

Am I A Doer?  
James 1:22-25  
ABC 4/28/19

*Let's pretend that you work for me. In fact, you're my executive assistant in a company that is growing rapidly. I'm the owner & I'm interested in expanding overseas. To pull this off, I make plans to travel abroad & stay there until the new branch office gets established. I make all the arrangements to take my family in the move to Europe for 6 to 8 months, & I leave you in charge of the busy stateside organization. I tell you I will write you regularly & give you direction & instructions.*

*I leave & you stay. Months pass. A flow of letters are mailed from Europe & received by you at the national headquarters. I spell out all my expectations. Finally, I return. Soon after my arrival I drive down to the office. I am stunned! Grass & weeds have grown up high. A few windows along the street are broken. I walk into the receptionist's room & she's doing her nails, chewing gum, & listening to her favorite disco station. (That dates this illustration, doesn't it? Replace disco with FB, IG, Twitter.) I look around & notice the waste baskets are overflowing, the carpet hasn't been vacuumed for weeks, & nobody seems concerned the owner has returned. I ask about your whereabouts & someone in the crowded lounge area points down the hall & yells, "I think he's down there." Disturbed, I move in that direction & bump into you as you're finishing a chess game with our sales manager. I ask you to step into my office (which has been temporarily turned into a television room for watching afternoon soap operas).*

*"What in the world is going on?"*

*"What do you mean?"*

*"Well, look at this place! Didn't you get any of my letters?"*

*"Letters? Oh, yeah—sure, got every one of them. As a matter of fact, we've had letter study every Friday night since you left. We even divided all the personnel into small groups & discussed many of the things you wrote. Some of those things were really interesting. You'll be pleased to know a few of us have actually committed to memory some of your sentences & paragraphs. One or two memorized an entire letter or two! Great stuff in those letters!"*

*"Okay, you got my letters, you studied them, meditated on them, discussed, & even memorized them. BUT WHAT DID YOU DO ABOUT THEM?"*

*"Do? Uh, we didn't do anything about them."<sup>1</sup>*

How would you feel? Respond? You might think such behavior is absurd. But are we any less absurd when we hear God's Word without the slightest desire or effort to obey it? At the very least, we're self-deceived. After all, there's a world of difference between reading a menu & eating meal! This is why James follows his call to be hearers of the Word with the command, *Do not merely listen to God's Word, & so deceive yourselves. Do what it says!* If we're going to profit from God's Word,

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<sup>1</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Improving Your Serve*, pp 170-171

we must receive it & do it. To enforce the importance of this, James uses an illustration based on our response to a mirror. **1:19-25** PRAY

Before we can apply vs 22, we must first apply vs 21, right? We must work at putting aside sin & humbly receive God's Word. We talked about this 6 weeks ago in our last sermon in James. James tells us to get rid of everything that prevents us from hearing the Word of God. But hearing isn't enough.

**1. The Test of Doing God's Word** James gives us a series of tests that show that we are saved. We've already seen the tests of how we respond to trials & to temptations. Now he gives us the test of whether or not we do what God's Word says. **22**

The Greek word for **doer** is a favorite of James (who uses it more than any other biblical writer). It describes one who does something that produces something, whether a product or a poem. Christians are to be doers, we're to be productive, bearing fruit. We must be aware of the danger of hearing the words of the living God & not letting it change our life! To only read or to only hear the Bible is disobedience to a holy God & deceptive to our heart. Vs 22 is the most familiar vs in James. Because it's so familiar, it can be a danger to us. We may be ...

