

BROOKLAND BAPTIST CHURCH
Bible Study
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Lecture XII

Wednesday, April 19th, 2023

We began this section on listening and doing. We said that we need to be slow to speak but quick to listen. We also talked about the dangers of anger and places that it can erupt when anger is not controlled. We come now to that famous part of Chapter 1; ***“Do not merely listen to the word but do what it says.”*** James would have the believer to understand in this section that simply reading the Word of God means nothing if we are not willing to put into practice what it says.

James 1:22 – *“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” (NIV)*

Do what it says.

The Word is the gospel taught by Jesus and proclaimed by his followers. Simply reading, even studying, God’s Word does not profit us if we don’t do what it says. We learn God’s Word not just to know it, but also to do it. Here James is letting us know that we are not to engage in passive listening, but rather in an active attentiveness that leads to action.

James 1:23-24 – *“Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.” (NIV)*

These and the following verses show different ways of handling God’s Word. Some people take a casual look at God’s Word without letting it affect their lives, like the person who looks so quickly into a mirror that flaws go undetected, and nothing is changed. They listen but don’t act. The other approach is the intent look, the deep and continued study of God’s Word that allows a person to see flaws and change his or her life in line with God’s standards.

James makes use of two important verbs to drive home this point of looking and forgetting. The verbs **looking** and **forgets** picture something that naturally or repeatedly occurs. Goes away and at once he is gone and forgets. In like manner it would be silly to leave dirt on your face or your hair in a mess after seeing yourself in a mirror. It is just as silly to look into God’s Word and make no changes in your life. Whether we read God’s Word for ourselves or hear it read, our listening must

have an attitude of seriousness and submission that will lead to obedience.

BARRIERS TO LISTENING

Certain approaches or attitudes almost ensure that we will not be listening carefully to God's Word:

- **Some are able to read God's Word**, but don't, or won't.
- **Some rely on an outdated translation of Scripture** that is difficult to understand.
- **Some allow so many distractions** that they cannot possibly listen.
- **Some are not accountable to anyone** for their obedience to God's Word.
- **Some have become insensitive to their need** for spiritual input.

James 1:25 - *"But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it--he will be blessed in what he does."* (NIV)

This man looks with serious attention and then makes God's law his chosen life-style. He studies with rapt attention not only once, but continuously; as a result, he remembers God's Word and does what it says. The mirror of God's Word has shown his flaws, so he can correct them. The law gives freedom because it is only in obeying God's law that true freedom can be found compare **John 8:31-32**. Obeying our emotions and giving in to all our desires is true slavery. But in accepting God's will, we are truly free to be what God created us to be. Believers respond to God because they want to, not because they have to. We are free to obey. Therefore, as believers we are free to live as God created us to live. Of course, this does not mean that we are free to do as we please **1 Peter 2:16** — we are now free to obey God.

Consider why the one who obeys God's Word is blessed. The person is blessed because:

- **He looks intently** at God's Word.
- **He continues** to do this.
- **He does not forget** what he has heard.
- **He acts on it**, letting it make a difference in his life.
- **He then reaps the benefits** of having done what God required.

James 1:26 – *"If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless."* (NIV)

Here James introduces two major themes that he will discuss at length later.

Knowing how to speak well — as a great teacher would — is not nearly as important as having control of our speech: knowing what to say and where and when to say it. If our faith only makes us consider ourselves religious, then it's not worth much. If we valued our faith, there would be evidence in our actions. James is repeating the direction given in **1:19**, to be “**slow to speak**,” but this time with an equestrian twist. The way that others will know whether or not our faith is real is by what we choose to talk about and the way we speak.

How, then, do we keep a tight rein on our tongue?

When we listen to God's Word without taking action, even our outward religious practices are worthless without obedience. And we cannot be obedient if we cannot control our mouth. James does not specify how the tongue offends, but we can imagine a series of ways that our tongue dishonors God — gossip, angry outbursts, harsh criticism, complaining, judging. When we let our tongue wag that way, our spiritual pronouncements, and practices become worthless.

Our verbal actions speak louder than our religious rituals.

When both prove to be false, they merit the title of worthless that James gives them. Pretending to be religious and convincing ourselves that we are - is not only deceptive to others, it is also a deadly self-deception. Conversion is meaningless unless it leads to a changed life. A changed life goes nowhere unless it serves others.

