

# “I Can’t Hear You...”

- James 1:19-27

by Pastor Tim Dodson  
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*19 So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be*

*swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; 20 for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God. 21 Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.*

*22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; 24 for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. 25 But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues [in it], and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. 26 If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion [is] useless. 27 Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, [and] to keep oneself unspotted from the world.*

The writer of Hebrews lamented in chapter 5 verse 11 saying “*There is much more we would like to say about this, but it is difficult to explain, especially since you are spiritually dull and don’t seem to listen.*” What the writer was dealing with and what we so often face is not really a hearing problem at all. When God’s children don’t listen, it is not because of stopped up ears but stiff necks.

## **1:19-22**

One surprising attribute of our God... to many who claim to follow Him... is that He actually has some expectations for His investment. We read of such accounts in the parable of the faithful steward in Matthew 25:14 ...the parable of the Vineyard owner in Matthew 21...and other vivid accounts throughout scripture. Christ did not go to his martyred death so that we might be comfortable in our pews and have a nice day. He expects us to actually engage in kingdom pursuits once redeemed. He even expects us to make such pursuits for the kingdom of God our priority...that we “seek first” the kingdoms advance. So He regularly sends marching orders, new training procedures and updated battle formations.

James begins this week with a critical issue which one would think would be a no-brainer, but sadly it is perhaps the most abused aspect of Christendom that there is: the exhortation to be “swift to hear.” Such advise is good anytime and for anyone, but it is especially true when you are in the midst of the battle and bullets are flying. Maybe that’s the problem...maybe we fail to understand that we are at war and Satan is roaming about “seeking whom he may devour.” We are being lulled into spiritual lethargy providing time for distractions.

So often the best intentioned folks will set out to find God’s will and direction for their lives, but will spend all of their time talking instead of listening. And, *as this passage seems to intimate*, so often our incessive talk is invariably wrapped up in self and personal issues. Can you imagine the scene? “I’m trying to make this critical decision for my life yet all the people in my life are failing to help.” And what that means is they are failing to tell me what my itching ears want to hear. They aren’t speaking soothing words and giving affirmation to what I want to do. Of course if I am unwilling to hear the counsel of my brothers and sisters, how will I hear that ‘still small voice’ of the Spirit of God?” Thus I break free from my spiritual moorings and soon I’m just drifting about, living as I want, and often hiding it from my brethren because we know what they will say and we don’t want to hear it...

This is the well-beaten trail traveled by so many that I have watched over the years, move from blessing to blight. They came in with baggage ...*as will all do ...and all did*, and they ran for a period...sometimes a *long* period, free from those skeletons. But

alas, because their demons were never emphatically dealt with...or the fight against such was not endured...these demons say 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes, he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first." (Matthew 12:44-45) What that means in the practical realm is they leave the church with the same baggage they came in with...months or even years later, but now worse off than when they arrived. Sadly, this end is almost always easily prevented! They stopped hearing and roots of pride and bitterness then found ground and before long they were done. *"Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."* (Pr 16:18). In chapter 3 verse 6 of this letter we read *"For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there."*

We are told that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." But many people hear the Word of God, and to them it is only words. At best a "nice suggestion." They may intellectually accept it as the Word of God, but it remains forever as theoretical knowledge of God and never moves into experiential knowledge. This means they can tell you what the Bible says... call it "God's Word," ...and say it is to be followed. They can tell you it is "powerful, and sharper than a two-edged sword." Yet when it comes time to actually "pull the trigger," they fail to follow through. For them, it's ultimately just theory. Or they believe they are an exception...they have a special dispensation because of "mitigating circumstances."

Sooner or later, every one of us will be tested on this matter and we will then prove which side of the fence we are really on. (Note: that's why we have the guidelines and parameters as to the Disciples Community here in this church: Paul told Timothy to "test them first." (1 Timothy 3:10)...to "not be hasty in throwing support their way" (5:2). John called us to "test the spirits" before supporting them (1 Jn 4:1). We want opportunity to see that one's belief is not just theory but reality and practice. People have often approached the School of Ministry here with the idea, "Allow me to come in as a student and I will minister." And my response is, "Minister, and I will let you in as a student." The same is becoming more-and-more true of the School of Discipleship for the same reasons.)

These folks can generally be spotted doing a lot of talking, very little listening, and even less doing! They are wholly into this Jesus thing to gain and acquire, not to sacrifice, serve, and love.

