

Don't Just Listen!

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! And dive into a couple crucial and very central verses in this book.

Some of which James returns to in so many different ways throughout the remainder of the letter. So look with me down in verse 22. We're going to read to verse 25.

But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he's like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror.

For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he's 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.

[1 : 35] This is the infallible word of God. May God bless the preaching of it. You know, May is the season of graduating. School is out.

All the parents said amen, and the kids did at least. Kids are moving up. Graduates are moving on. And each year, around this time of the year, I love to read the commencement speeches throughout the country.

It's insightful to hear what our best and brightest, or at least our most popular people culturally, offer to graduates. This year was no different.

Several were filled with the same old, same old follow your heart message. One of them went like this. No matter what you choose to do, no matter what direction you go, you will face a moment in your career where you have absolutely no idea what to do.

I hope in that moment you'll be generous with yourself and trust that inner voice. I hope you don't. I guess we disagree. But others had some practical and helpful advice.

[2 : 42] One said, eat a good breakfast. Recycle. Make your bed. Now, this is good. Put your phone away at the dinner table. Know what you tweet or post or Instagram today might be asked about in a job interview tomorrow or in a deposition 20 years from now.

Another said, seriously, failure is not something to be ashamed of. It's something to be powered by.

Anybody that's far from graduation knows that experience. Failure is the highest octane fuel your life can run on. Learn to make it your fuel. I don't know completely what that means, but embrace failure, right?

That's a good, helpful commencement speech piece of wisdom. But one speech stood out to me the most. Former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said to this at graduates at VMI last weekend.

He said, maintain and protect who you are. Remember that being a person of integrity is the most valuable asset you have. It is true that your education will certainly play a part in your future success.

[3 : 58] But if you want to build a brighter future for the world, you must make a decision to live a life of integrity. He continued, committing yourself to a life of integrity and reminding yourself of that commitment often can give you the strength you need to resist the easy path that leads to poor results and even ruin.

There are so many things that graduation speech could include, but that is something vital. Few things are as vital as integrity. Webster's dictionary says integrity is a state of being whole or being complete.

It's that undivided state in which what you believe lines up with the way you live, in which this gap is bridged between what you confess with your mouth and what you live with your action.

And integrity, this wholeness is one of the main burdens of James' letter. Time doesn't permit for us to exhaust the different ways James points this out, but it's one of the main burdens for James.

It's one of the main burdens God has for us. That's what we're going to see today. James knows it's all too common to be divided. For our life to be out of step with our beliefs.

[5 : 14] It's even well known historically and culturally that Christians don't practice what they preach. And so we want to lean forward into these verses to hear what God is saying to the church.

We hear and know and are familiar with the things of Jesus Christ and the things of Scripture, but are our lives more and more shaped by them? That's what James would ask us today.

We sing praise to God with all our hearts on Sunday morning, but are our words guided by those same truths Monday to Saturday? Do we have integrity?

Are we honest? Are we the same person in every situation? Or are we chameleon-like? It blends in and suppresses the things we confess in moments where it's not comfortable.

Do we compartmentalize Christianity? Leaving it from 10 to 12 on Sunday morning? Christianity is a fight. And this passage is a gift.

[6 : 25] In a word, what I want to go for is don't just listen. Devote yourself to the hearing and keeping the perfect word.

Don't just listen. Devote yourself to hearing and keeping the perfect word. We're going to unpack this in three points. Just looking at James' passage, the command that's there, and then a couple, an illustration and application.

So the first point is don't just listen. Don't just listen. I don't know about you guys, but don't you just love stories of generosity?

A couple of years ago after his team won the championship, owner Mark Cuban, owner of the Mavericks, bought a \$90,000 bottle of champagne to celebrate with his team.

And even better than that, gave a \$20,000 tip. Now, I just love that. You know, a smile broke across my face. It made her year.

[7 : 31] And that's what he should do. You know, he's filthy rich. He should give a tip like that. Even just last week, NFL player after the shooting in Santa Fe High School, NFL player J.J. Watt offered to pay for the funeral expenses of each child killed.

He's an NFL player there in Houston, offered to do that. So generous. He just loves stories like that. But have you ever met somebody whose generosity makes you uncomfortable?

You know, somebody who always wants to pay for the meal, you know, who grabs that check first. My father-in-law is a little bit like this. He will not let you pay for anything.

Or maybe even someone whose generosity is just over the top. You know, it's not just like excess or it's not just extravagant. It seems excessive, even wasteful.

