

## ***Doers of the Word – James 1:22-25***

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*[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions, please get in touch with Pastor Derek at [dberry@calvarybaptistsc.church](mailto:dberry@calvarybaptistsc.church).]*

Take your copy of God's Word and meet me in James 1:22-25...

One of the books that have greatly impacted many of the missionaries and mission-minded folks of my generation is a work called "Back to Jerusalem." It was written by three leaders in the underground church of China. When I say "underground" church, I don't mean that the churches literally gather underground necessarily. That is the term for the churches that have not been sanctioned by the Chinese government and thus often meet in secret and are at risk of severe persecution.

Toward the end of the book, there's a chapter that asks the question, are we "Disciples or Just Believers?" In other words, they are trying to distinguish between those who are really following Jesus (i.e., disciples) and those who simply claim they believe in Christ. This distinction is similar to the one Kyle Idleman makes in his more recent book called *Not a Fan*, where he argues that there's a difference between people who follow Jesus and who are fans of Jesus. Growing up, I was a fan of Allen Iverson, but my brother was a follower. And we have this same distinction within the visible church as well.

In commenting on this, the three Chinese leaders who wrote *Back to Jerusalem* make this sobering observation:

*"True disciples are usually people that few understand. They are viewed as potentially unstable fanatics. Often the same governments that tolerate the existence of mere believers will stop at no ends to completely eradicate any disciple within their borders."*

I suppose these three Chinese leaders would know since, between them, they spent more than 40 years in Chinese prisons for their faith before being exiled from the country altogether. But here's what I want you to take away from these words. These brothers are telling us that the government in China doesn't really care about those who are gathering to merely listen to the Word of God, but they will imprison (or perhaps worse) people who go so far as actually to live out the Word. And yet, interestingly, that's precisely what James says we, as Christ-followers, should be known for—doing the Word.

In our passage today, we'll examine what James, the half-brother of Jesus, has to say concerning becoming doers of the word. If you're familiar with this book, you'll know that verses 1-18 were largely about how we respond to trials and temptations in this life. In verses 19-25, James addresses how we respond to the truth of God's Word. Before we delve deep into our focused verses this morning, I'd like to take time to provide a necessary precursory glance at the section preceding this text, particularly verse 21, by way of answering the question, "What is this Word that James has in mind in this text?"

Take a glance, and you'll discover that the Word of God is all over this passage. We see it in verses 21, 22, 23, and 25. We see it mentioned in the passage that comes right before what we will be considering this morning. That said, the "implanted word" of verse 21 is likely the same "word of truth" that regenerated, meaning brought us new life, in verse 18. This "word of truth" is the gospel message. Paul mentions that this is

*Colossians 1:5: "because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel,"*

*Ephesians 1:13: "In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit,"*

*1 Peter 1:23: "since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God..."*

We see here the "word of God," "the word of truth," and "the gospel" used interchangeably in these passages. So according to verse 18, we were born again when we heard and believed the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And this is what all the Scriptures testify about. From Genesis to Revelation. So, if you consider yourself a believer, it is vital that you are able to provide a biblical definition of the gospel.

As a Youth Pastor, I would constantly ask my youth students, "What is the gospel message?" Here are many of the answers I would receive. "It's the Word of God." This is very true, as we have proved this morning. But it is also a particular message found within the inspired text according to Romans 1:16, so this vague answer won't do. Other times I heard, "Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John!" That's not the gospel message. Those are authors of a genre called "gospel" that was initiated by John Mark, as the gospels themselves didn't quite fit entirely in any one particular category. Another answer is, "It's Jesus!" Please elaborate because there are many false Christ's out there, as was prophesied by Christ himself. The last one, "the gospel is Jesus died for my sins." Anyone who is familiar with the message of the gospel wouldn't truncate this message in such an irreverent fashion. It's not until the weight of a holy God, the weight of our

sinfulness, the weight of a perfect life lived by the God-man, the weight of the cross, the weight of the resurrection, is grasped that one can truly answer the question of, “what is the gospel?” Beloved, I pray you’re able to answer this question.

