



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

So You Say You Believe the Bible?

James 1:22-25

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Introduction

1. As a whole, James 1 is wonderfully reassuring: God will give us everything we need to meet our trials successfully and emerge stronger, closer to perfection and the victory of eternal life. For God is always good and gives nothing but good (v. 17).
2. That goodness led him, “of his own will, [to bring] us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures” (v 18). We’re churchgoers, so we know that. We praise God for it. We delight in it. We can also take it for granted.
3. In vv. 19-21, James says, in effect, “if you know this, show you know it by stopping and listening to the word that brought you such wonderful blessings.” “But, that’s a given,” we say. “We believe the word, cherish it, and accept it.”
4. And James asks, “You listen, but do you really *hear*?” It’s like a dialogue between an exasperated parent and slow to act child. We say, “I hear him.” And James says, “Really? Then why you not doing what he said?” (v. 22).
5. It is a command, not advice. And it challenges us to the kind of serious self-examination we will need repeatedly throughout our study of James.¹

Body

I. Teaching Through Contrasts.

A. Temporary vs. Lasting (23-25).

1. The figure of a mirror was used by teachers, especially in the Jewish wisdom literature, to encourage moral reflection² in the interest of gaining self knowledge and thus moral improvement.³

¹ James 1:22 is the first of several (I counted 17) uses of the “doer” word group (ποιητής, *poiētēs*); another 20-plus times, he also uses the “works” words (ἔργον, *ergon*). Words in the “doer” group are used in 1:22, 23, 25; 2:12, 13, 19; 3:12, 18; 4:11, 13, 15, 17; 5:15. Words in the “work” group are used in 1:3, 4, 20, 25; 2:9, 14, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 24, 25, 26; 3:13; 5:4, 16.

² Craig Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 90. See also Peter Davids, *The Epistle of James*, 98; and Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Pillar), 92.

³ Dan G. McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 120-121. See note 18.

2. James's illustration may strike us as odd; some have even thought that he is being "deliberately ridiculous. . . for no one in their right mind who examines their image that closely would then utterly neglect the flaws they discover and instantly forget what they had seen" (Blomberg & Kamell, 91).
 3. But, we must learn about mirrors as they existed then, not as used now.
 - a) They were not everyday objects, most being polished bronze or copper; the result was a dim and warped reflection (like a fun-house mirror).⁴
 - b) "Most people therefore were generally unfamiliar with their own faces. When they did look in a mirror, they realized, of course, that they were looking at their own image, but a onetime exposure to a blurry and slightly distorted image does not give most people a deep and lasting awareness of what they look like" (McCartney, 121).
 - c) So, even the kind of looking James has in mind – the word for "looks intently" and "looks at" (κατανοέω, *katanoēō*) in vv. 23-24 has to do with close observation and attentive scrutiny, not mere passing looks⁵ – would not have left a lasting impression.
 4. The contrast, then, is pronounced (v. 25).
 - a) "Looks" (παράκύπτω, *parakypō*) had the basic meaning "stoop to see" (Friberg), "like . . . a child who bends over to get nearer to a bug they wish to examine" (Blomberg & Kamell, 91); see Luke 24:12; John 20:5.
 - b) The looking is characterized by perseverance (ESV), or continuing (NIV)⁶; a pursuit of God's word is entailed.
 - c) The contrast in James is not between serious looking and casual glances, but between intense looking and prolonged examination and use.
- B. Deceived vs. Blessed (22, 25).
1. The person who merely hears without doing is deceiving himself (παράλογίζομαι, *paralogizomai*), "to deceive, fraud or mislead through false intentions" (McCartney, 120).
 2. In contrast, the person who really looks – and keeps looking – into God's word will "be blessed in his doing."
 - a) "Blessed" (μακάριος, *makarios*) is the word we saw in v. 12.
 - b) But, the blessing here is not something "out there," but comes "in his doing," i.e., "'in' or 'by' the doing itself" (Blomberg & Kamell, 92-93).
 - c) In other words, "truth acted on brings more truth, but failure to respond to truth will ultimately result in the loss of truth."⁷
- C. Hearer vs. Doer (22).
1. James is not calling for "a conversion experience or even an ongoing decision," but for "'word-doing' as an ongoing pattern of life" (McCartney, 119).

