

Don't Just Sit There! Do What the Word Says! (Jas. 1:22-24)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on August 2, 2009

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There's a great concern in my heart for a great danger in our midst, a very dangerous situation very close to home, in fact it's in this room right now. I wouldn't feel like a faithful shepherd if I didn't acknowledge it and warn against it again. There's a danger looming this very moment, and the extent of this problem is farther reaching than we can imagine, and the effect of the damage done can be serious. What makes it even more serious is it is so gradual and common we don't feel it or notice it. What's so scary about this threat is that most of us, even the best of us, don't tend to think of it as a danger, at least not for us. The great danger on my heart (which is a concern for my own heart as well as yours) is the danger of hearing the wonderful Word of life from the Living God, and not letting it change our life ... and not even trying to change and apply its truths. We close the Bible not only physically when we're done with our time in the Word, but spiritually and practically so many close its ongoing work that God desires, because we're done with that stuff, and now it's all about all the other stuff of far lesser importance that we immediately turn our attention and conversations to. To only read or to only hear the Bible is disobedience to a Holy God, and deception to our heart.

James 1:22 *"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves"* (NKJV, ESV)

- Amplified: "But be doers of the Word [**obey the message**], and not merely listeners to it, **betraying yourselves** ...
- Wuest's *Expanded Translation of Greek NT*: "**keep on becoming** doers of the Word and **stop being hearers only**, reasoning yourselves into a false premise and thus deceiving yourselves"
- NIV: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. **Do what it says.**"
- NET: "But **be sure you live out the message** and do not merely listen to it and so deceive yourselves."
- CEV: "Obey God's message! **Don't fool yourselves by only listening to it.**"
- NLT: "And remember, **it is a message to obey, not just to listen to. If you don't obey, you are only fooling yourself.**"
- J. B. Phillips paraphrase: "Don't I beg you, only hear the message, **but put it into practice**; otherwise you are merely deluding yourselves."
- Eugene Peterson's paraphrase: "Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go **in one ear and out the other. Act on what you hear!**"

Pastor Phil's Unauthorized Paraphrase: "Don't just sit there! Do What the Word Says!"

v. 22 is probably the most familiar and famous verse in the book, agreed by virtually all to be the key or theme verse in the book of James. The danger with familiar verses is being familiar:

- thinking we already know what a verse is saying rather than seeking to know it afresh again by active application
- thinking our mental recollection of a truth means we really know it, when to truly know in Scripture means much more
- thinking if we show up and are sitting in church at least 2-3 Sundays a month that we are therefore spiritual and healthy

- thinking that if we listen attentively and even for bonus points take notes or nod our heads occasionally rather than looking glazed like many others that we've truly listened
- thinking God's not really talking to me in this text or doesn't expect me to do something specifically, or maybe I actually think God *does* expect me to respond to a message (but I don't actually later ever think how I might respond)
- thinking even right now that you agree with everything I'm saying so far, but if you could honestly look at the mirror of your actions in light of Scripture, your deeds really disagree
- thinking right now of someone else who needs to hear this and hoping I'll really "give it to 'em" and "let 'em have it" rather than praying "God, I need your Word *for me* this day; help Pastor Phil to boldly give it *to me*, let *me* have it."
- thinking of others who you consider to be self-deceived "hearers only" and not realizing you're a "hearer only" is the most dangerous deception (you never consider it's you)
- thinking of everything but (or anything but) the sermon as soon as the sermon is done, immediately on with your life

Text/context in NASB: ²² *But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.* ²³ *For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror;* ²⁴ *for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.* ²⁵ *But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.*

This passage is for you and it's very much for me. What's a grave danger for people in pews is also a very great danger for pastors in pulpits. Studying Scripture 20-30 hours a week is a privilege, but it can also become so professionalized compartmentalized – studying for sermons rather than for souls (starting with my own), trying to be a Bible answer guy more than a bleeding-hearted-love-compelled compassionate servant and caring shepherd of sheep who need God's Word and grace daily ... as much as I do. I am convicted by our passage and I come alongside you to speak this Word that God intends for all of us, praying for our changing and the Holy Spirit's convicting as well as encouraging help today.

