

# Hearing and Doing the Word

## *A Present-Day Illustration*

**Y**ou go to Damon’s church?” asked the receptionist. Nathaniel was waiting on his friend and church member, Damon. The two had arranged to get lunch together. Nathaniel arrived about 30 minutes early, and he was enjoying visiting with the receptionist, Tiana. However, the mention of Damon’s name brought a polite but reserved, mildly hostile response.

In their conversation, Nathaniel discovered how long Tiana had worked for the company, her challenges of commuting, and her children’s names and ages. He also learned that Tiana was taking night classes to finish her bachelor’s and had been doing some reading on her lunch break.

“So, has Damon invited you to our church?” asked Nathaniel. “I don’t know if you have a church home.”

“He’s invited me,” Tiana answered, “but I don’t think I’ll come. Do you know about all his speeding tickets and the bar fight he was in last week? And you should see how he treats people in this office. He talks about following Jesus, but I don’t listen to what people say. I watch what they do.”

“Okay,” Nathaniel said nervously.

When he saw Damon come into the lobby, he rose to greet his friend.

Tiana turned her back to the two men and started busying herself on her computer.

**1.** *Why is it wise to understand and obey the laws that govern us?*

**2.** *How often do you ask for God’s wisdom to guide you in what you do for Him?*

**3.** *How does prayer keep us wise to what God wants us to do?*

## A Hearer of the Word

*James 1:19-21, KJV*

19 Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath:

20 For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.

21 Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.

*James 1:19-21, NIV*

<sup>19</sup>My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, <sup>20</sup>because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. <sup>21</sup>Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

The recipients of the letter of James did not possess individual copies of the Bible as we do today; most of the New Testament was not yet written, and very few believers had access to scrolls of the Old Testament. Instead, they received God's Word orally as their leaders read it to them or instructed them in it. It's within this public worship setting that we understand the commands of verse 19. Here James instructs his audience to carefully receive God's Word while being "slow to speak and slow to become angry." He commands them to carefully consider the words and let them soak into their minds and hearts before offering a hasty or unthinking opinion.

In the middle of a conversation, it is natural to begin forming our response to the other person even while he or she is still talking. Consequently, we tune out what this person is really saying. Being quick to listen and slow to speak takes concentrated effort, but in the long run pays great dividends in relationships. Every once in a while we talk with someone who is very good at active listening. We usually walk away from such conversations feeling like we've been understood.

Anger is a volatile emotion. Later in the letter, James addresses the presence of quarreling and fighting among these believers (4:1). Perhaps these spirited arguments spilled over into their meetings where they used the words of Scripture to judge

or attack others. James cautioned that such self-centered wrath did “not produce the righteousness that God desires” (vs. 20). While their anger blocked the message of God’s truth, so did their “moral filth” and evil behavior (vs. 21). Wickedness had closed their ears so they could not hear the words of Scripture. They had become experts at filtering out what they did not want to hear versus accepting its message for them.

A humble reception of God’s Word displays the reality of our faith that came to life through the word “planted” in us at the time of our new birth. While this does not mean we never resist its truth or go astray, it shows that the message powerful enough to save us in the past is able to break through the sinful barriers we put up and bring needed change to our lives.

**4.** *How does anger create an atmosphere that dishonors the Lord?*

**5.** *What are the attitudes that lead to a humble reception of God’s Word?*

## A Doer of the Word

*James 1:22-25, KJV*

22 But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.

23 For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass:

24 For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was.

25 But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.

*James 1:22-25, NIV*

<sup>22</sup>Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

<sup>23</sup>Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror <sup>24</sup>and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. <sup>25</sup>But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

A living faith does not end at humbly listening to God's Word—it puts it into practice. While hearing God's truth in their corporate gatherings was great, James desired that they incorporate it into their everyday lives.

In essence, he tells them to resist patting themselves on the back for quietly receiving the Word. Hearing without doing indicates self-deception since listening to it brings the responsibility of allowing it to change one's behavior.

James compares the act of hearing without action to a man who looks into a mirror and does nothing in response. This man carefully studies his reflection, sees something that requires his attention, but goes his way without fixing the problem. Despite careful scrutiny, he fails to take any action to resolve the issue. This is precisely the opposite of the response the Lord desires from us. The Lord never commends mere head knowledge of the truth without any action on our part in response to it. Rather, our faith brings us to God's Word, where our active response to it displays the genuineness of our walk with the Lord.

