

**"Hearing and Doing"**  
**Sermon Series on *Faith That Works* #2**  
**Dr. Peter B. Barnes**  
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**(James 1:19-27)**

**Introduction.**

Have you ever ridden a horse that didn't want to do what you told it to do? Many years ago when I was a seminary intern, a college student named Dan invited me to go to his uncle's farm to go horseback riding. I was eager to get to know Dan better, and to ride horses, so I took him up on the offer.

One Saturday afternoon we traveled out the farm, and we went to the stables where two horses were kept. One horse was a big, black, muscular stallion, and the other one was this little brown-and-white spotted, swayback kind of horse. His name was Joey. We saddled the horses and walked them out of the corral to the pasture. Dan turned to me and asked, "Which one do you want to ride?"

I said, "Well, Dan, I've done a little horseback riding in my day, so if you don't mind I'd like to ride that big ole stallion."

Dan said, "Fine. Whatever you'd like to do."

We got onto our horses, and Dan looked at me and said, "Are you ready?"

"Ready," I said. "Let's go."

I barely touched my heels to the rib cage of that horse, and Boom! we were off like a bolt of lightning! I've never been on such a fast animal in my life! My hair was blowing in the wind (I had hair back then), and I felt the G-force pulling against my face. We were just hauling across the pasture. Things were going pretty well until the horse decided to take a 90-degree left hand turn and head straight for the woods. He was intending to brush me off on the trees in the process. This horse wanted to challenge who was really in charge of this ride.

That's when I pulled on the reins as hard as I could and yelled at the top of my lungs, "Whoa, whoa!" The horse paid absolutely no attention to me whatsoever, and he proceeded to brush and scrape me against the trees, trying to knock me off.

Finally, we emerged from the woods, and the horse came to a stop, I think out of sheer exhaustion. Up trotted Dan riding on Joey, who was nice and obedient, and Dan asked, "Pete, are you okay?"

I replied, "Yeah. But if you don't mind, can we switch horses? Joey looks like a pretty good option to me about now."

This story illustrates what I want to talk about today – there is a difference between hearing and doing. The horse may hear the command of its rider, the master may speak at the top of his lungs, but the more important issue is whether

or not the horse does what the rider says. And I can speak from personal experience that not much is accomplished just in the hearing.

As we look at this passage together, I want you to notice the three steps James lays out which will help us develop a faith that works. The three steps are: hearing God's Word; receiving God's Word; and doing God's Word.

### **I. Hearing God's Word.**

The first step James gives us in this passage is that we should be quick to hear (19). Elsewhere in Scripture the Bible says that just as the servant is quick to hear his master's voice, and the mother her baby's smallest cry, so the believer should be quick to hear what God has to say.

**A. Hearing the Voice of God.** I especially like this last image in Scripture. Many nights when our children were small, Lorie and I would be sitting in the kitchen or visiting with friends in the living room of our home, when all of a sudden we would both hear the tiniest whimper from upstairs that was barely audible to the ear. Lorie and I would look at each other and say, "Who's gonna get him?" People visiting with us wouldn't know what we were talking about. They hadn't heard the cry. But our ears were trained, they were tuned to hear our children whenever they cried out for us.

That this is the same kind of ear that we should try to develop and listen for the voice of God. We should listen for His whispers in the times when it's quiet, and we should listen for His voice in the middle of a storm.

There was a shipping company that advertised a job opening for a ship's radio operator, and the office was crowded with applicants for the position. They were all sitting in the outer office waiting to be called in turn. There was a small loudspeaker that sounded like it had a loose connection because it made some clicking noises, but no one paid any attention to it.

A new applicant came into the office, filled out an application, and sat quietly for a few minutes. Suddenly, he jumped up and walked into the office marked, "Private." A few minutes later, he came out wearing a big grin, because he had been hired for the job.

A man in the waiting room protested and said, "Wait a minute. We were here first. Why did you go in there before us?"

The successful applicant replied, "Anyone of you could have landed this job, but none of you was listening to the Morse code signals coming over the loudspeaker. The message was, *"We desire to fill this position with someone who is constantly alert. If you are getting this message, come into the office marked 'private' immediately."* We should be quick to hear God's Word.