How NOT to listen to a sermon

1. With Hearts that Won't Repent
2. With Ears that Won't Receive
3. With Rears that Won't Respond (i.e., that just sit there)
4. With Minds that Won't Remember

1st way NOT to listen to a sermon: With Hearts that Won't Repent

v. 21 *"therefore laying aside all filthiness and all that remains in wickedness ..."*

We don't need to spend as much time on this first one, because our past 2 messages have developed this theme: We must uproot the weeds of sin so the planted Word can grow, we must cultivate a heart that is good soil, soft soil plowed by repentance as Jeremiah commanded, not sowing among thorns of unrepentant sin that will choke out the growth of the seed that is sown by the teaching of Scripture. Jesus warned of unrepentant worship, and He spoke of thorns as cares of the world that choke out the Word from growth.

We must continually put off and put on, as we saw all over the NT last week; here put off sin, and put on submissive obedience. This isn't mere behavior modification or human effort, as we said, it is gospel-driven transformation in the power of the cross. It's focused on Christ, empowered by the Spirit; it's of God, from God, through God, to the glory of God the Father, in all things.

Some Christians teach or emphasize only positional forgiveness – that those who are in Christ by grace through faith are judicially and positionally declared righteous and forgiven once and for all, and therefore (some teach) Christians don't need to repent any more or confess sins anymore or ask forgiveness anymore. Wrong! There *is* a positional forgiveness for all God's adopted children, but there is also a parental / relational forgiveness, Father-to-child.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught His disciples whenever you pray, begin with "*Our Father which art in heaven*" and part of it should be "... *and forgive us ... as we forgive ... For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.* (Matthew 6:12-15, NKJV)

Like the text we looked at last time (Mark 11:25) Jesus is talking to disciples who the text says are in a relationship with God as their Father, and the text says our prayers should be constantly asking God to forgive us. And our relational forgiveness with our Father is not only dependent on our repentant heart in prayer but in our heart forgiving others (the texts require relational forgiveness).

James 5:16 commands "*confess your sins*" (Greek present active imperative – i.e., "be continually confessing your sins")

1 John 1:9: *if we confess* [Greek present tense – continual habitual pattern of life] *our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins*

From OT to NT, God doesn't want unrepentant hearts in worship or just showing up at the place of worship. A physical heart that is unresponsive is deadly to your body, and spiritual hearts that are unrepentant are equally dangerous to your soul. Sin clogs your spiritual arteries so that the Word hardens instead of helps you.

2nd way NOT to listen to a sermon: With Ears that Won't Receive

v. 21b "*in humility receive the Word implanted ...*"

As we saw last time, one of the words for "sin" in v. 21 can refer to wax in the ear that prevents you from hearing. We also saw that "receive" means welcome, take in warmly, let it take up residence in. Truly receiving goes beyond what your physical ears hear. And I'm using the phrase "ears that WON'T receive" (rather than don't or can't – not a physical disability of ears, a spiritual disobedience)

v. 22b "... *not hearers only, deceiving yourselves*"

HEARER – ‘a common term for persons who were attendants at a lecture but not disciples of the lecturer. They were hearers who in life did not follow the instructions given [but *disciple* = learner who also follows the teacher and attaches his life to him. Merely hearing] is a common human failing from which Christians are not exempt. ... “Our churches are filled with spiritual sponges who soak up the information, sit, sour, and eventually stink!”¹

If you’ve ever audited a class at college / school, this Greek word is related to that *auditor* concept. Someone who audits the class is there to listen in on the lecture but isn’t required to do any work or tests or assignments. It’s an auditory (hearing) process only and the attendee doesn’t get any credit for it and typically doesn’t make any personal investment into it financially or otherwise. Too many attend to the public hearing of God’s Word the same way – it’s an auditory hearing exercise only, and they don’t think there’s any work or assignment required of them. They make no investment and they get no credit, so there’s no real lasting good it does them.

