Do What It Says

James 1:19-27
Key Verse: James 1:22
“Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”

If you ever want to do something right, especially something you’re not familiar with – it is important to not only be instructed, but to also do what it says. Mary and I were on vacation last week and we visited the Grand Canyon in AZ. At every trail, on their websites and in their visitor centers, they offer instructions on how to hike successfully into the Grand Canyon. Bring at least 1.5 L of water for every hour planned. Bring salty snacks for every 30 minutes. Take a 10 minute break every hour. Check the weather, and rest often when feeling tired or hot. Never try to hike from the canyon rim to the river and back in one day. It is important to not only read these instructions, but to do what they say. Every year at least 250 people are rescued out of the Grand Canyon, most are hiking accidents or are heat-related. Most of those rescued are young males from ages 18-24. I think at my age my body can’t deceive me to go that far. The trails go for miles, but after about 250 feet down one trail I started huffing and puffing, and we decided to head back up. Well actually, we didn’t plan for that hike, but if we are wise, we will listen to the instructions and do what it says.

In this letter James writes to Jewish Christian churches scattered outside of Jerusalem, some far, some near. This letter was written around 45 to 50 AD, which is 12 to 17 years after Christ’s death. These were some of the first Christians, the newest converts to the faith. Their faith was being tested through persecution, trials and temptations, but James writes this letter to strengthen their faith, and to instruct them on how that faith is revealed in action. In their struggles, they could be tempted to be angry with one another, or to blame God for their predicament, so James writes in v.19, “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” It seems there are no exceptions, he says everyone should be quick to listen. Listening is very important, and it is a skill that some people may need to work harder at than others. It seems with our technology, though we’ve advanced in communication, we may slowly be losing the art of listening. It may be easier to surf the internet in class now. At the lunch table everyone has their phone out. At work, people sitting in cubicles next to each other communicate using instant messenger. Listening to others means giving your full attention to them, and even waiting until their done speaking before you speak. This is the same with listening to the word of God. You shouldn’t be daydreaming, or thinking about what’s for lunch, or what are you going to do this week. You could be at home, watching another preacher on TV, and checking your email – but you are here, I hope, with your full attention to what the preacher is saying, every week.

James also adds that everyone should be slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. Most of human anger comes from 2 sources: pride and/or an unbelief in God. There was one time recently I have gotten angry at someone because my pride was hurt. I needed to repent and ask for forgiveness. In the book of Numbers ch. 20, the

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Israelites, while wandering in the wilderness quarreled and complained to Moses that they were going to die. God had commanded Moses to speak to a rock to pour out water. Moses, provoked to anger by the people, went out and said, “Listen you rebels, must we bring you water out of the rock?” And he struck it twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank. But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.” Ultimately Moses believed in God, but here, in his anger, he said “must we,” instead of giving the glory to God, perhaps for a moment lapsed in unbelief that God would provide water for the rebels. He was charged with not trusting the Lord enough to honor him as holy.

We should be slow to anger, James doesn’t say to get rid of all anger. There is some anger that is justified, like when Jesus cleared the temple courts. He made a whip out of cords, drove out all who were selling and buying, and overturned money tables. God is also angry at our sin. There is also anger flowing from a sense of justice. However, there is an anger that we should get rid of, and most of our anger is this type. Look at v.21, “Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.” The prevalent evil referred to here is malice, a hatred toward someone, with an intense desire to hurt them. Do you feel this way towards anyone at all? Do you dislike somebody, or wish to see them suffer? Get rid of this. It sounds easier to say than to do, doesn’t it. We can cast it off like a dirty shirt, or some dirty jeans. Like dirty laundry, we put away this sin, and clean it up. In our own power and ability, this might be an impossible thing to do, but look back up at v. 18, where James says, “He chose to give us birth through the word of truth.” The word of truth gives us the ability to put away evil.

Look again at v.21, “Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.” We need to humbly accept the word. This is in contrast to the pride we have when we’re angry. The word is the word of God, and this word is to be accepted with meekness – with no resistance, no defiance, no rebellion, questioning or argumentation against it. This word of God is the gospel, and we should not resist the gospel, because it has the power to save. Any other word that is not the gospel, any other command from someone like me, you can question and resist; but do not resist the gospel. It is the word that is planted in us, ingrafted like a branch. The gospel did not grow out of us, nor did we have it in us, but it was planted in us through some servant of God, just as it was planted in these early Christians through the apostles and disciples of Christ. This word planted in us is also the word of Christ, words that give life. Jesus tells his disciples, “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you – they are full of the Spirit and life (John 6:63).” Many disciples had deserted Jesus, and when Jesus asked his Twelve chosen, Simon Peter answered, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. (John 6:68).” The word of God is the word of life, therefore let us humbly accept it as being planted in us, and tend to it that it may bear fruit.

