

Repentance Every Day

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[0 : 00] Well, we're back to the first chapter of James, and we're going to read just a short section now from verse 19 of chapter 1 to the end of the chapter.

Know this, says James, my beloved brothers, that every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.

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

[1 : 22] If anyone thinks he's religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. A 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. Amen. May God bless to us his word. Well now, please turn in your Bibles to James chapter 1, and as you're doing that, let me pray.

We thank you, Heavenly Father, that you speak, that you're not silent. And we pray, therefore, that as we hear your words, you would help us to do as we've just sung, to reject the tempting choice of unbelief, but rather to urgently respond to what we hear you say.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. I want to begin this evening by talking about the subject of faith. Where we used to live, we had a garden with a couple of big apple trees in it.

[2 : 50] And at one point in our time there, we got a guy to come and tidy up our apple trees a bit, because they were getting out of hand. And he came round, and during the course of the day, we got to talking about various things.

He was a good talker. He was from Liverpool. And he was very interested indeed in the fact that I work for a church. Now, for most people, the moment that comes out in conversation is just the end. But let me say, not this guy. He was not really into mainstream religion. He'd had a very religious upbringing. And he really rejected all that. But we got to talking about the sort of subject that James has in mind in his letter.

Human nature and how human beings relate to God and to one another. And at one point, the tree man said to me, I'm sure that human beings have to get better.

He was a bit short on evidence for that claim. But he was pretty sure that human beings just had to get better, and they would. And I said, well, I'm not too confident about that.

[3 : 49] I can't see that they are. And I don't think that they will. And he said, your problem, mate, is you just need to have faith. There was tremendous emotional optimism there.

That despite all the evidence to the contrary, human beings really were getting better and would certainly get better. And many people think that Christian faith is just like that. It just must be true. I need it to be true. So I'll believe it's true. Now, of course, in the Bible, faith is not like that at all, because God has done things in history to make himself known. And he's very generously got himself out there in a way that we can look at.

And so faith is not to do with persuading yourself that something you'd really like to be true is true because you'd like it to be true. It's about taking seriously what God has said and done in history. It's not like having an imaginary friend that you dream up to make you feel better. It's more like knowing a real friend, someone who's there and who you can know because they say and do things

to make themselves known.

[4 : 56] Faith is not persuading yourself of things you'd like to believe. But, and here we come to the issue in question today, if faith is not about persuading yourself of things, neither is it just about thinking things in your head.

And that is a big issue. Because many people have got over the first hurdle. They know that faith is not to do with self-persuasion and self-deception. They know it's about taking God seriously and what he has said and done.

And yet they're not really over the second hurdle. Because for various reasons, day by day, they function in some areas of life as though faith is mainly about thinking things.

And in the Bible, faith is much more joined up than that. James chapter 1, verse 22. But, be doers of the word and not hearers only.

Deceiving yourselves. There's the kind of self-deception that says, I want it to be true so it must be true. Like my tree man from Liverpool. But there's another kind of self-deception which says, I know what God has said and I agree with that, full stop.

[6 : 17] No, James is looking for a much more joined up response than that. From the people he's writing to. I don't just want to hear, I don't just want you to hear what God has done and said.

We're looking, says James, for obedience here in your faith. I'm not interested in tweaking a few thoughts in your head. We're looking for the person, the whole person, to be living in line with what God has said.

And the question James is asking his readers here at this point in the letter is, are you receiving properly? Are you receiving properly what God has said?

Now, let me remind you of the situation in this letter. It is very important to bear the situation in mind when we come to this very well-known little statement in 122.

There seems to be a letter written to Christians who, for one reason or another, are behaving very badly towards one another. They think badly about one another.

[7 : 22] They speak badly towards one another. And they act badly towards one another. And in chapter 1, verse 21, James urges them to put away that kind of behavior.

Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness. And there are many examples of that in this letter. And receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls.

Stop doing that stuff and instead receive the gospel word. The gospel message that will save you. These go together.

It is the gospel message that will save them. Jesus is Lord and Rescuer. And receiving the message about him is the route to the rescue. And, says James, just as you received that message at the start of the Christian life, carry on receiving it with meekness.

