

## **JAMES 1:22-25**

### **MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL...**

“Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 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. 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.”<sup>1</sup>

**T**he Word of God has been likened to a mirror for the soul. The idea likely finds its origin in our text. Whether read or whether heard through sermons delivered by men of God, the Word of God exposes the true person who lurks inside. The tragedy of this analogy is the human condition itself, for just as the reflection we see each morning in the mirror has little impact on the course of our day, so we receive the Word, rush into the busyness of our lives, and forget what was reflected back to us.

This is not a new condition that afflicts only those living in this modern age. Failure to permit the Word to have its perfect work has plagued Christians since the earliest days of the Faith. In fact, one of the earliest letters to be included in the canon of the New Testament addressed this very concern. Join me in exploring James’ warning to pause whenever the Word is presented, permitting it to work effectively on the soul.

**THE ADMONITION** — “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” Hearing the Word without doing the Word is a form of self-deception. Within our churches are a disturbing number of people who treat the Faith as passive. They give assent to the Good News of Christ’s death and resurrection and assume all is well. However, the Word presents a vigorous Faith in which the believer is transformed by the Spirit of God dwelling within; the child of God cannot remain unchanged. Let me emphasise this truth: if your faith has not changed you, you need to change your Faith.

The Word of God is demanding. The Gospel anticipates a response. This is the reason I conclude almost every message with an appeal. There are no demands placed on you when you read literature, or science, or history. You do not need to take any action if you read a recipe. Merely acquiring knowledge does not demand that you act. However, God’s Word, whether delivered as a sermon or whether read, demands action. The message of Christ the Lord is “repent” [MARK 1:15], “come to Me” [MATTHEW 11:28], and “believe.” The Gospel of Christ demands belief, and belief anticipates transformation as the one believing is changed into the likeness of the Risen Son of God.

Our churches are filled with people who know the language; these self-deluded individuals know the words but they don’t know the melody. They are received into membership much as though they were joining a service club. They tolerate the occasional foray into the auditorium of the church where they endure some religious talk so long as it does not demand anything of them, and then they return to the “real world” to conduct their lives as they wish. The issue of living as they want is so vital to them that they will seize control of the church in order to ensure that they are not disturbed.

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

What you profess to believe is of no value if do not possess the Faith of Christ the Lord. How you live reveals your faith; all else is mere talk. If you possess the life God promises, it will be revealed through the way you live. The presence of Christ the Lord in one's life cannot be hidden. Likely you have heard someone say at one time, "Your life is too loud for me to hear what you are saying?" More people are turned away from considering the claims of Christ by the godless and phoney lifestyle of professed Christians than are ever deterred by stern demands for righteousness. However, Christians continue to look for a way to make the demands of the Gospel palatable.

Paul identified the Corinthian Christians as his "letter of recommendation, written on our hearts to be known and read by all." He continued by stating that these Christians were "a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the Living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" [2 CORINTHIANS 3:2, 3]. The world does not much care what we say, but it is mightily impressed by how we live. We need to remember that the only Bible many people will ever read is our lives. Someone has expressed this truth in poetic form.

The Gospel is written a chapter a day  
By deeds that you do and by words that you say.  
Men read what you say, whether faithless or true.  
Say, what is the Gospel according to you?

Dr. McGee is undoubtedly correct when he says we could use a new version of the Bible. He recommends a translation that is prepared by you. It is to be known as the Doers Version,<sup>2</sup> for each Christian is called to be "doers of the Word."

The Word of God is not calling outsiders to do what is written in the Word, rather James pointedly addresses Christians. Those coming into the Faith almost always ask, "What must I do to be a Christian?" It is wrong to ask what you can do; you cannot do anything in order to be saved. Having believed that Christ Jesus died because of your sin and raised for your justification, you are born from above and into the Family of God. Then, having been born again, you are appointed to do the will of Christ. Your active faith will grow out of the inner desire to be what God has created you to be.

The tragedy of being a mere hearer is that the individual is deluded. Moreover, it is delusion of the basest sort, for it is self-deception. The individual who is deceived is blinded to the reality of his or her own religious condition. Such people are mistaken as to their relationship to God. They are living in a fool's paradise of their own making. In the context of contemporary Christendom, the self-deceived are those individuals who attend church, perhaps even give some time to one "ministry" or another, but their false reasoning has led them to conclude that they have done all that is necessary. Hearing the Word is not the end of the path to life; doing the Word is required.

In other words, James focuses attention on the need for active faith, permitting the Word to be lived out through daily life. It is not that one fails to read the Bible for a period of time each day or even that the individual fails to attend the preaching of the Word. Rather James is confronting us with the sin that arises from being in the presence of the Word but not permitting that same Word to have any impact in our lives.

