

James 1:19-27

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[0 : 00] I'll please turn up James chapter 1 again as we continue on in this series.! Well, it won't surprise you, at least I don't think it'll surprise you to hear that! in a 2023 World Values survey of belief, faith, and religion, in part sponsored by King's College in London, it was found that, quote, the share of Britons who say they believe in God and heaven has been in decline for decades. I think that's fairly well known. It may surprise you, however, to hear that, quote, five nations are less likely than the UK to say they believe in God. Only five nations less likely than the UK. Those are Norway, South Korea, Japan, Sweden, and China. And again, quote, the UK public are among the least likely internationally to say that God is important in their life, with the share of Britons who feel this way doubling since 1981 and now at a record high.

Now, what this means is that our educational institutions, our government bodies, and the entertainment industry, all of the things that form the culture, have all increasingly adopted a bias against Christian faith. We now definitely live in a secular culture governed by secular people driven by worldviews that are hostile to biblical principles.

Of course, some will say, well, your faith is a private thing. What are you complaining about? Why does this matter? The truth is, no one's faith is private. Whatever you believe about the world and how we got here, whatever you believe about people and what the good life involves, those beliefs will inform your values and they will shape the way you live. That is unavoidable. Whatever you believe about the big questions of life will be expressed in the way that you live. It's just that Christians Christians do this or are supposed to do this as Christians. And whether it's your employer's DEI policy, or your refusal to play pretend with pronouns, or just your views on marriage and family as you articulate them in the course of life, pretty soon your acceptability and therefore your freedom starts to evaporate. Christian faith makes you persona non grata socially and professionally.

No, we don't like this. It's difficult. It's painful. It's awkward. And one of the temptations we face as we seek to navigate it all is that we get angry. Injustice, persecution, slander, how dare they? And we shake our fists or we tackle those people who oppose us or we fire off on social media or because the wave of opposition is so great we just don't get anywhere. Well, then we start to lob insults.

[3 : 14] That's what happens, isn't it? When you're angry and you push back against something that has made you angry and that thing doesn't give way or give any ground at all, you up your anger and you up the vitriol and so you lob insults. Well, this morning James holds out a different approach to people in that situation. We've seen over the last couple of weeks that he's writing to a persecuted group of Christians who have been exiled because they follow the Lord Jesus Christ. He has reminded them that these trials that they are experiencing come to them under the hand of God, and they are designed by Him to grow them up and to strengthen their faith. But in the midst of trials, it never feels that way.

When you're going through it, it never feels that this is something good that God is doing in order to strengthen you and build you up to maturity. It just feels humiliating. It just feels hard. So, verse 5, when trials come, we are to ask God for wisdom to receive them from Him.

We are, verse 9, to know that He loves us. And verse 17, that He is good, even though our circumstances are hard. And James continues here to outline what life lived according to that godly wisdom that we are supposed to pray for looks like. And it doesn't involve letting our anger get the better of us. Look at verse 19, 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. Now, James will have a lot to say about our speech as we go through the letter. But here, he's putting his finger on where our anger most easily gets expressed in our words.

And the reason that the anger of man is of no value is because it does not produce the righteousness of God, he says. That is, it does not produce the righteous world that God's people are waiting for. It does not make things right as God has promised to make things right in Christ, according to the terms of His covenant. The anger of man does not accomplish the purposes of God, he's saying. Now, there is, of course, a kind of anger that is not sinful. Paul distinguishes that, in your anger do not sin. It is possible to be angry in a righteous way. We should feel anger at the killing of the unborn in our nation. But, of course, the temptation with that anger is that, so righteous anger in itself can then lead in unhealthy directions because we want to act directly on that. We want to rectify the situation, make righteous, as it were, the situation. And we do it with fiery speeches and even, perhaps, with violence. There are all kinds of things that have been justified because of certain injustices in the world justified by Christians. And James is saying, don't go there. Don't go there because that is not the way that you will bring into effect God's promises to make things right. Instead, James wants us to orient our lives around God's Word.

It is the difference between a life based on our wisdom and God's wisdom, a life based on engaging the world on the world's terms or on God's terms. And so, James says, I want you to approach, you should establish your life around God's Word, and I want you to approach God's Word in three ways.