The word of God is living and active, working and making us wise toward salvation. It is not a dead word. It is not a false word. It is not a word for your amusement or entertainment, but a word for

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your life. Can we all please read v.22, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” Some people seem to think merely listening to the word is enough. They’ll come to church twice a year, on Easter and Christmas, to do their good deed for the year. Some might come in once a week, live totally worldly lives, but they can say, I go to church. But even if we read the word daily, but do not do what it says, still we deceive ourselves. Matthew Henry wrote, “If we heard a sermon every day of the week, and an angel from heaven were the preacher, yet, if we rested in hearing only, it would never bring us to heaven.” If we merely hear, but do not do what the word says, we deceive ourselves. It’s like enrolling in a class, and the teacher says, Ok, all you need to do is come in, show up and try to get perfect attendance. No homework, no test, no quizzes, but I’ll give everyone an A. Sounds like a dream, but that’s what it is, only a dream, not reality.

When we only hear, but don’t put the word into practice, we deceive ourselves, because we think that we have done something for the Lord when we have not. We deceive ourselves, because we think that we have been saved, but we have neglected the word of the Lord. In the book of Ezekiel, the Lord explains to the prophet why Jerusalem fell to the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon: “My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to hear your words, but they do not put them into practice. Their mouths speak of love, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words and do not put them into practice. (Eze 33:31-32)” When we don’t put the word of God into practice, our hearts are still as rotten as before. Although the people’s mouths spoke of love, their hearts were full of envy and evil desires.

James gives another illustration of what someone is like who does not put the word into practice. Please look at v.23-24, “Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in the mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.” This man is not just casually looking into the mirror, he is looking intently in the mirror to see what he looks like. This may be an obvious question, but why do people look in the mirror? They look to see what needs to be fixed to make themselves look presentable. There might be spinach in your teeth after eating that salad. You need to see if you missed any spots shaving. You have to make sure your hair looks nice. And if there’s something in your nose, you’ll need to clear it out. What would you do? You would need to pick out that spinach, finish shaving, make sure your hair looks even on both sides, and clean your nose. But after seeing those things, would you just leave, and forget about it? It sounds ridiculous, but that’s what we do when we don’t do what the word of God says. The word of God is like a mirror for your spiritual condition. It shows you what your sins are, and what needs correcting or repenting. It also instructs you, and trains you in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). But if you don’t put it into practice, you forget the lesson, and you walk away – not changing what needs to be corrected, and not growing in Biblical understanding.

Jesus gives his own illustration from Matt 7:24-27, “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came

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down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash." You can see why the early Christians, and also us, need to put the word into practice. It strengthens us in times of trial, and enables us to stand through it. But if we don't, we will surely fall the next time trials or temptations come.

We deceive ourselves if we do not put God's word into practice. Now what does it look like to put his words into practice. Can we all please read v.25, "But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it – not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it – they will be blessed in what they do." Here again we see that this person looks intently into the perfect law. To look intently is not a superficial reading – it's reading with a purpose. It's reading to learn something. It's reading devotionally. It's reading with a desire to know God, to honor God, to obey God. 2 Cor 13:5 says, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test?" The first step is, let us renew the way we look into God's word, each week, at every Bible study, or every day. If we aren't already, let us come to the word of God every day, and look intently into the perfect law that gives freedom.

The perfect law is the gospel. It gives freedom because it sets us free from the bondage of sin. In 1 John 3:4, we learn that "everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness." Sin is lawlessness, and because we have been born in sin, and enslaved to it, we cannot help but to break God's law. Think about the Ten Commandments: Have no other God before Him, do not make an idol and bow down to it, do not take his name in vain, honor the Sabbath, honor your father and mother, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not lie, do not covet. We have rebelled against God, and broken his law. "But you know that [Jesus] appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him. (1 John 3:5-6)" God's law is good, it is holy, and it leads to life, but we have broken it at every point.

We could not obey the law, which leads to life – therefore we are condemned to die. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We hear of Kermit Gosnell, who is on trial now for killing babies born alive after failed abortions. We hear of the bombers who bombed the Boston Marathon. We like to think we are better than them, but we are all sinners. Unless we repent, we too will all perish (Luke 13:3). But thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Rom 7:25). For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). We have been justified, our sins have been forgiven, our transgressions have been forgotten and we are sanctified through the shed blood of Jesus Christ, who gave his life for ours.

Our sins are no more. Our lawlessness is no more. Our bondage to sin forever vanquished by the

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power of our Lord Jesus Christ! Where O death is your victory? Where O death is your sting? The gospel is the perfect law that gives freedom, even freedom from the bondage of the law. What do I mean by that? Even though it's called a perfect law, it's the gospel of grace. There's a difference between law and grace. Under bondage to the law, it was the only way to be saved. Through the gospel, the law can no longer condemn us, and faith alone in Jesus Christ saves us. Although we don't follow the letter of the law, in Christ, we fulfill the law through obedience to him. Through the repentance of our sins and the grace given to us by God, we can fulfill the law which commands us to love God and to love our neighbor. We are not saved to be lawless, that would be going back into sin, but we are saved by the gospel, so that we can look into the perfect law, and obey it!

