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Sermon Notes

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Responding to God's Word with Obedience

James 1:19-27

James 1:22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

There are different ways to listen to God's Word... but not all of them are beneficial to the soul.

Throughout redemptive history, many many people have heard God's word faithfully and clearly preached or explained or taught or shared and it has done them no good at all.

One powerful illustration of a bad way to listen to God's Word is found in Ezekiel 33

Ezekiel 33:30-32 "As for you, son of man, your countrymen are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, 'Come and hear the message that has come from the LORD.' ³¹ My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. ³² Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.

As a preacher, I think about the times that great preachers have attained great popularity for a short time; their sermons have been wildly popular, thousands flocked to hear them, they attained "rock star status"... many people were genuinely converted and helped by their sermons; but others just came for the spectacle.

Like George Whitefield, who preached to tens of thousands in colonial America... and thousands were converted. Then there was Benjamin Franklin, that old skeptic, who came and listened to Whitefield preach and measured off the distance in the city of Philadelphia within which he could still hear Whitefield clearly. Franklin went to listen to Whitefield often, and said this about his preaching:

“Every accent, every emphasis, every modulation of voice, was so perfectly well tuned and well placed that, without being interested in the subject, one could not help being pleased with the discourse; a pleasure of much the same kind with that received from an excellent piece of music.” [Dallimore, i.116]

Franklin’s mind never stuck to the subject that Whitefield was preaching about. He described hearing George Whitefield preach in Philadelphia for the first time:

“[Whitefield] had a loud and clear voice, and articulated his words and his sentences so perfectly that he might be heard and understood at a great distance... Being among the hindmost in Market-street, I had the curiosity to learn how far he could be heard by retiring backwards down the street to the river; and I found his voice distinct till I came near Front-street when some noise in that street obscured it. Imagining then a semi-circle of which my distance should be the radius, and that it was filled with [hearers], to each of whom I allowed two square feet, I computed that he might be heard by more than thirty-thousand.” [Dallimore, 439]

George Whitefield became very good friends with Benjamin Franklin and earnestly sought his conversion every time they interacted. One of the saddest things I have read concerning Benjamin Franklin came in his own statement about his relationship with George Whitefield, written ten years after Whitefield’s death:

“Mr. Whitefield used indeed to pray for my conversion, but he never had the satisfaction of believing that his prayers were heard. Ours was a mere civil friendship, sincere on both sides, and it lasted until his death.” [Dallimore, 440]

Benjamin Franklin heard the gospel preached again and again by one of the greatest preachers in church history, and he delighted in the sounds of the words, but never believed the truth of the message.

Another example occurred in 1949 when a tall young unknown but ardently zealous evangelist from the mountains of North Carolina named Billy Graham was carrying on a tent crusade in Los Angeles. William Randolph Hearst, the most powerful media mogul of the mid-twentieth century, a man who owned 28 major newspapers read by over 20 million people daily... a hard man, a recluse, carrying on a long affair with an actress; heard about Billy Graham’s tent crusade, probably listened to some sermons by radio... we’ll never know. But he sent a two-word command to his editors all over the country: “**Puff Graham**”... that meant, write about him in glowing terms; put Billy Graham in the positive spotlight. Graham never met Hearst personally, but his career took off that very day. But there is no indication whatsoever that Graham’s gospel message had any effect on William Randolph Hearst at all. Hearst died two years later.

This problem of hearing God’s Word with a certain kind of pleasure but not obeying its life-changing message has been around a long time:

Think of wicked King Herod who loved to hear John the Baptist preach, despite the fact that John preached clearly that he and his wife were living in sin:

Mark 6:20 Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.

However King Herod eventually beheaded John the Baptist very reluctantly after a girl had danced alluringly for him at his birthday party.

Or think again of the Roman governor Felix who imprisoned the Apostle Paul. Felix often sent for Paul and loved to hear him speak of the gospel... but he became alarmed when Paul spoke of righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come. Felix sent Paul away, but said he would call for him to come back another time...

Acts 24:26 At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him.

This went on for two years, but Felix was never converted!

