

# Hearers But Not Doers of the Word Deceive Themselves

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May God grant you all much grace and peace through the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In Christ our Savior, beloved hearers!

If a person wants to be saved, the first and most important requirement is to diligently hear, read and study God's Word. Whoever does not want to do that cannot be helped, no matter how much he wants to do, pray and worry. He remains in his natural darkness, in his sins, and under God's disfavor.

The Holy Spirit who must work all good in a person does not work without means.

The *Word* is the means of grace, indeed the only means through which He works. Even Baptism and the Lord's Supper are means of grace only because of the Word, because the visible outward elements are connected with the divine Word. Without the Word, Baptism would be plain water and no baptism, and the Lord's Supper would not be Christ's body and blood, but merely bread and wine.

God's Word is, as it were, the hand God extends to us from heaven in order to lift us up to Himself. Whoever does not hear God's Word turns away from God's hand and therefore cannot be saved.

God's Word is not only the *only means* which shows us the way to heaven, it is also the *only way* by which men, who are all spiritually dead by nature, are awakened.

It is also the *only way* by which men are enlightened, so that they learn to know themselves and Christ aright.

*Only* God's Word works faith in Christ.

God's Word is the only heavenly seed which must be sown in the uncultivated field of the human heart. Otherwise the field remains waste, the weeds of error and sin continue to grow unchecked, and the heavenly plants of faith, love, and hope do not grow in it. St. Paul says: "*So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*" (Romans 10:17)

Therefore as long as a man still hears God's Word, one dare not give up hoping that he will yet be converted, come to know himself and the faith, even if all seems to be in vain. But if an unconverted person persistently flees the opportunity to hear God's Word, he cannot be saved unless the Word he heard earlier still awakens him in the hour of his death.

Paul and Barnabas preached God's Word to the Jews in Antioch. But when they opposed and blasphemed it, the apostles said to them: "*It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you, but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles.*" (Acts 13:46)

The hearing, reading and studying of God's Word is indispensable to awaken, become converted and become a Christian. But it is just as necessary to *remain* a Christian as it is to be converted.

Once a man is awakened from his spiritual sleep and death, he is in great danger of sinking back into it again. God's Word must awaken him time and again and keep him awake.

If someone has come to the knowledge of his sin and the danger of his soul, he is in great danger of becoming blind again. God's Word must therefore constantly remind him of his sins and the danger to his soul.

If someone experiences the comfort of the forgiveness of his sins, he is in constant danger of losing this comfort. God's Word must therefore constantly fill him over and over again with divine comfort.

If someone is on the right way of faith and sanctification, he is in great danger of going astray. God's Word must constantly guide him on the right road and bring him back again when he strays in weakness.

What food and drink is for the body of man, God's Word is for the soul of the Christian. When the body is without food and drink for a short time, it weakens and finally dies. Thus the Christian's soul loses its spiritual powers and sinks back into spiritual death, if the Christian does not daily and zealously use God's Word.

What wood and coal are to the fire on the hearth, God's Word is to the fire of faith and love in the hearts of Christians. As the fire soon dies if more wood or fuel is not added, so the fire of faith and love dies in a Christian's heart when he ceases diligently to hear, read and study God's Word.

As a tree withers not only when chopped down and fallen, but also when no longer watered, so a Christian falls from grace not only when he openly returns to the world, but already and most often when he ceases to hear God's Word with zeal and does not practice it daily and diligently at home. He ceases being a tree planted by the rivers of water, which brings forth his fruit in his season, whose leaves do not wither. (Psalm 1:3)

But, my friends, it is by no means enough to hear, read and study God's Word diligently to be a Christian and to be saved. Whoever is satisfied and set at ease with that thought deceives himself.

The apostle James shows us this in our Epistle for today.

*Scripture text: James 1:22-27. But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed. If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.*

When the apostle says in our text: "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves," he indicates the theme with which he deals in our entire text.

Let us therefore in the fear of the Lord ponder that

## **HEARERS BUT NOT DOERS OF THE WORD ONLY DECEIVE THEMSELVES.**

1. They Deceive Themselves by Hoping to be Saved by the mere Hearing of the Word;
2. They Deceive Themselves When they Imagine they Serve God by the mere Hearing of His Word.

{Prayer:} Gracious and merciful God! Thou hast given Thy Holy Word to the whole world. Millions, however, have lost it by their own fault. Yet to us, without any merit or worthiness on our part, Thou hast given this treasure in these last evil times. Oh help us, lest some day it witness against us that Thou hast wanted to save us, but that we did not want to let Thee save us. Oh, let it accomplish in us the whole purpose for which Thou hast sent it! Bring us by it to the knowledge of our sins and Thy grace. Let it convert us from the heart, so that we will let our light shine before men, that they may see our good works and praise Thee, our Father in heaven. Hear us for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.

### **[1. Hearers but not Doers of the Word Deceive Themselves by Hoping to be Saved by the mere Hearing]**

When the apostle says in our Epistle, "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves," this is exactly what the Savior says with the words: *"Every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon sand; and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it"* (Matt. 7:26.27), or what the Lord said a few verses earlier: *"Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven."* (Matt. 7:21).

