Theme: God's Word energizes your faith.

Introduction

We all know that food and water are essential to life. You could live for up to 6-8 weeks without food if you had water, but less than a week without water. Of course, we also need air. We need to breathe in order to live. How long can you hold your breath? Has anyone timed yourself to see how long you can hold your breath? (Don’t do that now!) Anyone? How long? If not, How long do you think you could hold your breath? [Responses].

In February of last year a professional freediver broke the world record by holding his breath under water for … 24 minutes and 3.45 seconds. Whether 24 minutes or 24 seconds, at some point we have to breathe. It’s a matter of life and death.

As we come to the last part of chapter 1 in James, he moves from the challenges of trials and temptations to some of the key signs of a living, healthy, energized faith. Today we are looking at the first one, our response and relationship to God's Word.

God's Word is a matter of life and breath. That is so because God uses the truth of the Bible to energize your faith.

As basic a truth as this is, it is often forgotten. A Seminary professor tells of the introductory session of a basic theology class he taught. He really worked to make it as interesting as possible and yet was surprised to have a number of students come to the front and speak with him after the class.

One student, rather agitated, thanked him for the class and said, “It was if you were reading my mind.” He went on to say he had been petrified coming into the class and had a great struggle with his conscience, “Was it right to spend so much money on a course of study that was so irrelevant to his desire to minister to people in the Church?”
The professor realized the student intended this as a compliment, but it demonstrated that this, and other aspiring pastors, sometimes lost sight of the importance of Scripture itself in daily life and ministry.2

In this part of this letter, James gives us fresh reminders of the basic truths God has given us to make our life of faith vibrant and vital—the basic truth of the importance of God’s Word on our personal, practical day-to-day faith; the basic truth of careful speech and self-control; the basic truth of being committed to help the weak and helpless.

God’s Word is an essential ingredient for faith with real value. God’s Word is our spiritual food. Most unhappy, unproductive Christians share at least one problem: the failure to feed on and live by God’s Word. For your faith to have real value day to day, you must know and live God’s Word. For you and your faith, God’s Word is a matter of life and breath.

The core truth in the paragraph before us today, chapter 1 verses 19-27, is that God’s Word energizes faith. James sketches two contrasting pictures as he makes the point.

A picture of worthless faith.

The first is a picture of worthless faith. Does that sound too strong? It is exactly what James talks about at the end of verse 26 where he tells us the religion or faith of a person who does control his or her tongue “is worthless.” What does that worthless faith look like?

For one thing, worthless faith is the self-deception of knowing without doing. James repeatedly refers to self-deception in this first chapter. That emphasizes how great the danger is and how easily it occurs. Here it is the common, easy self-deception of knowing something but not doing it.

Verse 19 begins, “This you know,” or “Know, take note of this.” There are many things we know but do not believe. For example, we know about the idea of reincarnation, but don’t believe it. And so we don’t wonder or worry about whether we will come back as an elephant or an ant.

There are also things we know and agree with, but we don’t do. Some common examples include eating less and exercising more, which explains why losing weight continues to be the #1 New Year’s resolution.
Then too we know we should not use our cell phones while driving, but there were over 87,000 convictions for distracted driving across Alberta from September 2011 to March 2015. Ninety-seven per cent of the incidents involved a driver using a hand-held device.

Also as Christians we know we are to be more concerned about what we can do for others than what they can do for us, and yet many Christians are caught up in the self-focused, the what’s in it for me thinking that is so common today.

We know we are to be more focused on celebrating good things than complaining about bad things, and yet our cups can easily overflow with complaining. And on the list goes.

Here is an important point: What we do reveals what we really believe. What we do demonstrates whether we really see something as true or not true, as important or not important. Yes, what we do reveals what we really believe.

James gives us three examples of the self-deception of knowing without doing. The first is in verse 19, “everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak.” How many times have you and I wished we would have listened more and better, taken more time before we spoke, and said less when we did speak?

A young man asked the Greek philosopher Socrates to teach him public speaking. As he introduced himself he talked, and talked and talked. Finally Socrates interrupted, “Young man, I will have to charge you a double fee.” “Why?” the young man asked. Socrates explained, “I will have to teach you two sciences: first how to hold your tongue; then how to use it.”

If we are not “quick to hear and slow to speak” we are deceiving ourselves. That is made clear in verse 26. Look at it. “If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion is worthless.”

