

A Study of the Book of James

Sermon # 3

“You Can Benefit From The Word of God”

James 1:19-27

At least once each day, and probably several times, we stand before a mirror and review the way we look. If an adjustment is necessary, and it usually is, then we straighten our clothes or comb our hair all because the mirror has helped us by revealing things about how we really look.

This morning I want to point you to something that can forever change your image of yourself and even has the potential to change the way others see you. The word of God is moral mirror which the Holy Spirit uses to enable us to see ourselves as we really are. The view we get is not what we think based on experience or what others think based on their observations, it is how God see us.

But the problem is that many people today don't read or understand the Bible. This is not because they don't have a Bible. The Bible is present in almost every home in America. The problem is that it is not read and applied.

According to a recent Gallop Poll “eighty-two percent of the Americans believe that the Bible is either literal or the “inspired” Word of God... more than half stated they read their Bible at least monthly. Yet half couldn't name even one of the four gospels and fewer than half knew who delivered the Sermon on the Mount.” [As cited by David Jeremiah. Turning Toward Integrity. (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1993). p. 42]

You can benefit from the Bible! The problem in our world today is not that the Bible is irrelevant, it is just not read, understood, and applied to daily living.

The Bible is a very practical book. Would you like to benefit from the Bible? Would you like to integrate the Bible into your daily life? Wouldn't you like to know the practical steps that guarantee that you can benefit from the Bible? Let's take a few moments and examine the steps that lead to receiving the benefits the Bible has to offer.

First, You Must Be Receptive To God's Word (1:19-21)

“So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath:(20) For the wrath of man does not produce righteousness of God.(21) Wherefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.”

The first step we must take is to be receptive to God's word. In verse twenty-one, James tells us to “receive with meekness” or “*humbly accept the word planted in you.*” The word translated “receive” literally means “to welcome.” The idea of “receiving or accepting” the Word has a connotation in the original language of showing hospitality. This word is used for how we receive others into our homes. Here it is used for how we receive the Word. In other words, we must cultivate a heart and life that

welcomes the word. And what kind of life is that? It is a life characterized by an attitude of humility, of openness, of receptivity. And such a life must be prepared to receive the word just as soil is prepared to receive the seed. After all, James tells us that the word is “implanted in you.”

To adequately prepare our hearts, James gives us four guidelines we need to model. These behaviors will enable us to accept the word and receive the full benefit we should.

A. A Capacity to Listen — We must be quick to hear the Word of truth. “swift or quick to hear” refers to an *alert* ear. But James is not talking about just physically hearing the words as they impact our ears, but listening for what God has to say. “Quick to hear” describes an attentive heart, listening for what God has to say. That is often true when it comes to what God is trying to communicate to us. You can physically hear His Word and yet not really hear it. We not only have to concentrate on the facts, we have to concentrate on the attitude of our heart in hearing the facts. What are the things that keep us from hearing?

B. A Controlled Tongue “slow to speak” One of the things that keeps us from hearing is that we need to be slow to speak. You can’t be an effective listener if you are doing all the talking. When God was giving out body parts, he gave us two ears and one mouth — that ought to say something to us, if we can hear it.

Often, we don’t hear what someone is saying because we are not listening. We may ask them how they are doing, and we expect to hear an answer like “fine.” That is what we are programmed to hear. If they start talking about how rough the week has been, we may be talking to someone else already. We are not quick to hear when it comes to receiving what others are trying to tell us. Sometimes we are like that with God.

C. A Calm Demeanor — The second thing we need to do is “cultivate a calm spirit.” We need to be “slow to anger.” James not only tells us that we need to be slow to anger, but that “the wrath of man does not produce righteousness of God” or our anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. So we need to calm down. You can’t communicate with an angry person. I know. I have tried. (And I’m not talking about my wife.) Did you know that being upset with what you hear can block all the capacity you possess to hear it, especially when it comes to a relevant new word from God? If you don’t calm your spirit down and let God speak a word to you, even when that word is uncomfortable, you will never hear. Cultivate a calm spirit. When we are angry, we are closed. We are not listening to reason. We are looking to get even and sometimes to get ahead. We feel resentment, or bitterness, and sometimes even hatred. These are barriers to communication. God cannot speak to you when you hold these attitudes in your heart. We need to calm down so we can hear.

