

## **International Sunday School Lesson Study Notes**

**Lesson Text: James 1:19-27**

**Lesson Title: Hear and Do the Word**

### **Introduction**

Jesus had a very practical older half-brother named James (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3). He is the author of the Epistle of James which is a very powerful book on practical Christian living (James 1:1). It took James a long time to recognize the true identity of his older brother Jesus (John 7:5). But when he did, James matured into a dedicated believer and effective communicator of how to hear and do the word of God (1 Corinthians 15:7). Commenting on Jesus half-brother James, author R. Kent Hughes writes, "He was a late bloomer, but he flowered well!"

James wrote his letter to Christian Jews scattered outside Palestine. Those who read this epistle in James' day were under persecution and needed instruction concerning how to deal with the stress and pressure of difficult trials. Christians today are facing increasing pressure and stress because of identification with Jesus Christ. We too can learn from James how to react to a world system that discriminates and will not tolerate Christians and Christianity.

James 1:1-18 deals primarily with how to handle trials and temptations. Having finished his opening instructions, James now issues an appeal to hear and do the word of God in James 1:19-27. In James 1:18, James makes a clear connection with the word of God and regeneration. James now proceeds to give clear instruction on the believer's attitude toward God's Word.

### **An Exhortation to Receive the Word of God (James 1:19-21)**

#### Verse 19-21a

"Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness..."

"Wherefore" means "know this." James is admonishing the "brethren" to whom he is writing to give their undivided attention concerning the subject of hearing and doing the word of God. This strong imperative is followed by a somewhat softer appeal as he addresses his readers as "my beloved brethren." The word "brethren"

means "born from the same womb." James is speaking to his spiritual brothers and sisters in Christ.

*Illus. "Now hear this" is a phrase known by those who have served in the US Navy. When the words "Now hear this" came across the speakers, a sailor knew to cease activity and listen to the announcement that was to follow.*

James exhorts his readers with a five specific duties in relation to receiving God's Word. First, "let every man be swift to hear" speaks of hearing God's Word quickly. The word "swift" is the Greek word *tachus* [takh-ooos} our English word tachometer. A tachometer is an instrument that measures velocity in terms of rotation. This exhortation was extremely important to the Jews of that day because they did have copies of God's Word as we have to day. It was imperative that they "listen" quickly when the word of God was read orally. Second, "slow to speak" speaks of hearing God's Word attentively. The word "slow" suggests that we should not be as eager to say something as we are to be quiet and pay attention to what God's Word is saying. There is this strange opinion among many that loudness and activity equals spirituality. Nothing could be further from the truth (1 Corinthians 14:26). The Scottish preacher, J.P. Duncan said, "God still speaks when He can find someone quiet enough to listen." Third, "slow to wrath" speaks of hearing God's Word calmly. "Wrath" is the Greek word *orge* {or-gay} and means "smoldering resentment." When God's people have things smoldering in their hearts the hearing of the word of God can often result in a smoldering anger. Such was the case initially when Nathan confronted David over his sin of adultery (2 Samuel 12). Do not get angry at God or His Word.

James further elaborates on the subject of "wrath" in verse 20 when he said, "For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God." That means the "wrath" or anger of a person does not work out God's will in that person's life. Some preachers and teacher deliver God's Word in "wrath." They are angry while they teach and preach. That will never "work the righteousness of God."

*Illus. Moses reacted in anger toward an Egyptian who was abusing a Hebrew while the children of Israel were slaves in Egypt. His anger caused him to commit murder and hide the Egyptian body in the sand. What did that do to advance the will of God? God had to put him out in the wilderness for forty years to get that anger out of his heart before he could lead God's people out of Egypt (Exodus 2:11-12).*

Fourth, "wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness..." is a call to receive God's Word purely. The words "lay apart" means "to strip away a garment." James is saying if you want to receive the word of God and you find some sin in your life, get rid of it like you would a stained garment. Our hearts are often stained with sin like garments of clothing are stained with dirt or foreign objects. One such spot on our hearts that would hinder the reception of God's word is "filthiness." "Filthiness" means "that which is ulcerous." It was a word used in James' day to refer to "earwax." And that would be appropriate here since James is talking about stripping away anything that would prevent us from hearing God's Word.

