

How the Word Works

Text:

James 1:16-25

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 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. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. 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.

Introduction:

In the last study we looked at the outcome of a life lived by the Word of God. We saw that true happiness, the happiness for which God created us, is only possible by being a “doer of the word”. We focused on verse 25 of our text: “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.” I remind you of the importance of the words “he will be blessed in his doing.” Unless we are doers of the Word we will not know the blessing of God, and without the blessing of God nothing else really matters. What we all desire, whether we realize it or not, is God’s blessing. It is the true source of contentment in life. Once we have experienced it, we never want to lose it, and until we have found it we are constantly restless.

Having established the importance of the outcome, and hopefully given you a desire to achieve that outcome, we now come to the process. The question we are asking our text in this study is: “How do I become a doer of the word?” Let us allow James to be our teacher and to answer that question. We have already indicated that James is like Jesus in his teaching. One of the things that they have in common is that they both appeal to the imagination. Both make liberal use of images in trying to help us understand spiritual truth. In this passage James uses four

separate images to help us see how God's Word works. Once we have grasped these four images we will have the answer to the question: "How can I be a doer of the word?"

The four are:

- A birth
- A garden
- A mirror
- An investigator

Let us take them in order.

I. A Birth

The first statement James makes about God's word is that it is the means of our spiritual birth. In verse 18 he says: "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." In saying this he is echoing the words of Jesus in John 6:63: "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." God brings us to spiritual life by his word. It is the means of our spiritual birth. It is God who awakens us, who opens our ears that we might hear, who gives us spiritual life that we might respond to him. The spiritual life begins with this divine act of grace, without which, it is impossible for us to either hear, or to do God's word.

Now this life-giving word of God is the Gospel, God's good news; the good news that God has sent his Son Jesus Christ, to be our savior. Peter says that we are "born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. For all flesh *is* as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you" (I Peter 1:23-25).

You see we are all spiritually "dead in trespasses and sin". We cannot hear God. We cannot respond to his word. But God has acted on our behalf by sending the Lord Jesus Christ into the world to be our savior; to die for our sins, and to be raised again to conquer death and to procure eternal life. This is the gospel, God's good news of salvation. When the gospel is proclaimed to us, and God's Spirit opens our ears to hear it, and we, by faith, receive it gladly we are spiritually born into God's family. That is the day our spiritual life begins. Without that birth, however, there is no need of proceeding further in speaking of a life of obedience to the word of God.

II. A Garden

The second image in the text that will help us grasp how we can experience God's blessing by a life of obedience to his word is that of a garden. It is found in verse 21 where James speaks of the "implanted word." In the first image of birth, the work was all of God, but in this second image we are given a twofold command relative to God's word. The first is to "put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness", and the second is to "receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls." The first action is negative, the second is positive.

In the last study I pointed out that the teaching of Jesus is never far from what James is saying. It is obvious that he has assimilated it and is basing his teaching upon it. He is in, in fact, a prime example of someone who has done what he is encouraging us to do. He has listened intently to the "perfect law of liberty" and "persevered in it" and experienced the blessed life that comes from it, and now he is encouraging us to do likewise. The specific teaching of Jesus that is behind what he is saying here is the parable of the sower. In this parable Jesus teaches that not all who receive the seed of the word are good soil where the word can grow and produce fruit. He talks about weeds that choke out the seed of the word. This is the image behind James' command to "put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness". He is telling us to cultivate the garden of our heart, to get rid of everything that would keep the good seed of God's life-giving word from growing. In French the most common expression for weeds is *saleté* literally, "filthiness", the most common expression for cultivating a garden is *nettoyer*, literally, "to clean." What James calls "rampant wickedness" is drawn from the image of aggressive plants that tend to overwhelm other plants and take over.

All of us have weeds of sin growing in the garden of our soul that, if left, will eventually choke out the good seed of the word of God that has been planted in our hearts by the new birth. We must recognize them for what they are and ruthlessly uproot them in order to give God's word a good soil in which to grow and produce good fruit. The New Testament solution for sin is everywhere the same – Recognize it for what it is and get rid of it; put it away; be done with it.

The second command of this verse is to "receive with meekness implanted word". This meekness comes from trust. I can submit to God's word, because I trust God. I understand as James does that God is wise and I am not; that true wisdom comes from above; that God's ways are right and lead to blessing. So, on one hand, we must get rid of everything that is contrary to God's word – every thought and deed, and on the other hand, we must be constant and persistent in our obedience to God's Word. No clear command of God should go unheeded. Say to yourself often "God is right, he will never lead me astray." Receive quickly and submissively that word that he has planted in the garden of your heart in order that it might grow and produce abundant fruit.

III. A Mirror

In verse 22 James gets to the heart of what he is saying when he exhorts us to “be doers of the word and not hearers only.” This is certainly the theme of this passage and probably of the entire letter. Having given his exhortation he then, again, gives us an image to help us grasp what he is saying. He says the word of God is like a mirror. We look at it and see our “natural face”. Having seen that face we must then do something about it. But, he says, we can walk away from the mirror and quickly forget what we saw.

The general idea of what he is saying is easy to grasp. We can hear the word of God, in that same way that we can see ourselves in a mirror without acting upon what we have seen or heard. It is easy for us to do that, especially when we are in the habit of hearing the word regularly. All of us at times are guilty of listening without really listening, or of reading without registering what we are reading. James would say there is no merit in listening to a sermon, or participating in a Bible study, or even of reading the Scriptures if we do not grasp something that is true and act upon it.

There may be more in this verse than what we have just stated, however. James says that what we see when we look into the mirror is our natural face, or the face that nature gave us. By that he could mean that we see ourselves as we are, that is as sinners in need of transformation. In this case the idea would be that we look into the word; see ourselves for the sinners we are then forget and do nothing about it. There is another possibility. By natural face he could mean the face with which we were created, that is our unfallen face, or ourselves as God intended us to be. This is what we see when we look at Jesus, we see the perfect human; the only human who ever lived who had the face that God intended him to have, who never sinned; never failed to live up to God’s expectations. If this is the case, the word shows us where we need to go, what we need to change, how we need to act, but of course that is only half of the equation, hearing. For the word to achieve its purpose it must be acted upon. As we look into the word and see the face that God intended us to have, we must act upon that word in a way that we really do begin to change; that we begin to take on the image that we are seeing.

IV. An investigator

This brings us to the last image. It is contained in the word “looks” in verse 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.” “Looks” is not a strong enough translation

to capture the impact of this word. It literally means to stoop down and look closely; to investigate. Think of an investigator with his magnifying glass gazing intently at an object until he sees all there is to see.

What motivates this intent concentration on the word is the conviction that it is the word of God. That it is the way of life and blessing. That to understand it and do it is the way to life and blessing, and to miss it is to miss life and blessing. That conviction will turn us into intent investigators; into intent listeners hanging on each word in order that we might become all that God intended us to be and experience all that God has given us in Jesus Christ.

A Prayer Before the Reading of the Holy Scriptures

From William Burkitt's Expository Notes, 1794.

ALMIGHTY God and merciful Father, who hast appointed thy word to be a light to our feet, and a lamp to our paths, and caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning; grant us the assistance of thy Holy Spirit, that we may in such ways read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

And seeing of thy tender love to mankind, thou hast given thy dear and only Son to be unto us both a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of Godly life, give us grace that we may always most thankfully receive this his inestimable benefit, and also daily endeavour ourselves to follow the blessed steps of his most holy life; who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

