

HEAR AND DO

Someone told me about a friend of his. The friend had a reputation of being a "mean fellow". I have no idea why people thought he was mean; however, his friend said, "He's really not. Let me tell you what he does. He knows a lot of elderly people that need help, and he will buy them a load of coal and have it delivered. If he sees something else that they need he will just go out and get it for them." It would be my guess that this person does not go to church, he probably curses like a sailor, probably drinks, smokes and chews. Yet he is coming closer to doing what Jesus told us to do than many people who are at church every time the doors are open, who never say a bad word, would sooner die than drink and thinks that smoking and chewing are about the nastiest habits around. Jesus told a parable about two brothers whose father told them to go work in the vineyard. Both of them understood what he said and what he wanted. One brother readily agreed to get right to work and the other brother refused to go. Eventually, the one that agreed to work found something else to do and the son that refused went out and worked all day in the vineyard. Jesus implied that it was obvious which son was pleasing to his father. The Word of God places much emphasis on turning what we know to be "the right thing to do" into "doing the right thing".

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 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 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 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. James 1:22-25

This admonition is very similar to what Jesus taught in His Sermon on the Mount. He used the illustration of building a house on the sand versus building it on a rock. If we simply hear the word of God and even agree that it is truth and yet nothing is affected in our lives, then hearing it and agreeing with it is useless. We are simply fooling ourselves. Part of our problem is that we can be easily stirred into wanting to do something about a situation while we are listening to a motivational speaker; however, if no real change happens deep down inside, then we quickly forget all the good things we thought we were going to do. I like James' example of looking into a mirror and then quickly forgetting as we walk away from the mirror. How many times have you seen a person check out his appearance in a mirror. He (or she) will straighten up, shoulders back, suck in their stomach, maybe even smile and then as soon as they walk away, they are slouching and frowning. Sometimes our resolve to do better lasts about that long. If we lived in a room full of mirrors so that we could see ourselves all the time, then we might smile more, have better posture and keep our weight in check.

The word of God can be a mirror for us. As we read the word, we can see our lives in comparison to what the word says. We may think about areas that could be straightened up and put into better agreement with the word and then we close the book, go out into the world and don't think about it until we read that particular passage again. If we really had the word of God in our hearts, and God has promised to write it on our hearts, then it would be like living in a room full of mirrors. When we did something (or even thought about it), then there would be the Holy Spirit holding up the word of God so that we could see whether or not we are in agreement with it.

The Bible is full of great promises and many Christians are missing them because we are forgetful hearers and do not practice (do) what we know we ought to do.

James gives some practical examples from daily living where we might do a quick check as to how we are doing.

If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. 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. James 1:26-27

If we can't control what we say, then perhaps we ought to do some examining of what is in our hearts. Jesus told us that "out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks." James characterized religion that does not result in a changed heart that leads to a controlled tongue as "empty" or vain.

Visiting the fatherless and widows is typical of the activities that will be considered at the Great White Throne judgement. Did we visit those in prison, those that were sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, etc. Notice that James includes these things in the same list that points out that we should have purity in our lives--keep ourselves unspotted from the world. This list of activities is not intended to be exhaustive and just because you find a person doing such things does not, in any way, prove that person is a Christian. Christians certainly should be doing these kinds of things. Notice what James is telling us that we need a balance of the Social Gospel and Personal Piety. Many times we find people concentrating on one or the other--we really need both.

These activities - these things to do - that James has mentioned relate to what we do out in the world. Do the same principles apply in the Church and its activities?

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favouritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong? James 2:1-7

It is so easy to judge things by the outward appearance that most of us fall into that trap. This can result in discrimination of people on the basis of some pretty shallow criteria. In the church, it might be how well one dresses or how much money one is perceived to have. We are guilty of such practice in our own church, I'm sure. James points out how illogical that practice was in his day. Those that were most critical of the church were likely to be those that were wealthy and yet the leaders and other members were showing partiality and preferential treatment over those that really loved and supported the church. James is not advocating that we treat the wealthy without proper hospitality, but that we should not let wealth be a criterion for deciding how we treat people.

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbour as yourself," you are doing right. James 2:8

I guess that this sums it up pretty well. If we love our neighbor as ourselves - regardless if that neighbor is rich or poor, then we will not have to worry about the specifics of what we do. If the love of God - the God kind of love - is in our hearts then we will be motivated to action and our religion will not be vain. Let just remember that it is not so much in knowing the right thing to do as in doing the right thing that we are pleasing to God.