

## **JAMES 1:17-27** **ST JOHN'S, 2.9.18, 9.30 am**

### **INTRODUCTION**

About seventeen years ago, while I was still a curate, my training incumbent started teaching me to play the guitar. I learned a few chords, and made a bit of progress. Phil even found some money to buy me a guitar – which I understand is a very nice acoustic guitar.

But after a few months, the time had come for me to finish my curacy and move on. It would have been a great idea to continue learning the guitar. I even bought a couple of 'teach yourself' type books to help me. But I didn't actually do anything about it. So now, my guitar sits untouched most of the time, and I don't have the freedom it could have brought me to lead singing in church, or simply to enjoy making music with it.

In today's passage, James contrasts *hearers of the word* with *doers who act* (vv 23-25). We could equally call them 'the person with the mirror' and 'the believer with the word'. We're going to think about what James has to say about these two kinds of people. The question is, which one best describes you?

### **THE MAN WITH THE MIRROR**

*If anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror, James writes in verse 23. This man looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like* (v 23). This isn't just a quick glance in a mirror - it's more like a long, hard stare. But then he just walks away. He doesn't do

anything about what he's seen in the mirror. His hair still looks like he's been dragged through a hedge backwards, and bits of last night's dinner are still caught in the tangle of what was his four o'clock shadow. He may as well not have bothered to look in the mirror at all, for all the good it's done him.

No-one's suggesting that taking a good look in the mirror is a bad thing to do! Mirrors are necessary tools. But none of us would get up in the morning, look in the mirror, and then ignore what we'd seen there! We'd comb our hair, clean our face, take a shave if appropriate. In other words, we'd take action according to what we can see of ourselves in the mirror.

James is saying that there are people who treat Scripture like the man who *looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like*. They are *hearers of the word* only. They might spend hours reading the Bible in private, they might go along to several Bible study groups a week, they might go to a church where the preaching is second to none. They might be able to quote chapter and verse, they might have learned Hebrew and Greek, so they know all the possible different translations of a particular word or phrase. All this is good. As I say frequently, Christians need to know their Bibles; we should be making the effort to read and study and understand God's word. But let's not be like the man with the mirror in verses 23-24! Because if that's how we treat the Bible, we may as well not bother, for all the good it will do us.

## THE BELIEVER WITH THE WORD

*But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing* (v 25). Amongst lots of other things, the Bible is a manual or instruction-book on how to live in perfect liberty, or freedom. Just like those of us who are parents lay down rules for our children, rules which are designed to keep them safe, to help them grow up to be loving, caring, independent and law-abiding members of church and society, so *the perfect law of liberty* is designed for us to obey, and by doing so to grow into mature Christian believers, who reflect the nature of our heavenly Father.

The problem with the man with the mirror isn't that he's done anything wrong. We should all be reading and studying our Bibles. But the man with the mirror hasn't taken the next, vital step in the process. Verse 25 spells out how the believer with the word treats Scripture. He or she *looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty* – that's like looking in the mirror. She or he then *perseveres* – she applies what she's read to her own heart and mind and life, and becomes *a doer who acts* – she puts what she's read into practice.

James goes on to mention three specific areas of life on which our reading of Scripture should have an impact. The first comes in v 26: *if anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless*. Control of our tongues is a subject which James returns to later in his letter. Jesus also makes this point in Matthew 12:36: *I tell you, on the day of*

*judgement people will give account for every careless word they speak*.

The things we say, especially when our guard is down, reveal what's truly in our hearts. If we haven't allowed God's *perfect law* to change us and to *bridle our tongue* as James puts it, then we'll show that by what we say, which will be hurtful and destructive of those around us, and dishonouring to God.

Secondly, James says that true religion will lead us to *visit orphans and widows in their affliction* (v 27). If we've *received with meekness the implanted word* (v 21), then we're in the process of being transformed into the family likeness of Christ, and we'll find our hearts full of love and concern for the vulnerable people in our community. That will lead us to do what we can to alleviate their suffering and support them through difficult times.

Thirdly, James says that true religion will mean that we *keep [ourselves] unstained from the world* (v 27). The value-system of the society we live in is not the value-system of the kingdom of God. Our thoughts and actions are to be dictated by the value-system of the kingdom which we learn from *looking into* and *persevering* in God's *perfect law*. What we read, what we watch, what we hear around us, is all encouraging us to think and to act in ways which are contrary to God's word. If we don't read and study our Bibles, we won't be aware of the ways in which society works against God's kingdom. The result will be that the values that we hold will either be those of our childhood – different from those of today but still not in line with *the perfect law of liberty* – or our values will be shaped by our current society.