

Pastor Steven J. Cole  
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship  
123 S. Beaver Street  
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001  
[www.fcfonline.org](http://www.fcfonline.org)

## DOERS OF THE WORD

James 1:22-27

By

Steven J. Cole

June 5, 2005

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James Lesson 7

## Doers of the Word James 1:22-27

Pastor Stuart Briscoe was teaching the principles of Bible study. 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."

Underlining the Bible's commands in blue might make for a colorful Bible, but the point of the commands is that we *obey* them. Unfortunately, there are many people in evangelical churches who have their heads filled with information from the Bible, but they don't obey what the Bible commands. That may sound harsh, but surveys commonly show that there is substantially no difference between evangelical Christians and the population at large on most moral and social beliefs and behavior.

For example, pollster George Barna (in *World* [12/6/03], p. 33) found that one out of three "born-again Christians" (defined as "those who report having made a personal commitment to Christ and expect to get to heaven because they accepted Jesus") accept same-sex unions. Thirty-nine percent believe it is morally acceptable for couples to live together before marriage. And, born-again Christians are *more likely* than non-Christians to have experienced divorce (27 to 24 %)!

James would be aghast! Although the readers to whom he wrote differ from the modern church, his message is just as relevant now as it was when he wrote it. He's saying,

To hear the word and not do it leads to deception,  
but to hear the word and do it leads to blessing.

When I counsel couples who want to get married, I ask them to fill out a form that asks, among other questions, whether or not they are having sexual relations. The follow-up question asks how they feel about their physical relationship. They can check "good," "concerned," "guilty," or "trapped." I have often seen couples check that they have sex often and they feel good about it!

I ask such couples, "Do you want God's blessing on your marriage?" I've never had one couple say, "Nah!" I follow that question by explaining that if you want God's blessing, you've got to obey His word. To ask God to bless your life while you disobey His word is crazy. James lines up with all of Scripture when he says that it is the doer of the word that will be blessed in what he does.

In James 1:21, he talked about receiving "the word implanted, which is able to save your souls." In 1:22-27, he goes on to emphasize doing the word. In 1:22-24, he shows that hearing the word without doing it leads to deception. He illustrates this in 1:26 with the man who claims to be religious, but who does not bridle his tongue. He deceives himself and his religion is worthless. In 1:25, he shows that hearing the word accompanied by doing it leads to blessing. He illustrates this with two examples in 1:27: caring for orphans and widows; and, keeping oneself unstained by the world.

It is important to realize that James is addressing church-going people. He is not writing to pagans, but to those who regularly hear the word of God. Probably, they took some 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. But James cuts through the veneer to the heart!

1. To hear the word without doing it leads to self-deception (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. Even seemingly irrelevant matters, such as biblical genealogies, are "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16). James gives us three warnings about those who hear the word without doing it:

- A. Hearers-only of the word take a quick glance, but don't do anything to fix what they see.

James uses the illustration of a man (the Greek word stipulates a man, as distinguished from a woman) 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). 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 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.

#### B. Hearers-only of the word forget what they heard.

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 quickly forgets what he saw (1:24). He is a "forgetful hearer" (1:25). And so he does nothing about the problems he saw in the mirror.

I think that 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." Just two chapters later (Deut. 8:2), he repeats, "You shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you ...."

Psalm 103:2 warns God's people to "forget none of His benefits." It promises that the Lord's lovingkindness is on those who "remember His precepts to do them" (103:18b). Psalm 106:7 warns of how "our fathers in Egypt ... did not remember Your abundant kindnesses ...." In verse 13 he states, "They quickly forgot His works; ..." He adds (106:21), "They forgot God their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt, ..." 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. You ask them to clean their room. You come back in an hour, and they're playing, but their room hasn't been touched. You say, "I told you to clean your room," and they reply, "I forgot!" Right! It's not that your child has a memory problem. Cleaning his room just isn't very high on his priority list, until you impose a stiff enough penalty to push it up to the top!

So hearers-only take a quick glance in the mirror of the word, but they don't do anything to fix the problems that they see. They forget what they see because other things are more important.

### C. Hearers-only end up deceiving themselves.

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 delude yourself. 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 (sometimes repeated, such as Ezra 2 & Nehemiah 7; see my two sermons on these chapters). 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 be asking how it applies to your life. If you can't figure out how a text applies, move on to those that plainly apply. As Mark Twain is reputed to have said, "It isn't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me. It's the parts I do understand!"

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.

James will deal more with the tongue in chapter 3, but 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. The Bible has very specific and practical commands on each of these areas. If you profess to follow Christ, but don't apply the Bible to your speech, you're fooling yourself if you think that you're religious. Your religion is worthless and your profession is empty. The solution to this problem is...

