

Series James

This Message Faith Without Obedience is Dead

“Do not merely listen to the word; do what it says”

Scripture James 1:19-27

Some commentators consider the letter written by James to be the most intensely practical book of the New Testament. James was writing to Jewish believers who had been forced to flee Jerusalem because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Given their situation, these believers did not need heavy theological teaching. Rather, they required instruction in how to live out their faith in the midst of people who did not accept them or understand them.

James was ideally suited to be an encourager to the scattered believers. He had been an elder and pastor to them during the years they had been members of the Christian community in Jerusalem. He understood their physical and spiritual needs and, in turn, was respected by them. James was able to effectively communicate because he was an insider, a member of the Jewish culture. As Westerners, we might think the words and style and illustrations of this letter to be a little strange, but to the original readers the meaning of his writing was simple and clear.

James was concerned about the faithfulness of his readers. He did not want any of them to be overwhelmed by their circumstances. Instead of their becoming bitter and angry at both their tormentors and at God, which they were inclined toward, he wanted them to look at their circumstances as opportunities to grow in their faith. James wanted his readers to “consider it pure joy whenever they faced their trials” because he knew that “the testing of their faith” would help them to become spiritually mature and complete (*James 1:2-4*).

James also wanted his readers to resist the temptations which were influencing their behavior. He understood that the discontentment and frustrations of their circumstances could become the seed-bed of all kinds of evil. James wanted his readers to recognize that they were the recipients of “every good and perfect gift” made available by God, and that they had been sovereignly chosen by God to receive spiritual birth. He wanted their appreciation of this fact to be their motivation to persevere through their troubles (*James 1:16-18*).

The two previous messages were about the need for “perseverance.” Today we are going to transition into the second of the nine main topics in the letter, “Faith Without Obedience is Dead.”

Read James 1:19-25

These verses are focused on “the word of God.” Verses 19 through 21 emphasize the attitudes and behaviors necessary before the Word can be received, and verses 22 through 27 stress the necessity of being obedient to the Word. This passage divides believers into two groups. On the one hand, there are those who either can’t hear what God is saying or won’t do what God says and, on the other hand, there are believers who both hear and are obedient.

Our reading today began with an appeal: “My dear brothers, take note of what I am going to say.” Several times in this letter, James introduces important statements in a personalized way, addressing his readers as “my brothers.” That was the way this letter began, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials.”

In the passage today, James is appealing to his fellow believers to stay tightly focused on God’s Word. The first point he wanted to get across was that certain attitudes and behaviors determined their ability to hear what God might be saying to them. He wanted his readers to remove all the sinful hindrances which would block and prevent communication with God. The first barrier to be removed involved listening and speaking: the believer must listen more and speak less.

Think about the logic of this. An incessant talker does not hear what anyone else says. Such a talker is usually negative about every situation. They complain about their personal problems. They dwell on hopelessness and gloominess, and they are not in a position to hear what God might be saying to them, either directly or through a godly counselor. In fact, such a person is probably not seriously inclined to be alone with God and to seriously study God’s word.

In the first message of this series we read these verses: “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all” (*James 1:5*). So if a believer really wanted to tap into God’s wisdom, he had to be prepared to listen, and that meant “be still,” “be quiet.” Individuals who were “quick to speak” would not be able to learn from God.

Let me explain the context for the statement, “Everyone should be quick to listen.” In the early centuries of the Church, believers did not have personal copies of the Scriptures. There were no duplicating machines or printing presses to help with the distribution of the writings of the Apostles and church leaders. Letters were circulated among the communities of believers and read publicly when everyone was together for worship and teaching. This is the reason James used the word “listen” instead of “read.” Careful listening was a prerequisite for meditation and reflection. The “quick to speak,” complaining believer would be disruptive and prevent the group from grasping the deeper meaning of letters which were read, such as this one by James.

James was not unaware of the personal challenges which were being endured by believers. He understood that their trials had the potential to stir up fear, self-pity, envy, confusion, anger, and other undesirable attitudes. However, we will remember from previous verses that James wanted his friends to use their difficulties in life as opportunities to grow in their faith. Unless they were listening to God, they would not benefit from the wisdom and comfort and encouragement that God would make available to them.

A particularly significant barrier was anger. Anger and its accompanying feelings of hatred and desire for revenge would block out any ability of the readers to receive God’s truth. Angry, emotional people do not have control over their tongues. The instructions to be “slow to speak” and “slow to become angry” were written as two balanced parts of one phrase.

Verse 20 gives the reasoning behind the instruction: “anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.” The purpose of this letter was to help believers to become mature; to become everything that God wanted them to be. James wanted his readers to know that human anger was not compatible with the desires of God. Righteousness would not develop in an angry believer.