D. A Clean Life — that’s another thing we need to work on. James tells us to “lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness,” or get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent. What we are to lay down is sin. The word for “filth” that is used here comes from a root in Greek that means “ear wax.” It is a wonderful picture. Just as we can hear with our ears full of wax, so we can’t receive God’s word with our lives full of sin. So we must be willing to get rid of anything that we know of in our lives that keeps us from hearing God. Are there things in your life today that you need to get rid of? You will never be able to receive the full benefit from God’s word that you need to until you do.

How do we receive the Word? We need to develop a capacity to listen to hear the Word of God. We need to develop a controlled tongue and a calm demeanor to receive the Word of God. Finally, we need to develop a clean life in obedience to the Word of God.

Secondly, You Must Be Submissive To God's Word 1:22-25

"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. (23) For if anyone is a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man observing his natural face in a mirror: (24) For he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. (25) But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty, and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does."

The first step is to be receptive to God's word. The second step is to be submissive to God's word. And there are three ways to do that.

A. It Requires Examination. In verse twenty-five, James speaks of "one looking into the perfect law of liberty." Notice that he is not simply talking about someone who merely looks at God's word. He is talking about someone who looks intently. In other words, we are to examine the word. We are to carefully investigate the word. We are to research it. The connotation of the word translated as "look" is "to stoop down and gaze into."

It is the same word that was used to denote the way Peter, John, and Mary stooped down to look into the empty tomb on Resurrection morning (John 20:5, 11). It also found in (1 Peter 1:12) where we are told that the angels desire "to look into" the glories of salvation that are outside of their personal experience.

The idea here is not that we merely glance at God's word but that we gaze at God's word. I glance at the mirror every morning. But I'm not really looking very hard — unless I see something unusual. If I do, then I look a little closer. I want to take a good long look then. I want to concentrate on what I am looking at. I want to make sure that I see and remember it. We should look at God's word in that manner. We should dig deeply for the truths that it contains. We should research it.

We should read the Bible like we read a love letter. It has been suggested that the one time people read for all they are worth is when they are in love and are reading a love letter.They perceive the color of the words, the order of phrases, and the weight of sentences. Then if never before or after they read carefully and in depth.

B. It Requires Reflection. James tells us that we not only look intently at the word but we also review and reflect on this word. In verse twenty-five we read, "But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty, and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does." James says the *"man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it — he will be blessed in what he does."* We are to continue to look into the word. We are to remember what we have heard and read.

Unless we have studied God word, we will not be able to make the right decisions that we are faced with everyday. We will be more susceptible to temptation. Jesus used God's word to deal with the temptations Satan threw his way in the wilderness. And we must use God word in the same manner.

David wrote in Psalm 119:11: *"I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you."* The word can be our protection. It can be our defense against the devil. But we can only use the word if we have know the word. To do that, we must reflect on the word. We must spend time in the word. Reading, studying, memorizing the word must become a priority.

C. It Requires a Response. One final way that we can apply the word is to respond to it. James tells us in verse twenty-two: *"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."* Again, in verse twenty-five, James tells us that we "will be blessed," not by simply hearing the word but by "doing it." We must personally respond to word. The word applies to us. It applies to you. You need to do it. That is the basis upon which you will be blessed. That is the basis upon which you will receive the benefits of the word. If you're not willing to do the word, don't expect to be blessed by the word.

Many Christians stop at merely hearing and receiving the Word. They hear the Word, receive it, but don't take the essential step to do what the Word commands. There are too many people who think that they can receive the blessing of God without being obedient to God's word. James tells us that if we think that, we are self-deceived. He tells us that if we are not willing to put the word into practice we are like someone who glances in the mirror but really never sees what they look like.

