

“Listen Forgetful Hearers, and Do”

In studying Greek at seminary you basically have to relearn the English language and all the grammatical rules in order to understand Greek. One of the things you relearn is the imperative mood. For all of you grammar geeks it's basically the form of the verb that makes direct commands and requests, like “sit still,” “count your blessings,” or “listen, and do.”

“Listen and do.” That last imperative was something my sister and I heard constantly around my house. The imperative mood was not just any ol' mood but a method of parental attitude that said something not with a period at the end of it, but with a forceful explanation mark! In other words, “you better do what I tell you to do, or else there will be consequences.”

Kendall is having a hard time with her class in using the imperative mood. It seems some kids just don't want to listen. She told me the other day, one girl just stares at her with a blank look as she's telling her to do something. The girl hears Kendall, she is just refusing to do. I feel for Kendall, because I know its got to be hard being a teacher when you cant parent.

In the lectionary reading of James today, James is our teacher but is parenting us in our Christian faith. In verses 20 through 22, he gives 7 imperatives: He says,

- Everyone must be quick to listen
- Slow to speak
- Slow to become angry. Why? Because, anger does not bring about righteousness that God requires.
- Put aside all wickedness,
- and receive with humility the Word given to you by God, which is able to save your soul.
- Be doers of this Word
- Don't be only hearers of this Word.

“Listen Forgetful Hearers, and Do”

I want to focus on James' last two imperatives given here. He says, “be doers of the Word, not merely hearers.” In other words, don't just listen and hear the Word, but take what you've heard and go make something out of what you've heard.

We do live in a culture where we get both halves wrong though. Some do and do but never get close to Jesus' heart; others are spiritually on fire but don't engage with people in need at all. Jesus' brother says to be (or really “become” — the Greek is *ginesthe*, implying continuous doing or becoming) doers. I feel James is not making this a request, but a direct command. There is an exclamation at the end of his command. He is in a parental state of mind saying, “you better do what I tell you to do, or else there will be consequences.” Listen AND Do. Don't just listen.

So what is exactly the consequence then of only being hearers of the Word? He says in verse 23-25, “for if someone is a hearer of the Word and not a doer, they are like a person who looks at their natural face in the mirror; then after looking at themselves they go away and immediately forget what they looked like.” James' analogy here suggests that “hearing” is a deliberate act that requires concentration and memory. But those who hear the gospel message and do not act on it “are like those who look at themselves in a mirror” and “immediately forget what they were like.” What is seen in the mirror must be viewed again and again, because the impression is gone as soon as one looks away.

Therefore, in order to listen and do, in order to be not only hearers but also doers of the Word as James commands us to, we must look intently into the perfect law, the law that provides liberty, and continues in freedom, not having become a forgetful hearer but an active doer. The perfect law, the law of freedom *is* the gospel message in which enables us to live with what we see and live out what we believe.

“Listen Forgetful Hearers, and Do”

And how do we live with what we see and live out what we believe? Well, James gives us the imperative of caring for orphans and widows in verse 27 which provides us with a concrete example of this call to integrate hearing and doing. We are to look toward Christ’s teachings and examples in the gospel to provide for the least, lonely, and lost people of the world.

Those who do this are both hearing and acting, listening to and doing the gospel message. And as James reveals in verse 25, those who do “will be blessed in their doing.” However, it must be noted that in the never ending journey to be sure that our faith in Christ is “worth something” like any other commodity or achievement, we often resort to calculating the rewards we may receive because of our belief or because of our action. James does identify a reward for those who act on the gospel, but the reward – the blessing – comes in the action, in the doing and carrying out the gospel message itself.

Therefore, be doers of the Word and you will be blessed! Do not go away from here and forget the gospel message to provide for the least, lost, and lonely of the world. Do not be forgetful hearers, but be mindful doers of God’s gift of His Holy Word.

Let us pray.

O Lord our God, look with compassion upon us and all who turn to you for help, for you are gracious, O Lover of Souls, and to you we give glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.