

Just Do It • James 1:22–25

A young pastor had just come to the church and everyone liked him. They were especially impressed with his first sermon on his first Sunday there. He explained the Bible with insights that were more typical of a veteran than a novice. His examples were interesting and his applications were relevant. It was an excellent sermon. Everyone eagerly looked forward to the next Sunday.

The next Sunday a most unusual thing happened. The new pastor preached the same sermon over again. It wasn't exactly word for word the same, but it was very close. It was based on the same lines of the Bible, the same illustrations and the same applications.

As people walked out they thought that was a bit odd, but they didn't want to be critical. A few mentioned it to each other but not to the new pastor. Some thought that maybe he had a busy week and didn't have time to prepare a new sermon. Some generous people who lacked any spirit of criticism commented that music is often repeated so why not sermons.

Sunday number three was a rerun of sermon number one. Everything was pretty much the same. Now people began to wonder and complain. There was a special meeting of the church board where the matter was thoroughly discussed and the pastor was brought in to explain his unusual preaching. The chairman asked him if he anticipated having any different sermons. He answered, "Yes."

"Then why do you keep preaching the same sermon each week?" they asked him.

With a youthful, warm naivete the young pastor said, "I figured that when you got around to doing what I said in the first sermon, then I would go ahead and preach the second sermon."

Perhaps that pastor should have been named "James" because that's what is preached in

James 1:22-25. Here is what James the preacher said:

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.

In other words, "Do what God says!" Don't just listen; do it.

Anyone who just listens is called an auditor. I have taught graduate students for many years. It didn't take too many semesters to learn the basic differences between students who take classes for credit and those who audit a course. Credit students pay hundreds of dollars in order to take the class; auditors pay little or sometimes nothing. Credit students are required to attend the classes, whereas auditors often don't show up. Credit students do the homework. They read the books that are assigned and write the papers that are required. Auditors just listen and want to share in the discussions without doing any of the work. Like most profes-

sors, I would prefer not to have auditors in my classes. All they do is listen, and they are not always good at that!

The point of the Bible in James 1:22-25 is to ask each of us to decide if we are Christians for credit or just for audit. Do we attend

church services merely as auditors who pay nothing, do not prepare, attend irregularly and never do the homework? Or are we Christians who are in it for credit — who not only listen, but who actually "do"?

James says that auditors should beware of

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the mirror mistake: “Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in the mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.”

How many times have you looked at yourself in a mirror? For most of us the number could be a million. But what do we look like?

Television police shows often have the witness to a crime work with a police artist to draw a picture of the criminal. Suppose you had to describe your face to a police artist and then have a picture drawn? Or, better still, suppose you had to draw a portrait of yourself? I’m embarrassed to say that I’m not exactly sure what I look like. Crazy, isn’t it? We can look in a mirror and soon forget.

Once we leave the mirror, we don’t know what we look like. Hair can be a mess. Makeup can be smudged. Food can be stuck in our teeth, and we just keep right on going as if we were as normal as can be. Others see us more than we see ourselves.

The point of the Bible’s illustration is that auditors hear the word of God and quickly forget what it says because they have no intention of changing their behavior. For auditors there is a quick “listen” to God’s word and a fast “forget”. Life goes on as if God never said anything.

The problem, James explains, is self-deception. Auditors deceive themselves. It’s true. There is something about listening without doing that makes us all think that we are different than we really are. There are millions of Monday-morning-quarterbacks who think that because they listened to a Sunday afternoon NFL game they can play better than the professional players. I’ve stood with the crowd at the State Fair and listened to the people shout to the first-time bungee jumpers. What just intrigued me were people on the ground telling them how to do it. “Jump! Jump!” You know there is no way they would ever jump, but they’re telling others because they think they know how to do it because they have watched it.

The same goes for Christian living. Those who listen without doing start thinking of them-

selves as if they are “doers”. We hear a sermon or read about prayer in the Bible and we think that we can pray. Or we hear people talk about trusting God — about sacrificing or suffering — and we trick ourselves into thinking that we do what we have only heard about.

I don’t think anybody does this intentionally. At least I certainly hope not. It is a dangerous practice. So God and the Bible warn us against the mirror mistake and self-deception.

But what if we want to switch from audit to credit? How would we do that? Well, we don’t just listen; we do it. James 1:25 gives the assignment for those of us who want to take Christianity for credit. It says that we should look “intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continue to do this, not forgetting” what you have heard, but doing it.

This is a little hard to understand. It’s saying that if we take a really hard look at the perfect law of God, we will be doers instead of hearers.

You know the way some husbands and wives start to look alike after many years of marriage? Or the way some people and their dogs seem to look alike? The idea seems to be that if you look at somebody long enough you start taking on that person’s appearance.

Actually, I think it may be more our imagination than the truth, but it is the truth with God’s laws. If we study them hard enough and long enough we start looking and acting like God’s perfect law. In other words, we should look hard at what God says in the Bible instead of looking at ourselves in the mirror.

I think it’s true from experience and observaion. Christians who really get into intense thinking about what God says start living God’s way.

The Bible seems rather strange here when it says that God’s perfect law gives freedom. At first glance this doesn’t seem to make much sense. Most of us would say that laws restrict freedom.

Do you remember when the laws in Kigali, Rwanda, were abandoned? Everyone could do whatever he or she pleased. Thousands of men and women, boys and girls were either shot to

death or hacked to death with machetes. There are no adequate words to describe the horror.

Who would dare to say that those Rwandans without law were free? Without law there is no freedom at all. We are free when we have laws that are good and are obeyed.

The Bible is loaded with laws and rules. That bothers some people because they feel restricted by God's laws. Except God's laws are perfect and make people free. So when God tells us to be moral, to be honest, to be good, to be just, to be loving — he sets us free. When God tells us not to lie, not to commit adultery, not to steal, not to murder — those are laws that provide freedom.

So to move from audit to credit — don't just listen, but intently look "into the perfect law of God that gives freedom."

Do it and be happy! That's what the Bible means when it says, "... he will be blessed in what he does." The word blessing is a great word with two sides. God's side is giving his good. Our side is being happy. So the Christian who does what God says in his word gets God's good and is a happy person. It is a win/win situation.

So what are we going to do? Actually, I shouldn't have to suggest a list because these words are written to Christians who have been hearing from God in the past but not always doing what God says. But for those who need some suggestions for action, let me suggest a few:

- 1) **Prayer.** How about praying better? Not necessarily longer, just smarter. Make a specific prayer list. Join with others in regular prayer out loud. Trust God for something or someone specific.
- 2) **Forgiveness.** Are you holding in your heart resentment against anyone? God's teaching on forgiveness is very clear — forgive others as he has forgiven us. Don't just listen; do it.

3) **Baptism.** The Bible clearly communicates that disciples of Jesus should be baptized as a means of witness and obedience. Do it.

4. **Generosity.** God tells us to give to him in proportion to what we have received from him. Don't just hear about it; give it.

Well, you begin to get the idea. For any of us who have listened a lot but done very little, pick one action item and go for it. Decide today and do it this week.

Every professor gets a class list. That list includes each student's name and whether that student is taking the class for credit or for audit. If

God put out a list of all of us who are considering this part of the Bible today, what would it say after your name? As for me, I want God to know that I don't want to just listen. I'm taking Christianity for credit and for keeps. I want to be more than a hearer of God's word. I want to be a doer. What about you?

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