They are like the African princess that George Sweeting tells about in one of his books:

"She lived in the heart of the uncivilized jungle and for years this chieftain's daughter had been told by all that she was the most beautiful woman in the entire tribe. Although she had no mirror to view herself, she had been convinced of her unparalleled beauty. One day when an exploring party traveled through that part of Africa, the princess was given a mirror as a gift. For the first time in her life she was able to see her own reflection. Her immediate reaction was to smash the mirror on the nearest rock. Why? Because for the first time in her life she knew the truth. What other people had told here all those years was of little importance. What she had believed about herself made no difference. She saw for the first time that her beauty was not genuine. It was false." [George Sweeting. *How to Solve Conflicts*. (Chicago: Moody, 1973) p. 47]

Mirrors are like that they show us what we really look like. When you look into the mirror, you see the brutal truth. Now, sometimes I don't want to acknowledge that truth. The word of God will serve as a mirror to show you the truth about yourself. But it will only do you some good if you apply it to your life.

Third, You Must Be Moved By God's Word 1:26-27

"If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is useless.(27) Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: To visit the orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world." There is unfortunately a great disparity between what Christians say they believe and the way they behave. A. W. Tozer put it this way: *"There is an evil which, in its effect on the Christian religion, may be more destructive than communism, romanism and liberalism combined. It is the glaring disparity between theology and practice among professing Christians. So wide is this gulf between theory and practice in the church that an inquiring stranger who chances upon both, would scarcely dream that there was any relation between the two of them. An intelligent observer of our human scene who heard the Sunday morning message and later watched the Sunday afternoon conduct of those who heard it would*

conclude that he had been examining two distinct and contrary religions. It appears to me that too many Christians want to enjoy the thrill of feeling right but are not willing to endure the inconvenience of being right." [A.W.Tozer. The Root of Righteousness. (Camp Hill, PA; Christian Pub, 1986), pp. 51-53]

The final step in this process that James gives us today is that you must allow ourselves to be moved to act on the word. He is talking here of putting the word to practical use. You see, you must not only respond to the word by acknowledging a need to do it, but you must find practical ways to actually do it.

A. Guard your tongue. That's right! James tells us that our "religion is worthless" unless our "tongue" is kept on a "tight rein." He has already told us that we are to be slow to speak. What he is saying here is somewhat different. Here he is saying that we need to control our speech. James knows that if we can learn to control our tongue, we can harness most of our other behavior as well.

B. Give to others. He says that practical religion is "to look after orphans and widows in their trouble." In other words, living out the word in a practical way will mean that we care about others. This has been one of the things that Christians have done well over the years. Historically, it has been the church of Jesus Christ has set up hospitals, orphanages, homes for the elderly, and many other social institutions designed to care for the needs of others.

People matter to God. And people should matter to us as well. One of the ways that we act on the word is to have compassion for people and do something to help them. It doesn't have to be huge. You might not be able to support them for life. But don't focus on what you can't do. Instead, focus on what you can do. You might not be able to do everything, but you can do something. And people will see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

C. Guard your life. He tells us at a mark of true spirituality is "to keep oneself unspotted" or "*to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*" In other words, keep your life clean. Guard it! Be careful! Watch what you do! Watch what you allow! Don't let anything keep you from having a pure heart and a clean mind.

Conclusion

Let me ask you an important question. What from today can you put into practice? What has God said to you? What in your life has kept you from really being able to serve God like you should? What are you willing to do about it? Has God said that you need to calm down? Is there too much anger in your life? Will you make a commitment today to get a handle on that?

Or perhaps God has spoken to you about a sin that you need to lay down. It could be a sin of commission or a sin of omission. By the way, some people think that sins of omission are sins that you simply haven't gotten around to yet. Sins of omission are things you should be doing but are not. In one case you need to lay down the sin you are committing and in the other case you need to lay down your refusal to do what God has told you to do.

You might simply need to stop talking and quit making excuses and blaming others. You might simply need to start living for Jesus Christ. Lay that sin down and guard your life. Make a commitment that you

will keep. As you think about what God is saying to you today, ask yourself this question. What can I DO. How can I apply what I know? Then — just do it!