

James 1:19-27

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[0:00] You speak to us through it, and Lord, I ask that none of us here this evening would merely be listeners to your word and so deceive ourselves, but that instead we'd do what it says, that we would respond with gratitude and with thanksgiving for what you've done for us in Jesus.

It's in his name that we pray. Amen. Friends, please turn with me in your Bibles to James chapter 1, beginning at verse 19. It's also going to be on the screen behind us, if you'd like to look on there.

James chapter 1, beginning at verse 19. James writes this, My dear brothers, take note of this.

Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. For man's anger doesn't bring about the righteous life that God desires.

Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent, and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Don't merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves.

[1:06] Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word doesn't do what it says. It's like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it, he will be blessed in what he does.

If anyone considers himself religious and yet doesn't keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts is pure and faultless as this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Friends, last week we began a new series in the book of James, or alternatively, as we began to see last week, a new series in the sermon of James. And the reason I say that is because in many ways that's how James comes across, as a preacher.

That's how his letter comes across, more like a sermon than a letter. To this letter, it's as much a sermon as it is anything else. It's James preaching to us as much as he is writing to us.

[2:16] And like any preacher worth his salt, James' purpose isn't merely to inform. As readers, as listeners, he wants to see us transformed. To this letter, this sermon, it's a call to action.

The Christian life, it revolves around God's initiative, to be sure. It begins and ends with God's unmerited kindness towards us in Christ. But that being said, what James wants us to take heart is that the Christian life is by no means a life of passivity.

And so in our passage tonight, God calls us to be good listeners. Verse 19, to be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.

God calls us to listen to him. But more than that, not just that, he also calls us to act on what we've heard. How do we know that we've heard? How do we know that we've really heard?

Internalize what we've heard? By living like we've heard. Verse 22, don't merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves, says James, but do what it says. Verse 26, if anyone considers himself religious, if you call yourself a Christian, in other words, if you say that you're someone who listens to God, it's one thing to say that the seed of God's word's been planted in you.

- [3 : 32] The question is, out of the soil of your heart, what's growing? What sort of fruit are you growing? Our God's a speaking God, and we're created in his image to be a speaking people.

What sort of words are coming out of your mouth? Constructive words or destructive words? Words that build up or words that tear down?

Kind words or mean words? Our God speaks with a controlled tongue. Friends, what about you? Our God's a God who cares for the weak and the downtrodden as well.

What about us? Are we those who care for the needy? Our God's a perfect and holy and righteous God. What about us? When we look at ourselves in the mirror, what do we see?

Are we seeing someone who's growing in personal holiness and purity or not? Friends, these things don't come easily. They don't come naturally for us. They're a struggle.

- [4 : 30] The book of James, James' letter come sermon. It's devoted to the reality that the Christian life is a struggle. That having been given new birth, spiritually speaking, if we want to survive, we need to persevere.

And if we want to persevere, we need to grow. And so what we see this evening, what we'll be seeing in the weeks that follow, Lord willing, is whether or not we're growing as a Christian, it's measurable.

These three fruits, how we speak, how we treat those who are less well off than us, whether we're growing in purity, whether we're being conformed more and more into Jesus likeness. They're God's divinely endorsed metrics, if you will, for measuring our growth.

So, in our passage this evening, James puts it like this, puts it to us straight. You say you're a Christian. That's great. You say you're a Christian. But are you practicing what you're professing?

So, friends, let's say that we want to. Let's say that we want to bear fruit that's consistent with repentance and faith. Where to begin? Well, in our passage this evening, what we see is this.

- [5 : 39] The Christian life begins with being a good listener. And that means closing our mouths long enough to hear God speak to us. Take a look with me at verses 19 and 20.

My dear brothers, take note of this. Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. For man's anger doesn't bring about the righteous life that God desires. You want to live a righteous life?

It begins with being a good listener. Hearing God speak to us through his word. Right from the very beginning of the Bible. One of the things that characterizes, most characterizes God, is that he is a speaking God.

And he's created us in his image to be a speaking people. That being said, God's created us to listen first and speak second. To be quick to listen and slow to speak, if you will.

