

When God Speaks, Do You Listen?

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[0 : 00] But this morning, David is going to be preaching to us, and he's going to be preaching from chapter 1 of the epistle of James. So if you'd turn with me now to that letter in the New Testament after Hebrews, and we're going to be reading together in James chapter 1 from verse 16.

James chapter 1 and verse 16. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will, he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits 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.

[1 : 23] But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he's like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror.

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

Amen. Amen. May God bless his word. Well, good morning to you all.

It is really good to be with you this morning. Let's turn back to James chapter one together. Perhaps at some point in your life, you've come across someone who claims to be something, and yet the reality of their life is completely disconnected from the claim that they make.

A trivial example, maybe you've met someone for the first time, perhaps after church, and you're talking to them, and you ask them, well, what is it you do? And they say, well, I'm an author.

[2 : 55] Ah, great. So, you ask, what have you written? Well, nothing yet. I've been to a lot of creative writing seminars, I've listened to a lot of podcasts, I've thought about writing, but I haven't done any writing yet.

Now, that person has deceived themselves. Their claim about themselves is not connected in any way to their actual life. They are disjointed. They are double-minded.

They talk the talk, but they really haven't taken a step in walking the walk. Now, that situation is trivial, and seeing someone pomp around like that is actually quite amusing, depending on the person who it is.

But the letter of James is concerned with a much more serious version of that same disconnect, that same double-mindedness in Christians. Some of the people that James wrote this letter to claimed to love God, and yet they didn't listen to his words.

They were people who claimed faith, and yet weren't faithful. They were people whose hands seemed divided from their hearts, people whose fingers seemed severed from their ears.

[4 : 08] people whose lives, loves, and loyalties were divided and split. Now, that is what James is concerned about in this whole letter. And this passage we've read together this morning is no exception to that.

In verses 16 to 25, James wants whole-person Christians, Christians who are Christians everywhere, in their whole being. Now, the book of James has a reputation for being a very practical book.

That's what people say about this book. And to some extent, that is entirely justified. James rarely leaves us hanging around in the abstracts, and that is a good thing. Humans without practicalities often end up clueless, no idea where to go.

And fittingly, for someone looking for joined-up Christians, James often takes big realities in this letter and joins them up with the day-to-day practicalities of church life.

But James also knows where those practicals begin. He knows where they are grounded. And so in these verses that we just read together, that's where he begins, in the big realities that ground those practicalities.

[5 : 21] Because the day-to-day begins with who God is and what he's done for us. And so that's where James begins. To get believers whose lives are suffused with the words of God in every part.

Well, James begins by telling us all about God, the gift he has given to us, the gift he has spoken to us, spoken into existence.

And so that is where we will begin this morning with our first of three points. So firstly then, we have been given life, and we've been given life by God's word.

James says, every good and every perfect gift is from above. God gives every good gift. And no good gift that we have has ever come from anywhere else, ultimately.

But James has one particular gift in mind here in these verses. A gift that God has spoken into existence. Look at verse 17. It says, of his own will, he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

[6 : 40] In other words, God has spoken us into existence, and he has spoken us into fulfillment.

Or again, in another way, God has made us, has saved us, has glorified us, and he has done all of this by the power of his word, by what he has spoken, by his decree, what he says about us, what he says to us.

And so our whole lives as Christians are brought out of nothing, are driven along, are given purpose and nobility by the power of the word of God, by the word of truth, by what he has spoken to us and of us.

Let's think a little bit more about some of this. God has spoken us into existence. Now, this is probably fairly familiar to most of us here.

We won't linger too long on it. But in the beginning, God spoke. He said, let us make man in our own image. And so it is by God's words, by his speech, that we have been created.

Notice, in passing, the contrast there with our own words. Perhaps do an experiment later, if you remember. If you have time, clear a space on a table, sit down looking at it, concentrate really hard, and then say the name of something that you would really like.

[8 : 02] Command it into existence and see what happens. I would like a steak. Well, I bet you it doesn't work. Your words aren't that powerful. They can't do that. But God's words, it's completely the opposite.

He speaks, and it happens. And so we are, because God has told us to be. And more than that, if God spoke the word for our end, our end would come.

We are creatures of his word. And so our existence, the fact that we even are, is totally bound up in the words that God has spoken. He has brought us forth by his will and by the power of his word.

James has this gift in mind here in verse 17. But God has done even more for us by the power of his word. And James has that in mind as well.

By God's words, he has brought us to fulfillment, to fruition. James says, of his own will, he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

[9 : 11] Now imagine an orchard. An orchard is planted for a purpose. It is planted with an end in mind. Planted to come to something. In winter, if you visited an orchard this time of year, it's a bunch of spindly and bare branches.

It is good in a way. It is lovely in a way, but it has not yet come into its own. In spring, the blossom comes out. The leaves start to unfurl.

