

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 29 August 2022

God of abundant love, you delight us with your grace—grace expressed in the beauty of our world. God of truth and light, you challenge us to live faithful lives to turn away from evil, to follow your ways, to serve your people. May your Word of truth grow within us this day, that we may bring forth peace. Amen.

James 1:17-27

### ***Hearers vs Doers***

Some of you may remember that I led a kimchi workshop at Tairawhiti Environment centre about a month ago. People enjoyed the kimchi workshop, and it was a happy event. But at that time, I wondered what made them come to the workshop as they could easily have found recipes on the internet. Then I realized that a few things made the workshop different from written recipes or YouTube videos. First, in the workshop, there was a two-way interaction. People could ask questions and I answered them instantly. Second, people were able to smell some of the ingredients and taste the fermented kimchi and the fresh kimchi. Recipes may give us information about kimchi, but not first-hand experience. We'll explore the similar theme in James 1:17-27 with three points: the role of hearing the Word of God in our faith, the meaning of becoming doers, and the life of church as both – hearers and doers.

### ***Hearers of the Word of God***

Hearing the Word of God is the first step when it comes to faith. As Paul said, unless we hear someone to proclaim the good news, we may not know what it is about.<sup>1</sup> Hearing the Word involves not only through words but also seeing as well. In Jesus' ministry, his disciples and the crowd heard him when Jesus proclaimed God's kingdom. Jesus also performed miracles as part of proclamation. He healed the sick, fed five thousand, and raised the dead. Yet, only a few people became believers among those who heard him. For the majority, Jesus was merely another miracle worker. His words and wonderful work soon disappeared from their minds and hearts. Jesus delivered them the true life in God, but it didn't stay in them as if they looked at themselves in a mirror, but soon they would forget what they were like.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 10:17 - So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the Word of Christ.

<sup>2</sup> James 1:23-24

They were just spectators who were not able to taste Jesus - the Word of God. Their knowledge of the law had prevented them from recognising the perfect living law before their eyes. Before Jesus came, the only law people knew was that the Mosaic Law. There were 613 commandments prescribed in great detail exactly what a person could and could not do. The Talmud, which was like the commentary of the law by rabbis, had thousands of more rules. Even Biblical scholars had problems remembering all the rules. The ordinary person, even if literate, had little access to the Biblical text and could have only a vague idea when they had transgressed the law. As such, it was impossible to keep the law perfectly. Then Jesus came to them to 'taste' the living Word through his words and deeds. The mirror metaphor tells us that the image that they looked at in a mirror was the image of the true person in them. Since they were not the source of the image, despite their hearing of Jesus, they soon forgot about it. It also happened to the believers, but God had a plan for them that is the church.

### ***Doers of the Word of God***

According to James, believers in the early church are the 'first fruits of (God's) creatures.'<sup>3</sup> God required the Israelites to bring their first fruits as an offering to God.<sup>4</sup> The idea behind the first fruits was that the first fruits of any harvest are especially valuable because they represent something that will be completed in God's time. When the believers saw the 'perfect law,' it differed from the Mosaic Law as it was 'the perfect law of freedom.' Christ set us free by subjecting us to the rule of grace rather than the rule of law. He, too, gave us the love commandments,<sup>5</sup> which were different from the Mosaic law. Now, we are able to love our neighbour as ourselves because we are under the full of grace<sup>6</sup> and made whole in Christ. The first fruits in the faith of Christ are not only precious to God. They are also the beginning of a great harvest as the church will spread the good news of Jesus to every corner of the world. The believers who used to be hearers are able to be doers as the church.

### ***The church – Doers as well as hearers of the Word***

In v23, it reads, "For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror." In common with other ancient writers, biblical writers refer

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<sup>3</sup> James 1:18

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 23:19; Leviticus 23:9-10; Numbers 15:17-21; Deuteronomy 18:4; 2 Chronicles 31:5; Nehemiah 10:35

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 22:37-40

<sup>6</sup> John 1:14

to the temporary or insufficient nature of the mirror.<sup>7</sup> What is seen in a mirror must be viewed again and again because the impression is gone as soon as one looks away. By contrast, the ‘perfect law, the law of liberty,’ enables people to live with what they see and live out what they believe. The imperative of caring for orphans and widows provides a concrete example of this call to integrate hearing and doing. Here when a person is living in the perfect law, they have got the living mirror in themselves. We can see an example in the story of the magic mirror in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

As heard, the evil queen was furious when the magic mirror replied that Snow White was thousand times more lovely, fair and beautiful than her. The question was why the evil queen got angry even though the magic mirror told her the truth. Here we find a few interesting things. First, the evil queen did know that the magic mirror always told her the truth. Second, she needed the mirror whenever she wanted to hear the truth. Third, the image she saw in the mirror was not hers, but Snow White’s – the true beauty. She was unhappy with the truth, as it wasn’t what she wanted to hear. She went out to eliminate the truth. Meanwhile, Snow White didn’t need a magic mirror as she herself exudes the truth. Later, the truth was identified by the Seven Dwarfs but also by the prince.

Merely listening to the Word of God without putting it into effect may make us hearers who have not benefited from God’s commands. We may remain half-hearted, unstable semi-believers as if spectators of food programs may not know the real taste of the food. The Word that we received from Jesus Christ becomes our identity and our self-image. In turn, it serves others through us. The author of James emphasizes that those who both hear and act on the gospel ‘will be blessed in their doing.’ We may often wish to make sure that faith is ‘worth something’ like any other commodity. As such, we would resort to calculating (privately if not publicly) the rewards we may receive because of our belief or action. If it is the case, we are like the queen who had to ask the magic mirror daily to see the truth. Once for all, in the letter of James, it is assured that the reward is the blessing of God that comes in the action itself, nothing more or less. May God help us live as doers and hearers of the Word of God so that people will be able to taste the perfect living Word through and in us. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12 - For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.