

The Hearing of God's Word and The Christian Life

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[0:00] And receive the word which is able to save your souls but be doers of the word and not hearers only deceiving yourselves and so on.

! And we saw something of the way in which God works in order to secure that and to achieve that in the life of his own people.

And we have seen that through the trials of faith come maturity of faith. We have seen that there is a proper response to these trials. And we've also seen the importance of understanding temptation when we are faced with it.

And laterally at verse number 16 we notice the way in which good gifts come from God. And these good gifts actually include the very testings and the trials that we face along life's way.

And of course when we come to verse 19 it won't surprise us that at this stage James wants to focus on the word of God itself. And of course the word of God is at the very centre of the life of faith.

[1:22] And James makes it central to what he is doing and what he is saying here. And when we look at these verses we see especially that James is introducing the idea of his word in the context of people's way of life and their behaviour.

And introducing us to the whole idea that the word of God should change our lives, should influence our behaviour and should through our behaviour prove us to be the children of God if that's indeed who we are.

So I want to look at these verses in verse 21 especially and to think of the hearing of God's word and the Christian life. I want to think first of all of the relationship that we find in these verses.

And the relationship not in particular a relationship with other people and perhaps not even a relationship with God himself or with the Lord himself. But a relationship with the word of God. And the word of God is introduced to us here in verse 21 as the implanted word. We understand our salvation and the work of God's grace to be the way in which the spirit of God dwells in our hearts.

[2:44] And we understand that there is the fruit of the spirit which shows itself in our lives. But in this case instead of focusing on the spirit of God which is that living presence of God in our hearts.

He speaks of the word that is implanted in our hearts. In other words the word of God becomes part of our very being and nature.

And it's planted in our inner beings as a seed that is going to bear fruit and that must bear fruit and that will bear fruit for those who are the children of God.

And it connects in some ways with the promise given by Jeremiah in chapter 31 that the new covenant that God is going to make with his people. That he will put his law within them and that he will write it on their hearts.

There is an internalizing of the word of God and the law of God in the hearts of the people of God. And it is there as a living and powerful word that is going to influence and change their lives.

[3:55] And James qualifies that that very word is able to save your souls. And of course we do understand that we are saved by the grace of God.

That we are brought alive by the word of God, by the spirit of God. But the salvation here is in particular with regard to being saved from the very things that are a challenge to us in our lives. Even in our behavior. Things that we may think we cannot overcome or change. And there is a reference to things like that in verse number 19 and 20.

There is the anger that we show sometimes to others. There is the sense of filthiness, rampant wickedness. There is that sense of behavior that is not consistent with the word of God. That is not consistent with Christian living and behavior. And we understand that it is challenging to overcome all of these things as they arise in our sinful hearts.

[4:57] Here is the implanted word. And it is this word that is able to save us, to help us overcome the very things that are such a challenge to us.

And when you think of that relationship and the word of God, there is a preparation that is absolutely necessary for the child of God and coming to the word of God.

And the preparation begins with putting away certain things. It is like entering into a changing room and preparing to step into action.

And here they are called upon to put away all of these things that should not be there. The filthiness and rampant wickedness. It is stopping doing these things.

And it is the prerequisite and the precondition of our coming to benefit from the word of God. That we ensure that we put all of these things aside.

[5:56] And we come in to worship God in our prayer meeting and Bible study. We come in to worship God on the Lord's Day. And it is so important for us to benefit from the word of God.

That we leave things aside. That we put things aside. That we empty our minds of all of the wrong things that we have carried with us perhaps during the day or during the week.

That we must rid ourselves as far as possible from these things with the assurance that the word of God itself is able, gives us the ability and the power to overcome them.

There must be that putting away. And in having put away, there is the sense of receiving with meekness the word of God.

And there are two things that arise from this expression that James uses here. There is a sense of receiving and in everyday life, it's a sense of giving hospitality to someone.

[7:03] In the sense of the word of God and a relationship with the word of God, it's welcoming the word of God. And again, that's so central to the way in which we are to benefit from the word of God.

That we do come to hear the word of God and that we do so with a sense of a readiness to welcome what God is saying. To give hospitality to the word of God in our hearts and in our lives. And to embrace it as something that we truly welcome into our lives. We are to receive the word of God, to welcome the word of God. And we are to do so with meekness.

And I guess in everyday terms and in the world around us, we think of meekness as perhaps being a doormat for everyone else.

That we let everyone else walk all over us and they do exactly that. That is not meekness. The meekness that the Bible speaks of, it comes from the experience of the people of God in the Old Testament.

