Rightly Responding to the Word

James 1:22-25

October 22, 2024

Turn in your Bibles to James 1, as we are almost through with the first chapter. Today we're going to be looking specifically at one of the more famous portions of the entire book, verses 22-25. And as we have gone through this chapter, we've drawn attention to the various linking words and clever ways that James has linked verses and ideas together.

The reason we've drawn attention to that is so that we can be confident that the entirety of this first chapter is not just a random grouping of teachings, but it actually should be read together. And there's a common theme that kind of weaves everything together, and that theme is the theme of trials, and specifically how believers are to respond to trials.

And even if you wanted to ignore all of that, all of the ways that James has tried to carefully do it, and say that these are all disconnected thoughts, it still wouldn't change the fact that the original readers of this letter were in the midst of what were evidently pretty difficult trials because, as we said last week, it's the first thing that James addresses coming out of his greeting. He literally greets them and then immediately gives them the imperative to "count it all joy whenever you face trials of various kinds."

And as we said last week, the reason this is so important as we came to this section, which began last week in verse 19, is because here, now, James is really starting to get into some of the more practical application in this section. He has spent the majority of chapter 1 kind of readjusting the mindset that these hearers had, these listeners had when it comes to trials.

And there have been some commands in the first 18 verses, but the majority of them have been this attempt to recalibrate their current experience into godliness in the midst of trials, teaching them why it makes sense for those who know and love the

true God and his gospel that has saved us to think differently about trials. So we can trust that the God who gives us every good and perfect gift, the God who brought us forth by the Word of truth and saved us for his own good purposes, we can trust this God to use even the most difficult trials in our life to bring about that which we want more than anything else in this life, to become more like Christ.

So last week we talked a little bit about the significance of keeping this context in mind as we read not only this passage, but all of James, because it adds an even greater weight to the commands, to actually every command in this book, let alone the ones we're looking at today, and as we mentioned last week, commands by the way, which come with a greater frequency in James than in any other book.

So we need to keep that in mind because the times that we allow ourselves to have the most excuses about failing in our obedience are the times when we find ourselves in difficult circumstances. Again, like we said last week, it's a lot easier

to excuse our anger, excuse our language, excuse our attitude and other sins when we're going through a hard time.

So again, that's the reminder, that's the context that we have when we get to verse 22, which is a verse that I'm sure many of you probably have memorized and you've maybe quoted to others before in an effort to help them to be an obedient disciple. It may, in fact, be one of your favorite verses, but even so, when you're going through a difficult time, you may turn to the Bible, you may want to probably hear some psalms or read some promises from God, get God's promises on whatever book and look at those. But during trials, you don't usually scour the Bible looking for commands to obey.

But nevertheless, that is what we see from James. Here he is speaking into the context of a persecuted group of early Jewish Christians who are dealing with those difficult financial hardships while at the same time losing many of their close family and friends, losing those relationships because they've embraced Christ as the long-awaited Messiah, and so they can no

longer be a part of mainstream Judaism that is still waiting for a Messiah.

So these are Jews that have been ostracized, and it's into this tremendous pain, this tremendous grieving, that James gives them commands, and he expects them to embrace them and joyfully obey them. So as we come to the text today, remember that this well-recognized passage and the command and rebuke that it contains was given to a people who are hurting and even mourning, and let that fact add extra weight to the seriousness with which we need to take it.

So we began this section last week looking at verses 19-21, talked about what the right reception of the Word of God looks like, that we should be those who are quick to hear and slow to speak. Now that is to be the type of disposition we are to have, but especially when it comes to our approach to God's Word. Are we looking to be instructed in whatever way that we must be to really discover what the Word is teaching us? Or are we looking to the Bible to help us in the ways we want to be helped in each moment, help us how we want to be helped?

Do we come to the Bible or do we come into a sermon looking for help in the particular situation that I'm thinking of or that I'm going through at this moment, maybe already with an idea of what we need to hear? Or do we come with no real agenda other than to be told what to do and how to live even if it's a passage or a concept we've heard many times before, or even if it's a passage or topic that doesn't seem to be relevant for me right now. Maybe you had kind of an "Oh, oh, we're in James 1:22. I know that verse. I know what Josh is going to say. I can, you know, check out for a little while." Maybe that's what you're thinking. Maybe you do that in other sermons.

