

Do the Word

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Date: 16 February 2014

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[0 : 0 0] good evening. If you are new to St. John's, my name is Aaron. I'm the minister for this service. And if you are new, I'd love to just say hi to you after the service. So would you come and sort of track me down and say hi. James. This is our third week in James? Third week in James. Love it.

Every time we start a new book of the Bible, I always sort of go, after, within about a month, it's like, this is my favorite book. And this is my favorite book now. I love James. And one of the reasons I love it is it's just so direct. Take verse 22, for example. Be doers of the word, not just hearers. I mean, you cannot get more straightforward and obvious than that. It's fantastic. And actually in that verse, be doers of the word, not just hearers, we actually find the major themes of the passage we're looking at tonight. And the major themes are the major things we want to look at is God's word, God's word, and doing it. God's word, and doing it. Because it says things about both of those things, which are really, really important. So let's begin talking about God's word. Be really helpful to have your Bibles open. If you just slide your eyes over that passage, you'll see that God's word is actually a major concern for James there. Have a look at, have a look at right at the start though, verse 19, because it's not so obvious in some places.

Verse 19, know this, my beloved brothers, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. So be quick to hear, quick to hear what? Quick to hear what? The other person that you're having a conversation with?

I guess, probably. I mean, but is this just a proverb though? Is it just sort of like good relational advice? I mean, it is good relational advice. You should be quick to hear.

A friend of mine many years ago told me the story of, her name is Kendall, when she's on the phone to this girl who's chatty Cathy, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, you know, and it was always one-way conversations. About 10 minutes into the conversation, she needed to go to the bathroom, and so she keeps trying to break into the conversation, but it's this impenetrable wall of no thought unspoken, right, from the other end, right? Listen, I just, can I just, yeah, yeah, oh, that's interesting, yeah, yeah, okay. Eventually, it gets so annoyed, puts the phone down, goes to the toilet, comes back, picks the phone up, girl is still speaking, has not realized she's been speaking into nothingness for like a good couple of minutes. So it's good, I mean, this is, this is good. This is, be a good listener. Fantastic. Absolutely. Now, if it's true in the general sense that we should be a good listener, of course, it's true in the specific sense, in terms of our relationship with God, and we do know that James is talking about more than just our peer-to-peer friendships, because the immediate context of this, be quick to hear, is verse 18, where it talks about the word of truth. So in verse 19, what's happening here is that James is kind of mixing the idea of getting on with people and going on with God, because they're not separate things. So the verse is not just about being nice. It's rooted in the idea that God has spoken, we should listen, and we should be quick to listen. We should be quick to hear what he has to say, because he's not only spoken, he speaks. He speaks through his word. He speaks to us today, because it's a living word.

[3 : 45] We should be quick to listen to that word. So that's the first thing that it says about God's word in our passage. We should be quick to hear it. Second, we don't want to just hear it, though. We want to receive it. Look at verse 21. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness.

I won't be talking about that tonight. You feel better, right? We'll come to that, don't worry. And receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. Receive with meekness the implanted word. So this receiving of God's word is about, it's about a posture of our heart that says, I really need this. I really need to hear God's word.

I mean, we can read, we can read God's word, right? And it can kind of bounce off us. Just kind of read it, and it kind of just sort of, you know. I don't know if you've had this experience of talking to someone, and you can tell they're not really listening.

They're kind of just, you're talking to them, and you can tell that they're just playing a little tune in their head. While you're trying to share with them something kind of pretty good, you know.

I remember being on a trip with some mates, and Larry and Dave, and we were snowboarding. Long trip. Dave breaking up with his girlfriend, sharing his heart. Brutal, brutal situation.

[5 : 17] And so Dave does, you know, like 20 minutes of just sharing his heart, which it doesn't really normally do. And at the end of that, Larry says, yeah, I like strawberry yogurt. The whole time, he'd been thinking about the type of yogurt he likes.

We can hear something, right? We can hear it. But we're not embracing it. It's just kind of bouncing off us. So when you read God's word, when you come to it, come to it with a humble heart. Because are you just reading it? Because I know I can just read it and sort of go, I'm doing it because this is good practice. I just want to tick a box. Yep, done that.

Yep, I'm a good Christian. But I want to be the kind of person that comes to it like a starving man to a banquet. Go, man, I really, really need to hear this. So God's word, be quick to hear it. Come to it with a right heart attitude, a posture of humility. Posture that says, I'm in great need. I love that. I love that verse. I think it's in John. This is not in my sermon. I just remember this now. One of my favorite verses where Jesus has just done this teaching on the communion. And it's very, very heavy. And because of that, some of his disciples leave. Some of his followers take off. It's just too much for them. They can't handle it. They don't like it. It's just too weird or freaky. Jesus is asking too much of them. And Jesus turns to one of his disciples and he says, are you going to go as well? Are you going to leave me as well? And he says, where would I go? You alone have the words of life. That's the kind of attitude it's talking about here. So be quick to hear.

