

How to Benefit from the Bible

Developing a Faith that Works, Part 3

James 1:16-27

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 18 June 2006

Introduction

Have you seen the film, *A Beautiful Mind*? It's an extraordinary account of the life of John Nash, one of the most brilliant minds in the twentieth century. The word *genius* gets thrown around pretty loosely, but in his case it was an understatement. His theories on the dynamics of human conflict would win him the Noble Prize. He did this work at an age when most of us are still trying to figure out how to move away from Mum and Dad. Before he was out of his twenties he was a distinguished professor at MIT.

But at the height of his career, John Nash suffered a breakdown. He interrupted a lecture to announce he was on the cover of *Life* magazine distinguished as the pope. He claimed foreign governments were communicating with him through the media, and he turned down a prestigious post at the University of Chicago because, he said, he was about to be named Emperor of Antarctica. In the film, *A Beautiful Mind*, you see the characters and hear the voices that exist only in his head, unconnected from reality. These deceiving voices made him feel important, as if he were the centre of the universe. And they played on his darkest fears. When he listened to them, they destroyed his relationships, distorted his perceptions, made him obsessive and fearful. They led to death.

What makes the story of John Nash so remarkable is that he was actually able to learn, over time, how to distinguish the voices, to find out which ones were false and which ones were true. As he listened to the true voices, and not the deceiving ones, his mind was renewed, his life transformed. He speaks at one point in the film about how in a way his battle is one that we all share. "I'm not so different from you," he says to his friend. "We all hear voices. We just have to decide which ones we are going to listen to."

Turn with me to James 1:16-27 (p. 1172). When we read this passage earlier did you notice the three-fold warning against deception? Three times James says "Don't be deceived," or "Don't deceive yourselves." Verse 16: "Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above..." Verse 22: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves." Verse 26: "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself." So James evidently thinks that we human beings are all prone to deception, and not least in spiritual matters. The obvious question is: How do you avoid being deceived? How do we avoid deceiving ourselves? According to James the answer – the only antidote to deception – is the Word of God. Three times in this passage he refers to "the word." Verse 18: God "chose to give us birth through the word of truth." Verse 21: "humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you." Verse 22: "Do not merely listen to the word..." So it's by paying attention to the word of God, "the word of truth" – the Bible – that we can avoid the trap of self-deception. In this passage James outlines how we are to pay proper attention to the word. There are three stages.

Attentive listening (1:19-20)

First of all, there needs to be an attentive listening to the word. Verse 19: "My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry..." Our natural tendency as human beings is to be quick to speak. We're quick to express our opinions. We're quick to criticise. We're quick to take up an offence, without first listening attentively, gathering all the facts, understanding the other person's position. The ancient writer Zeno said, "We have two ears and only one mouth in order that we might listen more and speak less." I was thinking about it this week. If we listened more and spoke less, so that we really understood each other, how much better – and more harmonious – our relationships would be within our families, our communities, our businesses, our churches.

If this is true in our relationships with each other, it's especially true in the context here of our relationship with God. He wants to speak to us, meet with us, through his word. Throughout the centuries Christians have told many stories of how they met God through the pages of the Bible. Augustine, one of the early church's greatest theologians tells of how he was sitting under a fig tree and he heard a voice, "Take it and read. Take it and read." It seemed clear to him that this was the voice of God telling him to pick up the Bible. So he did. And when he had read a brief section from Paul's letter to the Romans, Augustine said: "I had no wish to read further; there was no need to ... it was as though my heart was filled with a light of confidence and all the shadows of doubt

were swept away." It still happens today. A few days back I was reading Isaiah 40. And, if the truth be known, I guess I had been feeling a bit tired, a bit discouraged, a bit battered. And as I read these words, God whispered to me:

28 Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.
29 He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.
30 Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;
31 but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

After breakfast Lorraine and I try to read to our girls from a little children's Bible. Last week we came upon the story of the little boy Samuel who hears a voice calling to him. He thinks it's the priest, Eli. But eventually Eli realises that God is trying to speak to Samuel. So he instructs Samuel to lie down and say, "Speak Lord; your servant is listening." Do you ever say that when you read the Bible? Or in the quietness before the sermon on a Sunday? "Speak Lord; your servant is listening." When you think about it, it really is quite extraordinary that the God of the universe wants to speak to us, through his word. The question is: Are we listening? Is attentive listening to the Word of God a characteristic of your life? I have never known anyone leading a spiritually transformed life who has not made attentive listening to the word of God a priority in their life.

Humble receiving (1:21)

But in addition to, James goes on to talk about humble receiving of the Word of God. Verse 21: "Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent" and, in its place, "humbly accept [or receive, absorb] the word planted in you." It's not enough to listen attentively, and try to understand God's word. We must go further, and absorb it deeply. Maybe James was thinking here about Jesus' parable of a farmer sowing seed. Some seed lands on hard ground and just bounces off. Never penetrates. But other seed falls on soft, receptive soil, where its roots can go down deep. James is saying, "Let the seed of God's word sink down deeply into the soil of your mind and heart. Meditate on it." Meditation is important enough to be mentioned more than fifty times in the Old Testament. Psalm 1 says, "Blessed are those who ... meditate day and night [on God's word]." Meditation is not something spooky that gurus do while reciting mantras in the lotus position. It's simply focusing your attention on something. If you know how to worry, you know how to meditate. I have a book in which I keep all of the special love letters that Lorraine has given me over the years. When I received each of these letters, I didn't read them like I read the sports section of the newspaper in the morning, once over lightly. I read them slowly, over and over. James is saying, in effect, read the Bible the way you would read a love letter at the height of romance. Read it slowly. Roll the words over and over in your mind. When you read, choose a verse or thought to take with you throughout the day. Think about it and until it takes root in your heart, your memory, your will.

