

9. Hearers and Doers of the Word

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But 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.

(James 1:22-25)

Hearing and Doing Belong Together

In the previous chapter we dealt with James 1:19-21, where James warns against not listening to others but being very quick to become angry. He ended with the command that we must humbly accept the word that is planted in us. God plants the word and we are then called to receive it and to take it. All the passages in James' writing are intricately connected. Having spoken about the word that is planted in us, James now proceeds to examine how we accept the word and what we do with it. This is the well-known theme that we must be doers and not just hearers of the word. This theme returns later in the letter, but here it is powerfully introduced with the remarkable example of a mirror.

I mentioned earlier that Martin Luther objected to the canonicity of the letter of James because of the emphasis on doing, on works. Luther felt that the central notion of faith alone by grace was being compromised. His criticism starts with our current text, where James writes that it is not enough that we just *hear* the law but that we must also *do* the law.

We should not think that Luther was against observing the law, but we should realize that in his time, he had to oppose a prevailing theology of righteousness based on the law. Then we can understand his overriding concern. Honestly expressing this concern also opens our eyes for possible danger, yet we must understand that James makes a very important point in

the text: hearing the word and doing the word belong *together*. We may not separate the two.

It is also important to note that this is not just the peculiar emphasis of James. The Lord Jesus strongly stated that we must put into practice that which we have heard: “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice,” that is, everyone who is a hearer *and* a doer, “is like a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matt 7:24). Hearing leads to doing, just like a good tree bears good fruit. We cannot call Jesus our Lord and then fail to do the will of our heavenly father. James is therefore on the same track as Christ. The Lord Jesus calls us to be hearers and doers of the word. We will look at the superficial listening to the word, the deeper understanding of the word, and the abundant blessing by the word.

The Danger of Superficiality

There are a number of other churches where there is some preaching and where the Bible is read, but there are not many with such an emphasis on preaching as the Reformed churches. We place much emphasis on knowing the doctrine of the Bible. We do not have a loose subscription to our creeds and confessions, but a very strong and a very strict subscription. This is indeed proper, but there is always a danger associated with seeing and hearing something often, and that is the danger of superficiality.

Superficiality is dangerous because it easily goes unrecognized. When people go to church regularly, attend Bible study societies, and are even members of the school societies, we tend to conclude that they are exemplary members of our church. In those things, they are examples, and those are good things to do. But James wants to dig a little deeper into our lives. He writes in 1:22, “Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves.”

We may make a distinction here between listening and hearing. Listening means that we are present during a service and that we hear what is being said, but we do not absorb or internalize it. We are merely listening. From the outside, it looks as if we are very focused and are drinking in what is being said, but that is only a show. We are not truly hearing, for in the context of the text, hearing means that we eagerly take the word into ourselves, believe it wholeheartedly, and apply it faithfully to our lives.

The point that James raises here is not that we are fooling others, but that we are deceiving ourselves. We can fool all people some of the time, and some people all of the time, but the worst is that we deceive ourselves in this way. The worst deception is self-deception. If anybody would dare to approach us

and suggest that we are unfaithful, or admonish us on a certain point, we would say, “Who are you to criticize me? I am a faithful member of the church.” But James writes, rather tersely, “Do what it says.” It is easy to claim Jesus as Lord, but we must do what he says. Otherwise, he will say to us, “I never knew you. Away from me...” (Matt 7:23). If we do not show on earth that we know him, then he will not recognize us before his father. He will say, “Who are you?”

The Mirror

To illustrate his point very clearly, James uses the example of someone who looks into a mirror. There are various kinds of mirror-gazers. We can usually tell the difference between the two main kinds in our own family or circle of friends. There are those who take a quick look at themselves, a cursory glance. They might make some minor adjustments to their appearance, but that is the extent of it and they move right along. James writes that such people immediately forget what they look like.

Then there are those who can stand in front of a mirror for hours. They notice every line and wrinkle, every strand of hair that is out of place, and when they leave the mirror, they have to walk very carefully so that nothing is disheveled. Such people do not forget what they look like, but are very conscious of their appearance and concerned with maintaining it exactly as it was when they looked into the mirror.

