

A Guide For Non-Conformists

WISDOM FROM JAMES

James 4:4

Imagine you work for a giant company that is wildly successful. As the key executive leader, you have been entrusted with the business while the owner goes overseas to expand operations during the next year. He says he will write regularly to give updates and instructions.

After a year, the owner returns to see how things are going, only to find that the lawn outside is overgrown and there are broken windows. As the owner walks in, the receptionist is openly playing solitaire on her computer while loud music blares at her work station. Trash cans overflow, the carpet hasn't been vacuumed, and there's a general mess. The owner asks for you and someone says, "Yeah, I think he's down there," pointing down the hall.

Finally finding you playing a video game with a sales associate, the owner asks you to step into his office, which has now been turned into an entertainment room. When he asks you what's been going on and if you received any of his instructions, you say, "Oh sure! We got all your letters and emails. You'll be happy to know every Monday we have a study session. A few people have memorized your emails. And there's some really great stuff in there! Some of it was interesting."

"Okay," the owner replies, you got excited about my communication. You studied, even memorized them. But what did you do about them?" "Do? Oh, we were going to get around to doing something..." [adapted from Charles Swindoll, *Improving Your Serve* (Waco TX: Word, 1983), 170-171)].

We would never accept such behaviour in a business! But when we hear God's Word, it should be even more absurd to act in this way. James is writing to a church that knows the Old Testament, knows the teachings of Jesus, yet is tempted to act in a way that is completely inconsistent with it. God's Word is described as the word of truth (v. 18), the implanted word (v. 21), a word that is able to save your souls. These aren't mere letters. These are the very words from the mouth of God, words with power that can create and destroy, words that can rescue you. And since the word has power to save, we should...

1. Hear & Do

The first contrast that James sets up is in v. 22. Don't just be hearers of the word, but do it as well, so as to not deceive yourself. We could translate v. 22 as "Become a doer." James will devote an entire section of his letter to how important faith and works are – faith leads to action. Faith needs to be shown in how you live (3:13) because anyone who knows the good they should do but doesn't do it sins (4:17).

There is a real danger of hearing and not doing. Just because you have heard information and believe the information doesn't mean that you are obedient unless your action follows. I can remember growing up and my parents would say, "Be home by 11 pm." And I would nod and

say, “Yeah yeah, I’ll be home.” But when I would show up at 11:30 without giving any indication that I was going to be late, my dad would say, “Didn’t you hear me?” It didn’t matter if I said, “Yeah, I heard you, but there was a great conversation going on” – I could expect my dad to say “If you heard me, you would have obeyed me.”

As people who receive a ton of information every day, it is easy to compartmentalize and live in a radical disconnect. We don’t think anything of it. We compartmentalize easily. And James warns us by telling us not to merely hear information and deceive ourselves by thinking we are doing really good. In fact, James is concerned about our self-awareness. The problem of self-deception is real. We think we are doing better than we really are. We are more critical of others and give ourselves a pass. We want justice for others but mercy for ourselves. James cautions us – don’t assume you’re doing better than you are.

At this point, we should take pause and ask ourselves some questions. How do I do when people disagree with me? How receptive am I to the opinions of others? Do I think that I see clearer than others do? How willing am I to listen to others and act upon their advice? Am I growing in confessing when I’m wrong? How often do I apologize? Certainly we all can grow in these ways because the word of God is powerful to save our souls, so we should not only hear and do, but also...

2. Look & Act

James now sets up a contrast between two types of looking in vv. 23-25. There is the wrong type of looking and the right type of looking. Both are looking intently at the word. In the times of James, they did not have crystalized mirrors like we have today that give back such a clear reflection. Instead, they would have had a highly polished sheet of bronze or copper that would offer an imperfect reflection. So it would be necessary to stare intently into it to see any imperfections or changes that would be needed.

But the problem with the first one who looks into the mirror and sees his natural face and he goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. He doesn’t remember. He has looked at himself.

The second person also looks into the mirror. But James says that he looks into the this mirror and sees the perfect law of liberty. And this might be a subtle statement, but James says that there are two different ways to look at God’s word. One is to look into the word of God to see oneself and the other is to look into the word of God and see liberty.

