

# Hearers and Doers of the Word

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Preacher: Nick Lauer

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, good morning, church. Our sermon today is based on James chapter 1, verses 19 through 27. I invite you to turn there with me in your Bible at home. I'm going to begin reading, actually, one verse earlier in verse 18. So, James chapter 1, picking up in verse 18.

Let me read this for us. Of his own will, he, that is God, brought us forth by the word of truth, that we, that is the church, should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

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. Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. 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 is 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 was 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.

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Let's pray. Father, we have just sung and prayed that you would show us Christ and through the preaching of your word, you would open our hearts to the reality of who you are and to your kingdom.

[ 2 : 0 1 ] So we pray that would be true. Lord Jesus, have mercy on us this morning as we come to your powerful word. And by your spirit, would you give us ears to hear, hearts to receive, and then lives that would express all the goodness that is here for us to see about you and about who we are, God.

Lord, bless this time for Christ's sake. Amen. Well, I wonder if you've ever had the experience of forgetting what you look like.

Sometimes this can be simple and humorous. You attend a conference and you put on one of those hello, my name is stickers. And then at the end of a long day, you realize in the rest stop on the drive home that you're still wearing that sticker when the cashier at Starbucks greets you by name and says, well, hello, Nick, what can I make for you? And you say, oh, I forgot I'm still wearing this name tag. I remember an even more embarrassing story from college. A friend on the morning of a job interview had cut, had nicked himself shaving. So he put little pieces of tissue on his face to stop the cuts. Well, in his nervous rush to get to the interview on time, he had forgotten that the tissue was still on his face. And he didn't realize it until after the interview was actually over.

That was a pretty painful story to hear. And, you know, it's funny that long ago, I don't actually remember whether he got the job or not. You know, in our text this morning, though, James is exhorting us not to forget who we are. Don't forget what you look like. In a sense, these verses bring us to the primary message of James's letter. This is his big idea. This is his thesis that he's going to unpack in the rest of the letter. We've been brought forth by the word of truth. Now we must remember who we are. We have to go on to receive that word and even more to do that word. In other words, James is telling us what it means to live life as God's new creation people. In verse 18, he calls us the first fruits of God's creation. You see, when the gospel comes to a person, the saving message of Christ, and the Holy Spirit causes a person to be born again through faith in Jesus, that person is, as Paul will say in 2 Corinthians, a new creation. You know, here's the big picture of the Bible, of redemption. God is renewing all of creation around Jesus, his Son. And the forefront of that work, the advanced foretaste of all the world being made new, the sneak peek of what's to come, the future made present in the here and now, the reality of heaven come to earth, that amazing reality, the first fruits, if you will, are actually you and me. Those who've come to know Jesus as king, to be forgiven and made new through the gospel of grace, the word of truth.

But the word that gives us new birth isn't a sort of static or inert or a lifeless thing. No, it's full of life. And James says, if you are the new creation, then that means you need to go on receiving the word and you need to go on doing the word. The word isn't just the start of our spiritual life, it's the beginning and middle and end of our spiritual life. And in the passage before us, there are sort of two central imperatives, two commands, two sort of directives that James gives us that drives this whole section and help it to hang together. And we're going to look at those two imperatives. First, we're going to look at receiving the word and then we're going to look at doing the word. So first, we need to receive the word. We see this in verses 19 through 21.

[ 5 : 48 ] James starts with three commands. 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. Now, the righteousness or the justice of God here in James is what we might call the saving reign of God. God's kingdom of justice and righteousness. And James says, if we want to be participants in the advance of that saving reign, the spread of the new creation, then we need to slow down. We need to slow down.

And I think in our age of social media, this is hard. Most of the time, we are tempted to be quick to anger and quick to speak our minds. But that won't bring about God's justice, James says.

Of course, James is speaking in general terms here. Not all human anger is wrong. There are some things that ought to arouse in us a definite no. However, too often our anger is not righteous anger.

It's anger coming from a place of fear or a place of pride. And rather than listen first, we speak and we speak words that cut and that hurt, words that defend our own interests, rather than words that heal, that build up, that bring truth and light and grace.

But what's the answer? How do we slow down? It's very interesting that James doesn't just say, well, you just try harder. You just slow down. No, he says, if you're having trouble slowing down and listening well to others, then you need to start by slowing down and listening well to God.

[ 7 : 30 ] Notice James starts verse 21 with the word, therefore. We need to slow down. And here's how. Here's how. Put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls. Remember the context of verse 18. God's brought you forth through the gospel. You're a new creation. And so put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness, he says. And now that word put away is a word used for taking off, for changing your clothes, actually.

And filthiness and rampant wickedness, that's all those old patterns and behaviors of our old life, the anger, the self-justifying talk. James says, that's not the real you anymore.

