

INTRODUCTION¹

“The Bible said it; I believe it. That settles it!” But, does it? Does this bumper sticker theology adequately address the issue of scripture and our responsibility to it? Let’s hear an answer from the scripture itself. The text that addresses this issue is found in James 1:19-27.²

¹⁹Listen, my beloved brothers! Let every person be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. ²⁰For one’s anger does not accomplish that which pleases God. ²¹Therefore, after having shed off all filthiness and evil, which is excess, in humility welcome the engrafted word, which can save your very life.

²²And become doers of the word and not just hearers, thus deceiving yourselves. ²³Now if one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, this one is comparable to the fellow who looked at his natural face in the mirror. ²⁴He looked at himself, departed, and immediately forgot what he looked like. ²⁵But the one gazing into the perfect law of liberty and continuing to look into it, not becoming a forgetful hearer but an active doer, this one will be blessed in what he does.

²⁶If anyone supposes himself to be religious, while not bridling his tongue but deceiving his heart, this one’s religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion, pure and undefiled before God, even the Father is this: to take care of orphans and widows in their times of distress, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

James here treats the matter of hearing the word of God and getting it into one’s life. In his first century setting that meant listening to the gospel being preached in Christian worship. Every worshipper brought a responsibility to that worship service. Not just the preacher, but the worshipper were obligated to the sermon brought from God’s word!

In response to this question about the responsibility of listening to sermons, many people would answer: “Absolutely nothing! I come to the worship service only as a listener. Thus I bring only the responsibility of listening to the preacher. After the worship service I say my thanks to the preacher. That’s the sum total of my responsibility!” This is typical for the worshipers. The majority probably would not go as far as the lady who said: “Yes, my pastor’s sermons please me, because during his preaching I have enough time to make out my shopping list for Monday.”

Is such an attitude proper? Does it have a basis in the scripture? What does James say to this issue?

BODY

He sets forth, in my estimate, two points in response to this question:

First: the sermon listener should correctly listen! In verses 19-21, James says that there are a couple of obligations to correct listening. In verse 19, we have the duty to come to the worship service with a ‘listening’ ear. At minimum this means: I must come with the expectancy that God will speak to me through his word. The sermon is much more than a show. Also it is more than the opinion of the preacher, with which I agree or disagree. The sermon should be the channel for the word of God to me and as a sermon listener I must be ready for the demands of this word.

Why? This word of God is to play an important role in our life. Without this ‘listening’ ear we will come to the worship service in all likelihood with anger, anger at one another and also perhaps at God. This is an implication of the axiomatic statement: “Let every person be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.” James applies this to the situation of a worship service in the early church. Paul described a similar problem in 1 Cor. 14:26-40. Everyone wanted to speak at the same time; no one was willing to listen to his brothers. What was the result? In Corinth we see a carnal congregation, where envy and jealousy ruled (1 Cor. 3:1-4). In early Christianity this problem was not unique to Corinth. Such a situation existed in the congregations to which James wrote, as 4:1-6, 11-12 make clear.

In my experience as a preacher during the last 30 years I have often noticed the same tendency. The church of Christ has splintered itself through envy and jealousy. The worship service is empty and boring. Like Israel in the time of Amos many are saying: “When will the new moon be over, so that we may sell grain, and the sabbath, that we may open the wheat market, to make the bushel smaller and the shekel bigger, and to cheat with dishonest scales” (8:5). Very quickly the worship service comes to the situation that Ernst Eggimann described:³

Beloved congregation,
Every Sunday you hear blabla,
Also I myself hear blabla,
What I indeed say is blabla,
Now this Sunday let's keep silent.

Such people are “waiting for Monday” Christians whose life is without God's power and leadership. Paul has well described their situation in Eph. 4:14: they are “tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming.” This is at the core of the controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention. Few leaders among us possess a 'listening' ear. They always already know exactly God's word; only the lay people need this 'listening' ear! Envy and jealousy reign supremely; the annual convention meeting in June has been turned into a political convention like the Republican or the Democratic parties. Because of this our convention has become the laughingstock in the American newspapers. It's now wonder that the greatest source of new members for the Mormon church in America comes from our denomination.

In the community of faith we need a 'listening' ear, especially when we come to the worship service. Only in this way can God speak to us. Without such we are in danger of easily falling prey to anger. And we should never forget James' word in verse 20: “For one's anger does not accomplish that which pleases God.”

In verse 21 there are additional duties to correct listening. As preparation for listening to the sermon we must be prepared to lay aside “all filthiness and evil.” This means: when we come to church, we must be ready to acknowledge our sins before God. As James explains in verse 25, God's word is that perfect law of liberty that can set us free from our sins. O what kind of an opportunity we have in worship! The great gulf that separates us from God can be breached through the good news of the Gospel in the sermon. Forgiveness and reconciliation with God are within our reach, when we are prepared to listen properly. To neglect such an opportunity, because we pridefully hang on to our sins, would be tragic.

Verse 21 further states that we should be open to receiving the word of the sermon in humility. The Greek word *πραΰτητι*, which stands behind the English word 'humility,' meant in the ancient world “to break/tame a horse.” Many of us are well acquainted with Dr. MacGorman's definition of *πραΰτητι* as “saddled busted by God's grace.” Here it has the sense that we should listen to the sermon with a readiness to obey God's word.