[6 : 48] Three ways. The first way is this. He says, receive it to save your soul. Verse 21, receive it to save your soul. If you're doing fact finders, fill in the blanks there, receive it to save your soul. Now, when James says here, we should be quick to hear and slow to anger, etc., he might be suggesting that we listen carefully to understand what our opponents are saying before we respond. Like in the book of Proverbs, the emphasis on the wise man being careful before he speaks, Proverbs 1, verse 5. But I think it's more likely here that he is saying that we should be quick to hear God's Word. Be quick to listen to God's voice in this situation to correct your errant impulses. So, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness where your anger might lead you, the sort of filthiness and rampant wickedness that our anger can take us to, and receive with meekness the implanted Word which is able to save your souls. When God's Word comes to you, receive it, no matter what it says. Don't respond by speaking, by explaining why it doesn't mean what it says, or why it doesn't apply to you. Don't quickly respond by trying to get out from under what it's saying to you, or by getting angry at what it says. Receive it. Don't resist it. Don't reject it, because that won't do you any good. I was with a friend recently who told me that he said to me he didn't need a book to tell him right from wrong. And I said to him, I'm not sure that's true.

Now, as the Bible is set aside in British life more and more, I don't see a culture that is more tolerant, or more reasonable, or more committed to caring for the weak and vulnerable. I don't see greater pursuit of justice. I don't see more human flourishing. We're listening to lots of voices. The noise of opinions and advice and instruction is everywhere, constantly. But those voices aren't really leading us to get better, either as individuals or as a society. I think we do need a book to tell us right from wrong, actually. And only God's Word can do that, because it's only in God's Word that we have the Maker's instructions, the map for life in the world that He made. And even as Christians, we need to put away the filth and the wickedness of pursuing life on the world's terms, times. And getting angry when things aren't as we would choose them to be. When life does not go our way, we need to resist getting angry. We need to receive God's Word, what it says about our lives and about our situation. And we must do it with meekness. That is, humbly, depending on God, to bring His plans to pass in His time. James is echoing Jesus again. Blessed are the meek. Why are they blessed? For they're the ones who will inherit the earth. Receiving God's Word, God's implanted Word with meekness. It is us expressing by faith that we know that God is bringing His purposes to pass in His time. It is as we do this, as we receive His Word in this way, that we are changed.

And so, in the end, it will save our souls. Do you see, James talks about the implanted Word. It's like a stent in an artery that keeps the blood flowing and keeps the body alive. God's Word is implanted into us from the outside to transform us and keep the blood of new life flowing as it and directs us towards God's Word.

To grow out of your anger and avoid all of its destructive effects. If you want instead to grow to maturity, receive with meekness the implanted, life-giving, soul-saving Word of God.

[11 : 12] So, how's your Bible reading? How's your Bible receiving? Have you ever been in discussion with someone and you tell them something and they say, yes, I see what you're saying,

but it stays there? Oh, yeah, okay. I get that. And they do nothing with the info. So, they heard you, but they didn't actually receive your words. Nothing changed as a result of what you told them. We can be like that with our Bibles. We read them and we say, oh, that's interesting. Or we say, oh, I see the way that connects with this obscure verse in the Old Testament. Or, oh, yes, I see these links in the way the text hangs together.

Isn't that interesting? But our lives aren't actually changed because we haven't received what the Word has said into our hearts. If we are quick to hear, we will receive, we will welcome God's Word into our lives so that we start to think and act in line with what He says, not with our own exalted thoughts or not with the thoughts and the views of our culture. That is the way of wisdom.

The path of meekness that in the end will inherit the earth will save our souls. Number one, we are to receive God's Word to save our souls. Secondly, He says, we are to look into it to tell you truth. Look into it to tell you truth. Again, there it is, fact finders. Look into it to tell you truth. Verse 22, be doers of the Word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the Word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror, for he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.

So you're talking to someone and there's something about their appearance that isn't quite right. There's a bit of food in their teeth or there's something hanging from their nose or there's tufts of hair where they missed a bit when they were shaving. And you think, if you just checked the mirror before you left the house, maybe you pluck up the courage to tell them and you say, did you not check the mirror before you left the house?

[13 : 26] And if they then said to you, yeah, no, I did. I know I've got some cereal in my teeth. You'd think there was a problem. You'd think that's very strange indeed. Why would someone do that?

You received the truth about your appearance and you chose to do nothing with that information. This is what James is saying here. We must not do. Look into the mirror of God's Word, see what it says, and then ignore it.