So we talked about that last week, but then we saw that the right reception of the Word only exists in those who are actively and aggressively seeking to rid themselves of all of the sin in their life. It's impossible for the one who has made peace with remaining sin or has stopped striving for sanctification to receive the Word rightly.

And finally we saw the command to "receive the implanted word with meekness," and we talked about how that command really has to do with the idea of making the soil ready for a seed to grow, how it incorporates the right disposition and the aggressive fight against sin. We see that the seed is God's Word and it's perfect; and so if we aren't seeing growth in our life, it can't be the problem with the perfect seed. Rather, it has everything to do with the way we're taking care of the soil that the seed has been implanted in.

So if your heart is humble and soft to correction, is that how your heart is? Are you removing all of the weeds of worldliness and sin so that the implanted word can grow more quickly and be more fruitful? Is that your disposition? Is that how you're cultivating the soil around your heart?

So that's what we talked about last week in verses 19-21, and it's so important that you have that context in mind because that's what leads us into our section this week. That's how you're supposed to read this very common verse in 1:22, with 19-

21 already in your head. So last week the main point was the right reception of the Word.

This week we're going to be talking about the right response to the Word, the right response to the Word, and we're going to examine that principle in four points in verses 22-25. And I'll go over them again as we go. But they are, number one, a permanent principle; number two, a persistent problem; number three, a persevering practice; number four, a provisional promise.

But let me just say from the outset that I am going to spend more than half of this sermon, I'll be more than halfway through my sermon when I finish point one, just so you know. And that's kind of intentional because it is the principle that's contained in verse 22 that the whole text is building on and supporting. And it's a principle that I think many of us just assume we have down, but we probably need to think a bit deeper through it. So I'll be more than halfway through when we finish point one.

So the first point: a permanent principle. Let's look at verses 19-27 again. Let's read those together just to remind ourselves a bit about the surrounding context. "Know this, my beloved brothers, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. For the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted Word which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

"For if anyone is a hearer of the Word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away, and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. If anyone thinks he is religious and doesn't bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world."

So first point: a permanent principle. A permanent principle. You see that right there in that familiar verse 22: "But be doers of the Word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." We are to be doers of the Word and not hearers only. This is an enduring principle, and it's found throughout Scripture. This was the principle for the people of Israel throughout the Old Testament. I thought about looking up a bunch of those verses, but if you've been keeping up in your Bible reading in the Old Testament, you've already seen a lot of those passages. Israel is constantly rebuked for knowing the law, for having the Word of God and failing to be obedient to it. That's a constant throughout the Old Testament.

And it's the same principle that we see reiterated in the words of Jesus from the section of the Sermon on the Mount that we read this morning: "Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on a rock." And there's probably not many of you who came in this morning who are shocked by the statement, "Be doers of the Word and not hearers only." You've heard it before.

So as a permanent principle, it has also become a well-known one. And yet even though that is the case, it really is the principle that lies at the heart of almost all of our problems as Christians. This is why verses 19-21 are so important because when we are obedient to those verses, we prepare ourselves for obedience to this verse. That's why, as much as you know that verse, as much as you might know verse 22, why do you still struggle with it so much? If you're not humble, if you're not coming to the Bible or coming into a sermon, having already decided, if you're doing this, having already decided what you want to get out of it or what the passage means and what the passage doesn't mean. Or if you're just going to see if you come into the sermon or you open your Bible, and "I'm just going to see what sticks out to me."

If that's you, or if the death of remaining sin in your life is not one of your primary goals, whether it is the sin that you're aware of or not, if that's not how you are coming into the Word, then you're not prepared to rightly respond to it. The right reception of the Word from that previous passage needs to be our foundation as we think about this familiar verse.

So with that in mind, let's just take a moment, and I want to draw out a couple of details in this verse that can sometimes get lost in the simplicity of the command. So just as the previous passage described the type of person that we ought to be, this command also is pointing us to a type of person that we ought to be, and not simply a command to keep in mind whenever we read or hear the Word.

Notice that it doesn't say, as we maybe often kind of think of it, to be sure that when you come to the Bible, you obey it and you're not just hearing it. That's not what the command actually says, but that's how we usually use this command. We usually use it situationally. So when our kids are disobeying, we ask them, "What does the Fifth Commandment say?" And they recite it: "To honor your father and mother," and then you tell them something, "Okay, now go be a doer of the Word and not just a hearer." Or we might maybe do a similar thing in a counseling situation, point out a specific verse that this person has heard and the way in which they are disobeying this particular verse, and then we implore them, "Now be a doer of the Word and not just a hearer. Obey what you have just heard."

