

*Be Doers of the Word: James 1:22-27*  
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Sunday, June 15, 2008

I want to begin this morning by describing to you two different individuals. They are hypothetical, of course, but they represent real life characteristics. And the question for each of us this morning is: which one am I? Some of the details may be different, but which person do I most identify with?

The first person grew up going to church, memorizing Scripture and studying the Bible. In his adult life he continues to attend church faithfully. He is involved in a Sunday School class where he discusses the biblical stories and ponders deep theological questions. He even reads Christian books from time to time.

In certain ways, this person seems to be a godly individual. But as we look more closely into this person's life, we see some things that don't match up. At work, for instance, his attitude and demeanor are no different than those around him. He jokes about the same worldly topics. He loses his temper often and lashes out with harsh words. He looks out for number one and shows no concern for others. He especially avoids anyone who seems needy in any way. At home, there is a distance between him and his family, because he isn't patient or caring enough to listen to others, and he spends most of his time pursuing either work or hobbies. He shows up at church on Sundays, and he can share and discuss many insights from the Bible, but the day-to-day routine of his life is somehow unaffected by the word.

The second person is similar in certain respects. He is committed to a church body where he learns from God's Word and discusses it with others. He loves talking about the stories of the Bible and wrestling with deep theological issues. He reads Christian literature in order to understand the Bible better. The difference that we notice in this person's life is that his day-to-day routine is profoundly affected by the Word. He's not perfect. He still struggles with selfishness and impatience and apathy. But he is not content to let his life remain as it is. He is striving to *live* according to the Word. He has experienced the joy of heeding God's commands and trusting God's promises, and he yearns for more of that joy. He wants to be holy. He wants to separate himself from the sinful ways of the world and live for Christ. Therefore he reads the Bible, not just as a topic for interesting discussion, but he reads it and studies it as the guidebook for his daily life. And the fruit is evident. He is becoming more patient and compassionate. He exercises restraint in what he says. He looks out for the needs of others.

These two individuals illustrate the difference between the person who merely hears the word, and the person who puts it into practice. And in the passage of Scripture that we'll be studying this morning, the letter of James exhorts us to be doers of the word, and not hearers only. There are hearers of the word, and there are doers of the word. Which one are you? That's what I want each one of us to consider. Are you like the first person I described, who listens to sermons and participates in discussions about the Bible, but the Word has no impact on your personal life? Or is the Word changing you, day by day, and year by year, as you humbly receive it and apply it to your life?

The verses for our study this morning are at the end of James chapter 1. We'll be looking at verses 22-27. To put these verses in context, we need to look back to verse 18 where James introduces this theme of the word. He is teaching us about the new birth, that the Father "brought us forth," and then we're told the means by which the Father did this. He brought us forth *by the word of truth*. So the word of truth, which is the Gospel message revealed to us in the Scriptures, is what God uses to regenerate hearts as He draws people to Himself. Then in verse 21 we find a command to "receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls." The word is the means by which we are born again (that's verse 18), and it is also the means by which we live the Christian life (that's verse 21). The word is essential to the Christian life. It's our spiritual sustenance day after day as we fight the fight of faith. It's our food and drink, and our spiritual life depends upon it.

James now continues to teach us about the importance of the word by clarifying what it means to receive the word. The main exhortation in this passage is in verse 21, "receive with meekness the implanted word." And then verses 22-27 clarify and illustrate that command by describing these two types of people. There are those who merely hear the word, and then there are those who do the word. And it's only those who do the word who are truly receiving the word.

Throughout these verses James is contrasting the hearer and the doer. In the command of verse 22, "But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." Then verses 23-24 give a vivid illustration of the hearer, and the illustration is introduced with the statement—"if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer." Verse 25, in contrast, describes the doer, who is "no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts . . ." And then verse 26 speaks of the person who thinks he is religious (in other words, he is a hearer only), in contrast to pure and undefiled religion (in other words, the life of the doer) which is described in verse 27. So what I want to do in this sermon is simply to observe what James

teaches us about these two kinds of people, and I want each of us to ask ourselves: Which category am I in? Am I a hearer only? Or, by God's grace, am I a doer of the word?

I'll start with some observations about the hearer, and then the doer.

### **THE HEARER OF THE WORD**

#### 1) The hearer is a hearer *only*.

That's a very important word to notice in verse 22. "But be doers of the word, and not hearers *only*." The NASB says, "But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not *merely* hearers . . ." It's important to notice this because James is certainly not condemning those who hear the word. We must hear the word. That is part of receiving the word. The problem is not hearing the word. The problem is *merely* hearing the word. The problem is being a hearer *only*.

