

Finding Our Identity in Jesus Series

The Identity Problem (Jas. 1:22-25)

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These sermon study notes are designed to be a tool used after listening to the sermon. This resource is a guide to help deepen understanding regarding the Scriptures and ideas presented in the sermon. Those who use these study notes are encouraged to look up, read through, and think about Scripture references in this guide. There is more information in these notes than what is presented in the sermon. These study notes are designed to be used as an independent study tool to help the formation of Biblical convictions, character, and conduct.

The Identity Problem

I. Introduction

A. Illustration: Aaron Rodgers Enigma

1. Netflix produced a documentary that followed Aaron Rodgers, the former Packers quarterback, in his recovery after a season-ending injury. Throughout this documentary, it was easy to observe how Rodgers thought about his identity and how this understanding impacted the direction of his life and how he responded to the situations of life. His journey of figuring out who he is was an ongoing theme of this documentary. “Who am I?” is the main question he asked himself. Aaron said he, “wrestled with it [his identity] for many years.”
2. Rodgers said, “I put so much into this, I care about it so much. To have it taken away in an instant, four plays into a season, it’s been pretty jarring mentally. I haven’t experienced that much grief, in my life probably” (referring to tearing his Achilles in the first game of the 2023 NFL season). Why was a sports injury so difficult? Because of the time and effort put into his professional sports career. For most of Aaron’s life, his identity came from being a football player. He wanted to be known as the best of the best. A significant part of his identity came from his work and his career as an athlete.
3. His career being a major source of identity was evident during the injury, but it was also evident in what he said about pursuing the ultimate measure of success—winning the Superbowl. After leading the Packers to a championship win, Aaron asked himself while sitting on the bus, “You just accomplished the greatest thing ever...that was cool. Now what? Now I’ve accomplished the only thing I really, really wanted to do in my life. Now what?”.
4. The self-reflection questions continued following the Superbowl: “Did I, like, aim at the wrong thing? Or did I spend too much time thinking about stuff that ultimately doesn’t give you, like, true happiness? Is this going to be the only thing I accomplish in life? I was trying to find something to rectify feeling that way.” All this was in the first episode.

B. J. Warner Wallace makes the astute connection between mental health and a person’s sense of identity: “If you charted your life on a timeline and noted those periods when you struggled with some aspect of mental health, you would likely find that those same periods were when you were struggling with your identity”.¹ You can see how this plays out in Aaron Rodgers’ life. The importance of understanding our identity can’t be understated.

C. Failing to understand our identity often leads to mental health problems, along with difficult and unpleasant seasons of life. While this is true in general, it is also true that failing to understand our identity leads to spiritual problems as well. James 1:22-25 explains the negative

¹ Warner J. Wallace and Alisa Childers, [*The Truth in True Crime: What Investigating Death Teaches Us About the Meaning of Life*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2024).

impact uncertainty about our identity can have on our ability to live a healthy Christian life. If we are going to follow Jesus in a healthy way, the way God intends for us, we need to have a clear understanding of our identity.

II. Two Types of People

- A. Living a healthy Christian life means we take what we learn from Jesus and adopt His example and teachings as the way we live our lives. There is a transition in the Christian life where our focus transforms from learning to living. Here at Community Alliance Church, we emphasize the importance of applying what we are learning in our third C, called conduct. As each of us becomes the person God wants us to be, we use what we've learned, and our lives are impacted by God's word. In our disciple making plan, this transition from learning to implementing is emphasized in the Equip stage of disciple making. Once we learn what Jesus taught and how Jesus lived, we begin to follow His example in our own lives and put Jesus' words into action.
- B. Those who successfully take this step of progression in the Christian life can do so because they understand their identity in Jesus. Anyone who has regular contact with the word of God, possibly hearing it communicated every week in church, but fails to allow the word of God to change who they are and how they live, forget their identity. As we are going to learn through the instruction of James, failing to understand our identity in Jesus will result in failing to live a healthy and successful Christian life. Failure in the Christian life means to stay the person we are and not grow to become like Jesus.
- C. When it comes to the word of God, there are two types of people who stay connected to God's word:

