

Theme: Hear and Do the Word of God

Text: James 1:21-27 (EHV)

²¹ So after getting rid of all moral filthiness and overflowing wickedness, receive with humility the word planted in you. It is able to save your souls. ²² Be people who do what the word says, not people who only hear it. Such people are deceiving themselves. ²³ In fact, if anyone hears the word and does not do what it says, he is like a man who carefully looks at his own natural face in a mirror. ²⁴ Indeed, he carefully looks at himself; then, he goes away and immediately forgets what he looked like. ²⁵ But the one who looks carefully into the perfect law, the law of freedom, and continues to do so—since he does not hear and forget but actually does what it says—that person will be blessed in what he does. ²⁶ If anyone considers himself to be religious but deceives his own heart because he does not bridle his tongue, this person's religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled in the sight of God the Father is this: to take care of orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

The story is told about a man who owned a very successful, growing business here in the United States. He wanted to expand his business overseas so he made arrangements to move his family to Europe for a year to set things up and get things running over there. Before he left he put his manager in charge of the stateside operations of this business and told him that he would send regular letters from Europe spelling out all of his instructions and expectations. Sure enough as the months went by the owner sent a steady flow of letters to his manager spelling out everything the owner wanted done. After the year was over the owner was shocked and appalled when he returned to his stateside headquarters and found the place in complete shambles! The lawn hadn't been maintained, some of the office windows were broken, and the place hadn't been cleaned or vacuumed in months. Worst of all when the owner walked into office building he found that no one was working! The receptionist was doing her nails and the rest of the employees—including the manager—were either playing games or watching TV!

Furious and flabbergasted the owner found his manager and demanded, "What in the world is going on, man?" "What do you mean?" the manager replied. "Well, look at this place! Didn't you get any of my letters?" "Letters? Oh yes! Sure! I got every one of them. As a matter of fact, we have had a letter study every Wednesday night since you left. We have even divided the personnel into small groups to discuss many of the things you wrote. Some of the things were really interesting. You will be pleased to know that a few of us have actually committed to memory some of your sentences and paragraphs. One or two of us even memorized an entire letter or two - Great stuff in those letters." "Ok, you got my letters." the owner said, "You studied them and meditated on them; discussed and even memorized them. But what did you do about them?" "Do?" the manager replied, "We didn't do anything about them." (Adapted from an illustration by Chuck Swindoll from the book, "Improving Your Serve")

Does this illustration seem familiar? Does it remind anyone just a little bit of church? Do we always come, hoping to hear God's Word and do what it says? Does our "religion" begin and end at our worship service each Sunday? James warns against this type of attitude in our text when he writes, **"Be people who do what the word says, not people who only hear it. Such people are deceiving themselves" (v. 22).**

James was writing his letter to the Jewish Christians of Judea who had now heard the Gospel message for about a generation, and were in danger of falling away from their first love. They had become so complacent in their faith that they were in danger of losing their true faith in Christ

altogether. They had begun to fall into the trap of thinking that because they knew they were forgiven and saved by the shed blood of Jesus on the cross they could just sit back and do whatever they wanted and live life however they wanted. James was reminding these people that true saving faith is a living faith, and that their hearing of the Word of God should be accompanied by actions--what we often call the "fruits of faith;" the *proof* that our faith is alive and active.

Whenever we read from the book of James we always need to make sure we keep one thing clear: James isn't trying to say that we aren't justified ("declared righteous") and saved by our faith—because we are! Remember he pointed them to the saving Gospel message in the first verse of our text when he encouraged his readers, **"receive with humility the word planted in you. It is able to save your souls" (v. 21).**

However, James is reminding his readers that God saved us and gave us new life through His Son Jesus so that we might live a "new life"—a life that is "set apart;" a life that serves and loves God and others out of thankfulness and joy. Our faith, if it is real and living, will be *shown* by what we say and do. James warned his readers that unless sanctification (godly living) follows justification (salvation), they are deceiving their own hearts. He writes, **"In fact, if anyone hears the word and does not do what it says, he is like a man who carefully looks at his own natural face in a mirror. ²⁴ Indeed, he carefully looks at himself; then, he goes away and immediately forgets what he looked like" (v. 23-24).** Now, James is not talking here about a person who hears well but performs poorly. No, James is warning about the kind of hearing that deceives itself, a kind of hearing that promptly forgets after the person has heard. Being a **"hearer only"** means to hear without real faith.