You can take it off and you can put it away. I spend a lot of time in the summer working on my house and I have a pair of clothes, actually a couple pairs of clothes that I use to do that work. And I'll tell you, those clothes are pretty filthy. There's paint on them, there's wood stain all over them, there's rips, there's tears, they get worse and worse as the years go on. But when the job is done, when the work is over, I take those clothes off and I put them away.

You see, friends, in the gospel, we're told of a job that's been completed, but it's not been completed by us. It's been completed by another for us. When Jesus died and rose again, he finished the job once and for all of reconciling us to God, of making us clean and new. So now we don't need those old clothes anymore because the job is done. The anger that I used to use to protect my interests in fear, the anger that I used to use to protect my reputation in pride, the words that I used to use to tear down other people in my insecurity, to justify my actions in order to gain approval, all of that is done now. Christ has died, Christ has risen, the justifying work is done, and my fear and my pride can be swallowed up in his immense love for me.

And those old clothes that I used to use to try to get the job done, they can be put away now. And instead, I can receive with meekness the implanted word.

[ 10 : 03 ] Because the more I really listen to God's word, the more we really internalize it, the more we can slow down and keep those old clothes in the closet.

That's what James means when he says it's able to save your soul. It's able to do the ongoing work of making us more and more like Christ. You see, we've been reconciled to God once and for all through Jesus's death and resurrection by faith alone through him. Now God is actually making us more and more like Jesus's son. He's refashioning us from the old way of life and forming us into this new creation life that we truly are. And in the background here, there's this whole sweep of Old Testament promise that we read a little bit of earlier in the service from Jeremiah 31.

Jeremiah spoke of a new covenant when God's word wouldn't just be an external word that comes to us, but it would be written on our hearts and when our sins would be remembered no more.

That's what Jesus accomplished once for all on the cross. And that's what the Holy Spirit applies and affects in us through faith. You see, friends, we are living right now in the time of the amazing fulfillment of the promises of God. All the writers of the New Testament would have said the time that we've been waiting for is right now. It's happening right now.

The new covenant's here and the word is in us and our sins have been remembered no more. So what does it look like practically for us to go on receiving the implanted word with meekness?

[ 11 : 53 ] Well, let me suggest three practices, three things, three practices that will help us to slow down in our relationship with God so that we can slow down in our relationship with others. First, the practice of silence. When you begin your times of personal prayer in the morning or in the evening, whenever it is for you, I wonder if you might just take even five minutes and be quiet before God. Be quick to listen in those times of prayer. Now, you may think just sitting there and being quiet sounds kind of silly. It may seem like you're actually doing nothing until you actually try it.

When you sit still, you take a deep breath and you become aware of the presence of God around you. And then you start to become aware of the rumblings and the preoccupations of your own heart.

And you listen and you let God be God in that moment. Second, the practice of slow Bible reading.

Don Whitney, one of the great writers about spiritual practices and disciplines of the 20th century once said, sometimes we need to read less so that we can meditate more.

And you know what he means by that? I think you actually already know. You know, if you read five chapters of the Bible in a morning, you don't really have enough time to think deeply about it. But if you read five verses, then you actually allow yourself to slow down and hear what God is saying. Now, reading through the Bible in a year is a great goal and more of us should be doing it. But for your time of personal prayer, read less to meditate more.

[ 13 : 41 ] Be slow to speak and quick to listen in those moments with God. Let the words of God come to you slowly. Think it over in your heart and your life. All those preoccupations that bubbled up in those moments of quiet before God, now you can start to hear how God may actually be speaking to them through his life-giving word. You know, it's sort of like tea and hot water. You know, you have to let the word sort of seep into you so you can draw out the flavors. And for that, you've got to read slowly.

And then you can start to hear what God is saying to you today. What promise is there for you? What invitation is God making to you? What command is there? What challenge is there for you today?

Sometimes when we slow down before the word, it gets uncomfortable. And God's really starting to do his work. So the practice of silence, the practice of slow Bible reading, and third, the practice of praying your real life. If we're going to be slow to anger with others, we need to be acknowledging and praying our own angers and fears and insecurities before God. We need to be praying, in other words, our real life, not the life we think we should be living in sort of a masquerade before God in prayer.

And that doesn't mean blaming God for our problems, but it does mean honesty before God, so that God's implanted word and his grace can go down into those interior parts and do the work from the inside out, deep down in our souls. So what does it mean to live as those who've been brought forth by the word of truth? It means an ongoing receptivity to the word. It means slowing down before God, receiving the word in meekness, in humility, so that we can slow down and be agents of God's justice with others, so that in our relationship with our neighbors and our spouse and our children and our communities on social media, we can be quick to listen and slow to speak and slow to anger. But receiving the word is only half of the equation here for James.