Well, throughout the opening chapter of James, James has been describing God as having an extravagant generosity in this way. And before we dive into the verse, I want us to see the context in which our passage emerges.

[8 : 40] In the midst of suffering and trial, James says that God is near to give abundantly. He gives us what we need to make us complete, to make us whole is what he's going after.

He listens when we're in trial, eager to give generously to all without reproach. He's not tempting us in these moments or leading us to sin.

Rather, James says that every good and perfect gift flows from his hand. Every day brings forth endless good things on this fallen world for us, things we don't deserve.

And then he continues. He said, not only that, he gives us new life. He causes us to be born again. And as Jeff reminded us last night, last week, he gives us a new heart with the word of God implanted on it.

God is exceedingly generous with us. So it's no surprise in these verses we studied last week, we're called to receive. We don't give to God.

[9 : 47] We come to him to receive. We bow down low like a child to simply receive from him. Yet, in the verse we're going to look at today, James graciously and wisely reminds us in our text that we must not only receive.

We must not only listen. We must be active. We must work. Don't forget that context. God, in this passage, is here to rescue us and to keep us.

Look at verse 22. It simply says, But be doers of the word and not hearers only. The accent, as I mentioned, has been on listening and receiving.

James essentially says, don't just listen. We must be quick to hear, right? Verse 19. We must be quick to hear, but we also must be quick to act.

This command gets to the heart of the letter and is the most well-known verse in the letter. We must be doers of the word. Now, that's a curious phrase.

[10 : 57] What's that mean? Now, you may think of yourself as a doer. You wake up in the morning. You're ready to do that to-do list, you know? Is that what he's talking about? Literally, the word means a maker, a builder, a producer, a practitioner or a practitioner of the word.

The idea is that our faith and our hearing is to produce something visible. It's to produce something tangible.

The point is, what good is a maker who doesn't make? You know, what good is a builder who has no houses that he's built? Like, what good is an artist who hasn't a painting to call by his name?

And what good is a hearer who doesn't respond? That's what James is saying. It should be visible. And the command is always applicable.

It's the way it's worded. Continuously be a doer. Continually be a doer. This is not like for the first days of faith. This is a life verse, if you will.

[12 : 13] Continually be. The idea is that the consistent day-in, day-out pattern of a life is to be the practicing and keeping and doing and producing of the word of God. That our task in this life is to bring to life the principles and priorities of the word of God.

To adorn them. The word has no form. But we take it, ingest it, so to speak, and bring it to life so that the world might see.

Now, this command, this teaching is straight from our Lord's playbook. Remember Matthew 7, 24? We have these for you. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, he said, Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on a rock.

You remember that? One builds on a rock. One builds one on sand. The ocean comes in and washes away the one who's built on the sand. But the one who builds on the rock, the one who hears these words and does them, he's wise.

Luke 11, 28. Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it. I mean, that's almost the exact language that's in this passage, right? Don't just listen. Devote yourself to the hearing and keeping of the perfect word.

[13 : 32] That's the command. Then James illustrates it. Point two. The person who only listens deceives himself.

The person who only listens deceives himself. James turns our attention to the effect of neglecting and the effect of keeping this command through two illustrations.

James, this is wisdom literature in so many different ways. And James is contrasting two ways of life, just like the Proverbs does, just like the end of the Sermon on the Mount did. There's one way of listening.

That's what he's going to lay out for us. One way of listening only. And there's one way of listening and acting and working. Let's take it in turn. Only listening leads to self-deception.

Look down at verse 22. That word's used numerous times in the first chapter. There's self-deception.

[14 : 38] There's deception that comes. It's self-generated. Now, we know what it means to be deceived, right? We know what it feels like to be told a lie, to be deliberately misled.

We have this experience on social media. Was there collusion in the last election cycle? Was it the Russians? Only the Lord knows. I'm sure they'll be searching this out for the next 10 years.

But it seems clear that people sought to deliberately mislead us throughout that campaign. We were deceived.

Or maybe we've experienced deception just in previous churches or among different Christians. People that profess certain things and yet don't live it out.

We feel deceived. We feel defrauded. We feel a victim of how fraud they are.

[15 : 46] Sadly, that's all too common for people's experience with Christians and with the church. But how is it possible that we mislead and deceive ourselves?

It doesn't seem like that we can only be misled and deceived by another. But James alerts us to this danger. Look at verse 23. He said, If anyone's a hearer and not a doer, he's like a man who looks intently at his natural face in the mirror.

He looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he's like. So you see what's going on there. The first person, this person, this man, looks intently at the mirror.

He goes away and immediately forgets. So he's looking intently. This is not a quick glance. You know, the contrast is not between a long glance and a quick glance.

This is an intent look. This is a look in the mirror. He sees clearly who he is. That's what James means by he sees his natural face. He sees who he is, how he was made.

[16 : 53] He sees something there. He understands something about himself. And yet when he walks away, he immediately forgets. He deceives himself by failing to live in light of what he saw in the mirror.

He deceives himself not by believing something false, but by forgetting something true. You see, he saw, he saw clearly, he saw something true.

And yet he forgot it. So to the person who only listens does the same thing.

And we're often like this man. We assume all we need to do is hear, right? As if hearing will make all the difference. Well, we need a prophet to interpret that.

Yeah, it ain't good. It's an omen, I think. You know, we assume that all we need to do is hear, right?

[18 : 12] As if hearing alone will make all the difference. As if hearing these things proclaimed to us, kind of understanding them and believing them will make all the difference.

And that assumption far too often leads to the danger of forgetting. Not merely not remembering, but overlooking, neglecting, allowing something to escape our attention.

Take something like anger. Jeff addressed the topic of anger last night. We can hear messages on anger. If you've been a member of this church for any length of time, you've heard messages on anger. We can read books.

Bookstores got a handful, at least, of titles on anger. We can read those books. We can diagnose our heart. I've been diagnosing my heart at different times in anger.

Why did I respond that way? What was going on there? But if we just stop there, we drift into deception. Because we can know a lot about anger and still get really angry.

[19 : 13] And James says that we can know a lot about anger and still get really angry in different moments and go further into deception such that we think that we've already solved this problem with anger.

Does that make sense? That's what he's getting at. This drift often happens as we neglect these things. That's the way it happens.

Our forgetting is not a decision in a moment, but a slow, steady drift. Much like an ocean liner drifts off course a few degrees at a time, our souls often drift slowly and gradually.

Where tenderness of heart gradually grow calloused and hard. Where honest business settles for underhanded practices and cutting corners.

Where moderation gives way to excess. Where words are no longer chosen carefully, but thrown about carelessly and corruptly. The effect is drastic.

[20 : 20] We're duped. James says we're duped into thinking we're something we're not. We're duped into thinking we're better off than we are.

We're duped into thinking that we have substance when we don't. It's a serious matter. The danger is clear and the examples are so many and yet self-deception, as one commentator says, happens with astonishing regularity.

I was raised in the heart of South Carolina. And one summer, for my sophomore year at UT, I went home and I was asked to escort a young gal to a debutante ball.

I don't know if you know anything about debutantes and their balls. I didn't know anything about this until I escorted this girl.

I guess the idea is that at 18 years of age or something similar, a girl would be a debutante. In which she made her first public debut.

[21 : 32] That's where the word comes from. And became eligible for courtship or marriage or whatever. Whatever you call it these days. And it was a big, elaborate celebration in which those people around, you kind of, you went arm and arm around in a circle and everybody clapped for the debut.

It's very odd, but that's not the point of the illustration, so I'll keep moving. And in the weeks leading up to this, no offense to anybody who's a debutante.

We can talk later. Yeah, yeah, no offense taken, yeah. In the week prior, there were lots of parties, kind of like a wedding.

You know, you'd have these pre-deputante parties and there was celebration. And one particular evening, a party went late into the night. And I saw a childhood friend of my mother's.

And she was in my mom's Bible study. She was a prayer partner. This lady was a fixture in the Alexander home for years.

[22 : 45] But this night, she sort of stumbled up to me. She was drunk. She rested her arm on me.

And before long, I realized I was holding her up. And at the time, I was an unbeliever. And I was so confused.

He was this person. We exchanged Christmas gifts for 15 years. I was thinking, how could my mom's friend act this way?

I was brokenhearted. Is this what Christianity is? Is it just kind of some belief that we put on on Sunday morning that has no bearing on life?

As she was leaning on me. Is it just a veneer? I was almost angry at seeing that.

[23 : 52] And broken. But I tell that story not to sound better than this lady. I am not. I tell that to illustrate how far we can drift.

Nobody sets out to be deceived. But decision after decision.

Compromising decision after decision. We get to a place where we are not what we once were. We are duped.