The hearer interacts with the word on a certain level, but never lets the word impact his life. It's like there's a barrier around the heart, so that the word is analyzed and discussed (out there) but never applied (in here, in the heart). In our day there are so many Christian resources available to us, and it would be easy to listen and read and think and discuss while keeping the truth of the word at a "safe" distance. We could listen to sermons (in church, on the radio, on the web), and read Christian books, read Christian blogs, be part of Bible studies and small groups and book clubs . . . But the scary thing is that it's possible to do all of those things and be a hearer only.

Allistair Begg, in a sermon on this text, was illustrating the traits of those who are hearers only, and he referred to them as "sermon tasters." They may listen to sermons or read certain things, but it's always with a view to critique and compare. I like this person's style. I like this guy's illustrations. This preacher is funny. That sermon was too long, or too short, or too boring. And there can be endless listening and critique and comparison, without the heart ever being changed.

It's the same point we saw last week in verse 21 in the phrase "with meekness." The only way to truly receive the word is to receive it humbly. We can't put ourselves over the word, but we must humbly put ourselves under the word and submit to its authority in our lives. The hearer of the word does not humbly receive the word. Instead, it is a prideful and superficial interaction with the word. It is limited to listening. It does not translate into action.

#### 2) The hearer forgets

The second thing that we see about the hearer is that the hearer forgets the word. This is why he is a hearer *only*, because he forgets the word. And James uses this brilliant illustration to

show us the absurdity of being a hearer only. This is in verses 23-24. “For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.” The point of the illustration is to say: if you are a hearer of the word, but then you walk away and at once forget what it says, then there is something very wrong with you. This is not the way it’s supposed to be.

The illustration here has to do with a mirror, something we’re all familiar with. At the time James was writing, they didn’t have mirrors like the ones we have today. They had pieces of polished metal in which they could see their reflection. But both then and today, people look into mirrors to see what they look like. How does my hair look? Is there any food in my teeth? Does the shirt match the pants? And when we walk away from the mirror we still have a pretty good idea of what we look like. Even for those of us who spend very little time in front of the mirror, we could still describe our own appearance with a decent level of accuracy.

Imagine filling out the paper work for a driver’s license or some kind of identification card, and forgetting what color your eyes are, or what color your hair is. And so you either have to get up and walk to the restroom to look into the mirror again (or if you’re a lady maybe you have a mirror in your purse), or you have to turn to the person next to you and ask, “Could you tell me what color my hair is?” That’s not the way it’s supposed to be. When we look at ourselves in a mirror, we don’t walk away and immediately forget what we look like.

In same way, it should be shocking and shameful when a person looks into the mirror of God’s Word and then goes away and at once forgets what it says. Matthew Henry wrote, “As a looking-glass shows us the spots and defilements upon our faces, so the word of God shows us our sins. It shows us what is amiss, that it may be amended. When we attend to the word of God, so as to see ourselves, our true state and condition, and dress ourselves anew by the glass of God’s word, this is to make a proper use of it. . . . In vain do we hear God’s word, and look into the gospel glass, if we go away, and forget our spots, and forget our remedy” (*The Matthew Henry Commentary*, pg. 1932). The word reveals our sin, and it reveals the only remedy for sin, Jesus Christ. And if we miss that, if we forget that, then we are not looking into God’s Word appropriately. We are merely hearers.

In the context, this forgetfulness doesn’t necessarily mean that the biblical information evaporates from the person’s mind. But the Gospel message revealed in Scripture does not impact the person’s heart and life. The person does not see his own sin, and

does not see Christ as the only way to be forgiven of sin. The hearer listens to the word but goes away and at once forgets what he heard, meaning he does not put it into action. A person may remember the Bible stories and the theological points, but if the word doesn't translate into action, then that person has effectively forgotten the word.

3) The hearer is deceived

A third characteristic of the hearer is self-deception. The hearer is deceived. This is mentioned twice in our passage. In verse 22, "But be doers of the word and not hearers only, *deceiving yourselves*." And also in verse 26, "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but *deceives his heart*, this person's religion is worthless." The person who hears the word but does not put it into practice is severely deluded. There is the assumption that hearing the word is all that is involved in Christianity. As long as I go to church and read my Bible sometimes, then I'm doing well. If that's your mentality this morning, I want to warn you from this passage that you are deceived. You are wrong. The external listening to the word is not what Christianity is about. If you stop there, you are deceiving your heart and your religion is worthless. To say it another way, as James does in the next chapter, your faith is dead.

