

JAMES - FORGETFUL HEARERS/USEFUL DOERS

June 12, 2016

Some of you have already gotten your Bibles out, or opened up the app on your phone. I love that! You are set to spend the next half hour listening to some guy (ugh, the worship guy no less) speak about something important. You are pretty sure it is important because we are at church and I'm bound so say at least one or two things about the Bible. Let's say you, like me, go to church almost every Sunday. You listen to about 50 messages a year, more or less. That's 500 in a decade. If you are around 40 (like me) and have grown up in the church (like me), that's potentially 2000 chances to listen to God's Word. That's a lot of instruction, right?

So what would make this message different from any other? Sure, we will spend time in God's word. I'll do my best to illustrate some points and give you some solid application. But what if today you did something different? I don't want you to just listen to the Word. I want you to do something with it.

If God's word has the power to SAVE OUR SOULS, shouldn't we do more than just listen passively? When we open up the word, shouldn't we lean forward in anticipation a bit? These words have the power to save us from everything that weights us down. Everything. There are Christians in this very room, worried about their marriages, about their finances, about their families. Most will trudge through another day hoping it gets better, but will never utilize the power that is available to them. They will often wonder why God isn't blessing them like He said He would.

I may or may not be the biggest idiot in the world. I'm prone to mistakes and a massive sinner in my own right. But when I speak from God's word, I then speak with God's own power.

So, lean forward a little bit. Get ready. I'll be reading from James 1:18-27:

18 [God] chose to give birth to us by giving us his true word. And we, out of all creation, became his prized possession.

19 Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. 20 Human anger does not

produce the righteousness God desires. 21 So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls. 22 But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. 23 For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. 24 You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. 25 But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it. 26 If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless.

27 Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.

Pastor Stuart Briscoe was teaching the principles of Bible study to a class. He showed how to pick out the promises and the commands in Scripture, and what to do with them. Finally, he reviewed and asked, "Now, what do you do with the commands?" A little old lady raised her hand and said, "I underline them in blue."

What do you do with the commands? Underlining and highlighting make for a very colorful Bible. I, in fact, like to highlight my favorites in yellow on the YouVersion app. The point of the commands that are given, though, is to OBEY them. I have a sobering bit of news for everyone in this room: there is no substantial difference between evangelical Christians and the population at large on most moral and social beliefs and behaviors. What we watch, how we speak, what we believe in, where we spend our money, the things we do. We just aren't that different from the rest of the world.

James would be disheartened by this. He tells them, "If you hear God's word and don't do it, you are only fooling yourselves. But if you hear it and do what it says, it leads to His blessing." I'm convinced that if he was writing his book today, he'd look at the emptiness of our devotion, our similarity to the rest of the world and write the very same words he wrote to first century Christians. You see, when James wrote this, he was addressing church folk like us. He is not writing to non-believers, but to those who regularly heard the word of God (each and every week!). They

probably took some smug comfort in the fact that they often heard the word. That put them a notch above those pagans who never attend church! Being Jewish Christians, some probably took pride in their observance of certain rituals and outward commands. They had been baptized. They took communion. They attended church. They didn't steal or murder or commit adultery. That sounds eerily familiar, doesn't it?

I want everyone to take a good, hard look at themselves. As much as we like to tear down walls between every type of person here at church, I want you, even if it is in your own heart, to classify yourself one way or another. Every message in this James series has two words with a slash right down the middle. When we finish today, I want you to determine if you are a forgetful hearer of the word or a useful doer of God's word. Ask yourself, as you read,

1. Am I a forgetful hearer of God's Word? (1:22-24, 26)

Obedience should always be the bottom line of Bible study or biblical preaching. Correct application must always be built on correct interpretation. But to study the word just to fill your head with knowledge, without applying the word, short-circuits God's purpose in giving it. I was a huge fan of Bible Bowl back in my high school days. I loved it! I would memorize large portions of the Bible so that I could impress people with my knowledge. I can still do the genealogy of Jesus from Matthew 1 that I learned in sixth grade. Are you impressed? I also enjoyed pitting my knowledge against others in a contest to see who knew more. I was overjoyed when my team bested another. But none of those words really reached my heart.

Even seemingly irrelevant matters in Scripture (like genealogies), are "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). James gives us three warnings about forgetful hearers. First off:

A. FORGETFUL HEARERS DON'T ADDRESS THEIR PROBLEMS.

James uses the illustration of a man who looks at his natural face in the mirror, rushes out the door, and forgets what he saw. Maybe he had a couple of days of stubble on his face, or he slept wrong on his hair, and it

stuck up in an unruly manner. But, he's late for work, and he's really not all that concerned about his appearance, so he quickly tries to smooth it out and rushes out the door, even though he looks like he just got out of bed. The mirror showed him the problems, but he didn't do anything to fix them. The word of God is like a mirror that reveals to us the very thoughts and intentions of our hearts (Heb. 4:12).