- thinking we already know what it says rather than seeking to actively applying it
- thinking our mental recollection of a truth means we really know it, when to know in Scripture means much more
- thinking if we show up in church a couple of times a month we're spiritually healthy
- thinking if we listen attentively & take notes occasionally, we've truly heard
- thinking God's not really talking to me in this text or doesn't expect me to do something
- thinking of someone else who needs to hear this rather than praying, *God, I need your Word for me. Help Pastor Nate, by the Spirit's power, to boldly give me what I need.*
- forgetting what God's said to you this morning by the time you walk out the back door

Believe me, I know, I'm stepping on some toes, including my own. But we must be doers not merely hearers. The point of God's commands is that we obey them. But often we simply hear them & do nothing. Again, it's important to realize that James is addressing Christians. He isn't writing to pagans but to those who regularly hear God's Word. They probably took some comfort in the fact

they often heard God's Word. They thought that put them a notch above pagans who never attended church. Being Jewish Christians, some probably took pride in their observance of certain rituals & outward commands. They'd been baptized & took communion. They attended church. They didn't steal or kill. But James cuts through the façade & gets to the heart issue. So, what is a **hearer**? It was a common term for those who attended a lecture but weren't disciples of the lecturer. They were hearers who didn't follow the instructions given. Much different from a *disciple* who is a learner who follows the teacher & does what he says. Merely hearing is a common failing among Christians. As one commentator put it, *Our churches are filled with spiritual sponges who soak up the information, sit, sour, & eventually stink!*<sup>2</sup> We've all been guilty of merely hearing God's Word & never doing anything about it. If you've ever audited a class, this is related to that concept. Someone who audits a class is there to listen to the lecture but isn't required to do the work. It's an auditory process only & the attendee doesn't get credit for it & usually doesn't make any real personal investment into it. Too many people approach God's Word the same way. It's an auditory hearing exercise. They don't think there's any work or assignment required of them.

Listen to Ezekiel 33,

**as for you, son of man, your fellow citizens who talk about you by the walls and in the doorways of the houses, speak to one another, each to his brother, saying, 'Come now and hear what the message is which comes forth from the LORD.' They come to you as people come, and sit before you as My people and hear your words, but they do not do them, for they do the lustful desires expressed by their mouth, and their heart goes after their gain. Behold, you are to them like a sensual song by one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument; for they hear your words but they do not practice them (30-32).**

It's not unique to our times that many come to hear God's Word, but never actually do anything with it. Their mouths may profess faith, but they do only what they want. The message may be interesting, maybe your ears even like the sound of it like spectators at an entertainment event. But a concert, play, movie, or whatever doesn't demand anything of you & when it's done you're done & you walk out unchanged. That's how many of us approach God's Word. It would be better to be offended by the Word & leave, but undergo conviction as we think about it later. That's far better than to be self-deceived, hard-hearted spectators who're never convicted or troubled by

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<sup>2</sup> D. Edmund Hiebert, *James*, p 119

what the Word demands you to do. Woe to those who turn away from God's Word without ever truly applying it. Jesus said, **My mother & brothers are these who hear the Word of God & what? Do it** (Lk 8:21). To truly *know* something in Scripture has more to do with actions than intellectual knowledge. Hearing the Word is vital, but it's not all there is. Living under the Word's power is the goal of James in vs 22. Don't be a professional student of God's Word. Don't be an expert at studying the wonderful words of life without putting your heart & life to the test of what you're studying. Merely sitting in church or reading a chapter a day in your Bible doesn't make you a Christian any more than driving by a gym makes you fit & in shape. Don't just sit here & assume your presence makes you right with God. It can actually have the reverse effect if you're not receiving the Word & doing what it says. The same Word that softens some, hardens others. That's why Jesus talked about various types of soil that receive the Word. That's why He said let your ears truly hear & be careful how you listen. Don't just sit there! Do what God says! Your job isn't to be a spectator & a teacher's job isn't to be your entertainer. We all must be **doers** & not merely deluded hearers.