James's reference to the "perfect law that gives freedom" in verse 25 includes the whole of Christian teaching. While the word "law" no doubt reminded his Jewish readers of the Old Testament, "freedom" pointed them to the revelation of the Gospel that came through Jesus. This message frees believers from the bondage of sin and makes them a part of the family of God.

**6.** *What does the mirror illustration tell us about our need to be doers of the Word and not simply listen to it?*

## A Genuine Faith

*James 1:26-27, KJV*

26 If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain.

*James 1:26-27, NIV*

<sup>26</sup>Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup>Religion that God our Father accepts as pure

**KJV**

27 Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

**NIV**

and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Starting in verse 26, James offers three tests for “those who consider themselves religious.” Those who say, “I obey the Word” but fail the tests are hypocritical. The first test is the tongue test. Those who mistreat others through slander or cursing fail the exam. He characterizes their religion as “worthless.”

In chapter 3, James scolds these believers for allowing both “praising and cursing” to come out of their mouths (vss. 9-11). His frequent reference to their lack of controlling their tongue highlights this matter as an ongoing problem in their midst.

Christians who routinely berate and curse others deceive themselves regarding the sincerity of their faith. Like the thrusts of a sword, their words cause damage in the Body of Christ (Prov. 12:18) and reveal the emptiness of their walk with Jesus.

In verse 27, James gives the second test: the test of practical love. “Orphans and widows” represented the neediest classes of people in the first century. They were also the ones who could least repay the giver with money. Showing compassion to them through visits and financial help is one way that would show the value of one’s walk with the Lord.

The third test involves practical holiness, which is remaining separate from the world. James is not saying we must avoid its people, but that we remain apart from the world system that celebrates evil and opposes God’s standard of righteousness revealed in Scripture. A “pure” faith is one that resists the allure of the world to conform to its values versus those found in God’s Word and ministers to others out of a pure heart and mind focused on Christ.

**7. How does a hypocritical faith reveal itself?**

**8. What does it mean to keep oneself from becoming “polluted by the world”?**

## Do Good to Others

When people think about religion, many think that it comprises rules of what not to do. And to some extent that is true: We shouldn't murder, or commit adultery, or steal, or idolize false gods. But that is only one side of the Christian religion; the other side is what we should do.

Confucius addressed one side by saying that we should not do to others what we would not have them do to ourselves. Centuries later, Jesus taught the other side by telling His followers to do to others what they would want done to them. While the former teaching is passive resistance to unethical behavior, the latter teaching is proactive in doing good.

What are the things that we should do as Christians? While our good deeds should reflect what following Christ is all about, our actions should not always be visible for many to see. Certainly, we should build homes for the poor, volunteer for short-term missions abroad, or be involved in any number of group projects. Christian service, however, should also include what is done behind the scenes such as opening our homes to missionaries on leave, writing a generous check for those who are working hard at a low-paying job, or other private deeds that aid those in need.

Moreover, what we do in service for the Lord should not be restricted to what we do within our congregation. Again, the Bible insists that we take care of one another as sisters and brothers in Christ. Nevertheless, like Jesus, we should always reach out to those outside of our church. And reaching means both telling others about Christ *and* touching their lives with compassionate deeds.

**9.** *What is more important to you: not sinning, or doing good deeds for others? Briefly explain your answer.*

**10.** *Why are both the public and private things you do in service for Christ important to your walk with the Lord?*

**11.** *In what ways can your church balance what good is done outside the church with the good done within the church?*

## To Serve Others

James told his readers that our actions reflect how obedient we are to God’s Word—specifically, how devotedly we follow Jesus’ teachings to minister to people both within and outside the church. Moreover, the wisdom that God nurtures within us cannot thrive without putting our faith into action through service to others.

► Write “A Doer of the Word” at the top of an index card, then write one or two ways you might serve others this coming week. Put the card somewhere you will see it, and add to your list as the Holy Spirit leads you to more opportunities.

### KEY VERSE

But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. —James 1:22, KJV

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. —James 1:22, NIV

### DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK’S LESSON

#### Week of August 10 through August 16

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

- Mon.** Genesis 22:9-19—Abraham Blessed for Fearing God.
- Tues.** Joshua 2:1-7—Spies Saved by Rahab’s Quick Actions.
- Wed.** Matthew 18:23-35—Forgive Others as God Forgave You.
- Thurs.** Titus 3:1-2, 8-11—Devoted to Good Works, Avoiding Distractions.
- Fri.** Deuteronomy 6:4-9—Works Guided by Loyalty to God.
- Sat.** James 2:8-13—Receive God’s Mercy by Showing Mercy.
- Sun.** James 2:14-26—Faith and Works Must Go Together.