²² But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not just hearers who deceive themselves. (Jas. 1:22)
- D. Two types of people found in the church are being compared and contrasted with one another. One is positive, while the other is negative. There are hearers and there are doers. The difference between these two types of people is massive. Hearers do not realize their true spiritual condition of being separated from God and go through life without the urgency of understanding they are on a life path that will result in God's punishment. Doers have a life enriched by God and are blessed. The type of person we are related to the word of God is critically important to understand. The main topic of this passage is explaining the right response to God's word.²
- E. James encourages those in the church he leads in Jerusalem to become a doer of the word of God ("But prove yourselves doers of the word", v. 22). As disciples, we are to become the type of person who responds to the word of God the way James describes throughout the rest of this passage. Disciples are commanded to become a doer of the word of God.³ This is a command regarding our character and developing a character that engages in repeated action

² Douglas Moo, "[James](#)," in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, vol. 3, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995), 1155.

³ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, [James](#), vol. 16, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 89.

that becomes a habit.⁴ Reacting to the Bible in a spiritually healthy way is something we grow into, and it requires a learning process. This teaching of James is the same as the teaching Jesus offered in the Parable of the Soil (Mt. 13:3-9, Mk. 4:1-9, Lk. 8:4-8).

- F. Interestingly, James makes the same point of learning and becoming a specific type of person in relation to God's word about being a hearer ("not having become a forgetful hearer", v. 25). Again, there is an emphasis on becoming a certain type of person based on the habits we develop around the word of God. By our repeated and normal responses to the word of God, we will become either a doer or a hearer. Through James, we learn the valuable lesson of being careful about and paying attention to the spiritual habits we develop when the word of God is communicated to us. A person can't be passive in listening to the word of God; they must be intentional and active about developing good habits.
- G. The devastating spiritual consequence of being a hearer is that of self-deception ("hearers who deceive themselves", v. 22). The only other place where this term of deception is used is Colossians 2:4—in Colossians the deception is being done by others rather than the self. To deceive oneself is to misunderstand a person's relationship with God to the extent that they think they are safe with God when they are not.⁵ These hearers feel safe because of their familiarity and regular contact with the word of God. These deceived individuals think they have a relationship with God because they regularly attend church, go to Bible studies, or read the Bible.⁶ Listening to and learning from the word of God is not enough to make a person right with God. In this, James agrees heartily with Paul:

¹³ for *it is* not the hearers of the Law *who* are righteous before God, but the doers of the Law *who* will be justified. (Rm. 2:13)
- H. This is not a works-based salvation; a person doesn't earn God's favor through their actions and effort. Rather, the point being made by both these authors of Scripture is that a person can't truly receive the word of God and not be changed by it. A person who thinks they are receiving the word of God but are not impacted long term by it never actually receive the word of God as God intended. A person doesn't truly receive the word of God until it is put into practice.⁷ A healthy and positive response to God's word changes us and how we live.
- I. Every person needs to be developing good spiritual habits related to the word of God. The habits we develop around the word of God will reflect and be a determining factor of our spiritual condition. How we react to hearing the word of God taught to us matters. Each time contributes to the habits we are developing, and these habits will be either positive or negative. The longer these habits continue, the more difficult they become to change.

⁴ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, [*James*](#), vol. 16, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 89.

⁵ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, [*James*](#), vol. 16, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 89.

⁶ Douglas J. Moo, [*James: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 16, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 86.

⁷ Douglas J. Moo, [*James: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 16, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 85–86.

- J. What do you do after you listen to a sermon or hear a Bible study? Do you simply move on with your day and don't give what you heard from God's word another thought? Hearers are people who may be interested in and learn from God's word when it is being presented to them, but then quickly move on with life as soon as the instruction is over. Their interest in the word of God is mostly academic and intellectual; they learn and leave.
- K. Instead, do you keep thinking about what you learned throughout the rest of the week and consider ways God's word should be impacting your life and behavior? Do you put energy and time into aligning your life with what God told His people to do? Doers are people who stay connected to the word of God and bring it with them into all the other aspects of life. They don't leave the word of God at church; it influences them at work, at home, on the weekend, and in every interaction they have with others.