Why is it that so many people hate what they see in the mirror? Or to have their picture taken? Selfies and filters are great, you can delete 50 before you get it just right. But a candid from someone else's camera can ruin our day. It's because we hate to be reminded of the unfiltered, real version of who we are. We look at that picture and immediately think: "That can't be me; I'm not that old; I haven't gained that much weight." Then we untag yourself from it and go grab another doughnut.

A lot of us don't want to face who we are spiritually, either. It's much easier to pretend that everything is OK, when deep down we know that it isn't. Our love for Christ has grown cold and we have become careless about the way we live. It shows us our ugly, self-centered attitudes. It exposes our pride. It confronts our contempt for others and our lack of compassion. It hits our sinful anger and our rotten speech. It uncovers our deception, greed, and lust. But, if we just take a quick glance at the word once in a rare while and rush out the door, without doing anything to address the problems that it reveals, it won't do us any good.

Hearing the word without doing it is the default mode of our fallen hearts. Like Adam and Eve when God confronted them, we're quick to blame others and dodge our own responsibility for our sins. To be effective doers of the word, we've got to give it more than passing attention. It requires deliberate focus and hard work to apply it personally. James describes forgetful hearers further:

B. FORGETFUL HEARERS DON'T MANAGE THEIR PRIORITIES.

The main point of James' illustration about the man and the mirror is that he quickly forgets what he saw in the mirror. The mirror is not at fault. It tells it like it is. It shows us what we really look like. But the man who takes this quick look forgets what he looks like (1:24). And so he does nothing about the problems he saw in the mirror.

James is not describing a man with a poor memory, but rather a man with poor priorities. He doesn't remember what he saw in the mirror because he

doesn't regard it as very important. God, heaven, eternal life, and all of the other doctrines in the Bible are interesting and nice, but this guy has a career to pursue. He's got money to make. He's got his hobbies and toys that are his passion on his days off. He forgets what God's word says about his sins because, really, it just isn't all that important compared to these other priorities in his life.

The problem of forgetting God is a frequent theme in the Old Testament. Moses warned Israel (Deut. 6:12), after they got into the land, "then watch yourself, that you do not forget the Lord who brought you from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." As they conquered the land given to them, Joshua was told to remember God's Word. During the time of the Judges and the various kings of Israel and Judah we read of the entire country remembering God for a time, then quickly forgetting all that He had done for them. One of the last commands in the Old Testament is (Mal. 4:4), "Remember the law of Moses My servant, ..." Israel didn't have a memory problem. They had a priority problem. God's commandments just weren't all that important to them. They had other things that were more pressing.

All parents have experienced this with their children. I have two wonderful sons. They have memories that will blow your mind. They can name every Pokemon that has ever been made, quote large portions of their favorite movies and TV shows, and tell you who's turn it is to feed the dog without fail. But I will leave them in the morning and give them the instruction to clean their room. I get home and say, "I thought I told you to clean your room." What's their answer? "I forgot." Right! It's not that our children have memory problems. Cleaning their rooms just isn't very high on the priority list, until you impose a stiff enough penalty to push it up to the top!

So forgetful hearers take a quick glance in the mirror of the word, but they don't do anything to address the problems that they see. They forget what they see because other things are more important. Their priorities are out of order. Third,

C. FORGETFUL HEARERS DON'T STOP PRETENDING.

James mentions this twice, in 1:22 and again in his practical illustration in 1:26. There is an inherent danger in attending a church where God's word is proclaimed week to week: If you hear the word often, but do not put it into practice, you are merely pretending to be a Christian. The solution is

not to avoid hearing the word, but rather to apply it to the problems in your life that the word uncovers.

I confess that sometimes it takes a lot of work to figure out why a particular text is in the Bible. But I believe that every chapter in the Bible is designed in some way to apply to our daily lives. As you read the word, always ask how it applies to your life. If you can't figure out how a text applies, move on to those that plainly apply. You can seek help for the parts that are bit more challenging later on.

