

## August 9 Lesson 10 (NIV)

### HEARING AND DOING

DEVOTIONAL READING: 1 Corinthians 1:26–31

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: James 1:19–27

#### JAMES 1:19–27

<sup>19</sup> My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, <sup>20</sup> because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. <sup>21</sup> Therefore, 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.

<sup>22</sup> Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. <sup>23</sup> Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror <sup>24</sup> and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. <sup>25</sup> But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.

<sup>26</sup> Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup> 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.

#### KEY VERSE

*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. —James 1:22*

### MANY FACES OF WISDOM

#### Unit 3: Faith and Wisdom in James

LESSONS 9–13

#### LESSON OUTLINE

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## HOW TO SAY IT

*SirachSigh-rak.*

### Introduction

#### A. Disconnected

The title of today’s lesson gets at what is really a fundamental human problem: the disconnect in our hearts and minds between hearing and doing. The problem is not really a lack of information but rather what we do or don’t do with it. Consider: we know so much about what we should or should not be eating, yet we find it difficult to adhere to healthy dietary guidelines.

Some have pointed to the problem of an “attention economy.” Our attention is scarce, the argument goes, and is therefore valuable. Advertisers, tech companies, and social media platforms recognize this and capitalize on it. Advertising is everywhere. Even gas stations have pumps fitted with display screens in order to advertise while we fill our tanks.

In the midst of all this noise, we learn quickly how to tune *out* calls to action. We become so practiced in this that it can be difficult to tune *in* to the calls that are truly important. Today’s lesson has something valuable to teach us in that regard.

#### B. Lesson Context

Amid all that the Creator provided Adam and Eve in the garden—amid all the evidence of God’s goodness—the first humans heard the command not to eat of the tree in the middle of the garden. But they failed to do what God commanded (Genesis 3) when they failed to tune out a contradictory voice. The disconnect between hearing and doing was and is at the heart of sin.

This is also the story of Israel. Even after clear evidence of God’s presence during the exodus, the Israelites failed to obey, instead creating an idol to worship (Exodus 32). During the time of the judges, the Israelites went through relentless cycles of oppression, deliverance, and relapse. They never seemed to make the connection between their actions and the results. This pattern was fundamentally a problem of the heart (see Proverbs 4:23).

The power of speech is likewise a thread that can be traced through Scripture, beginning in Genesis 3. As we study, we remember the context of James’s audience: economic oppression, some infighting, and persecution (see lesson 9 Lesson Context: James the Epistle; also see James 2:1–7; 3:13–4:12; 5:1–6).

## I. Faithful Speech (James 1:19–21)

### A. Swift and Slow (v. 19)

**19. My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,**

James has just reminded his readers that they are called to be “a kind of firstfruits of all [God] created” (James 1:18). In light of this goal, the instructions of the present verse become all the more necessary.

The three commands in the verse before us are straightforward. They are commands that are already familiar to James’s Christian readers of Jewish background, being well established in the Jewish wisdom tradition. An admonishment of similar wording is found in the nonbiblical Sirach 5:11–13, which is part of Jewish literature written in the time between the Old and New Testaments:

Be swift to hear; and let thy life be sincere; and with patience give answer. If thou hast understanding, answer thy neighbour; if not, lay thy hand upon thy mouth. Honour and shame is in talk: and the tongue of man is his fall.

These instructions are about how members of the community interact with one another and, to some extent, how they interact with outsiders. *Quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry* is not so much about casual conversation—although it can certainly apply in that setting—as it is about how they should conduct themselves in verbal interactions that hold the potential to become aggressively confrontational.

### B. Wrath and Righteousness (vv. 20, 21)

**20. because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.**

James now gives the reason for the previous command. *Human anger* is a reference especially to our tendency to lash out. At such times, we often feel that our fury and the rash actions we take as a result of it are good and positive, or at least justified. This is a situation that all of us have experienced at one time or another: we fall into the trap of thinking that we know better than *God* what is needed in a given situation.

Anger that results in rashly violent behavior or hasty speech cannot bring about God’s desired *righteousness*, justice, or salvation. It should probably be said that James is not calling for passivity or for sitting on our hands. Instead, this is a call to the right kind of speech and action: wise, patient, and discerning.

**21a. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent**

James’s readers know how to communicate, and they know on some level that their anger works contrary to God’s desires and plans. But where do they begin the cure? How do they put

away the sins that are at the heart of the problem? The word *therefore* in the verse before us introduces the solution.