Friends, all over this nation this very morning, churches are filled with people who are hearing God's Word clearly preached... but are deceiving themselves that just being in church is enough. This passage in James speaks very powerfully about how we should receive and obey God's Word... and what kinds of fruit that obedience will bear

I. Quiet Humility Prepares to Receive God's Word

James 1:19-22 My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, 20 for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. 21 Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. 22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

A. A Horizontal Application... Extremely Helpful

1. Three pieces of simple daily advice which will help you immeasurably in your marriages, family life, church life, work life
 - a. Be quick to listen
 - b. Be slow to speak

c. Be slow to get angry

2. Be quick to listen = BE A GOOD LISTENER

Proverbs 18:2 A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions.

a. Husbands and wives need to learn to listen better to each other

b. Parents and children need to learn to listen better to each other

c. Coworkers need to learn to listen better to each other

d. Politicians, Democrats and Republicans need to learn to listen better to each other

e. Being “quick to listen” means you are eager to learn from the other person; not arrogant or full of yourself... TEACHABLE

f. Missionary training: “Entry posture diagram”; go into the new culture as a listener and learner, not an arrogant expert who’s here to save all these ignorant savages

3. Slow to speak = the flip side of quick to listen

a. Not in love with your own words, ideas, stories, perspectives

b. Not in love with your own voice

c. People spend a HUGE AMOUNT OF TIME talking... studies have shown up to 1/5th of an average person’s life =TALKING

So much of that talk, flowing from the human heart, is damaging:

Matthew 12:34 You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.

Proverbs 10:19 When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.

d. So being “slow to speak” is a good rule for most human relationships and situations

4. “Slow to anger”
 - a. So much damage is done by human anger
 - b. Marriages are destroyed by sinful anger
 - c. There are many criminals in prison right now that reacted to a situation with a fit of rage; their rational processes were overwhelmed, and they killed someone in a moment of irrational rage; they “SNAP” and act violently; later their minds cleared and they were stunned saying “WHAT HAVE I DONE?” Human anger is like a drug
 - d. Much human anger is based in PRIDE... our pride gets hurt and we get angry
 - e. So also a lot of anger is based on INCONVENIENCE... traffic jams, or kids spilling stuff on the carpet
 - f. Of the three pieces of clear command James gives, this is the only one he comments on

James 1:20-21 for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. 21 Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

- g. Human anger is EFFECTIVE, but it is almost never CONSTRUCTIVE
 - i) Sure, coaches that scream and yell have scary angry faces get results... so also battlefield commanders
 - ii) But generally, human anger is like an EXPLOSIVE; it does not build, or assemble... it tends to destroy
 - iii) It doesn't bring about the righteousness of God
 - iv) Zero in on anger in parenting... how screaming and yelling at your kids is not ultimately effective in bringing them up in the righteousness of God

- h. James calls human anger “moral filth” ... a very strong term; it’s like TOXIC WASTE
- i. The simple command is GET RID OF IT! Take that filthy anger out like the trash

Ephesians 4:31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.

- 5. So... that’s how a simple, horizontal, human to human preaching of verses 19-21 works
- 6. But I think the context points also to a VERTICAL reading... that this has to do with a heart quiet and humble, prepared to receive God’s Word
- 7. Jesus spoke the Parable of the Seed and the Soils
 - a. The seed is the Word of God
 - b. The first three soils represent crop failure... they all refer to the STATES of HUMAN HEARTS when the Word of God is proclaimed
 - i) The hardened path, in which the word never penetrates at all
 - ii) The rocky soil, in which the word penetrates little...
 - iii) The thorny, weedy soil in which the cares of this life and the desire for wealth crowd out the word
 - c. The good soil produces a crop—100, 60, 30 times what was sown
 - d. Listen to how Jesus describes that heart:

Luke 8:15 But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.

A “noble and good heart” ... what an amazing statement! None of us naturally has that, for our hearts are deceitful and wicked

But God can PREPARE the heart of his children to hear God's Word; he can make them like rich, black, moist soil, plowed and ready to produce a rich, abundant harvest

B. The Heart Prepared for God's Word

1. James calls for his "beloved brothers"... genuine believers in Christ, to KNOW this... "take note of this" "keep this in mind"
2. Then he gives these three commands we've been discussing... but we should look at them now VERTICALLY
 - a. WHY? Because of verses 21-25... the context absolutely is HOW YOU DEAL WITH GOD'S WORD

James 1:21-25 ... humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. 22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 23 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror 24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 25 But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it-- he will be blessed in what he does.

