



Be Doers, Not Just Hearers of the Word
Demonstrating Faith by Applying the Word
James 1:19-27
Jann Wright - January 24, 2007

Good morning/evening and welcome to Women's Bible Study. Today marks the third session in our study on the book of James, Being Doers, and Not Just Hearers of the Word. Before we begin our study this morning/evening, I want to pause and recap some of the major points from previous lessons so that we can continue to build on our learnings from this book. You will notice as we continue our study each week, James will introduce a topic briefly and then return to it in later chapters.

So let's recap. We have learned that the author is most likely James, "the Just", the younger half brother of Jesus. James was one of the earliest New Testament books written and is in the form of a sermon. As such you will find a variety of illustrations that are easy to picture and remember. We have learned how Christians are to address trials and temptations.

We have learned how to reconcile the seeming differences between the writings of Paul and the writings of James. That reconciliation is achieved by understanding that Paul and James were asking and answering different questions. Paul asked, "How is salvation achieved?" and his answer was, "by faith alone." James asked, "How is this true and saving faith recognized?" and James' answer was "by its fruits."¹ So there isn't really a conflict between Paul and James regarding salvation, but rather they are answering different questions regarding Christian life. Obviously, since we are studying the book of James we are going to be focusing on what the Christian life looks like in practice.

Research on Holiness

The Barna Research Group conducts primary research and provides analysis of cultural trends and the Christian church. Their web-site address is in the notes so you can review the data for yourselves. I reviewed their year end report from 2006 regarding some of the most significant themes from last year and found some interesting data regarding our topic.

Barely one-third of Americans (35%) agree with the statement that "God expects you to become holy." (A note of explanation; these lessons in James are basically lessons on holiness, lessons on how God wants us to behave as we live

¹ The Message of James, J.S. Motyer, page 20, quoted in WBS lecture January 10, 2007 page 3.

out our Christian lives. So barely one-third of Americans would agree that God expects them to be holy). But more surprising is that among born again Christians, defined as people who have said they made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today and who believe that when they die they will go to Heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior, among that group only 46% believe that God has called them to be holy.² That is less than half of Born Again Christians. There is very little difference between what non-Christians and Christians believe about the life that God has called them to live.

There is additional data as well that we won't take time to go through that illustrates this lack of distinction between Christians and non-Christians in a variety of areas. Barna as a summary to all of his studies done in 2006 said, "People do not have an accurate view of themselves when it comes to spirituality. American Christians are not as devoted to their faith as they would like to believe. They have positive feelings about the importance of faith, but their faith is rarely the focal point of their life or a critical factor in their decision-making."³ Additionally, Barna notes, "If people's faith is measured against a biblical standard of how faith is to be practiced, Americans are spiritually lukewarm."⁴

It sends chills down my spine to even read that quote. It is tempting to look at studies like that and say well, that must be those other people out there, but deep down we know better. We know that some of those people have to be sitting in our own churches and actually staring back at us from the mirror each morning. So what are we going to do about that? Let's begin by understanding some of the Characteristics of a Christian that James lays out in James chapter 1; we will begin with verse 19.

James 1:19-27

¹⁹My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. ²¹Therefore, 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. ²²Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵But 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. ²⁶If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion 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.

² www.Barna.org. The Concept of Holiness Baffles Most Americans. February 20, 2006. page 2.

³ www.Barna.org. Barna Lists the 12 Most Significant Religious Finds from 2006 Surveys. page 3.

⁴ www.Barna.org. Barna Lists the 12 Most Significant Religious Finds from 2006 Surveys. page 3.

Note the tender terms of address that James uses, my dear brothers, the New King James version renders it beloved brethren, such tenderness in his instruction. We are dear. We are beloved. We are brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. He is addressing his instruction to us, to believers. And to this body of believers he says take note, or listen up, and pay attention. And then just in case we are still not sure who he is talking to he uses the pronoun, everyone. This instruction is for all Christians, not just a few, not just those with certain gifts, or personality traits. This instruction is for all of us.

