

Do What the Word Says

James 1:19-27

Key verse 22: “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”

As a Bible-centered church community, we are surrounded by the word of God. Our church middle name “Bible” reveals that. We love to study and teach the Bible. We want to be good Bible students and grow as good Bible teachers. We are truly blessed with the word of God, and I am thankful for that. But is it enough to study the Bible and hear the word?

Last week we were greatly encouraged through the word of God from James 1:1-18. We can overcome trials and temptations by trusting God and asking him for wisdom. God is good and generous. He gave us a new life through the word of truth. Now, in today’s passage, James teaches about hearing and doing the word. He teaches a fundamental truth for our Christian life. Why did God give his word? Was it just for our hearing and enjoyment? We may be proud of reading, studying, and teaching the Bible. But James says, “Do not deceive yourselves.” What really matters is doing what the word says, not just listening to it. This is quite challenging to anyone who hears the word, especially to those of us who diligently study and teach the Bible. But God’s heart is that his children may be truly blessed through his word. God wants us to see his vision of full redemption so that we can experience new life every day.

In this passage, we will meditate on the word of God in three points: (1) be quick to listen and humbly accept the word, (2) be doers of the word, and (3) practice true religion, which is to live in a right relationship with God.

I. Be quick to listen! Humbly accept the Word planted in you (19-21)

This passage has many imperatives: Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger (19), get rid of all moral filth, humbly accept the word planted in you (21), don't merely listen, but do what it says (22). These are not optional suggestions, but commands. How do we understand these commands? Is James simply giving a dos and don'ts list? Is this a moralistic teaching that a right relationship with God is all about doing this or not doing that? If Christian life is like checking off boxes, God’s commands may feel burdensome or overwhelming.

But here, James is rather giving a gospel teaching that is firmly grounded in the grace of God. He says he is talking to “my dear brothers and sisters” (19a), who are “believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ” (2:1). Verse 18 reminds us that we are God’s beloved

children born of the word of truth. He gave us a new birth (a new life) through the gospel of Christ Jesus our Lord. Based on this grace, now James gives us instructions for life. They are not burdensome. As a train moves by an engine, our Christian life moves by the engine of grace.

In verse 19b, James exhorts, **“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”** The topic here is about listening. Are you a good listener? According to a professor of psychology, “Most of us think of ourselves as better listeners than we actually are....Talking without listening is like snipping an electrical cord in half and hoping that somehow something will light up.” (Michael Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening*). We are often full of opinions and comments to share. People want to be heard. Often people envy a great talker. But the great talker is usually not a great listener. Why do you think God gave us two ears and one mouth? Certainly not to let the word go in one ear and out the other. As wisdom says, it is wise for us to listen twice as much as we speak. Proverbs 10:19 says, “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.”

Also, we need to be slow to become angry. Why is anger such a big deal? It is **“because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires”** (20). Human anger is not a pure emotion. It is destructive. It not only destroys us, but also those around us and our relationships. We often think that whenever we are angry, we are angry for some “righteous” cause. But most of the time when I become angry, it's more about myself; I want to defend my feelings and promote my agenda in the name of a “righteous” cause. We get angry because we are frustrated or not in control. But our anger can never produce the righteousness that God desires. Proverbs 14:29 says, “Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly.” God wants us to be understanding, not hot-tempered. God wants us to extend grace to others and be slow to anger. This requires us to overcome our self-centeredness. But how can we do that? How can we be slow to anger when we are so focused on ourselves? The answer is through Jesus, who was and is completely and perfectly others centered.

James did not give 10 anger management tips such as: count down slowly from 10, take a breather, go walk around, repeat a mantra, stretch, stop talking, take a timeout. Rather, James introduced a foundational truth: **“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”** (21).

First, James starts out by dealing with all moral filth and rampant wickedness in us. We must put away filthiness and evil like putting away dirty garments. Sin, such as anger, bitterness, jealousy, addiction, pornography, etc., gives us a false sense of identity. We

must first come to God as we are — with all of our filth and baggage. We must bring all of our ugly parts to Jesus our Savior and take off our wrong identity.

