
“Doers of the Word”

JAMES 1:22-27

MARCH 6TH, 2022

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If you want to know your religion is one that pleases God, don't consider how much you know, consider what you're doing with what you know.

In James 1:22-27, we James confronts cold religiosity. He rejects a religion that boasts of knowledge but lacks self-control, compassion for others, and personal holiness. Genuine Christians will not only hear the Word, but they will also be doers who act upon the Word they have heard. Their lives will reflect their heart that approaches the Word seeking transformation. These people will see who they truly are and who God truly is. They will simultaneously be grieved by their sin and grateful for His grace. This will drive them to put into practice what they read in the Word, working out the commands of scripture in real life. No greater examples are their increasing ability to control their tongues, their care for widows and orphans who cannot repay them for their service, and a personal striving toward holiness.

INTRODUCTION

Last week Pastor Matt preached James' exhortation to receive the implanted Word which is able to save your souls. It's tempting for those who identify as Christians to believe that immersing ourselves in the Word and in Christian books will inevitably cause us to become more virtuous and more faithful. We might imagine that increasing in knowledge of the Bible is not only the main thing for a Christian to do, but is in fact is the only thing necessary.

We might conclude that what pleases our Heavenly Father and what makes us more virtuous is knowing more about the bible. That by attending more studies we are demonstrating a willingness to sacrifice our time and our effort and thereby we are doing *the* essential work of Christian discipleship. We may think that sacrificing our time and effort are the primary ends of the Christian life. However, James is going to burst this bubble in today's passage. The Lord is not impressed with the sacrifice of our time, effort, and energy to attend bible studies and have quiet times, nor the amount of biblical knowledge we have attained, if we are not obedient to what it says.

Let's read the passage then I'll pray, and we'll jump in.

JAMES 1:22-27

22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 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. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. 25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. 26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. 27 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.

NOT HEARERS ONLY

James says in **verse 22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.** There's a big difference between knowing the bible and obeying what it says. There's a big difference between being knowledgeable and being wise. Those who know a lot about the bible but do not approach the Word seeking to be transformed in their hearts so that their lives are changed, are **deceiving** themselves, James says.

Afterall, Paul says knowledge only puffs up. (1 Cor 8:1) Now, by "knowledge" I mean just knowing doctrine and knowing scripture, and going from one study to another, informing the mind, but not being changed in the heart. If our approach to the Word is not transforming how we live, we are just deceiving ourselves. Don't get me wrong, we must pursue knowledge of the Word. James says, do not be **hearers only**. We must hear in order to do. James is not suggesting anti-intellectualism or biblical illiteracy. James is telling us that unless hearing the word leads us to be **doers of the Word**, then we have not truly heard the word to begin with.

THE KEY IS NOT PERFECTION, BUT HATING OUR IMPERFECTION

Let's take a moment here to pause and state that James is going to lay down some principles of Christian living. By that I mean, James is going to give us some practical examples of what demonstrates genuine faith and what disproves it. However, none of us is going to execute these perfectly. Like Paul, we'll find ourselves doing what we do not want to do and not doing what we want to do. I love John MacArthur's encouragement that the key is not perfection, but rather hating our imperfection and striving to be changed by the power of God working in us.

So, as we look at what it means to approach the Word to be transformed, we're talking about a pattern of life. If you walk out of one of my sermons and you're like, "What in the world did that mean? I got nothing out of that!" That doesn't mean you're deceiving yourself. But on the other hand, if you consistently walk out of a sermon and you're never convicted, if you cannot point to the persistent and continual conviction of the Holy Spirit to submit yourself to Jesus and turn from your sin, brother or sister, you may be self-deceived. To consistently leave the Word unchanged is a warning sign for you. Are you a **hearer of the Word only**? If so, you need to repent and believe the Gospel.

SAVING POWER AND RADICAL OBEDIENCE

The Gospel has both a saving power (cf. Romans 1:16) and a summons to radical obedience, if you have only related to the saving power, then you have not truly embraced the Gospel. You would do well to hear the words of Jesus when he says in Luke 6, "*Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?*" *Luke 6:46* and again in John 15, "*You are my friends if you do what I command you.*" *John 15:14*. Jesus boiled genuine love for Him down to one thing, obedience. "*If anyone loves me, he will keep my word,*" *John 14:23a* Then to add emphasis and to be crystal clear, He stated it in the negative, "*Whoever does not love me does not keep my words.*" *John 14:24a* Someone who professes to believe Jesus with a

saving faith yet does not display a continual pull toward obedience to Him has only that - a profession. He or she is self-deceived. Heed the warning of Paul, who urged the Corinthian church, *“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.”* 2 Corinthians 13:5a

