

James 1:22-25

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Those who live the word they hear will be blessed in their doing.

In these verses James is building his point around a parable, much in the way Jesus commonly taught. The parable is that of a man who looks in a mirror but behaves in a dysfunctional manner. James' point is focused on moving from hearing to doing, and in doing, being blessed. The passage is proverbial, and so is a directive about how things generally go when one follows or violates wisdom.

The directive is for his readers to be *doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves*. In this formulation, James is affirming that hearing and doing are to be aligned in the believer. Or said another way, doing is an expected result of hearing. It should be plain that when one hears a truth the correct response is to act on that truth. Clearly, however, James has observed a different pattern of behavior (which he addresses throughout the letter, but especially in James 2:14-26). James sees that believers often are exposed to truth, but behave as though they never heard a thing. James could be the inspiration behind Winston Churchill's observation that, "Men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing had happened."

The issue is not deafness, but rather delusion or deception. When one knows a truth to follow and an action to take but moves on without action, then there is an internal false narrative the person has embraced. In so doing, we become *hearers who delude* ourselves. Paul uses the same *delude* word in warning the believers in Colossae,

"I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument."
(Colossians 2:4)

Clearly, we can be like those who *delude themselves* when we embrace arguments that lead us into a twisted understanding. This kind of delusion comes from outside of us (initially) by those who deceive us with clever words. However, since we chose to listen to what is false, we are of those who *delude themselves*. We have internalized falsehood, and chosen a perspective that is untrue.

James is placing both the deceiving and being deceived in the same person, the believer. He could be speaking about people in general, but the context of those who have received the *word* implanted tells us this exhortation is for his believing audience of *beloved brethren*. These individuals are not simply deluded, they are self-deluded. They *delude themselves* by trusting self over God, and adopting perspectives of the flesh, rather than of God. They are not being delivered from the "wickedness" that is within our old man, the lusts that lead us astray (James 1:14-15).

James is introducing something he will discuss in detail in Chapter 2: Acting in faith matures our faith, while unfaithful inaction separates us from it. In this passage, he is addressing the absurdity of listening to what is true, then ignoring it. The man in James's parable *looked at himself* in the mirror, *and* then when he has *gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was*.

The parable is of a man who looks at *his natural face in a mirror* but walks away without any corrective action, as though his appearance was exactly perfect. The normal interaction with one's reflection of their *natural face* is to correct mussed hair and dirty cheeks, etc. This man, however, hurries along as if nothing was seen. Imagine having food on your teeth, seeing it in a mirror, and then walking away and forgetting the problem, as though everything was fine.

The point is that inaction of a hypothetical believer who has the word of truth held up to their life, so that they may see what needs correcting, deludes themselves when they ignore what they have seen. They are deluding themselves that "I am fine." This causes them to act in accordance with their delusion ("I am fine"), rather than to live out the truth they have encountered ("I need to clean the spinach off my teeth").

James desires action based on seeing what is true. He desires that these believers *prove* themselves *doers of the word, and not merely hearers*. James desires believers hear the word, ingest the word, then do the word. The fact that James exhorts believers in this manner of course means that believers can, and do, walk apart from the word. Thankfully, God's grace is not conditional. So when believers walk in disobedience to the word of God, it will never result in them being rejected as children of God (Romans 8:17a; 8:38-39; 5:20-21). However, walking in disobedience does have severe adverse consequences in our experience, or reward of life. The adverse experience is various forms of death/separation from all that is good (James 1:14-15). It leads to a loss of blessing.

That James desires the believers *prove* themselves *doers of the word* makes clear that a choice is involved. The word translated *prove* reflects a choice initiated by each person. When believers are born again, God gives them a new nature (2 Corinthians 5:17). But they still have the old nature (Romans 7). Therefore, to become *doers of the word* requires them to decide to act, to *prove* their faith through a choice to take one step, then another, then another. This constant action of obedience to the *word* is what causes believers to live a lifestyle of righteousness (Romans 1:16-17).

The antidote to self-deception comes straight away where James describes the importance of looking *intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty* and abiding by it. What James previously called the "word of truth" (James 1:18) and the "implanted word" (James 1:21) he calls here *the law of liberty*. In other words, the truth is the source of freedom from the "sin that brings forth death" (James 1:15). Abiding by *the law of liberty* is equated with being faithful to do the truth one hears, that is, to live the *word* through a walk of faith.

This is compatible with the Apostle Paul's assertion that walking by faith results in believers fulfilling the law:

“...so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit”
(Romans 8:4)

Paul then makes the same claim as James regarding life and death as the effective consequence, or reward of our choices regarding choosing perspectives and taking the actions that result:

“For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace”
(Romans 8:6)

The *law of liberty* then is the abiding word of God that liberates us from setting our mind on the flesh, which leads to a natural consequence of death (James 1:15-15; Romans 1:24,26,28). The *law of liberty* provides deliverance from our internal bent toward self-destruction when it is accompanied with three steps:

1. First is to look *intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty*, which is the truth of God. It is the truth which sets us free (John 8:31-32).
2. Having understood the truth, the second step is to to be one who *abides by it*. There is a decision here to adopt the perspective that God’s ways are for our best, and make a decision to follow in obedience. To act, and do according to the word.
3. Lastly, there is a measure of endurance required, to *not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer*. Rather than glancing and forgetting, the one liberated from the flesh will continue to remember, and continually be an *effectual doer*.

Those who follow this progression to hear and do the word *will be blessed in what he does*.

The outcome of living the word of truth as *doers of the word, and not merely hearers* is that any such person, unlike the man who forgets the mirror, will be *blessed in what he does*. The blessing is directly connected with being *an effectual doer* of the word. The blessing here certainly harkens back to the idea of the “crown of life” as an outcome for the “blessed” man who “perseveres under trial” in James 1:12. However, James is probably meaning a broader category of blessing. The rest of the letter shows many specific ways that living the word blesses the individual by avoiding evil and pursuing good.

Here again James is speaking proverbially, reminding the reader that the path of wisdom is a path of personal blessing. The principle of obedience bringing blessing is illustrated in Paul’s exhortation to children,

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise), so that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth.”
(Ephesians 6:1–3)

In this verse in Ephesians, Paul means something broad in this blessing of well-being and also appeals to a long life as the outcome of godly obedience to one’s parents. One of many blessings is a long life. James also ends his letter with a similar blessing when he says that “...he who

turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins” (James 5:20). The blessing for the one who lives the word covers the full expanse between life on earth (James 5:20) all the way to a glorious reward in eternity (James 1:12).

Biblical Text

²² **But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.**

²³ **For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴ for *once* he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. ²⁵ But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.**