

2. True Christian Faith: Hears and Obeys the Word of God

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[0 : 00] If you have your Bibles, it would be a great help to keep them open at page 1011 as we study these words together. It is very easy to know something and yet not to do it.

There was a story last year, which the newspapers just loved, of a member of the House of Lords who employed an illegal immigrant as a cleaner.

The law requires that if you employ someone from overseas, you look at their documents and you take a copy of them for your own records. The senior politician had seen them, but they had not photocopied them.

They had not, in other words, done what the law required. And the great irony of this, and the great embarrassment to the government, was that this politician was the one who had introduced the law in the first place.

She had brought it in in 2006. She knew exactly what was required, and yet she herself did not do it. That is a danger, I'm sure, for politicians.

[1 : 12] But how much greater a danger for the Christian believer to know the Word of God, to hear it week after week, to read it day after day, and yet not to obey it.

And that is why James writes this part of his letter. He writes to warn Christians of the danger of that, of worthless religion that hears but does not obey, and to encourage them toward true religion, religion that is acceptable to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So we began our studies last week in the letter of James. And we learned that, in addition to being a letter, it's quite likely that it existed as a sermon.

It reads very much like a sermon. It's very visual. It's very personal. It's very punchy. But it has been written as a letter. And like all the letters of the New Testament, it is in one sense an occasional letter.

It is written to a specific set of circumstances to deal with a particular problem. And we get something of the flavour of these problems. When we read the letter, we see that there were difficulties in the church.

[2 : 23] There was bad feeling between believers. People were bragging and boasting and speaking wrong about each other. But at the same time, it has much to teach believers of every generation.

And it deals with general issues. How we should cope with trials and temptations when they come our way. What is the relationship between saving faith and good works?

How are we as Christians to speak and conduct ourselves in church and in the wider world? It has wonderful truth to teach us about God and about ourselves.

And it has long been noticed by commentators that James, the brother of the Lord Jesus himself, refers heavily to the Sermon on the Mount. The ESV Study Bible makes about 20 cross-references between what James says and writes and what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount.

So, for example, and very briefly, if we consider the Beatitudes, Jesus says, Blessed are the meek. And in the chapter we read today, James says in verse 21, You are to receive with meekness the implanted words.

[3 : 36] Jesus says, Blessed are the merciful. And in chapter 2 of his letter, James says, You are to show mercy to one another. Judgment will be shown without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy.

Jesus says, Blessed are the peacemakers. And James exhorts his hearers to be makers of peace. Jesus says, Blessed are the pure in heart.

And James exhorts his hearers to purify their hearts. And in each case, the language is the same. So we have before us what seems to be an exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, applying it to the specific areas of our lives which we meet every day.

And you remember in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus set a very high standard for his followers. He said, Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect. And in chapter 1 of his letter, James tells us in verse 4 that steadfastness, endurance in the Christian life, must have its full effect so that we may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

And we saw last week how God uses the trials and difficulties which we invariably face to develop our characters, to strengthen our faith, and to bring us on to Christian maturity.

[5 : 02] But the other great theme of the Sermon on the Mount is righteousness, living life God's way in accordance with his will. And Jesus said this was to be the primary concern of the Christian believer.

They were to hunger and thirst after righteousness. Their righteousness was to exceed that of the Pharisees and scribes. They were to seek first God's righteousness and his kingdom.

And the chapter before us tonight, James describes how we can pursue and live that righteous life. Verse 20, he tells us that God requires righteousness from among his people.

So we must ask the question, therefore, how do we live a righteous life? What is true religion? How do we become not merely hearers, but also doers of the word of God?

And I want to look at this heading after this topic under two headings. The first is the true Christian listens to the voice of God in his word.

[6 : 10] And the second is the true Christian obeys God in the world. The true Christian listens to God in his word and the true Christian obeys God in the world.

Now I read a few years ago of a missionary who travelled to a communist European country. And as you'll probably know under communism the Bible was banned.

It was a forbidden book. And yet this man found himself in a church which had been preserved and in the midst of the church was this great lectern on which was a tremendous Bible. Lovely, big, decorative Bible.

And this missionary was very excited. He said, wonderful, we've got this Bible and he ran up to it. But the local he was with said, no, no, don't get any closer. We don't read the Bible, we just venerate it.

And in a country starving for the word of God, the Bible was venerated but it was not read. And unfortunately, that is the attitude some people have today. The Bible is a sacred holy book.