And receiving it with meekness will involve putting that bad behavior away. Because that behavior is totally out of line with the Lordship of Jesus.

[8 : 36] So much so that, verse 22, if you think that you're receiving the gospel message, and you're still behaving in that way towards your brothers, you really are deceiving yourself.

Do you see the point? Now, at this point, I should say that any Christian with a sensitive conscience, reading chapter 1, verse 22, will be able, with 30 seconds reflection, to think of a number of areas of life where their behavior does not match up with the gospel message.

I mention that because it is possible to beat yourself with verse 22 in a way that simply ignores the context in the letter. James does not believe that perfection is to be had in this age.

If you find inconsistencies in your Christian life, well, that's normal. And it's going to be your experience till the last day of your life. Now, the context is all important here.

James is not writing this letter so that the humbly obedient Christian who recognizes his and her inconsistencies is made to feel extra bad because of those.

[9 : 50] No, this is a letter written to deal with gross bad behavior among Christians who don't feel that it's grossly bad behavior. Whose consciences are not at the moment troubling them because of their bad behavior.

And they think that it's fine to think and speak and act towards one another as they have been and still think of themselves as being people who are hearing the gospel properly.

And verse 22 is written in response to that situation. Guy says, James, if you're still behaving like that, you really are deceiving yourselves if you think that's proper reception of the gospel word.

Are you receiving, says James? If you are, that behavior has got to go. You must be doers of the word as well as being hearers.

And then he illustrates. Verse 23. 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.

[10:58] 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.

The picture is of a man. Verse 23 and 24. A man who looks into a mirror.

What is the point of this illustration? Well, some have looked at verse 25 and noted the persevering word, and perseveres being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, and have said to themselves, well, this illustration must be about a person who glances at God's word but doesn't really take it in properly, and then goes away and forgets what it says.

So the answer, verse 25, is instead to look deeply into God's word, rather than just glancing at it. To have long sessions in the Bible.

To spend ages in Bible study. But, brothers and sisters, that is not the point of this illustration. The words here do not imply a little glance. In fact, verse 23, we're told that the man who looks in the mirror looks intently at his natural face.

[12:18] The point is that the man who looks in the mirror doesn't respond to what he sees in the mirror, but goes away and forgets.

And that is contrasted in verse 25 with somebody who looks into the perfect law and does what he sees. Imagine then, friends, imagine a man getting up in the morning, just an ordinary bloke.

He's not feeling too good this morning. It was a late night last night. He looks in the mirror. He sees greasy hair. Bits sticking out all over the place.

And a couple of days of stubble. And eyebrows just way out of order. And he has a huge spot on the end of his nose. And he thinks, My goodness! I'm glad I remembered to look in the mirror this morning.

And he gets on with getting ready to go out. He's busy. He has his breakfast. He brushes his teeth. He puts his clothes on. He takes the dog for a walk. And off he goes to work. And yet, of course, he is unready to go to work.

[13:22] For he has not responded to what he saw in the mirror. He sees the problem. He just doesn't do anything about the problem that he sees.

In some way, in the illustration, he seems to have thought that looking in the mirror was enough to deal with the issues that the mirror revealed. But that is not so. One only looks in the mirror in order to take action in response to what one finds there.

Action with the flannel and the razor and the shampoo. Mirrors are agents of change, are they not? That's why we have them in our house. And the person who looks in the mirror and doesn't deal with the stubble and the eyebrows and the spot on the end of the nose might as well not have looked in the mirror at all.

Indeed, worse than that, there is something profoundly disturbing about a person who, having seen all that, does nothing in response. What is the point of even having a mirror unless action is going to be taken?

Now, in many ways, it's a ridiculous example, and it's meant to be a ridiculous example. Fancy looking in a mirror and not doing anything with yourself when you see the nightmare that's revealed there.

[14:36] Who would look in a mirror and not take action? Everyone knows that the reason you look in the mirror is because it is potentially too embarrassing to go out without having looked in the mirror.

How stupid would it be, says James, actually to look in the mirror and see the grease and the stubble and the zit and not do something? Can you imagine not doing that?

What a silly idea. What is James doing here? He is making their current behavior seem as stupidly absurd as it really is.

