

8am Sunday Worship Service

## **“DO WHAT IT SAYS”**

James 1:19-27

Key Verse: 1:22

“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”

In 1:18 James introduced the new birth that God has given us through the word of truth, the gospel. In this passage he tells us how to live after receiving the word of truth. The key words are “do” or “doing,” which appear six times (22[2],23, 24[2],26). “The word” (or its equivalent “the perfect law”) appears four times (21,22,23,25). The main idea of this passage is to do what the word says. Usually, we want to hear the most amazing teaching with our ears. And we like to talk about this teaching with our mouths. But in “doing” what the word says we may be weak and reluctant. There is a saying: “Only their lips will go to heaven.” This tells us that doing is not easy; it requires sacrifice, self-denial, and commitment. However, paradoxically, when we do what the word says, we experience the blessing of God overflowing in our lives. We can divide this passage into three parts, and each part has important exhortations. Let us take them to heart, put them into practice, and experience God’s blessing.

First, regarding listening, speaking and anger (19-21). We can approach verses 19-21 in two ways. Some scholars see them as general teachings, as we find in the book of Proverbs. Others consider them to apply to “the word” since they are bracketed by references to it (18,21,22,23). Both approaches are possible and helpful and will be considered. Verse 19 says, “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” This verse is prefaced by the words “take note of this,” which means to pay attention to, write down, and not forget the teachings. We should take note of exhortations about how we listen, speak and deal with anger in the Christian community. These exhortations are significant because relationships are built up, or broken, depending on how we practice these teachings.

The first one is “Everyone should be quick to listen.” This reminds us of the wisdom of Proverbs that careful listening is important. Proverbs 18:13 says, “To answer before listening--that is folly and shame.” Proverbs 19:20 says, “Listen to advice and accept discipline, and at the end you will be counted among the wise.” These proverbs tell us that being foolish or wise depends on how we listen. Those who listen well gain understanding but those who fail to listen misunderstand. Genuine understanding builds relationships, while misunderstanding breaks them. Someone who does not listen well leaves a trail of broken relationships. Those who listen well have many friends. In order to listen well, we need patience and to value the person speaking. This attitude of listening should also be applied in studying the word of God. Careful listening is essential in Bible study. Jesus said, “Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they think they have will be taken from them” (Lk 8:18). Yet we tend to read the word of God quickly and then speak what we have on our minds, saying, “This is not really related to the passage, but...” Then we are no longer engaged in Bible study and our souls are not nurtured by the word of God. If we are quick to listen to God’s word, and learn to listen carefully, abundant blessings will follow.

A second exhortation is “be slow to speak.” What does this mean? It means that we do not just say the first thing we think of. Rather we should wait until we fully understand the other person or the situation before we speak. Then our words are truly relevant, and we can build up a good working relationship based on trust. It is especially important to have the attitude of being slow to speak when teaching the word of God. Before speaking and teaching the word of God, we should study carefully until we grasp the meaning of it clearly. Then we can make a proper and precise application.

A third exhortation is “be slow to become angry.” This does not imply that all human anger is sinful. It refers to the quick-tempered, emotional anger that reveals lack of trust in God and others. This kind of emotional anger exacerbates any problem that needs to be dealt with, making it even harder to solve. Among many Biblical warnings about hot-tempered people,

Proverbs 29:22 says, “An angry person stirs up conflict, and a hot-tempered person commits many sins.” The author of the proverb says that it is not wise to associate with such people (Prov 22:24). Verse 20 explains why we should be slow to become angry: “It is because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.” Here “righteousness” refers to God’s righteous character that his people should emulate in their lifestyle. Human anger alone does not produce this righteousness. It is normal for anger to arise if anyone is a victim of injustice, or witnesses injustice. This anger may be a kind of righteous anger. But if this anger produces vengeance that leads to violence, it is no longer righteous anger. Rather, it is a perpetuation of the cycle of violence that will only make things worse.