In verse 26, James gives an example of someone who hears the word, but does not do it and so deceives himself. This man thinks that he is religious. "Religious" (and "religion") are infrequently used words in the New Testament. James uses them here because he is describing a man who prides himself in the outward trappings of the faith, but who is not applying it to his heart. He is a religious Jew who now professes faith in Christ, but like many of the Jews, his religion is a matter of pride and outward performance. He prays, he fasts, he tithes, he goes through all of the rituals, but in James' example, he doesn't bridle his tongue. James says that this man deceives his own heart and his religion is worthless. He's merely pretending to be a Christian.

In his commentary on this passage, John MacArthur says that the Greek term used here for a 'hearer' refers to someone who audits a class. College-goers, do you remember the auditors? They would saunter into class late. Leave early. Not even show up even it pleased them. It was if they were doing the professor a favor just by showing up. "Yes, this subject interests me, somewhat. If you continue to entertain me, I may come back." Someone who audits a class is not responsible to take the tests or do the homework. James says, "Don't approach God's Word like someone auditing a class. Don't think that the homework is optional. Be a doer of what you are taught because someday you might be responsible to take the test."

There's great danger in developing the audit mentality concerning God's Word. If you carefully read the Gospels, you will see that Jesus never got upset with those who didn't know. He became upset with those who knew, but didn't do. Concerning such people, Jesus said this in Matthew 13:15 (NIV):

For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.

Willful disobedience to revealed truth produces spiritual apathy. It causes our heart to become calloused and insensitive. It causes us to fall out of love with our Lord. Paul quoted this same passage when he stopped trying to reach the Jews and turned to the Gentiles.

James will deal more with the tongue in chapter 3, but here in v. 26 it can encompass a multitude of sins: lying, half-truths, slander, gossip, angry words, hateful words, cursing, telling filthy jokes or stories, and much more.

If you profess to follow Christ, but don't apply the Bible to your speech, you're just pretending. Your religion is worthless and your profession is empty. I don't want anyone in this room to be a forgetful hearer I have great news! You don't have to be a forgetful hearer of God's Word. You can be something much more. As you read, ask yourself:

2. Am I a useful doer of God's Word? (1:25, 27).

If you hear the word and becomes a useful doer James says that God will bless you for doing it. So how do we do that? There are four things to note:

A. THE USEFUL DOER LOOKS INTENTLY AT THE WORD.

Rather than a quick glance, the useful doer of the word looks intently at it. The Greek word means to stoop and look carefully at something. It was used of John and Mary stooping to look carefully into the empty tomb after the resurrection (John 20:5, 11). This isn't the quick glance of the guy who rushes out the door, but rather the careful look of one who notices a blemish or spot of dirt on his face and takes the time to correct the problem.

Examine God's Word. Scrutinize it. Learn what it has to say. Stoop down, slow down, take a seat, and take a serious look. Each and every day, get into it and start asking these questions:

What does it say?

What does it mean?

How does it apply to me?

I've often read a passage many times, but missed something that seems so obvious once I see it. I love reading and hearing great Biblical scholars. They will make practical observations about verses that seem so obvious sometimes that I think, "Why didn't I see that?" The answer probably is that I didn't take the time waiting on the Lord and meditating on the text that these men and women did. As you look intently at the word, ask God to help you understand what it means. You can't apply a text that you do not properly understand. Then ask Him how it applies to your life, not just outwardly, but on the heart level.

B. THE USEFUL DOER APPLIES THE WORD TO HIS HEART.

Note that James changes terminology in verse 25. Up till now, he's mentioned "the word" (1:18, 21, 22, 23), but now he refers to it as "the perfect law that sets you free." Why does he do this?

James was writing to Jewish readers who would be thinking, "James, my dear fellow, you keep mentioning the word. Are you forgetting that you're writing to Jews who are steeped in the Torah? We've studied the Law of God from our youth up! We take great pride in our obedience of the Law. Are you forgetting that we're not Gentile dogs who are ignorant of the Law?"

But James knew that his fellow Jews were prone to keep the Law outwardly, while their hearts were far from God. Like the rich young ruler who spoke to Jesus, they thought that they kept all of the commandments from their youth up, but he was violating the great commandment, because he loved his money more than he loved God (Matt. 19:16-22). As Jesus rebuked the Jews in Matt. 15:8, "These people honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far away from Me."

James is not referring simply to the Law of Moses. Laws like that are binding. They weren't meant to be freeing. Rather, he is pointing to the interpretation and fulfillment of that law in the teaching of Jesus, the new law-giver. When James calls it the law that sets us free, he is referring to "the new covenant promise of the law written on the heart ..., accompanied by a work of the Spirit enabling obedience to that law for the first time." It does not enslave. It is not enforced by external compulsion. Instead, it is

freely accepted and fulfilled with glad devotion as the Spirit gives us strength.