[7 : 12] Someone like me can't possibly read it. And we're happy to have it on a lectern in a church or some family Bible somewhere in the house. But we're not all so keen to read it.

And yet James says, know this, my beloved brethren, let every person be quick to hear, quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.

They are to listen to the word of God. They must be quick and eager to do so. And you'll notice how he compares their listening to their speaking.

They are to be slow to speak and slow to anger. It seems that the people in James' day had a problem with their conversation. They couldn't stop talking.

They couldn't tame their tongues. We read that they were quarreling among themselves. There was selfish ambition and envy. They were slandering one another, talking each other down.

[8 : 11] And James says, when you come together as Christians, you must stop talking. You must not simply want your own voice to be heard, but rather you must want to hear the voice of God, the living God speaking in Scripture.

Be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires.

So our first point is, are we quick to hear the word of God? We live in a remarkable time. We have, not just in our bookshop, but in the whole country, literally thousands of Bibles, numerous translations, and tens upon thousands of Christian books in English to help us grow as Christians, to help us understand the Scriptures, and to grow in our faith.

Ninety-five percent, I'm told, of the earth's Christian resources are in the English language. And if you don't like to read, there are CDs in abundance in the world.

There is an internet filled with MP3 sermons from very gifted speakers. There is no shortage of the word of God. But are we quick to listen?

[9 : 24] When I was a medical student, I wasn't very quick to listen at all. And one day, someone took me aside. It was an older man, and he loved Scripture. And he said to a group of friends and I, he said, you boys, you spend a lot of time reading your textbooks.

And in actual fact, we didn't spend very much time reading our textbooks at all, but he didn't know that. And he must have seen me come out of a library or something, having had a nap. And he said, you spend a lot of time reading your textbooks.

And you apply your minds, and you concentrate, and you memorize, and you study these things. He said, do you have that same attitude to the word of God? If you say you believe this book is inspired by God, does your attitude reveal that same belief?

And actually, at that time, it didn't. If I was lucky, I'd flick through a gospel on Saturday morning. I'd maybe read a few verses just as my eyes were drooping off to sleep at night.

Be quick to hear, says James, the word of God, which we have in superabundance. And does our attitude as believers reflect our belief that it is inspired?

[10 : 33] Do we, like the psalmist, meditate upon it day and night? Does it get the priority in our lives? You see, in James' day, people were too busy talking to listen. But in our day, there's all sorts of other pressures that cram in, aren't there?

We have the pressures of mobile phones ringing, the pressures of family and work commitments, the pressures of television, the pressures of other hobbies, magazines, other material competing for our attention.

And James says, what gets the priority in your reading? If you have half an hour to spare, how do you fill it? With the word of God or the words of men? So we must come eager to hear what God has to say.

But he also identifies the correct attitude in which we are to hear. Verse 21, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls.

If you come ever to our house, which you're welcome to do, you will find a very small but a very beautifully kept garden for which I can take no credit. The credit belongs to Helen, my wife, who is a very gifted gardener.

[11 : 43] And during the summer months, she can often be found in the garden. And before she plants flowers, she has to weed the garden. She has to pluck out anything that would stop the flowers developing and looking beautiful and bearing fruit.

And James says, when you come to the word of God, pluck out anything that stops you hearing it. put away filthiness, rampant wickedness. Do we come before a holy God acknowledging our sin, confessing our sin, repenting of it, and humbly waiting for him to speak to us as forgiven sinners? Do we have the correct attitude? Or do we have an attitude of pride? He says, you are to receive with meekness, with humility, the implanted word.

Lord, the people of James' day were troubled with envy and selfish ambition. And it's no different now in our own hearts. It's very easy to come to the word of God exalting ourselves over it or sitting in judgment upon it as many are wont to do.

And yet, says James, you must be meek. We must have upon our lips the words, speak Lord, for your servant is listening. I used to have a colleague, now a brain surgeon, very clever guy, and we spoke about the Bible one night on a night shift, and he said, in religion, as with all matters, my reason is the ultimate guide and authority.

[13 : 14] James says, put away all filthiness and wickedness and receive with meekness. We do not sit in judgment upon the word of God. It sits in judgment upon us.

Blessed are the meek. We must listen to the word, therefore. We must receive the word. But verse 22, we are to be doers of the word and not hearers only.

There is a certain enjoyment often in listening to the word of God being read or the word of God being preached. And it's not exclusive to believers.

