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Living What We Say We Believe

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James 1:22-27

“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the Word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does.”

If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is 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.”

Early on a crisp September morning in 1944, 2 French cyclists, taking cover in a small French town near the Luxemburg border, decided it was safe to venture out into the countryside. The nighttime rumble of the tanks had died away, so they mounted and rode. They sniffed the smoke of cooking fires in the chilly air. They noted the usual scattering of grimy, muddy vehicles, partly covered by camouflage nets: a couple trucks, some trailers, and a few big M-4 tanks with huge guns poking out from the cover of trees and netting.

Then a young American sentry stopped the pair. He was friendly enough, but firm. “Where were they going, and why?” The Frenchmen replied as best they could until, all at once they stiffened and fell silent, their eyes wide. For over the American sentry’s shoulder they saw 4 GI’s walk over to the huge tank and with one man on each corner, simply pick it up, turn around, and set it back down again. And with that, the cover of the 603rd Engineer Camouflage Battalion was blown.

You see, the 603rd Battalion was one of 4 units that formed one of the most baffling outfits ever fielded in battle. They specialized in impersonating other troops. With inflatable rubber guns and vehicles, ever-changing shoulder patches, stencils for phony signs, and loud speakers that could play recordings of heavy equipment, they played role after role. Their purpose, which they accomplished for a long time, was to fool the enemy; to create the illusion of military strength; to confuse the Nazi forces as to the real whereabouts of our troops.

On the battlefields of our spiritual lives we are all too familiar with phantom battalions; units who specialize in impersonating others, playing role after role, woven into the fabric of the church. But here’s the difference: our impersonations don’t fool the enemy. We specialize in fooling Christ followers and even ourselves into believing we’re the genuine article, when we’re not. We pretend to be on God’s side, when in reality we have never left the enemy’s side. We’ve remained hidden, not wanting to be found out, remaining right where we are. Like the Christians James wrote to, we’ve convinced ourselves that listening is the same thing as doing, that spectating is the same thing as living it out.

James, the author of this brief letter in the New Testament, strongly opposes any listening to the Word of God – the Bible – that does not lead to a change in actions. Don't just be a hearer of the Word. Be a doer. It's the theme of his whole book.

A gentleman walked into a waiting room where a number of people were sitting, each of them waiting for a job interview, to be a Morse code interpreter. All of them were sitting there waiting, no one speaking, and no signs of movement from the inner office. After sitting there for a minute, however, the gentleman who was last to arrive stood up, walked into the inner office, and got the job. When all the others protested, the man posting the job pointed out that the entire time that they were sitting in the waiting room, he had been tapping out "Please walk into my office. The job is yours." Like God's Word: if you really hear it, you can't help but act. Jesus himself said, "Those who have ears, let them hear."

It's not just enough to hear it and sit there and expect to grow deep. And it's not just about busyness. Spiritual depth and maturity grow as we live as *doers* of the *Word*. It's not just knowledge, but knowledge acted upon. If we just did what we already know, we'd be busy for the rest of our lives.

We usually want God to speak to us so He can give us a devotional thought to make us feel good all day. But if you want the God of the universe to speak to you, you need to be ready for him to reveal what He's doing where you are. God doesn't just small talk with people. We can't stay the same and go with God at the same time.

A dear person in our church shared with me for the first time in their married life she and her husband just committed to be tithers last week. (Tithing means giving 10% of your income to the church). She was excited and fearful at the same time. Her tears of joy as she spoke were evidence that God was already blessing their new step of faith as they put their belief into action in a new and deeper way, as doers of the Word. Faith is belief in action, faith brought to life. "*Do what it says*," James writes. Many of us know plenty of God's Word. We just don't do it, or we only do the convenient part, the easy part. But, "Selected obedience is not obedience at all, it is merely convenience." (Robinson)

One thing about Jesus: he brings love, peace, joy, and many other things – but rarely convenience.

James says "*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves.*" When we don't act, we begin to deceive ourselves. For a long time, I felt like a mamby-pamby Christian without a story to tell. It paralyzed me. But somewhere along the way, without realizing it, I talked about it. I served somebody as a part of a mission trip. I decided if this is true, if this is real, I need to say this. Or I need to do that. Somewhere along the way, I decided that I didn't line up with God. And I was smart enough to realize I was the one who needed to move!

20 years ago, Richard Halverston was the chaplain to the United States Senate. He prayed these words before the Senate: "Lord, it is not those who deny Your existence who are the problem. It is we who profess to believe in You and (yet) live as though You are non-existent. It is we who say we believe, and behave as though it makes no difference. Forgive us, Lord, for the contradiction in our lives: With our lips we worship You, but our hearts are far from You. Forgive the vanity, the emptiness, the fruitlessness of loves whose faith in God is a charade..." John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, called those of us who hear and don't act "practical atheists."

D.C. Talk in their hit song Jesus Freak, said it this way: "The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, walk out the door and then deny him by their lifestyles. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable."

What is profoundly different in your life today, as compared to a year ago, because of your relationship to Jesus Christ and what you have learned from his Word? In the 21st Century, the new generation is less convinced by logic and more convinced by experience. They are looking for authentic faith brought to life. Authentic is the key word.

