

“Be Yourself”

Sermon from Sunday 22 September

Discussion Questions

First: As a group, read James 1.14-27

Second: Decide as a group which questions will be the most interesting/provocative/helpful for you. Take as many or as few as you like.

Comprehension

1. The beginning of James’ letter weaves together several ideas that set up the content later in the book. In verses 14-21, James is showing two ways we can be, both of which employ a metaphor of conception, pregnancy, and birth. What are the two ways of being, and what are the verses/words/images that describe each one?

The bad way: slave to desires. Desire a predatory seducer, implied intercourse, conception of sin, which gives birth to death. Desire comes to control you, makes you quick to anger and speech.

The good way: born of/birthing the word of God. “Brought forth” by the word; may refer to creation (John 1, all things created through the word) or spiritual rebirth in Christ. “Implanted word” describes God’s intimacy with us, something not-us that becomes internal to us, akin to a child in a mother’s womb.

2. When James says “be a doer of the word”, what word is he talking about?

Verse refers backwards: receive with meekness the implanted word...BUT be doers of the word. Implanted word has many layers of meaning: the Word is God and with God (John 1), incarnate in Jesus (John 1); the Word is Jesus’ words that we receive and hear; God’s written word in Scripture; God as God’s word abiding in us and transforming us. All these speak with the same voice.

3. Why do the two ways of being (question 1) matter for being doers of the word? How does starting with be-ing affect the way we might think about our do-ing?

James’ focus on who we are (being) makes the emphasis on action (doing) about conforming our external selves (what we do) to our internal identity (who we are), which is a product of God’s action—rather than “be doers of the word through your own effort and strength”

4. Unpack as a group the metaphor of a mirror that James uses to describe the difference between being a hearer only versus a doer. How does the metaphor illustrate the key difference between these two?

Hearer only sees their “natural face” (Greek: face of their genesis, or creation) and then forgets they look like that. They see (hear) God’s word but it doesn’t take root. The discrepancy between their identity (reflection in mirror of the word) and their doing is described as “forgetting”.

Doer of the word stares into “perfect law/of freedom” (also the word) and perseveres—holding that image in front of them, recalling who they are, acting accordingly.

5. James is weaving together many ideas in these verses. Given the focus on who we are (two ways of being) and being a doer of the word, why do you think speech and anger (vv19, 26) are such significant behavioural markers of who we are?

May want to refer to later passages about speech (ch3) and anger (ch4). James sees speech as a primary expression of our internal selves and thus a danger for hypocrisy/doublemindedness. Anger comes from thwarted self-interested desires. Quick speech/anger a manifestation of slavery to desire rather than attending to God’s implanted word.

6. Though the sermon didn’t get to it, discuss how being a doer of the word might relate to the “true religion” in verses 26-27.

Open-ended question. Attention to widows and orphans could relate to true apprehension of God’s word: society marks these as worthless categories, but God’s word says different. Here widows and orphans refers to literal widows and orphans but also is used as a common biblical category for the disenfranchised and powerless in general. Unstained from the world probably relates to the moral purity of resisting desire’s seduction.

Application

7. Who do you see when you look in a mirror? Be honest: list the good, and the bad. Then, who do you see when you look into the mirror of Scripture/the gospel—that is, who does the word of God say that you are? What’s the difference between these two reflections?
8. Where in your life (situations, relationships) are you most likely to forget “your natural face”—the reflection you see in the Gospel? Imagine a scenario you’re likely to be in over the next few days. How would it go differently if you “persevered” in the “law of liberty”?
9. We often think of sin as something we do or don’t do, but James expands the moment: the predatory temptation of desire (v14), the implied intercourse, and the conception and birth of sin which grows into death (15). Could this image help you resist places in your life where you perhaps give in to desire without thinking about it?

Open-ended application questions to be navigated per the leader’s discretion. May take time for people to be willing to open up about what they don’t like about themselves (and probably longer to admit what they do like!). See if you can get people to make the “gospel reflection” image specific: not just generic adjectives that could be applied to anyone (as the sermon did) but what the gospel version of each individual looks like particular to them.