It is good in many ways. Lovely in many ways. But it has not yet come into its own. It is only when that first fruit ripens on the branch that the orchard comes into its own, into the start of its glory.

When it becomes, when it starts to fulfill its purpose, become what it was meant to be. In that orchard, we have a picture of creation. God created by his word with a purpose, with an end in mind.

Creation, in some ways, has been sort of planted in order to come to something in the fullness of time. Creation has been made to glorify God forever, to reflect his glory back to him in its myriad, multifaceted ways.

[10 : 24] There is an end and a purpose, a harvest of glory to what God has created. And James here says that by the power of God's word, we have become the first fruits of that harvest of glory, the first fruits of all of God creatures, that God, the good gift giver, has given us this gift, the honor of being the beginning of creation coming into its own, into its glory, the start of new creation.

And he has done this by the word of truth. And James means there by the gospel message, by words that God has spoken.

James's readers have heard the gospel proclaimed to them, and in that message, they have heard the words of God himself. And that word has called them onwards, into the beginnings of the fulfillment of all creation, into the start of fruition, of glory and honor.

Just as God's word of creation in the beginning has called them into existence, they have now been called into fruition, into fulfillment. The word of truth has called them out of sin, out of darkness, out of futility, and has called them into life.

And we should note here the huge honor there is in being the first fruits. It is similar to being called the royal priesthood, that we're called elsewhere in scriptures, devoted to God, honored, holy.

[12 : 00] Now, James's words here are filled with many huge intertwined things, and we don't have the space this morning to chase them all down, as much as that would be fun for all of us. But that's all right, because the point here in these verses this morning is not to intellectually grasp all of the themes that James ties together in these verses, but to grasp the weight of what he is saying.

And he is saying we have been created, brought to fulfillment, and devoted to God in honor, and that great gift that we have has been spoken into existence.

It is bound up with the words of God. It has been achieved by the word of God. You have been created, redeemed, glorified by what he has said, and so you, as a Christian, are a creature thoroughly of the word of God.

What holds you together? What drives you on? What gives you far greater glory than anything you deserve? It is the power of the word of God, and what he has spoken of you. Your life, Christian, is knit together by God's word.

It is what underwrites your life, what is woven into the fabric of your being now. How can that not be so when all that you are has ultimately been achieved by Jesus Christ, who is the word of God made flesh?

[13 : 22] The word of God, without whom nothing was made that has been made, in whom all things hold together, and through whose word you have been brought forth as the firstfruits of all creatures.

This is where James starts before he gets to the practicalities. And perhaps this does seem quite abstract at this point.

I suppose in some sense it is. James' words here are concerned with big questions, big questions of being and purpose. The big transcendental realities of who God is and who you are in the light of that.

In the next few verses, James will go on to the day-to-day. These ideas will have their consequences, as all ideas must. James will get there, and so will we.

But James knows that practical living as a Christian must be grounded in these great realities of the universe. The day-to-day must come out of something bigger than itself. God has given us a great gift, this great gift, an existence of eternal honor and purpose and life, and he has done that by the power of his word through the work of his word incarnate.

[14 : 38] And this is what lays the foundation for what follows. James, remember, is seeking joined-up Christians, whole-life Christians. And so what does this great reality look like when it is joined up to the day-to-day, joined up to the particular lives that each of us have as we live in this world?

How do people who are this, the firstfruits of God creatures, how do people who are this start living like this? What does it look like? And that's what we're going to look at in our final two points this morning.

Firstly, people of God's words should receive God's words. And secondly, the people of God's word should do God's word. Firstly then, receive God's words.

Now sometimes there is a gap between what someone is and the life they live day-to-day. A simple example, a man might objectively be an employee. He has a contract to prove it.

In a sense, that is what he is. And yet he might not do much work. He is an employee, and yet the day-to-day life does not match up with that. There's a gap between what he is and what he does, and someone would be entirely right to say to him, you are an employee, so shape up.

[16:00] Bridge that gap. Close it. A gap like that is here in James' letter. It's in play. Christians are creatures of God's word, and yet here and now, whilst we wait for the revelation of Christ in his glory, there can often be a gap, a disconnect between that fact and between our day-to-day lives and what we do.

A double-mindedness, a split, a division in God's word people. A failure of this reality to be manifest in their lives.

A separation between minds and hands, or since God is a speaking God, a separation between ears and hands. A separation between what we know God has said and what we do. And this is the gap that James wants to address.

In verses 19 to 21 here, he tells us both how not to join up these things, what will not work in bringing these two things together, and he also tells us the way that this whole person, Christianity, will happen, how it will be manifest in the lives of God's people.

Look at verse 21. Doing evil will not bridge this gap. This ought to go without saying, really, but rampant wickedness, as James puts it, will not lead to Christians living in line with who they are in Christ.