HE GOES AWAY AND IMMEDIATELY FORGETS

Anyone who hears the Word but does nothing about it deceives himself about his relationship with Jesus. To illustrate how self-evidently true this is, James gave an illustration of a man looking into a mirror. Let's look at **verses 23-24**. **23 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. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.**

Unlike for us, **mirrors** were not a common commodity for James' original audience. They didn't have mirrors in every bathroom and car visor and woman's purse. In fact, their version of a mirror was polished metal, not glass. Think of those mirrors that you find in athletic stadiums and public restrooms at state parks. As such, most people didn't really know what they looked like.

James used a compound verb when he said the man **looks** at himself in the mirror. This implies a careful inspection of his face. He's noticing the wrinkles, the teeth, the beard. The man looks intently at his face but when he **goes away**, he immediately **forgets** what he looks like. It has no impact on his life. He perceives what he sees, but he does nothing with it. It was a useless waste of time to carefully inspect **his natural face**. The mirror here is symbolic of God's word. When we look carefully at the Word, we see who we really are. It reveals to us what we are really like, our **natural face**. It shows that we are sinful, and it shows the real depth of our sin.

WHAT A TRAGEDY

What a shame that the same thing happens when people approach the Word of God. They sit under preaching and teaching, they carve out time to read it on their own, and then they walk away, and their minds immediately shift focus to the next thing. They don't approach the time in the Word with a desire to be changed by it. For that person it is just a waste of time. Someone who looks carefully at the Word of God, who sees themselves in their sin and the holiness of God and does nothing with that is like the man with the mirror. That's a tragedy.

But praise the Lord there's a flipside! Amen? There's blessing in the Word of God! Let's continue with **verse 25**. **But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.**

STOOPING TO SEE

James uses a stronger verb for "looking" here when he says **looks into**. This is the type of looking that causes one to get a better angle, perhaps by stooping over to get a better look. It was used twice in John 20:5 and 11 to describe how Peter and then Mary Magdalene bent over and looked into the tomb. This is a look that is a seeking to gain something.

The **perfect law, the law of liberty** is the gospel, the word of God. The **law** includes the books of the Old Testament and also the teaching of Jesus because Jesus fulfilled the Law. Commentators note that it is **perfect** because it reflects God's perfect character, it is perfectly suited to life in this world, and because it is now a completed law, resulting in true freedom. Thus, it is a **law of liberty**.

And the one who **looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty** is someone who seeks communion with the Lord in His Word. You want to hear from the Lord? Open the Word. You want to understand His will for your life? Open His word. You want to know how you ought to lead your

family, submit to your husband, work at your job, stand up under persecution? Open the word. That's where you find life. That's where you find liberty.

WHEN YOU SEEK ME WITH ALL YOUR HEART

God said to His people through the prophet Jeremiah, *"You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart."* *Jeremiah 29:13* That's what James means when he uses the phrase **looks into**. It means seeking and finding the Lord because you are seeking Him with all your heart. You're going to the Word not just to gain information, but to commune with the living God! This looking into the Law and finding the Lord there is what enables you to **persevere** through trials in life.

The person who **looks into** the Word enters into a persevering cycle of meeting with God, connecting to Him in the Word, coming face-to-face with his true self there, repenting, being filled and encouraged by God's grace, enduring trials strengthened by knowledge of who he is and whose he is, and being drawn back to the Word for more of the same. He is strengthened to remain steadfast under trials by his time with the Lord in His Word; remaining steadfast under trials pushes him back to the well-spring of life that is the Word of God. He is a **doer or the Word**.

SEEKING TRUTH

He is not just a **hearer who forgets** what he heard, but perpetually is a **doer who acts**. It won't go in one ear and out the other. It doesn't just puff him up. The doer of the word is concerned with more than learning the Word, more than gaining facts about it. He is seeking Truth! So when he hears Truth, he applies it to his life. It changes how he lives, how he thinks about all of life. It gives courage to step out in faith and strength to do the hard things he knows are the right things. It fills him with conviction!

Take, for instance, Pastor Matt. Last week he used an illustration in his sermon that came across as making light of lying. When confronted by a goldy man in our church after the sermon, Pastor Matt was convicted to express his apologies for using that illustration, which he did in our church Facebook group and here this morning before you all. Making light of lying was not what he intended to do, but when faced with biblical conviction, he owned it quickly. That's a doer who acts.