When Moses speaks to the people of Israel, what does he say? He says, hear, O Israel. The Lord is our God. The Lord is one. Not speak, O Israel, but the hear.

- [6 : 43] Listen, O Israel. God's a speaking God. And he's created us in his image to be a speaking people. And yet, when it comes to us communicating with God, the order is all important.

God speaks, we listen. And then, and only then, only once we've heard and really heard, do we then respond. In other words, the way God's created us, he's created us to be quick to listen and slow to speak.

But friends, the trouble is, when we rebelled against God, and we all have, when we declared independence from God, the trouble is that all of that got turned upside down.

Completely flipped, if you will. That's why James needs to write verse 19 in the first place. Because what used to come naturally, what ought to come naturally, in the new heavens and the new earth, what will come naturally for us, it now comes unnaturally.

Especially, we're not quick to listen, either to God or anyone else, but especially God. We're not slow to speak. And those quick words, all too often, they're angry words.

[7:52] You know, one of the themes that's repeated all throughout the Bible is that speaking quickly is fraught with danger. When we rush off at the mouth, as we're all liable to do, it's never good.

The Bible's full of verses about it, especially in Proverbs. To give just a few examples, Proverbs 29, verse 20. Do you see the man who speaks in haste?

There's more hope for a fool than for him. Speaking quickly is fraught with danger. And compounding things, our quick words, all too often, they're angry words, destructive words.

They couldn't be more different than slow words. You know, from experience, maybe you can relate to this. I know I certainly can. Speaking quickly is fraught with danger.

But when we're quick to listen, slow to speak, our words, when we pause, think before we speak, think about the impact that they're likely to have. They're much more likely to be constructive words.

[8:51] Words that turn away anger, not incited. But Proverbs 15, verse 1, a gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

So, verse 19. My dear brothers, take note of this. Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. Why? Verse 20. For man's anger doesn't bring about the righteous life that God desires.

And, you know, the thing is, you know, even if we don't subscribe to the authority of the Bible, even if we don't claim to be Christians, and maybe this is you this evening, I don't know.

The reality is, even if we don't believe that God spoke the world into being, that right now he's sustaining the world with his word, even if we don't believe that at this moment, it's impossible to deny that our words are powerful, that they've got the power to build up, that they have the power to tear down.

You know, even the world knows that the old saying, sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me. Even the world knows that that's a lie. That words are powerful. Even if we don't buy the biblical truth that God's created us in his image to listen to him, to be a people who listen first, speak second, I think we can all agree that there's something really refreshing about a good listener.

[10:09] By nature, we're quick to speak, slow to listen. And so when we do, it stands out. When we ask good questions and listen to what people say in response, it stands out, doesn't it?

I know I've been in situations like this, maybe you have as well, situations where you've done a lot of listening. For whatever reason, not much by way of speaking, but a lot of listening. At the end of it all, the other person says, that was a great conversation.

You know, I really love talking with you. You know, we should do this more often. For instance, Christians, we should be known for being good listeners. For speaking God's truth in love by all means, but not just that.

For being people who are quick to listen as well. And all the more so in a world where good listeners, people who are quick to listen, slow to speak, where they're few and far between.

Verse 19, my dear brothers, take note of this. Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry. You'd be hard pressed, I think, to find anyone wanting to dispute that this is a worthy ideal, a worthy aspiration.

[11:17] The question is, how to achieve it? You know, supposing we can all agree that we'd all be a lot better off if we were quicker to listen, slower to speak. But now going beyond that, supposing you're someone who, verse 20, who wants to live the righteous life that God desires.

The question is, how? Given that good listeners, slow speakers, given that they're so few and far between, that it's so hard to pull off, how do we become someone who's quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry?

And it's at this point that our approach versus God's approach couldn't be more different. Can I summarize it this way? It's the difference between moral reformation.

That's our way. Trying harder. Turning over a new leaf. Vowing to be a better listener. Vowing to be a slower speaker. It's the difference between our way, between moral reformation, and spiritual transformation, which is God's way.

