

With Obedience  
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James 1:19-2:4

Opening Discussion: Let's begin by talking about self-deception (kidding ourselves.) **How do we sometimes deceive ourselves about our health, fitness, diet, or money? What about our spiritual life? How do saved believers sometimes deceive ourselves when we read God's word?**

Several years ago I read a business book called *"The Knowing and Doing Gap."* The title describes the problem, it's not about what we know; it is about what we DO with what we know. Sometimes we deceive ourselves when we confuse what we KNOW with what we DO. *"I know I should exercise...eat healthy...do what scripture teaches...but am I ACTING on what I know?"* In this next section of James's letter to scattered and persecuted followers of Christ, James is teaching them (and us) to avoid the "spiritual knowing and doing gap."

Big Idea: The Christian life isn't just about knowing God's word, but putting it into practice. Hearing, followed by doing, leads to LIVING the authentic Christian life.

Let's begin with how to HEAR God's word in James 1:19–21 (ESV)

<sup>19</sup> Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; <sup>20</sup> for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. <sup>21</sup> Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

- "Quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger" is good advice in terms of human relations, but the context here is about hearing God's word.
- Most of us would rather speak than listen. (Illustration: First grade teacher)
- *"Wait a minute; this is about hearing God's word. I don't talk in church!"*
- "Adlai Stevenson once opened an address to students at Princeton with these words: *'I understand I am here to speak and you are here to listen. Let's hope we both finish at the same time.'*
- [Commentator:] ...the truth is, a lot of church attenders get through listening long before the pastor gets through preaching."<sup>ii</sup>
- James wasn't just warning about talking versus listening, but angry talk.
- When someone speaks in anger without listening we call that arguing.
- **What does that have to do with absorbing God's word in scripture?**
- We know that hearing God's word is crucial to growing as a believer.
- Jesus said in Matthew 13:9 (ESV) <sup>9</sup> *"He who has ears, let him hear."*
- Paul wrote that *"...faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ."* Romans 10:17 (ESV)
- Jesus in His high priestly prayer: John 17:17 (ESV) <sup>17</sup> Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.

- Sanctification – growing more like Christ comes through His word.
- James says sometimes we can't hear and receive God's word because of that angry little voice in our heads arguing about what scripture is telling us about ourselves. (Ex. The serpent to Eve: "Did God really say...?" The Pharisee in the temple: "Glad I'm not sinful like that guy!")
- Another possibility, these were persecuted Christians and some of their anger or cynicism with God's word may have resulted from their trials.
- Can't you hear Satan? *"If God loved you, you wouldn't be in this mess!"*
- Reacting in anger to God's word doesn't lead to a more Christ-like life.
- Verse twenty-one: James compares God's word to a seed planted in soil.
- In Jeremiah 31:33 (ESV) God described how the new covenant works:  
*<sup>33</sup> For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*
- **Before you plant a garden what do you have to do?**
- God through His Holy Spirit plants the seeds of scripture in our hearts, but we have to prepare the soil. **How can I remove the weeds of filthiness and wickedness that we all have popping up in the garden of our hearts? What does it mean to receive God's word with meekness?**
- Some are not only NOT DOING but also not TRYING. (Why I never learned golf.) None of us gets 100% in doing! Grace keeps us trying.
- The Christian life isn't just about knowing God's word, but putting it into practice. Hearing, followed by doing, leads to LIVING the authentic Christian life. I may know a lot of scripture, but do I DO what it says?

<sup>22</sup> But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. <sup>25</sup> 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.

- Now we get back to our earlier discussion about self-deception.
- Warren Wiersbe says: *"If a Christian sins because Satan deceives him, that is one thing. But if he deceives himself, that is a far more serious matter."*<sup>iii</sup>
- James gives the example of looking in the mirror and walking away.
- **How is God's word like a mirror (missionary and witch doctor)? How is his mirror illustration an example of poor Bible study? How can "mirror glancing and running" result in deceiving ourselves about our spiritual condition?**
- "Law" and "liberty" don't seem to go together. Some resist following Christ because they think His teaching might cramp their style. **How does looking into and acting on God's word actually give us FREEDOM?**

- Hearing sermons and reading scripture do us no good without meditating on what we've heard and read. As our friend Steve Brown says at the end of each message: *"You think about it!"* (Hat tip to Mark & Susan Robnett!)
- The Christian life isn't just about knowing God's word, but putting it into practice. Hearing, followed by doing, leads to LIVING the authentic Christian life. What does that life look like?

<sup>26</sup> If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup> 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.

**2** My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. <sup>2</sup> For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, <sup>3</sup> and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," <sup>4</sup> have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

- James seems obsessed with controlling the tongue and we haven't even gotten to chapter three (a fire, deadly poison.) That's another lesson.
- Is *"pure and undefiled"* religion simply taking care of widows and orphans? **What do widows and orphans have in common? What is the broader meaning? What is the point about James's example of the rich man and poor man coming to church? Why is partiality a problem?**
- In 1 John 3:17–18 (ESV) the Apostle John tells us: <sup>17</sup> *But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?* <sup>18</sup> *Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.*
- The Bible Knowledge Commentary: *"James just made it clear that true religion finds an outlet in service, a service which demands that a believer learn to accept others without prejudice and to assist others without presumption."*<sup>iv</sup>
- James also says *"pure and undefiled"* religion involves keeping ourselves *"unstained from the world."* In this context we see that the "world's" system is *"influenced by evil, centered on self, and opposed to God."*<sup>v</sup>
- How can we live IN the world but not be "stained" by the world in this age of the Internet and 500 cable channels? The church even struggles with trying to be relevant yet separate but it can be a slippery slope.
- Quoting one commentator: *"...if Christianity is not different, there is no need for it! We can't hope to influence the world for Christ if we allow it to influence us in our thoughts, words and deeds."*<sup>vi</sup>
- *Romans 12:2 (ESV) says, <sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

- That gets back to the point of this passage: I may know a lot of scripture, but do I DO what it says?

### So, What's the Takeaway?

- The Christian life isn't just about knowing God's word, but putting it into practice. Hearing, followed by doing, leads to LIVING the authentic Christian life.
- James taught us that God's word is like a "mirror" showing us the true state of our spiritual condition. A mirror is worthless if we never look into it or just glance at it quickly and ignore what it shows us.
- It's not enough to look in the mirror; we have to ACT on what it shows.
- When it comes to God's word we need to be "quick to listen."
- We also need to quiet that little arguing voice in our heads and accept God's word with a meek, teachable spirit that desires to do His will.
- To receive the "seed" of God's word we have to constantly "weed" the garden of our hearts through confessing sin and asking His forgiveness.
- Once we've become a good "hearer," we need to be a consistent "DOER."
- Hearing God's word but not taking action on it leads to spiritual self-deception. We have to close the spiritual "knowing and doing gap."
- DOING God's word will result in caring for and serving those who can't care for themselves. It will also keep us "unstained" by the world.
- This week let's really LOOK into the truth of God's word, then DO what it tells us to do.

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<sup>i</sup> Pfeffer, Jeffrey, and Robert I. Sutton. *The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge into Action*. Boston, Mass: Harvard Business School Press, 2000.

<sup>ii</sup> Ellsworth, R. (2009). *Opening up James* (p. 56). Leominster: Day One Publications.

<sup>iii</sup> Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 2, p. 345). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>iv</sup> Blue, J. R. (1985). James. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 824). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

<sup>v</sup> Explore the Bible Leader's Guide – pg. 98 - Lifeway

<sup>vi</sup> Ellsworth, R. (2009). *Opening up James* (p. 73). Leominster: Day One Publications.