

## **James 1 (23-25) – Who Do You Think You Are?**

No one wants to be deceived, do they? Being deceived means that you are convinced that you are right but you aren't. None of us like that, but all of us have been that, at one time or another. It can happen on a massive scale, and we see it all the time when we prop up people who were lying to us the whole time. It is happening right now to all the people in the world who think that they are ok, spiritually speaking, but they are damned and on their way to hell.

You may think that this isn't you, that here you are, in a Christian church, listening to a message from the Bible, and so you are on the right track. However, in this very passage, James is telling us that there are people who are living in the midst of deception, people who might believe that they believe the Word of God, and think that they have a saving faith, but they are in fact deceived. They may be able to say the right answers at the right time but they are not applying the Bible, they are just affirming propositions. Some people might be deceived into believing they have received salvation because they made a "decision" when they were young, yet they still haven't "waved the white flag of surrender" to Jesus Christ. They know the truth but they won't live for it. People can say they believe all day long, but affirmation is not action, and acceptance without action is rejection.

The problem with deception is that you don't know it. Someone who is just a hearer, but not a doer, thinks that they have a biblical faith, in other words, a saving faith, but they are deceived. There are those who may listen and learn but fail to live out the message. This is the story of many but they don't know it, and some might think it can't be them, but it is. When you don't believe that you can be deceived, that's when you already are.

This brings us to a crucial question. What is the difference between someone who is living in deception, and someone who has a true understanding of their spiritual condition?

It is all about truly receiving the Word of God instead of rejecting it. It is about submitting to what God is saying rather than getting angry about it. "Receiving the Word" does not just mean understanding what the Word says. People can be advancing academically not but experientially (i.e., obedience). You don't argue with the Word of God, you respond like you believe it. Vs.19-20 are dealing with having the right mindset (hungry, teachable, submissive), and vs.21 deals with creating the right environment (holiness and humility), so that we can truly receive God's Word, to give Him glory, and to benefit from it.

In vs.22 we learn that we must also take the right action. We listen, not just to get information or inspiration, but to examine our lives and take action, to make decisions and take the direction God's Word is giving. Not just listening and learning, but living. And it is not just selective obedience, but submissive obedience. You are supposed to hide the Word in your heart, not hide your heart from the Word. The person who knows this and submits to the process of progressive sanctification is the person who benefits from God's Word. We have to live out the message or we are deceiving ourselves as to our own belief in it. We're not who we think we are.

The true receiving of God's Word involves doing it. James calls professing believers to be doers, not just to do, meaning that it is a lifestyle pursuit. Yes, Christians will fail to do this at times, but

it is not about perfection, it is about pattern and practice. It is also a lifetime pursuit. You never get to the point where you don't have to be a doer. It's a commitment; "doer" and "hearer" describe someone's character. It is about the predominant pattern in your life. James is talking about wanting to live as a reflection of Christ's character. Hearing the truth is not enough; believers must act on it. Believers *will* act on it.

This has to do with our salvation but also our sanctification. We know this because James has been addressing people who are true Christians, but who are going through the testing and trials, the process God has designed to give us maturity and wisdom and a godly quality of life (vs.4-5, 12, 17-18, etc.). The Word is what gives us our new nature, but it is also something we must nurture. There can't just be attitude and atmosphere, there must be application.

Now if you are always having a problem succumbing to temptations instead of maturing in your trials, if you are never growing in godliness, if you are consistently becoming angry and resisting God's Word, then that is a sign that you are not even saved yet. However, even Christians can stop growing mature and start growing calloused. This is what your problem is; you are not applying the Word, just adding more words to your head. This deception is a spiritual miscalculation; people think that they can get away with it, but they have been deluded. They are cheating themselves out of the blessings that God has designed. They never receive the maturity, endurance, wisdom, and godly quality of life the Word is meant to produce.

Those who are hearers only are under the false impression that God is pleased with them just because they listen to His Word. They reason that if they go to church, read their bibles, feel a little conviction, and say a little prayer that this is all that is required to really receive the Word and the benefits that God has designed for those who are doers of His Word. They have no real commitment to change. They put it in their pocket, but not into practice. They are just hearing, and it is not enough, it is deception.

Of course some who claim to be Christians don't even bother to take time to hear, so what can we say about them? They aren't deceived, their just defiant, and damned. Grace doesn't mean you are allowed to do what you want to do; it means that you are allowed to do what He wants you to do. In fact, it means that you actually do want to do what He wants you to do. If what you want never changes, then you haven't changed at all, and you aren't born again.

Having shown us what receiving the Word of God entails, and warning us about being a doer and not just a hearer of the Word, James now illustrates what the hearer and the doer are like.

In doing this, James will help us to discover the answer to this crucial question we asked earlier. What is the difference between someone who is living in deception, and someone who has a true understanding of their spiritual condition?

We have seen that truly receiving the Word of God involves the right mindset, the right environment, and the right action. But here we see another thing. It is also about making the right assessment. There is a link between how I listen and how I see myself. How you respond to the Word of God will affect your self-perception. The wrong response leads to self-deception. The right response leads to godly correction.