The second part, he says, is that we must be doers of the word. Do the word, James says here. This is verses 22 through 27, the rest of chapter 1. And you can see there, again, this underlying structure to James' thinking here. The word gives us birth in verse 18. Then we must go on receiving that word in verse 21. Now we must put the word into action and be doers of the word in verse 22. Otherwise, James says, if we're merely hearers of the word only, then we've deceived ourselves, he says.

[ 16 : 23 ] We are self-deluded. We're living a lie. We might say we are Christians, but we are not. We might think we're part of the new creation, but in reality, we're still very much stuck in the old.

James likens it to looking in a mirror. Now, mirrors in the ancient world were usually made of polished metal, and they weren't as clear as our modern-day mirrors, but they got the job done.

And imagine, James says, looking at your natural face in a mirror and then walking away at once and forgetting what you look like. It's sort of silly, isn't it? Especially in the ancient world when mirrors aren't as common as they are today. Imagine getting a chance to really see yourself and then walking off as if you hadn't seen it in the first place. What a waste!

But now consider, if that's true of a mirror, it's even more true of God's word. When you look into God's word, you aren't just seeing your natural face. You are seeing who God created you to be.

You're seeing your true, eternal image. That's part of the reason why James calls it the perfect law, the law of liberty. Here is completion.

[ 17 : 37 ] Here is freedom. For James, the law found in Scripture which has been fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah, the law which is perfected in the call to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. This, this is how the human machine is meant to run best.

This is where freedom and joy is found. You know, even more when we see that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the law, the prophets, and the writings. And when we start to see that every story and every promise and every command starts to echo and show us a new perspective on the face of Jesus, when we realize that this image of Christ that we see throughout the Scriptures is who God has formed us to be, then we start to realize that staring into the perfect law of liberty is seeing not just our natural face in a mirror, but our eternal face.

This is life as it was meant to be. And imagine getting a glimpse into that, and then moments later walking away and forgetting it all. How silly. Imagine seeing the path of freedom, the path of wholeness, seeing the face of Jesus, seeing our own face, who we've been created to be, and then walking away as if nothing happened. James says, remember who you are.

When you look into the law of liberty, persevere. Be a doer who acts. Live this new life that you've been given by grace. For there in the living, there you will know, he says, God's blessing. You will be blessed in your doing, he says. Now, James, does it mean that life will suddenly get easy?

Life sometimes gets harder when we start doing the Word. And blessing here, you know, doesn't mean worldly health and worldly wealth. That's not what James is talking about. No, God's blessing is God's fatherly favor. Do you want to know a richer communion with God? Do you want to have a deeper sense of his love? Do you want to have a near intimacy with God through your sorrows and joys?

[ 20 : 15 ] James says that it's found in the living. When we don't merely hear the Word, but we do it. When we take those steps of faith. Now, what does that look like practically?

James mentions three things here in verses 26 through 27. Now, he's going to unpack these themes in the chapters that follow, but James sort of lays them out here as a sort of summary of what's to come. You'll see in the weeks that come as we walk through this book of James that we're going to circle back on a lot of these themes and sort of explore them in a lot more depth. But here, James sort of lays them out and he says, you know, if you don't have these, then your religion is worthless. Now, religion here doesn't mean what we usually mean today. When we say religion, we usually mean one of those big families of belief and practice that shape people's whole lives. You know, when we say religion, we mean Christianity or Islam or Judaism or Buddhism. But that's not what James means. When James says religion, he means the outer actions of worship. You see, he's talking to Jewish Christians and he's saying, you can do all the outer actions of worship. You can go to church, you can listen to the Bible, you can go through the prayers and the songs, etc., etc. But if those outer actions aren't matched by a compassionate and holy life, then your religion, your outward practices are worthless. Literally, they are powerless. They won't do a thing. They won't extend God's kingdom. In fact, that word worthless there, powerless, is often sometimes used of the worship of idols in the Bible. So James is saying, you know, if you're just going through these outward acts of worship, it's almost idolatry. So what does it look like then to put the word into practice, to be a doer of the word? First, James says, we have to bridle our tongues. Ah, what a powerful image that is, isn't it?

A bridle is something that you put around a horse's face and mouth to make it turn this way and that. James is saying, your tongue, your speech is like a horse. It's full of power and you can use that power to trample things down and to run off and to kick up dirt and create all sorts of havoc or you can use that power, you can harness that power to produce good. Like a horse, you could plow a field for harvest or pull a cart full of grain or carry a rider to his home. Your words can be a life-giving force.

So how do we use our tongues? To bring life or to spread death? Again, this is especially true in our internet age. Words have power and so often we use words with almost no discretion, like a pack of wild horses just trampling down the weary.

