

Three Important Relationships

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[0 : 00] And if you've been with us so far in this letter of James, you'll know that he's been introducing different themes for us in this first chapter.

And what James does, as any good wisdom teacher does, is he introduces the theme, says a little bit on it, and then he will circle back to these themes as the letter progresses, saying more each time.

And so as one author puts it, he is like somebody who is bringing us to an orchard, and he's bringing our first, he's getting us to visit this orchard on the first occasion in chapter one.

And then on the subsequent occasions, he shows us more fruit to harvest than you'd noticed before. And so what he's doing in chapter one, he's introduced some themes. And this morning, what he wants us to dwell on, what he wants us to think about, is three relationships.

So he wants us to think about three relationships. So he wants us to think about the relationship between hearing and speaking. He wants us to think about the relationship between hearing and doing.

[1 : 14] and he wants us to think about the relationship between speaking and doing. So those are the three relationships we're going to think about this morning. So let's dwell first of all on this idea of hearing and speaking, the relationship between those two things.

As James says in verse 19, My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this. Everyone should be quick to listen. Slow to anger, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.

So quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. Now as we think about this verse, we want to recognize that James is addressing these people as loved brothers and sisters.

So it's interesting that James, who is a half-brother of the Lord Jesus, did not draw attention to the fact that he is a half-brother of the Lord Jesus. But he is drawing attention to the fact that these are brothers and sisters in the Lord, of James, who are dearly loved brothers and sisters, loved by James and loved by God.

They are people who have heard about Jesus and who have responded to the good news of Jesus. And so James is speaking to them as such.

[2 : 49] And he's saying, look, brothers and sisters, you are to be quick to hear and slow to speak. Quick to hear and slow to speak.

Now what would it look like for us to be quick to hear? It's like a race between hearing and speaking. And hearing is always winning the race. Hearing is always out in front.

And speaking is kind of lagging behind. So if we were to be quick to hear, at the most basic level, that would mean if somebody is speaking to us, we're not interrupting them.

We're listening to what they have to say until they've finished saying what they want to say. And the reason is because the moment, of course, that we start speaking is the moment that we stop listening to them and start listening to ourselves.

And of course, you can interrupt somebody by saying something out loud. Or you can also interrupt somebody, even though they might not realize it, by starting to think in your own mind how you're going to respond to what they're saying.

[4 : 06] And so after five seconds of somebody speaking, if you are already formulating your answer, the chances are you haven't heard the rest of what they're going to say.

And so James is saying we have to be slow to speak, quick to listen, slow to speak. Or if we're listening to somebody and we get distracted by the dinner or our plans for tomorrow, James is saying we need to be quick to listen to them.

So by the end of them speaking, either you want to be in a place where you've understood what they've said well so that you could repeat it back to them and they would say, yes, that is exactly what I've said.

You've heard me well. Or if we feel like we haven't heard them, we have got distracted, we have been thinking about other things, or there's bits that they've said that we haven't understood, that we ask them, what did you mean by that?

Why do you say that? Can you tell me a little bit more about that? And what that means is you're still hearing them as they say a little bit more.

[5 : 19] And it's funny when you think about it because we get to listen to ourselves 24-7, don't we? We are with our thoughts all the time. And so when we are speaking to somebody, it's an opportunity to hear somebody else's thoughts, somebody else's heart on something.

And so James wants us to be quick to listen and slow to speak. Not that we never speak, but that we listen more than we speak. It was interesting during the week when there were all those scenes in the government and quite a few people were quick to speak.

And Verona Murphy, who was the chair of the government, or chair of the government, she was kind of in the firing line at one point and people were wanting her to say something.

So RTE and other news outlets were wanting her to make a statement and she wasn't saying anything. There was no statement coming from her office. And it wasn't until the next day that she issued a statement.

Now, whatever you think about all that happened in the government during the week, it was just interesting to see the sense of impatience. People wanted her to speak and she wasn't saying anything.

[6 : 36] She didn't issue any statement. And you realize that we live in a culture where people want you to be quick. To say something. Get your opinion out there. We want to hear what they have to say.

And to pause or to be slow to speak is actually quite counter-cultural at times. To bide your time, to hear the other person out, and to speak when you've got your thoughts gathered.

Part of the reason why James wants us to be slow to speak, quick to listen, slow to speak, is because of how it can be tied up with anger.

So he wants us to be slow to speak and slow to anger. You know, when we think we have heard somebody but we haven't really heard them, that's when misunderstandings start to arise.

When we don't hear them out, when there's confusion, when there's motives being questioned, when we are jumping in with what we want to say, that is when anger starts to grow.

[7 : 43] That is where anger starts to simmer. And so James clearly connects these two things, that if we are to be quick to hear and slow to speak, we are also to be slow to anger.