## 2. The Illustration 23-24

Here we have the phrase **looks at his natural face**, which simply means his true or original face. By implication, his true nature. Vs 24 says it again: **looked at himself** which the end of the vs explains as **what kind of person he is**. This mirror shows you your true self. As you read the Word you see yourself as you really are. God's Word is a mirror that talks. Spurgeon writes,

*The Scripture gives a truthful reflection of man's nature—it lets the man see himself, not as others see him, for others make mistakes, nor as he would see himself, for he is very apt to be partial to his own soul—but the Scripture makes him see himself as God sees him. Look at the Scriptural portrait of a sinner. That is you, O man! Look at the depraved heart, the rebellious will, the darkened understanding—that heart, will & understanding are yours ... The Bible does not flatter human nature....*

*The reflection of self in the Word is very like life. You have, perhaps, seen a dog so astonished at his image in the glass that he has barked fiercely at himself. A parrot will mistake its reflection for a rival. Well may the creature wonder, since every one of its movements is so accurately copied—it thinks itself to be mocked. Under a true preacher, men are often so thoroughly unearthed & laid bare that even the details of their lives are reported ... The Scripture of Truth knows all about him & it tells him what it knows. Many a time the hearer has said, "Somebody has told the preacher." ... I have sometimes said to you that people frequently wish that the preacher knew their experience in order that he could preach to it. But it is not necessary to tell God's sent servant anything about it, for he will speak to you with all the more power because he does not know! ...*

*When the preacher's description of the man's heart is true to life & yet no human mouth has whispered it into his ears, then the man cries, "This is the finger of God!"*

*A great part of the self-evidencing power of the Gospel lies in the way in which it discovers to our minds that which, before, lay within our hearts, hidden, even, from ourselves! ... He that reads & hears the Word may see not only his actions, there, but his motives, his desires, his inward condition. As the butcher cuts down the carcass & reveals all the innards, which never could have been seen but for his knife, so is the Word of God "quick & powerful & sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul & spirit, & of the joints & marrow, & is a discerner of the thoughts & intents of the heart." The secrets of the man are opened up to himself ... But if this is all, to what purpose is it?<sup>3</sup>*

God's Word is a mirror that makes us see ourselves as we are, sinners in desperate need of God's grace & power. The good news is for those who believe the gospel, this book can actually change your appearance! To use the language of vs 21, the mirror shows you the filthy stains you have on your clothes so you can lay them aside & put on clean ones instead. But you need to act right away or you'll forget like the guy in vs 24. Most of us probably at least glance at a mirror every day before leaving the house. A mirror can show you when you have your shirt on inside out. Look, see, & change it! Don't just sit there as a hearer only, walking away with your shirt on inside out, never to reflect on your life & take steps to change. Don't just sit there! Do what the Word says!

One writer says those in vss 23-24,

*...pay close attention to their reflection, examining it carefully before they leave ... starting well by closely examining their face but ... they depart without doing anything.... Compounding the problem, they "immediately" forget. The point is that the impression is only momentary. But at this point we wonder if perhaps this illustration is not better understood as a deliberately ridiculous analogy, for no one in their right mind who examines their image that closely would then utterly neglect the flaws they discover & instantly forget whatever they had seen. Likewise, James seeks to stress how ludicrous it is for people so rapidly to ignore & forget what they have heard.... To treat God's Word in such cavalier fashion is equally absurd.<sup>4</sup>*

James' illustration is simple & yet effective. Don't hear God's Word & walk away without doing what He's said.

### **3. The Result 25**

James writes to encourage us with blessedness at the end of vs 25: **this man will be blessed in what he does.** There's the end result of being a doer of what God says. Being a **doer** of what God says is no joyless duty. No, this is the source of true joy, true happiness, boundless blessedness instead

<sup>3</sup> Spurgeongems.org/vols31-33/chs1848.pdf

<sup>4</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Exegetical Commentary on the NT: James*, p 91

of the burden of the Pharisees who made doing God's law a yoke because it wasn't from the right motivation or from the right heart. According to the Bible, the law is God's owner manual for life. He's the One who created life, He's the One who knows how to live it correctly. He's made us to become what we were always intended to be & become. When you buy a new car, you maintain it according to the instruction manual. As you do this, it will give you years of trouble-free service. But if you hitch it to a plow, take it into the back 40, & plow your field with it or if you never change the oil & ignore all the warning lights, it won't be long before your car is a piece of yard-art & absolutely useless. As we become **doers** of God's Word we are becoming what God created us to be.