[17:31] It will not lead to the righteousness of God being manifest. This ought to go without saying, but too often it does need to be said. And throughout this letter, you get a picture of the kind of things that these Christians have been doing, particularly to each other.

And it's not a pretty picture. They need to be reminded that if they want the righteousness of God to be manifest in their lives, if they want to be who they are, they need to put away wickedness.

They need to put away evil. And so that's what James tells them to do. If they're to live out what they are, they need to put it away. And notice how active that is. Doing evil will not join up these realities with our day-to-day.

Perhaps slightly more surprisingly, human anger will not do it either. Now this is often a temptation for those of us who see clearly the first of those, who see people persisting in wickedness and get angry.

Well, human anger is powerless to achieve God's righteousness. It doesn't work. For even human anger against the right things can quite quickly turn rancid, like a bottle of milk you've left in the fridge for too long.

[18:50] In fact, later in this letter, James tells us that much of our ambition, much of our striving, much of our anger comes from just petty envy. It might dress itself up in righteous-looking words, but it doesn't make us righteous.

And it certainly doesn't give it the power to produce the righteousness of God in us or in those around us. So James says, be slow to anger.

Are you sure your anger is directed the right way or at the right people or at the right things? Are you sure that your anger comes from godliness?

Merely getting angry even at bad stuff will not join our day-to-day with these fundamental realities of who we are through the power of God's word. In fact, there is only one place to turn.

One thing that can produce the righteousness of God in our lives and it should come as no surprise what it is. We have life by the power of the word of God and the only thing that can join up that reality with how we live in the day-to-day is the power of the word of God.

[20:01] Look at verse 21. James says, receive with meekness the implanted word. God's words are already at work within James' readers and they can only live that out by humbly receiving his words.

Now we surely want our lives to reflect this truth about us, the nobility of being God's first fruits. We surely want to live as people who have been brought forth by the will of God, by the power of his word.

And well, this is how. Hear, listen, receive God's words with humility. Now the next few verses will show us that listening to God's word in the scriptures is what James particularly has in mind here and we'll get on to those verses in a minute.

Since receiving the word of God is so vital, it's worth examining briefly our attitude towards the Bible, the place that we have the words of God written down for us. And particularly examining our

attitude to that word when it is preached, when it is taught faithfully, especially in weekly gatherings like this one.

James commands a humble attitude, receiving the word with meekness. So do you do that? Here are a few questions perhaps to ask yourselves in reflection.

[21 : 30] When you come across something in the Bible that rubs you up the wrong way, and if you are listening to the Bible, you will come across stuff that rubs you up the wrong way, what do you do?

How do you react? Do you get angry and reject it? Do you just ignore it? Do you skim over it and think, well, that's probably not important as long as I can keep the nice stuff.

We'll just ignore that. Do you start up your theological gymnastics routine to try and twist out of the pickle that you've been left in? When you come to hear the Bible preached to you, are you coming to examine it?

Or are you coming to let God speak and examine you? One of those is the right way round. It's pretty easy to see which. Unless we receive the words of God humbly, then this great gift of God, achieved by the power of the word of God, will not be manifest in our daily lives.

It will not be joined up. What a tragedy that would be. What a missed opportunity. What a missed opportunity to shine the light of Christ to the world around us, to be filled with a joy that comes with obeying the Lord.

[22 : 42] Going easy on sin in your life will not join up your day-to-day life with the life God has given you. Merely getting angry, even at other people's sin, won't do it either.

It doesn't matter how well-versed you are in anything else, in self-help techniques, in being a nice person, in philosophy, or anything else. None of that is enough.

You have been created, redeemed, and restored by the power of God's word, and your life will show it by listening, by receiving that word humbly.

But hearing is not enough. Or rather, hearing is not complete. Not complete without a final step, which is where James turns in the next few verses, and where we turn in our final point for this morning.

Thirdly, do God's word. verses 22 to 25 here, we get quite a bit closer to that famed, always practical James.

[23 : 47] We began with great cosmic realities, and now we've moved to the nuts and bolts of living it out. What does it look like when creatures of the word of God join up their daily lives with the reality of their being?

What does it look like for Christians to humbly receive the word of God, as James has just told them to do? Well, in no uncertain terms, they hear the words of God, and they do them.

Our faith needs to be joined up all the way down, joined from who we are to what we listen to, and joined from what we listen to to what we do. In fact, James says that if someone hears the word of God, claims to have faith in God, and yet makes no move to do the word of God, then they are lying to themselves.

They're living a deeply disconnected, unnatural, disjointed life. Now, when we talk about obedience like this and doing God's word, always remember, James is writing to saved people.

That's the foundation. These are people who have been made into the first fruits of God's creatures. James is not saying here, earn your salvation. James is saying, be who you are.