There were lecture halls in those days where people came to just listen. Entertainment was big to Romans (performances, plays, sports). This root word for “hear” in Greek was used when they would sit in on a piece read, recited, played, or sung, and enjoy it.

Ezekiel 33 (NKJV) ³⁰ “*As for you, son of man, the children of your people are talking about you beside the walls and in the doors of the houses; and they speak to one another, everyone saying to his brother, ‘Please come and hear what the word is that comes from the LORD.’*”³¹ ***So they come to you as people do, they sit before you as My people, and they hear your words, but they do not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain.*** ³² *Indeed you are to them as a very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not do them.*

It’s not new or unique to our times that many come to hear the Word from the Lord, sitting as God’s people among God’s people, in the place where the Word is proclaimed, sitting there many weeks, months and years, hearing the Word, but not doing it. In any given assembly, the mouths may all profess the faith, but some of the people’s hearts will pursue only what they want. The message may be interesting to you; maybe your ears even like the sound of it as an audience likes listening to music, like spectators at a concert. But a song doesn’t demand anything of you and when it’s done you’re done - you walk out unchanged.

You may be moved as an audience member of a play or spectator at a musical, even to tears or emotions. During the event you may even have times of self-reflection as you may during a sermon ... but the key part of what James says is you don’t do anything later.

It would almost be better to be offended by the preached Word and leave, and to be convicted and think about it later, even though you disagree, then to be self-deceived, hard-hearted spectators who are never convicted or troubled by or thinking about further what you heard and what the Word demands you do. Woe to those who turn away from a service without ever truly turning ears to the sermon.

Proverbs 28:9 (NKJV) *One who turns away his ear from hearing the law, Even his prayer is an abomination.*

God uses the word “abomination” for pagan idolatry perhaps most commonly, for sexual perversion, prostitution, homosexuality ... and for those who turn their ears away from receiving the Word. And on the other hand, Jesus uses the closest relationship terms and most intimate family language of those who are doers of the Word and not hearers only. Luke 8:21: *My mother and brothers are these who hear the Word of God and do it.*

3rd way not to listen to a sermon: With Rears that Won't Respond (i.e., that just sit there)

When James tells us in this text “*be doers of the Word,*” I can't help but think of one of my middle school teachers. When she would give us an assignment, she would say “Don't just sit there, students, get your rear in gear.” I think James and her would have gotten along. Don't just sit there! Do what the Word says!

Moses said to the sons of Gad and to the sons of Reuben, “Shall your brothers go to war while you yourselves sit here?” (Num 32:6)

The song of Deborah and Barak in Judges 5, also in the context of war, rebukes the men of Israel for their inactivity and passivity: *Why did you sit still among the sheepfolds, to hear the whistling for the flocks? Among the clans of Reuben there were great searchings of heart. Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan; and Dan, why did he stay with the ships? Asher sat still at the coast of the sea, staying by his landings. (v. 16-17, ESV)*

Jeremiah 8:14 (NASB95) *Why are we sitting still? Assemble yourselves, and let us go into the fortified cities*

We already read from Ezekiel who rebukes the people who would just sit there and hear the Word, but wouldn't do anything it said.

Don't just sit there in church thinking that's the seat of knowledge. To truly know something in Scripture is manifested by your feet more than where your backside takes its seat (in other words where you walk, not just where you sit to hear someone talk). It has more to do with the actions of your hands than the acknowledgments of your head. Sitting under the Word's preaching is very important, but it's not all – living under the Word's power is the goal of v. 22.

Don't just sit there as a “hearer only.” This is a conviction for me. In seminary, one can quickly learn to become a “professional” student, an expert at studying wonderful biblical material mainly so we can do well on the test, but too often without putting my heart and life to the test of what we're learning in the classroom. It's so easy for any of us to separate spoken communication and information from our personal application and transformation.

