

Lesson for August 9, 2020

“Hearing and Doing the Word’,

Background Scripture is from James 1:19-27.

Too many people are turned away from the truth of Christianity because we as Christians have not proved to be good followers of what our LORD, Jesus taught us to do. Jesus showed us that the Christian life is something to be lived out among the people around us. In this week’s lesson, James reminds us in a special way that mirrors are helpful instruments. James described the Word of God as a mirror that allows us to examine our spiritual lives. It reveals the spiritual flaws that demand our attention.

The Apostle James saw himself as *“a servant of God and of the LORD Jesus Christ”* (James 1:1). He was the brother of our LORD Jesus, and did not become a believer in Christ until after Jesus’ resurrection. He later became the head of the church at Jerusalem. As the leader of the church in Jerusalem, James addressed his letter to Jewish Christians who were scattered abroad as a result of persecution, and were going through various kinds of hardship (James 1:1-2). James told them that as followers of Jesus Christ, they must reflect His image in the details of everyday life. Their trials should be occasions for spiritual growth (James 1:2-12), not temptations to do evil (James 1:13-16). James reminded his readers that the Father sends His good things down from above (James 1:17) for the sake of His children, who when they have received the word of truth became *“firstfruits of His creatures”* (James 1:18).

From the text section, “A word about Doing. When our study began in Proverbs, we learned that the book was written as a teaching tool for a young person. First we need to learn what is right, and then we must do what is right in order to live wisely. James takes a similar angle on right living. While the letter contain faith principles, the call of the letter is to do something about what we believe. For James, the congregation sitting on the pews on Sundays that does not live out its faith in service to others misses the mark. Once you understanding what your faith requires, says James, just do it.”

James' readers struggled with the same problem that all of us do. They equated listening to the Word taught in church with living out its implications in their everyday life. We can see this in self-righteous church-goers, but can we see it in ourselves? Probably not, unless God helps us to get very honest.

First, James said to his readers “let every man be swift to hear.” Believers who have been born again through God’s Word should be attentive to its

instruction and eager to apply it. The term "hear" implies more than just listening to oral instruction. Many of James' readers spoke when they should have been listening, I would say that this applies to us, likewise. That's why he also told them to be "slow to speak." It is always good advice to listen and learn before speaking one's mind. Being "slow to speak" goes hand in hand with James' exhortation to be "slow to wrath" or slow to develop deep seated anger. In the Bible, "wrath" is not just the heat of anger but a settled attitude of hostility. Christians both then and now were prone to get into passionate theological debates. They allowed their strong convictions and overactive tongues to lead them into personal animosity. Those who disagreed with them became their enemies. A quick temper and the grudges that result from it should have no place in the Christian life, even when we experience injustice.

We all struggle with anger. Some have it under better outward control than others, to be sure. But anger can pollute us with bitterness, even if we do not lash out openly. We're angry when we feel wronged. Sometimes it is our selfish pride that has been stepped on. Sometimes it is a violation of our human rights. James warns, "Man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires" (1:20). Anger is to arouse us to action. That is the Creator's intent for giving us anger. But once aroused, we must slow down and listen to God concerning what to do, since we cannot act in anger and do right.

James introduces in verse 22, a serious concern for all Christians, especially those who are constantly in church: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says". Familiarity with the Word, knowing what is right, can be deceiving. It can breed a kind of self-righteousness, a spiritual smugness within us. Some of the Pharisees in Jesus' day were like that. They were experts in interpreting the Old Testament and they made an outward show of their observance. But Jesus blasted them as hypocrites. On the outside they looked like clean cups, but inside they were filthy.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean." (Matthew 23:25-26)

Pastor Stuart Briscoe was teaching the principles of Bible study. He showed how to pick out the promises and the commands in Scripture, and what to do with them. Finally, he reviewed and asked, "Now, what do you do with the commands?" An elderly lady raised her hand and said, "I underline them in blue."

Underlining the Bible's commands in blue might make for a colorful Bible, but the point of the commands is that we obey them. There are many people in evangelical churches who have their heads filled with information from the Bible, but they don't obey what the Bible commands.

What would James have to say to us? The readers to whom James wrote differ from the modern church, his message is just as relevant now as it was when he wrote it. James is saying, to hear the word and not do it leads to deception, but to hear the word and do it, leads to blessing.

James gives us three warnings about those who hear the word without doing it: 1. Hearers only of the word take a quick glance, but don't do anything to fix what they see. James uses the illustration of a person who looks at their natural face in the mirror, rushes out the door, and forgets what they saw. Maybe the person had a couple of days of stubble on his face, or they slept wrong on their hair, and it stuck up in an unruly manner. The person is not all that concerned about their appearance, so they quickly try to smooth it out and rush out the door, even though they look like they just got out of bed. The mirror showed them the problems, but they didn't do anything to fix them.

The word of God is like a mirror that reveals to us the very thoughts and intentions of our hearts. It shows us our ugly, self-centered attitudes. It exposes our pride. It confronts our contempt for others and our lack of compassion. It hits our sinful anger and our rotten speech. It uncovers our deception, greed, and lust. But, if we just take a quick glance at the word, once in a rare while and rush out the door, without doing anything to address the problems that it reveals, it won't do us any good. To be doers of the word, we've got to give it more than passing attention. It requires deliberate focus and hard work to apply it personally.