[25 : 01] Let your faith work its way out into every corner. James is saying, deal with the totally unnatural disconnect between what you hear from God and what you do.

When you hear God's words, do them. James gives a great illustration here. The law of God, the perfect law, the law of liberty, is like a mirror.

When you look in a mirror, intently, you come away knowing what you look like. How utterly useless would that mirror be if you looked in and then completely forgot your own face. How weird would that be?

How unnatural, how strange, because that is not how mirrors work. Perhaps on some mornings we wish that is how mirrors worked, but it is not. They don't work that way.

You look, you see, you know, you remember, and sometimes you need to act. How unnatural it would be to look into the mirror of God's word then, to be someone who hears it, and then to forget entirely what you saw there.

[26 : 06] How strange to hear and then act as if you don't know what God said. For those of us who have been brought forth by the power of the word of God, who are creatures of his word, the first fruits of his creation, such a thing is entirely unnatural.

It should not be. And yet, sometimes, if we're honest with ourselves, this is the way we act towards God's words, we often hear and don't do.

Why? What stops us? Well, perhaps here are a few reasons. Sometimes, we simply do not know what God commands. We don't know what he is telling us to do.

James tells us here to look into the law of God, the perfect law, the law of liberty, and a large part of what he means by that is the law given to Moses and the various expositions, applications of that law written in the Old Testament and the New.

How well do you know that? How well do you know it? Have you adopted a theology, a gospel, that says you don't really need God's commands now, so there's no point getting to know them? A gospel, then, that prevents you from doing what God says here?

[27 : 18] James says it is unnatural to look into the law of God and not do it. Do we need to take a step further back and actually look there in the first place with an eye to learning what God's commands are?

Perhaps another reason is that when we look into the mirror of God's words, we quite quickly become embarrassed by some of the things we see there. God seems to have quite strong opinions about quite a lot of things, including some of the things that our friends and families, our colleagues, quite like.

taking that step from hearing to doing is a big one, a costly one, because starting to do what God tells us, believe his verdict on things, view the world the way that he views it, starting to do that will likely lose some of the respect of the people we'd quite like to respect us.

It will often stop us being cool. Another reason, and may God have mercy on us, is probably that we quite like some of our sins ourselves.

And so for all of these reasons, and for others, we are experts at making little escape routes, little wiggle rooms when we hear the words of God. But James says here, stop, stop wriggling away, for you are the first fruits of his creatures.

[28 : 43] You have been created by the power of his words. He has made you better than that. Listen to his words, join it all up, receive God's words, and then do them.

Now of course, our approach to interpreting, applying the Bible, should never be simplistic. The words of God are not simple commands, his commands are wisdom. And that means that properly working them out and applying them to our lives can never be childish or simplistic.

But once we've done the hard work to understand, our reaction should be simple. if God commands it, do it. Christians are creatures of God's word.

He has spoken us into existence. He has made us the first fruits of his creation and he has done this by the power of his word. And so, receive the word of God.

Listen to it humbly, for nothing else will join up your daily life with that great reality. humanity. And that means when it comes down to it, do what God says.

[29 : 52] As we come to a close, I want to dwell very briefly on verse 25. When we look at the perfect law of God, we will find all sorts of things that run counter to our assumptions of what the good life will look like.

And that's because our assumptions are often built more than we know by the assumptions we swim in every day. When we come across that kind of thing, things that demand us to actually change, we will hear the same lie that humans have heard throughout the generations, the lie that started it all off in the garden in the beginning.

We'll hear the lie, God commands these things because he wants to harm you, because he doesn't want the best for you. Don't listen to him. Go your own way and you'll be better off.

We'll read James' words in verse 25 there and let them sink in. The devil is a liar. Those who walk in God's ways, who listen and hear and do, who join all of this up into a single-minded, whole-person faith, well, God will bless them in their doing.

We're not told exactly how God will bless them. that decision is always and entirely up to God and he knows best. But we are left with this simple assurance that listening to God is best for us.

[31 : 15] It is, in the end, the most whole and happy path to take. Brothers and sisters, you who are the firstfruits of God's creatures, who are brought forth by the power of the Word of God and the

work of the Word of God incarnate in you, be doers of the Word and not hearers only.

For 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.

Let's pray together. Father God, we praise you this morning for this great work that you have done in us by your Word.

We thank you for the life you have given us. We thank you for the salvation you have given us through Jesus Christ. Lord God, we pray that you'd help us to be humble as we come to your words.

help us to listen to them. Help us to receive them humbly. Help us to put down our defenses against them. Examine us by them.

[32 : 32] And Lord, we pray that you would help us to do them. Give us the courage that we need to do that where we need courage and give us the wisdom to do it well, we pray.

Lord God, join up our lives so that what we live here matches the reality of who we are. And so may the light of Christ shine forth from us, we pray.

In Jesus' name, Amen.