You don't just automatically become your surroundings – sitting in a Christian church doesn't make you a Christian any more than sitting in McDonald's makes you a hamburger. Don't just sit here and assume your mere presence makes you more spiritual – it can actually have the reverse effect if you're not receiving the Word in the way that James 1:21 says. The same sun that melts the wax also hardens the clay. The same Word that softens some ... hardens others.

That's why Jesus talked about various types of soil that receive the Word, and why He said let your ears hear truly hear and be careful how you listen. Don't just sit there! Do what it says! Your job isn't to be a spectator and a teacher's job isn't to be your entertainer, or even merely your educator. Alistair Begg's ministry title: "Truth for Life: Where the Learning is for Living."

4th way not to listen: With Minds that Won't Remember (1:23-24)

²³ *For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴ for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.*

Mirrors in biblical times were polished metal; bronze, copper, or in some cases, gold or silver for those who could afford it. It wasn't until centuries later that glass mirrors (looking glasses) were made, but mirrors have been around since before the days of the Exodus.

Spurgeon said: 'the children of Israel came out of Egypt in a great hurry yet we find that the women carried their looking glasses with them into the wilderness. (See Exodus 38:8). It was according to their womanly nature—whatever else they forgot, they must have the indispensable [mirrors] ... It is to their praise, however, that in the desert their devotion overcame their vanity, for when the bronze laver was to be made in which the priests should wash, it was made of the [mirrors] of the serving-women who were accustomed to meet at the door of the tabernacle.'²

Nowadays they have glass mirrors that some of you ladies have that actually greatly magnify your face so you can see pimples and pores that aren't visible to the naked eye. I'm happy to see myself from about 6 feet away! I get in trouble with my wonderful wife sometimes if I don't look in the mirror closely before going out.

In mirrors of NT times you had to look even more carefully, and that's the term used here. The verb for "looks" is in the present tense, this wasn't just a temporary or quick glance. And the Greek word "look" by itself is not a short or superficial quick glimpse.

- it's translated "perceived / detected" (Jesus of Pharisees deceit, Lk 20:23) – He saw through, saw what's truly there
- or "consider" (contemplate, reflect, think what you see) when Jesus says "*consider* the ravens ... lilies" (12:24, 27)
- it's used of Moses "as he approached **to look more closely**" (Acts 7:31) to see an unusual burning bush, or when Peter sees an unusual vision of animals in Acts 11:6, he uses this word to say *I had fixed my gaze on it and was **observing** it*
- It's translated "contemplate" (Rom. 4:19) and Hebrews 3:1 translates the same word "**consider Jesus**" -fix focus on
- Hebrews 10:24 says "*let us **consider how** to stimulate one another to love and good deeds*" – reflective, attentive

TDNT says with the Greek prefix added to this word in 1:23 the:

'lit. meaning is intensified, "to direct one's whole mind to an object," also from a higher standpoint to immerse oneself in it and hence to apprehend it in its whole compass ... It can also denote 2. critical observation of an object: "to consider reflectively," "to study," "to examine," ...

3. In literary Gk. ... “to consider,” “to ponder,” “to come to know,” “to grasp,” “to understand” ... The emphasis in NT usage lies in the visual sphere. ... attentive scrutiny of an object (Jm. 1:23 f.), the observation or consideration of a fact ... used imperatively, impress upon the readers the duties involved in being a Christian ... the duty of looking to ... of concentration upon’³

Verse 23 uses the phrase “*looks at his natural face*,” in other words, his true or original face, by implication, his true nature. Verse 24 says it again: “*looked at himself*” which the end of verse explains as “*what kind of person he is*.” It shows the true self. As you read the Word you see yourself as you really are. This is a mirror that talks. The wicked queen in Snow White had a talking “mirror, mirror on the wall” that could not tell a lie – she was not the fairest of them all as she thought. And this mirror, mirror in the Word also does not lie – it tells us all we’re not as fair as we think.

