

Sermon Theme: Hear It, Receive It, Do It

Sermon Reading: James 1:17-27

In general we have a good idea of what we should be doing with our lives. Just to name a few common suggestions: we know we need good sleep, be sure to exercise, have proper nutrition, avoid—as much as possible—those people who negatively impact our lives. We know we need to have money and a certain amount of it so that you can live comfortably. The problem isn't so much not knowing what we should be doing, but actually following through with it. I know I should save my money, but I really want this right now. I know I should probably be eating more fruit and veggies, but then there's that beautiful pepperoni pizza calling my name with a bowl of ice cream to top it off. I know I should get more sleep, I know I'm going to regret it in the morning—I'll even say it out loud—but the time keeps ticking by and I'm still not in bed. We can be strangely drawn to those people who make our lives more difficult; we can't seem to shake those bad habits as much as we want to or try to get rid of them. You may have had someone even tell you, "You know better than that." And you do; but nothing changes.

It's really not that earth shattering or difficult: just do what you are supposed to do. But that seems to be the problem especially when it comes to what God tells us. We struggle with hearing what we should be doing, we have difficulties with accepting it, and then have hard time wanting to follow through with it. The problem is deeper than the surface actions done or left undone. We need an attitude adjustment; a fixing of the heart. And God works through his Word to do just that.

It's from God's Word we have this assurance that everything good and perfect comes from him. Think of all the blessings you have in your life: the car you drove here, the home you live in, the clothes on your back, the air you breathe, the food you eat, and so on. Everything is God's good gifts to you. Even the trials that you have in your life—as hard as it may be to believe—are good and perfect gifts from God who does not change like a shifting shadow.

What a comfort that is as we wrestle with the various difficulties in life. Those difficulties aren't there because God has changed his attitude towards you. It's not like he was slowly losing his patience and finally hit a breaking point. Those blessings someone else has aren't because they won more of God's favor. The blessings you have aren't because you were an extra good Christian one day. No, these are gifts; you didn't earn them. The creator of the sun, moon, stars, and planets is your Father who takes particular interest in your life to know exactly what you need and gives it to you. And unlike those things that he created, your Father does not shift and change and make shadows. You can always count on God to do good and to

give you give good things. There is no dimming of the light of his goodness because he does not change.

This is guaranteed yours because the Father chose you! No one forced or obligated God to do this. It is God's will that he carried out through his word of truth so that you would be the first-fruits of all he created. In other words, the truth is you are God's prized possession, sacred to him.

Since you are his first-fruits, dear brothers and sisters, take note, v.19 tells us: **“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”** Even if this wasn't God's Word this would be solid life advice. You may have heard we have two ears and one mouth to listen more and speak less. Be quick to listen to all the details; slow to jump to conclusions, slow to become angry. Keep your emotions in check; be in control of how you speak and how you act. And when we understand these words in context, we understand this points us to being quick to listen to what God says, and, having listened, slow to express objections or doubts before God.

But that can be so difficult. There are too many things that can get in the way of us wanting to listen to what God says or believe it. We hear God's promises but because of how so many other promises we say to one another are broken, we can't seem to help but wonder that God might break his promises too. Or you hear what God's Word says and one might interject, “Well, I just don't think” or, “I think...” and instead of listening to God's Word, they listen to their own voices first. Then there's the old Adam, that sinful nature that distracts us and pulls at our focus away when we are trying to study God's Word. There's our sinful actions of misplaced priorities and misguided time and schedules that get in our way. There's other times when you might be caught up in sin so you don't want to be near God's Word because you know how it's going to make you feel. There's that anger at others for when they have sinned against you, injured your pride.

