

WHICH ROAD WILL YOU TAKE?

A STUDY IN JAMES

Look in the Mirror First

People often speak about “bad hair” days. For me, the best way to avoid a “bad hair” day is to not look in the mirror. As I look at myself in the dim light without my glasses on, I can be feeling pretty good about my hair, until I put on my glasses and look at myself in the mirror under a bright fluorescent light and that feeling will quickly disappear!

Casual Christianity would have us believe that the reflection from God’s Word is inconsequential as long as we try to be a “good person.” Many people have the mistaken idea that hearing a good sermon or occasional Bible study is sufficient. It is not the hearing but the doing that brings the blessing. Warren Wiersbe comments, “Too many Christians mark their Bibles, but their Bibles never mark them!” If you think you are ‘spiritual’ possibly you need to ‘check the mirror’ to make sure – the mirror of God’s Word that is.

James directly relates who we are with how we must show it as mature Christians. It is most likely that the book of James is the first New Testament scripture written, around 45 A.D., just a few years after Jesus time on earth. The book of James is most likely a sermon that was copied and distributed to the growing church. The church did not yet have the doctrinal writings of Paul or even the written gospels. The book of James tells us how Christians should live and act.

Today’s study begins with three characteristics of the mature Christian.

Read James 1:19-20 (ESV) ¹⁹ *Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger;* ²⁰ *for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.*

This advice is designated for followers of Christ. We know this because James addresses the recipients of his letter as *my beloved brothers*. Followers of Christ should be:

Quick to hear – we all want someone to listen to us. Sometimes we don’t even need an answer – just someone to listen is enough. If we are to live out our faith and be like Jesus – we must be people who are *quick to listen*. Most of us need to practice our listening skills – because as the general rule – we would rather talk than listen. Not only should we be good listeners for others, we need to be good listeners toward God and His Word. **Psalm 25:4-5 (ESV)** ⁴ *Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths.* ⁵ *Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long.* Don’t just sit waiting for a Word from the Lord, read His Book! Followers of Christ should be:

Slow to speak – **Proverbs 21:23 (ESV)** ²³ *Whoever keeps his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble.* Jon Bloom on Desiring God suggests that we give others the gift of being slow to speak! Listen!

Wait! Respond! Listening to understand before we respond is a sign that we are not wise in our own eyes. **Proverbs 3:6 (ESV)** ⁶ *In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.*

James is not encouraging us to refrain from speaking when we should. However, we need to remember that the words we speak can never be taken back – they can be forgiven – but not taken back and that can bring regret. In so many situations, we feel that we must say or do something. Remember this: **Proverbs 16:24 (ESV)** ²⁴ *Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body.*

Temper is such a valuable thing, it is a shame to lose it!

Slow to anger. Many quarrels in church and out are the result of short tempers and hasty words. Of all the things in the human heart, anger can be one of the most intense, destructive, and unhealthy emotions that we can experience. If not handled in the proper way, it can have drastic life-changing consequences.

There is a godly anger against sin. **Psalms 97:10 (ESV)** ¹⁰ *O you who love the LORD, hate evil! He preserves the lives of his saints; he delivers them from the hand of the wicked.* In our anger and unhappiness with circumstances and what others do, we often feel an inner desire to take matters into our own hands and do something! What we need to remember is that our anger does not produce God's righteousness. The cross of Jesus is a public demonstration of God's righteousness. God transfers the righteousness of Christ to those who trust in Him.

Keep in mind that unchecked anger provides Satan with a foothold in our lives. **Ephesians 4:26-27 (ESV)** ²⁶ *Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,* ²⁷ *and give no opportunity to the devil.*

Read James 1:21 (ESV) ²¹ *Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.*

The 'therefore' links verse 21 as the conclusion to verses 19 and 20. *Put away* is a term used for taking off filthy clothes. James' words here are the same as Paul's, in **Ephesians 4:22-24 (ESV)** ²² *to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires,* ²³ *and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,* ²⁴ *and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.* In the beginning we often are blind to the sins we carry over from our old way of life to our new life in Christ. We have accepted Christ as our Savior and all is well in our world. We don't even realize that our heart – our actions are displeasing God. However, as we look into the mirror of God's Word with an open heart, our sins are revealed – things we did not previously consider to be sin.