Sometimes, when the word of God rebukes our sin, we can become angry. For example, when King Jehoiakim heard God’s words of judgment, he became so angry that he cut them from the scroll piece by piece and burned them in a fire (Jer 36:23). Though this may be an extreme case, we see the same attitude exhibited in our time, even by Christians. If we do not like a certain Bible verse, we may insist on our own idea, becoming angry. This attitude toward the word of God is wrong. We should respect the word of God even when we do not like it or fully understand it. In Isaiah 66:2b, the LORD says, “These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word.”

As we have seen, human anger is a serious problem. It is important for us to learn how to manage our anger. There are numerous programs and courses in anger management. Some tips include: “Take a breather,” “Go walk around,” “Stop talking,” “Count down,” “Take a timeout.” These can be helpful in managing the symptoms of anger, but they do not touch the root problem. However, verse 21 gets to the heart of the anger problem. It says, “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.” Here we find two instructions leading to sanctification, one negative and the other positive. Negatively, we need to get rid of all kinds of dirty things and wickedness which come from our sinful nature. These things cause us to become angry so that we plug our ears and do not hear (Ac 7:57). Positively, we should humbly accept the word planted in us. Here “humbly” means

submitting to whatever the word says to us. Humility enables us to turn from our own thoughts and old lifestyle and to receive the word of God. “The word” refers to the gospel message. When we humbly accept the gospel, it transforms us into godly people who live godly lives. This truth is echoed throughout the Bible. Colossians 3:8-10 say, “But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” Simply speaking, we should repent and accept the gospel with faith. Only the gospel can save us and produce the righteousness God desires (Php 2:12-13).

Second, be blessed in doing what the word says (22-25). Our attitude toward the word of God is vitally important. Now in verses 22-25, James tells us why we have to put the word into practice. Verse 22 says, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” The phrase “Do not merely listen to the word” does not mean to discount listening to the word; listening is especially important. However, listening is not enough. After listening, we should do what it says. Jesus taught his disciples to put his word into practice through the parable of foolish and wise builders (Mt 7:24-27). The foolish builder ignored the importance of laying a foundation and built his house on sand. In contrast, the wise builder dug down deep and laid a solid foundation on bedrock. When the storm came, the foolish man’s house was completely destroyed while the wise man’s house was unshaken.

Apostle Paul also taught the importance of putting God’s word into practice. But this is not just a matter of reading and doing, as we would follow instructions in a cookbook. It requires a deep understanding of the word and letting it transform our inner person first. Out of this transformed character the doing comes. As someone said, we are human beings, not human doings. In Colossians 2:6-7 he said, “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.” To take root in Christ through the word of God can be done in various ways: memorizing Bible verses, writing reflections on Bible passages, sharing what we learned with others, and more. The point is that God’s word

should become internalized as our own life source, world view and value system. As this happens, we begin to do what the word says in a genuine way as the natural expression of our faith. Putting the words of God into practice is the way to bear fruit. The late Dr. Samuel Lee used to say, "Putting one word of God into practice is more important than knowing 10,000 theological arguments." Dr. Lee often told us how the UBF mission movement began. As he and Mother Barry and their coworkers studied the gospels, they received deep grace from the stories of Jesus' compassion and love for people. At the end of each gospel they found Jesus' command to go into all the world and preach the gospel to all nations. This command troubled them. They wanted to obey, but it did not seem possible. Nevertheless, they began to pray and find ways to obey. They sent a missionary across the sea to Jeju Island. They caught nurses who were going to Germany and commissioned them on the spot. As they struggled to obey, God began to pour out his blessing. In a short time, hundreds and thousands of missionaries went to many nations of the world. Last Thursday we sent Philmar and Romaldo Kabua to the Marshall Islands as a missionary family. May God accept this as our prayer to obey the world mission command. May he renew the spirit to obey this command among us and use America as a missionary-sending nation.