When you hear these words today, does it make you take a long look inside your own heart? It should for all of us! These words should move all of us take a good long look into our own hearts and examine our attitudes and actions and makes us ask ourselves, "Am I a **'doer'** of the word, or a **'hearer only?'** Do I come to church just to hear the preacher say some nice words so that I can feel good and go on with the rest of my life during the week?" Do we allow the words of God to sink in to our hearts—" **receiv[ing] with humility the word planted in you. It is able to save your souls" (v. 21)**—or do we close ourselves off and let the words go in one ear and out the other; forgetting them as soon as we hear them? Are we **"deceiving ourselves"** about our own faith, as James warns against in our text? Notice that he warns against self-deception twice in these seven verses (v. 22, 26). He is reminding us that the status of our faith is a very important and very personal matter known truly only by ourselves and God. That is why honest, self-evaluation of our faith and its fruits (our actions) is so important.

If we do take the time to examine our hearts and lives and consider the status of our faith this is the first sign that we are not just a "hearer" of the word, but we're also a "doer." If we were "hearers" of the word only, we wouldn't *care*! We wouldn't even be concerned about whether or not our faith was genuine and being shown by our words and actions. When we read God's Word we find that the first thing it calls us to do is *repent*! *Repentance* means to have a change of heart; to turn away from our sin and to turn to Jesus for forgiveness.

When we compare our hearts and lives to God's standards and to the examples He has given us in our text our hearts should be moved to *repentance*, a change of heart—sorrow over our sins, and a reliance on Christ for forgiveness. Listen again to what James writes in the last two verses of our text, **"If anyone considers himself to be religious but deceives his own heart because he does not bridle his tongue, this person's religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled in the sight of God the Father is this: to take care of orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (v. 26-27).**

Raise your hand if your words and actions this past week have measured up to this standard? Have we always **“bridled our tongue” (v. 26)?** No harsh or unkind words to anyone? No crude or ungodly language that is not appropriate for a child of God? How about caring for those who cannot care for themselves? James refers to **“tak[ing] care of widows and orphans in their affliction” (v. 27).** Have we always given help to those in need as often as we could? Or were we too busy, or were our hearts just too cold? And how about **“keep[ing] ourselves unstained by the world” (v. 27)?** Have our words and actions “set us apart” as God’s people, or have we lived like the world lives? Have we watched and listened to some of the same ungodly things the world does? Have we lived like a “light” in this world and stood up for Christ and shared Him with others as often as we could?

I’m guessing your answers to all of those questions are the same as mine: “No, I haven’t.”

What are we going to do? We turn to Jesus! We’re going to cling to the cross and thank Jesus for forgiving even cold, heartless, thankless sinners like ourselves. We are going to drink deeply of His grace, fully appreciate just how much He’s forgiven us, and be grateful for the rescue from death in hell which our sins had earned for us. How can we now hear this saving word—the Gospel that God has **“planted”** in our hearts which is **“able to save your souls” (v. 21)**—and then forget about it; turn around and live our lives in such a way that we’re essentially saying, “Yeah, I know what you did for me Jesus, but it doesn’t mean enough to me to make a difference in my life or my behavior.” That would be as ridiculous as looking at yourself in the mirror, and the next second forgetting what you looked like!

How can we **“bridle our tongues,”** warm our cold, uncompassionate hearts, and free ourselves from the filth of this unbelieving world and become better “doers” of the word with a living and active faith? We can’t do it! But God can and He can work these changes in us through His Word, namely the Gospel message of His love and forgiveness in Christ. **Colossians 3:16** encourages us, **“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.”** Dwell richly in Jesus’ Word! James says in our text to **“continue in it.”** He writes in v. 25, **“But the one who looks carefully into the perfect law, the law of freedom, and continues to do so—since he does not hear and forget but actually does what it says—that person will be blessed in what he does.”** We are blessed when we continue in God’s Word and do what it says because that is evidence that we have saving faith in His Son Jesus. We will bring glory to His name by our words and actions, and our lives really will be better (**“blessed”**) when we live in the **“liberty”** of saying “No!” to sin, and saying “Yes!” to God’s holy will for our life.

A man once came very late to church one Sunday. He walked in right near the end of the service and asked an usher, “Is the sermon done yet?” The usher answered wisely and said, “The sermon has been preached, but it has yet to be done.” Well, now the sermon has been preached. It has yet to be “done.” May God by His grace move us ALL to not just be **“hearers only”** but also **“doers of the word.”** Amen.