And the reason for this is because, as he says in verse 20, human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. Human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

So we're in a culture where anger is taken as something that gets results. So if you want to get results, you get angry.

The person who shouts the loudest, the person who turns up the volume, the person whose voice is out over everybody else's, that can get results. People can rally around. People might even change their behavior to come in line with what is being said.

It gets attention when the volume is turned up. Human anger can seem like a good tool in the toolbox if you want to get the job done.

[8 : 59] And you know, we can be tempted to approach life the same way, where we think, well, I want to get this result, and the way to get that result is to get angry, to get my opinion across at all costs.

We might desperately want to see our children change. And the temptation is, well, if I get angry, they'll change. And they will for a time.

But it won't last. Because once the anger is gone, the change will be gone. We might desperately want our boss to hear us at work, and the temptation is to think, well, if I shout the loudest, I'll be the one who's heard.

Or we might think, well, I want my parents to do things differently, and so I'll be demanding. It's tempting to buy into this idea that anger gets results.

It gets what we want. But any results that it gets will only be self-centered or self-serving. And what will grow in us if we take this approach of being angry, quick to anger, what will grow in us is not a good thing.

[10 : 22] It's not the righteousness of God. James wants us to hear that clearly, that human anger does not produce the righteousness of God, the righteousness that God desires.

And he realizes that there is a connection between how we speak and the anger that we feel. The more we turn up the volume, the more it feeds into our anger, and the more anger we feel, the more we will turn up the volume.

So James says, we are to be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to be angry. And because anger does not produce the righteousness of God, therefore, verse 20, wouldn't get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent.

Isn't it amazing that James is talking to beloved brothers and sisters? He's talking to people who have heard the good news of Jesus, how Jesus has died for their sins, how they are forgiven in Christ, how they stand justified before God.

And yet he needs to say to them to get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, that even though they stand justified before God because of what Jesus has done, that doesn't mean that they're walking closely with him.

[11 : 52] that doesn't mean that their lives are perfect and pure. In fact, he's saying it could be the case that even as those who are loved by God, there are things coming out of our mouths, things going on in our hearts that are not good, that are filth, as James says it.

You know what it's like when kids come in after playing outside in the mud and they're just covered from head to toe in mud and you're thinking, I can't even put that coat in the washing machine because the washing machine will be destroyed because of the filth that's on the coat.

And James wants us to realise that even as beloved brothers and sisters, loved children of God, there can be things going on in our hearts and our minds that are filthy before God.

And you wonder, is James being over the top in this language? Well, he's not saying that every single thing we do or every single thing we say is like this, but he's saying it can be the case.

It can be the case. And of course, it depends, doesn't it, on your standard of cleanliness or purity or holiness.

[13 : 14] whenever anybody in the Bible encounters God who is holy, holy, holy, their response is to recoil from that because they realise their own sin.

You think of Isaiah and he has this vision of God and there are these seraphim which are like angels that are burning that they're so pure and holy and these burning angels cannot even look at God who is holy, holy, holy and Isaiah himself says, woe is me, I'm a man of unclean lips.

Or you think of the apostle Peter when he encounters Jesus and he says, depart from me Lord for I'm a sinful man. And James is saying to us that apart from Christ and unless we're living for Christ, there can be filth, moral filth and wickedness going on in our lives and our hearts in a prevailing way and he says we need to get rid of it.

We need to get rid of it. Not in order to make ourselves right with God but because we have been declared right with God. And the way we get rid of it or the other side of this coin is by receiving God's word.

In verse 21, he says, humbly accept the word planted in you which can save you. James doesn't want us just to be people who hear others.

[14 : 43] He wants us to be people who hear God. And how different this phrasing is, humbly accepting the word planted in you to somebody who is quick to speak and quick to anger.

There's a humility to accept and receive the word of God. To hear what he has to say about who we are, about who he is, about our need for a saviour.

And again, James is saying this to people who have already received the word of God but what he's highlighting for them is even though you have received it and believed it and accepted it and have been saved by it.

The word of God is the way in which you continue to be made holy and pure and presentable and acceptable to God. As one author puts it, the word that has saved us cannot be gotten rid of.

We need to continually accept humbly the word of God that has been planted in us as his children. And so James draws our attention to this relationship between hearing and speaking that we are to be quick to hear especially God's word, slow to speak and slow to anger.

[16 : 09] and we need to ask the question of ourselves are we quick to speak or are we quick to hear?

And James will draw us back to this idea. He's going to compare next this relationship between hearing and doing. So we've had the relationship between hearing and speaking, the relationship between hearing and doing.