⁴ Blomberg & Kamell, 90; also McCartney, 121.

⁵ See the Bauer (BDAG) and Friberg lexicons, and Moulton & Milligan's *Vocabulary*.

⁶ The word is παραμένω, *paramenō*, "to remain in a state or situation" (BDAG).

⁷ R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works*, 76.

2. He is challenging “the one who hears but does not pay attention or allow it to change behavior patterns” (McCartney, 124).
3. For James, real, steadfast faith is not just professing belief in the word, or even using the word as the source for belief and practice; he wants us to see that “true religion is a religion of results, not ritual, so that obedience to God’s will measures devotion to God.”⁸

II. Questions Prompted by James.

- A. Am I open to being further convicted by the word or do I think I have arrived?
 1. Kent Hughes tells of a missionary in the bush who hung a small mirror on a tree so he could shave. The local witch doctor happened by and looked into the glass, frightening herself as she saw her hideously painted features. She began to bargain with the missionary for the mirror. When she finally convinced him and got the mirror, she immediately threw it on the ground, shattering it, and shouting, “There, it won’t be making ugly faces at me anymore” (Hughes, 73).
 2. It is in fact too easy to look only at the parts of the word that reinforce or comfort us, glossing over the parts that expose our “ugly faces.”
 3. It is also possible to imagine that we’ve arrived in our faith and practice and thus become complacent in the belief there’s nothing else the word can teach us. Especially as a people who take following its original intent seriously (restoration), we can be content with the idea that since we have reformed so many things, especially external things, we have nothing else to learn and do.
- B. Am I applying the word to my circumstances and talents?
 1. A. M. Burton, Christian, and founder of the Life and Casualty Insurance Company, reportedly gave extremely large donations to his church, a Christian university, missionaries, and a traveling evangelist. Few can match his largesse, but God has not called us to do what someone else can do, or to do what we cannot do.
 2. We can be so focused on the general expectations for everyone that we are not sensitive to the conviction of the word where our unique talents are concerned.
 - a) A friend of mine is a “people person,” a gift he willingly uses for the Lord; if there’s door-knocking to be done to hand out flyers, he will be there.
 - b) He is not as skilled with a computer, so others do the works requiring that expertise. Some of them would not be as well-suited to door-knocking.
 3. Serious study of God’s word, along with the insight that comes as I mature in the faith, should lead me to use my unique talents more in obedience to the word.

Conclusion

1. Charles Swindoll once wrote an exercise in “let’s pretend” wherein he is a company owner who goes overseas to tend to setting up expansion operations. He leaves you in charge of the company here for the 6-8 months he is gone. He periodically sends written instructions. When he returns, the office is a disaster and the company is falling apart. He calls you in and asks what is going on. Didn’t you get his letters, his instructions?

⁸ Robert W. Wall, *Community of the Wise: The Letter of James*, 79.

2. You reply: "Letters? Oh, yeah – sure. We got every one of them. In fact, Chuck, we get together every Friday night and study those letters; we've done that ever since you left. We divided all the personnel into small groups and discussed the many things you wrote. Several have actually memorized some of your more significant sentences and paragraphs. Those letters are great!"
3. To which he says: "Okay, okay – you got all my letters, studied them, meditated on them, discussed them, and even memorized them. *BUT WHAT DID YOU DO ABOUT THEM ?*"⁹
4. James shows us that God may one day ask that of you and me. What will you say?

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⁹ Charles R. Swindoll, *Improving Your Serve: The Art of Unselfish Living*, 170-171.