James 1:27 – “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” (NIV)

James now gets to the heart of the matter when he explains what it really means to practice religion that is acceptable to God and yet serves humanity. First, he says that it is alright to have certain daily rituals such as prayer and meditation. But if you are still not obeying the Word of God it is useless. Church services are no substitute for our service to God. In other words, telling ourselves that God is not aware of our real attitude towards Him, and his Word is, as James keeps reminding us, self-deception. It contrasts with mere acts of worship that are commonly called “**religion**.” In fact, the point becomes clear that the more obviously “**religious**” a behavior is, the more easily it becomes meaningless.

Pure and faultless religion is not perfect observance of rules and observances; instead, it is a spirit that pervades our hearts and lives. (**Leviticus 19:18; Isaiah 1:16-17**) Like Jesus, James explains religion in terms of a vital inner faith that acts itself out in daily life. Our conduct must be in keeping

with our faith. (**1 Corinthians 5:8**)

James further illustrates that real religion will manifest itself in acts of kindness towards the most venerable orphans and widows. This is an illustration of how our Christian conduct should look. Orphans and widows are often mentioned in the concerns of the early church because these were the most obviously “**poor**” in first-century Israel.

The widows, because they had no access to inheritances in Jewish circles, were very much on the outskirts of society. This is why Paul had to develop an entire order concerning widows in his own churches, as in 1 Timothy, chapter 5. The widows could not get jobs, and their inheritances went to their oldest sons. It was expected that the widows would be taken care of by their own families, and so the Jews left them with very little economic support. Unless a family member was willing to care for them, they were reduced to begging, selling themselves as slaves, or starving. By caring for these powerless people, the church puts God’s Word into practice. When we give with no hope of receiving in return, we show what it means to serve others.

Even today, the presence of widows and orphans in our communities and cities makes this directive of James very contemporary. To this group we can also add those who have become de facto widows and orphans through the death of families in divorce. These people have complicated lives. The needs always threaten to overwhelm our human resources. Looking after hurting people is stressful work. Yet we are called to be involved. James balances the command to be concerned about others with the command to be concerned about our own life.

How can believers keep themselves unstained by the world? This is a picture of how our Christian character should look. To keep ourselves from being polluted by the world, we need to commit ourselves to Christ’s ethical and moral system, not the world’s. We are not to adapt to the world’s value system based on money, power, and pleasure. True faith means nothing if we are contaminated with such values.

Further the Apostles Paul tells us how in **Romans 12:2**, Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world. When believers offer their entire self to God, a change will happen in their relation to the world. Christians are called to a different life-style than what the world offers with its behavior and customs, which are usually selfish and often corrupting. (**Galatians 1:4; 1 Peter 1:14**) Christians are to live as citizens of a future world. There will be pressure to conform, to continue living according to the script written by the world, but believers are forbidden to give in to that pressure.

Book of James – Chapter 2

James Chapter 2 - DO NOT FAVOR THE RICH

In the last part (section) of **chapter 1, verses 1:19–27**, James encourages us (believers) to put our beliefs into practice. Now, in **chapter 2**, James begins by sharing some practical lessons about favoritism:

- We are not to show favoritism.
- Such discrimination violates God's truth.

James is persuasive. James wants his readers to wake up and live right. He wants our faith to work its way into all our relationships.

As the Christian faith outgrew its Jewish roots, it was in danger of perpetuating certain customs that might have seemed beneficial but were in fact deadly. In the existing synagogues, it was the tradition to give places of honor to those who had earned them in some way. Illustration: this practice has been continued in our modern churches where respect is given to seasoned pastors or respected leaders. What may have originally started out of respect for the wisdom of leaders eventually became a system of status and power within local synagogues. James and others realized what a profoundly destructive effect this kind of elitism would have on the gospel. Favoritism brings bondage.

James actually almost takes welcoming strangers for granted.

He is urging us to be alert about the way that we welcome strangers into the church. He does not want the warmth or honor of our welcome to be determined by the status or apparent wealth of the visitor. It is showing favoritism based on social standing that James specifically condemns. He makes it a cause for questioning the reality of a person's faith.

James 2:1 (NIV) - My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.

The readers of this epistle were members of the church and his dear brothers in the Christian faith. James is addressing men and women because what he is explaining is a family issue. Among

believers in Christ there exists a common accountability to God's Word. Whenever we remind one another of something Jesus taught, it must be done in such a way that we remember we are also required to obey. Biblical truth applies to all of us. By saying "*my brothers*," James emphasizes the togetherness of real obedience to Christ.

As believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. James appeals to a single fact that binds these people together — they are all believers. His reference is not to common human values or general goodwill, but rather to the strongest bond that believers claim. The family relationship he is describing is limited to those who believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

Because of their shared position as believers, James's readers were to follow the instructions he was about to give them. At times all of us need to be held accountable to our claims. If we want to be called Christians, believers in Christ, then our life needs to display the effects of that belief. There may be times when we must act with no other reason than obedience to Christ. We cannot be so identified with our society that we are unable to stand against it for the sake of Christ. Believers have established a history of resisting such evils as oppression, slavery, discrimination and racism, sexism, ageism, police brutality, human trafficking, domestic violence, and voter suppression. This is a point overlooked by Evangelical Christians, who will not take a stand against the modern-day ills. Unfortunately, they are enablers.

DON'T SHOW FAVORITISM.

Another translation would be "*Stop showing favoritism*." The construction of the Greek shows that James was forbidding a practice already in progress. This phrase has also been translated, "***My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?***" (NRSV). The believers receiving this letter were already guilty of practicing discrimination. The believers apparently were judging people based only on externals — physical appearance, status, wealth, power; as a result, they were pandering to and being unduly influenced by people who represented these positions of prestige.

In general, social distinctions did not exist in the early church. Masters sat beside their slaves during worship; sometimes a slave was the leader of the assembly. But from its beginnings, the church had many poor, outcasts, and those of little class or influence. So when a rich person was converted, the church members needed to guard against making more of a fuss over him or her than they would at the conversion of another poor person.

Upon what grounds did James make this command?

⇒ **Because impartiality is an attribute of God.**

❖ (*Deuteronomy 10:17; Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11;*

❖ *Galatians 2:6; Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 3:25*)

⇒ **Impartiality was an attitude Jesus practiced.**

❖ (*Matthew 22:16; Mark 12:14; Luke 20:21*)

⇒ **Scripture had warned against favoritism.**

❖ (*Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 1:17; Psalm 82:2; Proverbs 18:5*)

James emphasized two clear points:

- 1.) **Shunning the poor** contrasts with God's attitude because He chose the poor to be rich in faith. (**2:5**)
- 2.) **Favoritism goes against God's royal law** to "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" (**2:8**)
Showing favoritism based on external considerations is inconsistent with faith in Christ, who breaks down the barriers of race, class, gender, and religion. (*Colossians 3:11*)

James's command remains important for churches today.

Often, we treat a well-dressed, impressive-looking person better than someone who looks poor. We do this because we would rather identify with successful people than with apparent failures. The irony, as James reminds us, is that the supposed winners may have gained their impressive life-style at our expense. Our churches should show no partiality with regard to people's outward appearance, wealth, or power. The law of love must rule all our attitudes toward others. Too often preferential treatment is given to the rich or powerful when offices for the church need to be filled. Too often, a church brushes aside the suggestions of its more humble or poorer members in favor of the ideas of the wealthy. Such discrimination has no place in our churches.

Does your Church show Favoritism?

Ask yourself these questions:

- How closely does our congregation reflect the socioeconomic and racial neighborhood in which we gather?
- In our church, people may not be ushered to good or bad seats, but in what other ways might we be favoring the rich or discriminating against the poor?
- Would a poor person feel welcome in our church? (Brookland Baptist)
- Would a rich person feel welcome in our church?
- In what ways do we consciously or unconsciously favor some people over others in our

church? Why do we do this?

- How can our ministry reach out to all people without any hint of discrimination?
- What can we do to be completely free from being impressed by the wealth or power of others?

James 2:2 (NIV) - Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in.

James launches into a vivid hypothetical case study. Two men were entering a meeting. We can assume that these men were both visiting, since they are described only by appearance. The meeting was either a gathering of Jewish Christians or a meeting of the Jewish synagogue. The Greek Word *sunagoge* (*meeting or assembly*) generally refers to an assembly of people meeting for various purposes. In some instances, the meeting was for legal purposes — in most instances, for worship. One man was rich, as noted by his clothing and jewelry. A ring signified upper class and power. Rings were the same kind of visible status symbols that cars function as today. The rich man here is not a Christian (1:9–11) but is a non-Christian Jew (2:6–7).

