

Doing the Word

James 1:22-27

Faith drives faithfulness, and so those who trust in Christ are called to act on what they believe. James the son of thunder listened carefully to Jesus who warned His followers not to be like the servant who took the talent his master entrusted to him and buried it in ground (Matt. 25:25). So James contrasts the self-deceived who hear the word and forget about it, and those who hear the word, persevere in it, and practice pure religion before God.

Summary of the Text

The Puritan Thomas Manton says verse 22 grabs the heart of the verse 21. The implanted word saves your soul, and because it's planted in you, it bears fruit (v. 21; cf. Matt. 13:8, 23). Because Christ has given you His word, "*Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves*" (v. 22). Self-deception occurs when someone hears the word but doesn't do it, like looking at yourself in the mirror and then walking away, completely forgetting what you look like (vv. 23-24). The one who looks into God's perfect law of liberty, remembers, and acts on it, will be blessed in his deeds (v. 25). Anyone who thinks he is pious but doesn't bridle his tongue has a worthless religion (v. 26). In contrast to uncontrolled, destructive speech, pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is to care for orphans and widows in distress, and to keep yourself unspotted by the world (v. 27).

Self-Deception

Self-deception is an odd phenomenon that reveals the fallen human heart (cf. Jer. 17:9). Hearing without doing is not truly hearing, but the information is received. Scripture is God's verbal plenary inspired revelation, meaning He reveals Himself to us through all of it which is inspired by the Holy Spirit. The Word is sure (2 Pet. 1:19; Jn. 10:35). Whenever you read the Bible, the Lord speaks to you in the reading of those words. Your ideas for how to apply the words might be directed by the Spirit or not, but the text is God's word, and it reveals who we are and what we are to do. Self-deception occurs when we know what we ought to do and may even intend to follow through, but we then believe a lie that we tell ourselves and fail to do the word. This is like looking in the mirror, seeing a big piece of food in your teeth, but then turning away and forgetting to take it out. You wouldn't do that, which is James' point. But this is a bigger deal, a matter of faithfulness to God. How is it that we can lie to ourselves and believe it? Sin is outrageously unreasonable and this is why we need the gospel day in and day out. We are not merely to believe, but to believe and act on the word. We are to let the word convict us of self-deception, seek forgiveness, and grow.

The Law of Liberty

Whenever someone fails to succeed or live up to whatever they aimed for, the world's answer is look to yourself, believe in yourself, to dig down deep and know you have the strength that originates within you to do better. This is the gospel of Disney that catechizes kids and turns them into sentimental and blame-shifting adults who can't take responsibility for their actions. This doesn't prevent failure, but it prevents people from understanding and learning from it. We see this occurring societally as identity politics are weaponized when groups of people form victim classes based on race, gender, or sexual orientation. These groups blame their problems, real or imaginary, on other groups and seek favoritism. Scripture tells you not to look to your own heart but rather to Christ, to His word, to His perfect law of liberty (v. 25). Don't just hear it and conclude you are blessed. Rather, do it, continue in it, and walk in it and you will be blessed in whatever you put your hand to. There's a temptation to think of God's law as restrictive, which was the tactic that Satan employed in the garden and all self-deceiving lies since (Gen. 3:5). John Calvin helpfully explained the three uses of God's law: the pedagogical, political, and normative. The law convicts of sin and leads us to call on Christ for salvation

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(Ps. 19:7). The law curbs evil by declaring just penalties and punishments for sins and crimes (Rom. 13:4). And the law teaches us how to live rightly, loving God and our neighbor, growing in grace. This third, normative sense is what James means by embracing the law of liberty—the way of freedom. God law does restrict us from groveling before idols, dishonoring His name, working like slaves, dishonoring our parents, taking the lives of innocents, lusting after other wives and husbands, ripping people off, lying, and being covetous and discontent. These restrictions and the positives commands He issues are pure freedom. So the great Augustine can sum up the Christian imperative as *“Love God and do as you please.”* In Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son, the older brother complains about the celebration of his younger brother’s return, and accuses his father of never letting him have a good time, to which he replies: *“Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours”* (Lk. 15:31). The older brother is the Pharisees and scribes who complained about the tax collectors and sinners who were drawn to Jesus (Lk. 15:1-3). They were in God’s house—circumcised people marked by His covenant, with access to the wealth of His kindness—and yet chose to focus on tithing from their spice racks. These people were a caricature of righteousness and enemies of true freedom which is why Christ says *“unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven”* (Matt. 5:20). Hearing is the beginning obedience, but hearing alone is self-deception. Books, sermons, podcasts, education are all meant to lead to action. Remember the son who said good things but didn’t do them and son who resisted obedience but then went and obeyed his father anyway. Jesus favors the latter.

Pure Religion

We are not saved by good works but we are saved to them. Interestingly, James’ highlights a particular self-deception that happens with an unbridled tongue (v. 26). It’s not uncommon for conscientious, conservative Christians, the kind who would never get drunk or steal or cuss their neighbor out, to speak in an unbridled way rife with complaints and ingratitude and gossip. If we talk about loving God and edifying His people but then dress up our unconstructive whining as prayer requests, what good is it? You can say countless accurate, true, non-refutable awful things about other people that do not edify the people listening. Conversely, you can overflow with gratitude for what God has done and how He has blessed you through him and her and them and the other thing, causing people around you to realize how blessed they are. God commanded Adam to name the animals, to rule using his words. Jesus spoke with authority, not as the scribes, and equips us by the Spirit to use words, and not use other words, to extend the reign of His kingdom. James sounds like Jesus again describing pure religion as visiting orphans and widows in distress (v. 27). When the Son of Man judges the nations, He identifies the sheep as those who gave Him food, drink, shelter, clothing, who attended Him in sickness and visited Him in prison when they did these things to the least of His brethren (Matt. 25:35-36, 40). Boaz did this for Ruth the Moabitess who showed up poor and widowed in Israel. His success and power in the city didn’t distance him from caring for the displaced and needy. To “visit” is not simply to hang out, but to determine needs, care for, and deliver from hardship as God does when He visits His people. Through Boaz’s kindness and eventual love for Ruth he comes into the line of the messiah, and thus into the Christmas story (Matt. 1:5). In the context of visiting widows and orphans James says to be unspotted by the world. It’s a call to care for the things and people that God does even when the world despises them.