2. Hearers only of the word forget what they heard. The main point of James' illustration about the person and the mirror is that they quickly forget what they saw in the mirror. The mirror tells it like it is. It shows us what we really look like. But the person who takes this quick look and quickly forgets

what they saw, is a "forgetful hearer." So they do nothing about the problems they saw in the mirror.

I do not think that James is describing a person with a poor memory, but rather a person with poor priorities. They do not remember what they saw in the mirror because they do not regard it as being important. God, heaven, eternal life, and all of the other doctrines in the Bible are interesting and nice, but this person has other priorities in their life.

3. Hearers only end up deceiving themselves. James mentions this twice, in 1:22 and again in his practical illustration in 1:26. There is an inherent danger in attending a church where God's word is proclaimed week to week: If you hear the word often, but do not put it into practice, you deceive yourself. The solution is not to avoid hearing the word, but rather to apply it to the problems in your life that the word uncovers.

I believe that every chapter in the Bible is designed in some way to apply to our daily lives. As we read the word, we should always be asking how it applies to our life. Mark Twain is reputed to have said, "It isn't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me. It's the parts I do understand."

In verse 26, James gives an example of someone who hears the word, but does not do it and so deceives himself. This man thinks that he is religious. "Religious" (and "religion") are infrequently used words in the New Testament. James uses them here because he is describing a man who prides himself in the outward trappings of the faith, but who is not applying it to his heart. He is a religious Jew who now professes faith in Christ, but like many of the Jews, his religion is a matter of pride and outward performance. He prays, he fasts, he tithes, he goes through all of the rituals, but in James' example, he doesn't bridle his tongue. James says that this man deceives his own heart and his religion is worthless. James will deal more with the tongue in chapter 3, but it can encompass a multitude of sins: lying, slander, gossip, angry words, hateful words, cursing, telling filthy jokes or stories, and much more. The Bible has very specific and practical commands on each of these areas. If you profess to follow Christ, but don't apply the Bible to your speech, you're fooling yourself if you think that you're religious. Your religion is worthless and your profession is empty. The

solution to this problem is to hear the word and do it, which leads to blessing. The one who hears the word and becomes an effectual doer "will be blessed in what he does." There are four things to note: the blessed hearer and doer looks intently at the word. One of Yogi Berra's quirky comments was, "You can see a lot just by looking." That's true of Bible study. That's why I enjoy reading and listening to sermons from various preachers. They make practical observations about verses that seem so obvious that I think, "Why didn't I think or see that?" The blessed hearer and doer applies the works not just to his outward behavior, but to his heart. James knew that his fellow Jews were prone to keep the Law outwardly, while their hearts were far from God. Like the rich young ruler, they thought that they kept all of the commandments from their youth up, but he was violating the great commandment, because he loved his money more than he loved God ([Matthew 19:16-22](#)). As Jesus rebuked the Jews, "This people honors, Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me."

The blessed hearer and doer continues applying the work to his heart. How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season. And its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers. The blessed hearer and doer looks intently at the word. He applies it, not just to his outward behavior, but also to his heart. He continues applying it over a lifetime. The blessed hearer and doer applies the word so that it changes his conduct and his character in the sight of God.

In contrast to the worthless religion of the person in James 1:26-27. James gives two practical examples of a person who applies God's word. He has a special concern for the helpless who could not provide for themselves. When we give with no hope of receiving in return, we show what it means to serve others. To show concern for orphans and widows requires that a person takes focus off of himself and his needs and think about others and their needs. What motivates people to care for them is, you apply the golden rule (how you would want to be treated if you were in their situation), and you do it to please God, who sent His Son so that you could be adopted into His

family. The point is that when God's word takes root in our hearts, it shifts our focus from self to others.

A longtime member of their church, shook hands with the pastor after the service one Sunday morning. "That was a wonderful sermon," she exclaimed, "just wonderful. Everything you said applies to someone I know."

James doesn't want us applying the word to others. He doesn't want us underlining all the commands in the Bible in blue. He wants us to apply it to ourselves. "Do you want God's blessing in your life?" If you say yes, then James' answer is clear: Don't be a forgetful hearer of the word. Become an effectual doer and you will be blessed by God. As believers in Jesus Christ, we are to bury the old nature and its habits and live as a new person in Christ. James brought to our attention areas where, difficult but often necessary, changes need to be made. We must be willing to listen to others, be cautious and courteous in speech, obey the dictates and principles in God's Word, and to help the poor and needy. Unfortunately, all of these changes need more attention than many people are willing to give.

**Closing: For the love that casts out fear, the faith that sustains and the hope that never perishes, be with us now and forever more. Amen. God watch over us and take care of us.**

Next week's lesson August 16, 2020, "Faith Without Works Is Dead"  
Background Scripture is from James 2:14-26.

*Sources for this lesson: The Bible, Sermons from Dr. John Piper, Sermons from Rev. Bob Utley, retired professor of Bible Interpretation, International Sunday School Lesson and Commentary, and The Present Word Adult Bible Lessons.*