If we do not accept the duty to listen correctly, then we short-circuit God's power in our life. And this word of the sermon possesses power, a power that can “save our very life” (v. 21). We also experience it as an 'engrafted' word, which can change our life. This goal God has for his proclaimed word — a wonderful opportunity for every listener to sermons to release this life-changing power of God's word into his life. A renewal of life: this is possible to every person who correctly listens to God's word through the sermon.

Is, however, the 'listening' ear all we need? Or, does James demand still more from us? Still more! Of that I am convinced. In verses 22-27 one finds an indication of the second main point: **Hearing should lead to action**. True Christianity can never content itself with being a 'spectator religion'. The worshiper is no spectator who takes in the sermon from his ecclesiastical pew. Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian,

correctly sized up the situation with his theater metaphor, in which the worshiper is the actor, the preacher the prompter, and God the spectator. The Bible affirms this perspective of the situation. Applicable to the field of sports is the metaphor in the following manner. The preacher is the coach, the congregation the playing team, and God the spectator in the stands. This picture corresponds to the text here in James. Hearing and doing are equally important aspects of this 'sport' we call worship.

Both, hearing and doing, are inseparably linked together. Doing, which does not stem from correct hearing, leads to a superficial Christianity that contents itself with an empty 'busyness'. Such Christianity easily falls prey to "every wind of doctrine" and to "the trickery of men" as Paul describes in Eph. 4:14.

Also hearing without doing leads to a faith that, although orthodox and correct, is anemic and powerless. Through this many Christians quickly become "burned out" in their faith. By this I mean, their Christian service depends exclusively on their own power, and is not undergirded by the Lord. Eventually they grow weary in serving and abandon the church. James raises the issue of what value hearing without doing possesses. None, is his answer! It is as worthless as the action of the man looking at his face in the mirror. He looks, departs, and immediately forgets what he looked like. What good did it do to look in the first place! The glance in the mirror had no impact on him whatsoever. If our service is to have lasting value, it must have God's blessing on it. According to verse 25, this can only happen when our doing proceeds out of correct hearing.

If we hear God's word in a worship service and we leave the church the same person as when we entered — unchanged, without a deeper faith, without a commitment to serve God better — what real value did the sermon then have?

Correct hearing leads to action. But what action? James answers this question in verses 26-27. Doing encompasses three areas:

1. Correct hearing leads to proper speaking

We must bridle our tongue, says James. This is a proof that we have correctly heard God's word. What we say as Christians is very important, not only as a witness to other people, but also as an indication of our inner spiritual condition. Jesus said in Matt. 12:34b: "For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart." James especially stresses the importance of bridling our tongue. If we don't, we deceive our own heart. What kind of a catastrophe would it be if one thought he was serving God, while he really didn't even know God. The Pharisees are the prime example of this. They supposed that they were closer to God than all other Jews. But the assessment of Jesus comes like a clap of thunder: "If your righteousness doesn't far exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, there is no possible way for you to enter Heaven" (Matt. 5:20).

If we don't bridle our tongue, then our religion, our service to God, is worthless. The Greek word here for 'worthless' is μάταιος. It possesses an especially sharp tone. In the Bible it is often used to stress the worthlessness of pagan religions. Thus there is a very real sense in which James asserts that a Christianity that doesn't control its tongue has no more value before him than paganism.

Correct hearing leads to correct speaking! But also...

2. Correct hearing leads to service to others, especially to those in need.

We must help others who are in need. The orphans and widows symbolize such people. This kind of service was pivotal to the mission of Jesus. In 1 Timothy 5, Paul made the church responsible for widows without family. As John declares (1 Jhn. 3:17-18): "But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth." Are we ready to help these 'helpless ones'? This is genuine evidence of our Christianity.

3. Correct hearing leads to personal holiness

Are we genuinely holy? Perhaps this question disturbs us. The Pentecostals in America define it sometimes in a way that causes us concern. To them holiness frequently means an excessively emotional piety. Therefore we may not concern ourselves with personal holiness sufficiently. Here and especially in 4:1-10, James has made us accountable for holy living. Holiness, in James' view, has a great deal to do with relationships and attitudes. Proper relationships with other people, hostility toward worldliness and friendship with God: these establish the shape of our personal holiness.

CONCLUSION

Doing, according to James, is always concrete action. Therefore it follows that our speaking, our ministry to neighbors, as well as our personal holiness, are the result of proper hearing the word of God and they constitute evidence for genuine Christianity.

In closing, I repeat my question: What do we as sermon hearers have to do with the sermon? Or, perhaps better put: What responsibility do you have to it?

End Notes-----

¹See shorter version of this sermon text in JA1_1927.SER. This MSS is an English translation of the German text of JA1_1927.SE2.

TEXT: James 1.19-27

C.I.T.: James set forth the requirement for genuine hearing of God's Word.

THESIS: Worshipers today must properly hear God's Word through the sermon.

PURPOSES: #484

Total: Abundant Life

Major: Doctrinal

Specific: That the congregation would understand its responsibility to the sermon.

TITLE: (Predigthören) Sermon Listening

²Translation is my personal one of the Greek text.

³Zitiert von Rudolf Bohren in Die Predigtlehre 5. Aufl. (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1986), S. 33.