

Do the Word

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[0 : 00] We continue in our series in James, and if you'd like to have it in front of you, please open the Bible to where Bob just read to us, 1011, page 1011.

I arrived home from Australia a few days before Bron came home in January, and all I noticed was that it was cold and dark and wet, and the house was cold and dark and wet because the heating had broken.

But a few days later when I brought Bron home, before she'd entered the front door, she said, look, she said, the crocuses are out, spring's coming, and they were, and I'd completely missed them.

And the point of today's reading is James does not want us to miss the crocuses. So last week we finished with verse 18, where James pictures Christians as like little crocuses growing early, not just signs of spring, but signs of a new creation.

You remember verse 18? This is the very verse before our passage. Of his own will, just out of the goodness of his own heart, God brought us forth, that is, new birth, by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

[1 : 24] The reason that God has done all this is so that we would be first fruits, we would be the first little new thing growing up in the old creation, as signs of the new creation. In fact, we would be guarantees of the new creation.

It's an amazing thought, and it's a very big picture thought, that when God looks at the world, he's not happy with it as it is. And he's promised a day of liberation, when he will free the world from its captivity to darkness and decay and death.

And he's going to bring creation into a whole new creation. And to show that he's begun that work now, he has taken one creature from all his creation, human beings, and planted us back in that old creation, so that we would blossom as a guarantee that the new creation is going to happen.

And so part of the reason for being Christians, in James' mind, is that we would show the life of the world to come, which I think is just amazing. So every time we come and we hear God's word, what's at stake for us is not, you know, a minor ethical adjustment, or having some inspirational thoughts that will last us till Monday.

We're part of God's eternal cosmic plan. And we are to show out the life of the new creation, here in this creation, and to be crocuses.

[2 : 52] I couldn't think of a more manly picture. I'm sorry. But I happen to like crocuses, so take a look. If you can think of a better one, tell me before the next service. So today we come to the most famous passage, I think, in James, with that most famous verse 22, Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

This is a verse I should read, and we should all bow in prayer after it, I think. It's pretty blunt. It's pretty clear. And I think James writes this because he knew what it was to be a sham.

Jesus' half-brother grew up with Jesus, heard words from heaven all his life, heard words, the best words that had ever been spoken, saw the purest, loveliest life that's ever been lived.

It made absolutely no difference to him whatsoever until after the resurrection. In other words, he went through years and years and years of his life where he would not hear the word of God, and he would not receive the word of God, and he would not do the word of God.

And James, you notice in that verse, wants to protect us from self-deception because it's so very easy for us to think that because we hear the word of God and understand the word of God, that's all we need.

[4 : 15] And it fits right here at the end of chapter one as a very wonderful flow into the next chapters. He's already called us to live out a life of grace, you know, to count our trials as joys.

It doesn't matter how long it goes since we've covered that verse. I still find that very tricky. Last week we heard that he's calling on us, if you're rich, to boast in your poverty, and if you're poor, to boast in your riches, and a variety of other things that are entirely impossible.

And we talked a bit last week about this crazy calculus of grace where James keeps reminding us that God is the giving God, that he gives us wisdom from above, irrespective of whether we deserve it or not, and that he gives us new life and every good gift, irrespective of whether we deserve it or not.

And he's given us new birth, irrespective of the fact that we don't deserve it. And now verses 19 to 27 comes at the end of this chapter and the question is, how does this work?

I mean, how does it work out into the practical details of our life? How does God's grace come to me and how do I respond to his grace, you know, when the bills pile up and everything feels overwhelming and nobody understands what kind of pain I'm carrying?

[5 : 39] How are we going to be formed, you and me daily, so that we might be this new life, life of the world to come? And there's one core issue in 19 to 27 that James wants to drive home to us and that is, everything depends on our ongoing response to the word of God, how we hear it, how we put it into action.

So I've got two headings for us as we look through this today. The first heading is hearing and receiving. The second is doing and showing. So that basically summarizes what James says.

Hearing and receiving, verses 19 to 21. Let me just start with 19. Know this, my beloved brothers and sisters, that everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.