So, this gospel or this “word” is implanted into the believer, according to verse 21. The gospel not only regenerates us and then leaves once the work is done, but it remains in us. It’s innate to us, it’s a part of us. This is why we say that the gospel is not the ABCs of Christianity, rather it is the gospel that sanctifies us. It’s not just for non-believers, but for believers also. Listen to the words that Paul employs to the church at Thessalonica

*“And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.” (1 Thessalonians 2:13)*

So, the word is working within them. Beloved, do you realize that you have a supernatural power working within you the moment you repented and placed faith in the gospel? This is a truth that we should pause and meditate on. And yet James, who describes God’s people as those who have the word *implanted* in them, states that they need to *receive* this word in verse 21. That sounds strange, doesn’t it? How do you receive something that is already implanted within you? Piper points out that we wouldn’t speak of other things in this fashion. Take your kidneys, for example. Our kidneys were given to us by virtue of our first birth. They are implanted. They are part of us. No one needs to do the work of “receiving” their kidneys. You probably don’t give them much thought. They just do their thing without much notice unless something is wrong with them.

It would be a mistake, however, to think of this implanted “word” as we think of our kidneys. *Piper writes,*

*“James says, ‘Receive the implanted word.’ It is already in you. And you should receive it. It is rooted and planted in you. It brought you life. It is there sustaining that life by feeding faith in Christ. But it is not there like kidneys. It is there like oxygen. It gives life and in giving life, it makes you breathe, and in breathing you receive oxygen. No one says, ‘I have oxygen; look how well it is working in me; it makes me alive; I don’t need to receive oxygen.’ The implanted word of God and the external word of God are so united that we live by having it already implanted and we live by receiving it. It is at work in us, as Paul says. And the work it does in us is it makes us want to receive it. Receiving the external word replenishes the power of the implanted word, and the implanted word creates the hunger to receive the external word. And then to make us very serious*

*about this process, James adds at the end of verse 21 'which is able to save your souls.' What saves our souls? The implanted word, which we receive."*

The entire Christian experience is propelled by the Spirit of God using the Gospel of God in the people of God. We need the Gospel like we need oxygen.

So, verses 19-21 are dedicated to the idea of accepting the Word of God. The portion of Scripture we'll examine is concerned with applying the Word of God. So, let's now turn to verse 22, but before we do, I'd like to provide you with a quote.

65 years ago, A.W. Tozer wrote some scathing words concerning the church in his day: *"There is an evil which I have seen under the sun.... It is the glaring disparity between theology and practice among professing Christians. So wide is the gulf that separates theory from practice in the church that an inquiring stranger who chances upon both would scarcely dream that there was any relation between them. An intelligent observer of our human scene who heard the Sunday morning sermon and later watched the Sunday afternoon conduct of those who had heard it would conclude that he had been examining two distinct and contrary religions.... It appears that too many Christians want to enjoy the thrill of feeling right but are not willing to endure the inconveniences of being right."*

I wonder what he would say in our day, as not much has changed. There is still a great disparity between hearing and knowing the word of God or theology and applying that which has been learned. Verses 19-21 dealt with our problem of not listening to the word, these verses deal with our tendency to *only* listen to the word.

*"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."*

In other words, don't just show up, nod your head, say amen when necessary, or stay silent as some do, and think that you're blessed. No, the Bible would say that you may be deceived. The blessing comes with obedience, as we'll examine later on in this text. But the call is actually to obey the word. Don't just hear about giving your offering consistently to your local church, actually do it. Don't just hear about the importance of getting into the community and doing life with others, but when there is a call to be a part of a group because we have leaders who want to welcome you in, actually join a group. Don't just affirm that Christians are called to evangelize, but actually preach the gospel. Don't just hear the biblical description of sexual purity, actually, practice it. Don't just hear week after week about the dangers of idolatry and our need to worship the One true triune God, actually destroy the idols in your life. Don't just nod your head to the fact that gluttony and overeating are sinful, actually honor God with the sustenance

that you consume. Don't just read about the dangers of anger and bitterness, actually, practice forgiveness and bearing with one another.