James goes on to tell us, *"for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God"* or *"...human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires."* It's sad that he has to tell us that, and it sad that we need to hear it. For one would think this is would already be a clearly understood fact, but apparently not. Temperamental anger is one of the most excused sins in individual believers' lives. We think it is no big deal or that we are justified. Really? You mean like Jesus was justified when they lied about Him, beat Him senseless and then crucified Him, and He responded with, *"Forgive them, Father. They don't know what they are doing?"* I am astounded by people who claim to be God's kids, filled with His living Spirit, then turn and spew garbage, explode in language that would make a sailor blush, pass evil lies and do whatever they can to hurt someone else. How does that work in God's dispensation? It doesn't. For some people, anger is as powerful and as destructive as any drug addiction. It doesn't matter whether it is a slow, seething anger or the kind that flashes in rage; it will hinder spiritual growth as well as our use in furthering of the Kingdom of God. It will eventually, ...*every time*... take you out of the game.

The text continues, *"So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the message God has planted in your hearts, for it is strong enough to save your souls."* Notice that as Scripture so often does, the language is emphatic with the presence of the word "all." We are to seek to get rid of **all** the junk! This verse speaks concerning some practical application of the Spirit of God to our lives. It's not a complicated concept. Like so much of this book, James is saying, "Stop just talking about it, and step up and do it." As redeemed believers, we are called to action here, to put these things away. Apparently we are not to sit around waiting for a mysterious supernatural and unilateral miracle to take place, but to take our garbage out to the curb ourselves, though God will empower you to do so if you are willing to act. This speaks of **our** part in our personal sanctification. Please note that this is the BIBLE saying this, not just this pastor!

Acceptance of the Word must be followed by persistent obedience to it. Hearing is useless if it is not followed by active doing. Obedience to the Word has to be more than just the tacit practice of outward forms of religion (church attendance, financial giving, participation in prayers and singing). There has to be a development of an inner two-way communiqué with God and faithful follow-through on our part. There has to be a living out of the same radical faith that took Jesus to the cross. Truly receiving the Word of God is not just acknowledging the right information, but acting upon it!

*"For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe."* (1 Thess 2:13)

The Scripture here is calling us to practical, Christ-modeled living. This is an “applied Christianity.” It’s where the rubber meets the road. It’s where theory comes to the edge of the diving board, and there are clearly only two ways to go. But this is profoundly against our very human nature. The fact remains that we, in our humanity, disdain being told what to do. The greater church today has found a way, albeit a weak theology on any scale, to cry foul when it comes to this directive, by attributing it all to legalism. We cry out, “*I’m saved by grace, not by works!*” Amen, that’s true! But this is not speaking of coming to salvation. This is not speaking about our redemption, our positional “cross ordained” status, nor the love of God toward us. This is speaking of the power...the *answer*, the *effect* of an indwelling Holy Spirit in a man. This is encompassing the profound power and effect of God in us, *post salvation*. We absolutely understand from the rest of Scripture that even though a man is not saved through his works, he will work because he is saved. He is overwhelmed by and driven through this new love and passion in his life. Indeed our works are a true test of our relationship with Him! To deny this is to deny Scripture, reject that God’s salvation changes a person profoundly, and emasculate the supernatural power of God. To run down this road is blasphemy against God and His Word.

According to this passage, the one who attempts merely to hear the Word without acting upon it is deceiving himself. In what way? Deceiving himself that all is well between him and the Spirit of God. Perhaps even deceiving himself that he is indeed born again.

This is so applicable in today’s church-going world. We are comfortably led to believe that our church attendance, *merely sitting through another church service where the Word is spoken of*, is the heart of Christianity. It is not. Many of us think we get “loyalty points” for all the time we have gone to church and now we can cash some of them in...not for grace, but for license. We know what the pastor is saying and we simply reject it. It matters little that I am simply regurgitating scripture up here, we just pick and choose the aspects of faith that fits my world.