It would be a funny example if it were not so serious. What kind of blindness is involved if a person sees facial issues and does not take action?

So, what kind of self-deception is going on when people who call themselves gospel believers behave with carelessness or pride or malice towards one another?

[15 : 47] Can you imagine anyone doing that? How stupid is that? Actually, he doesn't have to imagine, does he? He knows that they are behaving like that. And my guess is that you don't have to imagine either because it's too close to home.

Christians behaving badly towards other Christians. The callous indifference, the dismissive attitude, the arrogant word, the malicious gossip, the long-held grudges and resentments, the frank hostility.

One does not have to look far. How unusual is that? Well, it's as blind as looking in the mirror and not dealing with your spots.

But it's ever so common. For one reason or another, it's a particular feature of human sinfulness that we are somehow able to claim knowledge of God and ignore the significance of our speech and behavior towards those made in God's image.

James says that inconsistency is as unbelievably unjoined up as the person who looks in a mirror and does nothing about the facial issues revealed there.

[17 : 04] And yet it's possible. And don't we know it? James wants something different from his hearers. Don't just listen, verse 22.

Just do it, verse 25. 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.

Notice that James uses a slightly different expression here. He talks about the law of liberty. What is he talking about? Well, let me say, so much ink has been spilled over this verse.

Questions raised about Old Testament law and its relevance to the Christian life and how that relates to the gospel and all sorts of stuff like that. Pages and pages and pages of commentaries devoted to that kind of stuff.

And most of it, I think, is somewhat missing the point. Let me say two things about this. First, notice that James is still on the same subject in verse 25 as he was on in verse 21.

[18 : 10] The logic of the argument goes that way. Look at verse 21 again. Put away all filthiness and rap and wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word.

Receive the saving word of God, the gospel word. Verse 22. Be doers of the gospel word, not just hearers. Verse 24, not like a person who doesn't do anything in response to the mirror, but verse 25, somebody who does it the right way.

He must still be talking about the reception of the gospel word. So why does he call it the law of liberty? Second observation.

He uses other related terms for the same idea in the following chapter. Look at chapter 2, verse 8, for example. He's still going on about the same subject.

If you really fulfill the royal law, according to the scripture, you shall love your neighbor as yourself, you're doing well. Here he calls it the royal law, you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

[19 : 22] Look at 2, 12. He talks again about the law of liberty. So speak and so act as those who are going to be judged under the law of liberty. What's the point in this differing language?

And I think it's differing language for the same thing. Well, I think it's this. He's making the point all the way through that the gospel that relates me rightly to God has absolutely inevitable relationship with other people consequences.

You cannot be rightly related to God and not be differently related to other people. An inescapable dimension of being rightly related to God is being rightly related to humanity, those made in his image.

And sometimes James uses relationship to God type language when he talks about the gospel message. And sometimes he uses relationship to people type language when he talks about the gospel, especially Old Testament language relating to conduct of life and relationship to others, the law of liberty, the royal law, love your neighbor as yourself.

And the point throughout is that these belong together. The gospel has inevitable consequences for human relationship. You mustn't separate those.

[20 : 47] And of course, James' hearers are doing precisely that, separating those. You cannot believe the gospel and sideline the human dimensions of it.

And this needs to be said because James' hearers are happy, apparently, to keep doing precisely that. To say they believe the gospel and yet to treat one another disgracefully.

Now, I mentioned earlier on that it's possible to beat yourself up with verse 22 in a way that ignores the context. It's probably not all that helpful to apply verse 22 bluntly to every inconsistency as life,

as though every inconsistency were important as every other one.

But what this little section does flag up is that it is particularly possible to be blind and self-deceived when it comes to relating to our brothers and sisters.

This is an area in which we seem to be particularly able to ignore the implications of the gospel. Of course, there may be issues here about how we communicate the gospel in the first place.

[21 : 59] Do we emphasize enough the human dimensions of turning towards God? There may be issues here for how we teach the shape of the Christian life.

Sometimes the Christian life is taught as a bunch of do's and don'ts, not particularly related to the gospel message itself. And one of those do's and don'ts is, well, we need to love one another, which tends to make love for one another just one among many slightly random-looking commands. So there may be issues there, but I think mainly this is just something about the human condition, don't you? That it is common for us to think we are responding rightly to God and yet ignore our human relationships.