And it's not that that's a bad application. That's good application, and we should do that; but it doesn't represent the fullness of this command. So the command is "to be a doer of the Word." So if my wife orders an end table off of Amazon, and it shows up in a box with instructions, and I follow the instructions, and I build the end table, it might be true in some way that I have not merely read the instructions, but I have acted upon them and built it as the instructions have said.

I may have situationally obeyed the instructions, but there is no sense in which I should be referred to as a builder. I am not a builder. Every once in a while I might build an end table or help with a Lego set, but to make the leap from that, from those situations, to calling myself a builder would be totally untrue. A real builder probably doesn't have his wife ordering tables off Amazon.

So in a similar way to that, being a "doer of the Word" is a characteristic that we must strive for. It's not just situationally trying to muster up some self-discipline to do

something that you know you're supposed to do but aren't doing. There are times, though, where you do need to do that. But that's kind of like the bare minimum. That's taking the first step of obedience in this type of thing, to become this type of person.

The ultimate goal is to be one who is described as "a doer of the Word," that it's just what you do. It's the disposition you always have. It's how you're known, not just reading the Bible just to get it done, not just listening to a sermon because it's what you should do or because you believe it's more productive than listening to music or doing something else. But any time the Word is opened, any time the Word is being faithfully preached, your guard is down. You're just looking to be changed by it. You're not coming in with your own ideas of the type of stuff that you want to be changed, the type of stuff that you think is important. You're ready to hear and obey the Word in whatever it says.

So just like it would be ridiculous for me to ever embrace the title of "builder" because I've faithfully followed some

instructions and built a couple of things in my life, it's just as ridiculous for us to think of ourselves as "doers of the Word" just because we can point to a few sermons or point to a couple of really meaningful devotions we've had that have been really impactful, and say, "Aha! Because I can point to those times, I am 'a doer of the Word.' This is me; I've got this down. I can go on."

Now being "a doer of the Word" is a constant disposition we ought to have, a way that people know us and describe us. So are you truly "a doer of the Word"? Do you approach every single sermon, every single time you open your Bible, every single time a person opens the Bible in front of you? Do you see that, and is your heart ready to obey? As soon as you see that, when you see the Bible opened in front of you or across the table from you or in the pulpit before you, does everything about your demeanor change into a ready position?

"Here it comes. All right, here it comes. This is going to change me. I'm never going to be exactly the same again after the Word of God goes to work on me right now. I am going to be a

little different as a result of this. From this point on for the rest of my life, nothing will be exactly the same as it was before I opened the Bible today."

Is that your response to the Bible? This is what full embracing of this command looks like, becoming the type of person who is always like that before an open Bible. That is what it is to be "a doer of the Word." That's the part we know: "But be doers of the Word, not hearers only." And then we forget that last part a lot: "deceiving yourselves." "Deceiving yourselves." This passage warns us not to deceive ourselves by thinking any other way.

And one of the ways that we could do that would be to think that we are "doers of the Word," again just because we can point to a couple of times in our lives where we have made meaningful changes as a result of reading or hearing the Word of God, and then being satisfied with those, rather than being surprised that that isn't happening all the time, to some degree at least. This is so important for us because we are prone to be deceived in this area.

So just as James warns us here, let's spend a bit more time talking about the danger of being deceived. Again, just because we're familiar with this passage, let's be extremely careful that we don't just automatically throw ourselves into the "undeceived" category. So there's a particular form of deception in this area that James' audience was prone to, that we would be good to be attentive to ourselves. And again, this is where that context we talked about earlier is important because it is extra easy to deceive ourselves by excusing the type of person that the trials are exposing us to be. In spite of the type of person that we think we are, these trials are really kind of showing that "I'm maybe not so much a 'doer of the Word.'"

Because it is, in fact, in times of trial that this is demonstrated the best, whether we are "doers of the Word or hearers only." Just like in that section from the end of the Sermon on the Mount: when the rain comes, when the storm comes, how you actually are in regard to the Word, it will be exposed. And it's because it is these times which we are, like we said, most tempted to excuse our current attitude or our current behavior, and instead we take solace in the fact that "No, no,

no; I'm still 'a doer of the Word' based solely on past actions and the fact that I still declare my respect for the Bible even though I presently lack any actual obedience to it."

