

Steadfast Joy: The Book of James

Actions Matter

James 1:22-25

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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 (James 1:22–25).

Francis Chan, in the short film series *BASIC. Follow Jesus*, provides a helpful illustration of the ironic and tragic disconnect when Christians fail to follow Jesus and think that just listening to Jesus is enough. He wonders why listening but not acting works in church but not anywhere else. Chan quotes Jesus's words in Luke 6:46 when he says, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?" as he compares it to his instructions for his daughter to clean her room.

Chan illustrates what we know is true.

Imagine a parent telling a child to clean their room, only to hear:

- *Hey Dad, I memorized what you said to me – "Go clean your room."*
- *Dad, I can say "Go clean your room in Greek."*
- *My friends and I are going to gather together every week and we are going to study what it would look like if I cleaned my room.*

Chan then asks, "Why do we think that this kind of approach is going to work with Jesus?"¹

It's a great question. And it's one of the central messages of the book of James: faith works. Or, to state it exactly as James says it: "...faith apart from works is dead" (James 2:26b).

As James writes to a group of people experiencing hardship and some level of persecution, one of the ways that he motivates them to be steadfast is by reminding them about the connection between what they believe and what they do. Faith and works must go together.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgQ2wiTefmQ>

That's always true. But it's especially important when the pressures of life begin to rise. It's one thing to say that we believe in Jesus and obey him when life is calm and peaceful. But it's another thing when life is complicated and costly.

James reminds us that actions matter.

Today we're going to examine verses 22-25 while introducing the faith/works tension and drawing some applications. We'll look at the principle, an illustration, and then some applications.

The Principle

Let's start with the principle that is central to the message of James's letter and one that will reemerge at other places throughout this book. What is that principle and why is it important?

Look at verse 22: "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."

First, let's determine this principle is because it's at the core of the message of James and his pastoral concern.² James is concerned about the real possibility of an uncoupling of hearing the Word and doing the Word. He's warning about the tendency to be content with listening or agreeing with truths that we do nothing about.

Remember last week's message? We talked about verse 21: "...receiving with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls." What does "receiving" actually look like? Well, James follows that command with verse 22 because the Word "has not been truly received until it is put into practice."³

James wants to be sure that we connect hearing and doing. In practical terms, James would argue that you cannot say something is true without acting in a manner that reflects the truth. The issue here is not merely information but submission.

Parents or schoolteachers, you know the difference when dealing with children. One of the immature statements kids say is, "I know," when they don't act like they know. For example, just before recess, you tell your class, "Don't run in the hallway," only to hear a student say, "I know," as he darts out of class and runs down the corridor. He knows the information but he doesn't know the implication of the information - he doesn't know.

Imagine a police officer pulls you over for speeding on 96th street. The officer approaches the window and says, "Do you know that the speed limit is 35 mph?" There are two questions in play: are you informed and are you obedient? To answer that you *know* what the speed limit is only matters if you *obey* the speed limit.

² Douglas J. Moo, [*James: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, Second edition, vol. 16, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015), 112.

³ Ibid.

You see, there are some things that you can know which have no bearing on obedience. You might know how a combustible engine works so that a car can go fast. You might know the composite of the road upon which you are driving. You might know the temperature outside. You might know why the leaves change their color in the fall. But knowing the speed limit is different.

Some truths demand implications. If you don't embrace the implications, you really don't know the thing that you claim to know. This is a basic principle in life but also in the book of James and in Christianity. There is a vital connection between hearing and doing, between faith and works. A few other examples in James and elsewhere:

- *What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? (James 2:14)*
- *Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? (James 2:20)*
- *For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified (Rom. 2:13).*
- *But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:28)*

So, the importance of works is not limited to James. But we need to balance it with other passages that talk about faith.

- *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph. 2:8–9).*
- *For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20).*

How do we handle this? It's important to recognize that the Bible calls sinners to put their faith in Jesus, not their works, for the forgiveness of their sins. Faith alone saves. But then the question is: saved to what? This is where faith and works need to be seen as complementary. Augustine (354-430 AD), the North African theologian, famously said, "Faith alone saves, but faith that saves is not alone." Faith works. That's what the principle is.

But secondly, why is this principle important? The second part of verse 22 is important because it talks about the problem of self-deception. There is a danger for religiously-oriented people to spend their time merely listening to the Word and not doing the Word.

James is probably drawing from a second-century rabbi who may have been well-known to his readers who said, "Not expounding the law is the chief thing, but the doing of it."⁴ There's a real danger in knowing what God says, talking about what God says, studying what God says, but not acting on it.

⁴ Douglas J. Moo, [*James: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel, Second edition, vol. 16, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015), 112.

Christianity always faces two ditches that need to be avoided. On the one side is legalism— teaching people that they are saved by their works. The other ditch is license—teaching people that the implications of the gospel don't matter. Legalism and license abandon the gospel. Legalism abandons it by trusting in something other than the gospel. License diminishes the gospel by making it powerless. Legalism adds to the gospel. License invalidates the gospel.

Self-deception enters the mix because when you “hear” truth, it brings it close, makes it feel internalized, and it feels like you've embraced it. This reality can make you feel more obedient than you are. Or, it can convince you that there are areas of life where the rule of Christ shouldn't touch.

