

Be a Doer of the Word

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[0 : 00] you can give to a person is to say about them, you're all talk and no action. From my experience, most of us are better at talking than we are at doing.

A small minority are better at doing than talking and they are to be respected. However, as Christians, we don't ever want to be those who talk a good game but do nothing about it. As those who talk about God's love but don't love others. As those who talk about God's forgiveness but don't forgive others.

As those who talk about God's grace but don't show grace to others. Yes, with considerable shame, I'm sure many of us can say, we're a lot better at talking than we are at doing.

Now the baseline from which James is working in his book is that his readers are Christians. They are believing in Jesus Christ and in his gospel.

[1 : 07] They have faith in him. It would be a mistake to pit Jesus and Paul against James. Jesus and Paul, of course, emphasising the primacy of believing and justification by faith alone, not by works.

The baseline from which James is working is that it's not that we're saved by faith and works. But James is assuming that his readers already have faith in Jesus.

And he wants to press us on to express our faith in Jesus in good works. After all, as someone has wisely said, we are saved by faith alone.

But the faith that saves is never alone. It is always accompanied by good works. As James has already said in verse 21, it is the word which is implanted within us, the gospel, which is able to save us.

So we cannot pit Paul against James. And yet, there's a temptation, is there not? As those who believe in and proclaim the doctrine of justification by faith alone, in Christ alone, through grace alone, that we talk much, but do little.

[2 : 33] That we don't live out our salvation, expresses in good works. That we are hearers of the word only and not doers. Surely this is part and parcel of what it means to be wise in the Christian life.

That we put into practice the word we hear and at times so passionately talk about. The foolish Christian is a mere hearer of the word.

Whereas the wise Christian is a hearer and a doer. That then is the message of James 1, 22 through 25. What it means to be foolish with the word.

Namely, to be merely a hearer. And what it means to be wise with the word. Namely, to be a hearer and a doer. We're going to recognize what that word is.

The gospel of Jesus Christ. And we're going to learn that in hearing and doing the word in the way of wisdom, there is much blessing for us as Christians. So first then, we want to consider foolishness of the word.

[3 : 42] And secondly, we're going to consider wisdom in the word. Now, think of this message at a very personal level indeed. This is directed toward each of us.

In Glasgow City Free Church, we all have three opportunities per week to hear the word being preached. Likewise, each one of us, I would hope, reads our Bibles many more times during the week than that.

So the question for us is not so much how much of the word are we hearing. But how much of the word are we doing? First of all then, foolishness and the word.

Foolishness and the word. James begins, Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and after looking at himself, goes away and immediately

forgets what he looks like.

Now, I guess of all the figures of speech James uses, perhaps this is the most famous. That of a man who, having looked at his face in a mirror, goes away and forgets what he looks like.

[4 : 59] Judging by the frequency with which our teenagers look into mirrors, this seems to be a big problem for them. They must be very forgetful indeed, given that they look at themselves in a mirror at every opportunity.

But James' message isn't directed toward Christian teenagers any more than it's directed toward Christian pensioners. It's a message for us all.

It is entirely possible that the most foolish people in the world aren't those outside the church who have never heard the word of the gospel, but those inside the church who, having heard, do not do what it says.

That's real foolishness. To have a mirror to look into, but to do nothing about your appearance. The real fool is the one who merely listens to the word.

The emphasis being on the word merely. If you are a mere listener, then you're a fool. According to James, the fool who merely listens and does not do, the Christian who's all talk and no action, is guilty of two things.

[6 : 18] Self-deception and self-forgetfulness. Self-deception and self-forgetfulness.

Self-deception, first of all. Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves.

And so deceive yourselves. It's one thing to deceive others. It's altogether another thing to deceive ourselves, but both comes natural to us as human beings.

If they didn't, God would not have devoted at least one of his commandments to the truthfulness of our speech as a community. You must not bear false witness.

But I reckon for every one person we deceive, we deceive ourselves ten times. The Bible is filled with examples of deception and self-deception.

For example, Genesis 29, 25. Jacob complains to Laban, his father-in-law, as to how he has been deceived. He thought he'd only have to work seven years for Rachel, but Laban deceived him into working 14.

[7 : 26] Deception and self-deception are the names of the devil because his name means the deceiver. The word the NIV translates as deceive is one of those Greek compound words we encounter so much in the New Testament, a word made up of two words.

Literally, it means to reckon beside or think against what we might call in today's world to think wrong. Here's a man who was plain wrong thinking.

It's not that the word he hears is wrong. It's that he thinks about it wrong. As we'll see in a moment, there's a very important stage between hearing and doing, which involves thinking and attitude.