2. To hear the word and do it leads to blessing (1:25, 27).

The one who hears the word and becomes an effectual doer "will be blessed in what he does." There are four things to note:

A. The blessed hearer and doer looks intently at the word.

Rather than a quick glance, the 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 was not a casual, quick look! They peered in there carefully, trying to see if

the body of Jesus was inside. It's also used of the angels longing to look into the matters of our salvation (1 Pet. 1:12). 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.

One of Yogi Berra's quirky comments is, "You can see a lot just by looking." That's true of Bible study. I've often read a passage many times, but missed something that seems so obvious once I see it. That's why I enjoy reading the sermons of men like J. C. Ryle and Martyn Lloyd-Jones. They make practical observations about verses that seem so obvious 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 did. As you look intently at the word, ask God first to help you understand what it meant to the original readers. 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 blessed hearer and doer applies the word not just to his outward behavior, but 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, the law of liberty." 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, 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 (Matt. 15:8, citing Isaiah 29:13), "This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me."

Douglas Moo (*The Letter of James* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 94) argues that by “the perfect law,” James is not referring simply to the Law of Moses. 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 of liberty, 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.” Donald Burdick confirms (*Expositors Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [Zondervan], 12:176), “ . . . it does not enslave. It is not enforced by external compulsion. Instead, it is freely accepted and fulfilled with glad devotion under the enablement [sic] of the Spirit of God (Gal. 5:22-23).”

God’s word applied to our hearts by the Holy Spirit frees us from bondage to sin (John 8:31-36). As I’ve often emphasized, we must apply the word on the thought level if we want to overcome sin, because all sin stems from the heart (Mark 7:21-23).

C. The blessed hearer and doer continues applying the word to his heart.

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. He gets his answer and says, “Thanks, see you next time I’m in trouble!” Rather, the Bible 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 blessed hearer and doer looks intently at the word. He applies it, not just to his outward behavior, but also to his heart. He continues applying it over a lifetime. Finally,

D. The blessed hearer and doer applies the word so that it changes his conduct and his character in the sight of God.

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. But these two examples represent "pure and undefiled 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. In Psalm 68:5, God is called "a father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows." He has a special concern for the helpless who could not provide for themselves.

- (1) The applied word results in selfless conduct in the sight of God.

The word "visit" means more than dropping in for a social call, although it includes that. It comes from the same word that is translated "overseer," describing the work of elders. It means to look out for, care for, and be concerned about. To show this concern for orphans and widows requires that a person take his focus off of himself and his needs and think about others and their needs. Usually, there is no payback when you care for orphans and widows. In that society, they were poor and not able to work.

What motivates you to care for them is, you know they have needs, you apply the golden rule (how you would want to be treated if you were in their situation), and you do it to please God, who sent His Son so that you could be adopted into His family. The point is that when God's word takes root in our hearts, it shifts our focus from self to others.

One practical way that I've found to move from having good intentions to obey the word to actually doing it is, *to put it in my schedule*. It's easy for me to think, "I need to go see so-and-so and encourage him in his faith." Great thought, but if I don't put it in my schedule, it won't happen, because I don't have a lot of spontaneous free time where I'm wondering what to do.

- (2) The applied word results in separated character in the sight of God.

James says that pure and undefiled religion is "to keep oneself unstained by the world." The world refers to the evil system under

Satan's domain that is opposed to God. It is dirty and defiling. As God's people, we are to be *in* the world, but not *of* the world (John 17:15-19). We are not to join monasteries to keep ourselves from being tainted by this evil world. James later says (4:4), if we make friends with the world, we have made ourselves enemies of God. He means that we are not to embrace the world's goals, priorities, and temporal values. We should not find pleasure in the world's entertainment if it mocks God and His word. To be more specific, most TV shows and movies will defile you. Avoid them! But, we are to go into the world and befriend sinners, as the Savior did, and yet not be stained by their evil thinking and evil deeds.

### 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 ask you what I ask young couples, "Do you want God's blessing in your life?" If you say yes, then James' answer is clear: Don't be a forgetful hearer of the word. Become an effectual doer and you will be blessed by God.

### Application Questions

1. How can we make sure that our application of Scripture is accurate? What guidelines apply?
2. Often our areas of disobedience are blind spots. How can we see these areas that we often overlook?
3. Where do spiritual gifts fit in with obedience to the word? For example, is a person who lacks the gift of mercy required to visit orphans and widows?
4. How separate from the world are Christians to be? If we don't watch TV or go to movies, won't we be out of touch when it comes to relating to the lost? See John 17:14-19; Eph. 5:3-12.

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