

Avoiding Self-Deception

James 1:19-27

This morning we are considering the last 9 verses of James 1 that warn us against self-deception. Just to let you know, my presupposition as I teach this passage is that all of us (myself included) deceive ourselves in some ways (probably in many ways). Our self-deception is not necessary intentional or conscious. Most of us don't get up in the morning and say, "My strategy for getting through today is tell myself all sort of things that just aren't true." Most of the time we are not aware that we are deceiving ourselves.

But today's passage makes clear that we ARE RESPONSIBLE to avoid self-deception when we recognize it. We are responsible in the sense that by God's grace we are able to respond and believe what's true. That's actually a mark of spiritual maturity: recognizing our own self-deception and then taking steps to avoid self-deception in the future.

In James 1:19-27 James warns against self-deception in relation to three specific issues: in relation to ***anger***, in relation to ***God's word***, and in relation to ***what constitutes God-honoring religion***. In the first issue the warning against self-deception is implicit; in the second and third James explicitly warns us against deceiving ourselves (see verses 22 and 26).

We are going to see that James doesn't merely expose areas of self-deception; he also gives a path forward, an antidote, something specific to do that will convince our hearts that there's a better way to live.

Self-deception concerning anger. (James 1:19-21)

James wrote something his readers already knew (or as some translations suggest, something that they *needed* to know):

19 This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger;

James gives three simple commands to ***everyone***, not merely to a few in the church. For the church to be healthy, all of us need to live out these commands. First, ". . .be quick to hear." The idea is that we should be eager to understand the message that others (including God) are trying to communicate. Instead of being passive and/or lazy, we are eager to "get" what is being communicated. This is the settled habit of someone who is teachable.

Second, ". . .be slow to speak." Whereas we are to be eager to hear, we are to pause before we speak. It's not that we never speak; we are supposed to speak the truth in love. But we don't say the first thing that pops into our minds because it might not be true, it might not be kind, or it might not be the need of the moment (Ephesians 4:29). We "taste our words before we speak them" (as Elizabeth Eliot once said). Down in verse 26 James will say of the person who doesn't bridle his/her tongue that their

“religion is worthless.” The first twelve verses of James 3 explain how destructive our words can be. Therefore, we are slow to speak.

Third, “. . . be slow to anger.” Anger isn’t always a sin. We are told that Jesus got angry on at least a couple of occasions (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 3:5). You’re likely experienced “righteous anger” when you’ve felt the way God feels about some sin or some injustice in this world. But just as God is “slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness and truth” (Exodus 34:6), James urges us to be “slow to anger.”

Notice the reason James gives in verse 20:

20 for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.

While Scripture acknowledges that there are times when we imitate God by being angry about something that angers Him, the dominant, overwhelming emphasis in Scripture concerning human anger is that our anger is most often sinful and destructive and the opposite of what the Spirit wants to manifest in our lives. [For example, “outbursts of anger” is listed in Galatians 5:20 as one of the “deeds of the flesh.”]

Our anger does not accomplish God’s righteousness/justice; it doesn’t produce what God wants in the life of the person who is angry or in the lives of the people who experience their anger. For example, if someone has sinned against you in word or deed, it’s God’s will is that that person realize what they’ve done, apologize to you and to God, and do differently next time. If you approach that person humbly and compassionately (see Galatians 6:1), they just might respond that way. If you get angry and them, they will probably not feel sorry for what they’ve done and they definitely won’t want to apologize to you because you’ve now sinned against them!

Anger is complex. And we can deceive ourselves about anger in a number of different ways. The self-deception James warns against is the kind that says, “Because my anger is justified, I am free to express it however I want. If my anger is a problem for you, deal with it.” Here in verse 20 James reminds us that like Jesus our deeper commitment is to do the will of God and accomplish **His** purposes. James says that our anger doesn’t accomplish that; therefore, we need to do differently.

Verse 21 tells us how we become people who can be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger:

21 Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.

James describes here a lifestyle of repentance: **turning from** sin and self and **turning toward** God and His ways. First, just like we might take off work clothes that are filthy and smelly, we should put aside everything that is incompatible with our life in Christ: all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness. Of course this would include the vast majority of our anger.

Second, “in humility receive the word implanted.” Instead of being arrogant and self-willed, we humble ourselves. A core aspect of humility involves being teachable. The “word implanted” implanted is a reference to the word of God “that has taken up residence within believers,” planted there by God’ (Blomberg, p. 88). In the new covenant in Christ’s blood, God writes His word on our hearts.

