our God wants us to hear his answers. Our God wants us to be quick to listen to him so we can see that good and perfect gift, so that we can be sustained through all difficulties and all troubles that life brings because life will bring them because we live in a sinful world. But he also wants us to be strengthened not so that we are just sustained but so that we live triumphantly, so that we live according to God even if it means we are going to suffer for a time like the people James was writing to.

He said to put away the filth and the things of this world. Live your faith. Don't just listen to the Word. Do what it says. Don't just listen to it and let it go in one ear and out the other as though now you've done something for God so God owes you good because you've listened to his Word. God wants you to listen to it and do it. Believe it. Live it. Live for him and no longer for yourself. So when James tells these people to put away the moral filth, that might have been some of the things that some of the Gentile believers were suffering for. The way that they had always served what they

believed was a god, they have now learned is wrong before the true God. So they stop doing it and their friends start attacking them. He says it doesn't matter. Put it away. Live for God because he doesn't change like shifting shadows because every good and perfect gift comes from him. Live for him no matter why you find yourself being attacked. Don't just listen to the word and so deceive yourself. Go Nike on the Word and "Just do it." That's what our God tells us this morning.

So how do you do it? Look at the last paragraph of what I read to you this morning, where he talks about the religion that is acceptable to God our Father. Look at what he points to there. "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." Keeping oneself from being polluted by the world is what I was just talking about. Even if you are going to be attacked for it, don't do what everyone else is doing. But what is this talk about looking after widows and orphans in their distress?

Widows and orphans in their distress had no safety net at that time. They had no one else to help them. If they had no family, they had no one. So he is saying to help those who are helpless. Help those who can give you no offer of return. He is really saying that religion that God accepts as pure and faultless is this, to be a little Christ.

Look at what Christ did. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Didn't we talk about that a little bit earlier as we were confessing our sins? While we were dead in our transgressions and sins, Christ died for us. We couldn't offer anything to God. Heaven will not be better because you and I are there. If you and I are not there, we will lose an eternity of blessings. But if we are there, it doesn't make it better. Heaven is already perfect. God is already perfect. We offer nothing to God. Yet, he loved us so much he left heaven, lived perfectly where we are sinners, and then died as the punishment for our sins. He did it all for those who could offer him nothing in return. He would get nothing out of it except the joy of doing his Father's will.

Now think about that. Think about how you live for others in Christ. Do you always live for others with no expectation of return? Or do you spend most of your life living for Christ in ways that will benefit you or those close to you?

Sometimes I think that's the heart of the matter within congregational life. Within congregational life, when people get upset and complain about things, is it because widows and orphans aren't being looked after, or someone they love is not being looked after the way they think it should be done, that they aren't being served the way they think they should be served? Sometimes I wonder if that's why in the last three months we haven't even gotten to 50 people signing up to do the Shepherds program...take a piece of paper to five different families once a month and spend as long as you want with them or as short a time you want with them and be the love of Christ on your face and be a conduit of information from the congregation to the person, from the person to the congregation. If we said sign up for your family or for your children, I bet we would

have had it filled right away. But when it is doing something for someone else and it's not something you are going to get in return specifically, we don't seem to do as well, do we?

“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” At our core, each and every one of us here is a selfish being. We at times think the world revolves around us. We're not going to worry about those who can offer us no return unless something acts from outside of us. That something is every good and perfect gift of the Gospel that God has given to us.

Look at what our God says about how he wants us to use the Gospel. “The man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom.” That perfect law is not just the Law as opposed to the Gospel, that's all of God's Word in its entirety, the whole message of God's Word. God's Word gives freedom. The man who looks at the perfect law that gives freedom, the man that looks at God's Word that gives freedom, “and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.” Continues to do this...the same thing was said in our First Lesson today. Don't let the things that your eyes have seen or what your ears have heard slip from your heart as long as you live. Over and over in Scripture God speaks about this as being a life-long thing, to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Be quick to listen to God's Word your entire life so you can live according to that gift.

On our own we are not inclined to do this. On our own we fail. On our own we need to have the Law confront us with our sin, which is what that failure is, and have our Lord tell us our sins have been washed away. Then in that forgiveness we can find the joy and the peace of being close to our God and the desire that comes from outside of us. Do what our God wants us to do, listen to his Word, live his Word and share his Word.

God's Word to you today is that the best way to do that is to be quick to listen to God. Amen.