Often unaware. Often believing. Nothing's happened. We're the same. And for some of you.

No doubt. Group this size. You are deceived. Paul warns that in the last days there will be some who have a form of godliness but not its power.

[24 : 57] Is that you? And be faithful to the word of God. We have to ask these questions. Have you drifted to a place where your beliefs no longer line up with your life?

Now I'm not saying that they're perfectly lining up to our life. Because we will not reach that this side of the heaven. But do they honestly line up with your life?

Do what you confess with your mouth line up with the way you live? Or is this all a charade? Is it an act?

Is it an act? Our gracious God is calling us and calling you to walk in the light of honesty and repentance. That's why this passage is in the Bible.

Not to condemn you and send you out. But to invite you to come near and find grace in Jesus Christ. And if that's you, I pray you would come to him.

[25 : 54] It doesn't matter if you confessed him ten years ago or five years ago. We don't even need to talk about those things. But what you can do is respond to the gospel today. And if you confess your sin, he'll forgive you.

And cleanse you. For all of us, though, this passage is a sober warning. There's no reason this could be us. Many drift.

Many are deceived. Paul says in 1 Timothy, Many have made shipwreck of their faith. I've been a Christian long enough to see that happen. Let's fight.

Let's not go there. Don't just listen. Devote yourself to hearing and keeping the perfect word of God.

The whole Old Testament is the people of God drifting in and out of deception. God didn't leave them. He won't leave us. And this is how.

[27 : 04] Look at point three. The person who listens and acts receives blessing. The person who listens and acts receives blessing.

So I said there were these contrasting illustrations. We're going to look at the contrast. We're going to look at the way of wisdom here. The way of blessing. The way of avoiding self-deception.

The way out. Verse 25 says, 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.

So we look at this passage. What's the difference, right? They both look. But instead of going away and forgetting, the second person perseveres.

He continues to look. He continues to give attention to what he has seen. And then he acts. The idea is that rather than being forgetful, he perseveres.

[28 : 12] He just sticks with it. The word, he remains with it. He stays with it.

He gives attention to it and he acts on it. Rather than walking away and forgetting, this person remains in the word. He's like that man in Psalm 1. He meditates on the law of God day and night.

He sticks with it. There's nothing impressive about this man, but that he sets himself into that word. And he remains there. And he's kept. Remember, the wicked are like chaff that the wind blows away.

But the man who stays in the words like a tree, planted by streams of water. What's water do? Makes you shoot forth with new branches and new strength.

He's like the man in John 15. Same word used. Remains. He remains. He abides in Jesus by abiding in his word.

[29 : 13] Remember, Jesus said, if you obey my word, if you keep my word, I'll come to you and make a home with you. And then we have this passage. If you keep my command, you abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and abide in his love.

If you keep, you abide. It just says, I have kept and abide. And so we're invited into this by just remaining. You know, in churches like ours, there's a wonderful emphasis upon God seeking sinners and inviting them to come.

It's okay to not be okay. Amen. Come as you are. Come to Jesus Christ. Find in him. Find forgiveness in him. But this verse reminds us that change doesn't just happen immediately after that.

This verse reminds us that change happens by devoting ourselves to the word, by persevering, remaining in the word, abiding in the word. Jesus said, sanctify them in the truth.

Your word is truth. And so we get there and we abide there and we are changed. Last month, former first lady, Barbara Bush, died at the age of 92.

[30 : 26] 1,500 people gathered. Invite only ceremony. It's the first time I've ever heard of that. Invite only ceremony for a funeral in Houston, Texas. And I saw one picture from the service.

It affected me. These two men. Long before the crowds arrived for the service, her secret service detail stood by her casket.

Long after President Bush or President Bush and all the rest of the family left, her secret service detail remained with her casket.

Long into the night and into the next day, while they awaited her burial, her secret service detail awaited by her casket, they refused to leave.

They said, our job is not done until this woman's buried. They stuck with it. They remained. It wasn't impressive work, what they were doing.

[31 : 35] I mean, obviously they were gardening. It's more impressive than a lot of stuff I do. But they were sticking with it. They refused to give up. They pushed back and they stood there. That's all we're called to do.

You can take down the picture. We're just called to stand there, to stick with it, to remain in the word, and to press on and push back. D.A. Carson says this, We slide towards godliness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.

Stakes are high. Carson is clear. Drifting only goes one direction, and our effort, discipline, work are required.

You want to avoid self-deception? Persevere. Don't just listen. Remain in the word. Keep it.