Characteristics of a Christian

Quick to Listen

In these few verses there are recorded at least six characteristics of a Christian. The first is that a Christian is to be **Quick to Listen**. I was surprised when I did a computer search of the word listen. It occurs often, over 300 times in the Bible. Apparently there is a wide audience of people who need to be reminded to listen.

Matthew 15: 10, Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand.

Matthew 17: 5, While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

Are you a good listener? Do you really engage with the person who is talking to you? Do you listen fully, with your ears, your body language, and your eyes? Several years ago my then two year old son, exasperated by my constant multi-tasking, took my face in his hands and said, "Can you listen with your eyes?" Do you listen with your eyes? Do you listen with your mind, focusing your thoughts on what is being said rather than planning your next point, or mentally preparing dinner?

Reflect on the environments in which have opportunity to listen. Think about the people around you in concentric circles. You have in your inner circle, family and very close friends. In the next circle are other friends, neighbors, and people in your small group. Maybe the next circle has in it colleagues and others you encounter on a regular basis. And yet another circle is composed of strangers and those you really don't know at all. Are you a good listener in each of those circles? Sometimes we can be a very quick, engaged, attentive listener, to strangers and those in the outer circles and a very poor listener to those in our own family. We are called to be quick to listen.

Now, that we have reflected on being quick to listen in regard to our relationships, I want us to think about the Word of God, the scriptures. Are you quick to listen to what God has to say on a topic, even if you feel you have already decided your position? Are you quick to listen to your Pastor as he preaches the Word? What about when someone who is young and

inexperienced is the guest Bible Teacher? Are you still quick to listen to the Word?

It is our responsibility when we come to hear the Word to be accountable for listening. Sometimes we saddle the speaker with all that responsibility and expect them to demonstrate continual wit and spell bounding oratory skills to hold our attention. While those skills may aid in our listening, we are responsible for being quick to listen to the Word of God regardless of the skill level of the speaker.

One caution is in order here. Just because we are to be quick to listen does not mean that we are to be naïve and taken in by every teacher that comes along. No, we like the Bereans in Paul's audience have to be responsible for what we hear and check it against the scriptures to see if it is true.

Slow to Speak

It has been estimated that the average person will speak around 18,000 words a day. That is enough to fill a fifty-four page book. Many people speak more words than that; I would guess the vast majority of them are women. Up to one-fifth of a person's life is spent talking.⁵ This is a huge portion of our time. No wonder we are counseled to be Slow to Speak. Do you carefully measure your speaking to see that it is considerably less than your listening? Do you give thought and prayer to your words before speaking?

Let's look for a moment at Jesus and his words to the woman at the well recorded in John 4:5-26. It is a bit of a long passage, so we are just going to look at some excerpts. I think Jesus is our best model for this type of speech.

⁵So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. ⁷When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" ⁸(His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

¹⁰Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." ¹¹"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?"

¹²Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?" ¹³Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water

⁵ MacArthur, John. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: James. 1998. Moody Press. Chicago. Page 88.

will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

Skipping down to verse 25

²⁵The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." ²⁶Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he."

Can't you just feel the measuredness in his words? He doesn't give lengthy monologues. His words are few; but they are straight to the heart. They are engaged, they are tailored to the situation and to the person. Think of the majesty, revelation, the culmination of the ages in the phrase, "I who speak to you am He". That was thousands of years of prophecy and expectation set in a single sentence.

I have noticed lately in our home that the older children are becoming less attentive to what I say. Part of the problem may be their ages; teen and almost teen. Part of the problem may be that I need to offer a refresher course for them on the absolute necessity of being quick to listen. However, after reflecting on this lesson; I think a big part of the problem is that I am talking too much. I am using too many words, too quickly, and without prayerful reflection and therefore my words are not having much of an impact. How about you? Are there any areas in your life where you need to concentrate on being slow to speak?