This is what James is instructing his audience. This is the Christian experience, but sadly it's not the experience of all who claim to be Christians. I find what David Platt has to say about this subject helpful:

*"We have created a Christianity that stops at saying Jesus loves you just the way you are and Jesus loves you no matter what you do. Certainly, there's glorious truth to this when it comes to Jesus saving us from our sin, no matter how horrible they are, and Jesus loving us when we have nothing in us to deserve such love. But at the same time, Jesus says things like, 'You are My friends if you do what I command you' (John 15:14). And 'If anyone loves me, he will keep My word' (John 14:23)."*

And just to provide another Scriptural text concerning this issue, let's examine *John's first letter*:

*"And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked."-1 John 2:3-6*

John says we can claim to be Christians and check the boxes of church attendance and bible studies, but if our lives are not consistent with his teachings, then we are liars. This is what James means here in verse 22 when he states that this hearer only is deceived. To quote Platt again,

*You are blind to your true spiritual condition if you claim to have heard and received and accepted this Word, yet you fail to act on it.*

Unfortunately, nominalism is a huge problem in the American visible church. There's more than a little self-deceived member of churches across the country who will hear the terrifying words from Jesus, "Depart from me, I never knew you." You can liken it to auditing a class in college or grad school. When you audit a class, there's usually not the same degree of commitment. You may do the homework, but only if it's convenient. You may show up in class, but only if nothing else is more appealing that day and you don't want to sleep in. You try to get some of the benefits without any significant sacrifice, buy-in, accountability, or investment. But you don't get any credit for auditing Christianity. Just because you listen to good gospel-centered sermons, attend bible studies, and can hold your own in a theological discussion, does not mean you are born

again. As a matter of fact, this can all contribute to your deception. This is why James is saying the hearer is deceived if he is not practicing. The non-hearer is not deceived, they just openly reject the one true God. Unfortunately, I believe these last few years have exposed that not as many people are doers of the word who claim to be.

I like what Kent Hughes has to say:

*“The mirror ministry of God’s Word, which is rooted in showing us what we are, is essential. But there is also a danger here, because we can be deluded into thinking we have accomplished all God requires by hearing his Word. It is natural to imagine that the accumulation of Biblical knowledge is not just the main thing, but the only thing. Being the kind of person who thrills to open a book, who gets a sensual thrill from turning the pages and enjoys the esoteric language of theology, it is so easy to imagine that by reading books on spiritual subjects’ great virtue will course through my soul—like the primitives who thought they could imbibe others’ powers by drinking their blood.”*

This should remind you of what Jesus states in the Sermon on the Mount:

*“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”-Matthew 7:24-27*

Jesus uses the house metaphor, and James uses a mirror metaphor.

*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. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.*

Now mirrors in the ancient world were a bit different. They were made of copper and bronze and had to be polished, and the reflection was still dim. And yet, these ancient mirrors were still useful mechanisms in which one was able to notice the imperfections in their appearance and address them. Often times I’ll tell Neriah to look at herself in the mirror to remove the several remnants of food all over her face and hands. She usually comes out of the restroom even dirtier than she was before she went in, if that was possible. What’s the point of looking at the mirror and seeing the issues on your face if you’re going to leave without making an adjustment? This is the point that James is making here. Obviously, the mirror represents the word of God, showing us the truth

about ourselves. We may not always like what we see, but in seeing, there is a chance to repent and do what is found in verse 21, and that is *put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness*.

What a waste it is to hear the inspired Word of God, both through reading and preaching and yet allow no change to take place in your life. Is your hearing and studying of the Word doing you any good? Have you seen progress and the work of the Word sanctifying you? If the Word of God is not changing you, there should definitely be a pause for concern. By contrast, James describes the true believer,

*“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.”*

So, remember, we can either deceive ourselves by not being doers of the word, or we can receive a blessing by becoming doers of the word. What is this *blessing* that James is referring to? This is not a financial blessing, as the word literally means happy. We experience true satisfaction and profound happiness when we obey the word of God. Even if it costs us something or we have to endure suffering, for the Christian, there is nothing truly more satisfying than knowing you are in the will of God.

He also gives us a definition of blessing here with this law language. Let's delve into that now. James refers to the law as *perfect*. Paul would say something similar about the law in Romans 7. We shouldn't hesitate to believe and acknowledge the perfection of the law because God is perfect.