Read James 1:22-25 (ESV) 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 who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror.* ²⁴ *For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.* 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.*

Bible.org relates – “Pastor Stuart Briscoe was teaching the principles of Bible study. He showed how to pick out the promises and the commands in Scripture, and what to do with them. Finally, he reviewed and asked, “Now, what do you do with the commands?” A little old lady raised her hand and said, “I underline them in blue.” Underlining the Bible’s commands in blue might make for a colorful Bible, but the point of the commands is that we *obey* them.” If I look at my messy hair in the mirror and don’t do anything about it, it makes no difference that I looked in the mirror.

The Hebrews had reverence for the Torah or Law (that is – the first five books of our Bible today). They believed that just hearing it was a blessing. In the NT we read in **Revelation 1:3 (ESV)** ³ *Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.* Sometimes, I turn to read Revelation when I feel the need of being blessed. However, I cannot overlook the part where Jesus says blessed are those *who keep what is written in it.*

In the ancient world, a mirror was a specially shaped piece of polished metal. Ancient literature has many references to the mirror as a metaphor for moral development. Over the centuries, man has improved the mirror. Mirrors are all around us in fabulous shapes and sizes – giving us clear visions of our physical selves. On the other hand, the mirror of God’s Word has remained the same.

Mistakes We Make When Using God’s Mirror

Mistake #1 – Using God’s Word casually – not really delving into the Word– just glancing. We may read the Bible every day, but it is only a religious ritual. When we close the Bible, we have no clue as to what we just read. We should dig into the Bible for answers to our deepest needs. Instead we skim the surface. It can be described as the difference between a cell phone photo and an X ray.

Mistake #2 – Forgetting what we see. We tend to not believe the “extremes” of people back in the days of the great revivals, but perhaps we could use some of their conviction. John Wesley wrote about a preaching service: “One before me dropped as dead, and presently a second, and a third. Five others sunk down in half an hour, most of whom were in violent agonies” (*Wesley’s Journal* for June 22, 1739). Before we relegate these folks to experiencing some sort of psychological mumbo jumbo, consider how saints in the Bible responded to the true knowledge of their own hearts. Isaiah cried, “*Woe is me! for I am undone!*” (**Isaiah 6:5**) Peter cried, “*Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!*” (**Luke 5:8**) Job who was the most righteous man of his day confessed, “*I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes*” **Job 42:6**).

Mistake #3 – Failing to obey what the Word tells us to do. *Hearing* is NOT the same as *doing*. As Christians we often want to substitute *reading* for *doing*, or even *talking* for *doing*. As our pastor mentioned last week, we hold endless committee meetings and conferences about topics like evangelism and church growth, and think we have made progress. While there is certainly nothing wrong with conferences and committee meetings, they are sinful if they are a substitute for service. Our lesson calls us to perfect our faith – what that means is – we are going to have to work at it if we get this “faith thing” right!

Mistake #4 – Applying the Word to others rather than ourselves. We should never make the mistake of not carefully looking at ourselves as we read the Word. If we are honest, it is usually easier to see the flaws of

others in the Word than it is to see our sins. **Matthew 7:3-5 (ESV)** ³ *Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?* ⁴ *Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye?* ⁵ *You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.*

Read James 1:26-27 (ESV) ²⁶ *If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.* ²⁷ *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.*

When we first read this passage, our thoughts may turn to keeping our speech free of filthy language and all Christians need to practice “clean speech” habits. However, I am convinced that when James was speaking of keeping a tight rein over our tongue he was going way beyond cuss words. Words can be spoken that cut others to the heart. And, sadly to say, one of the places this often happens is in the church. Words carelessly spoken in jest may be taken by the hearer seriously since many believe that often what people say jokingly is what they really mean. We give our opinion when we know nothing about the subject and we lose our Christian influence. We use our tongues to judge others, to keep others in line – forgetting to look in the mirror of God's Word at ourselves.

It is important to remember when we are the victims of “religious” people giving free rein to his or her tongue, we must not allow their words to separate us from the love of Christ. **Romans 8:38-39 (ESV)** ³⁸ *For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,* ³⁹ *nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

The Bible says that pure religion is to look after orphans and widows. And to be honest, I think most of us remember that – whether we do it or not is another story. But, I think it is easy to forget that pure religion also involves keeping ourselves from being unstained by the world. At times, we should step back to look in the mirror of God's Word and examine our own motives. Some people like to emphasize service and neglect personal purity. Then there are those who are so pure they would never “defile” themselves by reaching out to help and serve anyone.

In order to make an impact on the lost and dying world around us, we must take full advantage of the mirror of God's Word regularly and use it intently through the power of the Holy Spirit. Which road will you take?

Choice A: The road of forgetful hearer

Choice B: The road of effective doer