

## Lesson 2: Hearing and Doing the Word (1:19-27)

### Introduction

James continues his emphasis on being single-minded by addressing the conflict between *hearing* the word of God and *doing* the word of God. Many times we hear the word of God taught or preached, but we fail to implement what we learn. James notes that hearing without doing is inconsistent. One important area of life that should be changed by “doing the word” is the tongue.

### Homiletical Outline

- I. Anger and the Word of God (1:19-21)
  - a. Replace Anger with Righteousness (vv. 19-20)
  - b. Replace Wickedness with the Implanted Word (v. 21)
- II. Doing and Hearing the Word (1:22-25)
  - a. Hearing Without Doing is Deceptive (v. 22)
  - b. Example of the Man and the Mirror (vv. 23-24)
  - c. Perseverance Is Blessed (v. 25)
- III. True Religion (1:26-27)
  - a. An Unbridled Tongue is Worthless Religion (v. 26)
  - b. Pure Religion (v. 27)
    - i. Visit Orphans and Widows (v. 27a)
    - ii. Remain Unstained (v. 27b)

### Verse-by-Verse Analysis

**Verses 19-20.** The “beloved brothers” are to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger (v. 19). It is no coincidence that James lists the three commands in this order. When we are quick to hear and slow to speak, we are less likely to become angry. Those who are quick to speak and slow to hear are the ones who become angry too quickly. What is wrong with anger? It does not “produce the righteousness of God” (v. 20). The righteousness James describes is simply the way of life God requires of his people. In other words anger inhibits our ability to walk in obedience to God’s commands.

**Verse 21.** James begins verse twenty-one with “therefore,” which means that what follows should be viewed as flowing directly from what preceded the verse. Keeping with the view of the “righteousness of God,” James exhorts his readers to “put away” filthiness and rampant wickedness. The imagery here for “put away” is that of removing clothes. Given that followers of Jesus are new creations and are trying to walk

in obedience and righteousness, they should continually “take off” or “put away” anything that remains of the old life. Filthiness and wickedness have no place in the life of the true believer, and are offensive to our holy God.

As believers “put away” these offensives sins, James exhorts them to “receive with meekness the implanted word.” The power to overcome sin and walk in obedience to God is not found in willpower or determination. It is found in the power of the word of God, that which is put in us at conversion. Thus, believers are called to submit to the work of the word continually, that we might be transformed. The word will ultimately “save” us as it transforms us into the image of Christ. James views salvation in this context as a present working but, ultimately, a future event.

**Verses 22.** Having highlighted the importance of God’s word, James now gives a caveat. Hearing the word is not enough. Believers must also be “doers of the word.” It is easy to hear the word of God, but it is much more difficult to obey the word and respond with action. James says that those who hear the word but do not do it “deceive themselves.” They are deceived in that they misunderstand their true spiritual condition. It is very easy to hear the word and think that you are right with God. However, merely hearing the word without obedience indicates a spiritual problem. Failure to obey God’s word indicates a rejection of God’s authority and a resistance to God’s demands.

**Verses 23-24.** To help his readers understand the inconsistency of hearing without doing, James provides an illustration. The one who hears without doing “is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror” (v. 23). Everyone knows what it is like to look in the mirror. We see our faces every day. They should be quite familiar to us. However, the man in the illustration sees his face and “goes away and at once forgets what he was like” (v. 24). It is absurd to think that someone who sees themselves in the mirror would immediately forget what they look like, and that is the point of the illustration. When we hear the word but do not obey it, it is absurd and inconsistent. We are like the man who forgets his own face.

**Verse 25.** In contrast to the man looking into the mirror, James describes the man who looks into the “perfect law,” the law of liberty.” James most likely is describing the Old Testament law, such as the books of Moses, but more specifically as the law interpreted by and fulfilled in Christ. Notice that James calls it the “perfect” law, and the law of “liberty.” The commands of God, when obeyed, should not be viewed as constraining us or enslaving us. Rather, God’s word is liberating. It liberates us from sin effects, both immediately upon conversion, and continually through daily submission and transformation.

Again, in contrast to the man with the mirror, James tells his readers that they should look into the law and persevere, “being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts.” Notice again the importance of perseverance in the Christian life. The one who perseveres “will be blessed in his doing.” While daily obedience to God’s commands can be difficult, it is ultimately worth the struggle as we experience the blessing of God and the power of his word-brought transformation.

**Verses 26-27.** Keeping with the theme of doing and hearing, James identifies a real problem affecting at least some of the Christians to whom he writes. Apparently, there were some people promoting themselves as “religious” but acting in a manner contrary to God’s word. Specifically, James notes that if you think you are religious but do not bridle your tongue, you deceive your heart (think back to v. 22) and your religion is worthless (v. 26). In other words your speech contradicts the religion that you believe you have. You cannot claim to be a follower of Jesus who is obeying the word while simultaneously speaking ill of others or using vulgar speech. James will continue this thought in chapter three.

In contrast to the one with worthless religion, James gives a two-fold description of religion that is “pure and undefiled before God.” While religion is not limited to these two things, it certainly must include both of them. First, believers are to care for orphans and widows “in their affliction.” In first century culture orphans and widows were at a particular disadvantage because they had no one to provide for their needs. They were completely on their own. Orphans had no family to provide financially and they also had no family name from which they could draw prominence. Widows of course had no husband to provide for them, but they also could not rely on the husband’s family. Christians have the opportunity, and the requirement, to provide for those who cannot provide for themselves. Taking care of the needs of widows and orphans is a demonstration of love and it imitates God’s giving nature (1:5).

Second, true believers are to keep themselves “unstained from the world.” While they will continue to struggle with sin, believers are to work to distance themselves from worldly things and desires. Fleshly desires, immorality, and impurity have no place in the believer’s life. Having been delivered from the world through the power of God’s word, believers must work to remain “unstained” or “unpolluted” by the world.

### **Key Theological Issues**

Consistent, biblical faith

The transformative power of God’s word

### **Points of Application**

James is clear that the word of God has the power to transform our lives. However, we must not resist that power. As we “put away” evil things and “receive with meekness” the word, we will see our lives change. Our desires, thoughts, and actions will change and look more like Christ. The question is, “In what area(s) am I resisting the power of God’s word?”

All of us are guilty at one point or another of hearing the word but not doing the word. When we hear but do not do, we are being inconsistent Christians. We are basically refusing to adjust our lives to God's word. In what area(s) are you hearing God's word but not doing his word?