If you go to Edinburgh, the Royal Mile, beautiful view, other side of the M8, but it's still lovely. On the Royal Mile, there's a statue of David Hume, who was a philosopher.

He really laid the foundations for a lot of modern atheism. Deeply atheistic man, deeply opposed to the gospel. And yet on one occasion, he was seen running out of his house at five o'clock in the morning, and somebody said, David, where are you going?

[14:15] And he said, well, George Whitefield's about to start preaching, and I'm going to hear him. And they said, oh, David, I didn't realize you were a believer. And he said, I'm not. But he loved to hear him preach, because Whitefield was so theatrical and so expressive that he just wanted to hear him, simply for the art's sake.

That's not dissimilar to the attitude of Herod. Herod was a wicked king. There he was, at the time of Jesus, sitting there with another man's wife. And we read in Mark chapter 6 that he liked to listen to John the Baptist.

John, of course, didn't mince his message. He spoke of repentance and faith. And yet Herod seemed to enjoy listening to this. Didn't make the blindest bit of difference to his life.

But he liked to hear the word of God being preached. And James says, don't be like that. Verse 22, be doers of the word and not hearers only.

And he gives us this illustration, this lovely illustration. 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.

[15:25] 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.

Two men, one who looks in a mirror, walks away and cannot remember what he saw. Cannot remember if he was wearing a top hat, if he had green hair or pink hair, cannot remember if he was wearing a shell suit.

Completely forgets what he saw. One man who looks into a mirror, he goes away and does not forget, thinks about what he's seen, meditates upon it, and then puts it into practice.

It is that man, verse 25, who will be blessed in all his doing. So the question is, how do we respond when we look at ourselves in the mirror of God's word?

And when we look into that word and see the law of liberty, do we walk away and simply forget what we read? Or do we take it away and like the psalmist, meditate upon it day and night, bringing it to our recollection during the week, discussing it around the dinner table at home, maybe reviewing our notes midweek and thinking, what does this mean for me?

[16:51] How am I to apply this to my life and my particular circumstances? Do we simply forget? When the service is over, when the coffee is served, do we immediately revert back to speaking about the football or the working week to come?

Or do we make it a point to share with each other our experience in the word of God, to discuss it with our spouses, to talk about it with our friends, to remind each other during the working week what it is we've learned, either corporately or individually?

Or do we simply forget, like a man who cannot remember what he looks like? And all too often, church history, of course, witnesses that Christians have forgotten, that they've read the word, but they haven't put it into action.

Jesus said, my kingdom is not of this world. And yet, how often Christians have tried to establish a kingdom of heaven upon earth. Jesus said, give away your goods, store up treasure in heaven.

And how often churches have tried to store up treasure on earth with gold leaf and wonderful masterpieces, accumulating silver and gold at the expense of the poor. Christ said, love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you.

[18:02] And yet, how often Christians have treated their enemies just like everyone else and persecuted them, sometimes pursuing them to death. Christ said, deny yourself.

And how often we've been just like everyone else and satisfied ourselves and lived according to the standard of the world around us. Be doers and not simply hearers paying lip service to the word.

And James is saying just what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount as he brought it to a close and as Jesus himself gave the test for discerning between true and false religion.

He said, the way you know if someone is a true believer, do they do what I say. Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat on that house but it did not fall because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.

[19:09] The rain fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell and great was the fall of it. What are you building on in your life? Sand?

Much easier to build on that but temporary, ultimately futile or rock. How are you sustaining your Christian life? Hearing the word of God or hearing it and doing it day by day and encouraging others to do the same.

We are to be eager to hear, quick to hear. We are to receive it in a spirit of humility and meekness and we are to obey it. And James, ever the practical preacher, gives us three examples of true obedience.

Verse 26 to 27. 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.

[20 : 21] If you go into hospital, you will probably ask at some point to stick out your tongue like that. And the reason being is you can tell an awful lot about the state of somebody's body by looking at their tongue.

You can tell if they're anemic, you can tell if they're dehydrated and I'm sure more skilled doctors can tell an awful lot more about it as well. But James says you can tell the state of somebody's heart.

by listening to their tongue. If somebody says they're religious but if their tongue is not bridled then they are deceiving themselves. And scripture has so much to say about our tongues.

The book of Proverbs and in particular the Proverbs of Solomon are full of exhortations to pure speech. The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence.

