Hear and Do the Word

Read James 1:19-27

Key verse: “You must be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves” (James 1:22).

Three friends decided to go deer hunting together: a lawyer, a doctor, and a preacher. As they were walking, along came a big buck. The three men all shot at the same time. The buck dropped dead, and the three men ran to it. They soon realized they had a problem—they could not tell who had actually killed the deer.

While they were hotly debating the issue, a game warden drove up and asked what the problem was. The doctor told him that they were debating who had killed the deer. The game warden looked closely at the deer, then said confidently, “The preacher shot the buck!”

“How can you tell?” asked the lawyer.

“Easy,” replied the game warden. “The bullet went in one ear and out the other.”

The story makes some gentle fun of us preachers. It also illustrates a more serious challenge for all believers. As we hear or read God’s Word, do we allow it to transform us? Or do we allow the Word to go in one ear and out the other?

James 1:22 gets to the heart of this issue with these words: “You must be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves.”

One of the world’s greatest needs today is for people of faith to live faithfully, not just hearing the Word or talking the Word, but doing the Word. What are the marks of this kind of authentic Christianity? We find several in this passage:

1. One mark of an authentic Christian is a Spirit-controlled tongue. “If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless” (James 1:26).

In his book Sabbath Time, Tilden Edwards tells about a family with teenage children who decided, as part of their Sabbath commitments, that they would not criticize each other on Sundays. As the months went on and they kept
this commitment, they realized more and more of their children’s friends were coming over on Sundays just to hang around. No one in the family had talked about this commitment, but somehow other teenagers knew this home was a good place to be.

Jesus said, “Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks.” If the heart is right with God, the tongue will show it.

2. A second mark of an authentic Christian is a heart for hurting people. “True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows....” (James 1:27a). In the world of the New Testament, “orphans and widows” typified those people who were most vulnerable and needy. In our day, the list might include the poor, the grieving, the hurting.

Now as in the first century, what we do for those around us who are hurting will be a sign to the watching world of whether or not our faith is real. Someone wrote:

“I was hungry, and you formed a humanities club and discussed my hunger. I was imprisoned and you crept off quietly to your chapel and prayed for my release. I was naked, and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance. I was sick, and you knelt and thanked God for your health. I was homeless, and you preached to me the spiritual shelter of the love of God. I was lonely, and you left me alone so you could go pray for me. You seem so holy, so close to God, but I am still very hungry, and lonely, and cold.”

3. A third mark of an authentic Christian is a lifestyle of personal holiness. “True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their difficulties and to keep the world from contaminating us” (James 1:27, italics mine).

A Gallup survey compared the behavior of churched and un-churched Americans in a variety of categories. The survey found, “little difference in the ethical views and behavior of the churched and un-churched.” Both groups, in nearly equal percentages, called in sick when they weren’t, lied on their resumes, and cheated on their tax deductions.

The crying need of our world is for people of faith to live faithfully. “You must be doers of the word and not only hearers.” May God give us the grace to be authentic Christians.

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