

# Blessed by Doing

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## **Text:**

James 1:16-27

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. If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

## **Introduction:**

The theme that runs through this passage is the Word of God. James calls it first the “word of truth”, then the “implanted word”, then simply the “word”, and finally the “perfect law, the law of liberty”. His concern is that we become “doers of the word”, and he sets forth the way by which we can. However, before we look at how we become doers of the word I want to call your attention to what he says about the outcome of being a doer of the word. In verse 25 he says: “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.” Now you might read this passage and hardly notice this verse, but that would be a mistake. It is essential to all that James is saying, not just in this paragraph, but in his entire letter or sermon. It is a highly meaningful statement when we understand it as James understood it. We could paraphrase it this way: “Knowing God’s Word and not putting it in practice does us not good at all.” “It is only when we begin to do God’s Word that we experience the joy for which God created us.” Let us

begin our study of this passage by trying to get a clear image of what will happen when we actually get it right; of what our lives will look like when God's Word has its proper place.

Most of us can remember an experience when we were trying to do something, but we were leaving out something necessary to the success of the operation; of how frustrated we were until we finally reviewed the process and discovered that we were doing something wrong that prevented the very possibility of a positive outcome. Projecting that felling of frustration to life overall will get us close to what James is trying to tell us in this passage. He is saying to us that until we are really hearing what God is saying to us and doing it, we will be neither happy nor satisfied.

## I. "Blessed"

Let's begin with the word "blessed". James says that the person who hears and does the word will be "blessed". Now the Bible has at least two words for blessed. In English we make a rather unconscious distinction between them by pronouncing them differently. You may not have noticed, but when the word is found at the beginning of a sentence we pronounce it "bless-ed", but when it is found elsewhere in the sentence as in the present case we say "blessed". I'm not sure how this came about, but it can help us distinguish between two different words that should be understood differently. What is interesting about our text is that the word that is used is the one that is generally at the beginning of a sentence. We could rephrase it: "Blessed is the one who hears my word and does it". Notice when we state it this way we naturally say "bless-ed" instead of "blessed". When we state it this way we also recognize a pattern that is found frequently throughout the Bible. We call that pattern a beatitude. We know it best from the beatitudes of Jesus found at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:3-12).

The Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount, however, are only the most striking example of something that is found throughout the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments. In fact, this is the second example in James 1. The first is verse 12: “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. “

Translators have struggled with how to translate this word in a way that would communicate its real meaning. Other than blessed, its most common translation is “happy”. Properly understood, “happy” is satisfactory. Think of it this way. We were created and placed on earth for a reason; our creator intended for us to be happy, but that happiness is not a self-chosen happiness. It is, rather, the reaction that we have when we find ourselves where we are supposed to be doing what we are supposed to be doing. Now our problem is that as rebels against our creator, we set out to find our own happiness, often ignorant of the real purpose for which we are here; to hear and do the will of our creator. We are deaf to the word that can set us free, what James calls the “perfect law, the law of liberty”. When, by the grace of God, one of us actually has our ears opened to this eternal truth, and we begin to hear it and to act upon it, then we, sometimes suddenly, and sometimes gradually, find that we are happy or content. In fact, we are happier and more content than we ever dreamed possible, but when we stop and analyze our new found happiness we realize that we only found it when we stopped looking for it; when we forgot ourselves and became preoccupied, not with our own happiness, but with obedience to the word that God had addressed to us.

Each time you see this word in the Scriptures, the picture that lies behind it, is that of a person who has gotten it right, who has found the right way, who has prayed “teach me your ways, O God”, and has had his prayers answered. A beatitude is, in fact, a form of congratulation. Each time you hear one you can assume that someone has done the right thing; taken the right road.

Behind every biblical “blessed” is the biblical idea of the two ways: the way of God, and the way that seems right, but ends in frustration and death (Proverbs 15:25). The blessed person is the one who has chosen the right way. This is the reason Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with the beatitudes, and then closes it by talking about the two ways, encouraging us to enter in at the narrow gate because: “the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction,

and those who enter by it are many, but the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few" (Matthew 7:13-14).

So when James say: "He shall be blessed in doing", he is saying that the only way to achieve the happiness that God created you for, the contentment that won't go away, is to be a hearer and doer of God's Word. We will talk more about the process of how we can achieve this in the next study, but for the present I want us to focus on the outcome of hearing and doing God's word. The only way to live our lives with a deep sense of satisfaction, and to come to the end of life without regrets is to live it with our ears open to God's Word, our hearts ready to do what he asks, and our hands busy doing what he has called us to do.

## II. The Teaching of Jesus

James was a half-brother of Jesus, the leader of the Church of Jerusalem. More than any of the other writers of the New Testament Epistles his teaching is directly connected to Jesus. He seldom quotes Jesus directly, but the very words of Jesus are never far from what he is saying. This is especially true about the text we are presently looking at. Nothing is more central to the teaching of Jesus than the need to both hear, and do his words. He says so in different ways on several different occasions. We don't have time to look at all of them, but let me illustrate what I am saying with two examples.

We just alluded to the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus concludes his teaching by placing us before the two ways and encouraging us to take the narrow way. After giving this invitation to enter in at the narrow gate, he gives a final illustration; the story of the wise and foolish builders. This is what he says: ""Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

So the difference, in the end, between wisdom and folly according to Jesus is "doing" his word. The wise builder "hears and does these words of mine", the foolish builder hears them, but doesn't do them.

In Luke 11:27-28 there is recorded a small, but significant, event of the ministry of Jesus. Jesus is teaching one day, and a woman being impressed with what he is saying cries out: ""Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts at which you nursed!" This is interesting, first of all,

because it demonstrates what I have been saying about beatitudes being a form of congratulation, but its real importance is to be found in Jesus' reply. Rather than accepting and thanking her for her congratulations, he replies with a counter-beatitude: "'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" The woman is implied by her beatitude something like: "Oh, how happy I would be if I were your mother." Jesus replies: "No, that would not make you happy. What makes you happy is hearing my word and keeping or doing it." This unnamed woman then becomes representative of all of us who have misplaced ideas about where happiness is to be found. How would you, for example, complete the sentence: "I would truly be happy if ---". Jesus would say there is only one right way to finish that sentence; with the words "If I could hear God's words and keep them."

Since Mary, the mother of Jesus, and not Jesus, is the subject of the woman's exclamation, let us conclude by taking her as an example. Is it not true that she was blessed? Did not her cousin Elizabeth say of her: "'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb"?' (Luke 1:42). So why did Jesus take issue with this woman? The answer to the question is found earlier in the birth narrative of Luke 1 when the angel appears to Mary and tells her that she is to be the mother of the Messiah. Mary's response to the angel is found in verse 38: "'Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.'" You see Mary was blessed, not because she was the Mother of Jesus, but because she heard God's word and did it.

To get the full picture of Mary's blessedness, and our potential blessedness, we need to add one more thing. Accepting to do what God said may have made Mary happy in the ultimate sense, but it did not necessarily make her life easy. One need only reflect for a few moments on the shame and the sorrow of Mary to realize that her life would have been easier had she refused, but easy does not mean blessed or happy. We sometimes think it does, and instead of seeking the way of blessedness, we simply take the easiest way out. To do so is an error. The only way to know the deep satisfaction and joy for which we were created is to do what God is calling us to do each day – to hear his word and do it. This is not the easy way, but it is the blessed way.

