

James tells us in our Epistle lesson for today that there are hearers of the Word and there are doers. And the question that he asks each and every one of us this morning is, which one are you? Because if we are just hearers of the Word, Christians, then we are deceiving ourselves, and our religion, as James says, is worthless. I know those are hard words to hear, but they are necessary words. Because this is not what we want to be. But if we are doers of the Word, then we are blessed, and our religion is pure and undefiled. This is what we should be. This is what God calls us to be. So the question that we must ask, of course, is: how do you tell the difference? How do you know if you are a hearer only or a doer of the Word?

But of course, the first thing we have to say here is the difference is not between an unbeliever and a believer, as if the hearer of the Word is somebody who didn't believe and a doer is somebody who did. What James is talking about here is that both hear the Word, the hearer and the doer alike. He's not talking about somebody who never hears the Word at all. So the hearer and the doer alike know what the Word says. The hearer and the doer alike claim to believe in God. The hearer and the doer alike go to church. And the hearer and doer alike would both say that they are Christians. The unbeliever's not even in the picture here. We're not concerned with them at all. They are not deceived in the way that James is talking about. They are simply under the judgment of God.

So what, then, is the difference? James uses an example to show us, verses 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 is like." So the picture is of a man who's looking at his own face in a mirror. He's trying to figure out what he looks like, studying his own features, so that he has an idea of himself. But James says that when he leaves, when he stops looking at that mirror, he forgets what he looks like, and he goes away and continues on as if nothing had changed. Maybe that confuses us. We'd say, "How does he forget what he looks like?" We know what we look like, right? We have an idea of our appearance. We know what our hair looks like, our eyes, our face, our features. We have a pretty good idea of our face. So how can James say that he just simply forgets what he looks like when he goes away? Christians, do you really know what you look like? Because honestly, a mirror is not what you are. That's why we call a "mirror image," right? Whenever you're looking into a mirror, you are seeing yourself flipped. You're not seeing yourself as you really are. And it's not like any of you, or I for that matter, can see our own face right now. When we aren't looking at a mirror, we simply don't know what our face looks like. If you had something on your face, you wouldn't know it until somebody else pointed it out to you. It would be something strange to us, so that we're not entirely sure exactly what we look like in any given moment. It's kind of like if you've ever listen to yourself on a recording. It sounds pretty strange, right? You say, "That's not my voice. That sounds nothing like me!" We have a totally different idea of what our voice sounds like in our heads. But it's the same way. We have an idea of what we look like, but we don't know exactly. So James is perfectly right here. When we walk away from the mirror, we forget what we look like, because we aren't looking at our face all the time.

And so a hearer, he says, is like that. Someone who is looking into the Word of God. Maybe they're studying it. Maybe they're really listening to it and really trying to figure out what it means. But then they walk away from it, and they forget everything that they've heard. They forget all about it. It has no impact on who they are, because they're not looking at it constantly.

And no matter how much they studied it, no matter how hard they looked at it, they forget it, leaving it behind as they go out into the world.

But a doer, on the other hand, is also looking into a mirror, but a different kind of mirror. James goes on to say, 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 a doer is looking also into the Word of God. But unlike the one who is only hearing, the doer keeps looking. He keeps thinking about it. He keeps focusing on it. He's constantly studying it, constantly keeping it in view. He never leaves it behind. So that he doesn't walk away and forget about it, because he never stops thinking about what it means. And it is this doer, James says, who will be blessed in his doing. Because the hearer hears it, yes, but it has no impact on him. It doesn't change anything about him. He's just the same as he was before. But the doer, on the other hand, listens and keeps looking at it, and his life will never be the same.

So the difference between them, Christians, between a hearer only and a doer of the Word, is in the heart. Because it is the heart that makes all the difference here. The hearer hears the Word, yes. Maybe even knows it really well. But it doesn't change his heart. It doesn't change anything about him. His life is the same. But a doer hears the Word, and it also changes him within, so that he is a new creation in Jesus Christ. As Jesus himself says in Luke, chapter 6: "The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks." So it is the heart that makes all the difference here. It is the heart that determines whether we are just a hearer or a doer.

