

Is Hearing God's Word Enough? – James 1:22-27

Nate Ryan – June 28, 2020

Good morning, for those of you who don't know me, my name is Nate Ryan and I am a lifelong member of Brewster Baptist Church. I have had the pleasure of serving as an intern under the mentorship of Pastor Doug for each of the past two Summers as I work towards completing my master's degree in theology at Boston College. I am both grateful and blessed to have the opportunity of sharing God's words with you this morning.

Perhaps you have recognized that the songs and Scriptures chosen for this service each emphasize the transformative power of the Word of God and our subsequent call as Christians to respond to it accordingly with love for our neighbor. But I think if we were all to be truly honest with ourselves, we would recognize that saying these words and singing these lyrics often equate to little more than vain attempts to make us feel better about ourselves or make us feel like we are doing the "right" thing, as if we are just checking off the boxes of what our Christian social circles deem to be right and acceptable behavior. Whether we like to admit it or not, I think many of us have created what I affectionately call a "formulaic faith." We rationalize within ourselves that if we go to worship **this** many times a month, or pray **this** often daily, or read **this** many passages of Scripture weekly, then we have done our due diligence and can rest assured that God looks upon us with favor.

And it's easy to fall into this mode of thinking because unfortunately, for many of us this is the faith that we've inherited. During the Summers of 2015 and 2016, I had the pleasure of serving as a camp counselor at Berea Ministries up in Hebron, NH. Each week, a new crop of

young teens would come and experience the good news of the Gospel, often for the first time, through the message of some of the country's most prominent Christian speakers and worship bands. These kids would have an absolute blast and often leave at the end of the week feeling something strange stirring in their hearts brought on by the Holy Spirit, a certain warmth they struggled to describe. As counselors, we were trained to assure these kids that they must plug themselves into a local church, that they must read the Bible, and that they must commit to a life of prayer so that they can continue to feel this sense of connection with to the God they had encountered in that space. Now of course, none of these things we were encouraging these kids to do were in themselves bad. In fact, one can make a good argument that each of those things are vital to the essence of the Christian life. But ultimately, I found that this agenda we were imposing on these students was sadly incomplete. What our teachings implicitly taught them was that there was a right formula for Christian living that if perfected, would cause all of their life's difficulties and challenges to instantly vanish and that the "fire for Christ" they felt would never go away if they simply did these things. In the end, this was a convoluted and feeble message that did not accurately depict the way Christ actually calls us to live. When this is the image of faith we impose upon young believers, it is no wonder why so many walk away from the church, because they find it impossible to live up to the legalistic standards we claim earns them God's favor. Perhaps this doesn't look too far removed from our own experiences. Maybe you find yourself guilty of imposing this sort of agenda on other Christ followers as I have? Or maybe you personally are struggling with your own faith, feeling as though you have to live up to a certain set of standards in order to feel worthy to be called a Christian.

But this is not what the Scriptures teach us. The reality is that there is no formulaic method that produces God's righteousness within us. There is no schedule of reading God's

word that I can cling to in order to be looked upon favorably in his sight. And there is no perception of pious living I can portray to others that validates that I am doing my Christian duty. But what the Scriptures do teach us is that pious living actually amounts to very little if we are not susceptible to the message of the word of God and let it influence the way we live in accordance with others.

This is perhaps made most abundantly clear in the epistle of James, written by the brother of our Lord in the middle of the first century. A primary theme throughout this epistle is the harmonious relationship James sees between faith and good works. In the history of the Christian tradition, primarily during the life of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformations of the 16th century, the relationship between faith and works was the subject of bitter controversy. In fact, Luther famously called the Book of James a quote “epistle of straw” because he could not reconcile what he interpreted to be a works-based righteousness encouraged in the letter with the doctrine of justification by faith alone he became so well known for. But nevertheless, James does rightly hold a place in our New Testament canon for a reason, and therefore its contents cannot be glossed over or understated. Its message is abundantly clear: if we do not allow the Word of God to actively influence the way we live in our communities; our faith is deceptive and ultimately meaningless. Listen to these words from the epistle of James, chapter 1 verses 22-27.

be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act – they will be blessed in their doing.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

As I was meditating on this passage earlier this week, I was struck by how the theme of “remembrance” is repeated. Clearly, James urges us to not merely hear the Word of God, but to put it into action, but it is the way he describes those who fail to do this that is rather peculiar. He does not call them lazy or lethargic or lukewarm or apathetic as one might expect, but instead, he calls them **forgetful**. The reason they fail to be doers of the Word of God is because they have forgotten something. James uses a metaphor to unpack this idea. He states, *“For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.”* Now this is, admittedly, one of the most difficult metaphors in the entire New Testament to unpack because upon first reading it, it is unclear what the mirror is supposed to represent. What is further challenging is trying to understand what the connection between being a doer of the Word of God and a person forgetting what they look like in a mirror is. Unfortunately, I think the true meaning of this metaphor has, quite literally, become lost in translation.