Get that? Which is completely upside down and completely unnatural, isn't it? I mean, isn't that the reverse of the way we live? We are slow to hear, quick to speak, and quick to be indignant and angry, right?

And it's very good general advice for any of us who are married. This will make your marriage much happier. Seriously, it'll make meetings, not beatings, meetings much more bearable.

[7 : 01] It's true in every relationship, isn't it? But James is not making a general point. James is specifically talking about how we hear and how we relate to the word of God.

Because verse 19 comes between verse 18 and 21. In verse 18, he speaks about the word of truth as the change agent that's brought us new life. In verse 21, he's going to tell us that our ongoing Christian growth in life is about how we receive the implanted word.

So, while it's absolutely true that the person who just speaks and speaks and speaks and never listens and never gives you a chance to speak and speak and speak is a pain, and while it is true that God has given us two ears and one mouth and that we ought to listen with more humility more often to each other, it is eternally more important to take this attitude when it comes to the word of truth.

Everything depends on our attitude. Be quick to hear. It's a strange phrase, you know. It's a physical phrase of running, pursuing, chasing something.

Hurry up and listen. And we think of listening as passive. You know, we wait for the end of listening until we can speak. James says, no, no, pursue the word of God.

[8 : 23] Before you hear the word of God, he says, you need to make a decision. Close the mouth. Open the ears. Run toward that. And I think that's why he mentions anger at this point, because if there's anything that ruins listening in any relationship, it's anger and bitterness.

And if, you know, if you have anger with God, and it's unacknowledged anger with God, don't you find in your prayers that your mind just keeps going over and over that angry thought and you're not listening at all?

Now, there's right anger. The Bible says we should be angry at certain things. And if you are angry, the Psalms give many wonderful models of how to pour out your true feelings to God.

Problem is that most of our anger is mixed with pride and self-focus. So we're usually angry because we don't get our own way or because things are not happening the way I want.

However, the simple point James is making here is that when anger enters in, particularly in listening to the word of God, listening is going to go out the door. So are you quick to listen to the word of God?

[9 : 38] Do you make listening and hearing the word of God a priority in your calendar and in your life? James wants to take us one step forward in this listening because it's not just the act of listening, it's how we listen.

It's not just in one ear and out the other ear. It's hearing the word and receiving. Verse 21. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls.

It's very close to what Jesus taught in the parable of the sower, you remember? There's no doubt about the power of the seed. It goes out in all four soils. The difference is the receptivity of the different soils.

And James says that the way to receive the word of God, that there's a negative thing we have to do and a positive thing. Negatively, he says we have to put off all filthiness and rampant wickedness.

It's not a word we use in church these days, filthiness. And you may wish James would spare our feelings on this and not quite be so blunt. But you see, as it has to do with our salvation, James is not going to back off.

[10 : 53] He's not going to hold back. And during the preparation of this, I came to love this word because filthiness describes moral uncleanness, any form of behavior or thinking or speaking which is contrary to the word of God.

From God's point of view, it's something that contaminates and separates. It could be anything, greed, lust, envy, covetousness, self-righteousness.

We try to think of them as our little weaknesses, but from God's point of view, they're filthy. And rampant wickedness, it's an overflowing, it's just, it's any evil that overflows the bounds of our self-control.

It can be evil thinking, it can be stealing, it can be coveting, it can be pride or slander or bitterness. And what James simply says is that we cannot, we cannot receive the word of God ongoingly unless we're willing to put these clothes off like dirty rags.

Unless we approach the word of God with a willingness to change and to repent, it's going to be a waste of time. If you're a new Christian, of course you know, repentance isn't a one-off deal.

[12 : 14] Repentance isn't once a week. Repentance, every time we come to the word of God, we hear it and understand it, but to receive it, we need to be willing to put away what displeases God and do what God says.

I know in my own life, this is the fastest way to get stuck. It's refusing to let go of something that I know the Lord doesn't like. And it doesn't matter whether things are going swimmingly in every other area of life.