Here James speaks of God's law as the **law of liberty**, which can be translated **the law that brings or gives liberty**. James isn't referring simply to the law of Moses. Instead, He's pointing to the interpretation & fulfillment of that law in the teaching of Jesus. When James calls it **the law of liberty**, he's referring to the new covenant promise of the law written on the heart, accompanied by a work of the Spirit enabling obedience to that law. When you see the word **law** you probably think of something binding & restrictive, not freeing. But Scripture is binding & is truly freeing & liberating (Ps 119:45, Jn 8:32). In the grammar of vs 25, the phrase, **of liberty** indicates that this law gives the experience of freedom in the lives of those who wisely observe it. This is the Christian freedom from bondage to sin that the believer knows through faith in Jesus. As we submit ourselves to Christ's transforming power, this **law of liberty** works in our life an ability to do God's will joyfully. It prompts obedience without compulsion. In Js 2:12, the only other place in the NT where the phrase **law of liberty** occurs, James associates it with the law of love which Jesus said sums up & fulfills the OT law (). The believer isn't free from the obligation to do God's will as revealed in His Word, but love gives him the desire to do his Father's will. We are truly free when we want to do what we ought to do. You are free when you've been released to be truly what you were built to be. A perfect example of this is a fish. A fish has gills, right? They extract oxygen, not from the air, but from water. The fish has fins. The fins don't work well on land but wonderfully in the water. So here's a fish. The fish has water & it has land. Where should it go? If you define freedom as the

absence of restrictions, then you could say, *If this fish is really free, you have to let the fish be on the land as well as the water.*

*Come on, fish! Exercise your freedom! Get up there on the hot sand. Let's leave you there & see how free you are at the end of an hour!*

Stupid, isn't it? Unless the fish is restricted to the water, it loses its freedom. Freedom, liberty is the ability to fulfill what you're built to do. When a fish is restricted to the water, it swims like lightning. It has speed, vitality, strength. Freedom is not the absence of restrictions; its finding the right restrictions. It's finding the restrictions that go with your nature, who you really are. We find this in God's Word to us. There's much more that could be said about law in relation to NT grace, & we'll discuss it more when James discusses it in chap 2, but note for now that everything James is calling us to do must be grace-empowered. Vs 25 isn't *blessed by what he does* but **blessed in what he does** (cf 17). There's no power source in the law itself, but there is in living gospel faith by God's Spirit. The word **blessed** at the end of vs 25 makes clear there's a deep-rooted joy that can be found in obeying God's commands, not a mere duty but a delight. God inspired this text so we may experience blessedness in practicing what is preached & proclaimed from God's Word!

**4. Application** How can your time in God's Word be more delight than duty? More blessing than burden? God's Word isn't to be merely heard or studied academically. You should be reflecting on what's being taught & what you're reading & studying on your own. You should meditate on it, think about it, rather than immediately forgetting what you've just read or heard. You should reflect on yourself, on what God says about you, your life, & your heart in the mirror of the Word. Search the Scriptures & let them search you as well. One of the uses of the law is to reveal our sin, as Paul taught in Romans (3:20, 7:7). As we look into God's **perfect law**, we see our imperfect reflection, so we can change. Unless you're a proud & vain person, that's why you look into a mirror, not to see *how great I art*, but to see where *thou aren't so great*, to see what's wrong with your life so you can fix it. The contrast in vs 25 is a literary about face to the one who hears & doesn't do anything, but just walks away. Mirrors in ancient times were not perfect & often gave a poor reflection dimly (1 Cor 13:12) but they still showed the face & its imperfections. James says in vs

25, how much more the **perfect law** reflects not only our outer man, but our true inner soul. We need that!