But just because it's something of the heart, Christians, doesn't mean that it's somehow secret or that it's somehow hidden from other people. And James uses an example here to show us exactly what he means. And he loves using pictures to do it. So this is the picture he uses, verse 26: "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless." So the picture here is of a horse. A horse putting on a bit and a bridle. We put a bit and a bridle on the horse in order to control it, so that we can tell it where to go. Because if the horse didn't have that bit and bridle, it would be tempted to go wherever it wanted, to just do whatever it pleased, and not go where we wanted it to go. So the rider puts the bit and the bridle on the horse so that he can have control over that animal.

But James actually takes it one step further here. He says we are the horse. And he says that we should be putting on a bit and a bridle on ourselves. And he says that the hearer of the Word is like a horse without a bridle, who goes wherever it wants, runs wherever it pleases, and does not hold its tongue in check. It just allows its tongue to say whatever it pleases. But the doer, on the other hand, is a horse with a bridle, putting a bit into its mouth, so that it holds it back and doesn't allow it to say whatever it wants to say.

And Christians, do we put a bit on our own tongue? Do we use the same tongue to praise God this morning and then to curse our neighbors this afternoon? Do we use the same tongue today to talk about all the things that God wants us to talk about, but then tomorrow we talk about filthy things, the sort of things that are shameful, the things that we should not talk about? Do we use the same tongue to talk to God in prayer this morning, but then talk and gossip about our

neighbors in secret later? If we do that, Christians, how can we say that we are doers of the Word? We're not doing what God wants us to do. We're giving our tongue free reign to say whatever it wants, and the tongue always shows the truth of the heart one way or another. That's what Jesus means when he says: "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." So God calls us, then, to put a bit into our mouth, to hold back our tongue, to bridle ourselves, to be self-controlled, to talk about the things that are good, the things that are eternal, and to build one another up with that tongue. And this is what it means, James says, to be a doer and not a hearer only.

But James uses other examples here too. He goes on in verse 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." So why orphans and widows, we might ask? Because they are the ones who need help. They are the ones who in this time period had no other way of supporting themselves. The orphan didn't have a father. The widow didn't have a husband. And in that time, that meant they had nothing to turn to. And so caring for them means providing for their needs, making sure that they're taken care of and get the things that they need each and every day. But a hearer of the Word, James says, is a man of good intentions. He probably knows what he's supposed to do, how he's supposed to take care of them, but he never actually gets around to doing it. He always intends to do something about it, but that's about it. A doer, on the other hand, is not just about good intentions. He follows through. He does what he says he's going to do, and he gives that to them to make sure that they're taken care of. And that, then, is also the difference, James says, between a doer and a hearer of the Word.

But another example he uses is having a stain on your clothes. A stain that you can't quite get out, that no matter how much you wash, no matter how much you try to bleach it, it simply won't go away. A hearer, he says, is one who is stained, because he's been in the dirt and the grime of the world. Always going out and doing what the world is doing, and in that way becoming stained by it. But a doer, on the other hand, is one who is unstained, one who is not following the world, who is not in the muck and the grime of the world around him. So that he is listening to God not only on Sunday morning, but also in work, in play, in recreation, in every point of his life. That's what it means to be a doer and not a hearer only.

So the difference, then, ultimately is this: a hearer is a Christian only in his words. One who maybe says the right things, who knows a lot of the right things, but lives in a way totally different from what he says. That is one who is a hearer. The heart is ultimately unchanged. But a doer, on the other hand, is a Christian not only in words, but also in action. So that in every part of their life, they're doing what God wants them to do. The heart has been renewed within. Because a living faith, Christians, is an active thing. It's not content with just words. It also shows itself in everything that we do.

But maybe we're worried after hearing all of this that maybe we are just hearers and not doers of the Word. What are we supposed to do in that case? Where can we turn? Christians, we can turn to Jesus Christ. Because Christ is the one who makes us doers of the Word and not hearers only. Christ gives us a new heart, changing our heart so that we do and not only hear. Christ gives us his blood, the blood which cleanses us from every sin. And Christ gives us his Holy Spirit, the

Spirit who changes us, the Spirit who transforms us, the Spirit who makes us into something new. Through Jesus we become doers of the Word.

But let us not use Jesus Christ as an excuse! To simply hear what he is saying and then turn away and forget all about it, leaving this place unchanged. That's not going to do at all. That's what it means to be a hearer. But instead, let us believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and change our ways, Christians. And then we will be blessed in our doing. Because Jesus comes to you today to make you a doer of the Word and not a hearer only.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have called us to yourself through your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us always to do what you would have us do, so that we may follow after him in all things. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.