Second, James draws our attention to the life-giving word: **“humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”** **“The word planted in you”** refers to the word of the gospel. The life-giving word is planted in our hearts (cf. Jer 31:33). This is a thrilling promise for us that has now become reality through the Holy Spirit. This word planted in us is the power source for our spiritual life, renewal, and growth.

Now, what should our attitude be towards this word planted in us? We should **“humbly accept”** or **“receive with meekness”** (ESV) God’s word. In anger, people want to wield their swords. When we are challenged by the word of God to repent and obey, we want to debate or resist the word of God. But meekness is the way of Jesus our Savior, who is gentle and humble. Though he was perfect, he did not come to argue or crush his opponents. Jesus lived in humble obedience to God, showing grace even to his enemies. So, humbly accept the word. In fact, humility is really about receiving. Spurgeon wrote, “It is the door through which God’s grace enters to us. We are not saved by working, but by receiving.” So, we should let the Lord speak to us through his word. We should let his word take root in our hearts and lives.

Through receiving God’s word again and again, our faith grows. The word of God has power to save us; it has the power to change us inside out. I used to be easily angry at home so my family called me “angry bird.” I didn’t know why I got angry. When I came to Jesus’ cross with my emotional problem again and again, Jesus accepted me and gave me inner healing and peace. Now after 25 years of my marriage, I am no longer an “angry bird,” but a “happy bird.” Through the word of the gospel we are being sanctified; through the word of the gospel we will be fully redeemed. Amen! May we humbly accept the planted word of God every day!

II. Do not merely listen to the Word! Do what it says (22-25)

How do we humbly accept the implanted word? We do so by doing what the word says. James 1:22 says, **“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”** Do we need to hear this again and again? Yes. James knows that we easily deceive ourselves by just listening and not doing. Today, we live in a culture where we are constantly bombarded with information. We get tons of information every day through online media platforms such as YouTube, social media, podcasts, etc.. And, after listening or watching, we usually evaluate what we see by clicking like or dislike. In this time of the pandemic, we may be tempted to passively study the Word and listen to messages in a similar way. Even now, many of you are sitting and listening to this message online. And I’m glad that you are there and listening. But my question is

this: How are you engaging with the message? Certainly, we are not called to just listen and then forget.

In verses 23-24, James illustrates his point through a mirror analogy. Why do you look in the mirror? Certainly not to admire yourself. You look at your face in a mirror and do something about the imperfections you see: maybe you shave, or pluck some undesirable hairs, or comb your hair or put on makeup. But if someone looks at him or herself in a mirror and five seconds later forgets what they look like, there's no point in looking at the mirror. Likewise, if we merely listen to the word but do not do what it says, we are foolish and missing the point of Bible study.

The problem is that our selfish ego allows the word of God to only come in to our ears and no more. Our selfish ego makes religion serve and promote our own agenda. The religion of this generation can be portrayed as "moralistic therapeutic deism," a term coined by the sociologist C. Smith. It is "moralistic" because it is about making a morally good person. It is "therapeutic" because it makes people feel good about themselves. It is "deism" because God is not needed unless we have a problem to fix. This self-centered religion is not interested in putting the word of God into practice. A documentary film, "American Gospel" exposes this false version of Christianity. By combining Christ with the "American dream," the prosperity gospel boosts our selfish ego.

I believe we have to deal with "cheap grace" as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian expressed: "Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting today for costly grace... Costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus" (The Cost of Discipleship). Costly grace challenges us to die to our selfish ego and to follow Jesus. Jesus is not looking for fans who merely admire him. Jesus is looking for people who put his words into practice. When I studied theology in Germany following God's calling, my beloved wife challenged me with a question: "Why are you studying theology?" This question implied that my knowledge is nothing until I give my heart and obey the Word. I came to experience that truly knowing is not just knowing with my head but engaging with God personally by obeying his Word.