Well, James won't allow that to happen. Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves, he says.

And of course, the point that he's illustrating is verse 21. That if we're to receive with meekness the implanted words, that has implications for our behavior towards other people.

[23 : 15] And he follows, therefore, with three little examples of what real gospel reception is going to look like for these people in this situation. Now, I take it he could have thought of many different examples of what it looks like to receive the gospel.

But you'll notice that these ones are particularly relevant to what's going on in this letter. In the first part of this passage, the question that James was asking is, are you receiving the gospel word properly?

In this part, the question being asked is, is your religion the real thing? In verse 26. If anyone thinks he's religious, and he goes on. And these three examples are all angled towards the bad behavior that he's dealing with all the way through this letter.

In other words, he's saying, if the gospel is really working in you, it'll be manifest in these ways. And he's raising the question about whether it is manifest in these ways.

Are you religious? Three little tests. First, what do you say? The first test is speech as it reveals our attitudes to others.

[24 : 26] If anyone thinks he's religious and doesn't bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Note the self-deception thing there.

It was there in verse 22. It's there again in verse 26. What do you do with your speech? And in particular, because the context demands it, what do you say to or about others?

What does that say about the genuineness of your religion? It's so often true that Christians in various ways badmouth one another.

James' readers are certainly behaving in that way. It's easy to do all the culturally acceptable Christian things and agree about the right truths but there's the quiet word here about someone or other.

The little juicy piece of scandal dropped in there. The group of people who consider themselves spiritual, who talk about others as though they're not. There's the word in the ear of the person you know will love to hear about somebody else.

[25 : 41] If anyone thinks he's religious says James and doesn't keep a grip on his tongue, this person's religion is worthless. When your speech is relationally destructive, when it's designed to benefit you, when it's often tearing down of others, then that says something about your gospel reception, doesn't it?

Verse 26. Worthless, says James. Not real at all. Now, of course, in this letter, speaking badly in relation to others is a big issue.

It's woven all the way through the letter. Think you're religious, says James. What does your speech about others tell you? Second question, second issue, second example.

Who will you serve? Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction.

Who will you invest in, says James? And I think these examples are here because these are people who, in the world's terms, give very little reward.

[27 : 05] It's characteristic in the Bible that God is the one who cares for the widow and the orphan. He is the one who looks after those who are unable to look after themselves. That is because he deals evenly with everyone.

He loves all that he has made. So often, however, human beings give attention to those from whom we can gain something, who can help us, whose approval we value, whose names we like to drop into conversation, who we like to be known as people who know.

But God shows no kind of favoritism like that. And so he looks after those who other people don't look after, people who don't give much reward.

And, says James, those in the family are known by the family likeness. Verse 27, religion that's pure and undefiled before the father is this, to share the family likeness, to do the same sort of thing that he does.

It's not, of course, that you're acceptable to God by doing those things. It's just that it's a great test of whether you're really in the family. It's characteristic of the family member that they will give attention to the unrewarding.

[28 : 28] easy, isn't it, to complain about certain people because they're hard to talk to or need effort to be made or we don't enjoy talking to them much or we don't click with them or whatever.

But, says James, God loves the unrewarding. In fact, he doesn't need rewards from anyone. and the family must be like that too.

Who will you serve? Third, what do you value? Actually, I've changed my mind about this third one since I wrote the headings, so that heading is redundant if it's coming up on the screen. I think the third one is really part of the second one.

Keeping unstained from the world. I think that's probably in context a statement qualifying the previous bit. The world loves those who are great in status, valuable, rewarding, profitable to invest in.

But you ought to be unstained with that, says James, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, to be like God, not to value the things the world values in people, but the things that God pays attention to.

[29 : 39] Watch your tongue, look out for who you help, and avoid the world's valuation of things and people. Of course, being tainted by the world has many different facets, but I think in this context it's just the reverse of what's been said.

The father loves the orphan and the widow, the children are to do the same, rather than valuing what the world around them values. Well, now our time is gone.

