

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Have you ever not read the directions and really messed something up? I'll confess that I am one who rarely reads directions unless I have to. You know how a lot of men don't like to stop and ask for directions? Well I'm the same way when assembling something, or learning a new computer program, or whatever. I'm not stopping to ask for directions. I figure if I have to read directions, then the thing was made too complicated to start with. Now I admit, I've gotten myself into trouble with this kind of thinking. And it's not always been the manufacturer's fault. My own stubbornness... or laziness... has led to some messed up projects.

God in his wisdom and love has given us a set of directions. It is his Word found in the holy Bible. In his direction book, God reveals the secret to removal of sin and guilt, rescue from death and how to receive eternal life with him. Also in his book, God reveals the secret to a happy, productive, purpose-filled life right now. Some feel they don't need these directions from God. Some feel they can figure things out for themselves. But the truth is: the only way to get right with God and live in line with God's will is if God himself tells us. It is absolutely essential that we listen to God's Word and know it backwards and forwards. And it is essential that we not only know it in our heads, but put it into practice in our lives. We learn these truths today from letter of James, chapter 1 beginning and the 17th verse.

Now, there are three main areas I want to cover with you this morning: First: why is it that God's Word is so vital and essential for us? Second: why is it essential for us to not just listen to his Word, but to DO it? And third, what are some examples of putting doing God's word in our lives? In other words, you listen and you do... and what does that look like in practical terms in our daily life?

So let's start with the first. Why is God's Word so vital and essential for us? Why can't I just find my own way? Why can't I just live without God and find my own meaning and purpose and happiness in life?

Our text says: "**Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.**" Every good and perfect gift comes from our Father in heaven. He is the one who created everything. He is even the Father of the heavenly lights. This past week the first pictures were published from the refurbished Hubble space telescope. There were some spectacular, beautiful images of stars so far away we can't even comprehend it. God made them. And he made our sun and our moon. He is the creator of all and he is the source of *every* blessing and all that is good. It's not that he is one of the sources of good gifts. He is *the* source of every gift. If we are going to be happy and blessed, it will depend solely and completely on our Father in heaven.

But what do we tend to do when we are blessed with riches or honor? Do we give God the glory? No! The more we have, the more we take pride in self. And we tend to think the same way about spiritual gifts. The good we do is a heavenly gift. Yet don't we like to pat ourselves on the back for it? Are not repentance and faith heavenly gifts? Yet we want the credit. And are not forgiveness of sin, salvation and heaven the greatest spiritual gifts of all? But most people want to earn these gifts by their virtue, godliness, good works, repentance, self-improvement and good performance. What a dreadful delusion.

God's word is vital and essential because it corrects our sinful thinking. God's word shows

us plainly how incredibly far short we have fallen if we want to earn or deserve any of these gifts. What we deserve is death and hell. And it is God's Word that reveals to us the amazing truth that instead of these, God gives us good and perfect gifts.

And note that what God gives us is called a *gift*. When God blesses us in any way, it's not because we have earned it or deserved it. It's simply because in the generosity of his heart, he has determined that he will give us gifts. Whether we're talking about earthly gifts like sunlight, or crops for food, or shelter over our head... or spiritual gifts like forgiveness, life and salvation... these gifts come from our Father.

“God chose [desired, intended, planned] to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.” God chose to give us birth. This isn't talking about physical birth when we came out of our mothers. He's talking about birth through the word of truth... birth into God's kingdom. He's talking about when he brought us to faith in Jesus as our Savior. This isn't by our work or performance or effort. It's God's work and God's gift.

Jesus said to a man names Nicodemus, **“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”** We are born into this world dead. It's always heartbreaking when there is a still birth, isn't it? When a baby is born but is already dead... few things tug harder at the heart strings. And yet Jesus said to Nicodemus that really EVERY birth of a baby is a still birth. The baby is born dead... because the baby is born with a dead, sinful heart. Jesus said it is necessary to be born again... to be given new life from God and be born into his kingdom and his family.

This new life, this rebirth is something God chose... he desired it and he planned it... for you and me. It was his choice to give us new life... not our choice. And he gives us that new life **through the word of truth.** That word of truth, by the way, is also tied to baptism. And it's also tied to the Lord's Supper. In the word, baptism and communion, God makes a binding promise to us that we are alive, and not dead. We are forgiven and not guilty. We will live eternally, even though we die. In the word, baptism and communion, God creates and strengths our connection to Jesus. He is the vine, we are the branches. Our life is drawn from him and is fully dependent on him. Apart from him we are dead branches. Apart from him we can do nothing.