III. The Identity Problem: Forgetfulness (Jas. 1:22-25)

- A. The practical result of being a doer or a hearer of God's word, developing good or bad habits in response to God's message, is a successful or unsuccessful Christian life. James begins by explaining the effects of being a hearer. These types of people, despite all the time and attention given to the word of God, never align their way of life with the word of God. They don't successfully implement the word of God into their life.
- B. When we don't have a clear understanding of our identity, this identity problem creates problems for us spiritually:
 - ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; ²⁴ for *once* he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. (Jas. 1:23-24)
- C. Here we find the identity problem—forgetting the type of person we are in Jesus (“he has forgotten what kind of person he was”, v. 23). Failure to understand our identity in Jesus always leads to a failure to live the way God wants. A lack of identity leads to a lack of consistency. A comparison is made between a hearer of God's word and a person who looks in a mirror and forgets what their face looks like (“he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror”, v. 23). Failing to put God's word into action in our lives is like failing to remember what we look like. It is an absurd situation because embracing the word of God requires its implementation.
- D. The point of contrast of the comparison is not found in how a person interacts with the word of God in terms of interest or looking. James tells us that both the hearer and the doer take an intense and studied look at the word of God. Looking in a mirror at oneself is not a passing glance or a quick look.⁸ It is to be fully aware through thoughtful viewing.⁹ The imagery is more like a woman looking at herself in the mirror in detail than a young boy who doesn't care. Both the hearer and the doer have a deep interest in the word of God, thinking carefully about what it means. The difference between the two is not in how they look at the word of God.
- E. The hearer who is deceiving themselves carefully studies and looks deeply at the word of God, but there is not a lasting impact on them (“he has immediately forgotten what kind of person

⁸ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, [James](#), vol. 16, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 90.

⁹ Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on James 1:23 “who looks at” and James 1:24 “he has looked at”

he was”, v. 24). After listening to the word of God being communicated and thinking carefully about it, the hearer quickly moves on with their life. There is a strong emphasis on the suddenness of the action.¹⁰ What they learned and heard from God’s word is out of mind and it has no lasting effect on them. They are like a person who forgets what they look like after looking at their face in a mirror.

- F. A person will never be able to live out the Christian life in a healthy way if they don’t understand their identity in Jesus. Forgetting who we in Jesus leads to a disconnected and inability to live a consistent Christian life. All disciples face a spiritual danger of having their lives disconnected from the word of God. We need to bring the teachings and commands of God into harmony with the choices we make, the behaviors we act on, and the regular activities of our lives. If we don’t make this connection, we won’t be able to put the word of God into action. Disciples can’t forget what they look like in Jesus. Those who forget or misunderstand their identity will not live the way God instructs them to live in His word.
- G. Our posture toward the word of God should be one of acceptance and trust. When God says something about who we are and what He’s provided, disciples assume what God says is true. If God says we are forgiven, we can live with a clear conscience. If God says we are dead to sin, we are and sin no longer control us. If God says He is at work in us, He is. If God says He provides a way out of every temptation, there is an exit to find. If God says the Holy Spirit will help us become loving, patient, and kind, this is the person we are growing into, and we will be successful with God’s help. If Jesus says that He will set us free from sin, although we may struggle for a while, we will eventually be free using the power of God. This is what it means to find our identity in Jesus and the word of God.

IV. A Healthy Response to God’s Word

- A. What is the solution to the problem of forgetfulness and misunderstanding our identity? How do disciples learn to become a doer and become successful in putting God’s word into action? What steps can be taken to overcome the disconnect between God’s word and the way we live our lives? Disciples can learn to become a doer instead of becoming a hearer by taking note of how James describes doers:
 - ²⁵ But one who has looked intently at the perfect law, the *law* of freedom, and has continued *in it*, not having become a forgetful hearer but an active doer, this person will be blessed in what he does. (Jas. 1:25)
- B. Contrary to the hearer who immediately forgets what they learned and saw in God’s word is the doer who acts on God’s word (“not having become a forgetful hearer but an active doer”, v. 25). Here we find the point of contrast between a hearer and a doer; it is a difference in response to the word of God.¹¹ The theme of forgetting verses acting is repeated for emphasis (“immediately forgotten”, v. 24 compared to “prove yourselves doers”, v. 22 and “forgetful hearer but an active doer”, v. 25). The examination of the word of God is the same as the

¹⁰ Luke Timothy Johnson, [*The Letter of James: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 37A, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 208.