Let me summarize and do one or two implications. Let me start, we started with faith, let me end with faith. Faith, says James, verse 21, humble receiving comes along with repentance.

It's not just believing things, it's a joined up response of the being. Because this is true, this must happen in response.

when I hear the gospel, it is meant to change me, to reorganize my life. And I'm to expect that when I hear it, there will be things I hear which challenge what I already think and what I already do and what I already assume to be true.

[31 : 01] I was speaking some while ago with a minister friend of mine, an older man, who said this, my great fear is that people come every Sunday and nod at the truth.

They put ticks beside all the things they agree with and crosses beside the things that they don't and then they go away. What a terrible thing it would be to get to a stage of life where the gospel message makes no more demands on me than it already has.

where I no longer expect God to rule over me for change, where I expect the Bible to comfort but not rebuke me, where I expect that my life will be in agreement with it rather than in opposition to it. So, question, have I got comfortable? Especially, it might be worth asking, have I got comfortable in relation to my relationship issues in the congregation?

Am I unconcerned that I'm relating badly to or thinking badly of or speaking badly of a brother or sister? Does that bother me or not?

[32 : 21] Apparently, it bothers God. Or, have I begun to despair? Perhaps especially in relationships.

have I begun to think I've been struggling with this for so long and nothing has changed? I still find this relationship really hard. I still find it hard to forgive that person.

I still find it hard to think well of them or kindly of them. Maybe that's never going to change now. One of the interesting things about becoming middle-aged is that you eventually come to terms with the fact that this is who you are and this is what you have and this is what life is going to be like. There comes a time when the dreams of youth are finally faced up to as being just that, dreams. It is possible also to become spiritually middle-aged.

I never expect the gospel to do anything in my life anymore and I despair of its power to do anything in my life anymore because I've been struggling with this difficulty for a long time.

[33 : 42] Well, if that's you, can I encourage you to do things? One, don't stop repenting. And two, don't take heart.

There's great hope in this passage as well as difficulty. Can I say that the Bible is not naive, especially about the difficulty of relating to one another.

Do you find it straightforward to relate to your Christian brothers and sisters and do the rest of humanity? You got that one covered? I don't think so and I have either. The Bible is not naive about that.

We are not easy to get on with. And there is plenty of fuel for the fires of bitterness or resentment, hatred and discord.

And James says to that, do not get tired of putting away those things that are out of line with the gospel and gladly receiving it again.

[34 : 46] There is power to change there. Don't grow tired of it. So first, faith is more than just thinking things, it's doing things, it's repenting of things.

But second, can I say, the gospel message is a message of hope. Chapter 1, verse 21. put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls.

James looks forward to the end, to the last day. And what he's saying here is that the gospel is able to deliver you on that last day.

It's powerful enough to do that. And so often we feel it's impossible. There is so little progress in my life right now. There is so little progress in my difficulties with the relationships right now.

How can it ever be that I will escape God's wrath on the last day? And says James, keep repenting, keep receiving the implanted word, because that is able to save your souls.

[36 : 01] the Christian message is not a message of perfection now. What a good thing that is, because we do not find ourselves to be perfect now. It looks forward to perfection on the last day.

Let's pray together. Why don't we have just a moment or two to reflect on what we've heard and to respond in the quiet to what God has said to us particularly?

Amen. Bye-bye. Bye-bye. The question is our ■■■■■■- Robot about the increasing by Mantra or raising or raising our overcomeism when we hope for the prosperity we vi throughfighing Gracious God, we thank you for the wonderful realism of your word.

We look in your word and we see ourselves. And we confess that all of this is true to life and so very true to our own experience.

And we pray that you would help us not to lose heart in turning away from wickedness and receiving again the good news of the Lord Jesus.

[37 : 47] Help us not to be like the one who looks in the mirror and does nothing. Help us rather looking in the mirror and seeing ourselves to turn to you again for forgiveness.

And to put aside again those things that don't fit with the gospel. Not least the difficulties we have in relationship with one another and with the world around.

We pray that you'd grant us true repentance. And we pray that you'd give to us genuine hope. That the implanted word is able to save us.

Hear our prayer for we ask it in Jesus name. Amen.