Why is this so? Why is unbridled, uncontrolled speech in a Christian an evidence of us deceiving ourselves? Turn ahead here in James to chapter 3. Go to the middle of verse 2, “If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. Now if we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well.”
Drop down to verse 5.

“So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell” (5-6).

All of us saw pictures of the great, terrible devastation of the Fort McMurray wildfire last year. The financial devastation has continued to grow, now being pegged at almost $9 billion. All of us have also seen and experienced the devastation of uncontrolled speech. You may have words from long ago that still play in your mind, that still hurt. James does not give us specific examples—he really didn’t have to.

If we think we are “religious,” that is, spiritually mature, fulfilling at least a great deal of what God expects, but do not control our speech, we are deceiving ourselves. Why? In part, Galatians chapter 5 verse 23 tells us part of the character of Christ the Holy Spirit produces in us as we yield to Him is self-control—and that includes controlling our tongue, our speech.

This, we know, is a difficult challenge. So King David prayed in Psalm 141 verse 3, “Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips.” Back in James chapter 3 again, verse 8 tells us “no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.” This is something we cannot do on our own. If we are not growing in being quick to hear and slow to speak, we are deceiving ourselves and draining energy and life from our faith.

The second example starts at the end of verse 19 which tells us to be “slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God” (19b-20). The picture in this word for anger describes an ongoing, smoldering fire, a strong persistent feeling or attitude of anger. We might crusade for a good cause, but if there is anger smoldering at the root, it will block accomplishing the righteousness we think we are working for, and so we are deceiving ourselves.

This occurs more often than we want to admit. At times we do not agree with others—that’s part of life. But, if we engage that disagreement with anger at the root, we cannot accomplish God’s righteousness in that situation, even if we are right on the issue.
To complicate it more, we can try to justify our anger, or deny we are angry when others see it clearly. And so, again, we deceive ourselves.

The last example is in verse 21. “Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.” *Put aside, take off.* Soldiers and farmers of that day would take off outer clothing that could get in the way of getting the job done in the battlefield or the wheat field. Put aside, take off “all filthiness, and all that remains of wickedness,” in other words, all sin. The apostle Peter put it this way in chapter 2 of his first letter, “[put] aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander” (verse 1).

There is no total perfection this side of heaven. At the same time, we deceive ourselves when we hang on to *this sin*, ignore *that* call from God, or excuse *any* sin we recognize in our lives. Any time we do not move to strip off sin which God enables us to see we are deceiving ourselves and our faith loses energy and value.

Then worthless faith is displayed in carelessly seeing without remembering. Drop down to verse 23.

“For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was” (23-24).

Let’s update that. Men, you get up tomorrow morning, wander into the bathroom, look in the mirror. You see that you need to wash, shave, comb your hair before you tackle the day. But first you go get some coffee, and then forget, and off you go! “What? Forget? That’s both foolish and leaves you in a mess!” Exactly. That is James’s point spiritually. When we hear or read the Bible and then go on our way without living it, we carelessly see but do not remember.

Seeing God’s truth without doing it is careless and saps the energy, effectiveness and life out of our faith. This self-deception and carelessness leaves us with a faith that is worthless to face the challenges of living in this world.
A picture of Word-energized faith.

Now let’s move to the second, contrasting and positive picture, a picture of Word-energized faith. There are a number of features to this picture. The first is receiving God’s Word humbly. Look at the last part of verse 21, “in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.”

Not only is God great beyond measure, His gift of the Scriptures is great beyond measure. God’s Word reveals Him and draws us to Himself. God’s Word enables us to see ourselves as we really are. God’s Word, the gospel, “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”

Yes, God’s Word is a very precious gift. God directed the human writers so that while they wrote in their own styles and personalities, the product was exactly what God wanted us to have and without error. And so it is totally trustworthy.

A faith that has vitality, that grows, that has meaning in our day to day lives is built on humbly receiving God’s Word. Throwing the door wide open, gladly, warmly saying to God and His truth, “Come in! I’m glad you are here!” Humbly, gladly welcoming and taking God’s Word to yourself. Not ignoring this precious gift, nor taking it for granted. Not excusing ourselves from its truth. But reading and studying it, asking and relying on God to help us understand it. Receiving not just the promises and encouraging words, but also the warnings and corrections. Welcoming them leads to peace and joy, to an energized and vital faith.

When James speaks of God’s Word being “able to save your souls,” or “can save you,” he is not speaking of the salvation of receiving forgiveness and new life in Christ as Paul did in Romans. Rather, he is speaking about the believer’s life of faith, about God’s word saving those who have been saved, rescuing them from the devastation that sin in believers brings, and about the energizing, building, maturing of our faith.