And of the New Testament writers, James has much to say. And he picks up this theme in chapter 3 where he expounds his doctrine of the tongue. And he says in verse 8 it is a restless evil full of deadly poison.

[21 : 29] The tongue is dangerous. Why? Verse 9 because with it we bless our Lord and Father and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. The tongue has tremendous potential for good.

We can bless God. We can build one another up in love. We can encourage each other. A parent can strengthen and show love to a child. A husband and wife can show their affection through their simple words.

business relationships can be eased by gentle, kind, thoughtful actions in the workplace. The tongue has tremendous power for good but it also has tremendous power for harm.

We can curse each other. We can argue with each other. We can slander one another. And experience tells us, doesn't it, of the harm the tongue can do within families, between husband and wife, between parent and child and between colleagues, broken relationships, unforgiven hearts, long-standing feuds.

James has a lot to say about the tongue and so he says you must tame it. The evidence of the genuineness of your faith is how you speak to other people and in particular how you speak to other believers.

[22 : 51] So as we seek to speak to each other, let's ask the question, is what I'm about to say to this person, is it gracious? Is it seasoned with salt? Is my talk good for building this person up or for tearing them down?

Am I giving grace to the person who hears? Or am I simply trying to score points? And if we're tempted to speak about somebody else in a way that perhaps smacks of gossip, we have to ask ourselves the question, would I be happy to say this if this person were standing in front of me just now?

How do you speak about other people? How do you speak to other people? And James says true religion, the sign of a true believer is someone who bridles his tongue and says only that which is fitting and upbuilding.

And there is a second evidence which he gives us, verse 27. pure and undefiled religion is this, to visit orphans and widows in the reflection and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

God in scripture is revealed as one who cares for those who often have no one to care for them. The psalmist writes this, sing to God, sing praises to his name, lift up a song to him who rides through the deserts.

[24 : 18] His name is the Lord, exalt before him. Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. God settles the solitary in a home.

He leads out the prisoners to prosperity, but the rebellious dwell in a parched land. We see the God of the Bible has all the power in the universe, and yet he cares for the smallest and the weakest of people.

We see that he has all the riches of heaven, and yet he cares and tends to the poorest of the poor. We learn that in his presence is everlasting joy, and yet he stoops down to wipe the tears from people's eyes and draw near to the brokenhearted.

If that is the character of our father in heaven, ought that not to be the character of his children? Visiting orphans and widows, visiting those who have no one who have nothing, and speaking to them about the love of Christ.

You see, in Edinburgh there are other statues, not just of atheist philosophers. I think Princess Street is one of the best streets in the world for statues, because you come out of Waverly Station, and immediately before you you have David Livingstone, and Livingstone was a man who cared for other men.

[25 : 34] He said, cannot the love of Christ carry the missionary where the slave trade carried the slaver? He longed for slaves to be set free, as the psalmist said, for the prisoners to be brought out to prosperity, and he gave his life trying to secure their freedom.

But if you walk a little further along Princess Street, you see this wonderful statue, I saw it yesterday, of Thomas Guthrie, and he's got a little friend by his side, just before Edinburgh Castle, but halfway along.

And the engraving says, Thomas Guthrie, an eloquent preacher of the gospel, founder of the original ragged industrial schools, and by tongue and pen, the apostle of the movement elsewhere, one of the earliest tempering reformers, a friend of the poor and of the oppressed.

Thomas Guthrie was a very eminent evangelical preacher. He had a distinctive style, and thousands of people would listen to him preach. But he had a particular concern for the poor in Edinburgh.

And at that time, there was no shortage of poor in Edinburgh. You're sometimes hard pressed to find them now, but at that time, the streets were full of children from broken homes whose lives had been wracked by alcoholism.

[26 : 53] And he began to set up schools for them. In a document he wrote, which was a plea for funding, he recounted an interview he had with one of these boys. And he describes him like this.

This little lad, his feet were red, swollen, cracked, ulcerated with the cold. A thin, thread-worn jacket with its gaping rents is all that protects his breast beneath his bush of hair.

He shows a face sharp with want, yet sharp also with intelligence beyond his years. He has studied the arts. He is a master of imposture, lying, begging, stealing.

And having met this young boy, he proceeded to interview him. And he said this, where is your father? He is dead, sir. Where is your mother? Dead too.

Where do you stay? Sister and I and my little brother live with granny. What is she? She is a widow. What does she do?