**B. Hindrances to Hearing.** James points out that there are hindrances that can prevent us from hearing God.

1. **Talking.** The first hindrance is *talking*. Our passage says, "*Be quick to hear, slow to speak...*" Nothing is more certain than the fact that we won't hear God's Word if we do all the talking. How often in our prayers do we rush into the presence of God and rattle off our list of requests, never stopping to listen to what He has to say. God gave us two ears and one mouth, which should remind us to listen twice as much to God as we speak. Talking can be a hindrance to hearing.

2. **Anger.** A second hindrance James mentions is *anger*. Our passage tells us that we should be "*quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.*" James says that a person's hot-headed anger will prevent them from hearing God clearly, so we need to be slow in allowing our emotions to build up when we're angry. There was once a poster I saw that read, "One's temper is such a precious thing; it is a shame to lose it!"

## II. Receiving God's Word.

James goes on to write, "*Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and humbly receive the Word planted in you, which is able to save you.*" There needs to be more than just hearing God's Word. We also have to receive it if it's going to impact our lives.

In this passage it seems that James is calling to mind Jesus' parable of the sower. You'll remember that the sower sowed the seed, and the four different types of soil responded in different ways. The point of the parable is that the fruitfulness of the planting depends on the quality of the soil which receives the seed. In other words, the seed must be received by good soil in order to produce abundant fruit.

**A. Weeding.** And as James sees it, this involves two things: weeding and sowing. One doesn't need to be an experienced gardener to know that ground must be cleared to receive seed, and also if the ground is cleared and left unsown, the weeds will return very shortly. This is true morally and spiritually as well as in the world of gardening. It involves the process of weeding out the sin and planting in the Word of God.

What are the weeds in your life that are choking out your spiritual grown in Christ? What are you doing that you know is wrong which needs to be cut out?

Daag Hammarskjöld, who was Secretary General to the United Nations in the 1950s, once said, "*You cannot play with the animal in you without becoming wholly animal yourself. You cannot play with falsehood without forfeiting your right to truth. And you cannot play with cruelty without losing your sensitivity of mind. He who wants to keep his garden tidy does not reserve a plot for weeds!*"

**B. Sowing.** The other way that James mentions for how we can receive God's Word is *sowing*. Our passage says, "*Humbly receive the word implanted in you,*

*which is able to save your soul.*" The implication of James' words in this passage is that in order to be receptive to the Word of God we need to believe it.

The great Reformer Martin Luther once said that the greatest miracle that happened in the life of Mary the mother of Jesus wasn't that she conceived, but that she believed, and she took the angel of the Lord at his word. Her belief made her receptive to what God wanted to do in bringing salvation to the world through her, and as a result her life was never the same again.

Are you prepared to receive and believe what you hear from God and His Word? It isn't enough to hear it; you must also receive and believe it.

### III. Doing God's Word.

**A. The Illustration of the Mirror.** James says that the person who hears God's Word and receives it, but doesn't do it and put it into action, is like a person who looks at his face in the mirror, and, after looking at himself, he goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. You can imagine the scene. A woman looks into a mirror and sees possibly her hair disheveled and maybe make-up smudged, but then she walks away and doesn't do anything about it. She hasn't taken the information she received about the nature of her appearance and done anything with it.

The parallel is this. If we hear and receive or believe the Word of God, and what it says about us and our lives, and yet don't do anything about it, or don't put it into practice, then we're missing the whole point of the exercise. Unless our hearing the Word leads to action, it's a fruitless activity.

**B. The Call to Obedience.** There's a word in the English language which sums up this idea of hearing and doing, and that word is "obedience." Jesus calls us to obey what He says, and He deserves nothing less. He said, "*Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do the things I say?*" (Lk. 6:46). To learn to obey the voice of Christ is one of the most important lessons we can ever attempt to undertake in the Christian life.

Several years ago there was a crew of men in the British Royal Navy who were on a boat which was towing a much heavier and larger vessel in a rough sea. The larger vessel was attached to the boat by a large steel cable. Suddenly, in the midst of the wind and the spray, there came a single, insistent word of command from the officer in charge. "Down!" he shouted.