When James says, **looks intently at the perfect law**, he uses a different word for **look** than in vs 23-24. The word for **look** here is used 4 other times in Scripture, 3 of them refer to the disciples stooping down, bending over, & leaning in to look into the empty tomb of Jesus. Do you see what that tells us? On Easter morning, Peter went to the tomb. He saw the stone rolled away, the tomb empty, & the grave clothes lying there. He looked intently into the tomb. What does that mean? Do you think he looked into the tomb the way we often look at the Bible? Does Peter say, *Oh, an empty tomb. Interesting. What should I do with the rest of my day?* Of course not! His mind was going crazy, it was working overtime. He was asking, *What does this mean? What is going on? How must I respond?* He was observing, interpreting, & applying. He was thinking of all the implications. He was looking intently. That's how we're to hear & read God's Word. How disciplined are you at it? How intently do you break a verse down & look at its parts & look at the context & try to figure out the flow and main point? The other use of the term is 1 Pt 1:12 where it speaks of salvation in the gospel, & things **which angels long to look into**. Christians too should also long to gaze deeply into the glories of the gospel of our resurrected Savior. We must look intently into God's Word & see our imperfections so that, with the Spirit's help, we may change it & become more like Jesus. Yogi Berra reportedly once said, *You can see a lot by looking*. He may not have been a theologian, but there's a lot of theological truth we can see by looking at Scripture which causes us to see our sin. But it doesn't stop there, & we don't look to Scripture only to see our sin because God's Word also reflects much about our Savior. Jesus said **you search or diligently study the Scriptures ... it is these that testify about Me** (Jn 5:39). Never miss the ultimate aim of the study of Scripture, which isn't merely yourself, it's your Savior. You're not just to see your sin in this mirror; you're to see the Christ-centered, God-glorifying, grace-magnifying deliverance from your sin, in Jesus Himself! James doesn't just want us to see our sin in this mirror, He wants us to look to our Savior who can cleanse us from all our filthy stains. As you look in the mirror of Scripture, don't miss the One who is the whole point of all Scripture. If you miss Christ here, you haven't looked long enough or deeply



enough. Study reflectively, reverently, looking to Christ who alone can open our eyes to His glory in His Book. The abiding here isn't merely with the pages of a book, but is a personal communication & communing with the Person who is inseparably associated with His book, Jesus. When you open your Bible, ask its Author to open your heart to see & love your Savior more. There are many who are *in* the Scriptures who are not *in* Christ. As we just read, Jesus said to the Jews **you search the Scriptures** (Jn 5:39) but in the vs right before He said, **You do not have His word abiding in you, for you do not believe Him whom He sent** (38). You can study the Word & hear the Word preached all you want, but for whoever doesn't obey the Son of God, Jn 3:36 says, **the wrath of God abides on him**. It's not enough to hear the Word or read the Word. As Christians we must be doing what it says. As we abide in it, it changes us. 1 Jn 2:24 tells us, **As for you, let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son & in the Father**. In 2 Jn 9 we read, **Anyone who goes too far & does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father & the Son**. Abiding in the Word of Christ is a mark of true Christians. Those who hear God's Word but whose lives don't abide in it, don't have life. True believers are **blessed** with transforming joy by the study of the Word, regular abiding with the Word, & remembering to obey the Word.

Vs 25 adds, **...not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer**. A **forgetful hearer** is a **hearer only** who is self-deceived (22). **Deluded** is a mathematic term for miscalculate. The worst kind of self-deception is miscalculating the state of your soul. All of us struggle with forgetfulness. But spiritually this is a moral problem. It's like those in Rom 1 who know God & His law but who suppressed the truth because of their sin. What James is talking about is more than the occasional accidental forgetfulness we all struggle with. It seems the forgetfulness here is continual, habitual, willful, & sinful. 2 Pt 3 talks about sinners who deliberately forget what God said because they don't want to think about judgment. Jn 3 says men love their sin & don't want their dark deeds to be in the light very long. The man in vss 23-24 looks in the mirror long enough to see what's wrong with his natural face but vs 24 says he's **immediately forgotten what kind of person he was**.