"Superfluity" means "overflowing" and "naughtiness" means "malice. Thus, James is saying we are to get rid of the overflowing desires to hurt people with our words and actions. It would shock all of us if we knew how many professing believers sit in Sunday school classes and worship services while the Word of God is taught and preached with their hearts overflowing with desires to get even with people who have wronged them. It is impossible to receive the word of God with that type of heart.

#### Verse 21b

Fifth, "...and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls" is a call to receive God's Word meekly. The word "meekness" suggests that God's Word should be received in a non-assertive way with a teachable spirit. The "engrafted word" speaks of the "implanted word." This expression, "engrafted word" is found only here in the New Testament. The word of God is not native to us, God put it in us. Therefore, we ought to have a teachable spirit to receive it. The result of doing so is that God's Word "is able to save your souls."

Since James is writing to believers, the "salvation" referred to here is a reference to the believer's ultimate or complete salvation. When the word of God is received with a willingness to hear, attentiveness as its spoken and with the absence of malice and sin in our hearts, the result is produces holiness, spiritual growth, maturity and character in the believer. In that sense God's Word "is able to save your souls."

#### **An Exhortation to Do the Word of God (James 1:22-27)**

James 1:22-27 is basically an expansion and further explanation of the command to receive and do the word of God. The word of God "engrafted" or planted within must be practiced without.

## Verse 22

"But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves."

James 1:22 is considered by many to be the very heart of this epistle and in fact the very heart of the Christian life. The word "doeth" is where we get our English word "poet." A "poet" is creative; he puts words together in order to express his thoughts or a meaning of something. God's people are to be creative with God's Word. We are to put together in action the words of our Lord.

The "word" used here in James 1:22 is a reference to the life teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ found in God's Word. When James wrote this epistle, much of "the word" had not yet been written on paper but was passed from believer to believer through verbal communication. James wanted his listeners to know that it wasn't enough for them to just sit and listen to other believers repeat "the word." They must be "doers of the word, and not hearers only."

The word "hearers" is was used in the Greek language as a reference to "someone who listened to a great teacher without becoming a disciple." James says that if you want to be an authentic Christian, listening without doing is not an option! A "doer of the word" is a practicing disciple. If a professing Christian is not a "doer of the word" he is "deceiving" himself. The word "deceiving" means "one who plays games with himself."

In Jesus' concluding illustration in His Sermon on the Mount, He said, *"Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it"* (Matthew 7:24-27). Our Lord makes it clear that anyone who fails to "hear" His words will end up a "foolish man." Listening without doing is to live like a fool!

## Verse 23-24

"For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was."

In order to further illustrate his teaching, James talks about a man who is in a big hurry looking into a bad mirror and running off forgetting what he looked like. A man who "hears" God's Word but fails to be "a doer" forgets what kind of man he really is as revealed in Scripture. In other words, he is not impressed. The "mirror" of God's Word is of little or no help to him as he just glances at himself and then "goeth his way."

If you stand long enough in front of the mirror of God's Word, you will see yourself as a sinner who has no hope of satisfying the righteous demands of God. You will see yourself in need of a Savior and you will humble bow before Him in repentance and saving faith. If you are a believer and continue in God's Word you will see yourself in need of God's sanctifying grace. In God's Word you will find light and direction to become everything Christ wants you to be. James elaborates on that in verse 25.

*Note: Sometimes we miss what it really means when we hear the word of God. A quick thirty minute Sunday school lesson or a forty-five minute sermon is just a glance! Unless we meditate over biblical truth and repent of the sins God reveals we will "straightway forget what manner of man" we are.*

### Verse 25

"But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed."