It's the difference between what we try to do in our own strength, trying as hard as we can to suppress our desires. This is what God promises to do for us. Do for us what we can't do for ourselves, and transform us from within.

[12:38] Not just give us an external cleanup, but give us a new heart. Not just help us to suppress our old desires, but replace them with new desires. Our approach versus God's approach.

They couldn't be more diametrically opposed. Superficial moral reformation versus a deep, inward, spiritual transformation. Allow me to illustrate.

Illustrate our way of trying to become slower to speak. Quaker to listen. I have two young children back home. My son, Lachlan, is two and a half, and very fond of his books.

Especially Mr. Men books. Maybe you've seen them yourself. I grew up with them. Maybe you're familiar. Maybe you're not. There are 46 in the series. We have 34 at last count.

And Lachlan knows every single one of them, back to front. If you happen to babysit for us, he'll try to introduce you to all 34 of these characters. The basic premise of most Mr. Men books is that we all need to change.

[13:40] True enough. Can't argue with that. But how do we change? Well, the response in every single Mr. Men book is that we change by trying to reform ourselves.

By turning over a new leaf. By trying harder. Or by others doing their best to reform us. By others shaming us or bullying us into changing our behaviour.

That if we want to be accepted more like, then we'd better change and become more likeable. That's the implicit theology that's embedded in these stories. That we all need to change. And that change happens by giving people incentives to reform their behaviour.

By giving people disincentives not to change their behaviour. Change is a matter of self-wrought moral reformation. These are children's books. But they're by no means theologically neutral.

No literature is. Whatever its genre, whatever its target audience is. And so each book features a particular Mr. Man. There are some characters who appear in sort of cameo roles, but for the most part, they focus on one individual.

[14:45] And many of them, many but not all, are characterised by a serious moral flaw that needs changing. And changing fast. Characters like Mr. Greedy and Mr. Nosy and Mr. Uppity, for instance.

And then, and especially relevant for our passage this evening, there's Mr. Chatterbox. As his name suggests, someone who's very much slow to listen and quick to speak.

And so a few key townsfolk decide to take it upon themselves to try to change him. And they do. They order Mr. Chatterbox a special hat. And whenever he talks too much, it grows down over his eyes so that he can't function.

And then it's only when he stops talking that it shrinks back up to its normal size. And so eventually, by the end of the story, Mr. Chatterbox gets the message. He comes to the conclusion that life would be a lot more pleasant if he changed.

If he talked less. Listen more. You know, it's only a kid's book. But friends, don't be deceived. It's as concise a model as you'll find anywhere of what happens when we're left to our own devices and how we try to affect change.

[15:51] When it comes to change, when it comes to changing ourselves, changing others, left to our own devices, our approach is to try to reform ourselves. Like the characters in a Mr. Men story, our approach focuses on superficial behaviour adjustment.

At which point, you might well say to me, but hang on, you know, these Mr. Men characters, they do change, don't they? Mr. Chatterbox ends up talking less, listening more.

Mr. Greedy starts off really fat, but ends up the story at the end really thin. Mr. Tickle starts off an inveterate tickler and ends up that way as well, but he's an exception to the rule.

You know, the characters in these Mr. Men stories, they pursue change via moral reformation and they do seem to change. You know, in real life, can't we all point to cases of people who vowed to reform themselves and succeeded in some way?

And you know what? Maybe we can. Maybe in the short run, at least. You know, maybe if we limit what we're trying to change narrowly enough, maybe we can achieve some form of moral reform.

[17:00] If we're single-minded enough, maybe we can, to some small degree at least anyway. Maybe like Mr. Chatterbox, we can train ourselves, be trained, shamed more like it into being marginally better listeners, compared to others at least, moderately slower to speak.

But friends, you know what? And I think we all recognise this deep down. And this is where our efforts always fall short. That no matter how hard we try to reform ourselves, no matter how hard others try to reform us, when we focus on behaviour at alteration, at the end of the day, it's just tinkering with externals, isn't it?