Why receive or absorb the word like this? Because James says it "can save you." Just as the word of truth gave us new birth (made us right with God), so it can grow us up (make us more and more like God) as we receive it, absorb it. John Ortberg tells about a ninety-nine-year-old woman who lived about two hours outside Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia. She had become a follower of Jesus in middle age, and she was both blind and illiterate. She lived in a little hut, where she kept two Bibles on her table – one in Amharic (the official language of Ethiopia), one in English. Whenever someone came to visit her, she would ask the person to read. Over time, her favourite passages became so familiar that she could recite them from memory, and if her visitors couldn't read, she would recite them as a kind of gift to them. People would come from far away just to visit her. Why would they make the journey for an elderly, illiterate, blind widow? Because somehow in her presence, through her voice, the words, "The Lord is my shepherd" ceased to be just words. Those thoughts had sunken into her mind so deeply, that there was simply no way that anxiety-producing thoughts could survive there. People flocked to this woman because it was impossible to hear her say those words without being filled with the hope that perhaps one day they would be as real to them as they were to her. Psalm 119:11 says, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." The word of God has an indispensable part to play in our becoming like God. If we neglect the word of God, no wonder the transformation is slow.

Obedient doing (1:22-27)

So attentive listening. Humble receiving. The third stage is obedient doing. Verse 22: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." James goes on in the next few verses to liken the word of God to a mirror. Why? I heard that Queen Elizabeth once had the mirrors lining all the walls of Buckingham Palace removed because she didn't want to have to keep looking at herself as she grew old. Mirrors are like that. They tell

us what needs attention. I get up most mornings, look in the mirror, and it says to me: "You're a bit rough this morning. You need a shave. That shirt's got peanut butter on the collar. It needs changing. Your hair looks a bit funny. It needs washing. Or dyeing..." So, for the most part, I act on what I see. In the same way, as we gaze intently into the mirror of God's word we often see how our lives, our thinking, our behaviour, need correction.

Some people say, "I don't want correction. I don't want to be bound by some rulebook. I want to be free to enjoy life." But are they really free? Does the Bible take away our freedom or give us freedom? I heard this week about a guy who was driving along the motorway. And his wife rings him up: "Herman, Herman. I've just heard on the news that a car is going the wrong way down the motorway. Please be careful." Herman replies, "It's not just one car. There's hundreds of them!" When intentionally or unintentionally we break the rules of the road code – when we drive the wrong way – accidents happen, people get hurt. Keeping the road code brings much more peace and freedom. It's the same with God's code, God's word. That's why James calls it in v 25 "the perfect law that gives freedom." Real peace and joy is found in obeying God's word. Looking for an action point when we read it, and then putting it into practice. That leads James to outline in vv 26-27 the kinds of things we will do if we not only listen to the word of God, but put it into practice. True "religion" worship, he says, is to control your tongue (what you say about other people), to care for widows and orphans (to give to people in need), and to keep yourself from being polluted by the world (to take your directions from God, not the world). If we're not doing these things our religion or worship is "worthless." We're "deceiving ourselves". That's the thrust of this passage. If you want to avoid deceiving yourself, and have a faith that really works, make the word of God your guide by listening, receiving, and doing of what it says.

So what place does the word of God have in your life? "If you were marooned on a desert island and could have only one book with you, what book would you choose?" Someone once asked that question of G.K. Chesterton. Given his reputation as a Christian, you'd expect his response to be the Bible. It wasn't. Chesterton chose *Thompson's Guide to Practical Ship-Building*. It makes sense, of course. If you were trapped on an island you would want a book that would get you home, a book that would show you how to be saved. The truth is we are trapped – trapped as Eugene Peterson put it – on an I-land, where we're constantly deceived into patterns of thought and behaviour that lead to death. We need a book that will get us home, set us free. That's why followers of Jesus throughout history have devoted themselves to the word of God. That's why John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, said that a pivotal moment of his life came when he prayed to become a *homo unius libri*, "a man of one book." That's why, amid all the deceiving voices in the tabloids and on billboards of our culture, God still says to us, as he said to Augustine, "Take it and read. Take it and read."

Questions

1. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* suggests that the Bible is not the inspired word of God. How would you respond?
2. John Wesley wanted to be "a person of one book"? What place does the Bible have in your life?
3. What are the three stages that James gives us for responding to God's word?
4. Can you think of a time when God spoke to you powerfully through his word? How did this impact your life?
5. What is one passage in the Bible that has sunk deep into your heart, and how has this portion of Scripture brought transformation to your life?
6. Read Psalm 1. What are the benefits that come from meditating on Scripture? Why not pick one verse to meditate on to meditate on as you go through this week (e.g. Psalm 46:10)?
7. Psalm 119:11 says, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." Pick a verse and commit it to memory this week.
8. What does James mean by "the perfect law that gives freedom" (James 1:25)? How would you answer someone who says they don't want to be bound by a "rule book"?
9. What three practical expressions of Christian faith should mark those who listen to and learn from Jesus and his word (James 1:26-27). How do you measure up to this test? What could you do this week to put the word into practice?