We sulk, we complain, we lose our temper, we feel a little justified in not paying attention to what we read, justified in the fact that we're sitting in the sermon just thinking about something else the whole time. If we're honest, if we're honest, we know that this is what we're doing, but we console ourselves, again, by telling ourselves that "once this is done, I'm going to snap back into my attentiveness to the Word. Again, once I'm out of this difficult situation, I'll be right back there with you, Pastor."

So that, brothers and sisters, is the attitude of someone who is deceiving himself. Someone actually characterized as "a doer of the Word" puts excuses to death and seeks God's Word with a desire to change even in the midst of a trial, not merely going to the Word to find your favorite verse to make you feel better although seeking to be comforted by the truth of who God is can certainly be part of it.

I don't want to dismiss that outright. But going to Scripture just like always, seeking to change, believing God about what he has said in these first verses in James on trials and what he's intending to do with them, that he's using trials for your sanctification; and then knowing that this growth, that growth through the trials, can only happen as we conform ourselves to the Word. So the character of one who is "a doer" is on even more display during a trial, and the character of "a hearer only" is also on more display during the trial as they kind of put obedience to the Bible on pause while they sulk and wait for the trial to pass.

Now, in addition to that type of deception, we in our current cultural context need to be extra careful to be attentive to this familiar command in verse 22, because we are probably even in more danger of deceiving ourselves in some areas when it comes to being doers of the Word than these original hearers would have been. We have in our culture the ability to really think that we are doing great when it comes to being biblical because we have the opportunity for Bible intake on a massive scale and maybe take advantage of it.

We can, if we wanted to, we could just sit and listen to sermons or theological podcasts on "loop," hearing so much biblical teaching from all over the world, just on demand. In fact, it would be possible for us to listen to faithful preaching and teaching all day, every day, and not run out. We could spend every waking moment reading the Bible and in good Bible studies and making use of ridiculous amounts of good theological resources online. We can do that, and there's a sense in which we should be incredibly thankful for that; and it's actually quite embarrassing that with all of that at our fingertips, we seem to be a far less biblically literate generation than those in the past.

But I actually don't think that it's too difficult to see the connection between the deception that we are warned about here in this verse and our current state of biblical illiteracy. It is becoming increasingly easy to deceive ourselves into thinking we are spiritually healthy simply because we find ourselves being more disciplined with our time in Bible intake.

If we could look back on our lives over the past few years and say, "Well, look at me! I am spending less and less time watching sports. I'm spending less and less time on worldly entertainment. I've become determined after that sermon a couple weeks ago to spend less time on my phone, so much less screen time. And now I'm reading more. I'm listening to more Christian podcasts. I'm listening to more sermons. I listen to preaching all the time, when I'm working, when I'm working out. I listen to sermons when I'm doing chores around the house. I'm reading the books that are being recommended to me."

Don't get me wrong, don't tune out right now. That is excellent application. Hopefully, many of you have made that application. That is biblical application of Bret's wonderful series on Psalm 19. You should do that. Where the deception comes in, is when we start to think of that good application of self-discipline and faithfully changing our spiritual appetites, to take that now and think that you have somehow arrived at a destination because of a change in the way you spend your time, deceiving yourself into thinking that spiritual maturity merely means just continuing to grow in this direction of more Bible intake, less world intake.

And again, I really do want to be careful and not diminish that in any way. That is absolutely what you should be doing. You should be doing that. You don't go home from here today, "Well, I guess I'm listening to too many sermons. Time to watch some more movies." That is not good application. You should continue on, excel still more in that.

But as you are doing this, you don't fall into the trap of thinking that spiritual maturity is only about spending your time better and increasing your biblical knowledge. We need to be so careful. I know for myself it is so easy for me to judge my day at the end of the day, whether it was a spiritual success or a failure, based primarily on the use of my free time. Did I get my daily Bible reading done? Did I pray? Did I get a good amount of other reading in? Did I not watch too much TV? Did I do a good job not wasting time? And if I can answer those questions well, I can feel pretty good about that. I generally feel pretty good about myself as I go to bed at night.

But when that's the case, I fall right into the category of one who's deceiving himself. If we're not careful to be ever-diligent in cultivating the soil of our heart, to be receptive to the Word so that we're hearing it in order to be changed by it, then, to return to the gardening imagery from last week, all of our sermons, all of our books, all of our podcasts, even our daily Bible reading, is in danger of becoming to us nothing more than piling up seed on top of hard soil.