[8:14] And we see, for example, in Isaiah chapter 57, that the holy God dwells with those who have a contrite and lowly spirit.

In other words, they have learned through life's experience that they are poor and they are needy before God. They have learned from life's experience that they need God.

And because they have learned that they need God, their hearts are wide open to receive the word of God. It is the meekness, the readiness, the submission to the word of God.

And in simple terms, it is as simple as going to the word of God and being ready to say yes to whatever the word of God teaches.

And again, we think of coming to the word of God and you and I am sure at times we have come to the word of God, not in the way in which James describes here.

[9:15] Perhaps we have come not with a sense of welcoming God's word, not with a sense of being ready to say yes to whatever God has to say to us, but instead to take the position of assessing and of judging what God is saying to us before we begin to think of how much of the word of God we're going to let into our lives.

And as the children of God, we cannot come to the word of God like that. It's something that we have to fight against and overcome and seek prayerfully to come to the place where we are ready

to let the word of God, which is planted in our hearts, permeate our whole beings and work out in our lives so as to transform our lives.

And whenever I come and whenever you come to the word of God, it's important to think about the relationship with God and the relationship with the word of God and to ensure that there are no barriers.

There are no obstacles so that I don't come away from the word of God and concluding and stating that there was nothing there for me when it is the word of God.

And when that kind of response comes simply because of my own relationship with the word of God and not preparing myself and having this relationship with the word before I come to hear it.

[10:57] And so there is a relationship, the precondition. I come to the word of God, ensuring the relationship is what it should be. Secondly, there is a responsibility.

And as the responsibility is with regard to the word of God and coming to hear the word of God. And as we move on to verse 22, we see the way in which he speaks of hearing the word of God.

And we can hear words from many people. We can hear what they say. We can choose to ignore what they say. We don't need even to pay attention to what they are saying.

But the background to what James is raising before the people here is the sense of coming together in the public worship of God.

He is coming with an Old Testament understanding of what worship is. He is coming with an Old Testament understanding of what is at the centre of the life of the community of faith.

[12:09] And at the centre of their life is the worship of God. And we go to a great statement in Deuteronomy chapter 6 where God is calling to his people.

Calling them to remember who he is. Calling them to worship his name. Hear, O Israel. The Lord of God, the Lord is one. There is a statement at the heading of that, the introduction of that book of Deuteronomy that sets the tone for the rest of the book.

That the audience must hear every single word that God is going to speak because he is one Lord. He is their God. And they must listen to what he has to say.

And we think of Exodus 24 where Moses reads the book of the covenant to the people. The word of God he reads to the people.

And the response of the people in that moment. All that the Lord has spoken we will do. Hearers of the word of God. The community of faith is marked by the fact that they are regular in the public worship of God.

[13:31] It is an expression of who they are. It's an expression of their relationship with God. And it's coming to the worship and the preaching of the word of God to hear what God the Lord has to say.

And so when we read the word hearing, we want to see that word as a window into what worship really is. And coming face to face with God and coming ear to what God has to say to us.

And if you and I lose this characteristic out of our life of faith, then there is something fundamentally and seriously wrong.

Because the people of God are a worshipping people. They worship the only true and living God.

And they come with ready hearts to hear what God the Lord has to say.

If I'm the child of God, a Christian believer, that will be evident and I will be known as the person, the kind of person that is always ready to gather, to worship with the people of God in the public worship of his name.

[14:52] But my responsibility does not come to an end there. My coming to hear what God has to say should lead to conformity to that very word.

And that's what James is focusing on here. There is the imperative. Be doers of the word and do not hearers only.

And the way he is speaking to them, it gives the sense and the suggestion that this is something they weren't doing. They were to begin to do this very thing that was absent from their lives.

They were doing the hearing. They were doing the worshipping. They were doing the gathering. But there was this fundamental aspect missing from their lives as the people of God.

To be doers of the word. To put the word of God into practice. To give hands and feet to what the word of God says.

[16:03] To be visible as somebody who walks the walk as well as talks the talk of the people of God. It's being a doer of the word of God.

And my failure to do so, being a hearer only, I deceive myself. And it draws attention to the way in which we can actually go through a process of reckoning in our own minds.

That we have done what we should. When we have done the public worship. And when we have heard the word of God. And we deceive ourselves into thinking that that's it.

I've done what God requires of me. I've given expression to my faith. And I can now go and fold my hands. And park myself. And not do anything with the word that I have heard.

And it's striking that I may. And I can. And we can. Deceive other people. But it's worth pausing and thinking.

