

James 1:22-27

Whenever we're **looking** for something, we always want it to be the **best**. Why is that? It's because we don't want to **settle** for **mediocrity** - whether it's in our **elected officials**, our **economy**, our **military**, or even in our **laundry soap**. We **Aim For The Best** - for **wise and godly leaders**, for **high productivity**, for **military strength**, and for **clean, bright clothes**. And why **not** go for the **best**? If America really is the **greatest** nation on earth, with an abundance of **resources**, high **ideals**, and **educated** citizens, then certainly the **best** shouldn't be out of our reach.

That's true for our **worship life** as well. Why should we **settle** for attending **worship** services just once a month? Why should we **pray** only when there's a **problem** in our life? Why should we settle for **getting by** with doing as little as possible, when we could **stretch** ourselves into doing **more** for the Lord and His kingdom? Why not be the **best** Christians that we can be? We have a **wonderful** Savior - a Savior who has conquered **sin** and **death** for us - a Savior who **rose** from the dead, and ascended into **heaven** to prepare a **place** for us - a Savior who **rules** over the entire **universe** for the good of His **Church**. And best of all, Jesus has given us the gift of the **Holy Spirit** - the Spirit who dwells in our **hearts** - the Spirit to whom we **pray** - and the Spirit who promises to **answer** all of our prayers. Certainly all of these **blessings** deserve **our best** response.

James - a **brother** of the Lord Jesus Himself, and also the **leader** of the Christian church in **Jerusalem**, wrote the words of our sermon text for today - words which take a look at our **superficial** way of living, and which **challenge** us to **Aim For The Best**. Right off the bat that means, don't merely **hear** God's Word, but **do** what it says.

One of the problems that plagues us as Christians is that we don't go **far enough** with God's Word. We **hear** the Word of God on a regular basis, but all too often it just gets **stuck** there - or **worse** than that, it just comes **in one ear**, and goes **out the other**. What we really **need** is to have that Word driven from our **ears** into our **hearts** and **lives**. James writes, "*Be people who **do** what the word says, not people who only **hear** it.*"

When we only **hear** the Word of God and fail to **live** it, we **deceive** ourselves into thinking that we're **honoring** God and His Word. In our text, James says that we're like the man who "*carefully looks at his own natural face in a **mirror**. Indeed, he carefully **looks** at himself; then, he goes away and immediately*

forgets what he looked like.” That’s just a **waste of time**, isn’t it? Why wouldn’t we **wash** our face, or **comb** our hair, or **fix** whatever it is that needs fixing. After we’ve **seen** where the **problems** are, the next logical step would be to **do something** about them. James uses that same picture for people who only **hear** God’s Word. God’s Word shows them the **problems** which exist in their lives, but they don’t bother to **change** anything. They **hear** the Word tell them to give **thanks** to the Lord, but days and weeks and even months go by, **without** them offering any prayers of **thanks** to God. They **hear** the Word tell them to **forgive** those who have sinned against them, but they continue to hold **grudges**, and **refuse** to offer forgiveness. They **hear** the Word pointing out their **sins** and the **condemnation** they deserve **because** of them, but they aren’t willing to **give up** any of those sins. They don’t **repent** - they don’t make **amends** - and in reality they’re no different than the self-righteous **Pharisees** to whom John the Baptist said, *“Already the **axe** is ready to strike the **root** of the trees. So every tree that does not produce **good fruit** is **cut down** and thrown into the **fire**.”*

Could that be **us too**? Let’s take a look at **our** hearing of God’s Word. Do we only hear it as a mere **formality**, because we’re **supposed** to hear God’s Word? Or do we let it **penetrate** our hearts to produce **repentance**, and to guide our **conduct**? Do we quickly **forget** what we’ve heard as soon as the worship service is over? Or do we take what we’ve heard **home** with us and **apply** it to our daily **lives**, so that we will not only be **hearers**, but also **doers** of the Word?

James gives us some wonderful **encouragement** in our text. He writes, *“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.”* James says that the Law of God gives **freedom**. It points out our **sins** - sins which have the potential to **crush** us, and to bring us **eternal death**. In this way God’s Law **kills** our pride, along with any hope of saving **ourselves** through **our** good works. We need to see how **desperate** we are, so we will also see our need for the **Gospel**, and God’s promise of a **Savior**. **Jesus** was the one who **chose** to be **crushed** for **our** iniquities. On the **cross** He suffered the punishment of **hell** in **our** place. His **resurrection** from the dead on the third day, assures us that His sacrifice **cancelled** the debt we owed because of our sins. God’s Word - the combination of **Law** and **Gospel** - gives **freedom**. It announces, *“There is now **no condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus”* - freeing us **from** the weight of **sin** and the fear of **death**; and freeing us to **love God**, to live in **peace** with Him, and to see His commandments as **blessings**, instead of **burdens**. God’s Word **also** frees us to approach God boldly in **prayer** as His dear children.

