

Going Deeper...

The Curse of Textual Christianity

October 25, 2006

In typical James-type fashion we're all separated into one of two categories in the verses that follow (verses 22-25). This part of what James has to say is part "B", if you will, to the statements in verses 19-21. In other words, the same topic is still under discussion—he's just not finished discussing it.

By way of review...

- The context of the entire chapter is the necessity for us to react to the various kinds of tests and trials life with spiritual maturity.
- The relational context between the entire chapter and verses 19-25 is an understanding that personal anger, losing our temper, & etc., will always interrupt that process and is never exemplary of spiritual maturity.
- The immediate context is the vast and glaring difference between "knowing" these truths and "living" them.

James 1:22-25

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵But 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.

It is the most well-deserved criticism of the Christian community in existence—that of hypocrisy.

- We are far too often long on talk and short on walk.
- There is too often more in the show window than there is in the store room.
- We are often more pretenders of our faith than we are contenders for it.
- I call it Textual Christianity...
- Stated bluntly...

Textual Christianity is when we know more than we do.

ILLUSTRATION

Years ago I attended a spiritual renewal week for pastors. One of the speakers was named Manley Beasley, and he had our attention. He was teaching us from the Scripture regarding the need for personal holiness and unwavering faith in God that would always result in immediate obedience to the teachings of the Bible... Because of who he was his words meant far more than they would have otherwise...because we all knew that he not only taught these things, but he believed them and lived them.

Half way through his last session he stopped. He closed his Bible, looked out at us and said, "I don't see any reason to tell you any more. I've already told you more than you're going to do," and quietly left the rostrum and sat down. To me it was a stark reminder of how easy it is, and how acceptable it is, to confuse *knowing* with *doing*.

ILLUSTRATION

I have a colleague that's read everything Rick Warren and Bill Hybels have ever written about leadership and church building. He's been to every seminar, conference and workshop that Saddleback and Willowcreek offer, some of them numerous times. He can talk up a storm about it...but he's never done any of it. He really does consider himself to be quite the accomplished leader. But if you aren't actually doing anything about what you learn, what's the benefit? There is no benefit.

But neither is it neutral. It actually makes matters worse. Before you learn something you exist in ignorance. But once you know a new level of accountability exists that actually makes you responsible and answerable for what you know whether you do it or not.

Failure at this level is at the very heart of every single act of hypocrisy that's ever been committed.

ILLUSTRATION

A few weeks ago I watched a program about Jack Abramoff, disgraced Washington lobbyist, who has admitted to a great deal of illegal political activity while working, ostensibly, to further his political party's agenda. It's beginning to look like the real goal had a lot more to do with personal wealth, and all that goes with it, for him and for many others that were riding high on his coat tails.

I'm not shocked at disclosures of corruption in politics at all. What disturbs me most is the hard connection between Jack Abramoff, corrupt Jewish lobbyist, and the high level leadership of the conservative Christian community, many of whom are being shown to be every bit as corrupt and hungry for money and power as he is...maybe more so, which, according to Chuck Colson, when combined with our earnest desire to believe that someone in control shares our values and our political naiveté, is what makes the Christian community so easy to manipulate by politicians as a voting sector.

But there's more to it than that. We can't blame our hypocrisy on anyone else...ever. If I've been misled, it's because I *took the bait* because it appealed to my own *desire to do wrong* (verse 14).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. As you think about your own decisions of the past two days (things thought, said, and done), would your family, friends or coworkers be more likely to describe you as:

- a. A spiritually mature Christian—one that constantly lives what he believes?
 - b. A developing Christian—one that's earnestly progressing toward what he believes?
 - c. A textual Christian—one whose life doesn't appear to be much effected by what he believes?
2. What might it be that exists within the Christian community that makes Textual Christianity, a.k.a., rank hypocrisy, acceptable as normal?
 3. What can you think of that would help the Christian community expose Textual Christianity for the sham it is and address the issue in such a way as to persuade men to get on board?

I. Listening is both necessary & good (verse 19), but it is also insufficient.

James 1:22a

Do not merely listen to the word...

The term used in verse 22 was an often used word to describe a classification of people who are best described with this passage:

Acts 17:16-21

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸A group of Epicurean¹ and Stoic² philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?" ²⁰You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." ²¹(All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

Ron Dunn was a great friend of mine, and I learned an awfully lot from him. We were at a conference together when, following tons of study, prayer, preparation and delivery of biblically balanced messages about living your faith in a world that's dying to see someone do it, some guy came up and asked him one of these wild, weird, out of

¹ Followers of the philosopher Epicurus, 341-270 B.C., who viewed any and all "truth" as an ultimately unknowable and unattainable entity, therefore declared the only possible meaning that life can have for human beings is the pursuit of personal pleasure wherever it may be found.