Verse 21 begins with the word, “therefore.” Verse 21 is a very strong statement. James associated “anger” with “moral filth” and “evil.” Because he wanted his readers to “get rid of” everything that hindered them from living “righteous lives,” he stated this in a very forthright way. The Greek verb translated “get rid of” was frequently used to describe the removal of garments that were too soiled to wear.

Notice how James summarized these verses: believers needed to strip away the “moral filth” and the other evils that were prevalent among them before they could “humbly accept the word of God,” and they needed to accept the word of God before they could live “the righteous life that God wanted of them.”

The reception of truth requires humility on the part of the believer. The attitude of “humility” stands in contrast to the attitude of “anger.” Believers who “humbly accept the word” are able to hear and will be guided by the word of God, and therefore will live in a way that is pleasing to God.

Notice that “the word” is described as already “planted in” the believers. This is, on the one hand, a clear indication that the recipients of this letter were already believers, but unfortunately, the passage is worded in such a way to indicate that James was assuming that many of them were not living out the truth which was alive in them — that they were unable to listen to God’s word, and that they were not living the “righteous life that God desired.” This was the reason for James’ urgent concern, and why he was writing in such a frank way.

The phrase, “which can save you,” is a reference to the overcoming power of the word. The phrase was not intended as an appeal for the readers to become believers by accepting the truth, but, rather, an appeal to existing believers to stay connected with God so that He would be able to help them endure the trials they were experiencing. The word of God, when it is welcomed and accepted in the believer’s heart, can promote holiness, stimulate spiritual growth, and develop character — all the things that accompany salvation.

Throughout this letter, James was underscoring the purposes of God: that God was more eager to grow the faith of believers than He was to change the circumstances of their trials and difficulties. As we learned previously, God sometimes puts His people in the midst of trials in order to test their faith and move them closer to spiritual maturity and completeness. It is not the suffering of the trial but the lack of faith and temptation to sin that is the most serious danger to believers.

Last week we learned that sin gives birth to death. Therefore, it is more important for believers to pray, “Lord, keep me pure,” than it is to pray, “Lord, keep me safe.”

James reminded his readers that they had been given birth through the word of truth in order that they might be delivered from sin and death, making it possible to live “the righteous life that God desires.” In essence, James was presenting his readers with a choice. Did they want to focus their attention on, and ventilate their bitterness and anger against, their circumstances, or did they want God's righteousness to be functional in their lives?

Verses 19 through 21 stressed the importance of listening to the word. The next paragraph stresses the application of the word. James wanted the readers to understand that listening is essential, but he went on to inform them that obedience was even more important. Verses 22 through 25 emphasize the necessity of putting the word into practice.

Notice how James emphasized the importance of obedience. He used an analogy to get his point across. The individual who listens to the word but does not follow the instructions of the word is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and then goes away without thinking further about his appearance. James states that such a person “deceives himself.”

We can assume that both the word and the image in the mirror reveal something that the person should recognize and understand. Unfortunately, by going away and immediately forgetting what was revealed, neither the reflection nor the word were of any benefit to the man. The man would be treating both as useless and insignificant to him. I'm sure the readers of James' words would quickly understand the application. By hearing the word of God and not following its instructions, they would be treating the word as if it were unimportant and useless, and they would be deceiving themselves about the nature and purpose of the word of God, and their relationship with God.

Most of the recipients of this letter had been believers for just 10 to 12 years. They were spiritually immature. They were living under difficult circumstances. James did not want them to give up on their faith or to give in to their own evil desires, or to begin to manifest the worldly characteristics of moral filth and prevalent evil. James wanted them to focus on the “good and perfect gifts which were available from the Father of lights.” He wanted them to “accept the word planted in them, which could save them” and sustain them through their circumstances. James did not want his readers to try to run their own lives, but, instead, to submit to God's authority as revealed through His word. Not to do this would be to follow the ways of self-deception.

In verse 25 James provided four practical steps which would lead to his readers being blessed. First the believer must “look intently into the perfect law” of God. This term continues the analogy of a person looking into a mirror, only James is here concerned about looking into the word of God. Believers need to look intently into God’s word because it is “the perfect law that gives freedom.” In the context of this letter, the word “freedom” could refer to freedom from temptations and “double-mindedness” as well as freedom from anxieties, to which the suffering believers were subjected.

The second step is encapsulated in the word “continues.” The listening/looking must not only be intense, but also continuous. God’s word will not be beneficial to the person who only reads it occasionally. God’s word must be read frequently and regularly, especially if it is to be beneficial to people who are under the pressure of circumstances.

Next, James wanted to restate an important point he had made earlier. He did not want his readers to be like the man who looked in the mirror and immediately forgot what he had seen. The believer must “look intently,” “look frequently and regularly,” and “not forget” the instructions of the word.

