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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“REMEMBERING OUR IDENTITY”

James 1:19-25

☑ One Sunday morning this spring I took a tie, draped it over my neck, brought the right side over the left side – and froze. What was the next step? I did not have a clue.

I have tied a necktie literally thousands of times, but I could not begin to visualize the process. More disturbing than that, my fingers had absolutely no muscle memory.

Over the next fifteen minutes I tried again, and again, and again. Nothing. I went without a tie that day.

If that was all there was to it, we could have laughed it off as a “senior moment.” After all, I turned 50 last year!

But that wasn’t all. I was stumbling over basic words and having trouble completing sentences. My thought processes slowed down. My attention span was painfully short. There were a few conversations which, for the life of me, I cannot remember having at all.

My internal condition had external effects. I was quick to speak harshly. I acted impulsively. Sometimes I realized it was selfish, but I did it anyway.

I wasn’t myself. Beth and the girls bore the brunt of it. (I am sorry! You deserve so much better!)

☑ It is called Chemotherapy-Induced Cognitive Impairment, or “chemo brain” for short. Up to 30% of cancer patients experience it. It generally disappears gradually over a period of four to ten years.

I still have chemo brain, and the symptoms might worsen again after more treatments. However, for now I am greatly improved. (Thank you, Lord!)

☹ But at its worst, chemo brain made me feel like I was losing *me*. It was as if my true identity was slipping away. I was afraid I would forget my real nature.

It is much worse for people with permanent brain injuries or dementia. My heart goes out to them!

Losing dates and names is a problem. As for losing your self – that is a tragedy.

? Question: Are *you* losing yourself? Is *your* identity slipping away? Are *you* forgetting your nature?

■ Please turn with me to James 1:23-24: ²³

“Those who listen to the word but do not do what it says are like people who look at their faces in a mirror ²⁴ and, after looking at themselves, go away and *immediately* forget what they look like.”

📖 Notice how rapidly this happens here. Anyone will forget what they look like if they avoid mirrors for a long time; but this person forgets εὐθιῶς [euthéōs], *at once, straightaway, instantly*.

Being unable to picture your own face is alarming. Still, there are worse things to forget, and verse 24 alludes to this.

📖 Ὅμοιος ἦν [homoios ēn] (“**what [one] looks like**”) can refer to bodily appearance. Yet it literally means “**what sort he**” or she is, {KJV} “**what manner of man he [is],**” what kind of woman she is.

☹ On the surface, James paints the comical image of someone instantly forgetting what they look like. But beneath that he portrays a person who cannot

remember *who they are* – and there is nothing funny about that.

★ In this case, the issue is not the medical condition of chemo brain or brain damage or Alzheimer's. It is the failure to act upon the Word of God.

■ For it is, verses 23-24, ²³ **“Those who listen to the word but do not do what it says”** who **“are like people who look at their faces in a mirror”** ²⁴ **and [afterward] go away and *immediately* forget what they look like.”**

{Eph 2:8} Listening to the Word is necessary, since **“It is by grace”** we are **“saved, through faith,”** and this faith (Romans 10:17) **“comes from *hearing* the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.”**

{II Tim 3:15} Hearing the Word enables us to receive God's unmerited mercy and kindness unto salvation. As the apostles contend, **“the Holy Scriptures ... are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in ... Jesus.”**

{II Tim 3:16} But this is not Scripture's only function. **“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”**

{Eph 2:9-10} These good works are neither optional nor unimportant. Right after he declares that we are saved by grace through faith rather than by works, Paul adds: **“For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”**

We are not saved *by* good works; however, we are saved *for* good works. Good works are not the *means* of

salvation; yet apart from good works, our salvation *lacks meaning*.

So, hearing someone read or teach or preach The Book is good; but it is not sufficient. Reading it is great; it is not sufficient. Studying, meditating on, and memorizing Scripture is excellent; it is not sufficient.

■ Verse 22: **“Do not merely listen to the word,”** don't simply take it in, **“and so deceive yourselves.”** Failing to act on it causes believers to forget who they are, to let go of their identity, to lose their true nature.