- b. Central concept: verse 21 "Humbly accept the word planted in you which can save you"
 - c. But James goes beyond that to talk about obedience to the word, and the effect it has on your life
3. So it is best to see the three commands of verse 19 as related toward GOD and HIS WORD
4. Step 1: Be quick to listen
 - a. Come to God's word HUMBLY... that's the very thing he says to do in verse 21 "Humbly accept the word planted in you"
 - b. Be ready to hear God speaking to you by his Word

Hebrews 3:7-8 So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice, 8 do not harden your hearts

c. Expect that God is going to speak to you by his Word

1 Thessalonians 2:13 when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

d. So many verses, God calls on his people to LISTEN

Deuteronomy 32:1-2 Listen, O heavens, and I will speak; hear, O earth, the words of my mouth. 2 Let my teaching fall like rain and my words descend like dew, like showers on new grass, like abundant rain on tender plants.

Jesus after teaching his parables:

Matthew 13:9 He who has ears, let him hear.

5. Step 2: Be Slow to Speak!!

a. Stop talking... be quiet in the presence of God

Habakkuk 2:20 the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him."

Zephaniah 1:7 Be silent before the Sovereign LORD, for the day of the LORD is near.

Ecclesiastes 5:1-2 Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong. 2 Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few.

6. Step 3: Be Slow to Anger

a. Vertically, this means don't react with anger to the Word of God

b. God's Word is a sharpened double-edged sword that is designed to cut us in order to heal us

c. God's Word is USEFUL to rebuke us and correct us

2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness

d. If we react with anger, it is only our pride fighting back against God's Word... it will not result in God's righteousness!!

7. Get rid of this MORAL FILTH ... = human anger at God's Word

C. SO... Humbly Accept God's Word

James 1:21 humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

1. A humble posture before God's Word is essential to our salvation
2. To realize we need the deep work of the Word in us in order to be saved
3. James uses agricultural language... the Word is like a SEED planted in your heart
4. Its role is to work full salvation in you
5. But you must HUMBLY ACCEPT GOD'S WORD... and keep humbly accepting it, so that you can receive MORE GRACE

James 4:6 he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

Isaiah 66:2 "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.

6. The Word alone can save your soul from eternal condemnation

But humbly accepting the Word is not enough... the soil of a humble heart accepting the perfect seed of the Word MUST produce a transformed life... fruit in keeping with obedience

II. Honest Humility Obeys God's Word

James 1:22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

A. The Great Danger of Self-Deception

Matthew 7:21-23 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' 23 Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"

1. Terrifying to think we might be among the self-deceived... who thought we were fine all along, and we weren't. Among the self-deceived will be those who thought that tolerating hearing God's Word was enough to save your soul

2. Don't deceive yourself about your true spiritual condition!!!

B. The Most Dangerous Skill to Develop: Hearing without Obeying

C. Jesus Again and Again Spoke of the Need for Obedience

John 14:15 "If you love me, you will obey what I command.

D. The Word as a Mirror

James 1:23-25 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror 24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 25 But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it-- he will be blessed in what he does.

1. James presents the word of God as a mirror

2. To read it is to look at your own face in a mirror

Back then, there were no silvered-back glass mirrors, which were only invented in Germany in 1835. In Jesus' day, they had highly polished bronze plates which gave a somewhat imperfect reflection... but if you held it in the proper light at the proper angle, you could get a clear reflection of your face

James likens someone who hears God's Word and does not obey it to a person who looks at his face in a mirror and then goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like

3. God's Word has the power to show you your true self... God's Law in particular cuts through all self-deception and shows you your corruptions
4. "Immediately forgets" = like the hardened path hearer, that the birds come and snatch the seed of the Word
 - a. So perhaps the sermon is addressing some aspect of holiness, and the person is convicted about some secret lust and wants to change...
 - b. But as soon as the service ends, he goes out and resumes his normal pattern of life
 - c. Or a husband is convicted that he is too harsh with his wife; or a wife is convicted that she is not submissive to her husband; or a covetous businessman is convicted to give money to the church or to the needy... but as soon as the time in the Word is done, they immediately forget and make no changes

E. Looking Intently into the Perfect Law of Freedom

James 1:25 But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it-- he will be blessed in what he does.

