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“When All Else Fails, read the Instructions”

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

James 1:17-27

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Opening

- When I was a little boy, there were a number of young fathers who lived in my neighborhood, who had shared interests and were frequently found to be “hanging out” with one another.
 - There was my dad of course and I remember Bud, who lived next door, Ray lived down the street and Phil lived directly across from our house.
 - Back then, none of these men had two nickels to rub together and they stayed pretty close to home.
 - During their free time, they would sometimes congregate at one or another’s yard and talk, laugh or help someone who needed a hand.
 - These four men were comrades, of sorts.
- One summer day, there was a knock on our front door and when my dad answered, there stood Bud.
 - After friendly greetings, Bud said to my dad “Glen, I’m trying to put together a swing set, and I’ve run into a bit of a problem- could you come over and take a look at it?”
 - “Sure,” said my dad and together, they headed out, next door.
 - As the headed over to Bud’s house, Bud said “The swing set is here in the garage. I thought it would be easier to assemble it here and then get you and Phil to help me carry it around back.”
 - By this point, Phil had joined the group in the garage, to see what was up and the three of them stood there looking at the assembled steel frame of the swing set- INSIDE the garage.
 - Bud then stated the obvious, “I’ve tried every way I can think of to get the swing set frame through the garage doorway, but I can’t figure out how to do it.”
 - “I wanted you guys to take a look at it and help me. Surely there must be some way we can turn it, to get it out.”
 - My dad and Bud, pondered the situation carefully, while Phil mostly stood around, laughing at the predicament.

- In the end, there wasn't a way to maneuver the set to get it out of the garage, so Bud had to disassemble the whole thing and put it back together again, **in the backyard**.
 - Standing there in the garage, my dad noticed the instruction sheet for the swing set lying on the garage floor, and picked it up and looked it over.
 - Phil roared with laughter as my father read from the instructions, something to the effect of "Find a flat, level location **out in your yard**, and assemble the swing set there."
- When all else fails, read the instructions!

When all else fails, read the instructions

- I suppose most of us can relate to Bud's predicament.
- I recall a number of years ago, I was assembling a computer desk in my home office.
 - It was one of those deluxe, L-shaped models- very large and heavy, with mail slots, CD slots and all sorts of shelves.
 - I like to think of myself as mechanically inclined, so assembling this was to be no problem.
 - And I tore right into it.
 - And I pride myself in assembling things tight- in fact, on occasion I have been known to over-tighten bolts and strip them or snap them off.
 - But that wasn't a problem this time- everything was tight and sturdy, and everything went together the way it was supposed to- that is, until I went to put the shelves in.
 - They just wouldn't go in- they were so tight you could hardly come close to having them fit into the shelf brackets.
 - About that time, I turned to the included instructions- which I really hadn't needed up until then- and found the part of the instructions that said, "Do not tighten bolts completely at this time; wait until final assembly before tightening all bolts securely."
 - Well, of course I was forced to loosen all of the bolts on the desk, so I could fit the shelves into place before tightening down all the bolts.
 - When all else fails, read the instructions!

The Word of God- our best instructions

- Sometimes in life we can find ourselves feeling boxed in, and we can't seem to figure a way out.

- It's sort of like trying to assemble that swing set in the garage without reading the instructions.
- And sometimes in life, we can find ourselves feeling like we can't seem to make the pieces correctly fit together.
 - A bit like trying to assemble that computer desk without reading the instructions.
- If we are honest, sometimes it seems like we need a good set of instructions for life, too, doesn't it?
 - Especially when it comes to making our faith work in today's world.
- This morning's reading from the Epistle of James is a reminder that the word of God can be the kind of help we need.
 - In a way, James gives us a set of instructions about using the word of God in our lives.
 - "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures."
- The first thing James does is **remind us who we are and to whom we belong**.
 - It is God who gave us birth.
 - It is God who gives us new life through the "word of truth"- the Gospel.
 - We belong to God, and God's goodness is to be demonstrated **in us and through us**.
- Next, James calls for us to **hear the word of God and to allow it to function in our daily lives**.
 - "You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore, rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls."
 - James reminds us again, as Jesus did, that **God has written God's word on our hearts**, and like a seed planted in soil, it needs to be nurtured in order to grow and flourish in us.
 - We need to receive the word of God with meekness- with humility- so that it becomes securely planted in our lives and we submit our lives to God's control.