But look at Jesus. At one point in the Gospel of John, Jesus said, I speak just as the Father taught me. As you read the Gospels, you see that Jesus' words were always the right words, whether it was a question or an encouragement or even a rebuke. Always his words were bringing life. And that's what the Holy Spirit, through the implanted word, is producing in us. As we participate with the ongoing work of God in us, our speech doesn't need to be an uncontrollable horse, but it can be a life-giving force for good. So first, being doers of the word means bridling our tongue to speak words of life. Second, James says it means visiting orphans and widows in their affliction. Now, widows and orphans were particularly vulnerable in the ancient world. And the Old Testament contains countless exhortations to show care and compassion toward them. Why? Well, because God's own heart is a heart of compassion. God cares for the vulnerable, the weak, the poor, the needy. And so, compassion for the vulnerable must be our heart too. You see, the new creation life isn't a life of seeking power and prestige and control. The new creation life is found among the least of these on the margins.

[ 24 : 53 ] They're precious in God's eyes. That's the forefront of the kingdom of God. So, brothers and sisters, friends, don't be afraid to visit someone who's struggling.

Of course, that probably looks like a phone call today or a socially distant driveway conversation with face masks or whatever it is. But all the same, don't be afraid to reach out, to show care and compassion, to simply show up. After all, isn't this what Jesus showed us? His care for the weak, for the lonely, for the orphan and widow, it was undeniable. It was among the least of these that he chose his first followers, built his church, and advanced his kingdom. And isn't that the heart of the gospel? When we were poor and needy and weak, utterly vulnerable in our sin and death, at just that time, God visited us in our affliction, literally showed up in the flesh and rescued us. Not because of works we had done, not because we deserved it, but because of his own compassion and grace.

That is the baseline of our whole life as believers in Christ, as the new creation, as the church. So, as we seek to live out the word then, it has to mean a likewise compassion towards the weak and towards the vulnerable. Third thing that it means to be a doer of the word.

It means to keep oneself unstained from the world, James says. Now, what does James mean by the word world? When the New Testament writers talk about the world, what they mean is human society living without any reference to the true God. Human society living on the basis, not of the true God, but of the idols of power and control and security, whatever it may be. But the church, you see, the church is meant to be different, to be distinct, to be a kind of new society within the midst of the old.

A society that approaches the sort of everyday things like money and sex and power and influence in completely different ways because we're serving a completely different king. The living and true God, the Lord Jesus. Because we serve a different Lord, our lives look very different in the midst of the world. And so, for example, things like racism should have no place in the church. What it means to be the new creation, the first fruits of God's kingdom, is to proclaim that all women and men of all races and nationalities and nationalities are created equally in God's image and are worthy of equal honor, justice, and respect. And to stand up for these things and to live in distinct ways.

[ 28 : 02 ] That's what it means to be a doer of the word and not a hearer only. To live in ways that are utterly distinct at times from the world around us. To be in the world and not of the world. And you know, sometimes that very well might bring opposition. To live in a way that's unstained by the world, serving a different God than the gods of this age, that will make the church unpopular at times.

But you know, Jesus himself has gone before us. He lived a life of radical distinction from the world. He was crucified and put to death at the hands of this world.

And so, if trials come, we need not fear. Even if a cross lies before us, our Lord has already gone there. And he has emerged victorious in the resurrection. And he is seated at the right hand of the Father, where he reigns in justice and grace, ready to return and make all things new.

You see, there's nothing to fear for those who are doers of the word. No, James says, that's where God's blessing is to be found. And so, church, James says, let us not forget who we are. We've been given new birth by the word. So now let's receive the word and let's be doers of the word. And in so doing and in so receiving, we'll know the power and we'll know the presence of the one who is the incarnate word, the Lord Jesus, who was the perfect receiver and the perfect doer of the word.

And that incarnate word, our Lord Jesus promises, that he will most surely complete the good work that he has begun in us. Amen. Let's pray.

[ 30 : 12 ] Father, we confess this morning that these words from the book of James, they're challenging to us, God. We acknowledge that we often would much rather think our own thoughts than think your thoughts after you.

We acknowledge, God, that so often we would much rather do our own thing than do your thing. Lord, for some of us, as we hear this challenge, it pricks sensitive consciences.

Lord, for some of us, it can drive us to almost a sense of despairing about whether we are actually in Christ or not. Lord, I pray that by your spirit, you would comfort those who need comfort.

Father, remind them that the grace and mercy of Jesus covers all of our sins and ushers us into this new life. Lord, but for those whose hearts are hard, would it open up something new?

Would your spirit continue to do his work in the days to come? Lord, please make us a people who are not just hearers of the word, but doers.

[ 31 : 22 ] Help us each step of the way, depending on your grace and on your strength, to live this new life that you've given us. Jesus, you said that when people see our good works, they'll give glory to our Father in heaven.

Would that be true? Would people see our good works and give glory to your name, Father? Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.