The challenge here is to humbly **receive** that Word, allowing God to expose our self-deception and allowing Him to teach us what it true. In this way the word “saves our souls/lives” in the sense of causing us to experience our salvation, especially in relation to putting aside anger.

For example, think about how you might “receive” 1 Corinthians 13, Paul’s explanation of *agape* love. There he writes that “love is not provoked”; if you love someone their words and actions won’t provoke you to anger. I find that when I get angry at someone, I think, “That person made me angry.” Or, “It’s their fault that I spoke in anger.” But if I receive that “love is not provoked,” I might think, “The fact that I was provoked to anger means that I don’t love that person as deeply and as fully as I should.” That simple realization provides a fruitful way forward. I could prayerfully consider why I was provoked to anger (there could be a dozen reasons) and how I can become more patient and kind toward that person. Receiving the word of God implanted - letting God write it on my heart - will save my soul from all sorts of self-deception and can teach me how to be more committed to the will of God.

Having mentioned “receiving the word implanted,” James goes on to discuss:

Self-deception concerning God’s Word. (James 1:22-25)

Notice in verse 22 how James flags this issue.

22 But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves.

In that day people didn’t have their own copy of the Hebrew Scriptures or the books of the New Testament (James was one of the first books written). Therefore, they would have gathered for worship and **heard** the word read and taught. Being a hearer of the word is essential for “receiving” it.

But James is warning against being “**merely** hearers” or “hearers **only**.” Such persons “delude themselves” by thinking that merely hearing the word is enough. Given the availability of Scripture in our day in this culture, James is warning us against merely reading the word or merely listening to a sermon or merely reading books about Scripture and about biblical topics. Again, hearing and reading the word is essential. But we delude ourselves if we think hearing is enough. We are deceived unless we become people who “do” the word (i.e., putting it into practice).

James gives an analogy in verses 23 and 24 to explain himself:

23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; 24 for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.

The NIV translates the end of verse 24, “he immediately forgets what he looks like.” It’s hard for us to imagine forgetting what our face looks like. We have mirrors all over the place and they’re made of glass that’s backed by silver or aluminum. With modern mirrors and electrical lighting, you and I might see a crystal clear image of our face several times a day. Plus we’ve all seen hundreds or thousands of photographs of ourselves.

But the first century mirrors were somewhat rare; therefore, looking into a mirror wasn’t something you did every day. And mirrors were basically a piece of metal that had been polished; therefore a mirror showed only a dim reflection of what you actually looked like. And since you’d never seen a photograph of yourself, it’s easy to imagine that you might look at your face in a mirror, walk away, and quickly forget what you look like.

That person is analogous to the person who merely hears the word but doesn’t put it into practice: the influence is **superficial and temporary**. But God wants our experience with the word to be substantive and lasting. In verse 25 James tells us how that that can be the case.

25 But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.

In contrast with looking in a mirror and quickly forgetting what we’ve seen, James describes a person who does three things in relation to the word. **First**, he “look intently” at the word (i.e., with “intense interest and attention” - McCarney, p. 122). This reflects many Scriptures such as Psalm 1 which speaks of “meditating day and night.” James calls the word “the perfect law” and “the law of liberty.” The Greek word he uses for law is equivalent to “Torah” or teaching. The “perfect law/Torah” refers to the teachings of Scripture as fulfilled in Christ; Christ brought the Torah to perfection. The “law of liberty/freedom” refers to the reality that the teachings of Scripture give us true freedom **from** sin and freedom **to do** the will of God.

Second, this person “abides by it” in the sense of continuing with it. You don’t merely hear the word and move on to other things; you don’t forget it like the guy who looked in the mirror. You continue to ponder the teachings of Christ in every area of your life.

Third, this person becomes an effectual doer; this person actually puts it into practice and therefore experiences the freedom available through the law of liberty.

We delude ourselves if we don’t do all three of these things: looking intently at the word, abiding in the word, and doing the word. We deceive ourselves into thinking we’re spiritually mature and right with God just because we read the Bible, listen to sermons, and have a greater knowledge of the Bible’s contents. Those things are good, but

Hebrews 5:14 says that “solid food is for the mature who **because of practice** have their senses trained to discern good and evil.” Unless we remain in the word and become doers of the word, we are deceiving ourselves spiritually.