This poor man, however, was dressed in filthy rags; he was most likely a beggar. James makes it very clear that the action about to be taken, if not guarded against, will be based entirely on the appearance of these two guests. The motive or attitude of the visitors does not come into question in this case study. Neither we nor the church members can know at first glance why these two people decided to come to the meeting.

Depending on the size of a church, the arrival of a visitor can have an electric effect. Sometimes panic sets in. The rush to welcome can be overwhelming to the newcomer. But whether the greeting is reserved or enthusiastic, what is most clearly communicated is its genuineness. Individual Christians can have a significant ministry in looking for newcomers of any kind in church and making them feel welcome. The decision to follow Christ has often been made easier by a warm and honest welcome at the door of a church.

James 2:3 (NIV) - If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “*Here’s a good seat for you,*” but say to the poor man, “*You stand there*” or “*Sit on the floor by my feet,*”

The rich man was shown special attention — the Greek Word meaning “*to look with favor on*” a person. Indicated that the believers were impressed by him. He became the object of special service

and deference. The rich man was singled out and escorted to a comfortable and favored seat. The poor man on the other hand gets standing room only, or a seat on the floor. It's as if he is being told to stay apart from his "*bettors*" by allowing them the seats, while he is given neither dignity nor comfort.

The Jews had a practice of seating the most important people nearest the sacred scrolls. Other people would be seated in the back. This unhealthy practice was still carried on by some Christians. Those with the most important jobs or roles would get preferred seating. James speaks out against this. It is our relationship with Christ that gives us dignity, not our profession or possessions. The Christian answer is not reverse discrimination — treating the poor like royalty and the rich like scum. Our goal is to treat people without consideration for their status. No one is unworthy to be seated.

Once, as Jesus observed the behavior of people arriving for an important social event, he commented on the tendency to jostle for the places of honor. (**Luke 14:7–11**) His instruction was, "*But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.'*" Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests." (**Luke 14:10 NIV**) Jesus was warning against self-exaltation. Later, Jesus emphasized the danger of misreading outward evidence when he described how he appears to the world: "*For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in.*" (**Matthew 25:35 NIV**) The point is that favoritism is not just mistreating people or breaking a standard of conduct — it is, in fact, treating Jesus as though he had little value.

When we gather for worship, we ought to be conscious that even if we are familiar with everyone in the room, Christ is present. If there are two or three of us gathered in his name, he is there. (**Matthew 18:20**) When we neglect or ignore the poor or powerless, we also ignore Christ.

James 2:4 (NIV) - Have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

James expected his readers to answer "yes" to his question. He condemned their behavior because Christ had made them all one. Paul later wrote, "*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*" (**Galatians 3:28 NRSV**) These believers were ignoring that fact. They were forced to admit that they were discriminating against the poor person and becoming unjust judges with evil thoughts, making their judgments by worldly standards. As Christians they professed obedience to Christ, but their conduct defied him. **Leviticus 19:15** firmly states: "*Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.*" In addition, they broke the commandment

of Jesus, who said, “*Judge not that you be not judged.*” (*Matthew 7:1*)

Why is it wrong to judge a person by his or her economic status?

Wealth does not necessarily indicate intelligence, wise decisions, and hard work. On the other hand, it may mean only that a person had the good fortune of being born into a wealthy family. Or it can even be a sign of greed, dishonesty, and selfishness. When we honor someone just because he or she dresses well, we make appearance more important than character. Sometimes we do this because:

- **Poverty makes us uncomfortable**, and we don’t want to face our responsibilities to those who have less than we do.
- **We too want to be wealthy**, and we hope to use the rich person as a means to that end.
- **We want the rich person to join our church** and help support it financially.
- **All these motives are selfish.** They may appear nothing more than practical considerations, but James calls them evil.

Another false assumption that sometimes influences our treatment of the rich is our misunderstanding of God’s relationship to wealth. It is deceptively easy to believe riches are a sign of God’s blessing and approval. But God does not promise us earthly rewards or riches; in fact, Christ calls us to be ready to suffer for him and give up everything in order to hold on to eternal life. (*Matthew 6:19–21; 19:28–30; Luke 12:14–34; 1 Timothy 6:17–19*) We will have untold riches in eternity if we are faithful in our present life. (*Luke 6:35; John 12:23–25; Galatians 6:7–10; Titus 3:4–8*)