

Doers of the Word

Devotional Reading: Psalms 92:1-8

Scripture Lesson Text: James 1:17-27

James 1:17-27

¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

¹⁹ My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰ because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. ²¹ Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

²² Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³ Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵ But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

²⁶ Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

INTRODUCTION:

God foreknew and predestinated us to conform us to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29). To this point, our lessons have portrayed the glorious image of Christ as seen in the book of Hebrews and the Gospels. But we cannot be satisfied with merely admiring Christ's perfections. We must allow Him to reproduce His image in us as well.

God's Word is truth. It demands a response from those who hear it. We are to hear what God's Word says and put what we hear into practice. Do you tend to be a hearer only? What steps can you take to make sure you are a doer rather than a mere hearer? This week's lesson reminds us of the importance of being doers of the Word.

LESSON BACKGROUND: **Time:** about A.D. 45 **Place:** from Jerusalem

James saw himself as "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (James 1:1). As the half-brother of Jesus, James grew up in Nazareth (Matthew 13:55) and later moved to Capernaum when Jesus began His public ministry (John 2:12). James received a post resurrection appearance of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:7), experienced Pentecost with the other disciples (Acts 1:13) and was a leader in the early Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13; 21:18). The book that bears his name was written to early Jewish believers who had been dispersed and were undergoing various kinds of hardship (James 1:1-2). They were being persecuted and as a result were in physical and financial distress.

James told them that as followers of 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 evil (vs. 13-16). This would be possible if they cultivated a proper relationship with God's Word.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE VITALIZING WORD (James 1:17-21)

Not only are God's gifts good (useful, practical) and perfect (nothing lacking in them), but His liberality is wholly consistent. James describes God in three ways: as the one from above, as the Father of lights, and as the one with no variableness, neither shadow of turning. The first phrase is a common expression of ancient Jews that is based on their understanding of God's location. The second phrase connects God with the creation of light (Genesis 1:3, 14).

This sets the stage for James's third observation. This is an issue of the constancy of God's character, which contrasts with that of people, who are described as "double-minded" and "unstable" in James 1:8. The image no variableness, neither shadow of turning brings to mind the lengthening of shadows as created by the interference of the sun's light by buildings and trees. God's character is like a sun that never sets and that has nothing to block its light. He is light without a trace of darkness (1 John 1:5). So those who trust Him need never be disappointed.

1. How does God compare with the "lights" of His creation (James 1:17)?

As in verse 17 above, this verse first draws on creation ideas from Genesis. The creation of humankind by God's word is implied as the absolute best result of all His creation activities. The major concern of this passage is not to talk about that life-giving word in Genesis, but to use its language as a stepping-stone to talk about God's perfect gift: the word of truth. This word gives birth to life of a different order: eternal life. This birth takes place at the spiritual level and is propelled by a specific word, the message of the gospel. God calls His new spiritual creation into being through His transforming word.

2. What is God's greatest gift to us (v. 18)?

God's purpose in giving us His life is so "*that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.*" (James 1:18). "Firstfruits" speaks of the first of any kind to be produced. Jewish believers understood this because at the Feast of Firstfruits, they were to offer the first ripe sheaf of grain to God (Leviticus 23:9-11).

In addition to the reference here to believers born again by the Word of God (James 1:18), the term "firstfruits" is a popular concept in the New Testament: referring to the earliest converts as the firstfruits of the Spirit (Romans 8:23); to the Jews as precursors of the Christian church (Romans 11:16); to individual believers (Romans 16:5); to Christ as the firstfruits of resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20); and to the group that will be redeemed as firstfruits during the Tribulation period (Revelation 14:4).

Firstfruits were a pledge of a more complete harvest to come. So James, writing to early believers, saw them as God's pledge of a greater spiritual harvest to be reaped around the world. And there may be more here. Our regeneration is also His pledge that eventually all nature, now groaning under sin, will be transformed by His power (Romans 8:18-23).

3. In what sense are believers the firstfruits of God's creatures (v. 19)?

Those who have accepted God's gift of eternal life and become "*dear brothers and sisters*" (James 1:19) should display a change in life, giving up former behavior patterns. One of these is a reluctance to receive instruction. James told his readers to be "*quick to listen.*" Coupled with this, they are to be "*slow to speak.*" Believers who have been born again through God's message should be attentive to its instruction and eager to apply it. "Hear" implies more than just listening to instruction. It includes receiving it with interest and concern.