Pure religion requires you to do certain things. Verse 26, bridle your tongue. Verse 27, help the neediest in your community. We read this. This is reflected to us from God's Word, and then we close the book and we do nothing with it. We go and fire off the way everybody else does with our tongue. We don't bother with people that are difficult and complicated. It's like we've just done nothing with what we've seen in the Word. We're not really looking into it.

When, let me ask you, when did you last stop or start doing something simply because the Bible said so? Look at the examples here. As I said, James has a lot to say about the tongue, especially when we get to chapter 3. But in a day when a Word can circle the globe in an instant, the need to bridle our tongues is more important than ever. Look again at verse 26. James is saying, it really doesn't matter how much theology you know in your head if we don't bridle our tongue, if we get angry and critical and nasty, even if it's returning the favor of those who treated us this way.

If we use our words vindictively, trying to get revenge for our persecution, he's saying our theology isn't worth tuppence. Boys and girls, tuppence, small amount of money, one pea. It's not worth a guinea. If we allow our own situation, however difficult it might be, to lead us to ignore the needs of the most vulnerable in society. In James' day, this was those who were orphaned and widowed by the oppression that they'd faced for the sake of Christ.

[15 : 50] In our day, it's definitely the unborn. It is our brother and sister in the church who is in need because they were canceled in some way for their faithfulness to Christ. If we don't care about that, and if we don't do something material to help in some kind of way, James is saying our religion, our theological precision, our ability to make really coherent biblical arguments for things is worthless. He's not saying theology is bad. He's not saying that doctrine and caring about doctrine is bad. He's not saying that we shouldn't know our Bibles. He's saying what we need to do is act on them. We'll come to that in a moment. It is really important in confessional churches like ours that care about getting the Bible right and care and love sound doctrine, we typically are tempted to measure our religion by what we know. But if that is all it is, we've deceived ourselves because what we know has got to show.

James says, let me listen to how you speak with your mates, to your husband, with your children. Hey, hand over your phone. Let me read your Twitter.

Let me read the way you communicate in those WhatsApp groups. And let me see how you care for those who can't do anything for you in return. How do you care for those who can't give you a leg up

in any way, shape, or form?

Don't tell me about it. Show me your care for the needy. James is saying, it's very challenging. It doesn't matter what you say you believe if your life doesn't follow suit. Looking into the Bible, allowing it to define your reality, allowing it to shape the way you view yourself and the way you view everything else, allowing the Bible to shape your view of the whole world, must always lead us to do what it says, no matter what the cost. No matter how unpopular it makes us, around our friends and colleagues. For some of us, our heads are full of truth, but our lives are no different to everyone else. We're just as anxious. We're just as selfish. We're just as angry. And frankly, we need to repent. We need to go back to the Word. We need to look into it, and we need to do what it says. We need to hear this challenge.

[18 : 29] And just by the way, a word to the tender consciences that are here this morning. I realize that a direct word like this from James can land heavily with us. And often it lands heavily with those people who are in their Bible and are living it out. You think you're hearing this, and you think to yourself, I read my Bible, I listen to sermons, and I try desperately to serve others, but I don't do it like I should, and I wonder, am I self-deceived? Actually, I'm a fraud. Remember, this letter is written to Christians who are starting to respond in kind to their persecutors. They're angry, and they think that they can bring God's purposes about by fighting the world the way the world fights.

So they're not in God's Word. They've got no time for that. They're too busy fighting. They're too busy to care for others. They're too busy fighting the culture war to be able to care for others. None of us do the Bible perfectly, so don't be crushed by this.

Just be faithful. Just keep being faithful. Don't turn morbidly inward. Just keep hearing God's Word and doing it. Indeed, this is the third way that we should approach God's Word. Receive it. Look into it.

Thirdly, the way you will avoid deceiving yourself about these things is persevere in doing it to set you free. Persevere in doing God's Word to set you free. Verse 19, be doers of the Word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. If you are merely a hearer of the Word, you deceive yourself that this is the Christian life. If all you're doing is listening to the Bible and you think that that's the Christian life, you've deceived yourself. But the way that you know you're not self-deceived is that you do what it says. In verse 25, do you see you keep doing it, 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. James returns to one of his big themes here.