And unfortunately, many people seem to believe themselves to be mature or maturing simply because of the abundance of seed that they can now point to in their life that's now just uselessly lying on top of that soil. If this is what we're doing, if we're not careful, the frequency of the preached Word in our lives can actually have a callousing effect on us, making it even more difficult to respond as we should in the future.

This is what I mean: If you're listening to a bunch of different sermons and theological podcasts every week, and it's easy to get into the habit of picking and choosing based on interesting topics, giving more attention to some than others.

"I'm going to listen to this one, not that one, and just put it on loop in my head all the time." And you're just listening and you're tuning in and out all the time. And then you start up another one a little later, tuning in and out, and it gets to the point where it just starts to become kind of background noise. The Word of the living God actually became background noise in your life. You get in the habit of hearing but not hearing with the desire to change and grow. You're changing but really becoming nothing more than an evaluator of content with nothing more really happening other than the desire to answer some questions you have taking place.

If this is your constant practice, you begin to get in the habit of treating all Bible intake much less seriously than you ought. You begin coming into and hearing the pulpit ministry in your church with the same type of filter that you've been using the rest of the time. Your ears perk up when you hear something that interests you, but in the end you just have kind of a take-it-or-leave-it mindset the whole time. And then you start reading your Bible that way, too.

Brothers and sisters, we can't ever just get used to the Word of God. Don't become so comfortable with it that it becomes just another thing that's there. Do not be deceived this way. This is the timeless, permanent principle that is always to describe God's people. This is what is meant by we are to "be doers of the Word."

So with that principle clearly in mind, let's move on to point two, a persistent problem. Point two, a persistent problem. This is what we see in verses 23 and 24. So look at 23 and 24. "For if anyone is a hearer of the Word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror, for he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like."

So James illustrates this problem with this clever illustration. It's a great illustration. We're told here that being a hearer of the Word and not a doer is like looking into a mirror, seeing what you look like, and forgetting what you saw after you leave. The word that's translated there as "naturally" is the word genesios, genesios. So you kind of hear the word

"genesis" in there. It literally has the meaning of origin or beginning. It literally means something along the lines of "he looks into the face of his birth." So it's talking about seeing yourself as you truly are, who you are at your core. So no matter what you think of yourself, no matter how good you feel you're doing in life, no matter how holy or righteous or mature you think you are, no matter how confident you might be in your salvation, the Word of God exposes you for what you truly are.

So this person in James' illustration looks into the mirror, is confronted with who he truly is, sees exactly what needs to change in himself, and then goes away forgetting what it is he saw. The word that is used for "forget" here, it isn't one that indicates that it's actually slipping your mind. It's a little difficult to translate perfectly. It's not like, "Oh, yeah, I forgot I was going to stop lying and hating people. So that slipped in my mind. I was going to work on that, and I totally forgot." It doesn't mean "forget" like that.

It means more literally, something along the lines of "to neglect or disregard." One lexicon says, "to care nothing for."

It's the same word for "forgotten" that's used in Luke 12:6, where Jesus says, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies, and not one of them is forgotten before God." It's not talking about God becoming unaware, that God's in danger of becoming unaware of the existence of the sparrow. It's talking about his concern for the sparrow continuing.

So this isn't someone who looks into the mirror, sees something that needs to change, and then that totally leaves his mind forever. I think that's the way we read it a lot, and we think, "As long as I'm not doing that, I'm doing good now. I see what needs to change, and I know it's there, and I'm leaving still knowing it's there," and then we feel good about it. So it's the idea of seeing something that needs to change and just not caring enough to do something about it, or maybe to find something else that I'd rather do instead, or maybe noticing it, knowing that it would be best to do something about it, but I'm just not feeling like putting the effort into it right now.

And this phrase that James uses, it's a carefully chosen phrase by James because it keeps us from two of the more common

ways that this verse is misinterpreted. So the word for "forget" can mean neglect, like we just said, but that word is still different from the idea of not caring at all. So the person in this illustration does see, and they do agree, that what the mirror is exposing in them is something that needs changed. It's just that they don't want to deal with that. They really do notice it. "I just don't want to deal with that. I didn't give myself enough time to shave today."