So James tells us, get rid of it! As you take off that coat on a warm day and leave it at home, get rid of that moral filth and the remainder of evil and leave it. In its place humbly receive and welcome the Word. Put aside that anger that puts up barriers and divides God's people from each other and God. Receive the Word, the seed of the Gospel planted in the soil of your heart creating faith. Receive the Word because it saves you! It's not only a neat story to share or a guideline to live your life. It's not just empty words being spoken. It doesn't only tell you what God has done. The Word itself is living and active, sharper than a double-edged sword. The gospel, the Word is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe. The Word is powerful

breaking through the stony heart of sin, creates faith, and saves you making you who were dead in sin alive with Christ. Hear God's Word and receive it!

But do not only hear the Word and listen to it, do what it says. James warns in v.22, **“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves.”** How can merely listening to God's Word deceive someone? How many have been lulled into a false sense of security thinking, “At least I go to church; at least I read my devotions, at least I went to Zion Lutheran School, at least I was confirmed, at least I was a member on the books.” As if they seem to think, “God should be pleased enough at that, right?” Or think of how one knows the right things to say because they heard the Word and know what is expected. But then they don't do anything at all, almost as if they are thinking, “At least I have the right intentions.”

James states in v.23, 24, **“Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.”** When looking in the mirror you can see what you should fix or what needs attention. But if you go away and do nothing, it's as if you forgot what you saw in the mirror. When one hears the Word of God and what it tells you need to do—God's expectations—but then don't do it, it's like you have forgotten what you just heard. Such a hearing is of little or no value! If the Word of God does not move the hearer to do something that needs to be done in his life, there is a definite problem. Christianity is not merely a passive thing. What one hears should lead to some action, just as what one sees in a mirror will lead one to do something.

If there is no effect, one needs to take an honest look at themselves to see what is going on and the best way to do that is with the clear mirror of God's Word. What you see in the mirror and how you react to it isn't the mirror's fault. The problem isn't the mirror; it's the individual. The problem isn't with the Word; it's the individual. That mirror of God's Word sees through the smoke that we have raised with our various excuses and the façade of a well put-together life. It rights the delusions that “I'm a good person” and shows you what you really are: a miserable sinner stained with all sorts of spots and blemishes of sin. It shows that the accidents, the falling into sin, is never just an accident, or “Everyone struggles with it”; no, it condemns you. That mirror of God's Word shows someone who should know better and expects you to know better. It leaves everyone without excuse. It shows how you haven't followed through; how your best efforts aren't good enough. It shows the problem is not just a lack of motivation or determination; it's a heart problem.

But the mirror of the God's Word also reveals who you are when God looks at you. What God sees is someone who he brought forth to be his fruit-fruits; his prized

possession. He sees someone who he saved by that Word working with the water of baptism so that you were born again as his child. He sees someone whose heart has been changed from a heart of sin and to a heart of faith and life. God's Word shows you what God declares you to be: justified—not guilty of sin—by grace through faith. By grace means that it's not dependent on you living up to a certain standard, fulfilling a certain goal, doing some sort of actions. You are justified because Jesus perfectly achieved the standards for you, he fulfilled the goal of a perfect life and innocent death, he said, "It is finished," when he died which give us the confidence that he completed the task to save us. And with his rising from the dead you know you will too.

Don't listen because this is what I have to say. These are God's words that he is speaking to you. In his infinite wisdom he has decided that these are the words you need for your life for both on this earth and the next. Know this: since your God is never-changing, you and I have the confidence that never there will come a day when God doesn't want you to have his grace. He is never going to regret giving you his forgiveness. He's not going to stop loving you or wanting to give you his grace. And so he comes to you in his Word to assure you. He comes to you in the Lord's Supper to strengthen you and forgive you. He gives you Christ's love to motivate and move you.

And it's for this reason that we want to live as God's Word tells us. We want to keep our tongues in check. We want to show care with service to others with our offerings and with a life that is not polluted by the world but spotless. We want to live as we are: God's children, the firstfruits of his creation. Hear God's Word, carefully and persistently grow in it, hear God's promise that your sins are forgiven and life is ours. Receive the message with a humble heart of faith believing it to be true. Do what it says not out of obligation or because you are trying to be better, but because this is what we do as God's people whose hearts have been transformed and have the forgiveness of sins. Amen.