The word “themselves” as it stands in English is not in the original Greek text. For some reason, our English translations of the New Testament fail to capture the true essence of this metaphor by changing that one word. Quite literally, the words which translate to “themselves” in Greek is τὸ πρόσωπον τῆς γενέσεως αὐτοῦ, or in English, “the face of their birth.” So when read with this in mind, the passage should be read, *“For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at **the face of their birth** in a mirror; for they look at*

themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.” What does it mean to look at the face of our birth? And why do we have to remember it? And furthermore, what does it have to do with being doers of the Word of God?

Do you remember the story in John chapter 3 of Jesus and Nicodemus, when Jesus claims that in order to enter the Kingdom of God, one has to be born again? The “birth” James is talking about here, which our English Bibles fail to mention, is our new birth in Christ, the fundamentally changed individuals we were when we professed Christ as our savior and surrender our lives to him. James is telling us that those who are not doers but merely listeners of the word of God are essentially staring at their previous selves, the persons they were when they were first transformed by the power of God’s grace, and completely forgetting what that were like. They have forgotten the feeling they experienced when they knew that for the first time the weight of their sin and shame was gone. Those who hear the word of God then, but do not put it into practice, have forgotten the gravity of what God has already done in their lives. They have forgotten the power of his grace, the faithfulness he has continually showed them, and ultimately the outpouring of his love which he has bestowed upon them on the cross.

Instead, James calls us to look deeply within the mirror of his metaphor, seeing the transformed individuals that we are in Christ, and acting boldly in the world by putting the message of the Scriptures into action before us. He calls the Word of God the “law of liberty” for a reason. Our new identities in Christ should promote freedom within us to go and proclaim the good news in both word and deed instead of making us feel like we have to comply with a set standard of Christian living in order to become worthy of God’s love. In other words, we do not have to live in fear. We do not need to feel burdened trying to live up to “perfect” standards of Christian living because Christ has already lived up to those standards for us. God sees us as

righteous in his sight not because we are or ever will be by our own doing, but because God has already declared us so by the death and resurrection of his Son. Therefore, we can live in freedom, never having to worry about whether we are living “pious” enough life in order to rightly be called a Christian. Instead, by looking deeply within ourselves and remembering the new life we have been given in Christ, we can freely humble ourselves to being transformed by the teachings of God’s Word. The pressures that we and others put on ourselves to read the Bible **enough**, or to go to worship **enough**, or to pray to God **enough** profit us nothing if it only leads us to forget the Gospel of freedom we have been given. It is only through truly living in this freedom and remembering the grace that God has shown us that we can begin to be doers and not merely hearers of God’s Word.

But this all begins with humility. James calls out those who pridefully live as though they are the most religiously pious people in their community. He calls their religion worthless and even goes as far as to say they deceive themselves by believing that this is the correct pathway to righteousness. Again, living by these standards of what constitutes “right” Christian living is ultimately worthless, for it does not take the Word of God and allow it to transform our hearts, which motivates us to do good in the world. If we eliminate our pride and first acknowledge that our righteousness comes from God alone and not by our own doing, we will begin to see the words of the Scriptures penetrating our hearts in a new way, a way that guides us in service towards others by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In 1878, the Salvation Army, under the leadership of their founder William Booth, was just beginning to make a cultural divot in the life of the United Kingdom. Men and women from all over the world were leaving their jobs and enlisting in Booth’s ministry. One of them was a young Methodist by the name of Samuel Brengle from Boston. By age 25, Brengle was pastoring

one of the largest Methodist Churches in the United States and had high personal aspirations to become a bishop when he received a spiritual call to join William Booth and his efforts. He quickly made arrangements to sail across the Atlantic Ocean and personally approached William Booth outside his Nottingham home asking if he could join the Salvation Army, unannounced. Needless to say, William Booth was skeptical of this young pastor who had ambushed him at his door and only accepted his services reluctantly. After a few tumultuous months, it became clear to Booth that Samuel Brengle lacked the humility necessary to be an effective asset to his ministry. One day, he approached Brengle and said, "You've been your own boss for far too long. I have arranged for you to go and shine the boots of all the other trainees." Brengle was outraged by this and said, "Have I followed my own fancy across the Atlantic in order to just shine other people's shoes?" At that moment, Brengle contemplated leaving the mission altogether and returning to the States with virtually nothing to show for his efforts. But the next morning, Samuel Brengle woke up from his sleep and believed that he had met the Lord in a dream. He wrote in his personal journal that he had seen Jesus, bent over washing the rough and calloused feet of his fisherman disciples. Moved and ashamed, Brengle walked over and approached Jesus, and whispered, "Lord, if you washed their feet, then I will shine their shoes." And that is exactly what he did.