These **freedoms** are the **blessings** which God's Word promises to give to those who **look intently** into the Word, and are **doers** of it. These are freedoms which we **all** want to receive as we **Aim For The Best** in our lives. When we believe the **Good News** that Jesus is our **Savior**, and put His Word into **practice**; we can have a quiet **conscience**, the **certainty** of God's **love** for us, constant reminders of our **redemption**, and the **joy** of living **for** and serving **Jesus** with our lives. We can have genuine **love** for one another, and we can live in **harmony** with the people around us. **Aim For The Best**. Don't just be **hearers** of God's Word, be **doers** of it, and we will be **blessed**.

The **next** words of our text urge us to make sure that the way we live our lives is **pure** and **faultless**. James writes, "*If anyone considers himself to be **religious** but **deceives** his own heart because he does not bridle his **tongue**, this person's religion is **worthless**.*" James uses the terms **religious** and **religion** to refer to the way we **live** our lives and **show** our faith. When people aren't **willing** or **able** to bridle their **tongue**, and end up - speaking words in **anger**, or **recklessly** voicing their opinion, or running down the reputation of others with **gossip**, or salting their speech with **vulgarity**, or talking **disrespectfully** to parents and others in authority - those people are **deceiving** themselves, and their religion is **worthless**.

We always want to **Aim For The Best** in the way we speak. Jesus gave us the gift of the **Holy Spirit** so we can use our tongues to give **glory to God**. Through the Spirit we can get **rid** of all those forms of **evil** speech. Instead, we can call God our **Father**, and we can tell others about His kind and forgiving **heart**.

But there's still **more**. James **continues** his words on Christian living by saying, "*Religion that is **pure** and **undefiled** in the sight of God the Father is **this**: to take care of **orphans** and **widows** in their affliction and to keep oneself **unstained** by the world.*" On the sixth day of creation God created the **family** when He created **Eve** and brought her to Adam. Husband and wife joined together in **marriage** was the **foundation** for all society. The gift of **children** would come through marriage, and the needs of those children would be **provided** in the **family**. But what would **happen** to a woman and her children when her husband **died**? In those days there were very few opportunities for women to **work** outside the home to **provide** for themselves and their children. There was no government **welfare system** - no **Aid for Dependent Children**. So, God called on **His** people - the **Church** - to look after orphans and widows. There is still **much work** for us to do on that front even **today**. Recent statistics put the number of children in foster care in the United States alone at 443,000, with over 123,000 of them waiting to be adopted.

When Jesus left this earth and ascended into heaven, He didn't leave **us** as **orphans**. He gave us His **Holy Spirit** to **comfort** us in all our troubles. Jesus has made us into a family of **believers** - brothers and sisters who will **look after** each other. And as we **do** that Jesus says, "*Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.*" Let's **Aim For The Best** as we reach out with the love of Jesus to **all people** who need **love** and **protection** - helping to provide for their **physical needs**, but most important of all, sharing with them the Good News of **salvation** through **Jesus**.

And let's not forget what James added at the very **end** of today's text, "*Keep oneself **unstained** by the world.*" The **world** is filled with **evil**. It's populated with people who don't follow **Jesus**, and who don't **care** about His **Word**. But we know that the blood which Jesus shed on the cross has **cleansed** us from **all** of our sins. The Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to **Titus**, "*(Christ) gave **himself** for us, to **redeem** us from all lawlessness and to **purify** for himself a people who are his own **chosen** people, eager to do **good works**.*" We live **in** this world, but are not **of** this world. We belong to **Jesus**. So, may we always set our hearts and minds on things **above** - on our dear Lord **Jesus** - so that we keep ourselves from being **unstained** by the world.

Let's never settle for **mediocrity** in our Christianity, but instead, **Aim For The Best**. We've already **received** the best in Jesus Christ our **Savior**, who offered His **perfect life** to pay for our sins, who rose from the dead to assure us of His **victory** over death and the Devil, and who ascended into heaven to prepare a **place** for **each** of us. May we **gladly** and **willingly** hear the Word of God, and **do** what it says, as we **Aim For The Best** in the way we live our lives as Christians. Amen.