Spurgeon again: ‘The Scripture gives a truthful reflection of man’s nature—it lets the man see himself, not as others see him, for others make mistakes, nor as he would see himself, for he is very apt to be partial to his own soul—but the Scripture makes him see himself as God sees him. Look at the Scriptural portrait of a sinner. That is you, O man! Look at the depraved heart, the rebellious will, the darkened understanding—that heart, will and understanding are yours ... The Bible does not flatter human nature, neither does the true preacher attempt so base a work—but in plain and downright honesty of truth the witness is given.

The reflection of self in the Word is very like life. You have, perhaps, seen a dog so astonished at his image in the glass that he has barked fiercely at himself. A parrot will mistake its reflection for a rival. Well may the creature wonder, since every one of its movements is so accurately copied—it thinks itself to be mocked. Under a true preacher, men are often so thoroughly unearched and laid bare that even the details of their lives are reported ... The Scripture of Truth knows all about him and it tells him what it knows. Many a time the hearer has said, “Somebody has told the preacher.” ... I have sometimes said to you that people frequently wish that the preacher knew their experience in order that he could preach to it. But it is not necessary to tell God’s sent servant anything about it, for he will speak to you with all the more power because he does not know! ... When the preacher’s description of the man’s heart is true to life and yet no human mouth has whispered it into his ears, then the man cries, “This is the finger of God!”

A great part of the self-evidencing power of the Gospel lies in the way in which it discovers to our minds that which, before, lay within our [hearts], hidden, even, from ourselves! ... He that reads and hears the Word may see not only his actions, there, but his motives, his desires, his inward condition. As the butcher cuts down the carcass and reveals all the innards, which never could have been seen but for his knife, so is the Word of God “quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” The secrets of the man are opened up to himself ... But if this is all, to what purpose is it?’⁴

The Bible, O Lord, is just like a mirror
That shows me the need of my heart,
For in it I see an accurate image,
A portrait of me—every part. —Hess

But the good news is for those who believe the gospel, this book can actually change your appearance! To use the language of v. 21, the mirror shows you the filthy stains you have on your clothes so that you can lay them aside and put on clean clothes instead.

But you need to act right away or you'll forget like the guy in v. 24. The mirror shows you missed a button in buttoning your shirt; fix it now, don't think you'll try to do it later in the car. If you see you have cream cheese on your face after eating a bagel, don't tell yourself you'll wipe it off later right before your job interview. Don't just sit there as a hearer only, walking away immediately on to other things, never to reflect on your life and take steps to change. Don't just sit there! Do what the Word says!

One writer says those in vv. 23-24 'pay close attention to their reflection, examining it carefully before they leave ... starting well by closely examining their face but ... they depart without doing anything. The second verb is in the perfect tense and thus the most heavily marked ... to emphasize the departure. Compounding the problem, they "immediately" (*eutheos*) forget. "The point is that the impression is only momentary."

But at this point we wonder if perhaps this illustration is not better understood as a deliberately ridiculous analogy, for no one in their right mind who examines their image that closely would then utterly neglect the flaws they discover and instantly forget whatever they had seen. Likewise, James seeks to stress how ludicrous it is for people so rapidly to ignore and forget what they have heard. Baker highlights the absurdity of this picture of a person who "examines intently his very own face in the mirror, but within seconds he cannot even pick himself out of a police lineup." To treat God's Word in such cavalier fashion [is] equally absurd.⁵

We've seen how not to listen to a sermon in verses 21-24, in v. 25 we'll see how to listen to a sermon – next week. There's much help and hope in Scripture for forgetful sinners like me and you and there's much joy and blessedness for us when we don't just sit there but do what God's Word says.

"Is the sermon over?" A young churchgoer said to an older one. The wise older man replied, "No, the preacher has finished speaking, and now the sermon has just begun in my life, I pray."

¹ D. Edmund Hiebert, *James*, p. 119.

² <http://spurgeongems.org/vols31-33/chs1848.pdf>

³ *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*. G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, Ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. Vol. 4, p. 973-975.

⁴ Spurgeon, *ibid*.

⁵ Craig Blomberg, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 91.