

The Holy Art Of Listening To God's Word.

Text: James 1:22-27

Suggested Hymns:

423, 265, 357, 286, 268

- 1) Listen to discover what kind of person you are
- 2) Listen to discover what kind of God you have
- 3) Listen to discover the freedom which is yours in Christ.
- 4) Listen for the purpose of action

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is James 1:22-27, ***22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; 24 for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. 25 But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. 26 If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless. 27 Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.*** (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Have you ever come home from church, rather disappointed at having gotten so little out of the sermon? Perhaps you said, *"That was a poor sermon,"* and then on Monday another member of the congregation remarked to you, *"Wasn't that a good sermon yesterday!"*

Or you may have studied your Bible, and after you had closed the Book, your heart was unmoved and you forgot most of what you read.

Every sincere Christian has had this same trouble. Even the Christians of the first century needed instruction in the holy art of listening to God's Word. In James's congregation were Christians like the five-year-old boy who said, *"I don't have any trouble hearing; I just have trouble listening."* God's Word went in one ear and out the other, and it never touched the heart.

Let us join this congregation and listen to the Apostle James preach to us. What he has to say is God's own direction on the holy art of listening to God's Word.

The reason we sometimes do not get anything out of a sermon is that we are not looking for anything in the sermon. We sometimes hear God's Word without expecting to make any kind of discovery. The first thing that God wants to impress upon our hearts is to "*listen for the purpose of discovery.*" May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. Listen To Discover What Kind Of Person You Are

If you really want to know what kind of person you are, then cultivate the holy art of listening to God's Word for that very purpose. God will not always tell you what you like to hear, but He will most surely make plain what you ought to know.

James exposes a temptation that faces all of us. We are misled by Satan into being "*hearers only*" and not "*doers of the Word.*" We thereby "*deceive*" ourselves, he says, and resemble the man who looks at himself in the mirror, barely gets a fleeting glimpse of how he actually looks, and then goes off, forgetting "*what kind of man he was.*"

You and I have done this many times, haven't we? We looked into the mirror, we went off, and we forgot. Then we rushed back, looked again, went away, and forgot again! Perhaps if I asked you right now what colour tie you are wearing, you would have to look to be certain.

What pitiful self-deception it is for a person to think that the great virtue is simply in hearing the Word and doing nothing about it! And how disgusting it is to God to see a person who has "*ears to hear but hears not!*"

But what about the person who cultivates the holy art of listening to God's Word? James describes him in this way, ***But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.*** This person listens for the purpose of discovery! He is trying earnestly and honestly to find out what kind of person he truly is!

When you and I listen to God's Word like this and look intently into the message from the heart of God, then we hear the things that we need to hear. And the message is by no means flattering! God's Word lays bare our soul and shows it to us in all its naked ugliness. It tells us that we have a heart that by nature loves the evil and hates the good. It convicts us of the fact that we are sinners, blameworthy sinners, who deserve God's punishment for every sin.

It tells us, "*out of the heart,*" and God is speaking of your heart and mine, "*proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witnesses, blasphemies.*"¹ And the more intently we look into the mirror of God's Word, the more convinced we become that God is right.

As we examine the words we speak, we find that we have often had an unbridled tongue, a tongue that blasphemed God by complaining against Him and that slandered our fellow man by lying against him.

No, it's not a pretty picture that we see when we look intently into the Word of God! We say with St. Paul, "*O wretched man that I am!*" Not until we make the great discovery of what kind of person we are, are we prepared to make the blessed discovery of what kind of God we have. And that is a blessed discovery indeed!

2. Listen To Discover What Kind Of God You Have

The Christian who cultivates the holy art of listening by listening for the purpose of discovery will be awed into a holy reverence as he discovers what kind of God he has. Then he will understand why the Apostle John almost shouts with holy joy, "*Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!*"²

Right listening to God's Word leads to the breath-taking discovery of a God whose holiness and justice, whose mercy and grace, are revealed in Christ, our Saviour. Every time we look into the Word of our God, we find out why the Apostle James calls the Word "*the perfect law of liberty.*" For this Word speaks of our redemption, of our being set free from the guilt, the curse, and the punishment of our sins by Jesus Christ, our Redeemer. It tells us of a God who is "*not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.*"

It reveals a God who, does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked, so He sent His only Son to *“seek and to save that which was lost.”*³ As you look devoutly into the Word, you will find a God who made Jesus to be sin for you, that you might be made the righteousness of God in Him, who wounded Him for your transgressions, bruised Him for your iniquities, healed you with His stripes, and raised Him for your justification.

Surely, *“If you abide [continue] in My word, you are My disciples indeed.*³² *“And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”*⁴

By that Word God declares us free people. Free from every sin and its terrible stain. Free from all its guilt, because Christ has taken our guilt upon Himself. Free from all punishment, because Jesus has endured it all for us. His blood has cleansed us. His righteousness now clothes us. He has given us a title to heaven.

3. Listen To Discover The Freedom Which Is Yours In Christ

But you will make another discovery if you listen to God’s Word with the purpose of discovery. You will find out what type of freedom is yours in Christ. You will discover that yours is not only a freedom from, but also a freedom for, something.