Accordingly, could they be right who now so often say: Not what one believes matters but what one does; not faith, but works save a person?

Yes, so it *seems*. But let us examine the words of the apostle a little more closely, and we will learn differently.

In order to understand the apostle correctly, we must first of all define what he understands by "word," and then what he understands by "doing."

The rationalist and the moralist usually understand that the "word" is the Law, the doctrine of good works, what a person must do and not do to be religious.

But three irrefutable reasons show that this is not the apostle's understanding of the "word."

First, the apostle says in the words preceding our text that the word of which he speaks can save us. (James 1:21). But the word about good works or the Law does not save, but rather the word of grace, or the Gospel.

Secondly, the next verse the apostle calls the word of which the hearers should be doers, "the perfect law of liberty." This tells us that the apostle cannot possibly be speaking of the Law of works. For the Scripture states that it does not produce freedom but slavery, and Christ says, "*If the Son (Christ) therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.*" (John 8:36).

Finally, James says of the doers of the word: "This man shall be blessed in his deed."

But according to Scripture, salvation is not our work but God's, not something we merit but a gift of divine grace, not a fruit of our virtues but the end of our faith. (Eph. 2:8.9).

And so it is clear that the apostle means the *gospel of Christ* by the "word," and *faith in it* by the "doing" of the word.

Do not suppose that this is a forced, artificial explanation!

It not infrequently happens in Scripture that faith is called a "doing of God's will."

The Lord Himself says, "*If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.*" (John 7:17). "*This is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day.*" (John 6:40). And once when the Jews asked the Lord: "*What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?*" He answered: "*This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.*" (John 6:28.29).

So when James says in our text, "*Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves,*" he means nothing else but that whoever diligently hears, reads and studies the Gospel, but does not let it become effective in him, does not believe it with his heart, he only deceives himself with his hearing, reading and studying.

But should this admonition really be so necessary? Would those who do not believe the Gospel even hear it diligently? Would those who heard it diligently not believe in it?

It does not seem likely. But does not our sad daily experience teach the very opposite?

Whoever truly stands in the faith must consider himself a sinner unable to save himself, in short, a lost sinner. But do not thousands hear God's Law and Gospel year in and year out, without once coming to a living knowledge of being lost sinners?

The believer builds all the certainty of his state of grace, salvation and blessedness on the Word alone. The Word is the only credential by which he can prove his hope of eternal life.

It alone is the first and last refuge of his conscience. "It is written!" is the first and last proof he can give himself and others that he does not deceive himself in his faith and trust in God.

But do not thousands hear God's Word year in and year out, and yet build their whole Christianity on nothing but their own heart and feelings? If they hear the preaching of an enthusiast or a false teacher of the law who appeal to their feelings in false evangelical zeal, they think: That is the man for us!

He who stands in the true faith considers his sins forgiven. For what "faith" in Christ, the Savior, would that be which accepted no forgiveness?

But do not thousands year in and year out hear the Gospel of Christ, and still have an evil conscience, remain full of slavish fear and sorrow, and never learn to cry, "Abba, dear Father"? (Romans 8:15).

He who stands in the true faith considers himself righteous before God. He therefore believes that all his works done according to God's Word please God.

But thousands hear God's Word year after year, yet are unable to say with true joy and confidence: This and that work which I have done, though it is small and insignificant, is pleasing to God, for I have done it in faith, only to honor God and help my neighbor.

He who stands in the true faith has a new heart, and so walks in a new life.

But thousands year after year hear God's Word, read it at home, study it, and talk about it, yet they remain as before. No one sees them perceive and lay aside their old habitual sins, and earnestly follow after sanctification.

He who stands in the true faith considers himself infinitely rich and happy, for he has found the precious treasure millions are still seeking. He is provided for throughout eternity. God is his. Heaven is his. Salvation is his.

But thousands hear God's Word year after year, yet quite obviously do not deem themselves rich and happy, for they pursue earthly riches, gold, property, houses, fields, fortune, honor and fame!

He who stands in the true faith knows God as his friend, patron and protector.

But do not thousands hear God's Word year after year, yet are still afraid of the world, knuckle under it, and disgracefully deny their faith to please the world?

Alas! Is it not clear that only too many are diligent hearers of God's Word but are not doers?

They let Christ be preached to them, yet do not believe in him.

They hear of grace, yet do not seize it.

They learn of the way to salvation, yet do not walk in it.

Many are often moved; but they are, as the apostle says in our text, *"like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass; for he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was."*

Scarcely is church over or the devotional book closed when they say: "That was a beautiful sermon!", or, "a sharp, powerful sermon!". But often already on the way home something else is discussed, and the very next moment thoughts of earthly or even manifestly sinful things occupy their hearts. And the instruction, comfort, or rebuke is forever forgotten.

How can such men be helped by their hearing, reading and studying of God's word?

It does them no good at all.