So this is not, as it's been used sometimes, this is not a rebuke of the person who doesn't care what the Bible says at all. So he's not rebuking the, the unbelieving humanities teacher who, who might read a portion of Scripture to his students as literature, but doesn't actually believe it has any authority or matters at all. This isn't a rebuke to that person. No, this is someone who agrees with what has been exposed in him, agrees with the judgment that the Scripture has made about him, but just neglects to actually do anything about it. So it keeps us from that error.

But it also isn't a rebuke to the one who just quickly glances at the Word and doesn't take the time to really see what it is saying. The word that James uses for "looks" in verse 23, it is a different word than what we're going see in verse 25. Verse 25 is a stronger word, but it doesn't mean "glance." So the ESV tries to capture this by saying "looks intently," but it could also be translated as "notices" or "perceives."

So he sees himself in the mirror. He perceives it. He perceives the problem. It means that the problem isn't that he's not spending enough time in the Word. He might not be, but the concern here is that he has, in fact, seen the problem that has been exposed. He just doesn't want to deal with it for whatever reason. It's like looking in the mirror, seeing that you accidentally put your painting shirt on, thinking about the fact that that needs to change, but then you go ahead and make the decision, "I'm just going to go to work with the paint stains. It's not worth changing right now. I'll remember it later."

What James is going after, here, is the problem that continually plagues us when we aren't careful to rightly receive

and respond to the Word of God. It's not that we don't agree with what is being taught in the Bible. We would never say that. It's that we do agree, but it just doesn't weigh on us like we should. James is going after that "I-need-to-get-around-to-that" type of mindset that tends to define each of us when we allow ourselves to be calloused to God's Word, when we become accustomed to hearing what we ought to do, how we ought to change, even seeing the need for it a bit, and then just not caring enough to do much more than give it a "Oh, yeah, I probably need to work on that," and then get back to whatever it is that I'm actually concerned about.

Again, we need to guard against the complacency that we are tempted to when we read familiar passages like this. Rather than reading this as a warning of what not to become, examine yourself now for all of the ways that this is already you. This isn't a warning about making sure that you revere Scripture. This is a rebuke towards our tendency to make peace with procrastinating in our sanctification. So instead of a shirt with paint on it, you walk in front of the mirror of God's Word, and you see, as you've seen regularly, that sinful anger that

you've always struggled with. You're like, "Oh, there it is again." That besetting sin, it's always there.

You see the vulgarity or the bitterness or the crassness or the harshness that you're known for and is just kind of the way people think of you now, you know? "Yeah, yeah, that's me. 'She's just the type of person who's going to tell you what she really thinks.' Yeah, I see that. That's me." You look in the mirror of God's Word; you see the grumbling about circumstances. It's kind of always been there in you, grumbling about the people around you, and you've now gotten so used to seeing that in the mirror, so used to seeing that in the mirror every day, it doesn't even really bother you anymore. "Yeah, that's not good, but take a lot of work."

You see the lust that's there: "There's lust again, still this morning, just like yesterday. You know, it is 'every man's battle,' so I guess I'll just kind of get used to that." You see that laziness or that selfishness that causes you to be one of those people that's late everywhere so that people are always waiting on you. Or the laziness or selfishness that causes you

to be, you know, bad at communicating. "This is just kind of who I am, so much so now that it's kind of a joke with my friends and family. 'That's who they are.'" All of these things, they're just not even really in the category of disobedience anymore. They're like struggles or personality quirks.

That is exactly the type of sanctification procrastination that this illustration, that we all know so well, is trying to warn us against, perfectly illustrated by myself this morning, going to the mirror and noticing this little gray mark again. I think I noticed it about ten sermons ago. At first I made an effort at getting it off in the mirror there. Came maybe a few sermons later, tried it again, still there. It needs dry cleaned. I just kind of got used to it. It doesn't even bother me that much anymore.

And the desire to get it cleaned isn't there. It's because I've become callous to it. The first time I saw it, it had maybe a little bit of a profound effect on me. And then slowly it's just become part of this suit; and I'm fine with it. And it is a funny for us in that type of situation, but it's deadly serious

when we do it the other way, when it's the Word of God and not the mirror pointing out sin in our lives, soul-destroying sin.