*“Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.”* (1 John 2:3-6)

*“...whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.”* (Mt 12:50)

*“If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”* (John 13:17)

James tells us that our attempts to avoid this truth is nothing more than self-deception. After all, why do we look into a mirror? Don’t we do so to check out how we look and to see what needs to be combed and straightened? James is pointing out how ridiculous it is to look into a mirror if we have no intention of fixing what is wrong. For us, the “mirror” is the Word of God. When we look into this mirror, we see our “natural face.” Isaiah 64:6 says, “...*we are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags.*”

*“Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock. And everyone who hears these words of Mine, and does not act upon them, will be like a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and it fell, and great was its fall.”* (Mt 7:24-25-note, Mt 7:26-27)

MacArthur writes that James “*is describing characteristic behavior, not occasional activity. It is one thing to fight; it is something else to be a soldier. It is one thing to build a shed; it is something else to be a builder. James is not merely challenging his readers to do the Word; he is telling them that real Christians are doers of the Word. That describes the basic disposition of those who believe unto salvation.*”

Pollster George Barna found that 88% of churchgoers believe it is important to have a biblical world view, yet only 43% *say* they do, and in truth only 6% *actually* do. About one out of every 10 people (11%) who regularly attend a Christian church actually claim some religious affiliation other than Christian. Roughly 1/3 of church-goers believe that homosexuality is morally acceptable. Only 41% described the human condition as “*people are born into sin and can only be saved from its consequences by Jesus Christ.*” The majority of churchgoers chose from various other perspectives such as the secular humanist idea that

- “people are neither good nor bad when they are born, but become either good or bad through their accumulated life choices” (28%),
- the Marxist view that “people were originally good but have become corrupted by society” (11%),
- and the Eastern Mystical notion that “everyone is a divine creature engaged in the eternal pursuit of unity and a perfected consciousness” (11%)

The list goes on...more than half believe it is morally acceptable for couples to live together before marriage. Many statistics reflect that born-again Christians are at least as likely as non-Christians to have experienced divorce!

How can this be? Where is the disconnection? We are so often "hearers that deceive ourselves." We want to believe that Jesus loves us so it doesn't matter how we live. Do we actually believe that Jesus saved us only to leave us living as we did before? Are we here merely to 'audit the class,' or are we taking the tests for credit? Are we here to receive instruction, and then go out and live the opposite. Is this just a club? Do we really want this life He is offering?

The "law of liberty," which is spoken of here, speaks of the liberty of Galatians 5:1, which says, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage." The Old Testament law by itself gave no hope and could not give life. It was given to show man's guilt and condemnation of sin, which it still does today. It is the standard to approach the living God, and you can't follow it! But the New Testament, *post-cross law of liberty*, is a very different animal. It is the new direction for our lives in light of the Spirit of God, who now dwells in us and empowers us.

For sure, such is not the freedom to sin, but a freedom to **not** sin. It is the freedom from sin's power and sin's penalty. We are free from eternal death that comes with sin. We are free to choose life....and moreover empowered to do so, because at last we understand the choice and the blessings that come through obedience as well as the pain and death of sin! Our eyes have been opened upon our salvation and rebirth.

*"And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed." John 8:35-36*

*"... where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." 2 Cor 3:17*

Our salvation and new relationship with Christ is not to provide us with the freedom to be autonomous, independent, and without authority in our lives. It is the freedom to now live for and serve God and Kingdom, to belong to a community of believers...instead of self and world, as those outside are constrained to do.

What a person does in and for Christ reflects the effect of the gospel working in him. Those who have truly experienced the gospel understand and embrace this law of liberty. They move freely *in* it and respond *to* it. The individual who feels they can pick and choose which scriptures to apply to themselves knows nothing of authentic redemption or living for the Kingdom. He or she does not grasp the magnitude of the gift and power of God's presence in his life. Quite likely, such an individual has never experienced real salvation!

*"...for it is God who works in you [WHY?] both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13).*

## **1:26-27**

Throughout this letter, James lists evidence of a receptive and active heart in a truly redeemed individual. The person who has received His saving grace and honestly seeks to live in His light, will absolutely reflect a profound transformation. He or she will hear the Spirit of God...will hear their pastors and teachers and leaders...will hear those around him or her...will hear the scriptures, and they will do all this because they long to please their Redeemer more than anything else in this world. He or she will manifest the reality and power of salvation, for real love cannot be hidden. Is that not a fact? The possessor of such love doesn't even try to keep it concealed! True love overflows the container in which it is housed because true love is a living, growing thing and cannot be buried.

James gives us a practical example of this change. He tells us that one way we see the redeemed life in action is our mouths and our ears. We can go to church all our lives, be active in the "rituals" of religious orthodoxy, but true religion is exercised in a controlled tongue and open ears, as well as doing the things of Christ and Kingdom. Not because we have to, but because we want to, because we get to, because it is the new passion of our redeemed lives. If that love truly exists within us, we will never be able to keep it bottled up. Christianity is not just a noun or an adjective, it is a verb: active, living, and manifested in all we touch.