Come to it with a right heart attitude. And thirdly, be doers of it. Obey his word. It's very plain. It's very plain, isn't it? We can't dance around this. We can't dress it up as meaning something else. That's the plain meaning of verse 22. I can have these wonderful times with my daughter, Sadie, where she comes to me and we talk and we have this beautiful little chat and I feel like she's nestled into my arm and we're all cuddly and it's great and we're really connecting. And then I say, okay, can you go clean up your room? No! What are you saying? Why? You know, and she runs away screaming and stuff. So I think it's all going well up until the point where I say, can you just do this? And it just all goes completely sideways. Right. What are we talking about? Doing. Doing. If the first half of the passage was about God's word, the second half is about the doing of God's word. And that's what 22 to 27 is really all about. That's the guts of 22 to 27. And being the practical guy that James is, he doesn't just go, well, be doers of the word. Go on.

Go and do some stuff. No, he gives three examples. Three amazing examples. Three very, what would you say, like pointy, sort of pointy examples of doing. But we'll get to that in a moment. First, just have a look at 23, 24, 25. They're just gold. I love it.

[8 : 51] For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he's like a man who looks intently at his face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and he goes away and at once forgets what he looks like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. I love that. Okay, but this first part, this mirrors thing, we like mirrors, eh? We love mirrors.

We like looking at ourselves, don't we? And we even like shop windows. And don't tell me you don't look at yourself in shop windows, pretending you're interested in the cookware, whatever it is. I know you're checking yourself out. So imagine this. Imagine, because it's quite funny, this 23, 24. Imagine you're about to go on like a hot date and you hear a knock at the door, they're coming to pick you up, and you look at yourself in the mirror before you go to the door and you've got a massive piece of mustard on your chin or something, like just a big piece of mustard, right? It would be insane not to deal with that mustard before you answer the door. Correct? That's conventional wisdom would say, that would be insane not to do that. That's what it's saying at the start. It's insane for you to look in the mirror, to see something, forget about it, not do anything about it. And this is what happens when we come to God's Word. God's Word shows you something about yourself. It reveals yourself to you, and it directs you. Surely it would be madness. It would be crazy not to do anything about that. So from here, James says, okay, I'm going to give some really practical examples of this doing, this showing this doing. Three case studies about how we can be doers of the word and not just hearers. And they are, you see them there. They're about bridling your tongue, about caring for the vulnerable, and keeping yourself away from sort of sinful attitudes and being polluted by the world. So let's look at these individually. First, the tongue.

Verse 26. If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Strong words. Now the word religion here is not. When we think religion, we think religious practices, like forms of religious practices, the word is actually more about how our spirituality presents itself in the world, how it's lived out. So that's the context of that there. So James mentions the tongue first. Why does he mention the tongue first? And I think it's because it's such a, such a, it's such a accurate barometer of what's happening in our hearts.

When you bridle, the bridle word there, it's a brilliant word, right? Because when you bridle a horse, you're controlling a horse. You're directing it away from something to another thing. So like a wild horse is our tongue. It's like a wild horse that needs to be captured and directed.

And it needs to be captured and directed because here tonight, and I'm including myself in this, here tonight are lying tongues, manipulative tongues, boastful tongues, vulgar tongues, savage tongues, tongues that don't stop when they should.

[12 : 25] So we need the Holy Spirit to help rein those tongues in and direct them to God's purposes and have tongues that, that bless, that edify, that bring joy, that welcome.

Now, if you're feeling a bit tense right now and you're a bit sensitive and you're thinking, oh, is he talking to me? Is that, is this Bible, is this verse talking to me? Probably is, probably is talking to you. Don't push it off. Remember, remember what we're talking about here.

About the whole, the whole big story of this passage here is, is don't just hear the Bible, come to it with a humble heart and do something about it.

Embrace this. If you're feeling a bit sensitive, like, oh man, is that, I do, like I'm a bit crass or I'm a bit kind of like, boastful or I talk too much or, or I'm a bit negative or really sarcastic all the time, embrace it. Welcome it.

Welcome that with a humble heart. Hear the conviction that God's word is bringing into your life and do something about that. Now, James has a lot more to say about the tongue and we'll talk about it a lot more over the next few weeks, but let's, let's move on.

[13 : 40] Okay, so if the first test of true religion is how we manage our tongues, the next here, it says, pure religion is visiting orphans and widows. Now, do you see that James doesn't say, be kind in a really awesome way?