Obeys it. Bear fruit. That's what James is saying. But how? Are we just to keep this thing by our own effort?

[33 : 18] The secret lies in what it doesn't say.

It doesn't say the one who keeps the word perfectly receives a blessing. It doesn't say the one who obeys the law fully receives a blessing.

It doesn't say the one who carries out the law completely receives the blessing. It says the one who perseveres, the one who looks, the one who perseveres in looking at the perfect law of liberty and keeps working receives the blessing.

This is James' way of reminding us of the gospel. James is not calling us and pushing us to strive to be perfect, obedient doers of the word in order to please God.

James knows the gospel. He knows God is pleased with us through our justification. So, he's reminding us that the law is the law of liberty.

[34 : 30] Not slavery. Have you remember the Israelites received the law after being delivered from Egypt?

The law was never meant to be a rule or a body of rules to keep in order to be pleasing to God. No, the law was just to guide them.

To adorn their lives having been delivered by him. So, too, we've been delivered through Jesus Christ. The law, the word of God, that are used interchangeably here, is our guide.

It is a law of freedom, is what he's saying. It's a law that has told us about the freedom that's found in Jesus Christ. Freedom from sin's power and death's sting in him.

It's a law that reveals the character of God for us. It defines the shape of godliness to us. It unleashes the spirit's power to help us. That's what he's saying. Freedom does not come from obeying the law nor from rejecting it altogether.

[35 : 34] Freedom, rather, comes from looking into this word, being refreshed by it, remaining in it, and keeping it, not perfectly, but continually, until he returns.

And that's the path. And that's the path. That's the path of wisdom. It's not a path of gospel plus. It's a path paved by gospel grace.

It's a path powered by the spirit's help. And it's a path marked by a promise that the person who does this will be blessed. They'll find blessing.

And things going well in reward, or things going well in this life and reward in the next. It just sounds like Psalm 1 again. Like, blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffer.

Remember, his delight's on the law of the Lord. And all he does, he prospers. It continues. That's the blessing. And he'll stand at the judgment is where it lands in verse 6. He'll stand where sinners won't stand.

[36 : 38] He'll stand. There's no need, then, to try to appear more mature than we are or to hide how immature we are. We can press on one step at a time.

Remaining in the word. Keeping it. Fighting. Not just listening, but devoting ourselves to hearing and keeping the perfect word, the law that set us free.

So, where do we start? I just, I thought, just three simple application points.

Very simple. First, meditate on the word.

The word literally means murmur over it, you know? Just keep mouthing it out. Get your mind in that word and keep meditating on it.

[37 : 48] Two, listen for how it speaks to you. The word of God, Hebrews 4 says, is living and active.

It's sharper than any two-edged sword. It pierces to the vision of soul and spirit. The point is, it gets into our heart. It's a living word. Thomas Watson said, take every word as spoken to yourself.

When the word thunders against sin, think. Thus, God means my sin. When it presseth against any duty, God intends me in this.

Many put off scripture from themselves as if it is only concern for those who lived in a time, in the time when it was written. But if you intend to profit by the word, bring it home to yourself.

A medicine will do no good unless it be applied. Bring it home. The word of God is clear. That's one of the attributes of the word.

[38 : 58] It's clear. It's a clarity that you can understand and that by the Spirit's power can bring it home. Point three is just apply it to your life.

Don't try to change everything at once. Rome didn't fall in a day. Neither will our lives change in a day.

Spurgeon famously said, take one bit of Bible and apply it to one bit of life. It's a great way to break down this passage.

Just take one bit of Bible, apply it to one bit of life. Take one bit of Bible about your anxiety, about your anger, about your unforgiveness or whatever it might be, and apply it to that one bit of life.

And day after day, year after year, the blessing will flow. Your life, just as Jesus prayed, will be transformed by the word.

[40 : 04] Let us pray. Father in heaven, thank you for this word. Lord, thank you, God, that all that we need for life and godliness is contained in this word.

Thank you, Lord, that we have in this word everything we need to be thoroughly equipped for every good work. God, we confess that we do not know all that we need to know. And we confess our need for you and our need for help.

God, open this word up to us. Make it alive. Cause it to bear fruit in our hearts and our lives. And keep us, God, in the love of God and in the good of the things of God, even as we press forward to listen and to keep this perfect word.

We thank you. In Christ's name. Amen. You've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.

For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at trinitygraceathens.com. Thank you. you