A quick survey of history would demonstrate that spiritually-minded people can find spiritual-sounding reasons or theologically-justified reasons not to obey. We are good at it. Really good at it. And it's an easy pattern to fall into.

Our staff is reading *A Gentle Answer* by Scott Sauls. In his chapter, “He Reforms the Pharisee in Us”, Sauls says:

Somewhere along the way, both the scribes and the Pharisees lost their way. Rather than letting themselves be handled by the Word of God, they presumed themselves to be handlers of the Word of God. Rather than standing beneath the Word of God, they started using the Word of God as a tool with which to exalt themselves over people...⁵

Somewhere along the way, they forgot that real understanding of the law creates real obedience. The right kind of actions matter. That's the principle.

An Illustration

Issues related to self-deception are hard to see. Sometimes an illustration helps to show us how our actions do not make sense. James uses an illustration with a mirror to make his point.

In verses 22-23, he sets it up by comparing a person who is a “hearer only” to someone who looks into a mirror but forgets what he looks like when he walks away. A few noteworthy observations:

- The man looks “intently,” so there is no lack of effort or intensity. Being a “hearer only” can make you very busy and very intentional.
- He sees something that should be obvious—himself. Yet he forgets. It's designed to make you shake your head.
- His forgetfulness is immediate. It would seem that he's not interested in the purpose of a mirror but only in the act of looking into the mirror.

James then turns the illustration. In verse 25, the man doesn't look into a mirror but into the “perfect law, the law of liberty.” This kind of language would be how James, as a Jewish pastor, would talk about

⁵ Scott Sauls, *A Gentle Answer: Our Secret Weapon in an Age of Us Against Them*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2020), 36-37.

the totality of the Scriptures, including the gospel. James may have in mind the kind of freedom connected to the fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:31-34 as the Word is written on the heart. Or it might refer to the Isaiah 61:1-3, the text Jesus preached in Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry (see Luke 4:16-19):

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound... (Isa. 61:1).

“Perfect, law of liberty” must refer to the hope of the gospel and the change that comes. It is a law that gives freedom.⁶ Jesus said, “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:30).

But notice the next word: “perseveres.” The word means to remain or stay. The idea is that something characterizes a person. They look at the law of liberty and it shapes the person. Looking into the law of liberty creates a change in what we do. Actions matter. This is the purpose of the gospel: to save people by grace through faith so that they will change.

Lest you think this is limited to James, here’s how Paul connects the two in Ephesians 2:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:8–10).

This is God’s plan for steadfast, joyful Christianity. James concludes this section by saying, “...he will be blessed in his doing.” We learned from verse 12 that “blessed” means the favor or approval of God.

And so, we find that James is identifying the path that God has designed for what true spirituality looks like. Faith without works is dead. We come to faith by grace alone. And our actions demonstrate if our belief is genuine.

Our actions matter. They prove that our faith works.

Applications

This text deserves some additional time given to application. We need to translate this verse into ways in which we need to change.

First, you may not be a Christian. Perhaps you know you need to change. You see the effects of your behavior—what the Bible calls your sin. The Bible calls us to put our trust in Jesus so that we can be forgiven and change by the power of the Holy Spirit. Why not come to faith in Jesus today?

⁶ Kurt A. Richardson, [James](#), vol. 36, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 97.

Secondly, who needs to listen to this text and respond to it more carefully? I would argue that it's the people who love the Bible, enjoy studying it, and do it a lot. James writes to biblically-literate, morally conservative people. Church! That's us. One of the greatest dangers is to become consumers of the Bible instead of being convicted by the Bible. We need to be sure we aren't deceiving ourselves by doing what the Word of God says. So, think, right now, not just about what you've heard, but what you are going to do.

Third, we need to preach the gospel as the only way by which people are saved. But the effective preaching of the gospel does something. There are important implications of the gospel. Sometimes people treat implications as if they violate the gospel. There's an important balance to maintain here because you don't want to add anything in someone coming to Christ, but our role is not to make believers, it's to make disciples.

The gospel must always be central, and the implications of the gospel must be lived out. You have to have both. We have to be careful of both ditches. On the one hand, there's a danger of adding to the gospel or changing the gospel. But on the other hand, there's a danger of disconnecting the gospel from how we live—both in our morality, how we treat one another, and how we care for one another.

One of the reasons we practice church discipline is because we believe that the Church has a role in protecting the legitimacy of the gospel. The Bible tells us that our actions validate the authenticity of our faith. After Paul gives a list of sin issues that characterize the flesh, he says, "I warn you that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:21). Actions matter. Implications of the gospel matter.

First John 3 tells us that love for one another and generosity toward one another fit with the gospel. "Let us not love in word or in talk but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:18). Now, you should do this personally, but we also can do this together. It's why we are focused on building bridges of grace in our community through this year's Christmas Offering that will further our investment in Brookside and will establish a partnership with NewDay Center for community counseling. It's why we've tried to build gospel-centered relationships across ethnic barriers, listen to one another, and love each other. It's why your friend's pain and their struggle are important—regardless of what they are. Paul called us to have the mind of Christ which looks like "counting others more significant than yourselves... look out for the interests of others" (Phil. 2:3-4).

The gospel is transformative. Jesus changes people. And the people who know his grace know that actions matter.

They know that faith works. They know that hearing the Word leads to doing the Word.

Church, does this make sense? Great! Let's go clean our rooms.

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