

Faith in the Marketplace: Hearing to Heart and Hand 1

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[0 : 00] Well, now, this is the last session for this term, at least, and I suppose that it sort of depends on some other factors about next term, but we're ending up on a place which seems to me to be a good place to end up for this year, and that is James chapter 1, verse 22 to 25, and you have the text in front of you on that small leaflet, and if you haven't, it's available to you at least, and it reads as follows.

Well, you've heard it read, so perhaps I don't need to read it again, but it deals with the issue of being doers of the word and not hearers only.

And that's a great debate, but I think that it's important to say that doers and hearers, there has to be a hearing before you can do, and I think that that priority is very important, and I think that, you know, I think the National has indicated, and I'm not bringing any sort of private and personal judgment to it, but once the earthquake took place, all sorts of doers went into gear, and the place is drowned with doers who haven't heard what the needs are yet.

And so there's a certain amount of complaint coming out of Armenia that, thanks for the help, but what we really need is. And so that I suppose our society, with its tremendous technological ability, tends to get into the act of doing a lot faster than it does get into the act of hearing.

And so that, and I think that appeals to people generally. Well, that's what James is trying to deal with.

[2 : 00] I think he's trying to deal with another problem, too, and that the gospel is good news. That is, it's essentially something that you hear.

And now that we've been reduced to these rather mundane circumstances from the glorious architecture upstairs and all the opportunities there is to contemplate other things besides the person who's speaking to you, which seems to me the way churches are designed, to give you some justifiable distractions so that you have a greater level of endurance.

But here we haven't any of those. But they tend to be auditoriums where you hear, and the essential function seems always to be hearing.

that we want to get 30,000 people in this auditorium, that is, a place where they can hear.

And so the Christian community has become very good on hearing. And some of the things that we have to talk about as a Christian community are things like the Last Judgment.

[3 : 15] You know, you can hear an eloquent sermon on the Last Judgment. It's doubtful if you're going to do anything about it this afternoon. Or you can hear about heaven.

Or you can hear about being justified by faith. Or you can hear things that are good and excellent. And I think we really get into a mode of hearing.

And that what we build into ourselves is a kind of capacity to hear a lot of things, but pay attention to very little indeed.

And I guess the thing that I find very convicting about this passage is the problem of a lot of people hearing.

You know, that's what I like to have the opportunity that people will hear what I have to say. I mean, that's what I feed on, I'm sorry to say, but I'll tell you.

[4 : 16] And this business of hearing and hearing and hearing and hearing goes on and on. And it never seems to galvanize into action. And, you know, I mean, it's why I think James comes along and writes this passage in a sense in contrast to those whom he already suspects in the first generation of the Christian church have got into the mode of hearing without taking it anywhere, without doing anything.

And so that what happens is you have, as I said in James' epistle, you have James constantly trying to bring things together.

The trials drive us apart or tear us apart, and he wants to bring us back together again. Hearing and doing tend to get separated, and he wants to bring them back together again.

And so we're always working at this, and James, I think, gives us a very important word here when he says, be doers of the word and not hearers only.

Well, then he goes on to describe what a hearer is. And a hearer is someone who is self-deceived. Our capacity to deceive ourselves seems to be almost unbounded.

[5 : 41] That is, we can think that by having heard something, that that's going to make a difference. And James says, be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

I mean, I don't know how many of you can even hear talks like this. I almost am ashamed to be giving it to you today in the light of what this passage is saying, because maybe you're all hearers anyway.

And if I tell you you're all hearers, and I'm encouraging you in that hearing, then in a sense I'm going contrary to the very thing I'm trying to talk about, which is that hearing and doing should go together.

So he says, you deceive yourself. The other thing that he says about what happens when you are a hearer of the word only. And he uses this wonderful illustration, like a man glancing at himself in a glass, that he looks, and then he looks away, and then he carries on.

There is instant recognition. Yes, that's who I am. There's an instant forgetting of what you saw.

People come up to me and say, my, you're looking tired, for which I thank them very much for such remarks, or why you're not looking well today.

[7 : 04] And I rush into the next room and look in the mirror and say, what are they seeing? What are they seeing? How can I cover this up? Because I can't have people seeing into my soul like that. But it's impossible when you encounter a mirror to see anything very profound.

It's very difficult. I mean, you might recognize the person that's there, but the significance of it escapes you. And I guess you, I presume you get over it early in life where you contemplate yourself in a mirror and try and determine what other people see when they meet you and think that you can tell something from that.

But it's, James says, it's a kind of lost cause because you observe yourself and you go away and you instantly forget what you were like or what your appearance is.

So you become, you hear quickly, but you forget very quickly. And I think that the abundance of Scripture, which we've heard, the abundance of Scripture which we read, is such that unless we can do something with what we hear and what we read, then somehow we're wasting our time.

