

13 Pentecost 2003
"Receiving and Doing the Word of God"
The Rev. Thomas W Simmons IV

I've never been one to read the funny papers, but I just love the cartoons in the New Yorker magazine. It's one of the highlights of my week, going through the New Yorker, pulling out the inserts and reading the cartoons. This week has a good one. It shows of a bunch of important looking executives-types sitting around a conference table.

At the head of the table the CEO holding glowing stone tablets that bear an uncanny resemblance to the Ten Commandments. From last week to this week this is becoming a familiar theme, isn't it? We are talking about the Word of God again. Well, the folks around the table look a little puzzled and one asks, "**Are these just *guidelines* or are they actually new *policies*?**"

Are they just guidelines or actual policies? What a choice, huh? Last week's readings showed us that God intends his Word to be honored and used, to be lived and to be witnessed to others. **God has spoken.** In the midst of a confused world, he has shown us what is true, good and right, what he requires of us. He's given us a vision of life in harmony with God, with each other and with the world. They are "actual policies" not just optional guidelines.

Last week we got a sense of how to use God's Word. It's a guide to life that we *walk* and *wield*; we live and witness to. Our lessons this morning continue the theme, but show us the Word of God in a different way.

James tells us what God's Word IS and what it DOES. **James speaks highly of what God's Word IS.** He calls it the "good and perfect gift" that comes down from above, from "the Father of lights, in whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." It is "the Word of *truth*." He calls it "the *perfect* law, the law of liberty."

That's a high view of Scripture, isn't it? It expresses a very clear reverence and awe of Scripture that is **echoed in our liturgy.** The Prayer Book calls God's Word "Holy Scripture" and we read it with great ceremony. For the Gospel reading we rise. I cross my head, lips and heart before reading "the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ."

That gesture expresses the sanctification of my thoughts words and desires, making me a fit and pure vessel to convey the Holy Gospel. And many of you do the same so you might worthily receive it. In the Episcopal liturgy we have a very high view of Scripture.

But you know what? **I think we are hypocrites.** When we get right down to it, most don't necessarily feel reverence and awe for Scripture. We tend to be a

little more ambivalent about God's Word and approach it with a bit of a skeptical eye. Do you agree with James that it's "perfect"? More often we wonder if we should be taking it "literally" or not. "Are these just guidelines?" Well guess what, folks. James has more to say about the Word.

James speaks highly of what God's Word DOES. He says God "*gave us birth* by the Word of truth" and he encourages us to "receive with meekness the implanted Word that *has power to save your souls.*"

So what does God's Word do? **The Word of God does stuff.** It works miracles. It changes lives. It changes the world! God's Word has an inherent, sovereign transforming power. Think about it. It created the world! Back in Genesis 1, God did it all by speaking, "Let there be..." and there was.

Isaiah expressed this beautifully. "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish...so is my Word that goes out from my mouth. It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." **Does that idea have a place in your understanding of the Word of God?**

We see it at work in our gospel lesson this morning. The Word of Jesus literally changes things in space and time, literally transforms a life, literally WORKS! The people "were astounded beyond measure" when Jesus speaks a word, a single Word, and heals this deaf mute.

Christians have always seen in this miracle an inner, spiritual transformation as well. Jesus does the same thing in our soul, giving us "ears to hear." That's how it gives us birth and that's why it has power to save our souls. It changes our lives. **Would you like to experience that?** James shows us how.

James shows us how we should respond to God's Word. We must quietly RECEIVE it and we must diligently DO it. Shhh, listen. Do you hear that? God is speaking to us in Scripture, so James tells us to be quiet and listen. "You must understand this my beloved, let everyone be slow to speak and quick to listen...welcome with meekness the implanted Word." **We must quietly RECEIVE it.**

On each of our heads, ears outnumber mouths two-to-one. James is suggesting we observe that ratio in our use of Holy Scripture: slow to speak, quick to listen. We need quiet, receptive hearts and minds to receive Holy Scripture.

That's why great gab-fests like General Convention or Diocesan Council or Parish Meetings aren't the best place for deep Scriptural discernment. That's why I love periods of silence in a Bible study as people are quietly receiving the Word.

Now I know we invert this 2:1 ratio in the liturgy where we have about 10 minutes *hearing* Scripture read and about twice that long with me *talking about it* in the sermon. But when you compare the time I spend preparing to preach - about 10-15 hours in prayerful study for the 15-20 minutes I spend in the pulpit - the ratio gets restored. I try to hear what God wants to say to you all in the passages each week. It literally takes that much time.

James uses another image to describe our receptivity to God's Word. He says **God's Word is like a seed that's planted in the heart.** We receive it like fresh soil. To do so we must rid ourselves of all "rank growth of wickedness." If you've been weeding gardens after all this rain you know what James is describing. You've got to get rid of the tangled, weedy underbrush to receive the good seed. But receptivity is not enough. You need resolve to act on what's been received.

James says we must diligently DO the Word. "Be doers of the Word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves." He's saying that Christians have a tendency to hear the Word, nod their head, think "that's interesting," say "thanks be to God" and **promptly forget everything they have heard.** Do you do that?

James likens it to looking in a mirror, which we all do. Do you ever pose in the mirror, putting on your game face, modeling different expressions you might use during the day? You try your fierce look, your sad look, your blasé look, your come hither look. "You good looking devil." **The mirror helps us gain a new perspective and awareness of ourselves,** doesn't it?

The Word of God does the same thing. As we gaze in the mirror of Holy Scripture we see ourselves anew, in all our sordidness and glory. We see ourselves as God sees us, with lots of trouble, and lots of potential, and above all, intensely and inseparably loved by God. We see ourselves "in Christ." It's his image reflected back at us, which should shape how we think and do when we put the mirror down. **We go and live out the image we see in that mirror.**

But James makes fun of those who don't, who hear the Word but fail to follow through with a changed life. He says we're like someone who looks in the mirror and immediately forgets what they see. They step out into the world and live by the old sinful, unhealthy, self-serving, enslaved patterns of life. And **that's just not acceptable for God's people.**

If God's Word is what James says it is, the good gift, the perfect law that saves our souls, we should receive it quietly and do it diligently, allowing it to change our lives into the mirror image of our Lord Jesus Christ. **That's what Building Christians for Service is all about.** AMEN.