

A Study in James

The Tests of a Living Faith

James 1:22–27

January 18, 2013

Introduction

Last time we considered the responsibility of all believers to hear the word of God. Whenever the word of God is proclaimed to us, we are to listen attentively (swift to hear), but not be quick to speak out against it or get angry about what it says (v. 19). In this way, we will give the word of God time to sink deep into our hearts and change us. But this is only half of the equation. James also instructs us to be *doers* of the word, and not hearers only (v. 22). It is only when we are both hearing *and* doing the word that we pass the test and demonstrate that we have a living faith.

Test #2: A Living Faith and Scripture (vv. 19–27)

The second test of a living faith involves a believer's response to the Scriptures. Those who are both hearers and doers of the word will pass this test. Those who fail in this regard may need to examine themselves to see whether they indeed have a living faith. If not, they need to repent and humbly come to the Lord for salvation.

Doing the Word of God (vv. 22–25)

The counterpart to hearing the word of God is to put it into action. Remember that James is talking about a *living* faith, not a dead faith. (We'll look more at the issue of a dead faith in James 2:14–26.)

The Command to Obey (v. 22)

The command in this verse is to be doers of the word *as well as* hearers. In other words, we shouldn't be people who listen intently to the Sunday morning sermon and then fail to put those lessons into practice during the week. We are told to be people who are actively engaged in the activities prescribed in the word. The present tense of this command implies an ongoing activity. James is writing to believers, and is assuming that they are already doing the word at some level. The command is to keep on doing, and do so with greater effect.

Reasons to Obey (vv. 23–25)

We have all heard of the child who is told by his parent to do something. When the child asks, “Why?” the parent simply responds “because I said so!” While this answer does not give the child an excuse to disobey, it can leave him frustrated at times.

Contrary to the above example, James does not leave us wanting for reasons why we should obey the word of God. God is not an irrational dictator whose commands must be obeyed simply because He says so. His commands should be obeyed because there is great blessing and reward to be gained. We should not deceive ourselves, thinking we can go through life as a “hearer-only,” and still call ourselves genuine Christians. God is in the business of changing *all* true believers through the process of progressive sanctification.

The Futility of Disobedience (vv. 23–24)

James gives us an illustration to show us how foolish it is to be a hearer but not a doer of the word. He tells us to imagine a person who looks in a mirror and considers what he sees. The mirrors of the first century were not the highly polished mirrors like we have today. Mirrors in the first century were probably made of some kind of polished metal. The image would not have been perfectly clear, so you would have to stop and look intently for a moment to consider the reflected image.

But this person, after gazing into the mirror, goes away and forgets what he saw. The point of the illustration is that the word of God, like the mirror, shows us what needs to be done. If we hear the word (let’s say during a Sunday morning sermon, or a Friday night bible study 😊) and walk away doing nothing about it, that is an exercise in futility! Just as the mirror reveals the condition of the man’s face, so also the word of God reveals the condition of a person’s soul. We would do well to take heed of that evaluation.

Obedience Brings Blessing (v. 25)

By way of contrast, we ought to look intently into the word. The word of God here is designated by the phrase “perfect law of liberty.” It is a law in the sense that God’s word is an authoritative body of truth. The specific law that James has in mind is the *law of Christ* (1 Cor 9:20–21). The law of Christ includes everything that Jesus and the apostles taught, both in word and deed. This means we are to obey the New Testament

teachings and those parts of the Old Testament that are “carried over” or affirmed by the New Testament writers.

Does this mean we can ignore most of the Old Testament? No! The Old Testament had two functions: a *regulatory* and *revelatory* function. For example, the Law of Moses (Genesis – Deuteronomy) *regulated* the activities of Old Testament Israel. As New Testament Christians, we are not bound by those regulations today.

However, the Old Testament also had a *revelatory* function. It reveals many things about God’s character, His plan, and His Messiah that are very relevant for believers today. In this way, the entire Old Testament is also profitable for the New Testament Christian (2 Tim 3:16).

Verse 25 also describes the word as the *perfect* law. It is perfect in that it is a complete revelation of Christ and not an obscure looking glass. In this sense, the word is more akin to a modern mirror that reflects precisely the condition of the person.

The word is also called the perfect law of *liberty*. The law of Christ has as its centerpiece the gospel, which is able to liberate us from the bondage of sin and death! What greater blessing could we hope for?

True Religion (vv. 26–27)

Increasingly in our culture, many people hear the word “religion” and think of it as something negative. Even in our Christian circles, some will describe Christianity not as a religion, but as a relationship. These things have contributed to the view that religion is something to be avoided or frowned upon. But “religion” does not always carry a negative connotation. What people are really guarding against is an empty, hypocritical kind of religion that does not match a changed heart.

In that sense, religion is bad. But religion can also be translated in a positive sense (e.g. a *God-fearer*), or in an ambiguous way that could be either good or bad (e.g. a *pious* person). In any case, religion can be defined as the outward and visible expressions of worship and service to God.

Useless Religion (v. 26)

The phrase “If anyone among you” shows that James is thinking of believers in this verse. The person James is addressing is one who thinks

that his *doing* of the word is good enough, and he concludes that he is fine. But in reality, his tongue is out of sync with God's word. He talks out of turn, gossips, slanders others, uses foul language, has conversations about useless topics, tells dirty jokes, talks about risqué things, etc. This person is probably not following the advice of verse 19 about being slow to speak.

The assumption here is that the tongue needs to be kept under strict control, or else serious problems will arise (see Jas 3:2–3). Holding the tongue in check is a key in genuine Christianity. The tongue is a good gauge by which you can measure the heart.

Whether or not the person has true religion, the solution to the issue in this verse is to obey God's word from the heart! A religion that does not affect one's speech (which is a gauge of the heart) is utterly worthless.

True Religion (v. 27)

In contrast to a false pious religion that is only skin-deep, true religion comes out of a changed heart. True religion is called pure because it is not stained by moral corruption. It is not a mixture of good and bad, but is holy and free from sin. True religion evidences itself in three ways.

Controlled Speech

A person who has true religion will control his tongue. Remember that one of the fruits of the Spirit is self-control (Gal 5:23)!

Serving Others

A person with true religion will care for orphans and widows. Orphans (fatherless) and widows are mentioned numerous times in the Old Testament. God has a real concern for those who are destitute. Visiting them means more than just stopping by to say "hello." Elsewhere we see that visiting means to look after and care for people (cf. Luke 7:16; Heb 2:6; Matt 25:36, 43).

Separation from the World

Genuine believers will also keep themselves from becoming defiled by the world. Jesus was a Lamb without blemish (1 Pet 1:19). We also are called to be unsoiled by the world, maintaining spiritual purity and moral cleanness. The word of God can produce that, as long as we hear it, and obey what it says from the heart!

~AWB