Now we must keep in mind the point of James’ illustration. The mirrors in his time were apparently not the clear glass kind we have today. They were crude, polished metal. They did not give an accurate reflection, and a person actually had to look at it from various angles. To discover anything, to get the right picture, one had to look in such a mirror extra carefully.

In the first example, the man looks into the mirror in a routine, obligatory check. He may even see some problems or some blemishes, but he has no interest or time to consider improvement, for he “goes away and *immediately* forgets what he looks like.” It does not even take him one minute. He does not care about his appearance or what others will think about it; he just goes on his own way. He quickly looks and he continues his life as it pleases him.

The mirror, however, is the perfect law of liberty, as we learn in the next verse. The word “law” in this context should not be taken as a contrast to the gospel. The apostle Paul sometimes uses it that way – the law of Moses as opposed to the gospel – but James does not mean that here. He is speaking

about the law as it is fulfilled in Christ, a rule of gratitude and love. James writes that it is “the perfect law that gives freedom,” and we will come back to that later. For now, we conclude that the law means the Word of God. It speaks about our justification by faith and also our sanctification to do good works. It is the Word of God that exposes our sins and sinfulness, but also shows us the way of righteousness and holiness by the blood and spirit of Christ.

Superficial Listening

The man has heard all this. He has looked into the mirror and it may have fascinated him, if but for a moment, and maybe he said, “Nice sermon, Pastor,” but it did not affect him. It did not touch him, and above all, it did not change him. He goes his way and before he is even out of the church building, he has forgotten what was said.

Now, one person is more forgetful than another, but the reality is that we tend to easily forget things that we do not consider important upon hearing. That is often how the mind works. We do not really listen well and we do not really hear what is said. We doze off now and then, and as we walk away, our minds are already elsewhere. And this is how we know that somebody is only a listener: nothing ever changes in his life. He never misses church, perhaps, but he never hears the word, either. Such a person never changes or exhibits growth, but thinks that everything is okay. The acme of self-deception still exists, but the Bible says that faith must be evident in fruit, in good works, in repentance, and in renewal. “By its fruits, true faith is known.”

Those who are only listeners never change. Superficial listening to the word is always a danger in the church. We all know that our daily life does not come close to the call of God that is heard in the preaching every Sunday, to the word that is read diligently every day of the week. We know it all and we have heard it before, but how does it really affect us? We can become callous in the inner ear. There can be a blockage in the main artery to the heart. And after a while, we really have no time for the word. We take a quick look and we say, “Well, I look pretty decent, so I’ll just move right along. I’m satisfied with myself and so the Lord should also be satisfied with me.”

Sometimes, there are those who criticize others in the church because of the emphasis on doing, on holy living, and on sanctification. Then we say, “Good works cannot save us.” That is true, and the others will also readily acknowledge it, but good works *must* become apparent. The catechism puts it very strongly in Lord’s Day 24: “It is impossible that those grafted into Christ by true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness.” It is impossible.

Superficial listening is, in fact, a refusal to hear the word because that word demands change, repentance, and renewal. Instead of blocking out that word, we must come to a deeper understanding of it.

A Deeper Understanding

James also writes about “the man who looks intently” into the law of God, and the word used here for “look” means to bend down and look closely. He really examines the law. He is trying to gain a deeper understanding of what it says. He is putting forth an effort to learn and grow. And this should warn us already not to skip church services or to despise Bible study societies. We should make time for daily devotions and meditation on Scripture, too. A deeper understanding comes only through hard work. We have to *work* with the Bible, with the law.

Notice that James now qualifies the law as the “perfect” law. He uses the same word here as earlier in the letter, the word that is translated as “mature” or “full-grown”. In this sense, it is the law that has come to its perfection. The perfect law is the law that leads us to spiritual maturity. (Remember James’ theme that we must grow towards spiritual maturity, a theme that comes up once again in this text.) Do we want to become mature in faith? Do we want to be spiritually strong? Then we need to grow in the understanding of the perfect law, the law that our Lord Jesus Christ himself fulfilled and of which he showed the depth. This is the law that he upheld in his own life. What effect, by the Holy Spirit, does this holy law now have in our life? If it truly functions in our lives, we do not go up and down morally like a yo-yo, or get caught up in every wind of doctrine, but we learn to stand firm in the faith. We become spiritually mature.