You know that fellow who wrote *The Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, Peterson, he says that the mode of the Christian tradition and the Christian Hebrew tradition is one of hearing.

[8 : 38] That is, it's not one of visualizing, of seeing things. It's one of hearing. That seeing things is something fairly superficial, but hearing things means something has got to go into your heart and make some kind of a change.

And we live in a very kind of visual kind of world where appearance is everything. You know, the appearance of store windows and the appearance of our home and the appearance we make in front of people and the projecting of images and so on.

All that, James says, tends to be very superficial because once you've seen it, it's gone and you forget about it.

Like a man who, observing his face in a mirror, observes himself and goes away at once and forgets who he was. Well, then he says there's another way that you can contemplate.

And he says the thing that you need to contemplate is not your face in a mirror, but it is the perfect law of liberty.

[9 : 46] Verse 25 says, He who looks into the perfect law of liberty. Now, you remember that the Bible is full of the struggle with the law.

It's full of the Ten Commandments and how you obey them. And then it goes on and the prophets preach them. And Christ comes along and says, I have not come to destroy them, but I have come to fulfill them.

And always there is in our life a kind of battle with the law. What it demands and who we are seem to be in contrast with one another.

And we're not able to live easily with the law. And what James is saying here, when he says that you look into the perfect law of liberty, he's saying this is the law, which is the fulfillment of all the law was meant to be.

Now, the law was obviously meant, I mean, we think of the law in terms of the law catches up on you and you are taken into custody. But this is the law that catches up on you and you're set free.

[11 : 01] So there's something essentially different about the encounter with the perfect law of liberty. And everything that appears in the Old Testament in terms of the Torah, the Ten Commandments, and so on, in a sense are the law which catches up on you and takes over.

And that's why Paul says the law is a dispensation of death. The law finally catches up on you passes judgment on you and you're dead. But what this law is, this perfect law of liberty that we're to look into, is the law which when it catches up on you or when you catch up on it, you then find that you are set free in a way that you have not been free before.

It's like driving into one of these big parking lots over here and you go floor after floor with reserved 24 hours. And you just don't know what to do.

If by chance it has the name of a friend of yours on it and you know who that person is and you happen to know that they're in Hawaii for three weeks, then you can ignore the law, move in, park your car, and live happily ever after.

And that's because you have moved from the law which says reserved 24 hours to knowing the person that put the law there. And you can begin to act now out of relationship to the person rather than just submission to the law.

[12 : 33] And that's what I think James means when he talks about the perfect law of liberty. This is the kind of law that sets you free. Now it's described in James' epistle in two other ways.

It's called the royal law. And you can get that if you look on in chapter 2. You'll see it referred to as the royal law.

So you're no longer dealing with books and texts which give the law to you. You are now dealing with the king whose law it is.

So that you have moved from a study of the text with which you can argue. I mean, in the absence of the person who gave the law, you can spend the rest of your life arguing about what it means.

And that's what the legal profession is all about with due apologies to those who... But you know how if you have the text, you can argue with it. But if you have the person who gives the law, there's no longer any arguing with it.

[13 : 42] You know the person and you know the intention and you respond to the person rather than responding to the text. And that's what I think James is getting at here when he says that rather than the quick look in the mirror which you quickly forget, you now look at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and in that you persevere.

You persevere in that relationship. Commentators say that there is another way of expressing what this law of liberty is.

And it comes in the first chapter, in verse 21, which just precedes this. It says that, therefore put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls.

So that what James is describing here is not a law which is on tables of stone out there, but which is an implanted word in here.

This word of God, this logos, this law of God is planted in you and the effect of that implantation is to give you life.

[15 : 02] It's able to save your soul. My friend told me about the first heart transplant in British Columbia on Sunday and how they took the heart out of a brain dead person and implanted it in someone else and was able to give him life.

Well, this same word of God, you see, now instead of it being a superficial contact with the word of God which you hear and you forget, it is the word of God which you hear and which takes root in your life and which is able to save your soul.

Now, I had this long conversation this week with a young couple who have been brought up in Bible teaching, preaching churches and they have been in it now for 20 years though they're still quite young and still have a young family.

And they were saying to me, we have had it. We can't take it any longer. And I think it's because so often when people come into a Bible teaching church, the norm of the expectation that is laid on

them is one of hearing and hearing and hearing and hearing and hearing. But there isn't that kind of implanting that produces life. And that's what James is getting at when he says, he who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty and perseveres in it.

[16 : 49] Remember how endurance, trials, persevering, all that's such a consistent theme throughout the whole of the epistle of James. You go on and on and on with it.

This thing that, this word that has been implanted, you keep at it and at it and at it and at it. You don't, it's not just a quick response.

It's something that you persevere in. He says you persevere in this law of liberty, being not hearers that forget, but doers that act. And you shall be blessed in that.