This man hears the same gospel everywhere else does. But he draws the wrong conclusions about it and about himself. He deceives himself.

He deceives himself as to the nature of the word of the gospel God has planted within us. That word which, according to verse 18, is the word through which we have been given birth.

[8 : 41] He deceives himself as to the nature of the demands of the gospel. Demands which, at the same time, are simpler and yet more difficult than any other conditions God could have imposed.

That it's by faith alone a man is saved and not by works. And perhaps more than anything else, if he's a mere hearer of the word and not a doer, he deceives himself as to his salvation.

He thinks he's a Christian. He thinks he has eternal life and all his sins have been forgiven. But there is no evidence of saving faith at work in his life because he is not putting into practice what he hears.

Jesus said, by their fruits you shall know them. Are there fruits in your life?

Are you progressively gaining more control over how quick you are to listen, how slow you are to speak, and how slow you are to become angry?

[9 : 47] I'm not asking whether you are perfect in every way. I'm asking whether any forward progress is being made.

Are you merely hearing the word but failing to put it into practice? If so, beware of the danger of self-deception, of easy believism, of cheap grace.

But the second thing the foolish hearer of the word is guilty of is self-forgetfulness, self-forgetfulness. The biggest problem with merely hearing the word and not putting it into practice is that of forgetfulness.

The foolish man looks at his face in a mirror, he goes away, and he immediately forgets what he looks like. Now, we need to understand something about the word forget as it's used in the Bible. For us, to forget something is for it to fall out of our memory. So we make an appointment, and we fail to keep it because we forgot we'd made it.

[10:57] We have an expression, it slipped my mind. That's what we understand in the UK when we use the word forget. But that's only part of what James is talking about here with the man in the mirror.

The man's forgotten what his face looks like. He's forgotten that his mirror told him that he needed to have a shave and a haircut. It slipped his mind.

It's fallen out of his memory. He couldn't have been listening very carefully if what he's heard could be forgotten so quickly. So he heard the gospel proclaiming our need for repentance and faith.

But the moment he closed his Bible, it slipped out of his mind. He forgot what his face looked like. But as I say, this is only part of what James is talking about when he speaks of forgetfulness and the man in the mirror.

To forget in New Testament times was not so much for something to slip your mind or fall out of your memory, but for you not to put into practice what you knew.

[12:12] You knew that the gospel commands repentance and faith. You knew it. But you did not repent and you did not believe. To use technical language, the problem wasn't cognitive up there.

It was volitional, what you wanted to do. You knew, but you didn't do. That's what it means in New Testament to forget.

So this man sees his face in a mirror and he goes away knowing that he needs a shave and a haircut. And all the way through the day, he knows he needs a shave and a haircut, but he does nothing about it.

He does not go to the Turkish barber and take action. He is a fool. He is an idiot. He knows what the Bible says about resisting temptation, but he gives into it anyway.

He knows what the Bible says about fellowship, but he keeps to himself anyway. He knows what the Bible says about prayer, but he never prays.

[13:24] He's self-forgetful. That man is a fool. He is forgetful in that not only do the words of Scripture slip his mind, but even when he knows them, he does not do them.

He is in danger of deceiving himself. He can have no confidence that he is a Christian at all. He is a mere listener.

He is all talk, no action. Okay, if that's foolishness in the Word, then what about wisdom and the Word? There is foolishness in the Word, but there's also wisdom in the Word, secondly.

Earlier in our chapter, James has spoken about wisdom that comes from God, a wisdom that we linked with understanding the place of trials in the Christian life and knowing where to go to find help.

But this is not the only wisdom we need or need to receive from God. We need wisdom to know how to deal with his Word.

[14:34] We need God's grace to be wise as we listen and obey God's Word. And it seems to me from this passage, James 1, 22, 25, that the wise Christian is characterized by three stances toward God's Word.

They are hearers of God's Word. They are enthusiasts for God's Word. And they are doers of God's Word. And, you know, in all truth, we could just as easily substitute Psalm 1 into James' letter here. Psalm 1 we all know so well. Because the basics of both passages are very similar. First of all, then, the wise Christian is a hearer of the Word.

He is a hearer of the Word. Consider with me the way in which the wise Christian hears God's Word. We read in verse 25, he looks intently into it.

Intently. He is looking into the same mirror as the foolish man, but the wise man is looking intently into it. The word James uses here means literally to stoop down to look.

[15:50] It's the word used of Peter. Here's a Christian who is listening to the Word of the Gospel with intent, eagerly, not merely listening to it.