Friends, what I'm saying is left to our own devices, our approach to change, playing the behaviour modification game, it doesn't get to the heart of the matter. It doesn't get to the heart of the matter because it doesn't get to the matter of our hearts.

By nature, our hearts are deceitful and corrupt. Who can understand them, says the prophet Jeremiah? Friends, our hearts are corrupt and out of the overflow of our hearts, our mouths speak.

God's approach versus our approach, they couldn't be more different. You know, he's no less convinced that we need to change. But his approach couldn't be more different.

[18:23] He knows that we need to change and he longs to change us. Change us transform us from within. He knows that true change, it's not about changing our behaviour, it begins with changing our hearts.

It's an internal thing, not an external thing. It's not about suppressing antisocial desires, it's about displacing them. And not just displacing them either, it's about replacing them with godly desires.

Isn't that James' point in verse 21? Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that's so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

You want to be someone who's quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger? Notice what God doesn't say. He doesn't say then just stop talking altogether.

In a sense, that'd be the easiest solution, wouldn't it? You know, us vowing to be mute. But that's not the solution, is it? If we did, if we just stopped talking altogether or at least attempted to, we'd be denying something essential to our humanity if we did.

[19:31] How can we communicate God's love for us in Christ to others if we were mute? God's solution, it isn't to cease talking, nor does he say try harder, you know, vow harder.

How do we change? How do we become people who are quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger? How do we live the righteous life that God desires?

Friends, only if he makes us righteous. Only if he gives us his righteousness, only if our hearts are changed. By God's grace, we've got to want to displace our love of self, our love of evil, moral filth.

Get rid of it, James says. But not just that. Don't just get rid of it. Don't just displace it, we've got to replace it. Have that void filled with a greater love, a love of God.

Humbly accept the word planted in you, says James. Receive it. Let it grow. Let it bear fruit. Respond in other words.

[20:36] which brings us to the remainder of our passage this evening. God calls us to be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. He's called us to listen to him.

But more than that, and not just that, he also calls us to act on what we've heard. How do we show that we've heard? How do we show that we've really heard?

Internalized what we've heard? By living like we've heard. Verse 22. Don't merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves, says James. Do what it says.

Anyone who listens to the word but doesn't do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and after looking at himself goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard but doing it, he'll be blessed in what he does.

Going on in verse 26, if anyone considers himself religious, if you call yourself a Christian in other words, if you say you're someone who listens to God, if anyone considers himself religious and yet doesn't keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.

[21:49] Religion that God our Father accepts is pure and faultless is this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. In other words, friends, it's one thing to say that the seed of God's word has been planted in your heart.

The question is, what's growing up out of the soil of your heart? What sort of fruit are you growing? That's the litmus test. Our God is a speaking God and he's created you to speak, to speak to him, to speak on behalf of him.

What sort of words are coming out of your mouth? Are they constructive words or are they destructive words? Our God speaks with a controlled tongue, a measured tongue.

Friends, what about us? What about us? Our God's a God who cares for the weak and the downtrodden as well. Can we say the same? Our God's a perfect and holy and righteous God.

There is nothing impure about him in the slightest. He has no contact whatsoever with filth. What about us? Can we say the same?

[23:01] When you look at yourself in the mirror, what do you see? Are you someone who's becoming more and more like Jesus? Now it's one thing to say that the seed of God's word has been planted in us.

The real question is, what sort of fruit are we growing? Which again begs the question, does it not? Supposing we want to grow, supposing we want to grow this kind of fruit?

How? Is it just a matter of trying harder? Pulling ourselves up by the bootstraps? Mustering the moral resolve to reform our behaviour? Friends, supposing we want to grow.

How? Verse 25 is key, isn't it? How do we grow? Truly grow? How do we avoid listening to God's word but not really internalising it?

How do we avoid being someone who looks into a mirror and sees a reflection of themselves and then immediately forgets what they look like? How do we practice what we profess? Verse 25, only if we're looking intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, says James.

[24:07] That's the key. Verse 25, but the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard but doing it, he will be blessed in what he does.