When we look into the perfect law we can continue in it, and James tells us how to continue in it: by not forgetting what we have heard, but by doing it. Jesus sums this up nicely in John 15:9-12, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." This is a command that's plain enough for all of us to understand: let us love one another. See all the blessings that come with obeying his command – the love of God is in us, joy is in us, and the love for one another is in us. James ends v.25 with, "they will be blessed in what they do." Sometimes, it might seem like a struggle just to obey, doesn't it? But the promise is that in doing what the word says, we will be blessed. To be clear – this is not saying "if you obey now, you will be blessed later," but this verse is saying "you will be blessed in what you do" – as you do it. That should be a great promise and encouragement to us to do what the word says. Shall we cast off sin? Love our neighbor? Put our trust in God? We will be blessed in what we do. "His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness (2 Pet 1:3)."

Look at v.26, "Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless." Religion is part of some of the things we do from the word. Here it refers to the external ceremonies and activities, such as Baptism, Lord's Supper, preaching, teaching, hearing, fasting and praying. Again we see that someone can deceive themselves if they do not keep a tight rein on their tongue. This is a person who allows their tongue to slander, boast or speak ill of someone. Their tongue may also gossip, and speak careless words that may dishonor the Lord. Their religion is worthless because even with all the outward show, their heart still has sin, as evidenced by the words they speak. Remember the Parable of the Pharisee, that Jesus told in Luke 18:11. This Pharisee was so confident of his righteousness that he looked down on others, even as he prayed, "God, I thank you I am not like the other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector." He was a Pharisee, who knew and did a lot of religious activities, but because of his pride, his religion was worthless.

"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world (v27)." Orphans and

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widows were the most needy class of people in ancient and Biblical times, and perhaps even up until the 19th century, men like George Muller and Charles Spurgeon set up orphanages. It is said that Muller cared for 10,024 orphans in his life. In those times, the men were the breadwinners of the homes, and when they were gone, there was no one to look after orphans or widows. If the men were gone, orphans and widows also could not repay you very much, if anything at all. To look after orphans and widows, then, was a display of true sacrificial Christian love. And it wasn't just money that was given – these orphans and widows were taken care of, followed up with, and truly cared for. This can be extended in our time to all people, within our ability, we should be ready and willing to do good to all, especially brothers and sistes in Christ. We should be ready and willing to love our neighbors as ourselves.

The second part of this acceptable religion is to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. This means to love not the things of this world – we should not seek after the things that gratify the lust of the flesh, or lust of the eyes. We should keep ourselves from being proud, having the pride of life (1 John 2:15-16). We should set our minds on things above, and not earthly things (Col 3:2). Is there anything that you love or desire more than God? Do not pursue these things, and do not give your affection to them. Give your affections to God. Finally, remember what we learned from Romans 12:2, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Acceptable religion, that is, the true religion and practice of life that God accepts has both parts: doing good to others and keeping spotless from the world. We may have good works, but if we are polluted by the world, then our religion is also worthless.

In conclusion, we are asked the "Do what it says!" Why? What's the point? Ultimately, the goal is to achieve our main goal in life, and eternally: to glorify God and enjoy him forever. How is God glorified? We glorify God by imitating him, because what he does is good. When we care for orphans and widows (and do good to our neighbors), we are doing what God did. In Psalm 68:5, it says, "A father to the fatherless, a defender of the widows, is God in his holy dwelling." Also, by keeping from being polluted by the world, we are imitating Him by being holy, because God is holy (1 Pet 1:16). We glorify God, we are blessed and receive joy, and others will glorify God by the deeds he is working through us. We shall also become like him in his glory. 2 Cor 3:18 says, "And we all, who with unveiled faces [reflect] the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." When we look intently into his word, it is like a mirror – and we do not walk away, but His glory is reflected on us, and we are being made like Jesus Christ with ever increasing glory, through the power of the Spirit.

Here is what Spurgeon said what heaven may be like: "Some think of heaven as this and some as that. Fellowship with believers of all ages is the great desire of some; others long for paradise as a place of increased knowledge, to know even as they are known; and a third rejoice in it chiefly as a haven of rest. There are are grounds for each of these forms of desire, but concerning heaven this is the believer's chief thought, that he will be with God, and that God will be for ever his joy and bliss." Let us not merely listen to the word, and so deceive ourselves. Let us look intently into his perfect law, and continue in it, not forgetting what we hear, but doing what it says – every day,

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every week, and we will be blessed in what we do. Let’s read v.22, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”

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