Yes, it's the same word, both the wise Christian and the foolish Christian hear, but it's the quality of their hearing which is different. I clearly remember Professor Donald MacLeod being asked during my college years in Edinburgh whether he thought the standard of preaching in the free church had gone down in recent years.

That's the question he was asked by one of the students. Has the standard of preaching gone down in the free church in recent years? And I guess that student expected him to say, well, of course it has.

The old preachers were so much deeper. Well, he thought about it for a moment, as Donald does whenever he's asked any question. And then he carefully replied, perhaps the standard of preaching has gone down, but the standard of listening most definitely has.

The standard of listening most definitely has gone down. Maybe it's soundbites on social media, maybe it's a changing teaching style, but it would seem far more difficult now to listen to a 30-minute sermon than it once was.

[17 : 29] If you find it difficult, then why don't you try taking notes or find some other way to listen? Perhaps pray that God would not only help the minister to speak well, but that he would help you to listen well.

Do you find it difficult to look intently into God's word? When you read the Bible by yourself, does it go over your head or are you wrestling with it? Are you really engaging with the word of the gospel in your daily Bible readings?

And perhaps at some point, it would be really great if we could give each other some helpful hints and pointers to resources which can help us to look more intently into the word of God.

Can I recommend just one which I've found very helpful over the years? It is to write out the passage of scripture you are reading. Write it out by hand, slowly and neatly, and then read over what you have written.

Be a good hearer of the word. Look intently into it and pray that God would give you understanding. But one more thing before we move on here.

[18 : 47] Look at what James says. That the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues to do this, and continues to do this.

You know, enduring and persevering have been prominent themes throughout James chapter 1, and now he turns our attention to enduring in our study of the word of God.

We don't give up after day one because it's hard going. We keep going. We continue to look intently into the word of the gospel, and we do not give up.

Secondly, the wise Christian is a hearer of the word. Secondly, the wise Christian is an enthusiast for the word. He is an enthusiast for the word.

Now, when I talk about being an enthusiast for the word of the gospel, what I mean is that if we are to be wise in our approach to the word, then we must develop a certain attitude toward it.

[19 : 49] We must view it from a certain perspective. It is, according to James, the perfect law that gives freedom. The perfect law that gives freedom.

Now, remember, James is writing to Jewish Christians who would understand better than we do today the world into which he was writing.

James here is not referring purely to the Mosaic law, the Jewish law, the Ten Commandments, and all the various laws of the Old Testament. We don't have time to enter into the various views regarding this phrase, the perfect law that gives freedom.

But what I do want to suggest to you is that it forms Jesus' own presentation of the gospel. Jesus' own presentation of the gospel. Because without gospel, that law does not bring freedom.

It brings slavery. It brings slavery. Slavery to a system which condemns us, though none of us could ever have kept it perfectly. James uses the word law here as another way of referring to the word which is used throughout the rest of the passage.

[21 : 06] The word of truth in verse 18. The word which is implanted within us in verse 21. And the word which can save us.

No less than they. The perfect law of Jesus. That is what the Christian must study and do.

This perfect law which gives freedom is given to us through Jesus Christ. The Christ who himself bore our sinful breaking of the law in his own body in the tree.

The Christ who now writes his law upon our hearts and who enables us by his spirit to keep it.

There is freedom here in this perfect law that gives freedom.

The freedom of faith and repentance. The freedom of the gospel and of grace. This is the law of forgiveness and restoration. This is the law of strength in our weakness and hope for our despair.

[22 : 10] To study the Bible only for what it commands us to do enslaves and does not bring freedom. Rather it is the whole of the Bible.

Both what God tells us he's done through Christ and now what he commands. Which gives freedom. It is the freedom of the expert musician like Heidi or Matthias or Helena. Who through years of practicing can play any tune they like on their chosen instrument. It is the liberty of the athlete.

Who through disciplined training is able to run with the freedom of the stag on the hill. It is the freedom of the Christian. Who by the grace of the spirit can now control his anger. And is keeping a tight rein in his tongue. You see to be an enthusiast for the word is to see it from the perspective of the gospel. This is the word of Christ and about Christ.

[23 : 22] This is the word which by faith and repentance will liberate us from the power of sin and the fear of death. That's why we devote ourselves to looking so intently into the word of God.

Not just because it's an inspired book. Not just because through the written word. Not just because it's a wonderful book. But it's because through the written word.

We have communion with the living word. Jesus Christ himself. He's an enthusiast for the word. And then finally. The wise Christian.

Is a doer of the word. A doer of the word. Ultimately. After everything we've said. The fruit of a man's faith is known by his works.