The bottom line is that the hearer of the word thinks he is a Christian, but is not. The word may have some superficial contact with his mind, but the message has never pierced his heart. It has not changed his life. So it's possible for him to think he is religious even though there is no sanctification going on in his life. For example, he does not bridle his tongue (verse 26). His speech is just as depraved after the Sunday sermon as before. And this is true in other areas of his life as well.

My prayer this morning is that anyone here who is deceived will see the truth of their spiritual condition. And I pray to God to open up your eyes, because only He can do it. This self-deception is so deep and pervasive. Only an act of God can cause you to realize that your religion is worthless. I pray that this morning, for the first time, you will not merely hear the word, but you will do it. I pray that you will become a doer of the word, who continually receives the word with meekness, seeing in the mirror of the word your own sin and the only remedy for that sin, and therefore repenting of sin and trusting in Christ. Humble yourself before the word. Do not be a hearer only, but a doer of the word.

### **THE DOER OF THE WORD**

Now let's look at how James describes the doer of the word.

- 1) The doer looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty (verse 25).

In verse 18 it's called "the *word* of truth." In verse 21 it is "the implanted *word*, which is able to save your souls." In verse 22 James exhorts us to be doers of the *word*, and in verse 23 he describes the person who is only a hearer of the *word*. And now in verse 25 he refers to the word in a new way. He calls it the perfect law, the law of liberty. The word "law" may have mainly negative connotations in our minds, but not so here. When we think of "law," we may think of bondage. But the perfect law of God, which James speaks of here, is a law that brings freedom. It is the law of liberty.

The commands that come to us in God's word are for our good. God does not give us rules in order to diminish our joy. He instructs us and corrects us and exhorts us with the truth in order to maximize our joy in Him. And as we look into this Book, as we look into this perfect law, it is liberating because it's here that we discover what will truly satisfy us. For the person who is humbly receiving the word, the biblical commands are not just what we *should* do, but what we *want* to do. It's with this kind of eagerness and joy that the doer of the word looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty.

2) The doer perseveres in the word (still in verse 25).

"But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and *perseveres . . .*" The doer of the word is not someone who looks into the word just for a season of life. Maybe as a child you spent a lot of time reading and studying the Bible. Or maybe during your college years you were involved in a Christian group that helped to motivate you in reading the word. Or you went on a retreat, and you got really excited about studying the Bible. Or you went through a trial in your life that drove you to the word day after day. But the question is: Are you persevering in the word? When the retreat is over, when the trial fades away, when life gets busier, are you going to be steadfast? Are you going to keep looking into the word and receiving the word with meekness? If you are a true believer, you will have a desire for the word. You will have a hunger for the word that will not go away, even though it will wax and wane. When you neglect the word, you will feel your need for it. You will be reminded of your need for it. Like a growling stomach reminds us that we haven't eaten, the Holy Spirit will convict us when we have not eaten of the word.

It's by God's grace that He brought us forth by the word, and it's by His grace that He will preserve us by the word. The doer of the word perseveres in the word.

3) The doer acts.

This sounds redundant. To be a doer is to act. But James is being intentionally redundant, I think, to emphasize his point. In the middle of verse 25, "being no hearer who forgets but a doer

who acts.” More literally, we could translate it, “being no hearer of forgetfulness but a doer of work.” James continues the contrast between the hearer who forgets the word and the doer whose actions are profoundly impacted by the word. As the word changes our hearts, it’s inevitable that those changes will become evident in all kinds of very practical ways. We will act differently. Our choices will be different. We will use our money in different ways. We will spend our time differently.

Verse 27 gives two examples of what this changed life will include. In contrast to the worthless religion of verse 26, verse 27 says, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction . . .” (we’ll come to the last phrase of the verse in a moment). James is getting very specific about the kind of deeds that will be produced in the person who is a doer of the word. It’s not an exhaustive list, but James helps us understand the kinds of activities that the doer of the word will be engaged in. John Calvin wrote, “[James] does not define generally what religion is, but reminds us that religion without the things he mentions is nothing” (quoted in Douglas Moo, *James*, pg. 96). Our Christian lives will include many things, but one thing that will not be absent is compassion for the needy. Doers of the word will reach out to help others, especially those who are helpless and disadvantaged.