At once the crew of the boat flung themselves down on the deck. Just at that moment the cable snapped, and the broken parts of it skipped around like an angry steel snake. If any man had been struck by it, he would have been killed instantly. But fortunately, the whole crew automatically obeyed, and no one was injured. If anyone had stopped to argue, or ask why, he would have been a dead man.

Our obedience to Christ should be like the crew of that ship – an immediate response. We don't always understand why God commands us to do something, but we can rest assured that He has our best interest at heart. He loves us, and He wants the best for us.

When our oldest son, Nate, was very small, he was with me one day while I was shaving. All of a sudden, I looked down and saw that somehow he had pulled himself up to the sink and gotten hold of my razor. I said to him in a very forceful voice, "Stop right there and give it to me!" He looked at me with such a puzzled look, and began to cry. And then I cried too when I realized how much I frightened him. Nate had no idea of the danger he was in, and I knew I needed to demand his obedience in order to keep him safe. The same is true with God and us.

**C. The Invitation to Justice and Righteousness.** What does obedience to Christ look like? James gives some examples in our passage. *“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” (1:27).* This is a biblical truth that is taught throughout the Bible in the both the Old and New Testaments, and seeking justice and developing a concern for the poor are at the heart of obedience to the Word of God.

Religion has been defined as the outward expression of worship in ritual, liturgy, and ceremony. But James believed that religious expressions were worthless if a person couldn't bridle their own tongue, and authentic religion is much more than just outward expressions of worship. Believers who are doers of the God's Word must be concerned about and engaged with matters of justice and they should try to come to the aid of those who are the most vulnerable and helpless people in this world. Helping widows and orphans are a good example of what James is talking about.

Moral purity is another mark of true religion James mentions. The cover article in *Time* magazine last week is on the subject of pornography, and it talks about what a problem it has become in our country, especially among young men. Pornography is \$97 billion a year global industry, and one out of every four clicks on the internet every day is to a pornographic site. 46% of young men and 16% of young women view pornography every week. Some of you are addicted to pornography yourself, and it's destroying your soul and it's destroying your relationships. You need to stop it in obedience to Christ.

How are you doing in the private areas of your life? Is your walk with Christ marked by moral purity, or are there areas that need to be cleaned up and repented of? If you want to be a doer of God's Word, your life should be morally pure. Is it?

## **Conclusion.**

Gary Haugen is the founder and president of the International Justice Mission. It's an organization that is on the front lines of interceding on behalf of some of the poorest and the most defenseless people in the world. His book *Just Courage* begins by relating a story about a time he was in college late one night during his freshman year. He was in the dorm laundry room waiting for his clothes to dry, and he was reading an essay by John Stuart Mill entitled "On Liberty." Mill was trying to explain the process by which words lose their meaning, and he casually offered that the best example of this phenomenon was actually Christians. Mill observed that Christians seem to have the amazing ability to say the most wonderful things without actually believing or doing them.

As Gary read further in the essay, what became more disturbing to him was the list of things Mill wrote about which were evidence of what he was saying, things like – blessed are the poor and humble; it's better to give than to receive; judge not, lest you be judged; love your neighbor as yourself, etc. Reading the list, Gary reflected on how he would live his life so differently if he really believed those statements. Mill concluded his essay by writing, "The sayings of Christ co-exist passively in the minds of Christians, producing hardly any effect beyond what is caused by mere listening to words so admirable and bland."

Haugen writes, "Looking at each of the glorious declarations on the list and at the corresponding mediocrity of my own daily character, Mill's observation seemed simply and clearly true. What ended up surprising me, however, was what followed – which was not a rush of guilt or despair, but the opening of a fresh and unexpected window of hope. Perhaps my life need not be, in fact, so shriveled and mediocre if I began to act as if what Jesus said were actually true."<sup>1</sup>

So Gary began to do just that, and it changed his life.

James does well to remind us that what is heard in the holy place must be lived out in the marketplace, or there is no point in the hearing at all. Are you merely a hearer of God's Word today, or are you a doer of it? This is where the rubber meets the road, or, as my experience with Dan's horse reminded me a long time ago, where the hooves hit the trail! It helps develop a faith that works.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Haugen, *Just Courage*, p. 10.