God's word applied to our hearts by the Holy Spirit frees us from bondage to sin (John 8:31-36). We must apply the word on the heart level if we want to overcome sin, because all sin starts there (Mark 7:21-23). Next,

C. THE USEFUL DOER APPLIES THE WORD TO HIS HEART FOR HIS ENTIRE LIFETIME.

In another translation, James adds, "and abides by it." In other words, this man is not coming to the word for a quick fix for his immediate problem. Have you ever been guilty of this? You are struggling for whatever reason, you turn to the Word for an answer and then things get easier. Then you just go back to the same mess you were in before. Although the Bible can be helpful in times of crisis, it must be continually applied to our hearts over our entire lifetimes. It's a long-term approach that requires discipline and diligence to reap the benefits. As Psalm 1:1-3 states,

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season. And its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers.

The useful doer looks intently at the word. He applies it to his heart. He continues applying it over a lifetime. Finally,

D. THE USEFUL DOER ALLOWS THE WORD TO CHANGE HIS CONDUCT AND HIS CHARACTER.

In contrast to the worthless religion of the man in 1:26, in 1:27 James gives two practical examples of a person who applies God's word. He is not being comprehensive, but is zeroing in on two areas of pastoral concern. In James's day, the widows and orphans were the most marginalized. These examples represent "pure and genuine religion in the sight of our God and Father." James says that to contrast it with the outward religion of the man who is doing it to be noticed by other men. He calls God "Father" here because of the reference to orphans and widows. He has a special concern for the helpless who could not provide for themselves. It could be, as you delve into His word and allow it to change your conduct and

character, that your new, pure religion helps you to reach out to people that you don't know, or to people that you do know. Becoming a useful doer will change you inside and out. Your heart will be different as He speaks to you and you start to do more than just listen. The fake show of your past will be gone. You will constantly be reminded of who you really are supposed to be in Christ. He wants you to be a useful doer. He wants to bless you like you've never experienced before.

I told you I wanted today to be different. Maybe it will be, maybe it will not. It is up to you. We are about to enter into a time of commitment. I want you to remember a few things. At each of the stations around the room you will be given an opportunity to remember the sacrifice of Jesus. The juice symbolizes his blood that was shed, the bread helps us to remember his body. The black boxes, marked offering, are for those who call Cap City their home. This act of worship, like everything else, is a choice. Give with a joyful heart if you feel that God leading you to do that. The white buckets, our generous buckets, are different. If you have something beyond your typical offering. We use these for those who'd like to give to people who are in need in our community. James would call that pure and genuine religion as you help them. There is a mirror at each station, as well. Take your time today. Take a good, long look at yourself as you do. Examine yourself. Scrutinize YOU. If there's a change that you need to make today, make it. Resolve to ask the questions as you approach His Word, 1. What does it say? 2. What does it mean? 3. How does it apply to me? There will be some people up here to pray with you if you need it. Let's go to the tables.

MESSAGE 2/CONCLUSION

A gray-haired old lady, long a member of her church, shook hands with the pastor after the service one Sunday morning. "That was a wonderful sermon," she exclaimed, "just wonderful! Everything you said applies to someone I know."

James doesn't want us applying the word to others. He doesn't want us underlining all the commands in the Bible in blue. He wants us to *apply it to ourselves*.

I read in a Proverbs 5 a warning against sexual immorality:

Now then, my sons, listen to me; do not turn aside from what I say. Keep to a path far from her, do not go near the door of her house, lest you lose your honor to others and your dignity to one who is cruel lest strangers feast on your wealth and your toil enrich the house of another.

At the end of your life you will groan, when your flesh and body are spent. You will say, "How I hated discipline! How my heart spurned correction! I would not obey my teachers or turn my ear to my instructors. And I was soon in serious trouble in the assembly of God's people.

I've said these words. Maybe you have, as well. They aren't reserved just for sexual sins. Your greed, your anger, your hatred, your bitterness, your pride. All of these sins can lead you to a place where you say, "Why didn't I just LISTEN? Why didn't I pay attention?" I'm pleading with you right now. Don't hate discipline. Don't avoid God's Word. Put it into practice. Today. When you went to worship stations, many of you had to stoop down to take a good look at your face. Let this be a symbol of you becoming a useful doer of God's Word. Don't forget. He wrote this for you and wants to bless you. We are praying for you. We want you to return next week and dig deeper into His Word together. Here at Capital City we will continue to ask, what does it say, what does it mean, how does it apply to me?