Verse 25 says, **"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."**

The expression "to look intently into" (that is, to "look into something by stooping down") tells about a sincere attitude toward God's word, studying it with great scrutiny and devotion. The word of God is also expressed as "the perfect law that gives freedom." I love this expression. We love the idea of freedom, but what emotion do you feel when you hear the words "law" or "obedience"? Perhaps these words create some burden or

resistance, rather than freedom. Why then does James speak about the perfect law that gives freedom? Though such a concept does not exist in our broken world, it is possible through the grace of God. The Lord gives his law as a lifestyle of freedom for those who have been saved. This law is the law of our Savior Jesus Christ who sets us free from bondage to sin. Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn 8:31-32). The law of Christ is not burdensome, because it is fulfilled through Christ. The law of freedom safeguards and enables the life of true freedom into which Christ has brought us. We are truly free when we live as those who are created according to the image of God.

To use an analogy, the law of Christ can be likened to the wings of a bird. During the pandemic, my son adopted two parakeets to keep him company. They are amazing little social creatures. The green parakeet can enjoy flying and often flutters around the whole house when we let him out of the cage; but the yellow one cannot and remains only on the floor, because its wings have been clipped. We feel bad for that parakeet. My point is that just like wings enable a bird to fly, the law of Christ leads us to freedom empowered by the Holy Spirit.

So, we are truly blessed when we continue obeying the law of Christ. Psalm 1:3 says, “That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither— whatever they do prospers.” God wants us to be blessed. As we obey the law of Christ, we will be like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in season. The word of God is the source of life; the word of God is like delicious and nutritious food that nourishes us; it transforms us into the image of Christ. His word enables us to overcome hardships and challenges. This is the blessing of a full life and a true humanity. May we enjoy this blessed life by putting God’s word into practice!

III. Practice True Religion (26-27)

In verses 26-27, James talks about true religion. He gives us some important examples of putting the word of God into practice such as to bridle our tongues, to show concern for the helpless in need, and to live a life of purity.

Verse 26 says, “Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.” For many today, the word “religious” has a negative connotation, but here this word has a positive one, referring to being “devout” or “pious.” Religion refers to worship in general. If anyone claims to be devout or pious, they must submit those claims to these tests.

1. **Bridle your tongue.** If we don’t bridle our tongues, we deceive ourselves and our religion is worthless. The Greek word for worthless (*mataios*) is often translated as futile

or useless, which characterizes idolatry (Ac 14:21; Ro 1:21). If we don't control our tongues, we deceive ourselves, and our religion is no better than idolatry. Do we criticize each other with our tongues? Do we gossip about others, spreading bitterness, and condemning others? How about on social media? Unless the word of God is transmitted in our speech and lives, we are deceiving ourselves regarding our walk with God. If our tongue and speech is not sanctified, our religion is worthless or even idolatrous.

2. Show concern for the helpless in their distress. In the Bible, orphans and widows stand for the most vulnerable in society. God is the defender of the fatherless, widows and foreigners because they are without any protection in society. Believers should look after them in their difficult situation. The Bible is straightforward against the idea of social Darwinism, the survival of the fittest. Do we have eyes to see this? Historically, the church has engaged in caring for the weak in society. May God continue to give us a generous heart to care for the needy and vulnerable.

3. Keep yourself from being polluted by the world. Personal holiness is critical to our Christian life because God is holy. People of this world are lovers of themselves. We are to put off the sin of moral filthiness every day. We are to be devoted to the Lord wholeheartedly.

These examples are not the only marks of true religion, but some of the important examples where we can obey the word of God practically.

Let us examine our lives before God. Is my religion acceptable to God? Or is it worthless, having a form of godliness, but denying its power? The word of God says, **“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”** True religion is not merely listening to the Word. How much we hear or read or how much we know does not matter to God. You may memorize Bible verses and have Bible Bees from youth. But more important is to trust and love and obey Jesus. What counts before God is acting on what we hear and what we learn. Does this passage challenge you? As for me, I am convicted. I read, study, and teach all the time. What should I do? I should repent and start practicing what I know.

But certainly, we are not encouraged to obey the Word with our own will power. The goal of our Christian life is not to keep many rules or change ourselves into “good” people who live by many rules. We are not changed by rules, but by grace. Our goal is to live in a right relationship with God. He wants our sanctification, which is possible and motivated only by his grace in Jesus. So, I pray that we humbly accept the word of the gospel every day.

God has blessed our church to love his word through Bible studies and meditation. God wants to bless each of us with his life-giving word all the more. May we grow in the love and holiness of God by putting his word into practice!