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<sup>2</sup> J. Vernon McGee, **Thru the Bible Commentary: The Epistles (James)**, (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN 1991, electronic ed.) 41

The Bible is not a popular book today. It is the best selling tome year-after-year, but the least read. It is not popular because it shows us who we are. Many years ago in eastern Tennessee the story went around about a mountaineer's contact with some tourists who had camped in the hills around his area. Because the mountain folk didn't see many tourists in those days, when the tourists left, this particular mountaineer went to look around the area where they had camped. He found several things they had left behind, including a mirror. He had never seen a mirror before. He looked into it longingly and said, "I never knew my pappy had his picture took!" He was very sentimental about it, of course, and took it home. He slipped into the house, climbed up into the loft and hid the mirror. His wife saw him do that but didn't say anything. After he went out of the house, she went up to see what he had hidden. She found the mirror, and when she looked into it, she said, "So that's the old hag he's been running around with!" Something like that happens when people read the Word of God; they see what is written and think it is a picture of someone else.

Whenever I preach, I can almost watch listeners mentally punching their neighbours as if to say, "You had better listen!" However, the Word of God is revealing to each of us what we are, and this becomes even clearer in the light of the glory of God. If we will avoid deceiving ourselves, we must permit the Word to find residence in our lives, accepting what is written as though it were written to us and applying what we discover therein.

Let me make one final observation before considering the explanation of what James has written. He began this section of the letter by urging readers to "receive with meekness the implanted Word, which is able to save [y]our souls" [JAMES 1:21]. Do not imagine that I am saying that hearing the Word is unimportant; James has made it clear that hearing is vital by using "but" as he transitions from one verse to the next. If we hear without acting on what is heard, what was preached or what we have read is of no value.

It is not enough simply to know Scripture; knowledge alone is useless. It is even worse than useless, for the person who thinks that knowing the Bible makes one godly is self-deceived. Instead, it is *obeying* the teaching of the Word that makes one godly. What is the source of teaching for James? I suggest that the words of his half-brother, Jesus, were ringing in James' ears as he penned this portion of his letter. Jesus said, "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" [MATTHEW 7:24-26].

This means that one can tell truly godly people by their lifestyle. If people are gossips or filled with bitterness and malice, all of their religious practices are worthless. They really do not love God in their hearts. If people are penurious or niggardly, withholding help from those in need about them, they are saying quite eloquently by their actions that they know nothing of God who is generous. James will shortly teach us that the type of piety which God looks for cares for the vulnerable, and it is pure—it is not "stained by the world," which means that it is not seeking security or advancement in terms of what is valued by people in the world. Because it does not love the world, there is no need to hold on to money. Therefore such people can be generous and give freely.

To accept the Word is to do the Word; we cannot segregate the two concepts. We receive the Word by doing what the Word commands is a neglected truth in this day. James is adamant that we receive the word by doing it. “Hearing” the word is absolutely essential; but if hearing does not lead to doing, if study does not result in obedience, if attendance at the worship service does not lead to a righteous life—then the Word of God has been mistreated and we are deceiving ourselves about the reality of our relationship to God. Obedience is not optional for the Christian; it is essential. The Master said, “Blessed ... are those who hear the word of God and keep it” [LUKE 11:28].

**THE EXPLANATION** — “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. 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.”

James identifies two classes of people—“hearers of the Word,” and “doers of the Word.” Those who are hearers are deceived and those who are doers are blessed. James contrasts the two situations with this analogy. The man looking in a mirror observes, goes away and forgets. The doer of the Word looks into the Word, perseveres in the Word and acts on what is discovered in the Word. The contrast is not between a hasty glance, for both are equally serious in gazing. It is what happens after looking that makes the difference in whether the individual is exposed as self-deceived or blessed.

Let me clarify one issue. Some people, reading this passage, have assumed that the one looking in a mirror glances and turns away without really seeing what is reflected. Perhaps this is suggested by the fact that James specifically says that a male [*anér*] looks into the mirror. Everyone knows that men are less particular about how they appear than are those of the distaff side of life. However, James’ concern is not that the individual looking in the mirror glances at the reflection and rushes away; he is making the point that what is seen has no real impact on the course of the individual’s life.

Focus for a moment on the disquieting truth that hearers only are self-deceived. We need to ask what the pattern of deception is. The English Standard Version gives a proper understanding of the hearer only. “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.” The individual under scrutiny hears the Word, but fails to do the Word, thus treating it as though it was worthless. This individual deceives himself.

More particularly, James pictures a man who looks into a mirror and “sees the face he was born with” [literal meaning of James words]. The ordinariness of what he sees makes no impression on his day; he has no need to think further about his appearance; his reflection is useless in the conduct of the daily business of life. In the same way, the individual who hears the Word of God but fails to do what it says treats that divine Word as though it were useless. It does not direct his life. So far as he is concerned, that Word is background noise that does not inform his decisions.