[27 : 56] She sells sticks, sir. And can she keep you all? No. Then how do you live? Go about and get bits of meat, sell matches and sometimes get a trifle from the carriers for running an errand.

Do you go to school? No. Never was at school. Do you go to church? Never was in a church.

Thomas Guthrie, this very gifted, eloquent preacher, a highly educated man, thereby set about a series of reforms to create schools for these boys where they would be fed, they would be clothed, they would be educated and they would be loved.

But above all, they would hear the gospel of Christ because he took his religion very seriously and he knew that genuine religion was to care for those in need and to love them.

And one boy said later in his life, Thomas Guthrie was the only father I ever had. to visit orphans and widows in their affliction. Well, we don't have ragged boys running around the streets of Glasgow today, but there is no shortage of people in need.

All sorts of need. Physical need, psychological need, emotional need. There is no shortage of people from other lands who come here seeking asylum, who are not permitted to work, who are dependent upon the hospitality and welcome and love of people they have never met.

[29 : 27] And so as Christians, how do we allocate our time? Do we make time for people? How do we allocate our talents?

Do we put them in the service of others? Or do we just keep them to ourselves? Or employ them in our own service? And how do we use our money? You see, we might not have a lot of money, but we are still, I think, the fourth wealthiest country in the world.

And we are able to use whatever small amount we have for the blessing and the benefit of others. To care for the widows and orphans in our society.

And James' final point, very quickly. Verse 27. To keep oneself unstained from the world. When the writers of the New Testament use the word world, they do not simply mean absolutely everything in the world.

I had a story of one Puritan who went for a walk and he and his companion turned a corner and they saw before them a lovely flower bed. And his companion said, oh, what lovely flowers!

[30 : 37] And his friend very seriously answered, I call nothing lovely in this lost and sinful world. It's not the word the Bible means at all. James chapter 1 verse 16.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above. Coming down from the Father of lights, God gives good gifts and he commands us to enjoy them.

And a joyless Christian is a contradiction in terms. God is glorified when his people are joyous and celebrate the good things he gives. When the word world is used, it refers in the words of Alec Motier to this.

The whole human scheme of things organized in terms of human wisdom to attain a goal without reference to God, his laws, his values, or his ultimate judgments.

The world is, in fact, anything and everything that is at odds with the lordship of Jesus over our lives. Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world.

[31 : 41] Do not let society and culture so brainwash you and so change your patterns of behavior that you are indistinguishable from the people around you.

Motier goes on to say, if we are to live for Christ, there is a constant issue of commitment, loyalty to be faced. Are we his or are we not?

Are we his, not by virtue of a past decision allowed to grow stale, but in the daily pressure of the often small things by which our lives are besmirched?

Faced with the world's ceaseless bombardment of our eyes, ears, thoughts and imaginations, the world's insidious erosion of values and standards, and clamor for our time, money and energy, it is easy to adopt a general way of life which, though it avoids the pitfalls of sin, yet is not discernibly different from the style of one who does not know Christ.

Are we continually asking that question? Are we Christ's or are we not? Are we living distinctively day by day for him in a world which rejects him and considers him irrelevant?

[32 : 56] Are we being conformed to the pattern of this world or are we being transformed by his spirit and the renewal of our minds? Are we being unstained by the world?

Are we living the righteous life that God requires? Is our religion true? So friends, I pray that as we take these words home, we will not forget them like that man looking in the mirror, that they will carry them in our hearts and our minds this week, that having heard them, that we might receive them with meekness, with humility, and as we go about our business, we might be doers of them, not simply hearers, that we might be those who tame our tongues, within our family circle, within our workplaces, within strangers we meet, we might be those who care for others, who lay ourselves open to the service of those who have no one to help them, and that we might pursue ever and greater holiness, being distinct, being separate from the world, yet at the same time being in it. God grant that we might have his help and his spirit to make this possible. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you that you are so honest with us, that you do not want us to be deceived, Lord, but you want us to practice true religion and live in true righteousness. We pray that as we go to our homes tonight, Lord, these words, of scripture will sink into our hearts, that we might meditate upon them day and night, we might speak about them with each other, and Lord, this implanted word might bring forth tremendous fruit for your glory. Help us to tame our tongues, Lord, to say only that which is fitting. Help us to practice true religion and loving care for those around us, and we pray, Lord, that you will continue to grow us more and more into the likeness of Christ.

And we ask this in his name. Amen.