[17:19] That you and I can actually deceive ourselves. That we can be so convinced tonight. That worship and hearing is all I need to do.

And I can be so convinced of that. That my life will confirm that. And I have lost sight of this key and final element in my relationship with God.

That I come to worship. That I come to hear. And that I come to go and put it into practice. Cheating myself.

Cheating God. Keeping from God what God requires of me. Keeping from God the very thing that should flow from my faith and my relationship with him.

Jesus says about abiding in him. And abiding in his word. And abiding in his love. That is that sense of being at home and living.

[18:26] Giving hospitality. Receiving the word of God. And going and living out of that word of God. And we read in Ezekiel chapter 33.

The people of God who had rebelled against God. The people of God who were taken away captive to Babylon. The people of God who were hanging on by their fingernails.

To the things that belong to their faith. And we read in that chapter. That they talk together. We read in that chapter.

That they hear that there is a word coming from the Lord. We read in verse 31. They come to you as my people. They hear what you say. But will not do it.

With lustful talk in their mouths they act. Their heart is set on their own gain. What we're describing here. What James is describing here.

[19:29] It's not something new. It's something that comes to light. In the history of faith. In the history of the community of faith. Here it is.

In these trying days. In exile in Babylon. And tonight. We have to be alert. To the fact. That we ourselves.

May be in line with. This group of people here. Who are saying the right things. Who are going to the right places. But in their minds. In their thinking.

They were saying. I will not do it. And the fact that they. Had stopped doing it. Is what's leaving them. Where they are. And they have. Carried on that way of thinking.

Despite the many ways. In which God has spoken to them. And. Broke his judgment upon them. And sent them away. Despite that. They are still. Saying.

[20:27] We will not. Do it. And it is. A searching question. I'm sure none of us actually.

Say. Openly and plainly. I mean. Say to ourselves. We're not going to do it. But. But it's. It's. What we don't do. And it's when we don't.

Follow through. What the word of God says. And what God requires of us. And we deceive ourselves. And we. Do our hearing. But then.

Nothing. Happens. Afterwards. And James. Wants them. And God wants us. This evening. To be on our guard. At doing the hearing.

And doing the receiving. But not. The doing of. Putting it into. Action. And I speak to myself. As I speak to. To all of you.

[21:21] This evening. This is a challenge. For us all. As the people of God. How we can be lulled. Into. A way of. Of worshipful life.

And stop short of. Of having the word of God. Influence. Our whole. Behavior. And being. So that we can be. The children of God. That we ought to be.

And so that we will practice. The very things. That God brings. Before us. Follow the example. Of Jesus. Be disciples. Be salt. And be light.

Be the things. That we ought to be. In practice. Every day. Be. So there is. A relationship. And there is. A responsibility. And finally.

There is. A reflection. And James. Uses. A kind of parable here. Where there is. An encounter. With the word of God.

[22:17] And he uses. The idea of. A mirror. In this parable. If anyone is. A hearer of the word. And not a doer. He is like a man.

Who looks intently. At his natural face. In. The glass. It's probably. Fair to say.

That. At some point. Today. That all of us. Will have looked in the mirror. For us. Before we. Came out here. Or first thing in the morning. Mirror.

Is at the center. Of our lives. We come face to face. With the mirror. We come face to face. With ourselves. And what we see. In the mirror. Should bring us.

To bring about. Some kind of. Remedial. Or corrective action. To. Address the things. That the mirror. Has highlighted. That's why we have the mirror.

[23:12] And that's why we go. And look in the mirror. So that we see. If things are out of place. That we need to address. And make sure. We address them. Before we. Go and.

Meet. And present ourselves. To the public. Eye. And here is. Looking intently. At his. Natural face. In the mirror.

And it's the. It's just the. Idea of. My natural face. Or. The face of my origin. Or the face of my genesis. It is. The natural face.

That I have. Of somebody. Created by God. Somebody. Who's created. To. To live in the service. Of God. And somebody. Who has. Fallen off. From. That relationship.

With God. And so. I come to. To the mirror. And this is what. The mirror. Wants me to see. This is what I. Should see in the mirror. I see myself.

[24:07] As the person. Who was made by God. I see myself. As the person. Who was made. To enjoy. Commune with God. I see myself. As the person. Who has sinned. Against God.

I take. Account. Of what I see. In. The mirror. It would be foolish. Of me. Not. To do so. And taking. Account of it. Taking. Appropriate. Action. We see. Perhaps. Metaphorically. Ourselves. We see. To somebody.