This became a pivotal moment in Samuel Brengle's life as he would later assume to one of the most high-ranking officials in the Salvation Army, faithfully serving the Lord through his service to the poor and disenfranchised communities of Victorian London. This story has survived the test of time because it provides us with a beautiful example of how the Christian life is not one of perceived piety, but of humility and selfless love. Samuel Brengle had done everything he could in his life to make others presume a sense of holiness within himself,

without actually allowing his heart to be transformed by the power of the Gospel and thus moved towards self-sacrificial love of others reminiscent of his Lord.

The plea that James makes at the end of this passage is to not look pridefully upon your weekly Christian routine and see it as indicative of your holiness or your Christ-likeness in and of themselves. Worship, prayer, and personal devotion are all intended to orient our hearts toward God so that we can fulfill his Greatest Commandments, to love him with all of our heart, and soul, and mind and to love our neighbor as ourselves. If our intentions behind these practices are in any way foreign to that, we have missed the mark on how Christ has called us to live. James says that “religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” Self-sacrificial love. Charity. Service to the downtrodden, the outcast and the oppressed among us. That is what God sees as our pure and undefiled worship.

So I urge you brothers and sisters, remind yourselves of the new creatures you are in Christ Jesus daily. Do not forget the wretches you once were when the grace of God freed you from your slavery to sin. And do not live as though you must earn God’s favor, for it has already been eternally bestowed upon you. Instead, live in gratitude for what God has already done. If we truly live this way, we resist the temptation of seeing the Christian life as a series of cathartic tasks aimed at making us feel better about ourselves and instead begin to see it as a call to respond to God’s love adequately in the way we serve other people. As Pastor David read so eloquently for us earlier, God has laid down his life for us, and so we ought to also lay down our lives for others

The Word of God, the Bible, the story of God’s redemptive history has the power to transform lives, but only if we approach it with the proper mentality. If we look at it as a set of

standards to follow and lose sight of its power as a declaration of freedom, we minimize its potential to change our hearts to be more like Jesus. Living each day reminded that we are a new creation in Christ has the power to let the Word of God propel us forward into action when we hear it, instead of it being merely used as another measuring tool we used to judge our religious commitment.

So I ask you this question brothers and sisters: Is hearing God's Word enough? The answer to that question largely depends on you. If the act of hearing God's Word, whether it be in a pew on Sunday morning or at home with a fresh cup of coffee more resembles checking off a box on your long list of "Christian" duties instead of calling you to service of the poor, then the answer is probably resounding no. But if hearing God's Word propels you to action, to providing love and care for those in our society who are the most vulnerable, the most hurting, and the most afraid, then you are being doers of God's word, responding to the love of God given for us by accordingly sending it out for other people. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, may we be doers of God's Word, and not merely hearers of it. May we resist the constant urge of the Enemy that convinces us that we must live up to a particular set of standards in order to be worthy of your love. This does nothing but makes us forget about the abundant and unmerited grace you have already shown us, consequently distracting us from fulfilling our true calling in the world, to love other people as you have first loved us. May our worship, our devotional life, and our prayer orient our hearts and minds to the true message of your Word. May we receive it with humility and gladness so that we can be changed by it and respond actively in service to those who are hurting the most in our society today: the orphan, the foster-cared, the widow, the immigrant, the addict, the African American, the poor, the homeless,

and the sick. Break our hearts for what breaks yours and tune our minds towards them in submission to the call of the Holy Spirit, for this is our pure and undefiled worship before You.

In the name of Jesus, we pray, Amen.

Benediction – Colossians 3:16-17

“Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” And all God’s people said, Amen.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- 1.) Do you find yourself guilty of thinking that you must comply with a certain set of standards of Christian piety in order to be worthy of God’s love? Why or why not?
- 2.) Are you guilty of imposing this agenda on others? Why?
- 3.) How often do you personally reflect on the person you once were before you came under the saving grace of God? What are some creative ways you can think of to help you personally reflect on this more often?
- 4.) How do you think remembering the freedom you have in Christ can effect your ability to be inwardly transformed by the message of God’s Word?
- 5.) How do these words from James effect you: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world”? If this is so, what do you think is the purpose of Sunday morning worship?
- 6.) Who are a few individuals in your own life that are especially in need of Christ’s love given from you due to their extraordinary circumstances? How can you actively help them in their time of need?