On the other hand, those who listen to God's word but do not practice it deceive themselves. They assume that knowing is enough and through knowing they will grow and bear fruit. They can be compared to those who "audit" a class. They hear the lectures but do not write papers or take exams. They receive no credit for the course.<sup>1</sup> Without putting the word into practice we do not take root and bear fruit. So we must do what the word says.

In verses 23-24 James gives an analogy to illustrate his point: "Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like." The purpose of looking in a mirror is to examine ourselves and correct anything that is wrong. In the same way, the purpose of Bible study is to examine ourselves before the word of God

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<sup>1</sup> Swindoll, Charles R., *Swindoll's Living Insights: James 1&2 Peter*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2014) p. 40.

and correct our character, desires, habits, etc. Those who study the word of God without correcting themselves forfeit the blessing it gives.

On the other hand, those who receive correction from the word will be blessed abundantly. Verse 25 says, “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.” When we hear the word “law” it seems legalistic and burdensome. Though God’s law is holy, righteous, and good (Ro 7:12), it does not enable people to change their sinful lifestyles and submit to it. Rather, it brings condemnation and enslaves people under guilt and shame. But the perfect law is different. “The perfect law” is God’s law perfected by Jesus who fulfilled the law and interpreted it fully (Mt 5:17,22,28,32,34,39,44). This “perfect law” refers to the gospel, the word of truth. This is because it gives us true freedom: freedom from the power of sin, guilt and shame; freedom from the power of death and eternal condemnation. As this freedom takes root in our souls, symptoms of sin and death also disappear--fear, sorrow, anxiety, meaninglessness, powerlessness, and more. Instead, we are filled with joy and peace. Then we can obey the perfect law from our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit.

These blessings come when we look intently into this perfect law and continue in it, doing what we have heard. “To look intently” means to give great effort, attention, or concentration. A good example is the Bereans of Paul’s time. As they heard his message, they received it with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what he said was true. As a result, many of them believed in Jesus and received his salvation (Ac 17:11-12). Let’s study the Bible deeply, let the words of God transform us and do what the word says!

Third, practice true religion (26-27). Verses 26-27 give a practical application of what believers should do. We can find a contrast between worthless religion and true religion. First of all, worthless religion lacks power to control the tongue. Verse 26 says, “Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.” This refers to people who boast about themselves, or gossip about others’ failures and weaknesses. They may seem to be pious

and devout, but inwardly they are ungodly. Their words reveal what is really in their hearts. Their religion is worthless, futile, and empty. Martin Luther said, “A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing.”<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, true religion is to practice compassion toward those in need and to live a pure life. Verse 27 says, “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” Religion is not the legalistic, formal practice of tradition, and it is not vague and theoretical. True religion is God’s love in action. It emulates God’s character, especially his compassion and mercy. God is concerned about the poor, orphans, widows, and foreigners, who are vulnerable and helpless (Ex 22:22-24). God is merciful toward the marginalized (Ex 22:26-27). God is a father to the fatherless and a defender of widows (Ps 68:5). As his children, we should also look after orphans and widows in their distress. This is the religion God our Father accepts as pure and faultless.

Another characteristic of true religion is to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. Here “the world” refers to the fallen system under the devil’s dominion that is godless and immoral. The truth is suppressed by lies and slander. There is no respect for life. The strong take advantage of the weak; the clever trick the simple; the rich exploit the poor. Destruction and chaos are rampant. As we live in this world, it is easy to be influenced by the world. God’s children must not be conformed to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the Holy Spirit and live according to the truth of God (Ro 12:2). That is what God really wants from his children.

The words of God are a reservoir of life-giving wisdom which provide: salvation, meaning and purpose, and true hope of eternal glory. The words of God make our lives blessed and prosperous. Everyone is happy to hear about these blessings. But hearing about these blessings is not enough. We need to hear the word in such a way that it transforms us and put it into practice.

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<sup>2</sup> Platt, David, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in James*, (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014) p. 27.

Then we can receive God's blessings. Let us be doers of the word and not just hearers. May God richly bless us.