The final step is the ultimate, the most essential one: “doing,” “carrying out,” “applying” the instructions of “the word.” This is the step in which “the rubber meets the road.” Only those believers who applied God’s truth would be able to experience the “righteous life that God desires.”

And what is the benefit of obedience to what God wants? The believer “will be blessed in what he does.” The word of God is God’s special way of communicating with His people. The reading and study of Scripture is the highest priority activity for the believer. If the study of Scripture is placed first, and there is the willingness to be obedient to what is read, then God will be able to reorder and guide everything else in the believer’s life.

As one commentator wrote, “Too many Christians mark their Bibles, but their Bibles never make any marks on them!” We need to have the marks of God all over our lives.

If we want to become spiritually mature, we have no choice but to immerse ourselves in the word, and then to obediently live like God wants us to live. Hearing a good sermon (even one like this one!!!) will not make a believer mature or get God's blessing. Neither will the casual and sporadic reading of Scripture. If we want to be blessed by God, we must do what God instructs us to do.

In verse 26 we have the example of the individual who “considers himself religious.” The word refers to the outward acts of religion, such as fasting, praying, and worshiping. Most of the Jews in the 1st Century practiced a ritualistic form of religion. They went through the motions but were not focused on the meaning of their activity. They were like the man who did not get any benefit from looking at his face in the mirror.

James did not want the Jewish followers of Jesus to be like the religious Jews of their time. He declared that the ritualistic practice of religion was “worthless.” As he previously emphasized, a person would be blessed only after he continually looked intently into the word, remembered what he read, and followed the instruction of the word. According to James, “a tight rein on the tongue” was a much better indicator of the sincerity and authenticity of a person’s religion. It was an indication that the conduct and character of the individual was changed in ways which were acceptable to God.

James gave instruction about the control of the tongue several times in this letter. The first time was in verse 19. In chapter 3 he will discuss the amount of evil which is generated by the tongue. In chapter 4 he will give examples of inappropriate speech. In chapter 5 he will instruct his readers not to grumble or swear. The repetition of this theme is an indication of the great importance James places on this subject.

The phrase translated “keep a tight rein on” was an especially picturesque way to describe the point that James was communicating to his readers. He was comparing the control of the tongue to a rider’s control of a horse by means of the rein and bit. To bridle the tongue is to discipline it, restrain it, curb it, keep it under control. The point is that any individual who is unable to control his/her tongue is not a spiritually disciplined individual. The individual may think of himself/herself as “religious,” but, wrote James, that person is deceived. That person’s religion is invalid, actually worthless.

In contrast to the worthless religion of the individual in verse 26, in the next verse James gives two practical examples of a person who applies God's word in meaningful ways. With only two examples, James is not being comprehensive; instead, he is zeroing in on activities by which his readers could give evidence of acceptable religious practices. These two examples represented "pure and faultless religion in the sight of God the Father." The first focuses on needy people; the second on ourselves.

In specifying "orphans and widows," James was reminding his readers of an important theme running through the Old Testament. On numerous occasions, God emphasized His concern for the powerless and defenseless, including the poor, the alien, the fatherless and the widow. He stated that "looking after" these unfortunate people was an indication of the obedience of His followers. In the context of the circumstances in which the believing Jews of the 1st Century found themselves, it was very important that they look after the needs of each other.

The second example was for his readers to keep themselves from being polluted by the world. As we have acknowledged from previous verses, James was greatly concerned that his readers remain faithful and steadfast through their trials and temptations. He wanted them to live "the righteous life that God desired." He instructed them to "get rid of all moral filth and the evil that was so prevalent. He wanted them to do what the word instructed them to do. No matter what pressure they were experiencing, they were to be morally distinct from the world. They were to practice the "religion that was acceptable to God the Father."

To summarize this passage, James insisted that the believer's obedience must go far beyond superficial action. It was not enough for them to listen to God's word casually and occasionally, nor was it sufficient to go through the motions of religious activity. The person whose religious experience was genuine would be eager to hear from God, and eager to put spiritual truth into practice. That person's life would be refined by trials and testings, but these troubles would only serve to develop an inner spiritual reality in the believer, which would express itself in love to others and holiness before God.

Hearer Only	Hearer and Doer
He does not control his tongue	He is slow to speak
He is quick to anger and has not put aside filthiness and wickedness	He desires to live a righteous life
He is not helped by the power of God	He is sustained by God's power
He pays scant attention to the word of God	He looks intently into the word
He immediately forgets and neglects what he reads	He applies what he reads and becomes an effectual doer of the word
He deludes himself	He is blessed in what he does
He practices a worthless religion	He practices a religion that is acceptable to God the Father
He fails to care for others	He looks after those in need
He becomes polluted by the world	He keeps himself pure