Will such a focus on the law not lead again to Judaism? Will we not again become slaves of the law, as happened under the old dispensation? Does this not inevitably lead to righteousness based on works, as Luther feared so desperately? Some explainers try to locate a deep rift here between James and Paul. Paul warns us to stand fast in our Christian freedom and not allow ourselves to again become slaves of the law. He says, “Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1).

What kind of slavery is he speaking about? It is the slavery of seeking justification by the law. Paul calls that a falling away from grace, and this is serious business. Certainly, God’s grace must remain in the very center of *all* things.

How can James then tell us that we must go back to the law? How can it ever be the mirror by which we examine ourselves?

The Law of Liberty

James writes, “the perfect law that gives freedom.” If Paul wants to stress that the people of God are free, then James does no less. Notice that James does not say the law *makes* us free; only Jesus Christ and the spirit of God make us free. What James writes is that the law has everything to do with *being* free. Literally translated, the phrase is actually “the law of liberty”. James knows that we cannot redeem ourselves by the works of the law. He does not want to leave the impression that we must again become slaves of the law. On the contrary, he says it is the perfect law, the law of freedom, because in Christ we are now free from the slavery of sin. The law therefore can no longer condemn us. It does not enslave us but has become a law of liberty.

Do we find this a strange expression? How can the law be called a law of liberty? Even children understand that once the law is laid down, we are no longer free. We are bound to certain rules. Well, it is really very simple. Whoever obeys the law of God from the heart shows thereby that he is no longer under the dominion of sin, that he is freed from the slavery of Satan. It is strange that people think they are only free if they may break the law, when it is that very breaking of the law that leads to destruction of life and chaos in society.

Those who learn to understand the law in the light of Christ’s redeeming work see it as a law of liberty. We are free in the Lord and we want to remain so. We do not want to become slaves of ourselves and our sin again. When we study the law and gain a deeper understanding of it, we see more and more how Christ sets us free from the dominion of sin by his spirit and word.

The devil would like to have us believe that we are free only when we do whatever we want. That is the age-old lie. He said it already in Paradise, and he has been repetitive ever since. He has a very simple formula: be free, break the law. But God says, “No, if you want to be free, then you *keep* the law in Jesus Christ.” If we follow Satan’s formula, we become slaves to our sins, our passions, and the lust of this world. We join the stampede, much like the buffalo used to do, not realizing they were heading for a cliff from which they would plunge to their certain death. The run is exciting, but the end is devastating.

Perseverance

The man who looks intently into the law, that is, studies and applies it because he knows that reward and blessing lie in the keeping of it, is truly free. Christ has made him free, and the last thing he wants to do is fall into the sins he did formerly. He wants to be mature. Maturity is a matter of applying the law to ourselves. There is nobody else around except us and the Lord. We know that we are sinful people, easily misled and weak in many aspects of life, therefore we turn time and again to the law that Christ fulfilled, of which he bore the penalty. We live a life that is now a rule of thankfulness.

James stresses that the man not only looks intently into the law, but he continues to do so. He perseveres. He remembers what he has read or heard and he is very careful not to forget it, but to apply it to the situations of his life. The word has a lasting effect on him. The law has a binding and a building power. He does not forget it, but he lives out of it every day.

This is not something we should take for granted. The perseverance of the saints, which we confess, is a great gift of God. In the very section of the *Canons of Dort* where we confess this, however, we also admit that the saints can and do fall into deep and grievous sin. And when do we fall into deep and grievous sin? “When [we] do not watch and pray...” (Canons of Dort, V, Art. 4).

