

Following James's Map

BY JEREMY COLLIVER

James provides a map to a continuing life of transformation and conversion. Along its two roads—a responsible and redeeming relationship with others and a personal struggle against sin—that Jesus laid out and James takes up, we are to walk ourselves and to lead others.

As I cup my hands to fill them with water, I look up and see myself in the mirror. I close my eyes and splash water onto my face with the hopes of removing the remaining residue left by the shaving cream. My eyes open to my reflection staring back at me, as I flick the remaining water from my hands. I stand there for a moment, pausing to look at my reflection, and then I walk away to begin my day.

My day starts out like this every day, seeing my reflection in the mirror. Some days as I look into the mirror I do not really believe what I see, so before closing my eyes to splash water on my face I stop and lean in, tilting my chin toward the mirror so my face looks leaner. Other days I hardly notice myself as I close my eyes to splash water on my face.

Most days I am satisfied with what I see staring back at me. But there are days when I look into the mirror and realize that I need to do something to change, because I do not like what is looking back at me. After I rinse the shaving cream off my face, I open my eyes to my reflection staring back and we both agree that today we are going to do something to change.

James challenges us to “be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive [ourselves]” (James 1:22). There are several other options that we choose over the doing-of-the-word that James offers. One option is hearing the word but dismissing it. That is like the morning when we look into the mirror and see our reflection but dismiss what we see as not the truth. Another option is hearing the word but doing nothing with it. On those

mornings we simply look into the mirror and hardly notice ourselves as we go about our daily business. A third option is hearing, but being satisfied with just being able to hear. It is like those mornings when we look into the mirror to see our reflection and are satisfied that we are still here! The final option is hearing the word and doing something about it. These are

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the mornings when we look at ourselves in the mirror and not only decide to do something, but walk out of the room and actually do it.

I am a minister with students, so I think about these options not only in terms of my own pilgrimage but also in relation to the formation of my students' discipleship. Those days of actually doing something about what we see in the mirror are the

kind of mornings I want to have and want my students to have every day. I want to join them in hearing the word and then doing something with it.

NOTICING THE MAP

Too often in my line of work, ministering with students through the conversion process is reduced simply to how the word is shared. We focus on getting students to at least notice the word. We spend huge amounts of time, money, and other resources on transposing rich Bible passages into 140-character tweets, setting them to the newest flavor of music, printing them with retro or urban fonts to garner more attention, and even replacing them with catchier slick images. James does not discourage the hearing of the word, but he warns about merely hearing the word and not doing anything with it. Those of us who minister with students should see this huge, neon-glowing sign that James has placed before us: "STOP! Don't merely hear this!" Why do many of us run through this stop sign? Because rushing to embrace the next cultural fad in which we wrap the word for presenting to our students is the easy part. Maybe our students dismiss, do nothing with, or are satisfied with simply hearing the word because that is all that we focus on and expect them to do.

If we do not run carelessly through the stop sign that James has placed in the text, perhaps we will notice another neon-glowing sign he placed next to it—"Do this!" This is how to not merely hear the word but be a doer of the word: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for the orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27).

With this sign James provides a map that will lead to a continuing life of transformation and conversion. The map has two roads that sometimes run parallel, sometimes cross paths, and sometimes seem to run separate ways in our lives: those roads are a responsible and redeeming relationship with others and a personal struggle against sin.¹ Following this map, it is along these two roads, which Jesus laid out and James takes up, that we are to walk ourselves and to lead others.

TAKING THE PERSONAL PATH

Early along this journey we come to an important point that many have mistaken for the very end of the road: it is the time of much rejoicing and celebrating when a person makes a profession of faith and the sacrament of baptism is performed. In a simple “dunk and done” theology we dry baptismal candidates off, pat them on the back, and wish them the best of luck. Granted, we have done something with the word, but James does not want us to use a profession of faith as a “refuge from ethical responsibility.”² Faithfulness does not stop with a profession of faith, but is a ticket to a life of continued transformation and conversion.

Continuing to travel down this path of “religion that is pure and undefiled before God,” of course, is not equivalent to religious busyness. Some youth today are encouraged by their parents and leaders or self-propelled into “doing” lots of church things, but they remain deceived about themselves. In a culture where everything is here and now, they may be looking to get in, get out, and be on their way. They have learned the vocabulary that is needed and actions that are to be performed to be really active, but may really be running in place. They are merely checking things off their spiritual “to do” list.

We must help them understand that doing church activities is not the life of faith, but it can lead to a life of faith. In addition to the doing there must be some fruit that comes, or all the doing is just another check on the list. Only when their actions flow from love of God and others will they see the fruit of the Spirit — “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23) — blossom and grow from their doings.

WALKING THE PATH WITH OTHERS

Students crave community, so it is beneficial that they will meet many fellow travelers on the path. James highlights some of these fellow travelers “in their distress” and calls us to join in community with them. Students know a lot about social connection — they can follow someone on Twitter or friend them on Facebook — but being connected to others does not mean being in community with them. James calls for us to be present in the life of another person. That is why ministries for students must structure time for them to share life together — by eating together, being in one another’s homes, and supporting one another at competitions.

The fellow travelers that James envisions, and that we need on the journey of faith, include “orphans and widows.” These are two groups of people who had little power and were oppressed. Transformation and conversion will occur in a community when there is such diversity of life experience that can be explored and shared.

Though the journey of faith is sometimes difficult—indeed, we must “persevere”—the epistle of James offers us this hope. As we journey with a transformative community into “the perfect law, the law of liberty, . . . being not hearers who forget but doers who act—[we] will be blessed in [our] doing” (James 1:25).

NOTES

1 Harold S. Songer, “James,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, volume 12, edited by Clifton J. Allen (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1972), 100-140, here citing 113.

2. *Ibid.*, 101.



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