What a blessed discovery we make in the words of St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:15, *[Christ] died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.* No longer are we slaves of sin and Satan, held in bondage by a ruthless master who forces us to displease God. We are free people. Looking into the *“perfect law of liberty,”* we find that we have been freed by our Redeemer for a life of service to God and man.

In that freedom we find opened up to us what Jesus Himself calls *“the abundant life,”* the full life, the thrilling life, the exciting life. It is the Christian Life! Jesus said in John 10:10, *I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.* We who have heard the truth now can do the truth!

4. Listen For The Purpose Of Action

If you want to cultivate the holy art of listening to God's Word, then do not only listen to discover what kind of person you are, what kind of God you have, and what freedom is yours in Christ, but also listen for the purpose of action!

Listen, because God has something for you to do, and you are free in Christ to do it. You ***“are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works.”***⁵

If we listen to God's Word in this way, no sermon, no Bible reading, will be without blessing to us and to others. When we approach God in prayer and ask Him the most natural question a Christian could ask, *“Lord, what will You have me to do?”* you may be sure that God will answer this question for you. He will tell you what to do because He wants ***“doers of the Word.”***

A newly won convert to Christianity in China once wrote a friend, *“I am reading my Bible and behaving it.”* He had learned the holy art of listening to God's Word. He believed and “behaved” it! This is exactly what God wants, as written in our text, ***But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.***

There is nothing that delights our God more than to bless us. He is “merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth.” When we who hear the Word of God do the works of God, then God is well pleased and blesses us.

What a wonderful reason to listen to God for His instruction as to what He wants us to do! After hearing what He has done for us, we cannot but listen to Him as He tells us what we are to do for Him! Jesus summarises it all when He says ***“Blessed are they that hear the Word of God and keep it.”***

Our text mentions three things that God wants us to do. Let us note them and observe them for our own blessing and for the welfare of others:

Firstly, guard your tongue. Now, that is a blessed instruction! Surely the person who does so is ***“blessed in what he does.”*** Failure to do so shows that such a person's ***“religion is vain.”*** In the third chapter of his Epistle, James warns us that “guarding the tongue” is difficult.

He says, ***“⁵ Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles! ⁶ And the tongue is a fire, a world of***

iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. ⁷ For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind.

⁸ But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so.”⁶

That is plain talk. And to think that James says, *no man can tame the tongue!* But those who look into the perfect law of liberty can. We are not slaves of this passion. God can give us tongues that bless and are a blessing.

If you have trouble with your tongue, then cultivate the holy art of listening to God’s Word for instruction and help regarding just this matter! Look for what you are to do, and God will give mastery over this temptation so that your tongue will no longer be like an unruly, unbridled, destructive wild horse.

Secondly, our text tells us also to visit the fatherless and widows in affliction. If you want to worship God in spirit and in truth, if you want to know what is pure and undefiled worship in God’s eyes, here is something that is. You should not withdraw yourself from the world to worship God. Go right into the homes of widows and orphans, and help them all you can.

But you say, “*That doesn’t seem so important and outstanding.*” If you say this, you are not looking steadfastly into the “*perfect law of liberty.*” Jesus thinks it very important that you do this. Those who take advantage of widows shall receive “*the greater damnation,*”⁷ says Jesus. On the great day of Judgment Jesus will note deeds of kindness done in faith as crowning evidence of true Christianity. If you want to do something as to God, who has done everything for you, then be helpful and kind to those in need.

And thirdly, here is another thing to do, “*keep yourself clean.*” James puts it this way. The Christian is to “*keep himself unspotted from the world.*” That is not easy, not easier than keeping a white suit unsoiled as you go into a coal mine.

We who have looked into “*the perfect law of liberty*” have discovered that by God’s transforming grace we have been made the pure temples of the Holy spirit, that we are not our own, but are bought with a price. God has made us pure and holy in His sight. He wants us to “*keep ourselves unspotted.*”

If we look into the perfect law of liberty, we discover that we are free to be clean in a rotten world, pure in the midst of wicked associates, unspotted in a mud-slinging crowd. If we intently seek to be pure with the help of Jesus who wants us to “*keep ourselves unspotted,*” we can be pure. The same Saviour who made us clean with His blood gives us the power through His Word to keep clean.

How many times have you been through your Bible? That question is not nearly as important as this question, **How many times has the Bible been through you?** If you cultivate the holy art of listening to God’s Word, you will read and hear with a definite purpose in mind.

You will ask yourself, Firstly, What is God trying to lead me to discover about myself, about Him, and about my freedom in Christ? And secondly, What is God telling me to do?

As you do this, you will find the sermon much more interesting and Bible reading much more blessed and productive. You will also see why this text was chosen for “*Prayer Sunday*” in the Christian Church.

You will see yourself as you are, God as He is, your freedom which is yours in Christ, and God’s plan for your life. Then you will be able to pray the collect for today:

“O God, from whom all good things do come, grant to us, Your humble servants, that by Your holy inspiration we may think those things that are right and by Your merciful guiding may do what is right. We ask this through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen.”

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Matthew 15:19

² 1 John 3:1

³ Luke 19:10

⁴ John 8:31-32

⁵ Ephesians 2:10

⁶ James 3:5-10

⁷ Matthew 23:14