

The Book of James

Lesson 3: Hearing and Doing the Word -- James 1:19-27

There is a particular kind of disappointment that comes from catching your own reflection and not liking what you see, then walking away and forgetting it entirely by lunch. James reaches for exactly that image. He says a person who hears the word but never does it is like someone who glances in a mirror, sees the smudge on his face, and then strolls off and forgets what he looks like. The mirror told the truth. It changed nothing. The smudge is still there.

That is the danger James is pressing into this week. It is possible to be a diligent hearer of God's word, to nod along, to underline, to feel moved, and to remain completely unchanged. We can mistake the warm feeling of having heard a good truth for the actual obedience the truth was calling for. James loves these scattered believers too much to let them settle for that. He wants the word to get all the way into their hands and feet, not just their ears.

So he gives practical handles. Be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, because human anger does not produce the righteousness of God. Put away the moral filth that clings to us and humbly receive the implanted word that has power to save our souls. And then, crucially, do not just receive it, do it. Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. The self-deception of James 1 is not only about sin; it is about thinking we are fine because we listened well.

James even tells us what real religion looks like when it leaves the building. It is not mainly about the words we manage to control, though it includes the tongue. It is a faith that visits orphans and widows in their affliction and keeps itself unstained from the world. Pure religion has a face turned toward the vulnerable and a life kept clean from the corruption around it. So we come to this passage to be cured of mirror-glancing faith, and to let the word we love actually remake the way we live.

Group Discussion: Where have you seen the difference between a church or a Christian that mainly talks about the word and one that actually does it? What did doing the word look like in a way that left an impression on you?

Personal Reflection: Be honest: where in your life are you currently a hearer but not yet a doer, a truth you fully agree with but have not actually obeyed? What is the first concrete step toward doing it?

Read James 1:19-27

Study Questions

1. James writes, "Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (vv. 19–20). What does this teach about the kind of life and speech that God's word is meant to produce in us?
2. Think about your typical conversations and conflicts this week. Where do you most need to become quicker to hear and slower to speak or to anger, and what relationship would change if you did?
3. James says to "put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (v. 21). What does it mean to receive the word "with meekness," and how does the word's power to save relate to the way we welcome it?
4. What attitudes in your own heart, defensiveness, pride, the need to be right, make it hard for you to receive God's word with meekness? Where do you sense God asking you to soften and simply receive?
5. James warns, "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (v. 22). How is it possible to deceive ourselves by hearing the word without doing it, and why does James consider this such a serious danger?
6. Where have you mistaken the good feeling of hearing truth for actually obeying it? Name one area where you have been hearing without doing.
7. James compares the hearer who does not act to a man who looks in a mirror and forgets what he saw, while the one who looks into "the perfect law, the law of liberty," and perseveres will be "blessed in his doing" (vv. 23–25). Why does James call God's word a "law of liberty," and what does this reveal about how obedience and freedom relate in the Christian life?
8. Consider a truth from Scripture that you encountered recently. Did you carry it into your week, or did you forget it like the man in the mirror? What practice would help you remember and do what God shows you?
9. James says, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (vv. 26–27), after warning that an unbridled tongue makes one's religion worthless (v. 26). According to James, what are the marks of genuine religion before God, and what does this teach us about the relationship between faith, compassion, holiness, and the way we speak?
10. Look back across the whole passage. James wants the word we love to reshape our ears, our tongues, our tempers, and our hands. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you to move from hearing to doing this week.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Matthew 7:24–27, the wise and foolish builders who hear the words of Jesus and do or do not act on them; Luke 6:46–49, calling Jesus Lord while not doing what He

says; Romans 12:1-2, being transformed rather than conformed to the world; Isaiah 1:16-17, ceasing to do evil and learning to do good to the vulnerable; 1 John 3:17-18, loving not in word only but in deed and truth; Psalm 19:7-11, the law of the Lord that revives the soul.