1. James likens the healthy reading of the law as gazing at your face realizing all the wounds and sores and flaws
2. It also enables you to address those wounds and sores and flaws
3. You keep gazing at it for a long time... you meditate on God's Word, and you see your failures, the ways you come short of God
4. How does the Law work freedom?
 - a. Sin is terrible BONDAGE!! Lusts enslave, and those invisible steel bands encircle our hearts and drag us away from God
 - b. God's Law shows us where those bands are
 - c. God's grace in Christ cuts through those bands and sets us free

John 8:32 you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

F. If that Freedom Happens... We Will Live a New Life of OBEDIENCE

That new life of obedience makes specific effects in our lives; James speaks of how it changes your tongue, how it purifies your life, and how it mobilizes your compassion toward others

III. Obeying God's Word Controls Your Tongue

James 1:26 If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.

A. We Need Not Spend a Lot of Time on This... For James Devotes Half a Chapter on It... and We'll Cover it Soon

B. But a Transformed Heart Results in a Transformed Tongue

1. A tight reign on your tongue... bridling it like a wild horse

Psalm 141:3 Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips.

2. When your heart is FULL of the Word of God, your mouth will follow

Matthew 12:35 The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him

C. Only Perfect People Perfectly Control the Tongue

James 3:2 If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.

IV. Obeying God's Word Purifies Your Life

James 1:27 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.

A. Religion = Pattern of worship offered to God

1. Some say "Christianity is not a religion... it's a relationship"

2. BUT religion is a good thing... if it is based on the Word of God
3. YET religion can be corrupt as well... for Israel was constantly involved in religiosity without a genuine heart after God and other people
4. True religion... pure... faultless... undefiled

B. Pure Religion = Purity from Worldliness

1. The world is that corrupt system of lusts and evils that can defile us
2. The “world”

1 John 2:15-16 the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life

3. Worldliness is POLLUTION... to be defiled by this evil world age
4. The internet is a powerful delivery system

Recently watching the YouTube video of 2007 MacWorld when Apple CEO Steve Jobs was announcing the release of three new revolutionary products that would change the world... 1) a widescreen iPod music device with touch controls; 2) a revolutionary mobile phone; 3) a breakthrough internet communicator... these three revolutionary products were actually just one... the iPhone... a smartphone that changed the world... over the next ten years, Apple would ship 1.6 billion of these devices.

As you stand in an airport and look around, 75% of the people at any moment are looking down at a handheld electronic device

I saw a Pepsi delivery guy wheeling a dolly of cases of softdrink across the parking lot with one hand, and looking at a smartphone he was holding with his other hand... stopping every few feet to type something in

How in the world do we swim in that sea with so many septic drainage systems spilling sewage into the electronic bay?

Internet pornography, alluring materialism, addictive electronic games, filthy Instagram posts, social media connecting us with total strangers that are evil though we don't know it...

How can we swim in this harbor and not get covered with filth?

James says religion that God considers pure and undefiled is to keep yourself pure from this sewage

It is the most exhausting fight we can ever have!

Romans 8:13 For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live,

2 Timothy 4:7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Ephesians 6:10-13 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. 11 Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. 13 Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.

C. If You Are a Christian But Filthy, Come Back to Christ and to His Blood

Hebrews 9:14 the blood of Christ...can cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

1. Perhaps you have been consistently violating your conscience by what you are doing with electronic devices
2. The gospel has power to cleanse you and restore you and make you clean again

V. Obeying God's Word Mobilizes Your Compassion

A. James Also Speaks of Caring for the Poor and Needy... Orphans and Widows in their Distress

1. These were the weak ones of society
2. The ones no one looked after
3. Pure, powerful real religion results in a life of active service to the poor and needy

B. To "Look After" Means to Care for their Needs... Not Merely Drop by for a Visit

1 John 3:17-18 If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

C. It's Hard Not to Think of George Mueller... who cared for over 10,000 orphans in his lifetime

1. A constant ministry of daily provision... food, clothing, shelter, love, education, guidance, gospel ministry... meeting the overwhelming needs of orphaned children
2. But the phrase "orphans and widows" extends to anyone in need

D. Bottom Line... Obeying God's Word Results in Actual Physical Ministry

Isaiah 58:6-9 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter-- when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? 8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. 9 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.

VI. Applications

- A. Evaluate Your Life... am I a Hearer Only or a Doer of God's Word?
- B. Am I Deceiving Myself by merely listening to the Word?
- C. Ask God to show you the truth about yourself... ask God to work obedience into your life
- D. Especially be sure you are born again... that the new birth has happened
- E. Special concern for worldliness... our American culture is becoming more and more corrupt... the call to keep ourselves free from worldliness is becoming stronger
- F. Let's See What God Can Do In Us as His Word Powerfully Transforms Us from the inside out!!!