So you want to be someone who's quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger? You want to keep a tight rein on your tongue? You want to share God's heart for the poor?

You want to grow in purity? How? By looking intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, says James, which begs the question, does it not?

What is this perfect law that James is talking about? When you read through many of the other books in the New Testament, especially when you hear the Apostle Paul talk about the law, if you're looking for freedom, the law is the last place you want to go to.

The law, God's perfect standard, the more intently we look at it, the more depressed we ought to be in one sense. It convicts us. It doesn't free us.

[25:08] It shows us what sin is. It doesn't free us from it. It produces death, not life. When you read Paul on the law, more often than not, that's what he's talking about.

The law is not our friend, it's our enemy. Not that it's bad, mind you, it's good. In and of itself, it's perfectly good. It's a reflection of God's perfect holiness and righteous character.

The law is good, but inasmuch as we're not good, inasmuch as we're unholy and unrighteous, the law is our enemy. It doesn't set us free, it convicts us, which again begs the question, what's James getting at in verse 25?

That if we look intently at this perfect law, that somehow we'll be liberated. What's he saying? Is he saying that if we stare at God's commands long enough, we'll be able to achieve them?

That that's been our problem, that we haven't been committed enough to keeping them? That we haven't stared at them intently enough, that we've been too distracted? That really we've been able to change ourselves all along, we've been able to liberate ourselves all along, we just haven't been looking intently enough at God's perfect law?

[26:16] Is that what James is saying? Friends, no, I don't think that's what he's saying at all. You know, the thrust of the whole Bible is that left to our own devices, none of us can liberate ourselves.

In and of ourselves, we're enslaved to self. We lack the desire, even if we had the desire, we lack the resources to liberate ourselves from sin. The only thing that can liberate us is the gospel.

The only one who can liberate us is God. Friends, that's what James is getting at in verse 18, the last verse of our passage last week. How can we be liberated? Only if of his own will, only if God chooses to give us birth through the word of truth.

That's what liberates us. It's God who liberates us. We're not liberated by our works, but, and this brings us to verse 25, we're not liberated by our works, but we are liberated to do good works.

It's only when we're looking intently at the perfect law of freedom. In other words, it's only when we're focused on the gospel, the perfect law, the law perfectly fulfilled by Jesus on our behalf.

[27:34] Friends, it's only when we're focused on the gospel, liberated by the gospel, motivated by gratitude, compelled and propelled by thanksgiving. It's then and it's only then that we can truly live a life that's pleasing to God.

You know, what James is saying is totally in sync with Paul. His language is just a little different. Ephesians chapter 2, for it's by grace we've been saved through faith and this isn't of ourselves.

It's a gift from God, not by works, so that no one may boast. So says Paul, to which James responds, amen to that. Whatever life we have is because God's freely chosen to give us spiritual new birth.

At which point Paul goes on. For we're God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God has prepared in advance for us to do. To which James again responds. In our passage tonight, he responds in the affirmative.

Amen to that. Christian, know this. Never forget this. We're always tempted to forget this. Always tempted to invert this order.

[28:41] Friends, we are not saved by our works, but we are saved to do good works. Friends, we're not saved by the fruit that we produce, but we most certainly are saved to produce good fruit.

Friends, let me ask you this evening, has the seed of God's word been planted in your heart? Pray that it would take root and grow, that it would produce a harvest of righteousness to God's glory and to God's glory alone.

Let's pray together, shall we? Father, you've said to us in your word that our hearts are like soil and that your word to us the word of your gospel is like a seed that you have planted in us.

Father, I pray this evening that you would break down the stony resistance of our hearts, that you would transform them by your grace, that you would make our hearts fertile soil, that the seed of your word would be deeply implanted in our lives, that it would bury itself deeply and take root and grow.

Father, by your grace, help us to get rid of all moral filth and the evil that's so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in us, which can save us. Father, enable us to be those who don't merely listen to the word and so deceive ourselves, but instead be those who do what it says, who respond with joy and with thanksgiving at what you have done for us in Christ.

[30:20] Lord, may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, our rock and our redeemer. It's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.