² Followers of the philosopher Zeno, 336-264 B.C., who taught that truth is fully knowable and discoverable through the vehicle of human sufficiency but only for those willing to endure life through rigid self-repression—the full and total absence of any personal pleasure.

left field kind of questions—I don't remember the question but it was in the vein of, *Do you think the clay feet of Daniel's vision really represent the Persian Kingdom?* Ron said something to him—again I don't remember what—then said to me; *Some people get their kicks at Honky Tonks and some people get 'em at church.*

- I know people, and I bet you do too, that will...
 - Drive across three states to attend a seminar on spiritual gifts;
 - Take a week's vacation to hear some television pastor expound on prophecy;
 - Spend their entire Christmas bonus on a new set of commentaries;
 - Or travel half-way across the country on a mission trip.

- But these very same people won't...
 - Walk across the street to meet a new neighbor;
 - Let the fact that Jesus is coming again make any difference in how they behave a work;
 - Take what they read in their commentaries and apply it to daily life;
 - Or behave like a godly man in the privacy of their own home for the sake and good of their own children.

II. Listening can be deceptive.

James 1:22b

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves.

I think this is the answer to the question I asked earlier, *what is it that makes this kind of behavior acceptable among Christians?* We've been deceived, tricked, hoodwinked, bamboozled into thinking it's okay. It's not okay. It's wrong. It's sin. And it has consequences. *Man, the devil is at it again...* Maybe. Maybe not.

It's nice to have someone to blame it on, but the way James constructs this sentence is essentially saying, *don't deceive yourselves...* It's a present deponent middle participle indicating that when we settle for Textual Christianity we're playing two roles in the dance of deception; we are both the deceived and the deceiver.

In other words, don't blame this one on the devil; this one's all you baby. As long as you're living here, the devil doesn't need to mess with you...you're already deceived and behaving like he wants you to.

ILLUSTRATION

Textual Christians are like a guy that gets up in the morning, goes into his bathroom and looks at himself in the mirror. Here's what he sees. He sees a guy that needs a shower, a shampoo, and a shave; a guy that needs to brush his teeth, comb his hair and put on some clean clothes.

But the physical parallel to James' complaint against Christians that *know* more than we *do*, is this guy turns around, gets in his car and goes to work. He's going to look bad, and smell bad all day long... Get the point?
When you *know* more than you *do*...it stinks... (verses 23-24)

III. The Solution to Textualism...Listen and Learn, then Do What You Know To Do.

James 1:22, 25

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

²⁵But 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.

Herein lies the unclaimed, unrecognized, unrealized, untapped, unappreciated, untold blessedness of the Christian faith, and here only, and so very few have learned the unhidden secret.

- Do what you know you're supposed to do—it's just that simple.
 - Do what's right, because it's right...
 - Regardless of the personal cost to you...
 - Regardless of what anyone else does or says...
 - Regardless of whether anyone else knows you're doing it or ever will know you're doing it...
 - Do it habitually and humbly...
 - And yours will be a life blessed by all the power of heaven.

- And...it isn't a question of whether or not we know what's right...
 - Really it isn't, and it never has been.
 - I've long advocated that...

**Our greatest problem as Christians isn't that we don't know the will of God.
It's that we know it and don't like it...**

**It isn't that the Christian life has been tried and found wanting.
It's that it's been found hard and not tried...**

ILLUSTRATION

James shows us how to begin the process that will enable us to transform from hypocrite to effective Christ-follower. It's illustrated in verses 23 & 25 where both verses translate a Greek word into English the word *look*.

In verse 23 the guy is *looking* (*katanounti*, to consider attentively, look at, or take note of) in a mirror and sees his face. Seeing is the point. No more is at stake. It's like me looking at all the babies in the nursery last Sunday morning.

In verse 25 a second guy is *looking intently* (*parakupsas*, to bend down in order to discover with a view toward reform) into the things of God. It's like me looking

for my grandson in the nursery last Sunday morning with the firm intention of picking him up and doing the kind of things granddads do. The difference is immense. The level of interest is immense. And the impact on everyone involved is immense.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does your goal, or purpose, of attending these Wednesday morning studies include the desire for personal repentance and reformation? Yes No
2. While none of us is a perfect example of a spiritually mature Christian would you categorize yourself overall as a person that is more likely to attend a Bible study with a goal toward “gathering information” or a goal toward “life transformation?”
3. Which scenario best describes the majority of your spiritual battles, struggles, trials, tests, & etc.?
 - a. A genuine lack of knowledge regarding what you should do.
 - b. A general lack of willingness to do what you already know you should do?
4. What do you think would convince men like us to stop leaving God’s untold blessings as the unclaimed trophies, and us as the willing victims of our textual approach to our faith?

Conclusion

The difference James wants us to understand and correct is the difference between...

- Walking casually through a great museum and taking note of how beautiful the paintings and sculptures are, and standing before those pieces, studying those pieces in minute detail because you want to learn how to paint or sculpt;
- Reading a menu and eating a meal;
- Having a prescription and taking your medicine;
- Reading a man and taking a trip;
- Hearing the Word of God and doing what it says.