Daniel Doriani states, *“The law reflects His perfect character. Why do we not murder? Because God gives life. Why do we not commit adultery? Because God is faithful. Why do we not steal? Because God is generous. Why do we not lie? Because God is truth and keeps His promises.”*

The law is perfect because God is perfect. This law that James is referring to is not simply the Old Testament law but rather the law of Christ. Now, this does indeed include laws we find in the Old Testament, as we see in chapter 2, verses 8-11. But these commandments must be seen in the light of Jesus' fulfillment of the Old Testament law. So, while this is still a “law”, it is absolutely liberating because, in accordance with Jeremiah's new covenant prophecy found in 31:31-34, this law has been written on the heart as opposed to on tablets of stone. I can say much more, but the overarching point I'm trying to make here is that James is referring to the law of Christ as opposed to the law of Moses.

And this is vitally important to understand, as the gospel teaches us that we are not saved by our ability to keep the law.

*James would say in 2:10, "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it."*

And yet, the perfection of the law is the requirement to stand before God justified. This is why the gospel is good news. Jesus fulfilled the law on our behalf, and now he offers us his own righteousness. And we now obey not to earn the favor of God but rather as an act of worship and gratitude.

Now getting back to this whole "law of liberty," a term that James uses and how it defines our blessing. Many would see this as oxymoronic. We're not accustomed to thinking of the law in terms of liberty. We tend to think of laws as restricting our freedom, right? If there is a law that says I can't drive above 45, I am not free to drive above that without consequences. So, when we hear the term "law," we don't typically think of freedom or liberty. But Sam Allberry points out something significant concerning this text,

*"Western society tends to think of freedom purely in terms of the absence of restriction. The idea is that if we remove all constraints, we end up with freedom. So the imposition of rules and boundaries is a restriction of freedom, by definition. But in the Bible, real freedom is not the absence of any and every constraint, but rather, the presence of the right kind of constraint. Removing a fish from water does not give it more freedom, but less. It is designed to live in the water, not apart from it. Freedom from water is a removal of constraint, but it is also (for a fish) a complete misunderstanding of what freedom really is. Our own true freedom is only found when we are in the environment which we were designed to flourish in. And that is obedience to God's word. As we live by God's word, we experience true life. Only then can we be said to be properly free. God made us. As we follow his word and live in his ways, our lives end up going along the grain of how he has designed us to live. His word corresponds exactly to our nature."*

Yes, of course, every law does restrict in some sense. It limits our freedom. But it also gives freedom. What do I mean? The law against bearing false witness, as we've seen, forbids our kids from saying whatever they want to say when their parents ask them to tell them the truth about something. But when our children tell the truth, it results in parents being able to trust them. That trust leads to more freedom. If the child asks if he or she can do this or that and come home by dinner, the parent is more inclined to say yes. Why? Because the parent is liberated to trust them, and they are, in turn, liberated from the constraints of suspicion, constant check-ins, and other limitations.



When God's law tells us not to steal, it restricts what we can take, but it ensures that we are not locked up and imprisoned, thereby losing our freedom. It frees our conscience as well. When the city tells us not to speed, then it restricts how fast we can drive, but it ensures that we can maintain our freedom to drive by not having our license confiscated. So, the law leads to freedom.

I would like to close with a memorable illustration drawn from Chuck Swindoll's book, *Improving Your Serve*:

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

I leave, and you stay. Months pass. A flow of letters are mailed from Europe and 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 and weeds have grown up high. A few windows along the street are broken. I walk into the receptionist's room, and she is doing her nails, chewing gum, and listening to her favorite disco station. I look around and notice the wastebaskets are overflowing, the carpet hasn't been vacuumed for weeks, and nobody seems concerned that the owner has returned. I ask about your whereabouts, and someone in the crowded lounge area points down the hall and yells, 'I think he's down there.' Disturbed, I move in that direction and bump into you as you are 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, man?'

'What do ya' 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 have had letter study

every Friday night since you left. We have even divided all the personnel into small groups and discussed many of the things you wrote. Some of those things were really interesting. You'll be pleased to know that a few of us have actually committed to memory some of your sentences and paragraphs. One or two memorized an entire letter or two! Great stuff in those letters!'

‘Okay, okay—you got my letters, you studied them and meditated on them, discussed and even memorized them. BUT WHAT DID YOU DO ABOUT THEM?’

‘Do? Uh—we didn’t do anything about them.’”

Let this not be the case in this local church.

Let’s pray.