James is forcefully stating that salvation is in question when the Word has no impact in one’s life. If we treat the doctrines of the Word as though they were optional, we are saying that the reign of Christ the Lord is similarly optional. Jesus is either Master of life, or He is not Saviour; we cannot separate His rule from His salvation.

It should be clear that James believes the Word of God, unlike a useless reflection in a mirror, is to be taken into our daily decisions and actions. James obviously believed that the Word of God is clear and understandable, providing an accurate reflection that demands that we who hear it take action. The Word of God is relevant to our daily lives. Those who are hearers only have tacitly concluded that the Word of God is useless. Underscore in your mind that there is no middle ground! Either the Word is relevant and applicable to our lives, or it is useless. If we treat it as though it was useless, we are self-identified (and self-deluded) as those who are hearers only.

It is appropriate to ask how one would be a hearer only today. George Stulac suggests that we become hearers only in four ways: through relativism, through superstition, through approaching the Bible emotionally, and through treating it theoretically.<sup>3</sup> Those who are relativistic in their treatment of the Word will usually concede that it is the Word of God, and then make concessions to culture to avoid doing what the Word teaches. They may say that what is taught is fine for others, but it won't work for them. These individuals have concluded that culture transcends Christ.

Those who are superstitious treat the Word as though it were magical. They are akin to Israel, who when facing the Philistines brought the Ark of the Covenant into the camp saying, "It will save us" [see **1 SAMUEL 4:3**]. Such superstition reflects the attitude of those who worshipped the snake on a pole [**2 KINGS 18:4**]. God's people are prone to superstition, as evidenced by the rebuke Jeremiah delivered to the people of his day who said they would be protected because of the presence of the Temple of the Lord [**JEREMIAH 7:4**]. Those who trust in a beloved church building, or a denominational affiliation, or the performance of some particular duties, are no less superstitious than those among the people of God who tacitly hold that reading the Word is sufficient to deliver them from judgement. Dear people, I care not how many prayers you say, nor how frequently you read the Bible, nor even how often you attend the preaching of the Word, if you are unchanged by what you read and hear, you are lost. If you are given to gossip, to slanderous accusations, to cheating and lying, your Bible reading has no value.

The Word of God is certainly intended to affect our emotions. As we hear the message of life declared, it is normal to feel joy at the knowledge of God's goodness and mercy. This is truer still when we discover that He has included us. In the same vein, we should feel sorrow in the knowledge that people we know are lost and in danger of eternal judgement. However, approaching the Word of God and the worship of Christ solely for emotional satisfaction exposes us as people who are hearers only.

Finally, James repudiates the merely theoretical approach to the Word of God. Such individuals see the Word as simply supplying material for a philosophical or theological debate. Such individuals may be doctrinally correct, but suffer from a paucity of biblical godliness. Those who are hearers only may have a reputation for holding proper theology, while leaving behind a trail of divisiveness and damaged relationships.

This is in contrast to doers of the Word, who are blessed. We must assume that James heard Jesus address this issue on more than one occasion. For instance, Jesus is quoted in **LUKE 6:46** asking a question that really cannot be answered. However, that the question is even asked should give pause to those who are hearers only. Jesus asked, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?"

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<sup>3</sup> George M. Stulac, **The IVP New Testament Commentary: James**, (InterVarsity, Downers Grove, IL 1993) Logos electronic edition

As He drew the Sermon on the Mount to a conclusion, the Master warned, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’” [MATTHEW 7:21-23].

Doers of the Word adopt a practical approach to the Word of God. They are not concerned about all the nuances they might be able to tease out of the Word, nor are they particularly eager to argue over the Word; they want to apply the Word. They long to know the will of God and to please Him through doing all that He commands. Consequently, they are blessed; and the blessing they receive is doing what God has commanded. Voluntarily doing the will of God is the secret to true happiness. Joy comes from obedience to the will of God. James says that their activity may be described through four steps: looking into the perfect law, persevering in the Word, not forgetting the Word and acting on what they have discovered through their time with God.

Doers of the Word look into the Word. The word James used speaks of stooping or bending over something to study it carefully. It is the same word that is used to describe the longing of the angels to learn of God’s salvation [see 1 PETER 1:12]. Doers of the Word study the Word because they want to understand the will of God, especially as it applies to their own lives. Doers of the Word persevere in the Word; they continue looking because they realise that the Word reveals the inexhaustible glory of the mind of the Master. Adding emphasis to what he has said to this point, James strengthens the description of the doers by stating that they are not forgetful. Finally, he brings to fullness the description of their character by stating that they apply what they have discovered; they are busy acting on what they have discovered in the Word.