Too bad for them, right? Yes, but not them alone.

★ Inward forgetfulness has outward impact. It is detrimental to other people, as surely as a flare up of my chemo brain is hard on my wife and daughters.

■ The harmful repercussions are social in nature. Here James narrows it down to failing to listen, speaking impulsively, and easily losing your temper (verse 19), unrighteous anger (verse 20), and moral corruption (verse 21).

- Looking ahead he will add favoritism, bigotry, and indifference to the poor in chapter 2 {1ff, 15-16}; filthy talk, hateful speech, envy, and selfish ambition in ch. 3 {3-16}; slander, a judgmental attitude, presumption, and boasting in ch. 4 {11-16}; and socio-economic injustice in ch. 5 {1-6}.

All of these are real life social consequences of listening to the Word and then failing to do it. This is what happens when Christ Followers forget who they are.

‡ In Christ, you and I are sons and daughters of God. How are we holding onto our genuine selves? In what ways are we losing ourselves?

‡ In Christ, Beverly Covenant is a household of God. How are we growing further into our true identity? In what ways is it slipping away?

‡ In Christ, God's people are a kingdom of grace and truth. How is the Church in the USA remembering its real nature? In what ways are we forgetting it?

■ **“Those who listen to the word but do not do what it says are like people who look at their faces in a mirror and, after looking at themselves, go away and immediately forget what they look like.”** That is the bad news – and it is b-a-d.

★ But James also announces good news – and it is good, indeed! Doing the Word helps us hold onto our genuine selves, grow deeper into our true identity, and recall our real nature in Christ Jesus – all to the glory of God and the good of our neighbors!

■ Verse 22: **“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”**

■ This has broad application, but James provides us with some specific guidelines. Verses 19-20: ¹⁹ **“Dear brothers and sisters, take note ... Everyone should be quick to listen,”** (that's one guideline) **“slow to speak”** (there's another) **“and slow to become angry,”** (that's a third) ²⁰ **“because our anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.”**

Being **“quick to listen”** is not mainly about registering audible sounds. It is the habit of paying close attention to the observations, ideas, concerns, joys, and needs of others.

As for slowness of speech, we should be *cautious* about giving voice to criticism even when it is accurate. We should *refrain* from speech that is careless, imprudent, proud, or cruel. In contrast, let's be quick to say words that are true and wise and humble and affirming.

And we should be **“slow to become angry.”** It is right to get angry at immorality, injustice, and idolatry. But aren't we adept at justifying our anger when it is sinful? I am. Even when our anger is justified, aren't we tempted to speak and act sinfully because of it? I am.

■ And verse 21a: **“get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent.”**

The phrase **“moral filth and evil”** does not apply only to unspeakable iniquity committed by extreme degenerates. It is a synonym for sin in general, including my sin and yours.

- The one sin we all have in common is pride. Pride makes us susceptible to **“evil desire”** **“Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death”** (1:14-15).

Regarding: Scripture, pride says: *‘The important thing is to know it. You understand a lot more than most people.’*

Regarding Scripture, pride says, *'Some people need the comfort of following the Scriptures. You are fine without it.'*

Regarding Scripture, pride says, *'Your struggles and temptations are extraordinarily difficult. The word cannot help you.'*

When we listen to pride, we fail to do what the Word says – and little by little, we lose ourselves. Our true identity slips away. We forget our real nature.

■ James reveals the antidote in verse 21b: **“humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”** Humility says, *'Knowing is not enough. You are not a Christ Follower if you do not heed the Scriptures. It is the way to life with God.'*

When we listen to this voice, we do what the Word says. When we do what the Word says we hold onto our genuine selves, grow further into our true identity, and remember our true nature in Jesus.

“Those who listen to the word but do not do what it says are like people who look at their faces in a mirror and, after looking at themselves, go away and immediately forget what they look like.”

“Don't merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”

James 1:19-25 is the Word of the Lord.