So this is the persistent problem that we are warned against in these verses. It's not becoming someone who sees what's wrong with them but disagrees that it is actually a problem. It's not that person that we always attribute this passage to. It's becoming someone who's just become so used to seeing that same problem that they've grown accustomed to it. They just don't really care enough to do anything about it right now. They've forgotten the whole reason that the mirror was there in the first place, and they've just adopted the attitude of "Well, it's good to know that it's there so that sooner or later I can get around to dealing with it."

So after stating the principle and then warning us of the problem, James then moves into the positive application from this passage, no longer showing us the deceived "hearer of the Word," but now illustrating the right response of the one who is truly characterized as "a doer of the Word." So that brings us to point 3, a persevering practice, a persevering practice. We

see that in verse 25: "But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing."

So the word that James uses, there, that's translated as "looks," that is a stronger word than the one from verse 23. It has the literal meaning of "stooping down and peering into," of making an effort to discover something. The word is elsewhere used, if this helps you, to describe the type of looking that the disciples and Mary did in Luke 24 and in John 20, when they looked into the tomb to see if Jesus' body was really there. It's the type of investigation that needs an answer. They weren't going to be satisfied just kind of looking over, "Yeah, I guess he's not in there." They bent down; they made sure they knew what they were seeing.

That is how we're to look at the Word as we hear it. We are really looking into it, looking deeply into it, wanting to receive answers on how to act, on how to live. We come to it desiring to be changed by it. There's a sense in which this

really is just summing up the type of disposition that we looked at last week.

So thinking back to the mirror illustration, it's the difference between looking at the mirrors you walk by because that's your habit every morning, the difference between that and deliberately going to the mirror with intention because you want to see what needs to be changed in you. Make sure you understand that difference. That's what "a doer of the Word" does. He doesn't just open his Bible with the intention to read the Bible. He does it with the intention to be changed by his Bible. So part of the practice is going to the Word, not just with the intention to read, or to hear, or to look, but to be transformed.

The next part of this faithful practice for the believer when it comes to responding to the Word has to do with having a right understanding of what it is you're looking at. So James now moves away from using the word "Word" and gets a little more descriptive, pointing our attention directly to written Scripture, referring to "the perfect law, the law of liberty."

So he's speaking to Jewish Christians. So he's certainly talking about the Old Testament law here.

So when we come to the Word, we should come with the same reverence that is displayed in James' language here. The law is perfect. It's perfect. When it speaks, it speaks a perfect word. When it makes a judgment in my life, it makes a perfect judgment. I have no defense to offer. My only response can be submission because it's perfect and I'm not.

It's also good to keep in mind what we talked about when it comes to James' use of linking words, here, in order to weave his passages together because if you're just reading this in order, it's just been a few sentences since the last time he used the word "perfect." That was in verse 17 when he said, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights." The law is a perfect gift that we have received from God.

When we look into the Word, we do it with the understanding that it is perfect, and not only is it perfect, but James also

calls it the "law of liberty." He calls it "the law of liberty." This is literally the word that you would use to describe freedom from bondage, freedom from slavery. That is what the law is: It's freedom from bondage.

This is such a big deal because in whatever ways you have made peace with your sin, in whatever ways you've decided to excuse your sin or just decided that "Yeah, it's something that I should get to sometime," in whatever ways those things describe your attitude, you will not be able to see the perfect law as "the law of liberty."

It will always look like something trying to constrain you, like, "The speed limit isn't a law of freedom for me; it's a law of constraint that keeps me from doing what I want to do." When the Bible tells me to do something that I would rather not do, or to not do something that I rather would do, then I can't see the law as a law of liberty.

But if I actually see sin as bondage, if I really believe sin in me is my enemy, that becoming like Jesus is the true goal

and aim of my life, and my sin and disobedience are keeping me from it, are restraining me from that, then the Word that tells me how to be free of those things truly is the law of liberty, and thus I will long to look deeply into it. Again, I will go intentionally, intentionally to the law of liberty in order to conform myself to it, because in it lies true freedom from the bondage that I actually hate.

But if I see the Word, or at least the parts of the Word that remind me about the sin that I've kind of just decided to procrastinate on really doing anything about, if I just see those verses the same way I see a speed limit sign, saying, "Fine, I'll slow down," only to, of course, speed back up again as you get further from the sign, as you get distracted by a conversation, or the radio; if that's how I actually am seeing it, then no matter what I might say I believe about the Bible, I don't truly believe it's the law of liberty. I don't truly believe it's the law of freedom because for me, freedom would be letting me continue on dealing with this sin in my own way, my own time. "I'll concern myself with the stuff of the Bible that I'm interested in. That's freedom."