Take note of a vital truth: doers of the Word are blessed in the doing! The blessing is the application of the Perfect Law of Liberty. Doers of the Word discover freedom through obedience to the Word. Driving on a freeway, you notice that it is loaded with traffic, and it is also loaded with laws. If you want to have freedom to drive down that freeway, you had better obey the laws. There is liberty in Christ, and it is the only true freedom. However, you can be sure that if you are in Christ, you are going to obey Him—and His laws are not hard; they are not rigorous. Because you are a child of God, your freedom does not entitle you to break the Ten Commandments. Those laws are for the weak, for the natural man. Laws are for lawbreakers—what to do, where to go, and how, with a punishment prescribed for those who break them. Honest citizens do not need the law. I do not know one-half of the laws of this province in which I live, but every shyster lawyer knows them, because he is seeking loopholes to break those laws.<sup>4</sup>

**THE APPLICATION** — The message is a call to examine our lives, ensuring that we are doers of the Word. If you are a child of God, you are a doer. If you are merely religious, you are likely a hearer only. The Word of God seeks to encourage growth in righteousness through doing the will of God. As a child of God, you will do what God commands in any case, but the Word will encourage you to stretch yourself to accomplish even more than you have been doing. Time is short before the Lord’s return, and the brief moment we have now requires diligence to fulfil the will of the Master.

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<sup>4</sup> See McGee, op. cit.

Chuck Swindoll, in an excellent series of messages entitled, “Improving Your Serve,” writes of the transformation that should be observed in the life of a believer. Master of Illustration that he is, Swindoll writes as only he can write, presenting a powerful commentary with humour.

“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 in 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 direction 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 favourite 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.”<sup>5</sup>

James says we have a choice—we can deceive ourselves, or we can bless ourselves. We deceive ourselves if we only read the Word. “I read the Bible for fifteen minutes this morning!” I announce proudly. “I read three chapters today,” I exult. “When I read the Bible this morning, I really understood what it said.” “Very good,” James would say, “but are your relationships different because of what you read? Are you living as you have always lived? Are living by the standards of the world? Or are you living according to the will of God?” He could go on for a long time. However, if we are doers of the Word, seeking to be blessed through living as God desires, we will make every effort to discover the will of God each day and then do what we discover. This is not something that we do once and then are finished; it is the work of a lifetime.

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<sup>5</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, **Improving Your Serve** (Word, Waco, TX 1983) 170-171

I long for the people of God to be blessed, and for the blessing of God to be obvious to all who know them. I am not seeking wealth or ease of life for you who are under my spiritual charge, but I am seeking joy in the Holy Spirit. I am seeking power in our witness. I am seeking the glory of God among His people as we meet and as we seek His face. I am seeking the opportunity for us to make a difference in the world.

According to what James' has already said in his letter, we are doers of the Word if we are joyful in the face of adversity. If you are striving toward maturity, making every effort to excel in your Christian life, you are a doer of the Word. When every avenue seems blocked and you cannot see where to turn next, you will ask for wisdom, if you are a doer of the Word. When you are steadfast under trial, you demonstrate that you are a doer of the Word. As you master your body—becoming quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger, you will be known as a doer of the Word. In a special sense, as you make every effort to know the will of God—reading His Word, participating in the study of the Word and listening to the message of life as it is preached—you are becoming a doer of the Word.

However, the danger for us, as was true of those to whom James wrote so many years past, is that we will be tempted to simply acquire some knowledge, or that we will begin to be co-opted by the culture in which we are immersed. The danger is always present for the people of God that they will prove to be hearers only, and never experience the blessing God intends for His people.

I do want to speak plainly. There are many churches in this town and in the communities surrounding us. Each endeavours to entice a larger portion of the Christian community to consider what they have to offer. Some seek to build a large church, some seek a particular class of folk, some seek to preserve a particular doctrinal point of view; I can only hope that all endeavour to declare the truth of the Word. Speaking candidly as pastor of this congregation, if you are seeking ease of life, I hope that I so preach that you will be uncomfortable each time we open the Word. If you are seeking affirmation that you are a good person, I will point you to God who is good; and in the light of His goodness, you will abhor your efforts as filthy rags and you will often feel miserable. If ease of life is what you seek, go elsewhere, and may you find what you are seeking.

However, if you are willing to endure hardship and opposition, if you are willing to experience animosity from the culture in which we now live, if you seek the smile of Heaven and the glory of God, then there is a place for you here. Otherwise, go where you will be comfortable and where you will have no conflict from those who seek the approval of the world. This is not the place for you.

To all who are willing to honour the Saviour, who are willing to grow in godliness and to stand steadfast in the Faith, there is a place for you here. We do not seek perfect people, but we seek people willing to be perfected in grace. We invite those who wish to walk with the Saviour to join us, taking your stand on the inerrant Word of God together with those who have gone before. Here is a place to stand.

You cannot hope to stand if you have no life within. The life of which I speak is the life offered in Christ Jesus the Lord. Paul testifies, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." That passage of the Word concludes with this invitation, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13]. Amen.