**Vs.23-24** – what a mere hearer is like. They look at themselves, they see the reflection, and they might even check it out carefully, but they soon forget. That is what it is like for so many who come to hear the Word. They hear the truth. They might get informed or feel inspired. They see who they are. They might have an emotionally charged experience where they are convicted of sin, and know that they need to make some changes in their life. In that moment they want to make some decisions about some new directions. But they leave the church building, and they forget all about it. They have fallen for the deception that hearing it equals doing it.

Ask yourself this question: how much really changes in your life because of your study of God's Word? How much information can you repeat and yet you still rebel? How many times have you said enough is enough, but you went right back to the poison well of the same old sin? Think about this mirror illustration. Ancient mirrors were made of polished metal. They produced only a distorted reflection. God's Word functions as a spiritual mirror of perfect clarity. It shows us what is in our hearts, and how we need to change, and yes, how to do it, as we will see here in this text. But a superficial look at our true self results in a life of rebellious self-deception. We can look into the mirror over and over again and never look any different. To be a doer requires more than a mere look. The point is that believers must do more than hear the truth or know the truth, they must act on the truth, and then they will experience the truth.

**Vs.25** – what a real doer is like. This person not only looks at themselves, they take the time to examine themselves to see precisely what is there. There are two different Greek terms in vs. 23-25 for "looks". One is used in vs.23-24 and it means to gaze, to observe, but the second one, which is used in vs.25, means to stoop down and peer into. It is a more concentrated look. This is further illustrated by the fact that this person perseveres, they fix their attention to what they are looking at. In this case it is the law of liberty. That is the perfect law, the Word of God.

With all this talk about law, what about grace? Some might see this as legalism. But legalism means we must earn our way into heaven, and this isn't that. Legalism focuses on the externals, and what James is speaking of is the heart. This is about a loving relationship with God, and God expects His Word to be obeyed. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not a barrier to our freedom, but is real freedom from our sin nature. Believers are now free to serve Him. Again, grace doesn't mean you are allowed to do what you want to do; it means that you are allowed to do what He wants you to do. It means that you grow into wanting to do what He wants you to do. This law is indeed a liberating law. It teaches you that you don't have to be a slave of sin.

We should be afraid of thinking that keeping external standards are what God is looking for, but we should also be afraid that we have no standards at all. The thought we are actually following Jesus without actually being broken over sin, repenting, believing, and pursuing holiness is anathema to biblical teaching. The Word of God reflects the character of God, and we should want to reflect that character to the glory of God. The highest expression of love is obedience. Grace doesn't teach you to drop God's commands, it teaches you to obey them.

Now let's talk about that grace; because it is truly here in this passage. You see, this is not about our performance but our perseverance. The one who perseveres is *no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts*. There it is; the answer to the critical question. What is the difference between

someone who is living in deception, and someone who has a true understanding of their spiritual condition? The doer perseveres in looking at the law of liberty, and so then they act.

So what does it mean to look and persevere? You keep looking at the mirror and you keep finding out where you come up short, but you also keep accepting the gospel and as you live out His truth in faith it keeps on conforming you to the image of Christ. But you have to persevere, you have to keep looking. You have to abide in His Word, then you are truly a disciple, then you will experience the truth that will set you free, free to live for the glory of God.

You have to really spend quality time in heart searching submission to the Word of God, ready to act on the truth that is revealed, and not hiding from any of it. Not just, oh yeah, I'm a sinner, but I'm saved by grace. No, it is more than that if you really want to change. It is yes, I am a sinner saved by grace, but I am also a saint who is being changed by grace.

Here it is in a nutshell. I keep looking into the mirror of God's Word to see the depths of my sin, to see how my sin is an offense to God, not just an inconvenience for me. I keep looking so that I see where I need to be changed, and then I see the glory of His grace which has forgiven me for my sin, but which will also lead me out of that sin, and so I act on that in faith.

You have to stay down in this thing; you can't just take a look, or even many looks. You have to persevere. Repentance, a true change of mind that leads to change in action, doesn't happen when you just see the light; you have to feel the heat. You see how miserable sin is, and how marvelous the Savior is. Being in His presence in this way will change your life. It will make you a doer. But when we choose the easy path, we miss the deeper blessing.

What does "*blessed in his doing*" mean? Blessed in his doing needs to be defined biblically, not emotionally, societally, socially, or financially, although these things may come to you. It means our character is being conformed to Christ. It means that we are receiving the Word of God, and receiving the maturity, endurance, wisdom and godly quality of life the Word is meant to produce. It means we see ourselves rightly, and we live out the truth in faith. We have made ourselves a living sacrifice, and we are proving the will of God by living the Word of God. The Word of God is not a burden anymore, it is a blessing. We see things differently, and we experience them differently. We experientially know that in the very doing there is blessing.

Let's look at this through 2 Corinthians 3:17-18. You have to spend time with God, and it will always show. It will affect your walk. It takes time. It takes consistency. It is progressive; becoming more like our Master in thought, word, and deed. It is not a clinical or mechanical process, it is not some formula, and no one has a shortcut; it is a living vital fellowship with the living God. You have to keep peering into the perfect law until you are convicted of sin, and keep peering into the law of liberty until you are overwhelmed with the vision of God's glory and grace, and then you will act on it, you will live out the truth in your life. You will be a doer. You won't be someone who forgets. You will be blessed. And you will be a blessing.

When you look into the mirror, what do you see, a picture of repentance or a picture of rebellion?

Who do you think you are?