

## IN ONE EAR AND OUT THE OTHER

### JAMES 1 v 22-24

**Do not deceive yourselves by just listening to his word; instead, put it into practice. If you listen to the word, but do not put it into practice you are like people who look and see themselves as they are.**

**They take a good look at themselves and then go away and at once forget what they look like.**

We are all familiar with the expression ‘In one ear and out the other’. When it is spoken to a person it is not very complimentary. The expression was originally a proverb in John Heywood’s 1,546 collection. It conjures up a graphic image of sound travelling through one’s head. It means something that is spoken by one person to another is forgotten, essentially ignored or dismissed almost immediately after being heard. When our first child Christopher was a toddler, I remember my wife Carolyn giving me clear instructions; “Go upstairs and get Christopher’s slippers”. As an obedient husband I did what I was told. When I came downstairs, I was asked; “Have you got Christopher’s slippers?” Sheepishly I had to admit that I had forgotten. Then I was greeted with words spoken in rather harsh tones; “You have a memory like a sieve. Everything I say to you goes in one ear and out the other”. I’m sure your wife or husband, or some other member of your family, has used this expression to describe you on occasions. We all have this problem to some extent. We hear a clear instruction given to us, but we forget to carry it out. It’s a case of going in one ear and out the other.

James was aware that this was a problem with some of the Christians he was addressing in his letter; James 1 v 22. These Christians were people who were more than happy to listen to the word i.e. to the teaching of the Old Testament and the message about Jesus, but who immediately went away without it having affected them very much, if at all.

In essence what James is saying is that however important it is to give mental assent to the word of God, it has not been truly received until it is put into practice. ‘Hearing’ the word is important and necessary. It would be a complete misunderstanding to think that James is against listening to the word. What James is strenuously opposing is any hearing of the word that does not then lead to doing. If the word goes in one ear and out the other, it achieves nothing. James was aligning himself with a widespread Jewish belief among the rabbis of his day which was; *“Not the expounding of the law is the chief thing, but the doing of it”*. James’ concern is in line with Jesus’ teaching Luke 11 v 28; *“Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it”*. Jesus’s preaching is filled with the overwhelming, amazing wonder of God’s sovereign grace reaching down to sinful people. His preaching also emphasises a call to radical obedience which is the necessary human response to God’s grace. Both the gracious initiative of God and the grateful response of people are part and parcel of the gospel. The word, through which we are born into new life, James 1 v 18, and which becomes implanted in us, James 1 v 21, is a word that has to be put into practice. Douglas Moo wrote; **“Those who fail to do the word, who are hearers only, are guilty of a dangerous and potentially fatal self-delusion. If the gospel, by nature, contains both saving power and summons to obedience,**

**those who relate to only one have not truly embraced the gospel**". If for people, the word goes in one ear and out the other, they are deceiving themselves. Some people think that they have a relationship with God because they regularly attend church, read the bible or go to bible studies. But if their hearing is not accompanied by obedience, then it calls into question what the standing of their relationship with God is. John Calvin said; **"Obedience is the mother of true knowledge of God"**.

This presents a challenge to us. We hear the bible read and explained many times in church. What difference does it all make to the way we live? The word that we hear must be lived out. There is no value in listening to excellent sermons if all that we hear goes in one ear and out the other.

To expand on his point James uses an interesting illustration; v 23 & 24. In James' day there were no photographs. Hardly anyone had their portrait painted. Not many people possessed mirrors either. Ancient mirrors were made, not of glass, but of highly polished metal. The quality, while not great, was adequate to enable a people to catch sight of their appearance. Sometimes they quickly forgot what they looked like. In our modern day we have high quality mirrors. We have several in our homes. They serve as a constant reminder of what we really look like. If we notice that our hair is dishevelled or that there are marks on our face, we can comb our hair or remove the marks. Sometimes if we are in a hurry, we forget to do this or choose to ignore what we have seen in the mirror.

That's what it's like, says James, for some people when they hear God's word. They give it a quick glance and say; "Oh, yes, that's very interesting and helpful", but then they forget it straight away and carry on as before. As we hear God's word either by reading the bible or listening to a sermon, we are given clear instructions about how to live the Christian life. We can see what is wrong in our lives and what we need to do to put things right. If we are only hearers, we will remain as we are. May we not be the kind of Christians who, when we hear the word of God, it's a case of going in one ear and out the other. May God's word go into both ears and change the way we live.