Herein lies the question as to how we change. Do we change by looking into the Bible and staring at ourselves? Or do we look into the Bible to see God and his unchanging grace? The Bible is a mirror, but what is it reflecting back to us? Is it reflecting back me, or is it reflecting back the very nature of who I am and what I ought to become in light of God’s unchanging nature? Both are looking intently, but one is focused on self while the other is focused on the perfect law of liberty. One is focused on law, the other is focused on gospel.

There are two ways to read the Bible. One is to read it so that I am focused on me. What does this mean for me? It places me at the center of the Bible. I am what every passage is about. And when we treat the Bible this way, we are just staring at ourselves and we often don't see clearly. We are more concerned about us and our glory than we are about the glory of God. We are staring into God's word looking for ourselves, not looking for God.

But when we stare into the perfect law of liberty, what the gospel does is it shows us the perfections of God and his righteous decrees and then we see ourselves clearly. We see how we are in need of God's grace. We see how we need to change. Why? Because we are not focused on ourselves, but upon imitating the One that we see so clearly. This is the difference between one who looks and the one who acts. The one who merely looks is looking at themselves. They become the objective standard. They are looking hard at themselves, but what they will find is only self, and that self will be just fine. But the one who looks into the perfection of God and his gospel will see that there is more obedience required, more transformation needed. So because the word is powerful to save our souls, we hear and do, we look and act, and we...

3. Begin & Mature

The final contrast that I want to point out comes from a simple comment that James makes. The two types of looking are further expanded upon: the one who looks intently sees his natural face (1:23, ESV). Or he sees the face of his birth, his genesis face. What he sees is literally his beginning face. He sees where he has begun.

But notice the other type of looking – he looks into the “perfect law of liberty.” We have already seen this word “perfect” before – the one who is steadfast (1:4), the one who sees God's perfect gift (1:17). And what we have said is that this word “perfect” can also mean is mature or complete. So when James says we are looking into the perfect law, I don't think he is meaning that we are looking into God's perfect rules. Instead, I think what James means is that we are looking into the mature instruction of freedom. This word “perfect” is the word *telios* that has the idea of maturity, the end goal.

What does all this mean? It means that when we hear God's word, when we look into it, we can look at ourselves, or we can look at the end goal of God's instructions. Paul would say that “Christ is the end of the law” in Romans 10:4 – literally, Christ is the goal of the law. And what is our goal when we look into God's instruction? Is not the goal to see Christ in us? The goal is not to merely look at ourselves, but to look to Christ! The way we mature is not by continual self-inspection, but to look to Christ and then to act. The goal is to become like Christ. Christ is the goal!

So we begin by seeing ourselves, but we do not stop there and just forget and walk away. What we do is we look at ourselves, and then we see Christ. We see his perfections. We see how we need to be changed by his word. And then we persevere, we continue.

Why? Because James says that this is where the blessing is found. Blessing is found not in understanding ourselves better and thinking more about ourselves, but by looking to Christ and following him, imitating him.

For Christ only did what he saw his Father doing (Jn. 14:31). Christ was obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Christ obeyed perfectly. As we look at Christ, we will see our imperfections, we will be able to confess our lack of wisdom, we will be able to repent and trust in him. Christ obeyed the law perfectly so that we would find the blessing of freedom. The blessing isn't merely in the future, but the blessing is now – that we have freedom in Christ, a clear conscience. As Jesus said in Luke 11:28: “Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it.” John Calvin would say that “Obedience is the mother of true knowledge of God” (Inst. 1.6.1). When we know God, we obey, we follow, we look to Christ and find our freedom there. His commands are for our joy, our liberty. And so we are blessed in continuing to do the word of God.

When the wicked queen looked into the mirror and asked it every day, “Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?” it could not lie. When the mirror saw the beauty of Snow White, it told the truth. And when we look into the mirror of God's Word, what God wants us to see is the beauty of Christ, the One who lived, died, and rose again, so that we might trust him and become like him.