"But" means James is about to give a strong contrast to the failure of verses 23-24. "Looketh" means "to stoop over, bend down, look in." It's the same word John used in John 20:5 when he described Peter's action at the tomb of Jesus, "And he stooping down, and looking in, saw the linen clothes lying..." Can you imagine the intensity and excitement with which Peter looked into the tomb that once held the body of his beloved Lord? James is saying when we open the word of God we ought to open it, read it, and obey it with the same intensity as Peter had when he "looked in" the tomb of our risen Lord!

James calls the word of God here "the perfect law of liberty," or the word that gives "liberty." In this section James uses three figures of speech for the Bible. In verse 21, he calls it "the engrafted word," or the word placed within. In verse 23-24, he compares it to a "mirror." Here in verse 25, James compares the word of God to a "law" that give "liberty." When we hear the word "law" we often think of something opposite of grace. But the "law" here is called "the perfect law" which

means it is "right, mature." God's Word is a "perfect law" that results in our "liberty," not our condemnation and slavery. In fact, you only know real freedom when it is based on a "perfect law." For example, if you want to play the piano you must abide by the law of music and notes if you expect to get a beautiful melody. You can't just sit down at a piano and start banging on the notes. The same is true of God's Word. People want a Christian life without applying the "perfect law of liberty" which is the word of God. You are only set free to live when you based your life on the word of God.

"Continueth therein" means "stay on course." A Christian just can't come and go when it comes to receiving and obeying the word of God. Christians must open the mirror of the word of God daily and faithfully look therein. As a result of doing so, he will not be "a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work," and "this man shall be blessed."

"Work" is the Greek word *ergon* which means "employment or that which any one is occupied." People are not blessed by Christianity if they do not practice what the Bible teaches. To be a "doer of the work" is to practically live out and do what the word of God teaches. The "blessing" James refers to is the spiritually blessing that comes from practicing God's truth in our lives.

#### Verse 26-27

"If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world."

James now gives us some examples of being "doers of the word" (James 1:22) and being "a doers of the work" (James 1:25). When a man practically obeys the word of God and he will do at least three things. First, "if any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain." James mentions human speech in all five chapters of his epistle. A man who is a "doer of the word" will control his tongue.

James was writing to Hebrew Christians who estimated themselves "to be religious." That meant they were people who prayed, gave their offerings, attended worship and fasted. That was the externals of a religious Jew. For a man who considered himself "to be religious" and yet he could "bridleth not his tongue" he "deceiveth his own heart" and his "religion is vain." The word "vain" means "there

is nothing to it." "Deceiveth" means "cheats." If we don't control our tongues, we "cheat" ourselves out of the real joy and happiness of Christianity.

Second, "pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction...." A "doer of the word" will help the helpless. "Pure" means "unblemished." "Undefiled" means "free from anything that would soil or impair." A "doer of the word" will have no blemish or be impaired "before God" as he reaches out to help the helpless. The biblical culture of James' day had no social security, insurance or community assistance. When a man died it was the responsibility of Christians to reach out to the "fatherless and widows in their affliction" and take care of them, but what about our culture? Who are the "fatherless and widows" today? It can be anyone, anywhere, in any situation where a Christian or a local church body can attach itself to those in need. In fact, the word "visit" literally means "to look in on them." "Doers of the word" put themselves in direct contact with those in need (Ephesians 2:10).

Third, "and to keep himself unspotted from the world" means the Christian must be unpolluted by this world system. A man who "hears God's Word" and is "a doer of the work" is a man who does not act or think in accordance with the value systems of our society or this present world. Once we know what God requires of us from His Word we must make tough decisions to remain "unspotted."

## **Conclusion**

If God were to give you a hearing test today, how would you do? If God were to give you a doing test today, would you pass? If God were to give you a looking test today, have you spent enough time in front of the mirror of God's Word? If your religion was tested today, would it come back pure and undefiled?

All of us can improve our listening skills when it comes to hearing God's Word. All of us can improve our doing skills when it comes to doing what we have heard from God's Word. All of us need to take time to carefully look at ourselves in the mirror of God's Word. All of us need to control our tongue and keep ourselves from thinking and acting according to this world system. And all of us should reach out to those in need.

Amen.