James is saying we need to hear others but that isn't enough. We need to hear God but that isn't enough. He says we need to do the word.

In verse 22 do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Do what it says. I was at a conference on Thursday and the conference was about prayer.

And it was a great conference and the guy who was preaching at it spent hours teaching us from God's word about prayer in lots of different ways.

[17 : 18] And as I listened to him I was thinking yes I agree. Yes this is true. And he wasn't just warming my brain he was warming my heart and I was listening and saying absolutely and I could actually tell you lots of the different things that he said at the conference about prayer on Thursday.

But James wants us to realize that it's not enough to just hear it we need to do it. And so if I've gone away from that conference and not prayed then James is saying here's what I'm actually like.

Verse 23 anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and after looking at himself goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

James wants me to hear and he wants you to hear that being hearers of the word is good but it's not enough because the purpose of God's word is that we would be doers of the word.

it's not enough for me to come away from a conference like that and be able to remember what has been said. Unless I practice what has been preached then James would say I've actually forgotten it and that's the word he uses as he uses this illustration of a man who looks at his face in a mirror and immediately forgets what he looks like.

[18 : 53] For James you could actually say that the opposite of forgetting is not remembering the opposite of forgetting is actually doing.

It's when we do what we have heard that we remember in the biblical sense that it is actually affecting how we are living. James' concern is that we would not just be hearers of the word but doers and so in verse 25 he says whoever looks not in a mirror now but intently into the perfect law in other words at God's word at the Bible that gives freedom and continues in it not forgetting what they have heard there's that forgetting word again but doing it.

James is saying that as dearly beloved brothers and sisters children of God our interaction with his word is one of hearing and doing and so we constantly need to be thinking to ourselves what difference does this make in my life?

What difference does what I have heard make in my life? What do I need to change as a result of what I have heard from God's word or read in God's word?

And the reason James is saying this to us is not to like heap guilt and shame on us the reason he's saying this is because he wants us to have a blessed life he says that at the end of verse 25 they will be blessed in what they do the consistent teaching of the Bible is that the one who lives God's way will be blessed not materially necessarily but spiritually living in his world according to his word is the life that we were made for so you think of Psalm 1 as the classic example blessed is the one who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the seat of scoffers or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of scoffers where's his delight it's in the law of the Lord he's like a tree planted by streams of water that brings forth fruit it's this image of blessing and James wants us to realize that if we have been listening listening listening listening listening to God's word and we're wondering where's the fruit in my life it may be that we have been listeners but not doers

[21 : 39] James is calling us to be doers of God's word so that we would be blessed I built a bit of furniture recently and it was an Ikea bit of furniture as you can probably guess I built this piece of furniture a number of times before like the same type of item and so this time I picked up the instructions and glanced at them and then just threw them to one side and I got to building it and I made a mistake early on in building it that I didn't realize and so by the end of it I wasn't able to fit the last bit of the furniture on to complete what I was building and so I had to take it all apart and I started again and this time I still didn't look at the instructions but this time I didn't make the same mistake I made a very similar mistake but not the same mistake and so

I built and built and built and then at the end I realized I'm after making another mistake and I took it all apart and this time I took out the instructions and looked at them and followed the instructions and by the time I'd completed the bit of furniture I actually felt blessed and I used that word carefully because it was good this is what the instructions had intended for me to achieve this is what the instructions had intended for the way in which they intended my life to go for the last hour and a half and when we have God's word before us and we not just hear it but do it what happens even if it's hard even if we make decisions that we would not otherwise want to make we get to this point of blessing of flourishing that even though our lives may feel like they're falling apart that living in obedience to him is what we were made for and it gives us a joy and a delight and a blessing that holds us even though we face trials of various kinds challenges that we would otherwise not want and so I reflect on the conference on prayer and I ask do I remember it and the answer to that is well if I remember it

I'm doing what I have heard we come and listen to God's word on a Sunday including myself and we ask do we remember what was said last Sunday and the answer to that is not so much whether we can say what was said but whether we've done what was said that's the way of blessing that James sets before us and so James draws attention to the second relationship for us that we are not just to be hearers of the word but doers of the word the last relationship he highlights for us is this relationship between speaking and doing so we've had hearing and speaking we've had hearing and doing and now we have speaking and doing verse 26 those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves and so James now is back to this idea of speaking he says that those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves us now I'm not a horse person at all but I do know that a rein or a bridle is there in order to control the horse and some horses you need to keep a tighter rein on it so that they won't go places that they're not supposed to go and you know

