

JAMES: AUTHENTIC FAITH

Small Group Discussion Guide

Text: James 1:22–25 - [22] But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. [23] For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. [24] For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. [25] But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. (ESV)

Theme/ Big Idea: Gospel transformed individuals are those who rightly receive, respond, and live out the word of God. In James 1:22-25, James further amplifies this point arguing that wholehearted acceptance of the word must result in active obedience to the word. We cannot just be hearers of the word because obedience is not merely listening. Obedience is demonstrated by taking action, by being a doer of the word. Listening to the word and knowing what it says is not enough if our lives are not changed as a result.

Context/ Background Information: James has been making the argument since verse 18 that the Word changes us but also that the Word must be lived out and applied in every context and contour of our lives. In verse 22, James argues that the Word of God was never intended to be simply soaked up like water in a sponge. Instead, it was intended to change individuals and then be wrung out in every day living. Douglas Moo writes, "James would certainly endorse the need to pay careful attention to what the word says, studying it, meditating on it, and pondering its meaning and application."¹ But the Word must also be applied and lived out. Studying the Bible is much more than an intellectual classroom exercise. It is a life transforming process. Application begins with belief, which results in DOING. Regarding studying the Bible, David Dockery, president of Trinity International University notes, "Fine study without thoughtful reflection and application is like a fine run [by a running back] that stops short of the goal line or a fine meal [cooked to perfection] that goes in the trash." James is not concerned with mere information transference. He is concerned with life transformation. It is the theme of his entire letter and the theme of this specific passage.

James argues that we must not be "hearers only, deceiving [ourselves]." The word "deceive" in this context means to make false arguments against something. James suggests that when we receive the instruction, correction, or rebuke of the Word of God, we must not argue against that which is revealed. In other words, we must not look for ways to squirm out of application of the Word revealed.

James goes further saying the person who hears the Word clearly and yet does not do it is like a man who looks intently in a mirror but goes away and forgets what he looks like. The language James uses is important and carries more than just forgetfulness. To look "intently" means to inspect deeply and discover something. Notice the thing James's imaginary man looks intently at. It is his "natural face." This phrase means his "true face" or "true self." Mirrors in the first century were not like the glass mirrors that we have today. Instead, ancient mirrors were "generally polished bronze, sometimes silver or even gold."² These polished metals enabled someone to get a good enough look at themselves. The reflection from these metals was imperfect. The mirror of God's word is different, however. It allows us to have a true picture of ourselves and see ourselves as we really are. The word of God is a mirror revealing our true selves. To look into it, see ourselves for what we really are, and to learn of areas that must be addressed and/or changed yet do nothing would be absurd to James. This is the crux of his challenge. To look into the Word and see an area of sin or a call to obey or a challenge to submit and to do nothing requires an individual to literally deceive themselves. Or as Paul says in Romans 1, it requires suppressing the truth.

This happens all the time as we pick and choose the commands we like and are willing to obey because they don't cost us much. But James argues this is not faith and this is not full submission to Jesus and his Word. He also argues in verse 25, this is not the life that will experience the full favor of God. Instead, it is the one

who looks into the law of freedom and acts that will be blessed. In the Word, we not only see that we are sinners, but we also begin to see the beauty of grace and freedom offered to us in Jesus's substitutionary and sacrificial death on the cross. That changes people and results in a tangible response: joy-filled obedience. This person, according to James, will be blessed. Remember, the word blessed means the approval or favor of God. James's chief point is that the person that receives the approval of God is the person that submits to God's rule and reign in their lives. Submitting to God's rule and reign means hearing what he says and doing it - not hearing only and not picking and choosing, but full obedience which is fully demonstrated through action.

Quotes For Further Consideration/ Discussion:

- "One act of obedience is better than one-hundred sermons." — Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- "You may as well quit reading and hearing the Word of God, and give it to the devil, if you do not desire to live according to it." — Martin Luther
- "Paul described [the Scripture] as *"inspired"* (2 Tim 3:15-17) that is, entirely "God-breathed" — a product of God's Spirit ("breath"). Truth in the Bible means stability, reliability, firmness, trustworthiness, the quality of a person who is entirely self-consistent, sincere, realistic, undecieved. God is such a person: truth, in this sense, is his nature, and he has not got it in him to be anything else. That is why he cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Heb 6:18). That is why his words to us are true, and cannot be other than true. They are the index of reality: they show us things as they really are. [But] the word which God addresses directly to us is an instrument not only of government but also of fellowship. He made us with the intention that we might walk together forever in a love relationship. But such a relationship can exist only when the parties know something of each other. God, our Maker, knows all about us before we say anything; but we can know nothing of him unless he tells us. Therefore, God sends his word... to woo us as well as to instruct us." — J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology*

Discussion Questions:

1. According to these verses, what role is the Word of God meant to play in our lives?
2. Why do you think we are so willing to stand before the mirror of the Word of God and yet not change the things it reveals about our hearts and lives? What does this say about us? What does it say about our study of the Word?
3. What does the phrase "the perfect law which gives freedom" tell us about God's law and where true freedom is found? How does this understanding differ from how people often view God's law and genuine freedom?
4. How do you personally avoid and protect against being a person who just hears God's word, rather than one who does it?

Worth Further Study:

- Consider doing a comparative study of Psalm 1 and Psalm 2. How many people are spoken of in 1:2 and 2:1? What does the man do in 1:2 and the nations do in 2:2? What is the difference in attitude in 1:2 and 2:3? What is the result in 1:3 and 2:4-5?

Footnotes

1. Douglas J. Moo, Pillar New Testament Commentary: *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 88
2. D. Edmond Hiebert, *James* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 2014), 120