¹¹ Douglas J. Moo, [*James: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 16, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 87.

hearer (“one who has looked intently”, v. 25). However, the impact God’s word has on the person is different between the hearer and the doer.

- C. The mirror is replaced by the word of God. The doer of the word of God continues to think about and interact with the word of God beyond their looking intently (“and has continued in it”, v. 25). This looking is continued and repeated rather than immediately moving on from the word of God like the hearer. The doer remains connected to the word of God after the hearing is done.¹² Perseverance in the word of God is present in the lives of those who obey God (Jn. 8:31-32). Doers continue to interact with the word of God outside of organized church services or public presentations of God’s word. There is an individual and personal element of the doer’s connection to the word of God.
- D. The doer of the word of God goes an additional step beyond the hearer when they put God’s word into action in their lives (“an active doer”, v. 25). James repeats his initial point from verse 22. Again, we see Jesus emphasizing this same point (Mt. 7:24-27). True disciples who live out their identities as described in God’s word participate in the activities communicated in God’s word.¹³ They put in the work to do what God says to do.¹⁴ For doers, the word of God changes who they are and how they live. Disciples are active, not passive. There is obedience to the commands and teachings of God (Jn. 15:10). Doers do the work of becoming the person God tells them to be in His word. Experiencing moral freedom from sin is a consequence of putting God’s word into action (“the law of freedom”, v. 25).
- E. All those who put God’s word into action in their lives will be blessed (“this person will be blessed in what he does”, v. 25). Jesus agrees (Lk. 11:28)! The blessing is not a future blessing God will give to a person in eternity, but an immediate benefit to the person who obeys God (“in what he does”, v. 25). Inherent in obeying God’s word is a blessing—good results automatically follow. Part of this blessing is described as wisdom, and a restoration of the soul (Ps. 19:7). The type of blessing inherent in obedience is in us personally, not in the bettering of our circumstances. Putting God’s word into action through obedience assures positive benefits, such as an increased chance of positive results, a clear conscience without guilt, confidence and satisfaction in knowing you did what is right, deepened character and godly habits, avoidance of harmful consequences of sin, etc. Putting God’s word into action puts us in the best, most positive posture we can amid a broken world with broken relationships.
- F. All these positive outcomes come because a person understands who they are and holds tightly to their identity in Jesus. Doers of the word use God’s word to discover who they are. They remember what their face looks like and act in harmony with their identity. The disciple’s natural face can be seen in the word of God. Once their true identity is understood, disciples live their lives according to this identity. Their identity leads to their doing the word of God.
- G. What does it mean to become a doer? According to James, being a doer of the word of God impacts our personal behavior, our relationships, how we interact with others, and our inner

¹² Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, [James](#), vol. 16, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 91.

¹³ Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on James 1:22 “doers” and James 1:25 “doer”

¹⁴ Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on James 1:25 “an active doer”

values.¹⁵ Disciples will talk differently because of God's word as their day-to-day behavior is impacted (Jas. 1:26). Disciples will be motivated to help others in need, especially those who are more vulnerable (Jas. 1:27). Disciples will value that which is important to and a priority of God, including their own moral purity, as they avoid the influences of the world (Jas. 1:27).

V. Conclusion

- A. Which type of person are you? Are you a hearer or a doer? What habits do you have for responding to the word of God when it is shared with you? Determining which type of people we are in our response to God's word is critically important. We need to know whether we have a genuine and healthy relationship with God or whether we are deceiving ourselves and are disconnected from God. The fate of our soul depends on this assessment.
- B. If we want the benefits of salvation from God's word, we must also embrace God's word as a guide for life.¹⁶ We can't get one without the other. Those who genuinely received God's word and have it implanted in them will put God's word into action. Learning from God's word and obeying it is the natural progression of how God works in the lives of those who belong to Him.

¹⁵ Douglas Moo, ["James,"](#) in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, vol. 3, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995), 1155.

¹⁶ Douglas J. Moo, [The Letter of James](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2000), 90.