Forgetfulness of God & His Word was a chronic sin of the Jews & so the book of Hebrews says repeatedly, **Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts...** If you hear God's voice & do not respond, you are hardening your heart. Today is the day to repent; today is the day to obey. If you're convicted about a sin in your life, make steps today to correct it while you see what you need to do in the mirror of God's Word. There's urgency when hearing God's Word or looking at God's law. We must respond in obedience. As Joshua told the Israelites, **choose for yourselves today whom you will serve ...as for me & my house, we will serve the Lord** (Josh 24:15). If you've never come to the crucified & resurrected Christ, & you do not abide with Him & His Word, today is the day for your salvation. Heb 4:7 commands, **Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.** Hebs 3:7-15 says,

Heb 3:7-15 says, **Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, "TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME, AS IN THE DAY OF TRIAL IN THE WILDERNESS, WHERE YOUR FATHERS TRIED Me BY TESTING Me, & SAW MY WORKS FOR FORTY YEARS. THEREFORE I WAS ANGRY WITH THIS GENERATION, & SAID, 'THEY ALWAYS GO ASTRAY IN THEIR HEART, & THEY DID NOT KNOW MY WAYS'; AS I SWORE IN MY WRATH, 'THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST.'"**

Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast (similar to *abide*)... while it is said, **"TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS ...**

There's a hardening that happens if you turn away from the mirror of God's Word. But there's a blessedness in practicing what it says today. Like Joshua who was promised if you abide in God's Word, **meditate on it day & night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it ... then you will make your way prosperous, & then you will have success** (Josh 1:8). James says the **effectual doer ... will be blessed in what he does**. Obeying isn't a legalistic burden, it's liberating blessing. For our good, James wants us to be doers not just hearers (22). So don't just sit there! Do what the Word says! Don't be a hearer only, be a doer of the Word, or you're deluding yourself (22). Jesus said in Jn 13:17, **If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them**. The blessing is in the doing, not just the knowing or hearing. Maybe you already know that up here in your head but what are you doing with what you know & hear & read? Being a **doer** means letting the Word

shape your actions. Here are a few simple questions we must always be asking ourselves as we hear or read God's Word.

1. Am I receiving God's Word with a receptive heart?
2. Do I have a sin that needs to be confessed?
3. Is there a command I need to follow?
4. Am I willing to obey God even when it's not easy or I don't want to?
5. How can I advance God's kingdom based on this passage?
6. Is there an example for me to follow here?

The mark of a God-changed heart is you love to have God tell you how to live. Is that true of you? Jesus said, **Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' & do not do what I say? ....the one who has heard & has not acted accordingly, is like a man who built a house on the ground without any foundation; & the torrent burst against it & immediately it collapsed, & the ruin of that house was great (Lk 6:46, 49).** No one would want that type of spiritual disaster for themselves but it's the promised end of habitual hearers who aren't doers. Jesus also said, **Everyone who comes to Me & hears My words & acts (same Greek words as Js 1:25, hearer, Word, act or doer) on them, I will show you whom he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep & laid a foundation on the rock; & when a flood occurred, the torrent burst against that house & could not shake it, because it had been well built (47-48).** Isn't that what we all want?

Once upon a time, a gray-haired, elderly lady, long a member of her church, shook hands with the pastor after the service one Sunday morning. *That was a wonderful sermon,* she exclaimed, *just wonderful! Everything you said applies to someone I know.* James doesn't want us applying this to others. He doesn't want us to just hear & know God's will for us. He wants us to apply it to ourselves. Do you want God's blessing in your life? If you say yes, then James' answer is clear: Don't be a forgetful hearer of the word. Become an effectual **doer** & you will be blessed by God. Some of us need to pray, *Lord, make me willing to be willing to be changed by You & Your Word.* Doing God's Word is the key to blessing & happiness. **Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them (Jn 13:17).** We've received His letters. We've read & studied them. We've discussed & even memorized portions of them. What are you doing to obey them? May God bless the hearing & observing & obeying of His Word today for our good & the glory of our gracious Savior who will help us by abiding in us as we abide in Him & His Word.