It's not, you see, it's not like having, as a lot of people do, I think. I think they have a kind of dormant filing system, you know.

And in that dormant filing system, they have the God file. And all the experiences of their life, which they can't put under any other general heading, which seem to be a little bit too much for anywhere else, they can put in the God file.

[17 : 58] But that, for them, is a dormant file. And that file needs to be brought to the front. You need to confront, not just the notes you have made on God, but the God on whom you have made notes.

You know, it's like when somebody comes in to see you, and you can't quite remember who they are or what were the last time you saw them, and you quietly say, excuse me a minute, and you step out into the other office and ask your secretary perhaps for, could you get me the file on this person?

I can't remember anything about them, you know. Well, this is, the file is there, and it's in place, and it's available, but you now have to confront the person face to face.

And you have to be able to respond out of that face to face encounter with the person. And this is what happens to us when we have a kind of dormant God file that we haven't been brought up to date on recently, and then we're confronted with the person.

And what James is saying here is that it's this that you have to work at.

[19 : 15] It's this that you have to live out, is this encounter with the living God. Robert Hutchins, who was once, I think, part of the University of Chicago and left it to go to be the head of the Center for Democratic Studies, he said that the problem was that the university was full of good ideas, wonderful ideas, and that they specialized in them and they wrote them up and they put them in books and they did theses, and the place was just overflowing with good ideas.

But he said somewhere we need to be able to pump new life into those good ideas. And so he moved away from the university thinking he could find a place where that would happen.

Well, you see, the trouble with our churches at the moment is that they are loaded with good ideas. I was driving along Fourth Avenue the other day on a Sunday afternoon, and there right in front of me was a car with a bumper sticker on it.

And the bumper sticker said, Think Globally, Act Locally. And I thought, gee, that's a good idea.

I think I've heard it somewhere before. And I thought and I thought. You see, it's a direct steal from Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself.

[20 : 50] That's how you think globally and act locally. I mean, it's just taking that idea and secularizing it so that you don't find our enterprising world coming up with new ideas.

The ideas are familiar and people know about them. Acting on them is where we have fallen down. Because we've known for centuries about thinking globally and acting locally.

But it hasn't been happening. And that's why James pleads with us in this passage that we will get around to doing it.

So that when you look at the church and you look at the business of hearing, hearing the word and doing it, you suddenly recognize that that's probably what a church is.

It's a place where it is heard and somebody does something about it. You know, Kierkegaard's great illustration of the geese that got together once a week to talk about flying, you know.

[22 : 05] And they waddled over to a corner of the barnyard and there they had a very animated hour and a half discussing flying and showing the strength and power of their wings as they flapped them and talked about it, you know.

And then having finished talking about it, they waddled back to the trough for some more food, you know. But nobody ever took off. And he used that as a rather sarcastic picture of what the church

was about, you know, that we waddle over together and meet together and talk about it. But nobody ever gets off the ground. And that's what James means when he says that we are to be doers of the word. And he says the thing that makes the difference is that if you look into the perfect law of liberty.

I mean, he's critical when he goes on in verse 26 which follows this text. And he says, if anyone thinks he is religious, he does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart. this man's religion is vain. In other words, he's saying if this is all you get out of your religion then the whole thing is empty.

[23 : 22] There's nothing there until the hearing and the doing come together. And when James goes on to say, well, you know, what do I do?

What do we do? He uses the very homely illustration if you want is pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Well, that may not seem too dramatic a kind of outcome of this being a doer of the word and not a hearer only. But I think it does mean that what needs to be done is of such a common everyday variety that there are opportunities for us not next year or next, you know, next term or anything like that but there are opportunities for us in the circumstances in which we find ourselves today to do what we hear and only by doing what we hear do we have a capacity to hear some more.

I'm a it's it's it's like that and so that we have to answer the question are we hearers only self-deceived looking in a glass getting a glimpse of what it's all about and then forgetting. Are we? That I understand. I mean, I know that from my experience how that happens over and over again. Or are we doers who look into the perfect law of liberty that law of liberty initiates what it commands because it is the law of love it communicates love it doesn't communicate ideas that's why I think we're different from Robert M.

[25 : 26] Hutchins University. I think the community that is hearing and doing that if people look into it then what they see is love and you don't see love as an idea you experience love as a reality and so you take away with it and give expression to what you have experienced of love and that's how the law of liberty works.

the text you confront is the initiation of the thing that you do and you can't separate them.

They have to be welded together so tightly that they can never be separated and I think James is writing this letter because he feels even in the first generation that Christians are beginning to edge these two things apart and to get hearing and doing separated from one another.

Let me say a prayer. Our God we ask that you will help us to hear you to hear you not as a new idea but to hear you in terms of your love and your purpose and to discover ourselves included in that love and called for that purpose.

We ask this in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[27 : 06] Amen.opus Amen.