Why is this so hard for us? Because there is something inherently wrong with us. When you step out like this, you lose your hiding place. And we've been hiding for a long time. We've been listening for a long time. We don't want to change. We choose comfort over sacrifice. Selfishness over selflessness. We prefer the hell of a predictable situation rather than risk the joy of an unpredictable one. We prefer the game of Monotony over Risk. Look at the book: Adam and Eve hid from God! They knew they'd blown it, and we've been hiding ever since. If that's you; if nothing has changed in your life, James has some good news for you.

THERE IS A SOLUTION, a way back: James 1:25 – *“But the one who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does.”*

James reminds us that there was a time BEFORE our sin, when we were made in the image of God – the God whose story is one of reaching out, creating, saving, and healing. Though his Son Jesus Christ, God provides a way back for us, and we can participate in his grand story of salvation as we look to him, continue in his mission, act on his behalf, and bless those around us. That's something worth coming out of camouflage for!

First, James suggests having the right attitude toward God's perfect Word. Why does James call it “perfect?”

1. Because God's Word expresses perfectly who God is – a clear picture.
2. God's Word reveals to us what we are. It is a mirror that doesn't lie.
3. God's Word is perfect because it cannot be improved. The truth does not change and therefore, we do not need an edited or updated version of God's truth.

The issue is, “Is it true for me?” Do I really believe the Bible to be God's revealed Word and that it is accurate and truthful for all time, but especially for today and for me?! OR do I see it as all right for my spouse, our kids, and people who really need help? Many of us think the Word of God is accurate until it gets too close for comfort, until it confronts our actions or our choices, and we have to change to line up with it. Or is it, indeed, God's Word for me today?

Only when we have that attitude can the Word of God be “the law that gives freedom.” Most of us talk about our freedom, our right to this or that.” But much of the time we don't behave as free people. We're slaves. Obeying our emotions and giving in to all our desires and twisted thoughts. That's not freedom. That's slavery. Galatians 5:1 says it: “It was for *freedom* that Christ set us free,” not so we could just be a slave to whatever trips our fancy.

Second, James gives us very specific and practical ways that we can apply it. Look at verse 26: *“If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his or her tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.”* Gossip can destroy a church. Your tongue and heart are linked, so that your speech is an accurate measure of your life. Jesus said, *“...the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart and these make a person unclean.”* Mt. 15:18. A person unable to control their tongue – regularly traffics in gossip, slander, rumors, criticism, and lies, - is demonstrating a heart untouched and unconnected to Jesus Christ. That person doesn't have the religion of the New Testament *because no real faith produces that kind of consistent behavior.* Don't soften this and try to create an exception to the rule. James is exposing phoniness, shallowness in people's faith.

Verse 27: *“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.”* Remember that our spiritual salvation never results FROM good works, but always results IN good works.

“pure and faultless” – a spirit that pervades our lives, and manifests as servanthood. You reach out to others, not to be seen, not to be noticed, but to line up with the inner desire Jesus places in your heart.

“to look after” – means to demonstrate concern and personal contact with the person in need. (Jesus didn’t do many drive-by healings). It’s not a one-shot deal, but an ongoing way to live.

“Orphans and widows” are two examples of people truly in need. James doesn’t say to limit your time and attention to only these two groups, but to any who are helpless and without hope. 1 Tim. 5:16 *“If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need.”*

We live out our faith beginning at home, caring for the powerless persons. When we give with no hope of receiving in return, we show what it means to live for Christ. Widows and orphans today include those de facto ones who become widowed and orphaned by divorce, and Christ followers whose religion is pure will be there to help them.

This word “distress” means suffering brought about by the pressures of circumstances. Anyone who is under pressure and faces a crisis in their life. James is saying, “Real religion is going to take you where the pressure is.” Who is under pressure? It might be you. It might be your neighbor, or a member of your family, or your kid, or your parent: low income, chronic illness, or a sudden loss. It could be pressure from mental illness or unemployment. But whatever it is, we need to be there. We need to share the incredible Gospel of Jesus Christ with those who don’t know him and are in distress and we need to give them care and help in their distress.

1:27 “keep oneself from being polluted by the world” is a picture of how our Christian character should look. We must commit to Christ and his ethics and morals. We can’t be dominated by the value system of our society.

What is that dominant value? Selfishness or narcissism. Most other vices come from that one. Wm. Kilpatrick, from Boston College writes, “There has probably never been a time in history when individuals have been more focused on their own needs, and less (focused) with an ethic of sacrifice and self-restraint, than our own.” Warren Bennis, the distinguished professor of business at USC says, “We don’t seem to want leaders anymore because we have become safe and secure in our cocoons of self-interest.” We worship personal peace and affluence; anything that can insulate our lives from pain, problems, and sacrifice. But when you think of it, how realistic is that? To rise above it all, to stay the same, to not care, is the literal definition of apathy. Apathy is the opposite of love and life. Apathy is death before life. And Jesus came to give us life abundantly, to the full. And that is based on relationship with God, being a doer of the Word. James promises: when you really live, you won’t deceive yourself, you will come to know yourself, you will be given freedom, and you will be blessed in all you do.

Do you or don’t you believe that God opening up more and more of your life to God is a good thing?

Why would you want to limit the blessing of God in your life to your ears, or your Sunday morning experience?