- American scientist and inventor, George Washington Carver, who developed hundreds of useful products from the peanut, once told a story about himself, that I think demonstrates the kind of humility James talks about in his Epistle.
 - Carver said, “When I was young, I said to God, ‘God, tell me the mystery of the universe.’ But God answered, ‘That knowledge is reserved for me alone.’ So I said, ‘God, tell me the mystery of the peanut.’ Then God said, Well, George, that’s more nearly your size.’ And he told me.”
- In order to receive the word of God with this kind of humility, James says, “Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness.”
- James is telling us to “put away” our old ways of living and embrace a new Christian lifestyle so that we can become receptive to God's word- to clear out the clutter and make a place for God’s word in our lives.
- If we make a place for God’s word in our lives; and if we listen to God’s word and welcome it into our hearts, then God’s word can function in our lives, and we can make our faith work in this world.
 - In James’ example, we can have the ability to really get along with other people.
 - To remember to be good listeners
 - To let people say to us all that they have to say
 - To make sure we understand them, before we reply.
 - And the ability to always hesitate before saying anything out of anger.
 - As James points out, anger will never produce righteousness- the kind of right relationships with God and with others- that God wants.

From listening, to looking

- But wait! James isn’t finished!
- Now, James turns **from listening skills** and **towards looking skills**.
 - He uses the metaphor of a mirror to describe how people not only **HEAR**, but also **PAY ATTENTION** to the word of God.
 - “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; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing”.

- James compares a person who is content just to listen to the word of God- to let it go in one ear and out the other, so to speak- to someone who uses a mirror to just casually glance at themselves, without really taking the time to examine their image closely to see what they really look like.
 - If we are really concerned with who we are, we need to let the word of God be for us a mirror in which we look for the reflection of our own lives.
 - When we hear the word of God, we need to take a closer, longer look at our lives.
 - We need to let God’s word examine us and prompt us to take action.
 - ‘If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless,” Says James. “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”
- Thus far, James has given us two instructions for using the word of God in our lives.
 - We are to **listen closely to God's word**, and **we are to look carefully into God's word**, or rather, we are to let God’s word look carefully into us.
- And now, James gives us a third instruction: to **live from God's word**.
 - Like “shalom,” which is not just the absence of conflict but the active pursuit of a peaceful existence, righteousness is more than just a passive life of not sinning.
 - Just listening to God's word isn’t enough.
 - James wants us to remember that God's word is a **living word**.
 - It is not just something to read or hear; God's word is something to obey.
 - God’s word is something to be done.
 - To care for others in their distress.
 - To try to live lives of personal holiness.
- Well, there we have it.
- James gives us four things to follow as we work at our faith.
 - Stop, listen, look and act.
 - **First**, we need to stop and remember who we are and who we belong to- we are all precious children of God- who need to take time to read the Bible seriously, pray, and attend worship.

- **Second**, we need to eagerly listen for God's word- to hear what God is telling us- and humbly welcome it into our hearts.
- **Third**, we need to look into God's word and let God's word examine our lives and tell us what **we need to do- to light our way**.
- **Fourth**, we need to act on what God is saying to us.

Wrap it up

- When all else fails, read the instructions.
 - There will be times in our lives when we get in trouble because we try do something without following the instructions.
 - And as a result, we get boxed in- or we can't make the pieces fit.
 - There will be times in our lives when we need to stop and read the instructions.
 - There will be times in our lives when we need to renew our efforts to put away the old ways and make a place for God's word in our lives- so that we may become living examples of God's word in the things we say.
 - And especially in the things we do.
- May it be so for us on those days, and every day, now and forever more.
- Amen.