Slow to Become Angry

Another characteristic of Christians is that they are slow to become angry. This is a characteristic often used to describe God in the Old Testament.

Psalm 86:15 But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.

Jonah 4:2 He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

Anger in its explosive form is certainly dangerous and harmful and we should refrain from those kinds of uncontrolled outbursts which certainly do not bring about the righteous life that God desires. James; however, is calling us to a

standard even higher than that. The anger he speaks of here is the Greek word meaning a deep anger that smolders and is nourished over time.⁶

Why does God want us to be slow to anger? What does the passage say? Man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. Our anger does not produce the kind of life that God desires. Our anger rarely produces good; rather it cultivates divisions, misunderstandings, hurts, and fractured relationships.

Perhaps one way to handle our anger is to first take it to God. We can pour out our hurts about how we feel wronged and taken advantage of and all the other injustices we feel we have suffered. Somehow when we tell God these things first, it allows us to vent our frustrations, causes us to be very honest about the situation (after all God sees everything and he knows when we are shading the story to highlight our best side), and allows us the opportunity to be comforted and counseled by Him about how to deal with the situation. Often when we just explode in anger or even slowly stoke the fires of anger we say and do things that can be very difficult to take back or ever erase in the mind of others.

Control the Tongue

James touches again on this theme of our speech in verse 26; where he gives us a mental picture from the equestrian world. We are to keep a tight reign on our tongues. We must take control of them as a horse rider would reign in his horse. This is such an important theme that James will bring it to our attention again in chapter 3.

Engage in Acts of Compassion

James reminds us to be compassionate. He uses the example of widows and orphans who in ancient times truly were without resources. None of us set out to lack compassion; but it can creep up on us if we don't cultivate our concern for others.

In a famous experiment Stanley Milgram assigned a number of volunteer subjects to the role of "teacher" and explained that he would be testing the impact of electric shock on learning. In reality he was testing how far the volunteers would conform in a given circumstance. The "teachers" were introduced to "students" who were really actors. They were then shown an impressive looking apparatus designed to give electric shocks. The apparatus was really a fake and did not deliver electric shocks, but the teachers did not know that. The teachers also were shown how to administer electric shocks using a switch and a dial marked with increasing levels of voltage. For example 15 was labeled a mild shock, 300 an intense shock, and 450 labeled danger

⁶ MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: James*. 1998. Moody Press. Chicago. Page 72.

severe shock. At 120 volts the “student” who was really an actor cried out in pain. At 150 they demanded to be released from the experiment. At 270 volts they screamed in agony and at 330 volts they exhibited dead silence. Well over half the teachers willingly turned the dial to 300 volts (that was past screaming in agony) and more than 30 percent continued to turn the dial all the way to 450 volts.⁷

It is appalling that given certain cultural encouragements how utterly unconcerned we can become about the needs of others. How is your heart with regard to compassion towards others? When is the last time you felt a real compassion for someone else? When is the last time you followed up on that feeling with an action? Again, think about our concentric circles. Are you compassionate throughout your circles? Or do you reserve acts of compassion just for the outer edges and forget those closest to you? Acts of compassion should be an observable trait of Christians in all their relationships.

Keep Oneself from Being Polluted by the World

The sixth trait mentioned is keeping ourselves from being polluted by the world. The world is all around us; yet we are to keep ourselves from being corrupted by its influences. Influences that say whatever I need want, think, or feel is most important. Influences that say it is my body and I can do whatever I want whether we are talking about promiscuity, abortion, or adultery. Influences that say the ends justify the means. Influences that laugh at absolute truth, absolute standards, and submission to God.

John 17:14-15, Jesus is talking to his Father and says, ¹⁴I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world.

¹⁵My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.

Strategies for Holiness

By now, you are probably feeling a bit overwhelmed, I am. How are we going to do all of this? How am I going to become more like Christ in the way that I listen, speak, and handle anger? How am I going to be attentive to the needs of others, and how am I going to keep myself from being polluted by the world. James gives us some ideas. He gives us some strategies for holiness.

