

# Hearing and Doing

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**Mark 7: 1-8; 14-15; 21-23**  
**James 1: 17-27**

I begin by telling you a story about two men I came to know when I was in Michigan. Their names are Kevin and Larry, and they lived with several other men in a group home. Both had intellectual disabilities. The men had once been friends but were increasingly at odds with each other. I met them through a program called, “Rejoicing Spirits.” Its purpose is to work with congregations to develop worship services that are meaningful for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities. We designed such a service at the First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham and held it twice each month on a Sunday afternoon, with supper afterwards to build community among those attending. The service emphasized one central theme that was reinforced by the songs, the prayers, the scripture, and the preaching, and often involved a skit. Interestingly, many church members also attended this service, finding it as meaningful but more fun than our regular worship on Sunday morning. The service was participatory. Every person had an instrument to play—drums, chimes, triangles, etc.

On one particular Sunday the theme of the service was forgiveness. Now you will recall that my friends Kevin and Larry had a long history of conflict and animus. In fact, there had been talk of separating them, moving one of the men to another

group home. So, imagine them being in this worship service when the importance of forgiveness is being preached. I'll have more to say about those two gentlemen, but let's first examine what the Letter of James tells us about anger. Before James speaks about hearing and doing the word, he advises, "...let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger...." As I said earlier in the children's message, we must listen carefully in order to hear, and we must hear rightly before we know the right thing to do. But listening to something you may not want to hear is a tall order. I particularly wondered what was going through Kevin's mind as he sat in church that day. He loves church. He ushered at our Sunday morning worship service, and he served as a faithful acolyte for my weekly Wednesday evening service. I knew that hearing God's word was very important to him.

Hearing the word and doing the word, to use James' terminology, are interconnected and interdependent aspects of faithful living. If we don't regularly listen for God's word in a disciplined fashion, we risk not understanding what faithful living requires. Why is that? As James, Paul the apostle, and Jesus tell us time and again, two realities exist side by side. There is God's reality, and there is the world's reality. In the reality of the world the self is at the center. What benefits oneself is good; what confirms one's own values is good; what leads to the security and happiness of the self is good. Anything else is, at the very least, suspect. In God's reality Christ is at the center. Anything done for the benefit of the self rather than out of love for others is, at the very least, suspect. From the perspective of the world's values, the validity of doing something is measured in terms of the satisfaction or happiness it gives oneself. From the perspective of Christ at the

center, the value of doing something is measured in terms of whether God is pleased.

Let's return to the worship service where Kevin and Larry, seated a distance apart, heard words preached about forgiveness. When the time came for the Prayers of the People, individuals were given the opportunity to take a portable microphone and speak their prayer requests. Kevin suddenly got out of his seat, walked to where Larry was seated, gave him a hug, and asked **his** forgiveness. Was God pleased? There is no question in my mind. Kevin was able to move self out of the center of his existence, even for that moment, hear God's word to him, and put anger aside for someone who had aggravated and annoyed him over a long period of time. For faithful living we must constantly practice moving self out of the center. One way we do that is to be in worship on Sunday. In worship the focus is on God. If we are asking ourselves, "How is God speaking to me in the words spoken, the word preached, the words sung, the confession affirmed, and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper participated in, we are asking the right questions; we have the proper focus. These things remind us what God's reality is. Recall that Kevin's act of forgiveness occurred during a worship service. In worship we have a prime opportunity to hear what God is saying to us.

Remember how Jesus was constantly angered and dismayed by our inability to listen for God's word and hear it. "Let anyone with ears to hear listen," he would say. He was particularly dismayed when tradition was the rationale for failing to hear God's word. Now we are still prone to stick with tradition. We all can easily go through the motions of sitting in church oblivious to hearing God's word for us. We

are preoccupied by our own thoughts and fears, our worries and burdens. Our traditional patterns and rules give us confidence and help reduce our anxiety. Now let me be clear, tradition is not a bad thing! The issue is whether we listen for a word from God so that we truly hear God's word. If our "doing" is a faithful response to "hearing" the word God has for us, then our doing will bless others and ourselves. (James 1:25) I know that Kevin's act of forgiveness toward Larry blessed them both.

So, how does tradition get in the way. Traditional thinking would argue that Kevin should have waited for Larry to recognize how **his** behavior had caused conflict with Kevin before Kevin approached him for forgiveness. Larry's behavior was his problem, not Kevin's. And let's consider tradition with a wider scope.

By tradition men have been favored for leadership positions over women, yet we know that leadership skills have nothing to do with gender. In the military more women are being selected for general officer positions as the military makes a determined effort to reverse a bias stemming from a male-oriented tradition. Tradition dictated that women should not be ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Elder Lilian Alexander from this congregation introduced a resolution to permit the ordination of women clergy. She wanted the church to recognize the value of women as church leaders. The Presbyterian Church (USA) passed it in 1955. By tradition, marriage was only acceptable between a man and a woman. It was the tradition of the church to understand sexuality in binary terms and to understand normal sexual orientation as strictly heterosexual. Science has taught us, however, that sexuality is not binary, that is, a person cannot always be defined

as either a “man” or a “woman.” Sexuality falls along a continuum, gender identity has multiple expressions, and sexual orientation is not dictated by assigned sex at birth and may not be heterosexual.

Our denomination now permits the marriage of two persons regardless of the gender identity of those two persons. The emphasis is on the commitment of those persons to make an exclusive covenant to be loving and faithful to each other. More significantly, our denomination no longer uses identity as LGBTQ as reason enough to prevent an individual’s ordination to ministry. It took a long time for the church to realize that it is not “defiled” by differences in its midst. Rather, as Jesus stated in our Mark passage, it is evil intentions coming from the heart that debase a person. Jesus never felt defiled by his contact with those individuals whom the Jewish world in his time judged to be unclean. All persons, in Jesus’ view, were beloved children of God. He certainly admonished some persons for their behavior, though never for their sexuality or their sexual orientation, and those he admonished were typically people with power and authority in his society. Their sin was to misunderstand and misapply God’s commandments.

The apostle Paul and James want us to experience the freedom we have in Christ to step away from traditional values in the world that hurt or belittle others, church values included, in order to **do** what love requires. It is that commitment to being God’s love that enables us to forgive others and also keeps us from the sinful behaviors Jesus lists in the final three verses of the passage we heard Lynette read. Of course, we will continue to be prone to do things that grieve God, but in

perfecting our listening and hearing, in worship and elsewhere, we practice responding to God's grace with Christ at the center.

Hearing and doing: two interconnected and interdependent sides of faithful living. My challenge to us all this day is this: Look into the mirror and see the child of God you are, as well as the ways in which self and not Christ is at the center of your hearing and doing. Then look into the perfect law of liberty, as James admonishes, and consider what actions love requires of you. Caring for the vulnerable, for those who need us—and Larry needed Kevin—is true religion, “pure and undefiled before God” to quote James. Consider today what the need of another person you know requires of you. Don't think about how that act of compassion will affect you or be judged by others. Consider only that other person's vulnerability and what you can do through a gesture or a word or some act of kindness to be God's love in that person's life. You will then be blessed in your doing. Practice looking for signs of God's grace and grow into the transformation of your mind. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.