The right response to the Word of God, the right practice, involves "looking intently into the law of God," which you understand to be the perfect law of liberty, that you have that Psalm 19 love for this word because you really do believe it to be those things. You're desperate for it. It is sweeter than honey to you. It's more valuable than riches to you because only through it can you be freed from the sin you hate to serve the God you love.

So we're to look intently into the law or to rightly understand and believe what we're looking at. And then thirdly, here in this verse, we're to persevere in it. We're to persevere in doing this. This means that we continue on in it. We continue to do it. So the NAS and the LSB translate that word "persevere" as "abiding in." That's pretty good. It's a continual process of constantly, intently looking into it. This is more than just what we mean by calling it a habit.

And again, I want to be careful. I think it's very good if you are in the habit of reading your Bible, if you're in the habit of going to church, if you're in the habit of taking notes

during the sermon. In fact, it's bad if you're not in the habit of those things. The fact that you just do those things almost without thinking is a good thing.

But developing a habit is not the end for which God gives us his Word. Abiding in it or persevering in it has more intentionality to it. So you might do these things as habits, but they can never fall into the category of just a habit. They're purposeful habits. When you open your Bible, you don't just read the Word. You abide in the Word. You persevere in the Word.

It implies that you're working at it. You're working in your reading. You're working in your hearing. Are you doing something while you're in your Bible, or are you just reading? Are you doing something while you listen to the Word preached, or you just hearing. It’s intentionality. It's walking up to the mirror not just because you do it every day, but because you need to see what needs to change, and you're going to deal with what's revealed. You go to the Word whenever you hear it,

whenever you read it, "being no hearer who forgets, but a doer who acts." So that is the practice. That is the practice.

And now notice, lastly, a fourth short, closing point: a provisional promise, provisional promise. In verse 25 again, "but the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets, but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing." The person will be blessed in what? In his doing. The blessing of Scripture only fully comes in the doing. Again, James, as he often does, is just restating words of Jesus. Jesus in Luke 11:28 says, "Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it." "And keep it."

Notice, the blessing is in the doing. The blessing comes in the keeping. He's not blessed in his hearing alone. He's blessed in his doing. How often do we hear a great sermon or a great conference message, and we say to the people around us, "What a blessing that was"? When in actuality, if all that happened in the message was that our convictions were stirred up, that we got emotional, or that we got excited because something was said

in a way that maybe we've never heard it said before; if that's all that happened, and we don't actually apply the Word, if we don't make effort now to do it, we haven't actually been blessed at all. All that's actually happened is we've been spiritually entertained for a while.

But when we take the things that we've heard, and we keep digesting them, and we persevere in them, and we continue to look intently into them, determined to take steps of sanctification in response to the Word that we've heard and that we've read, and then moving past the determination to the actual taking of the steps, then and only then do we actually start to experience the true blessing for which the Word of God was intended.

So brothers and sisters, every time you open your Bible, every time you sit to hear a sermon, every time you hit "Play" to hear the recorded teaching of a faithful pastor, you're not just using your time well, you are undertaking a great responsibility. This is "the perfect law of liberty" opened to you. You will be changed as a result of what you do with what

you are about to hear or read. The question is, will it be the change of sanctification as you intentionally, now, investigate with a heart that has been prepared to receive the implanted word, one who hears it, but through the ears of a doer?

Will that be your change? Or will it be the change that comes when a calloused conscience becomes more calloused after hearing or reading another verse pointing out something that, yes, needs to change, but being met once again with, "Ooh, that was convicting! Really got my toes stepped on, there, and I really need to look into doing something about that. What's for lunch? What time do the Broncos come on?" Every time you approach God's Word, you will either be blessed by God or deceived by yourself. Beloved, let us be those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget, but doers who act. Let's pray.

Father, we are so thankful for your Word. We are so thankful that the God of the universe would speak to us, that you would give us your Word, give us your message. What an incredible blessing! Will you help us to rightly receive it, to

rightly read it, to rightly respond to it? Oh, Father, please do not allow us to become a people who get used to having the Word of God, that we would be a people who are attentive, who are excited, who are ready and eager to hear and to read whenever there's an open Bible before us, and make that the mark of the members of Grace Church. In Jesus' name, amen.