The phrase *all moral filth* casts a wide net, covering a great many sins, as does the phrase *the evil that is so prevalent*. *Evil*, of course, should always been shunned, even though it is everywhere. Its presence in a believer's life is not to be tolerated.

### **21b. and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.**

It's not enough merely to get rid of the bad; it must be replaced with the good (see Matthew 12:43–45). The agricultural imagery in the verse before us refers to the action of God in the heart of the believer. The phrase *the word planted in you* seems to be synonymous with other terms in the surrounding text: “the word of truth” (James 1:18), “the perfect law” (1:25), and “the royal law” (2:8).

We cannot be fully certain, but it seems that James envisions a close, almost inseparable, relationship between the *word* and the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13). At any rate, the *humility* with which it is to be received refers not to timidity or weakness, but to restraint.

Consider the pressure that these believers are under to lash out against their oppressors and persecutors. They need the humility that grows out of wisdom and obedience to the Word.

## **II. Faithful Action**

**(JAMES 1:22–25)**

### **A. Hearing the Word (vv. 22–24)**

#### **22. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.**

We move into a new section of the text with an emphasis on action. There are two kinds of hearing in the Bible. There is the hearing that understands and leads to obedience, and there is the hearing that goes “in one ear and out the other”; this results in no change on the part of the hearer. To put it another way, the Scriptures make a distinction between “hearing only” and “hearing *and* doing” (compare Isaiah 6:9, 10, quoted in Matthew 13:14, 15; Mark 4:10–12; and Acts 28:25–27).

The engrafted Word of God will yield fruit in changed behavior (Matthew 7:15–20). If the behavior has not changed, then the Word has been uprooted or never engrafted in the first place. Our actions are the best indicators of the reality of our hearts.

James is firmly in line here with the overall testimony of Scripture. The thought he expresses is very similar to one found in the Sermon on the Mount: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

Those who fail to act *deceive* themselves (see James 2:14–26). The reality of such self-deception is found in Scripture repeatedly. Horrible to say, when we go down that path decisively, God allows it (see Jeremiah 44:24–28; Romans 1:24, 28; 2 Thessalonians 2:10–12). This makes James's imperative here all the more important.

#### **23. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror**

James now describes the self-deception of the person who does not act on the Word of God. In the world of the New Testament, people were just as concerned about their appearance as we

are today. So mirrors were rather common. But being made of polished metal, they were not entirely like ours. Even so, these ancient mirrors allowed people to check their appearance.

Of course, the purpose of looking *in a mirror* is to be able to do just that. That is the situation James is describing: one who is examining *his face*—that is, the person’s physical face—is doing so to get a close, deliberate look. The person takes note of the image in order to make adjustments to improve his or her appearance.

**24. and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.**

Looking in the mirror involves being honest about how we look and then remembering as a reference point for the next time we look in that mirror. How foolish to go away from the mirror and remember something false: “Yes, I have a full head of hair!” “No wrinkles—great!” or “Why, I look the same as I did when I was a teenager!”

So it is with the person who hears God’s Word and does not put it into practice. God’s Word reveals our true selves, “warts and all” as the old saying goes. It shows us what is wrong and puts us on the path to make it right. Not putting the Word into practice is akin to the foolish self-deception of looking in a mirror and pretending our real appearance is different. Like the mirror and the camera, God’s Word shows our true selves.

## B. Doing the Word (v. 25)

**25. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.**

James presses his analogy of God’s Word as a mirror that reveals one’s true self. He speaks of *law*, but that word is not limited to the books of Law in the Old Testament. God’s Word in all its parts is the sure and only guide to right understanding and right living. Although James’s readers do not have the full New Testament, they recognize that Jesus came in fulfillment of God’s Word. He is the climax of God’s all-important instruction of his people.

We tend to think of law as restrictive, but James affirms that God’s law gives *freedom*. This is a key theme of Scripture. The God who gave freedom to the Israelite slaves (Exodus 20:2) is the God who gives the commandments that instruct his people in the way of true freedom. Paul reminds us that the ultimate slavery is slavery to sin (Romans 6:15–23).

To enjoy this freedom, we have to do with God’s Word what the wise person does with a mirror: pay attention to what it reveals and live accordingly. It is a matter of hearing and doing, not forgetting. What God’s Word reveals about us may not be pleasant, but it is true. What’s more, God’s Word gives the answer to what it reveals about us, the solution to our essential problem.

So James says that the person who acknowledges what God’s Word reveals and acts on the Word is the one who *will be blessed* (compare Deuteronomy 30:16). This is the way to receive God’s favor, to experience life as God designed it to be experienced.