Strip Off the Old Self

The first strategy is to Strip Off the Old Self. The NIV translation says to get rid of all moral filth and evil. The word here is generally the same word used for taking off a set of clothes. We are to strip off our old natures like we would take

⁷ MacArthur, John. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: James. 1998. Moody Press. Chicago. Page 107.

off a set of dirty filthy clothes. Several verses elsewhere in the New Testament note this same idea:

Ephesians 4:31, Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.

Colossians 3:8, But you now must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.

This is a process. A chunk of it is stripped off when we become Christians. We know immediately that some things are evil and must be discarded; but as we grow in holiness we discover pieces of dirty laundry that we didn't realize we still were wearing. What dirty laundry do you still need to strip off?

Receptive to the Word

The process of becoming like Christ involves taking off the old self; but we must also develop the new self and we do this by being receptive to the Word. We must be quick to hear the word, we must be slow to argue with the commands of God, and slow to be angry at the life God calls us to live. The Word read with the Holy Spirit's illumination will convict us of the areas that need attention in our lives.

We are receptive to the Word, when we make a commitment of the will to read it every day regardless of distractions and interruptions. I want to put in one more appeal to encourage you to read the Bible through for 2007. It is not too late. That one goal of reading the Bible through each year has made a huge difference in my spiritual growth, more than anything else. If you are real compulsive and stressed with the fact that you are 24 days behind, just pick up the reading plan and start with the January 25th reading and go forward. Read the Word.

We are receptive to the word when make a decision of the will to obey it even when it is inconvenient, uncomfortable, politically incorrect, or even life threatening.

Third, we can stop deceiving ourselves.

To hear the word and not do it and to believe that we are living a life honoring to God is to deceive ourselves. Remember some of the Barna statistics reported earlier? There is empirical evidence that we as Christians in this country are deceiving ourselves. But it is not a deception unique to our time. It is a deception that has plagued the people of God for centuries. James, writing in the 1st Century A.D. was clearly observing it. Ezekiel, a priest and prophet

ministering to the early exiles in Babylon from 593-571 B.C. was dealing with it as well. If you have your Bibles please turn to Ezekiel 33:30-33. This is God's assessment of the people's willingness to be Doers of the Word.

³⁰ "As for you, son of man, your countrymen are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, 'Come and hear the message that has come from the LORD.' ³¹ My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. ³² 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 but do not put them into practice.

This has been a problem for the people of God for thousands of years. If we don't deliberately set our faces to be different we too will view the Word of God as intellectually stimulating, historically accurate, and spiritually profitable and yet we will not be Doers of the Word.

James gives us a mental picture of how foolish we are when we do this. He says we are like individuals who look into a mirror and then when we walk away we forget what we just saw. I think as women we can especially relate to this. How strange it would be if we looked in a mirror and noticed that our hair was uncombed, chives were stuck in our front teeth, our lipstick was crooked, and our make-up unblended on the jaw line and then simply walked away and did nothing. James is saying that is how we are acting when we are hearers of the word but not doers.

When we hold up the Word of God and look deeply into it, we will see the very nature of who God is and the very likeness of him in his Son. But the Word of God is a special mirror, for it allows us not only to gaze at Jesus, but to see the state of our own spiritual health. How deceived we are when we see our flawed image and do nothing to change it.

Notice that all of these strategies for holiness are intentional acts. It is an intentional effort to take off the old self; it is an intentional effort to receive the word. It is an intentional effort to stop deceiving ourselves. These actions don't happen by accident.

Grace

But there is one more strategy. It is not a work of ours but rather a work of God. It is grace. And so we come full circle back the questions that Paul and James asked and answered. And we realize that not only are we saved by grace through faith; but all of the works we do in the body even with our intentional efforts and actions are still works fueled and sustained by grace.