James’ last comment is that “this man will be blessed in what he does.” In Scripture God’s blessing is His **favor**. He gives His grace, His help, and His presence in ways that are nourishing and life-giving.

A couple of weeks ago we saw in the first few verses of James 1 that God uses trials to refine us and produce endurance in our lives. Therefore, when we lack wisdom we should ask of God who gives generously and without reproach. In the two weeks since we heard that teaching, we have all experienced trials, right? Unless you were asleep, you were a hearer of the word. How have you responded to the trials you’ve experienced the past two weeks? Have you actually paused and asked God for wisdom? If so, you’re the person James describes as the “effectual doer” who is blessed. If not, you’re the forgetful hearer who deludes him/herself.

Self-deception concerning God-honoring religion. (James 1:26-27)

Back in verse 19 James said that we should be “slow to speak.” Here in verse 26 James says that failure to control our speech reveals something rather sobering about a person’s faith.

26 If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion is worthless.

James has us imagine someone who honestly says, “I consider myself to be religious.” To our ears “religious” sounds like “self-righteous,” but it just means pious or devout; in our day someone would say, “I consider myself to be a spiritual person.” But that person doesn’t “bridle their tongue.” Many Scriptures suggest that just as you bridle a horse to control where it goes, you should bridle your own tongue to keep it from saying destructive or false things.

James says that that person “deceives his own heart” and “that man’s religion is worthless.” You deceive your own heart if you think that you can simultaneously be God-honoring AND have an uncontrolled tongue. Those two things are incompatible. In chapter 3 James will explain that an untamed tongue is “a restless evil and full of deadly poison.” If a person’s speech is poison and deadly evil, that person’s religion is worthless (or vain; it doesn’t amount to anything); devotion to God should make a person an asset to the well-being of others instead of a liability.

In verse 27 James describes the type of fruit you should see in the life of a person whose “religion” is worth something. This isn’t a comprehensive statement about what God desires and expects; James doesn’t say anything about believing in Jesus’ death and resurrection. It’s mainly an expression of how genuine faith manifests itself in compassion toward others **and** in personal holiness.

27 Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Orphans and widows represent the helpless and the overlooked in society. In the Old Testament we're told that God is a father to the fatherless and a judge for widows (Psalm 68:5). God expects His people to have the same concerns that He has. James doesn't merely say that pure and undefiled religion involves **caring about** "orphans and widows"; he says that it involves **visiting** orphans and widows in their distress - actually doing something tangible to alleviate their distress. This statement *illustrates* his earlier teaching about being a "doer" and not merely a hearer of the word and *foreshadows* his discussion in chapter 2 about living faith actually producing works.

As you go through your days and weeks, where do you engage the distressed and vulnerable? Many of you serve such person through your work; you serve the distressed in tangible, concrete ways. Others of you alleviate distress in your neighborhoods, in the church, and in your schools as a way of life. Many of you welcome children into your homes (either temporarily or permanently). Some of you volunteer is one or more of the many organizations in Manhattan who serve the distressed in our community. That's why I got involved in BBBS years ago; when you sign up to be a Big, you immediately become an MVP in the life a kid who likely experiences some degree of distress. Caring for the distressed is a core aspect of God-honoring religion.

James also mentions "keeping oneself unstained by the world." There are many ways that we need to keep ourselves unstained by the world, but it's likely James is still thinking about bridling the tongue. The term "unstained" here in verse 27 is the same root word he uses in 3:6 when he says that the tongue defiles/**stains** the entire body. He's likely saying that God-honoring religion involves not allowing the world to dictate how we speak; we have different priorities and objectives for our words.

James gives us ways to avoid self-deception concerning our religion/spirituality. Evaluate whether or not you control your speech and whether or not you actually show compassion to the most helpless and vulnerable in your world.

Conclusion.

We've covered quite a few topics this morning. How do we avoid being "hearers only" in relation to THIS passage? One of the strategic things we can do to avoid self-deception is to engage this passage prayerfully. If you've heard what God says in this passage, it's now your turn to respond to Him. You are honest with Him about what excites you and what scares you about what He's said. You ask God to give you clarity about what He wants YOU to be a doer of the Word. You ask for the will and the power to obey.

Tonight when we gather for our Monthly Prayer Night, we're going to pray through this passage. We'll have some time for quiet reflection and individual prayer. As we'll pray with and for each other in relation to avoiding self-deception in the areas addressed by this passage. Join us if we can; we'll meet in the Venue from 5:30 to 6:30.