For not the hearing of the sermon saves, but the *doing* of what is preached, the keeping of it... in a word, *faith*. Christ says, *"This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent."* (John 6:29).

James therefore continues: *"Whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the word, this man shall be blessed in his deed."*

James means that he alone who hears the Word, not like one who passes in front of a mirror and casts only a fleeting glance into it, but like one who remains standing before it and carefully examines the image reflected there, will be a blessed hearer.

In the mirror of the Gospel he sees himself as a sinner, condemned by the Law, and for whom Christ earned freedom from the curse and force of the Law. Because of his sins he sees himself a lost and condemned sinner whom Christ reconciled with God, redeemed from hell, and for whom He acquired grace, forgiveness of sins, righteousness, life and salvation. This sight will kindle in him the faith which comforts him with these treasures, grasping them as gifts and transferring them to him. Thus he will be "blessed in his deed."

Oh, may none of us deceive ourselves any longer by supposing it is enough merely to hear the Gospel. Hear it as a Word which opens heaven!

If it kindles but one small spark of faith in you, persevere in that spark lest your faith be quickly extinguished again. Be strengthened and preserved through the Word until you have attained the end of faith, even your soul's salvation.

## **[2. Hearers but not Doers of the Word Deceive Themselves When they Imagine they Serve God by the mere Hearing of His Word]**

Secondly, my friends, those who are hearers but not doers of the word merely deceive themselves insofar as they imagine they serve God by merely hearing God's Word.

Really no man, no creature, not even an angel can do anything for God.

For God is the One whom all creatures need but who Himself needs no one.

Everything comes from Him! Therefore we can give Him nothing but what He Himself has first given us.

He is too powerful to need help, too wise to need advice, too blessed and glorious to be made more blessed and glorious by a creature. He is self-sufficient. As He speaks, so it comes to pass. As He commands, so it is done.

But as little as God has need of our service, so graciously He has revealed in His Word what we must do so He may consider it a service rendered Him.

James tells us at the close of our text wherein this consists when he writes: *"If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their afflictions and to keep himself unspotted from the world."*

From this we see that holy love toward one's neighbor - unspotted by the love of the world - and the works of this holy love are the service God wants.

Since we cannot serve God Himself, He so arranged things that our neighbor needs us.

Therefore, we should serve God in our neighbor.

God will consider the service rendered our neighbor as a service rendered Him, as true worship.

Therefore Christ says that when the false Christians will some day say to Him, "*Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?*" He will answer them, "*Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.*" But He will say to those on His right hand, "*Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.*" (Matt. 25:40.44).

Now, friends, judge for yourselves: What do they do who imagine they serve God by merely hearing His word?

They deceive themselves.

As important as it is to hear God's Word, if a person wants to learn to serve God he is utterly mistaken if he thinks that the hearing of God's Word itself is that service.

To be sure, what Christians do in their so-called "houses of God" is usually called "public service." But really, there we do not serve God. *God rather serves us.*

The public service is an arrangement whereby we are to learn from God's Word how to serve God.

But wanting to serve God merely by hearing His word is just as if a beggar who accepts a gift from a rich man thinks he serves the rich man, or as if the pupil who lets himself be taught supposes he does good to the teacher.

Beloved, if ever there was a time when it was necessary to note and deeply engrave this truth upon our hearts, that time is now.

The great majority of people are now divided into two great groups.

The first consists of the unbelievers who no longer believe in God and make their own reason their god. Hence they do not want to serve God at all, considering service to God as something for the simple-minded.

The other group consists of people who still profess that there is a God and that man must therefore serve this God. But they define service to God as merely the hearing and pursuing of God's Word, praying, singing, pious conversations and other religious practices.

The works of love rendered their neighbor listed on the second table of the Ten Commandments they despise as ordinary works, which supposedly even the heathen can do.

And what is the result?

The result is that the unbelievers often far surpass the seemingly most pious Christians in works of love toward their neighbor.

Oh shame, if an unbeliever can say to a seemingly zealous Christian: You have faith without works, but I have works without faith. You have what you call God's Word and do not do it, while I do not hear your Word of God, but I do it.

You go to church and thereby want to serve God, and do not serve your neighbor.

I do not go to church, but I do serve my neighbor! Who is better, you or I?

Oh, my friends, may we be frightened at the words of the apostle: "If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue," that is, speaks lovelessly against his neighbor, and "deceiveth his heart, this man's religion is vain."

Up, then! If we want to serve God, let us not only hear His Word, but also do it in faith which is active through love.

Let us not think that we already have served God when we come to church, the Lord's Supper, confession, or diligently bend our knees in our closet, speak pious words, and have holy attitudes.

Let us practice love toward our neighbors, "visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction," that is, with a mouth full of comfort and a hand full of works of love clothe the naked, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, take the wretched into our homes, visit, attend, and serve the sick, and help those who are in trouble. Nor let us forget the poorest and the most rejected of widows, the oppressed Church of Christ.

Thus some day we will hear the happy voice, "*Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.*" Amen.