Regrettably, Jewish believers who already knew the law sometimes tended to become self-righteous and refuse to listen to anything beyond what they already knew. Indeed, many spoke when they should have been listening. That is why James also needed to tell them to be slow to speak.

These are exhortations we need as well. How much time do we spend reverently hearing the Word of God? Sometimes we are so busy giving our opinions that we cannot hear God speak. Our words then become worthless or, worse, harmful to others. Listening and thinking before speaking is always wise advice.

4. Why is it important for Christians to be swift to hear and slow to speak (v. 19)?

It is quite natural for us to want to lash out when we are hurt. When someone hurts us, perhaps we need to stop and consider the offender. There is a saying: "Hurting people hurt people." Remembering this might help us to stop and listen, rather than react hastily when words or actions cut us.

One Christian writer encourages us not to critique others until we are able to state their position back to them to their satisfaction. That will help keep us from uttering rash words, which have a way of coming back on us. There is truth in this old Irish saying: "Make the words you speak today tender, warm, and sweet, for tomorrow they may be the very words you eat."

We should also realize that we hurt and offend God when we sin. That is true of all sin, whether of word or deed. While we might think our anger is completely justified when we tell someone off, we actually are grieving our Lord who loves that person and died to save him or her. Remember that a fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22, 23 is temperance (that is, self-control). If you've surrendered your life completely for God's glory and pleasure, you will deny yourself those unregulated outbursts.

5. What situations present the greatest danger for you to speak out inappropriately? What tips have you found helpful for keeping your tongue in check?

James also cautioned his readers to be slow to give vent to wrath. In the Bible, wrath is not just the heat of anger but is a settled attitude of hostility. Christians, then as now, were prone to get passionate in theological debate. They allowed strong convictions and over-active tongues to lead them into personal animosity. Those who disagreed with them became enemies.

The reason Christians must be slow to anger is that man's anger does not promote the cause of God's righteousness (v. 20). Some may argue that they get angry because they are opposing sin and error and defending the righteousness of God. James denied the propriety of wrath even in doing this. It fails to exemplify the very righteousness we say we are defending, and it brings disgrace to the God we worship.

6. Why should Christians avoid getting angry when defending their religious beliefs (v. 20)?

Those regenerated by God's truth are also to "*get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent*" (James 1:21). "*Get rid of*" denotes stripping something off, as one would an unclean garment. "*Moral filth*" refers to an unclean life. All filthy thoughts, words, and actions should be cast aside, as should all other wickedness. "*The evil that is so prevalent*" can be more clearly understood as "abundance of wickedness." Wickedness tends to multiply even in believers' lives if not deliberately resisted (see James 1:13-15). We must actively clear away all the rubbish and debris of the past life so that God's Word can take root without hindrance.

Removing the sinful ways of the past is only the negative side of the Christian life. It only prepares us to receive further instruction from God. We are to receive His Word "with meekness." These words are given special emphasis in the Greek. Putting aside angry resistance, we must take in the Word with

humility and gentleness. "Receive" denotes a positive welcome for the Word as an active force in our lives. The verb tense implies a decisive act of reception.

God's Word has been engrafted, or implanted, in us; it is a picture of the Word taking root in our lives. It has already rooted itself by bringing us rebirth, but we are now to welcome it as God's means for our spiritual growth.

7. What must we do to allow God's Word to take root in our lives (v. 21)?

HEARING GOD'S WORD (James 1:22-25)

As important as it is to receive the Word, this is not the whole duty of the Christian life. James warned his readers to be "*not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*" His readers came from a culture that took pride in having heard Scripture read in the synagogue every Sabbath. Too often, however, hearing was not accompanied by obedience—a common failing of present-day Christians as well.

James exhorted believers, literally, to become doers of the Word. We are to become habitually obedient to it. One who remains a mere hearer is guilty of the worst kind of deception — deceiving himself. The verb James used implies deluding oneself by faulty reasoning or miscalculation. The hearer falsely assumes that hearing the Word is enough to please God.