Who does something. That they shouldn't do. Take a good look. At yourself. And it's that idea. Of. Taking a good look. At ourselves. In the mirror. Of.

The word. Of God. And the person. Who deceives. Himself. Here. Is the person. Who looks. In the mirror. And goes away.

[25:02] And at once. Forgets. What he is like. There's an instant. Forgetfulness.

Of what the person. Has seen. And. That's the person. Who is. A hearer only. The word. That has been heard. Hasn't.

Penetrated the person's mind. Or heart. It's had no impact. On the person. Whatsoever. And the. The person. Walks away. And nothing.

Changes. One of the commentators. In. Describing this. Says. As for the man.

With the mirror. Off he goes. But his friends. Meeting him. On his way. Could tell him. That the mirror. Is not. Not the comb. Or the face fland.

[25:57] And that. Without these aids. To gracious living. His devotion. To the mirror. Is in itself. Without value. In other words. If I have something.

All over my face. I see it in the mirror. I do nothing about it. If I see. A person. On the street. And they can tell. That. They can question.

Did I look in the mirror. At all. And if I did. They can tell. That I've just. Ignored. What I've seen. And that's the. The danger. Of neglecting. The word.

Of God. That for you. And for me. We come away. From the worship of God. From hearing. The word of God. And. We go and put it. Into practice.

Because. In our witness. It becomes evident. Whether we are Jewish. Or not. Does the word. Change us.

[26:50] Has the word. Changed us. Is our behavior. Consistent. With the word of God. In conformity. To the law of God. Or is there no sign.

In my life. Of. The genuine marks. And characteristics. Of being. A child of God. On the other hand. There's a person. Who is not deceiving him. Or herself. The person. Who is probably. Concerned. That they may be. Deceiving themselves.

But they are not. They come. To look. Into the perfect law. The law of liberty. And they persevere. Being no hearer. Who forgets.

But a doer. Who acts. Peering down. If I want to look. At something closely. And examine something closely. Not only.

[27:48] Do I. Do I need my glasses. To do so. But. I'll come down close. This because. I want to peer. Into this thing. That's a matter of interest. To me. I want to make sure.

That I know all the detail. And that's what genuine faith does. That's the. The image. That. That. James has here. I. I come to the mirror.

And I want to come close. To the mirror. I want to examine myself. In the mirror. Of the word of God. I want to take to heart. Everything that the word of God. Says.

About my journey. From being in the image of God. To being. A sinner that is lost. And then. I will see the law of God. As the perfect law of liberty.

That there is freedom. And that means. That. In the gospel. And in the message of God's word.

[28:46] And God's kingdom. Freedom. The freedom. Is mine. Because. Of the work of God's grace. In my heart. For freedom.

Says Paul. In Galatians 5. 1. For freedom. Christ has set me free. In Romans 8. The law of the spirit of life. In Christ Jesus. Has set me free.

From the law of sin and death. The freedom is secured. By the very death of Christ. And that. Freedom finds. Expression.

In. In. The freedom now. To. Fulfill the law of God. To. To. Walk in the paths of God. To go and. Practice. The very thing.

That God has said. And that God has commanded me to do. And that's what God did with the children of us. In the Old Testament. In Exodus chapter 20.

[29:42] Where he gives them the commandments. I am the Lord your God. Who brought you out. Of the land of Egypt. Freedom. You shall have no other gods before me.

Go and give expression to your freedom. By keeping my commands. And there's the conformity. And that's the person. That James. Says.

Is blessed in his doing. Empowered by God. Sensing the power of God in our lives. Sensing God. Working in our lives. Sensing God.

Helping us to. To overcome the. The. The misbehavior. And the sins that lead to misbehavior.

Sensing the power of God. Sensing the power of God. And our own weakness. And there we find.

The genuine Christian. The child of God. Having a right relationship. With the word of God. Coming to hear it. Recognizing responsibility. Ensuring that the hearing.

[30:42] Works out in life. And then. Knowing. The blessing of God. And how often do we say. That. We're looking for the blessing.

And we didn't get the blessing. And the blessing is not there. Well it begs a question. Which is obvious from the passage. But the person. Who is doing what.

They should be doing. With the word of God. Is the person. Who is blessed. And the freedom. To give obedience. To the law of God. Does not mean freedom.

From testings. And from trials. Or from difficulties. But it means enjoying. The power of God. In our lives. And may God grant. That it will be so for ourselves.

And may we learn every day. To overcome. The obstacles. In a way. To the proper worship of God. And to the proper way of living. Our Christian lives.

[31:37] In the world. May God bless his word to us. So we're not going to.