After all that's the entire message of the book of James. Is it not? Faith at work. Faith at works. And this is how we know we have saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[24 : 25] That we put into practice what he's teaching us in his word. This is how we know that we are, to use the language of verse 25, doing it.

That we're not all talk. But that we're action also. To translate the clause literally in verse 25. We are doers of works. And so we hear the Lord Jesus calling us to faith and repentance.

And we don't just talk about it. We do it. We turn away from our sin. And all we know to be wrong about the way we think.

And the way we act. And the way we speak. And we turn toward his grace. And he calls us to love our neighbour as ourselves. The so-called royal law of James 2.8.

And so we show genuine love to those who are different from us. The poor show love to the rich. In the churches to which James is writing.

[25 : 26] The Gentile shows love to the Jew. They love each other in thought and in word and in deed. They are doers of the word. They're not just listeners.

You know, it is really something of a surprise. When those who talk most passionately about the sovereign grace of God towards sinners.

Fail to show even a modicum of a similar grace to fellow sinners. It really is something of a shock. When those who talk most creatively and inventively about the love of Christ fail to show love to other Christians. It really is something of a surprise.

It really is something of a surprise. When those who talk most fervently about the word of God. Leave their Bibles unread and unstudied.

[26 : 30] Gathering dust on a shelf and taken down only when other people can see them. To look impressive. When I was a student in Aberdeen.

We used to love going to our weekly FCYA on a Friday evening. The Free Church Youth Association. Every year we'd have an FCYA reunion.

Where we'd meet up with all the other FCYAs in Scotland. And I remember one year it being held in Glasgow. It was probably 1994. And some of you will remember it.

I had never been in Glasgow before at this stage, by the way. First ever time. I knew most of the St Vincent Street young people. But there were a group of young people from another Free Church in Glasgow.

It was not Partick Highland, which is now Downvale. It was another one. Whom I met for the first time. Instinctively, I realised they were of a different kind.

[27 : 34] Ah, they fear looked apart. They wore their lovely big black suits and they carried huge big King James Bibles. They were the cool cats.

But behind the scenes I could tell something was very different with them. Because for all they looked apart on Sunday morning. The night before I knew they'd been out drinking too much. They could discuss the finest speculations of dogmatic theology. They looked down their noses at the rest of us and called us liberals. But I knew that they were hypocrites.

And they knew that they were hypocrites also. That they could talk a good talk. But that's all they were ever doing. Talk. To my knowledge, not one of those young people from that Free Church continues to walk in faithfulness with Jesus today.

Never mind them. Lord, let it never be that we merely listen to the word. Deceiving ourselves and forgetting to put it into practice.

[28 : 51] Lord, give us the humility of your grace and your wisdom, which looks intently into the law of the gospel and then puts it into practice. Brings us back, does it not, to that great hymn written by Robin Mark.

All for Jesus. All for Jesus. Where one line says, It is only in your will that I am set free. It is only in your will, Jesus, that I am set free.

Here then is true blessedness for the child of God. Here then is the grace of Christ for us all. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray.

Lord, our loving Heavenly Father, we thank you for the perfect law that gives freedom. Christ's own interpretation of all things.

We thank you that he died to take away our sinful transgressions of your law. Lord, that he has written his law upon our hearts and made us new people and given us his spirit to empower us for obedience.

[30 : 12] We thank you for his perfect law of faith and repentance. Repentance and restoration. As we come to this evening, O Lord, we pray that you would help us not to be mere listeners to the word and so deceive ourselves in forgetting what your word has said.

Help us, O Lord, to be hearers of the word, enthusiasts for the word, and doers of the word. We ask these things in your grace and for your name.

Amen. It's good to see you all this evening. Let me remind you of our weekly activities. Morning evening, 7.30.

Tuesday, Friday, 2 to 3. Chat time. And then Wednesday evening, half 7 to half 8, our prayer meeting. We're going to close by singing the hymn, When peace like a river attendeth my way, When sorrows like sea billows roll, Whatever my lot thou hast taught me to know, It is well, it is well, it is well with my soul.

It is well, it is well, it is well with my soul. When peace like a river attendeth my way, When sorrows like sea billows roll, What sorrows like people roll, Whatever derby wiper's joy Mhagun.

[31 : 48] What ails you? Windows 12 think with sorrows like sea billows roll means that Wheel kariat would be in the zone to offenses and release. Were you the [redacted] for templeazione?

Can be sure? Once more, give sorrows like oh, Are you quel egalites are all the way, Are you alive? And there is no way of gratitude to the hairling. It is true for gentlemen. When sorrows like us will be in the zone to the next day under the [redacted], Maiv.

Since death, my mother may have brought together for incentives,