“But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.”
The original idea of the word *look intently* was to bend down in order to get close to see, to examine something carefully. Do you find some fine print difficult to read? So, you squint, lower your glasses, take them off, put them back on. Move the writing closer and closer, then farther away. *That's intense! That's work!*

James is describing a regular, an ongoing pattern of getting close to God’s Word; of taking the time not to just read, but to examine it—to think, ask questions, respond to what God shows us; a pattern of *abiding* by it—accepting its truth and obeying, living that truth. Psalm 1 tells us the person who “delights in the law of the *LORD*, and in His law … meditates day and night” is blessed by God (verse 2).

This does not mean that every time we open our Bible we are to launch into a long, detailed study. Sometimes we read to gain an overall sense. For example, while we are going through the book of James, from time to time reading through its five chapters in one sitting can help us to get an overall sense of the letter. At other times we can read Scripture to meet with God, to lead us in our prayer. I find the Psalms especially valuable in doing this. And then there should be some regular times when we really *dig into* the Scripture. To think it through, ask questions, make and record what we see—principles, applications and our responses to what God is telling us.

When we do this we will be blessed in what we do. You see, God uses our looking intently into and living His Word to bless us with energized, growing faith, fellowship with Him, peace and joy in whatever we do, and in whatever comes our way.

James sums up this picture of Word-Energized faith with the feature of living God’s Word effectively. Go back to verse 22. “But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.”

The Greek philosophers wrote their ideas and taught students. They had serious students, who were called *disciples*. They also had those who listened to them teach, but were not disciples. They were called *hearers*. Whether James was building on that or not, the picture is clear: for faith to have life and value there must be active obedience, we need to be growing in, verse 25, being “effective doer[s]” of God’s Word.

It has been said, and I have said to you recently, that the greater the gap between what we know and what we live of what we know, the greater the danger, the greater the risk and even reality of indifference and hypocrisy. The gap between knowing and doing is a
balance sheet of our faith. The greater the gap, the lower the vitality and value of our faith. The smaller the gap, the higher the vitality and value of our faith.

Time for an example? Go to verse 27. “Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit the orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” Do you wonder why God chose these examples? Why He chose them repeatedly throughout the Bible? It’s easy to give attention to people we like, who are fun to be with. Remember what Jesus told us,

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men.”

One test of living faith, of God’s love in me, is how I respond to those who are in distress: to the poor and helpless such as widows and orphans; to those who are needy and have nothing to give; to those I don’t understand, and what I do understand I may not like; to those who are difficult to love.

Remember that Jesus is our example. He came to seek and to save ... the lost; to reach out to, to lift up those with heavy ... burdens; to care for those wandering without a ... shepherd.

Then too in verse 27, “and keep yourself unstained by the world.” In a way this is a balance to the outward expression of love to those in need — inner, personal purity. These two qualities and actions are inseparably linked and essential to energized, vital faith. Personal purity and living out God’s love to those around us go together.

Also remember Jesus’ words, “If you know these things, you are blessed [you are happy] if you do them.” Receiving God’s Word humbly, studying it carefully, living it effectively — this is a picture, this is the reality of word-energized faith.
Conclusion

God’s Word is a matter of life and breath for you and me because God’s Word energizes faith. None of us want a dull, drab, drained faith. Yet we can and do experience that when we get careless. One part of being careless is segregating what we hear and read, what we think and feel on Sundays in church from the rest of our lives. One writer puts it like this,

“The danger of Christian discipleship is that we should have two religions: a glorious biblical Sunday gospel … and, then, an every day religion that we make do with during the week.”

To which I would add that every day, make-do religion crowds out and drains the energy out of the glorious, life-giving and life-transforming faith.

In these next few moments with God personally, you know the place you have given to His Word. You also now know something of how that determines the value of your faith. Review that with God; tell Him where it is at with you. Confess your failures and indifference, including any religious segregation—any Sunday faith versus every day, make-do faith. Tell him about your desire to know and live by His word. Determine with God that your life will not be a tragic picture of worthless faith but a triumphant picture of Word-energized faith.

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4 Chris Newton. “Study says Fort McMurray wildfire costs at nearly $9 billion.”

5 Romans 1:16.

6 e.g., Colossians 2:7; 2 Timothy 3:16-17.


8 John 13:17.


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