YOU WILL NEVER APPROACH THE WORD THE SAME

When you begin to experience real life change from the Word of God, you will never approach the hour of study the same. You will come thirsty for life, hungry for righteousness, and longing for liberty! And you're going to be **blessed**, James says. So does Jesus in John 13, *"If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."* *John 13:17* When you and I humbly and sincerely look into the Word, when we seek God with all our hearts, and when we see ourselves as we truly are and we do something about it, when we, by the help and direction of the Holy Spirit, align our actions, attitudes, and words with God's Word, we build for ourselves a strong foundation for life. Our life stands the tests.

Jesus painted this picture in Luke 6, *"Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great."* *Luke 6:47-49*

If you want a blessed life, know what Jesus says and do what Jesus says!

LITMUS TEST OF GENUINE FAITH

James concludes this important section on the practical implications of true Christianity by singling out three specific ways in which we are to manifest Christian obedience to the Word. This is not an exhaustive list, but it does serve as sort of a road map James will follow for the rest of the letter. James knows that the true litmus test of genuine faith is not the type of religion that people routinely perform with their heartless liturgies and ceremonies and confessions. Rather it's a posture of the heart that works its way to the surface in practical ways.

Let's read **verse 26** **If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.** If you think you're religious and you cannot control what you say, your religion is worthless. That's a strong statement and James will later develop this with twelve verses in chapter 3 where he says "With the same tongue we curse others and bless the Lord." Obviously, that can't be right. Jesus says as much, in Luke 6:45. "*The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.*" Luke 6:45

THE MOUTH WILL REVEAL WHAT'S REALLY IN THE HEART

Here's the hard-core truth: the mouth has a way of revealing what is really in our hearts. That's why Paul links both a verbal confession and a heart belief to salvation. "...*if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.*" Romans 10:9-10

The mouth confesses what the heart truly believes. We can "fake it 'til we make it," but only for so long. We can go through the motions, but when we're really put to the test, our mouths will speak the truth of what's in our hearts. The problem with self-deception is that people can fool themselves and others into believing that their empty show of religion is sincere. The Pharisees had such an empty religion, and they fooled nearly everyone. Their piety before men was outstanding.

Yet, Jesus said they honored God with their lips while their hearts were far from Him. (cf. Matthew 15:8) They did all the rituals and ceremonies, they said all the right words, affirmed all the right doctrine. But apart from a saving relationship with Jesus, those things had no spiritual value. Sooner or later, in some form or fashion, their mouths would reveal the true nature of their hearts toward God. From the beginning of Jesus' ministry to the end, they condemned Jesus with their mouths, even to death. A religion that does not change the heart, and thereby the tongue is totally **worthless** in God's sight.

BRIDLE THE TONGUE, CONTROL THE BODY

James will later say that if you can control the tongue, you can control the whole body. (cf. James 3:2) Thus, this is really a message about self-control. It's a message about more than just what you say, but about how you live your whole life. You can go to church, you can tithe perfectly, you can memorize scripture, you can graduate from seminary and still have a worthless religion. Unless there is a change of heart, resulting in a change of living, most obviously demonstrated by a change in speech, your religion is worthless.

Remember what I said at the beginning. We're all going to slip up from time to time. We're all going to let out a curse-word or fall into gossip or false accusation or complaining, or criticism. No doubt all of these are sins, but James is talking about a person who habitually fails to control his tongue. If you habitually give people a verbal lashing, use curse-words, gossip, or criticize and you don't see these as sin in need of repentance, your **religion is worthless**. Be honest with yourself. Examine yourself and see if you are in the faith. Eternity is too long to be wrong!

From worthless religion, to worthy religion, James turns now to an expression of religion which pleases the Lord. Let's read **verse 27. 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.** For James, the right religion is not based on what we believe is best, nor what the world believes is best, nor even what other Christians believe is best. Right religion is religion that is pure and undefiled **before God the Father.** In other words, right is what God determines is right. James uses two synonymous words here to emphasize right religion: **pure**, which emphasizes cleanliness, **and undefiled** which means uncontaminated.

CARING FOR WIDOWS AND ORPHANS

To visit orphans and widows in their affliction is not exhaustive, but rather is a type of genuine, pure, undefiled religion; religion that is acceptable in God's sight. This is to really care for people who need care the most. They are those who were least capable of providing for themselves and from whom one could least expect to receive anything tangible in return for their care. In the New Testament, the phrase **to visit** carried with it the idea of going with the intention of helping in practical ways; of giving aid or looking after the interests of someone.