## III. Faithful Religion

(JAMES 1:26, 27)

### A. Vanity (v. 26)

**26. Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.**

The shift of subject in these last two verses is a natural extension of what has come before. From James's praise of the one who does what was heard (James 1:25), he moves to address what that work entails.

Of critical importance for our understanding of these verses is James's use of the word *religious* (a derivative of *religion*). The Greek noun behind this word is found in only two other places in the New Testament: Acts 26:5 and, translated "worship," Colossians 2:18. In some circles the very word religion has taken on a negative connotation. Consider, for example, a 2013 best-selling book titled *Jesus > Religion*, the mathematical symbol ">" signifying that "Jesus is greater than religion."

Or ponder the phenomenon that has emerged in recent years of people who describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious." The misdeeds of world religions has justified for these people not affiliating themselves with any particular faith tradition

In both cases, the distinction being made would likely have struck James as odd, at the very least. For James, religion can be true or it can be *worthless*. In either case, it is not a category to be rejected out of hand.

For the occasion of this letter, a critical determinant of one's religion is one's ability and willingness to bridle the tongue. That does not mean that pagans who control their *tongues* well have a valid religion. To control one's tongue is necessary for one's religion to be valid religion, but such control is not sufficient in and of itself. So having considered the negative of vain religion, James moves to observations about the positive of pure religion, next.

## B. Purity (v. 27)

**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.**

The distinction between *religion that is pure* and religion that is worthless is defined by the contents of each. James underlines that content as including a series of actions.

*To look after* involves knowing a situation well enough to recognize what constitutes appropriate aid and doing so. *Orphans and widows* are frequently mentioned together in the Old Testament as two of the most vulnerable people groups (example: Isaiah 1:17). God is their best and only hope for help in their state of helplessness, but often he expects his work to be done through our hands (6:8). When no one is willing to do so, bad things happen (Ezekiel 22:29, 30). Those who know the true God will reflect that fact in their response to the needs of the most vulnerable (Isaiah 1:17).

James's example of the orphans and widows might envision a situation in which a deceased father leaves behind a wife and one or more children who need the care of the Christian community (compare Acts 6:1–6; 1 Timothy 5:3–5). The phrase *in their distress* likely envisions financial problems in addition to the grief that accompanies the loss of a loved one.

Another significant point here is James's link between social and personal holiness. The definition of *pure religion* for James is twofold: caring for others (social or interpersonal dimension) and keeping *oneself from being polluted by the world* (personal dimension). He does not see one as more important than the other. Each is necessary, but neither is sufficient by itself.

It is important to emphasize this to ensure that we do not separate the two or elevate one over the other. Stop and try to imagine a person who excels at helping the poor, but whose personal life

is a shamble of unholiness; then compare that person to 1 Peter 1:13–16. Flipped around, imagine a person who focuses only on personal piety, ignoring the needy around him. The condemnation of Mark 12:38–40 may very well await that individual.

## Conclusion

### A. Why Do You Speak?

From the time we can first utter individual words like “Mama” or “Daddy,” we like to talk. As we grow up, our speech helps to form our identity and to distinguish ourselves from others. Talking is, by and large, extremely beneficial. It helps us work through problems, ask for help, comfort others, unburden ourselves, and so forth.

On the other hand, sometimes we just like to hear ourselves talk. It appeals to our pride, makes us feel smart, and can make us feel superior to those around us. James understands this about human nature. He understands that often our words are not as beneficial—either to us or to those around us—as we may like to think. What is best, rather, is when our thoughtfully slow words result in or are accompanied by action.

This is especially true when it comes to our posture toward our fellow believers who are most vulnerable and in need. Consider the thoughts of the apostle John on this subject:

If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has not pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. (1 John 3:17, 18).

Openness to what God has to say is the starting point for faithful speech and for the action that accompanies or follows it.

The principles of today’s first-century text can be brought readily into the twenty-first century. Do we not deal with the same problems of words in relation to action? In one respect or another, God’s Word reveals in all of us our stubborn tendency to run our lives on our terms—to value words and actions (or lack of either) in ways that God does not. If we do so after we have confessed that God’s way is the only way, then it is time to allow God’s Word to assess ourselves anew.

### B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, strengthen our resolve to discipline our speech so that it may result in action rather than attitude. May we not be content with mere words as we minister to others in the name of your Son, Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

Faithful actions must accompany faithful speech.<sup>1</sup>

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