When he talks about the perfect law, you see, the word is mature. And this is where James has been pointing us from the start. This is the goal of our trials, and this is the conclusion to which we are headed. Remember last week, the crown of life, verse 12, a share in Christ's rule and glory. And the person who looks into the mature law and does what it says inevitably grows up to maturity. They grow more and more into the likeness of Christ. And crucially, this is so because they are following the same path of faith-filled suffering that Christ took. So it isn't a one-time thing, looking into God's Word, doing God's Word. We must persevere. And it is as we do this that we discover true freedom. Do you see? That phrase, the law of liberty, did you notice the way James qualified that? But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, by the way, it sounds beautiful, but it also sounds strange to our ears, doesn't it? It's beautiful because we love liberty, but it's strange because we don't associate liberty with laws. We don't associate laws with freedom. Laws hold us back. Laws hem us in.

[22 : 04] We think they positively prevent us from being free. We think freedom is found in us setting aside our own rules, ignoring the laws, being able to do and be whatever and whomever we want. Individual liberty is one of the cardinal virtues of our day. The rhetoric of it is everywhere. My right to define myself however I want is held up in our culture as a universal good. It's not even questioned.

But there are, of course, some problems with that, at least two problems with that idea. First of all, it isn't possible. We are finite creatures, and there are certain aspects of who we are and where we are that we simply cannot change. You can't change a boy into a girl. You can't do it. You can't run at 70 miles an hour, however hard you try. You aren't free from the restrictions of the state.

If you try to express your desire to hold up a bank, you will go to jail, no matter how strongly you feel that being a bank robber is who you are. We all live, all the time, under a load of restrictions, physical, social, political, and so on. So it's not possible. Second problem is that, as I keep saying, we need to admit that the huge cultural push for personal freedom doesn't seem to have created

more freedom. It doesn't seem to have delivered happier, more fulfilled lives. Our culture is more divided and angrier than ever. So there must be a better way. There must be a better way. And there is a better way. We need to see that limitations, we need to see that restrictions are unavoidable for finite creatures. And so what we need then are the restrictions that bring freedom. It sounds like a paradox, and in some ways it is. But if you think about it, think about the train, the humble train, choo-choo, okay? Trains are limited by tracks. If someone suggested that this was discriminatory and that trains should be free to get off their tracks and run through the fields and into the rivers, we'd think rightly that they were wrong and stupid.

[24 : 31] Trains were designed to run on tracks. And it is within these limits of the tracks that they are free to surge ahead at high speed. It's when they get off the tracks that it's dangerous and in many cases probably deadly.

It is within the limits of their design that trains flourish. And it's the same for us. You'd use the example of a fish. A fish was designed to be in the water and swim around in the water. When it's in the water, it is a thing of beauty. It flourishes. It thrives. It jumps and wriggles and swims and does all it does. And then it comes out onto the beach. It wants to get away from the restrictions of water. And it wants to be free to go on land and spend its time on land and go to coffee shops and hang out like those other people over there. Nonsense. It doesn't work. It was created to exist in a particular environment according to particular restrictions. So it is for us. We were designed to be in relationship with the living God, listening to His Word and doing what it says. And it is to the extent that we do this, that we experience the freedom that we were created to enjoy.

It is within the restrictions of God's Word and its ordering of our lives that we truly flourish. Doing the Word, persevering and doing the Word, that is where we find liberty and blessing.

[26 : 12] Some of you here this morning might need to experience this freedom for the first time. You're not in a relationship with God at all. And you've come to realize for the first time that this seems true. That actually, you were created to exist within the restrictions of our relationship with Him. Well, receive His Word by turning to Jesus.

I'm sorry that I have lived according to my own way in your world, God of all the earth. Forgive me through all that Jesus has done and reconcile me to you. And He will do that.

His Word says that we've lived our lives on our terms apart from Him. That is the essence of our problem. That is the essence of sin. And we need to turn from that way and put our trust in Jesus. You can do that at any moment.

Jesus came to die and to rise to deal with that problem of our sin. He experienced the greatest of all restrictions as He was nailed to the cross to bear the curse of God in our place that we might experience the liberty that He gives us through faith in Him.

When you do that, God puts the train of your life back on the rails that it was designed to run on. That is life that is truly life. You can receive that now even in your seat.

[27 : 44] Others of us, if we're honest, we need to return to the path, the path to maturity and blessedness that James is calling us to here. However hard this is, let's be honest, it's not complicated.

We don't merely hear God's Word, but we look into the mysteries and the beauty and we persevere in doing what it says. It's hard. Our instincts want to take us in a different direction, but it's not complicated.

We know what we need to do. We are not mere hearers of the Word, but we do what it says. Because this is the way to life.

It is the way to fullness. It is the way to maturity and to blessedness. May God help us. Let's pray together.