8. How is someone who merely hears God's Word deluding himself (v. 22)?

James now showed the inadequacy of being only a hearer. The central feature of his illustration is a mirror, which in his day was polished bronze. It is analogous to God's Word, which reveals what a person is like. The "hearer" is like one who contemplates his appearance, pausing long enough to get an accurate image. He sees "his natural face" (literally, "the face of his birth").

James implied that the mirror revealed something needing improvement or correction. Yet this man goes on his way, immediately forgetting what he looks like. He does this either because he does not see any flaw or because he does not consider the flaw important enough to be changed. This is like the person who hears the Word proclaimed but then goes home and forgets it because it has not penetrated deeply enough to touch his will.

The "*doer*" has a different attitude toward God's Word. The verb "*looks*" pictures him stooping down and intently looking at himself in the mirror. "*Continues*" makes it clear that he examines himself for some time. He is not content with superficial appearances. He looks for hidden flaws. The mirror into which this believer peers is "*the perfect law that gives freedom.*" New Testament truth is binding and demanding. But since it is the same truth that brought about our rebirth (v. 18), it can be obeyed with a sense of liberty.

We are freed from legal bondage to serve God with a transformed nature and genuine gratitude. It is the law of love (James 2:8, 12; cf. Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:13-14). Thus, the doer sees the mirror of God's Word as a means to a practical end, not an end in itself. He becomes "a doer of the work" (James 1:25) and is "*blessed in what they do.*" He finds blessedness in his life of obedience.

9. How does the illustration of a mirror depict the hearer and the doer (vs. 23-25)?

CONTROLLING SPEECH (James 1:26-27)

How can one tell the difference between a hearer of the Word and a doer? James drew two pictures that demonstrate what these two outlooks produce. The first is of a person who seemed to be religious (or

considered himself to be so). A *"religious"* man is known for church attendance, prayers, giving, and hearing sermons.

In spite of these commendable observances, the man in James's illustration has a problem: he does not bridle his tongue. An uncontrolled tongue exposes a spiritual problem. It may produce gossip, profanity, filthiness, sarcasm, or foolishness.

This religious man is thus deceiving himself. He thinks his external observances are all that God requires, whereas God considers speech an important barometer of a person's spiritual condition. Until he has allowed the Word to do an inward work in him to control his speech, his religion is useless. It does nothing for him and does not gain the favor of God.

10. How did the man who thought himself religious fall short (v. 26)?

The outward manifestation of true religion is *"to look after orphans and widows in their distress"*. These were among the most needy and vulnerable persons in Jewish society. Meeting their needs was an opportunity for demonstrating Christian social concern. Their *"distress"* consisted of loneliness, lack of support, and exploitation by unscrupulous men.

The internal mark of true religion is to keep oneself uncorrupted by the world. The world is the kingdom of Satan. Christians are left in this environment as witnesses (John 17:14-18; 1 Cor. 5:9-11). But we are warned to refrain from its ungodly philosophy (James 4:4; 1 John 2:15-17).

Humanitarian concern for the needy will do little to glorify God if one's personal behavior is impure. Doers of the Word are faithful in both.

11. What are the external and internal marks of true religion (v. 27)?

CONCLUSION:

People see Jesus in us when they see His life being lived out through us. This week's lesson has emphasized the need for us not only to be eager listeners to God's Word but also to be faithful in putting what we learn into practice. Encourage yourself and others to cultivate a strong relationship to the Bible. Emphasize the need to have its precepts and principles embedded deep in our hearts. Emphasize also the need to develop a lifestyle around what we have discovered from the Word. When we do this, people will see Jesus in us and be drawn to Him.

PRACTICAL POINTS:

1. We should thank God for all the good we experience. It all comes from Him (James 1:17-18).
2. We could save ourselves much grief if we would listen more and speak less (James 1:19).
3. The easily angered person does not promote the righteous life that God desires (James 1:20-21).
4. We deceive ourselves if we think merely going to church and learning the truth will make us pleasing to God (James 1:22-25).
5. Speech is an important barometer of a person's spiritual condition (James 1:26).
6. "Pure religion" involves both social conscience and personal holiness (James 1:27).

PRAYER:

Father God, thank you for your Word that guides and directs our lives. Help us to let your Word dwell in us and control the things we do. Help us to know what your Word says and to do what it teaches. As we hear and obey, thank you that we are a blessing to each other and that we bring glory to You, in Jesus' name. Amen.