James is going to pick up on this imagery of a bridle or a rein later on again in this letter but he just touches on it now for us wanting us to realize that the tongue what we say needs to have a tight rein kept on it if we don't bridle a horse it'll just go wherever it wants and if we don't keep a tight rein on our speech we will say things that we will regret we will say things that will hurt others we will say things that as James maps out later on in this letter will be destructive and damaging and so he wants us to realize that if we consider ourselves religious but don't keep a tight rein on our tongue our religion is worthless he says that any claim that we have of a relationship to Christ is empty if we're not willing to rein in what we say if we're just giving free rein to our speech without any concern for the damage that it does and you know

James is using strong language here when he says that that person's religion is worthless you think of the phrase sticks and stones may break your bones I've never broken a bone but what is it six weeks in a cast and your bone is healed again and then the phrase goes on to say words will never hurt me and that is so untrue it is hard to fathom how it could be said to anybody because words create wounds that last a lifetime I remember reading a story of a man who had been just interviewed in New York in Central Park a guy comes up to him asks him about his life this guy is a middle aged man and he recounts the story of his dad when he was a three year old and what his dad did when he was a three year old was his dad stood him up on the kitchen counter kitchen cabinet and he stood his son here and the dad stood over here and he said now jump and

[28:10] I'll catch you and the son jumped now it wasn't too high but the dad didn't catch him and the son was obviously very upset by this and then the dad said to him never trust anyone and 50 years later this guy was still picking up the pieces of those three words spoken by his dad to him this is why James wants us to realize if we're not willing to reign this in we cannot claim to be followers of Christ in any meaningful sense we will not do it perfectly but if we just give it free reign James wants us to realize that our religion is worthless and you know as we reflect on this we have to realize some are quicker to speak than others just by temperament just by personality that's just either wired but the comparison

James wants us to make is not between this person and this person or that person and myself the comparison James wants us to make is between what would our speech be like if it had a free reign and what is it like because I keep a tight reign on it there are things that I say that I will not say I will not say them because I am a follower of Christ and this person is somebody made in the image of God and I'm not going to say it I'm going to keep a tight reign I'm going to bite my tongue there are things that we will not say no matter how much we are tempted to say no matter how good it would feel to say it we will keep a tight reign on our tongue there are patterns of speech that we will no longer indulge gossip slander lies James says we are to keep a tight reign on our tongue

James uses this word religion and it's rarely used funnily enough in the New Testament and it's rarely used in Christian circles I think part of the reason is because sometimes it's negative connotations and James says if somebody is speaking in this way not keeping a tight reign on their tongue you can understand why the word religion has a negative connotation but he says here's what religion in a pure form looks like if you want to use the word religion and you want to use it in a pure way verse 27 religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this to look after orphans and widows in their distress James says this is what pure faultless religion looks like is he saying it's perfect no but he's saying here's a religion that is living consistent with the call of

Christ on their lives and isn't it interesting to dwell on the fact that this person is moving away from the loud the volume the speaking in anger type arena and they're moving towards widows and orphans those who don't always have a voice aren't always heard are sometimes overlooked and you can imagine that in our society there are others who you could put in this category and James is saying if we're belonging to Christ if our religion is pure and undefiled if there's a consistency between who we are and the way we live you'll see followers of Jesus moving towards those who are vulnerable moving towards those who don't have a voice listening to them hearing them well because we have a father in heaven

James highlights the fatherhood of God religion that God our father accepts God is repeatedly spoken of in the Bible as a father to the fatherless a defender of widows and so as his people this is something that characterizes us that we would move towards those who are as one book puts it the least the last the lost that we would move towards people like this and that we would move away from the world verse 27 religion that God our father accepts as pure and faultless is this to keep oneself from being polluted by the world now when James talks about the world he's not so much thinking about the people in the world he's thinking about characteristics that would be described as worldly he comes back to this in chapter 4 he talks about it as fighting and quarreling he talks about desiring things that we shouldn't have so that we might spend them on our own pleasures in James his mind this is worldliness and this is what he's thinking about in chapter 1 when he says we are those who would move away from that

[33 : 47] James wants us to be slow to speak and quick to hear and quick to move towards those who are vulnerable and quick to move away from anything that is not pleasing to God James is going to circle back to each of these themes he has set them up for us we will return to them but he wants us to hear it loud and clear as those who are beloved by God who have been bought at great cost who stand justified before God in the blood of Jesus that he has declared us holy and right and pure and good because of what Christ has done that the life that we are called to is one of goodness and holiness and purity a life where we will be quick to hear slow to speak slow to anger a life where we will not just hear what God says but we will do it a life where we will care for those who are often unheard or overlooked we will move towards them and we will move away from anything that is not pleasing to God that's what

James calls us to that's what we are called to as dear brothers and sisters in Christ who has God as our father who long to know his blessing in our lives and so this is what we are called to pursue and so let's pray and ask him to help us to do what he has called us to voy voy!