He doesn't just say that sort of in general terms, because you could go, you know, well, I know my heart would go like this, it would go, am I living Christianity out? Of course. Why, just this morning, I smiled to my bus driver and I thanked him when I got off and I was a very pleasant person in public transport.

Public transport, just, you know, I'm very pleasant. It's Christianity. I dominate it. I am just dominating it right now. James, James brings this, he asks us to love like the Father loves, love in a way which costs and loving the poor costs.

You know, as a Christian, you have a remarkable heritage when it comes to caring for the poor.

Wonderful, wonderful heritage. And it helps explain how a small movement started by a guy nailed to a cross overcame Rome. One of the reasons behind that incredible, incredible thing is that Christians just loved so differently, so radically.

[15 : 10] And we will, in the rest of James, have a lot of time to talk about this some more, but just, I just want to give you a few examples. The idea of caring for widows and orphans in the ancient Near East was very foreign for many reasons.

In Greek thought, the poor were regarded as inherently not virtuous. So virtue and kind of wealth were kind of things connected. So if you didn't have wealth, you probably weren't virtuous.

And so, you know. And life was all about social climbing, about sort of moving upwards, so it was a dishonorable thing to kind of care downwards. One of the virtues of the time was to remain untouched by the pain of others.

And so the poor were pretty much abandoned. And widows and orphans, you know, really vulnerable people. And of course, Christians, Christians in the first few hundred years of the faith refused to play that game and as a result, changed society.

Women and slaves, for example, second class citizens in the ancient Near East, but there was one place where they were treated with dignity and seen as equals. And that was weekly house churches popping up all over the city.

[16 : 20] During the epidemics in the first few hundred years of the faith, 165 AD, 251 AD, estimated between a quarter and a third of the population died.

And of course, the pagan priests, city officials, fled the city at the first sign of this when people realized it was quite serious. Everyone fled. Christians stayed behind. And they cared for the sick and they treated the dying with dignity.

Dionysus writes this about it. He says, describing this epidemic, he says, heedless of the danger, they took charge of the sicknesses of the Christians, attending to every need and ministering to them in Christ.

He goes on to say, the heathen behaved in the opposite way at the first onset of disease. They pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated the unburied corpses as dirt.

St. Lawrence, a deacon in the early church, he was a librarian. A librarian. That was his job in the early church. And during some of the worst oppression of Christianity, he was told to hand over to Rome, the church's poor fund.

[17 : 29] So the church kept money for the poor and they would distribute it, specifically looking after widows and orphans. So this guy kind of knew where it was. It was kind of hidden away.

So he said to the emperor, I just need three days to sort this out. Over that period of three days, he distributed all the money to the poor. He gave it all away and then he gathered up all the diseased and orphaned and crippled Christians and on the appointed day that he was supposed to turn up, he brought them all to the palace and he said, these are the treasures of the church and the emperor roasted him alive.

Now amazingly, there was mass conversion to Christianity after this. Why is that? And it was because of the incredible example, the radical love, radical sacrifice that people saw in Jesus which they were seeing nowhere in their society.

So the ancient Christians refused to play along with status games. They loved it in a very costly, very costly way. They took the words of James very seriously.

Let's do that as well. Let's do that as well. James has a lot more to say about this and we'll talk about it a lot more over the next few months.

[18 : 44] Lastly, and just very quickly, okay, so broidel your tongue, costly love, and three, keep yourself unstained from the world. You see that in the last passage, the last verse.

What does James mean by that? In our home, at our place, we have these bulbs, planted bulbs, and they've sprouted already.

It's fantastic and it warms my heart to see them, these shoots coming through because they'll become beautiful flowers. But what I love is that it says to me, spring's coming. It's on its way and it's a wonderful example of what we should be.

So what I mean is this, we live in this generation partly as pointers to the next life, to the next world. So we live now living a life that points to a remade world that Christ will bring.

These bulbs say to me, spring is coming, it's going to get better, you know. Folks, we should take our moral cues from that next life because it glorifies God and it's such a wonderful example to the rest of the world.

[19 : 55] We should not entirely live Vancouver-shaped lives. we should not be conformed to this world's values and we should work hard at maintaining our new creation difference.

James has a lot more to say about this. We'll get through it over the next few weeks. So bridling your tongue, caring for the vulnerable, remaining unstained by the world. These are actually the three major themes of James and we're going to hit them all pretty hard leading up to Easter.

Let me bring this to a close. I love how direct James is. I find it very, very helpful and very, very challenging because picking up on the whole the mirror sort of analogy he used at the beginning of the passage, we gaze so carelessly at ourselves and we are morally so easily pleased but James calls us back to the truth of God's word in a very acute way and he says hear, hear it but don't just hear it embrace it but don't just embrace it do it live it and here's what it looks like and we're going to get there.

Amen.