



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

So, You Say You Believe the Bible?

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One of my teachers once told us a story related to him by his friend, a fellow-believer who taught psychiatry at a major university and also did clinical work. The therapist said he would ask his Christian clients how their faith influenced the way they dealt with their problems and that most responded as if the idea had never occurred to them. There was a disconnect between their profession of faith and its application to their lives.

It's not hard to imagine James had seen a similar disconnect. In James 1.2–18, he reassures us that God gives his people everything we need to successfully endure our trials and emerge stronger as the result, closer to the perfection and promised blessings of eternal life. We can be confident in this since God is always good and gives nothing but good things (v. 17). Indeed, his goodness is why “of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures” (v. 18).

As people of faith, we accept this as true, praise God for it, and delight in it. So, James's words in verses 19–21 may be disconcerting; he says, in effect, “Well, if you know it, then show you know it. Control your tongues and unrighteous anger and be more open to hearing God's word.”

“But we are!” we say. “We read and listen to the word. And we believe it!”

And James says, “But do you really *hear*? If so, why aren’t you doing what it says?”

The implicit tension in the text is reminiscent of parents exasperated because their headstrong child can’t, or won’t, understand that their instructions are not suggestions but commands. And the statement, “be doers of the word, and not hearers only” (1.22) is a command—as well as the beginning of one of the letter’s major themes. It amounts to a challenge to do the self-examination necessary for remaining steadfast in faith.¹

Teaching Through Contrasts

Temporary vs. Lasting (vv. 23–25)

“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” (v. 23). The metaphor of a mirror was used by teachers, especially in the Jewish wisdom tradition, to enhance self-awareness and encourage moral reflection with the goal of stimulating moral growth (cf. 1 Cor 13.12; Sir 12.11; Wis 7.26) (Davids 1982, 98; McCartney 2009, 120-121). Although we understand his basic idea, James’s use of the figure has led some to wonder “if perhaps this illustration is not better understood as a deliberately ridiculous analogy, for no one in their right mind who examines their image that closely would then utterly reject the flaws they discover and instantly forget what they have seen” (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 91). But that reasoning fails to account for the first-century context.

Mirrors were not everyday objects in the first-century world. Most were polished bronze or copper and what a person saw when looking into them was a dim and warped reflection akin to a modern fun-house mirror (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 90). McCartney comments,

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 2008, 121).

So, even with the intense scrutiny James’s language suggests—the word translated *looks intently* and *looks at* (κατανοέω; *katanoeō*), repeated in verses 23 and 24, had to do with close observation and attentive scrutiny, not mere passing looks (Bauer 2000, 522; Moulton & Milligan 1930, 330)—what an ancient person would have seen when looking into a mirror would not have left a lasting impression.

Thus, the contrast in verse 25 is stark. Here, the word translated *looks* is παρακύπτω (*parakupto*) which primarily meant, “to bend over for the purpose of looking, w. focus on satisfying one’s

¹ James 1.22 is the first appearance of multiple uses of *doer* and *works* in the letter: *doer* in 1.22, 23, 25; 2.12–13, 19; 3.12, 18; 4.11, 13, 15, 17; 5.15; *works* in 1.3–4, 20, 25; 2.9, 14, 17–18, 20–22, 24–26; 3.13; 5.4, 16.

curiosity, *take a look*” (Bauer 2000, 767). The close observation envisioned is “like ... a child who bends over to get nearer to a bug they wish to examine” (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 121). It is the same word used of Peter, John, and Mary when they stopped to look into Jesus’ empty tomb (Luke 24.12; John 20.5, 11).

But the word that most forcefully distinguishes the looking in verse 25 from that referred to in verses 23 and 24 is *perseveres* (παρᾰμένω; *paramenō*), which meant “to remain in a state or situation” (Bauer 2000, 769). The contrast is not between a casual and intense look, the latter being the kind of looking referred to in verses 23 and 24; it is between an intense but fleeting look and a prolonged examination of the object under scrutiny. The object of the look James has in mind in verse 25 is “the perfect law, the law of liberty.” Only the intense, ongoing scrutiny indicated by the pairing of the words *paraklypto* and *paramenō* will enable a person to fulfill James’s goal of being a faithful doer of the law.

Deceived vs. Blessed (vv. 22, 25)

In view of the intense nature of the persevering look in verse 25, it is not surprising that James says the person who thinks merely hearing the word is sufficient for steadfast faith is participating in self-deception (v. 22). The word *deceiving* is the present participle form of *παρᾰλογίζομαι* (*paralogizomai*), “to deceive, fraud or mislead through false intentions” (McCartney 2009, 120). It points to an adverse outcome in stark contrast with that which awaits the person who perseveres in close examination of the perfect law. That person, James says, will be “blessed” (μακάριος; *makarios*; see v. 12, discussed in “On Course for Victory,” [here](#)). But notice that the blessing James has in mind in verse 25 is not something reserved for the future; rather, it is “in his doing” (ἐν τῇ ποιήσει αὐτοῦ; *en tē poiēsei autou*), that is “‘in’ or ‘by’ the doing itself” (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 92-93). In other words, “truth acted on brings more truth, but failure to respond to truth will ultimately result in the loss of truth” (Hughes 1991, 76).

Hearer vs. Doer (v. 22)

As we reflect on the implications of James’s command and analogy in verses 22–25, we understand that he is not merely calling “for a conversion experience or even an ongoing decision,” but for “‘word-doing’ as an ongoing pattern of life” (McCartney 2009, 119). He is challenging professing believers who hear the word, but don’t take it seriously enough to allow it to actually change their thinking or behavior patterns. But genuine faith is not just professing belief in the word, or even using it as the sourcebook for orthodoxy. It entails a level of faith that understands that “true religion is a religion of results, not ritual, so that obedience to God’s will measures devotion to God” (Wall 1997, 79).

Questions Prompted by James

Possible applications of James's point are as numerous as the principles taught in God's word and the opportunities presented by our circumstances. I'll mention two, one more general and the other with the metaphor of the church as a body in mind.

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 it, she threw it on the ground, shattering it, and shouting, "There, it won't be making ugly faces at me anymore!" (Hughes 1991, 73).

The point is easy to see. Do I remain open to being convicted by God's perfect law or limit my acceptance to the parts that reinforce prior beliefs and typical behaviors while glossing over those that expose my "ugly face"?

Additionally, am I applying the word to my opportunities and abilities in a way that shows me to be steadfast? A friend of mine is a people-person who willingly uses his gifts for the Lord, seeking opportunities to engage with anyone he encounters. He is not, however, as adept with computers and related technologies. Others, many of whom are not people-persons, use the abilities they have in that area to the glory of God in ways he cannot. All are doers of the word.

So, you say you believe the Bible? Does your life match your claim?

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