When God gives us life through the word of truth, he makes us **“a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”** In the Old Testament, the first fruits of the crop were given as an offering to God. The first and best was dedicated to him. Through the Word of truth, God has made us a firstfruits. He's made us the first and best in creation, dedicated to him! We are set apart from the rest of sinful humanity, and set apart from a creation spoiled by sin. We are the firstfruits and the guarantee of freedom from sin that will come for all creation when Christ returns.

Why is God's Word so vital and essential for us? God gives us eternal blessing through his word of truth. He gives us new life (a rebirth) through that word. He connects us to his Son through that word. And one more thing: through that same word of truth God also blesses us in our lives now as we obey it.

In James entire letter he drives home a vitally important point. To simply hear God's word and say “I believe it” is not enough. Anyone can mouth some words. James tells us that an authentic and living faith in God and in his Savior Son, Jesus Christ, is a faith that *does* what it *hears*. To know what God says, but not live it, is to have a dead faith... a faith that does not save. Here's what our text says: **“. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets**

what he looks like.

God wants us to hear his word *and* obey it. God wants us to live out his word in our lives. To make the point, James describes a man who looks in the mirror but then immediately forgets what he looks like. Looking in the mirror tells you something. A button on your shirt is unbuttoned. Your hair is messed up. You have a piece of broccoli in your teeth. This information enters your brain and you acknowledge these things aren't good. Wouldn't it be foolish to gather this information from the look in the mirror before you go to an important meeting, and then not act on it? You leave with your hair messed up, your button unbuttoned and the broccoli in your teeth. Foolish!

We do exactly this when we sit here on Sunday morning and hear God word of truth and nod our head in agreement and then go home and for six days we live our lives as if God's Word were of no practical benefit for us and no impact or meaning in our daily life. Friends, may this never be!

“But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.”

Has the thought ever crossed your mind that following God's laws are restrictive and so very not fun. Have you ever been tempted to think, “The unbelievers go and live and party as they want. They don't seem to suffer from any guilt. They are free to do as they wish. But I, a Christian, am not free. I must obey God and his restrictive rules.” We sometimes may think that, but it's a lie. James describes God's commands as **“the perfect law that gives freedom.”** He wants us to know that living our lives within the boundaries God has set is good and blessed. Within those boundaries we enjoy true freedom. We will be truly blessed by God living within those boundaries, and life will be much more enjoyable and fun.

James gives us a few examples in our text of how our lives will look different when we put God's word into practice in our lives. He says, **“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.”** A true love for our neighbor will mean we listen attentively when someone speaks to us, and be sure we understand them before we fire back our response. It also means we will not quickly get angry but will keep our temper in check. When we lose our temper, it doesn't take long to rack up a whole host of sins, does it.

Another example of doing and not just listening: **“Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”** Is there moral filth in your life? There is evil all around us... are you in any way part of it?

James also says: **“If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.”** So many sins are committed by what we say. Carpenters live by the saying, “Measure twice, cut once.” Making the wrong cut can't be undone. Better to measure twice before cutting. Likewise, it's usually beneficial for us to think twice before we open our mouths. It often impossible to take back what is said once it has escaped our lips. Is what we're going to say constructive or destructive? Am I speaking the truth? Can I say it with love? Keep a tight rein on the tongue.

And a final example from our reading: **“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”** We clearly see the person who listens to God's word and does it has a life that is changed and different. It is a life that is better and blessed.

CONCLUSION: Only God's pure word of truth can change lives in such ways. By the way, that's why the warning in our other lessons about adding or subtracting or changing God's word. If we change it, it is no longer the power of God for salvation. It is an entirely different substance, weak and useless.

God's word of truth, pure and unchanged, reveals who we really are. It reveals who God really is and what he's done for us. It reveals a way of living that lines up with God's will. Living that way makes him happy. It makes us happy. He gets the honor and glory he deserves! So, brothers and sisters, God has given us his life-changing word of truth. Treasure it above all else. Hear it. Learn it. And please, dear friends, please... *do* it.

How will you take God's truth that you have heard today and do it? If you really take this message to heart, you will hold his Word in highest regard. How will that change what you do this week? You heard from his word that every good and perfect gift comes from God. He has forgiven you and given you life eternal. How will that change your attitude and perspective every minute of every day this week? He has given you some specific examples of what it means to live in obedience to God... to live in the freedom of God's law. Watching your tongue. Listening instead of always doing the talking. Watching your temper. Getting rid of moral filth. Helping provide for those who are unable to care for themselves. Keeping yourselves from being polluted by the world. You've heard it. You've looked hard into the mirror. Will you forget? Or will you act on God's word that you have heard today? Go and do, for **"God chose to give us birth through the word of truth."** Amen