If God is calling for change in you, in one specific area, and if we refuse to give, to open our hands around that area, we won't receive his word.

If we're holding on to something, we can't have an open hand to receive his word. So that's the negative side of receiving. We've got to be willing to let go. And the positive side is to receive the implanted word with meekness.

Meekness, humility, it's the opposite of anger. It's that it's being ready to receive, but receiving, knowing it comes from the hand of a good heavenly father.

[13 : 23] It's very serious for us, isn't it? God says in the book of Isaiah, this is the one to whom I will look. The one who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.

So we have to ask ourselves and examine our hearts again this morning, I think. How hungry, how humble am I before the word of God? I mean, do I allow God to change me, or am I a selective listener to the word of God?

One of our sons, when he was younger, we were really concerned about his hearing. Many parents have got stories like this. So we took him to a hearing lab to get his hearing tested.

And his hearing was perfect. And we discovered he was just selective when he listened to us. But are there parts of God's word that you like, and parts you don't like, but you pretend not to listen to those bits, particularly if they don't fit with your view of things, or if they mean you're going to change?

And what do you do with a part of the Bible that is different from the way you've always thought? When was the last time you allowed God to change your thinking by the word of God?

[14 : 39] Or when was the last time you repented deeply of something you knew to be contrary to the word of God? This is how we receive the word, and this is how we grow, and this is how we demonstrate the life of the world to come.

It's by hearing and receiving the word of God. Secondly, James moves us to doing and showing. And I was trying to think of a way of lightening up at this point, but I don't have any readings from Wind in the Willows like I did last week.

It's just very straight up and down here. Verse 22. Doing and showing. Be doers of the word, not hearers only. Why? Deceiving yourselves. The great danger for us is to mistake hearing for obeying.

To substitute the feeling of understanding for the faithfulness in action. To mistake knowledge for love in action. And James is not concerned that we're going to deceive others about this.

We rarely do. But that we'll deceive ourselves. Because it is possible to devour Bible studies and to devour theological books and sermons and it to make absolutely no difference in your life.

[16 : 02] You can download a thousand sermons a week and listen to them. You'd be a bit sick if you did, but you can listen to sermons and love them and go away rejoicing in the great teaching.

But if it doesn't make any practical difference in our lives, if we don't put into practice what we're hearing, it's a waste of time and we're deceiving ourselves. It's not real. We've just become sermon tasters.

Let me be clear. Hearing and receiving is crucial. There can be no real obedience without them, but on their own they're not sufficient. And all the Bible learning in the world is no substitute before God for that very simple first step action of obedience, doing what he says.

And the choice James puts before us on this is either deceiving ourselves or living in God's blessing, verse 25. And there is a kind of blessing in knowing and understanding the word of God, isn't there?

I mean, in your Christian life, when you get past the first couple of memory verses and you begin to see the big picture. But the true blessing of God comes with this.

[17 : 17] It's not, do I understand what the Bible is saying, but am I doing what he's saying? And James uses a funny picture here of the mirror. You know, if you're shaving in the mirror, you get halfway through and your phone rings.

When you get off the call, you don't race out into the day with half your face shaved. Well, some of you don't. You shouldn't. That's not a good thing to do.

But if we look into God's word without doing God's word, what James is saying is we're like that person. It flies out of our head. We forget it. The only way to remember it is to do it.

Verse 25. The one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty and perseverers, being no hearer but a doer, sorry, no hearer who forgets, but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in this doing.

The reason for this is the nature of God's word. It's the perfect law of liberty. It's perfect because it perfectly matches our nature. As human beings in the way God created it.

[18 : 24] And it perfectly represents God's will. Do you remember the book of Leviticus, which I'm sure many of you were reading this last week, again and again and again, before God gives a law, he says this, I am the Lord your God, therefore.

It's because God is this way, he gives laws to us in this way, you are to be like this. And that means that we become more authentically ourselves when we obey the word of God.

It's the perfect law. It's law because it comes from God. There's demand in it. Even when God gives the most heartbreaking tender promises, there's obedience required on our behalf.