How can our prayers be kept pertinent? How can our minds remain watchful if they are not shaped and filled by the word of God? Sin will happen and we will never be perfect, but we must mature in faith as the years in our life progress. I find it remarkable that a line of Psalm 25:3 of the *Book of Praise* reads, “Sins of youth remember not...” Sins of youth must remain sins of youth. As we grow in faith, we leave behind childish ways. The same psalm speaks about hidden transgressions. These must be overcome through prayer, obedience, and struggle. Can we sing openly and honestly before God, “Sins of youth remember not, nor recall my hid transgression”?

The Two Houses

Whoever matures in faith receives the abundant blessing by the Word. James writes, “[the man] who continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does.” Here we come back to the “Sermon on the Mount” again. Many commentators draw parallels

between the letter of James and the “Sermon”, and I think rightly so. Blessed are the hearers and doers of the word for they will prosper in all they do.

“He will be blessed in what he does.” Why? Because he deserves it? No, for it is all grace. This promise is not a blank check. God gives his blessing in the way of obedience. When we give all things to Christ, when we commit ourselves to the law and the gospel of the Lord, then the Lord commits himself to us. That is the essence of the covenant. We will be blessed. If we organize our life along sinful lines, without God, then we might think that we are achieving a whole lot when in fact we are achieving nothing.

Let us look at Matthew 7 in more detail. There we read about two builders. One builds on a rock and the other builds on sand. I imagine that building on rock in mountainous areas is more difficult than building on sand. The builder has to chisel away the rock to make a level place, and then he has to cart all the building materials up the mountain. The builder who chooses a sandy location has a flat surface already and he probably also has a great view of the ocean. Everybody thinks that the man with the condo on the beach is smart and that the man up in the hills is a fool.

The Lord Jesus, however, tells us that “everyone who hears these words of [his] and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock...But everyone who hears these words of [his] and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand” (Matt 7:24, 26). Then the rain, the wind, and the torrents came. The house on the rock stood firm because of its solid foundation, but the house on the sand fell with a great crash because it had no foundation. The water just swept the sand away, for sand is very weak. One house is not better than the other, but it is the foundation that matters.

The Abundant Blessing

The Lord gave his “Sermon on the Mount”, the perfect law of liberty applied in great depth and all its riches, and he ended with the section about the builders, saying, “Okay, you have heard my words, now what are you going to *do* with them? Will you be a hearer only, or also a doer?” And James writes in the same way, saying that we will be blessed if we keep the word.

From Psalm 19:5 of the *Book of Praise*, we sing that “he who with faith in [God] keeps [his ordinances] obediently will reap a great reward.” God’s blessing does not mean that everything always goes smoothly, without any problems or glitches. Remember that James has written in this same chapter that we must face trials of many kinds. Only a very immature Christian would

conclude that if we do God's will, nothing can go wrong. Trials are needed in order to grow up in the faith. A tree that bears good fruit still needs to be pruned back in order to bear more fruit.

So the Lord knows exactly what he is doing with our lives. The blessing is that he will be with us every step of the way, and he often grants us more and better than we can even imagine. Whatever the case, when the storm strikes, the house will stand because it is built upon the rock. "Through life's storm and tempest our Guide hast Thou been"(Hymn 59:2).

Somebody once wrote that it is amazing that wherever the true gospel was embraced, life was blessed and generally prosperity was granted. People became free in many ways. Where there is respect for God, there is also respect for his creation and creatures. I am not a historian, nor can I say that this was always the case, but it was certainly true for Israel. Whenever the Israelites served the Lord, he blessed them abundantly; whenever they fell away, he chastised them severely. We need only read the book of Judges to discover this.

God has not changed. This is even more true for the church of Christ. As the letter to the Hebrews asks, if we reject so great a salvation, what is left? What will our end be? Where will we go if we reject the only Savior, if we are hearers but not doers of the Word? Christ will say, "I don't even know you." We must be hearers *and* doers. And we will discover that there is great reward in the keeping of God's law. The law is never without the gospel. The greatest blessing is the forgiveness of sins and the joy of living that never ends. Let us grow and mature in the Word, with its abundant blessings.