In this way, we reflect the nature of our heavenly Father. Psalm 68:5 describes Him in this way: “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.” If we are truly His children, then we will resemble Him. And we will have this kind of compassion for the most needy and helpless individuals in our society. We need to ask ourselves, Do I only look out for number one, or am I seeking to serve others, especially those who will never be able to pay me back or return the favor?

This may involve visiting those who are sick, or being involved in a prison ministry, or helping the homeless, or considering adoption, or helping the elderly, or ministering to the needs of recent immigrants in our country, or traveling to other countries to help those who are impoverished. The needs are all around us. The possibilities are endless. And we need to examine our hearts and pray that God would conform us more and more to His likeness, so that we have His compassion for the orphan and the widow.

#### 4) The doer pursues holiness and purity.

Fourthly, the doer pursues holiness and purity. This is the last phrase in verse 27 and continues the definition of pure and undefiled religion—“to keep oneself unstained from the world.” Not only will the doer of the word care for the needy, but he will also pursue holiness and purity. There will be a noticeable

difference between the life of the Christian and the unregenerate world around us. The one who has been regenerated by the word of truth, and is receiving with meekness the implanted word, will necessarily be different than the world.

It's very easy in our culture to call yourself a Christian, while continuing to conduct your life just like everyone around you. But the person who has been born again will seek to be unstained from the world. We will seek to put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness, as verse 21 exhorts us to do.

To be unstained from the world doesn't mean we run away from the world, but that we live in the world without being of it. That was Jesus' prayer for us in John 17, where He prayed to the Father, "I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth" (John 17:15-19). We are to be in the world but not of it. We are to live in this fallen world, ministering to the needs around us and sharing the truth of the Gospel, and at the same time our conduct must be unstained from the world.

Later in the letter of James we'll read the very pointed statement that "whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (4:4). This can happen so subtly in our lives. We may think that we're free from any "major" sins in our lives, but we may still be slipping into a lifestyle that is basically the same as our unbelieving neighbors and co-workers. Listen to this quote from Alec Motyer, from his commentary on James. He says, "faced with the world's ceaseless bombardment of our eyes, ears, thoughts and imaginations, the world's insidious erosion of values and standards, and clamour for our time, money and energy, it is easy to adopt a general way of life which, though it avoids the open pitfalls of sin, yet is not discernibly different from the style of one who does not know Christ" (*The Message of James*, pg. 78). What a danger this is for all of us. We must keep ourselves unstained from the world. And if we are true believers, then, by God's grace, we will be pursuing holiness and purity. We will seek to live in the world while remaining unstained from it.

5) The doer is blessed.

Finally, I want to end by coming back to verse 25 and noticing that the doer of the word is blessed. We saw this word in verse 12, where it says, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial." And here it's the doer who is blessed. Jesus said the same thing in Luke 11:28, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" James writes, the doer "will be blessed *in his doing*." This is a great note to end on, because we must



never think that doing the word is drudgery. This word “blessed” is a very meaningful word, and it refers to deep spiritual contentment and joy. And this is the blessing that we receive as we humbly receive the word in our lives and put it into practice. As we continually repent of our sins and trust in Christ and heed the commands of Scripture and minister to the needy and pursue holiness and purity, we will be truly blessed.

Oh, how I want God’s blessing upon my life. I pray for it. I desire it. I want God to bless my family. I want God to bless our church. And this will happen as we do the word. We will see more of God. We will experience His power working in us and through us. We will have the joy of being part of the most exciting things going on in the universe. So let us not be hearers only, who miss out on these blessings. May we be a church of doers who are blessed in our doing!

This morning as you examine your own heart, are you a hearer only, or are you a doer of the word? If your interaction with the word is only on a surface level, and if it is not reaching down into your heart and changing your life, then you should fear for your soul. You are in a very frightening spiritual condition. You have been deceiving yourself, thinking that your hearing of the word constitutes genuine Christianity. You need to repent of your sins. You need to see that your religion is worthless. And you need to look to Christ as your only hope of salvation. He is the One who can change you from the inside out.

If you are a believer, if you discern evidences of grace in your life and see that God has brought you forth by the word of truth and that, by His grace, you are a doer of the word, then let us pray for more grace. We may be doers of the word, to some degree, but we fall far short of where our lives ought to be. We need more grace to look into the word with humility and to apply it to our lives, as we seek the blessing of being doers of the word.