And it's the law of liberty because this is where God's blessing lies. Not just in the knowing, but in the doing. So if we want to be the crocus flower, if we want to be the sign of the new creation, this is how we do it.

We seek to do God's word. God wants this life, this new birth to show. And I think that's the point of the last two verses of the chapter.

[19 : 41] What does this new crocus life look like? What does doing God's word, what's the shape of it? And James gives three sharp illustrations.

They're not comprehensive, but they're very searching. Tongue, hand, and heart. Firstly, the tongue, verse 26.

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, that person's religion is worthless. So, what we do with the tongue is an infallible index of what's going on in the heart.

In the Bible, the tongue and the heart, they're almost two ends of one organ. Jesus says, out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. I've been reading Proverbs this week.

Proverbs says, death and life are in the power of the tongue. Those who love it will eat its fruit. And here are just some different kinds of tongues that are in the book of Proverbs.

[20 : 49] The lying tongue, the smooth tongue of the adulteress, the perverse tongue. There's also the tongue of the wise, which brings healing. The gentle tongue, which is a tree of life.

Then there's the mischievous tongue, or the backbiting tongue, or the flattering mouth that works ruin. And to these, of course, we could add the self-obsessed tongue, or the angry, or the dirty tongue, or the critical tongue.

James is simply saying that if we follow Jesus, if our tongues are unbridled and uncontrolled, we're self-deceived, and our religion is worthless.

It's blunt, isn't it? Second, verse 27, religion that's pure and undefiled before God the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction.

Orphans and widows have a special place in God's heart. I'm not being sentimental. In Psalm 68, God is called the father of the fatherless and protector of widows.

[21 : 53] And while it's true in James' day that widows and orphans were the most destitute, desperately destitute, and while it's true that the word visit is the Bible word for when God brings blessing, still I think James is calling us here to specific, concrete, costly concern for others like God.

to be concerned and act for others in need without looking for return. And thirdly and finally, the last phrase in 27, keep oneself unstained from the world.

And I think James is returning to the idea back in verse 18. The world is human life arranged without God, without reference to God or his word or his law. And to be unstained, that's a word used for offerings in the Old Testament.

So, James is not really speaking so much about sexual purity. He's talking about the whole, the whole compass of our minds and hearts not being formed by the opinion of our culture.

Being in this world but not being of this world. that too is doing the word of God, trying to bring our attitudes and our opinions to God and before his perfect law of liberty.

[23 : 22] And this passage, I think, involves serious self-examination. We've got to see this, that God's word to us is part of his grace.

It's the word of truth that brings us life. It's the perfect law of liberty to keep us and save us. if, if, if, we receive it with meekness and do it.

So I ask again, how is your attitude to the word of God? Are you quick to listen, slow to speak? Quick to obey? When you hear it, do you receive it with humility?

Are you ready to change? Or are the defences up? Are you ready to do the word and not just hear it? Or are some of us in that terrible place of deceiving ourselves?

And these three specific ways of showing the word, I think, are not just searching. I think they're overwhelming and could even be condemning. Because none of us have adequately bridled our tongues.

[24 : 26] We've all said things this week that we need to repent of. And few of us have cared in concrete, costly ways for the needy amongst us. And who amongst us can say that we've been unstained from the world?

And I can't leave this passage without just pointing out this lovely encouragement. At the beginning of verse 2, 22, and just focus down on this please.

It's hard to translate. It says in our version, but the doers of the word, not hearers only. It's literally become doers. And the word is in the present.

Ongoingly, continually, become, becoming doers. So it's not about having a mathematically perfect score or God's not pleased with us.

It's about the direction of our lives. And I think this is very encouraging because James is under absolutely no doubt that the word of God has enough power to bring us through this.

[25 : 28] It's by the word of truth that we were born anew. It's the implanted word, he says in verse 21, that has power to save us. And in verse 25, God promises his active blessing in our lives as we do the word.

So, it doesn't really matter if we became a Christian yesterday or 90 years ago, every single one of us are always becoming doers.

We are always asking this question when we hear the word of God, now what do I have to do in response? Amen.

Amen.