

We have all heard of the three monkeys: “see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil”. James’ epistle would include the latter two monkeys but as to the first, he would probably change him to “do no evil”. This section of James deals with proper listening, speaking and doing. These are about as basic as you can get when trying to outline proper Christian behavior. There must necessarily be a relationship between what we do and what we say. Hypocrisy is the result when this union doesn’t exist.

We have also all heard the excuse for not coming to church offered by some that the church is just full of a bunch of hypocrites. (If you hear that, tell them there is room for one more!) Everyone is a hypocrite at one time or another. Everyone says things they themselves do not always do. Or as the parent is sometimes criticized by the child, "You say do as I say, not as I do." Maybe they smoke when they tell their child not to. Remember that the sanctified life of a Christian is always a work in progress. But in the meantime, do not judge others by your standard if you do not keep it yourself. The measure we give is the measure we will get, says the Bible. So if everyone is a hypocrite because of their sinful inconsistencies, why does James give us this word?

We would benefit at this point with a brief catechetical review. The three functions of the law are the curb, the mirror and the guide. The curb provides a moral check for society, the mirror shows our sin and need for God’s mercy in Christ and the guide shows born-again believers how God would have us live. James, like all sanctification talk, deals with the third use of the law, the guide. It presupposes and requires that saving faith is already in the heart. Verse 25 applies this use although it may seem that James is using the second use of the law there, the mirror. The “perfect law”, however, can only be perfected through the perfect obedience of Christ. Only through His righteousness received by grace through faith do Christians have their freedom.

So James, like Jesus preaching the Sermon on the Mount, is reinforcing the standard of the law to be practiced among believers. James is reminding the Christian what it means to act like a Christian. Namely, listen (v. 19), be slow to anger (vv. 19, 20), don’t be entangled with the ways of the world (vv. 21, 27), use good speech (vv. 19, 26), walk how you talk (vv. 22-25) and be charitable to those especially in need who have no other recourse of aid (v. 27). It is the union of what we believe with what we actually say and do.

Our confession defines our faith but our actions, much louder than words, demonstrate it. The previous two verses to our present text read as a kind of creedal statement. God is good. He chooses to share His goodness and love with us. He does what He says and doesn’t change by every whim. We are transformed by His love. Thus so, we are born again and there begins a shaping of our lives into the image of Christ. We share our love as Christ does. We should do what we say. We are to be holy as Christ is holy. We are the “first fruits” of Christ’s redeeming grace; the first and the best of that which has been remade as a new creation. Just because we continue to sin and daily need Christ’s forgiveness does not let us off from striving after the perfect law. It is a matter of not just hearing the Word, but doing the Word.

For Our Further Discussion

1. How can sins of the tongue (word) be even more devastating than sins of the hand (deed)?
2. Comparing our text with the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-12, do we do any better to measure up to that standard of discipleship? In what way is it good, though, that we see ourselves clearly?
3. How does Ephesians 4:26, 27 echo vv. 19, 20 of our text?