By caring specifically for the widows and orphans, we also demonstrate that we have truly understood the Gospel and have connected to the very heart of God, who is especially the *"Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation."* *Psalm 68:5* Those who have been adopted into the family of God, as one's previously spiritually fatherless and impoverished, we appreciate the physical plight of the widow and orphan and are moved to go to them **in their affliction.** We know that apart from the grace of God who visited us in our spiritual affliction, in our sin, we would not stand a chance with Him.

ALLEVIATE THE AFFLICTION OF THOSE YOU CAN

Praise the Lord, by faith in Jesus, we have been adopted into God's family. This should cause us to live out the principle of adoption by practically meeting the needs of those who cannot care for themselves. This isn't something that we can pawn off to charities and para-church organizations. While supporting them financially is great, this is a personal appeal to action of the individual Christian. Those whose **religion is pure and undefiled before the sight of God** will be filled with gratitude for God's grace and motivated by God's compassion to seek ways to help people who cannot help themselves. They will actively look for ways to live out their religion; to enter into the affliction of the afflicted and alleviate that however they can. It's not that you have to do the impossible and alleviate everyone's afflictions. Just alleviate the one's God gives you opportunities to alleviate.

James continues describing right religion when he says, **and to keep oneself unstained from the world.** One of James' primary concerns for the audience was worldliness in the church. He was concerned that the world would influence the church rather than vice-versa. Certainly, a valid concern given what we've seen in history, and what we're seeing now. How much feminism, pragmatism, secularism, hedonism has infiltrated the church? How much of *how you do you* is influenced by secular, worldly ideas and principles? We can't say none, so we ought to be seeking wisdom from above to discern to what degree the world has "stained" so-to-speak our worldviews.

THE WORLD IS EMBOLDENED

Let's begin by first asking what James means when he says **the world?** The world is a system of thought and of values. James is describing the prevailing philosophy or theology of those who do not love God nor submit to Him. Obviously, those anti-God values contradict God's values; so

much so that James says in 4:4, *“You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.” James 4:4*

The world today seems to be emboldened to flaunt immorality and what the bible calls sin. It is increasingly calling evil good and good evil. It’s increasingly denying and rejecting biblical principles that lead to human flourishing like biblical masculinity and femininity, biblical sexuality, the nuclear family, law and order, true justice, and natural consequences. It calls blatant perversion “love,” the murder of pre-born children “reproductive justice,” Marxism it calls “justice,” and it labels a woman’s highest calling of motherhood “oppressive.” Let me be clear, you and I have a Christian duty to *“test all things and hold fast to what is good.” 1 Thessalonians 5:21* and implied is to throw the rest into the garbage heap where it belongs.

KEEPING ONESELF UNSTAINED BY THE WORLD

To keep oneself unstained by the world is best understood “keeping” oneself unstained by the world. It implies a perpetual obligation of Christians to abstain from what the Lord calls evil and to practice what He calls good. This process requires careful examination of values & should never be disengaged. There’s no neutral. Its either in drive or reverse. You’re either being stained by the world or keeping yourself unstained. How do you examine your lifestyle to see if it is unstained by the world? By being **not just hearers of the Word, but doers who act**. Hear and obey the Word. Read and obey the Word. That’s how you keep yourself unstained by the world.

If your strategy is just to accept whatever everyone around you accepts, or even what most Christians accept, without working through this examination process, you ignore what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10, *“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” 1 Corinthians 10:31* There’s no area of your life that gets a pass. Paul treats something as trivial as what you eat and drink as being important to God and says it should be done for His glory. Notice, too, that it’s personal – whether *you* eat or drink. It’s a personal and perpetual responsibility for each one of us. Try with all the power the Holy Spirit works in you to live for the glory of God and not fail. Repent when you do.

IT’S NOT WHAT YOU KNOW, ITS WHAT YOU DO WITH WHAT YOU KNOW

This is weighty if you really consider what James is calling us to. This is religion that is pure and undefiled before God. It goes beyond the external “big sins” and gets to the heart, to the attitude, to the motive of even good things like bible studies. James makes it clear, if you want to know your religion is one that pleases God, don’t consider how much you know, consider what you’re doing with what you know. Remember, the key is not perfection, it’s hating your imperfection and working by the power of the Holy Spirit to be rid of it.

We have to begin at the beginning. We don’t do anything that pleases God without first entering into a saving-faith relationship with His Son Jesus Christ. The Pharisees thought they could please God by knowing scripture and practicing religious deeds. Not so. We come to the Father by faith in His Son or we do not come at all. Brother and sister, do not proceed one more step without giving Jesus Christ your whole life, body, soul, & mind and asking Him to forgive you of your sin. Do that today. Then get busy being a doer of the Word!

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