

James 1:19-26

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[0 : 00] Well, I guess it was in the days when Steve was still somewhat young in the mission, well that's not quite true. About 25 years ago, I don't know if Steve was not yet halfway through, where they finally ended up, a church gathered a bit like this, not too many miles from here, and I don't know all the details, thankfully, but halfway through the, I think it was the evening service, an argument broke out.

Clearly some tensions had been under the surface for a long time, and the argument was between the two main families in this relatively small church, about 40, 45 people. Now what happened as a result of that argument?

I don't know the details. But what happened was that more or less overnight, a church of 40 to 45 went down to a church of 5. And some of those people have never been back to church since. Others have gone to other churches, some have never been back. And whatever witness the church did have in the neighbouring community was completely blown. You can imagine it primarily, all the neighbours saying, did you hear about that church?

What a bunch of hypocrites. Christians are just hypocrites, aren't they? And I suspect here tonight, there are some of us who've had that experience, haven't we? Christians are just hypocrites.

[1 : 12] Maybe you've been winded by it. Maybe, like me, you've been one of those hypocrites. And maybe for others, you've been hurt by tensions in churches in the past. I've not been in this church long enough to know some of the tensions that may have been in the past.

Or maybe you're sitting here thinking, this could never happen to us. We're not a basket case like that other church you talked about, Stuart. Well, that other church was a Bible-believing, reformed church.

So James has something to say for all of us. Whether we think it could happen or not, whether it's happened to us or not. And in these verses we're looking at, we hear how such rows can come about.

Why it's wrong. And what we need to do to stop this happening to us. What we need to do to ensure we don't demolish the witness of a church somewhere. So how do these rows happen?

Well, look at James' command here in verse 19. Know this, my beloved brothers. Let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.

[2 : 19] Why do these rows happen? They happen because people are not quick to hear and slow to speak, but the other way around. They're quick to speak, quick to anger, and very slow to listen indeed.

Now why is it that we get angry? What is it that makes you angry? What is it that makes me angry? Isn't it usually that something's getting in the way of what we want?

So a car cuts us up on the roundabout. We get frustrated. What makes us quick to speak is the fact that we love our own voice. We think our point of view is right. When was the last time you got really angry about something?

Let me tell you about what makes me angry. It's in the mornings at about 8 o'clock when I want to get to do my work, and my children are still messing around, not knowing where their book bag is, not able to put their coats on, not finding their shoes, and I'm going mad.

Now, of course, part of that is my self-righteous anger. What do I want to do? I want to get down to work. Especially on Monday morning, I've got to stand there for Tuesday morning.

[3 : 25] Let me get on with God's work for my life. And our anger can be even worse when we think it's somehow righteous and allowed, isn't it? I think that's what's happening here in this community that James is fighting to.

People are getting angry about stuff. They're not listening to each other. Why? Because they think they want what God wants. Look at verse 20. See the warning James gives? For the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

The righteousness of God is the righteousness, the right relationships among his people that he wants, that is his desire that he saved people for. So it seems these Christians James is writing to are people who are arguing with each other and not listening to each other because they think the church should be how they want it.

They think that's what God wants. I'm sure you've known that in communities of believers, haven't you? I know I have. How many times have you heard it said or how many times have you said? I'm guilty of a number of these. This church would be so much better if only the marriage would look out for the single people and actually invite us around for dinner occasionally. This church would be so much better if only the elders actually knew what was going on and took time to listen to people. [4 : 39] That's the problem. This church would be so much better if only we sang some of the songs that I really like. If only we knew what Sovereign Grace were up to. This church would be so much better if the sermons were shorter.

My gifts were recognised. If those people over there actually got off their chairs and served instead of letting me do all the work. So you quickly think it's righteous anger, don't you?

That actually we're doing, we're wanting what God wants, aren't we? James says no. The anger of man never produces the righteousness of God.

So what makes us angry really is not that we want what God wants. We want God to want what we want, don't we? Everyone else wants what we want. That's why we don't stop to listen. We want to speak.

That's why James is warning us here, be slow to speak. Slow to anger. Quick to listen. That's how arguments happen. That's how that church got to a stand-up fight in the middle of the service.

[5 : 45] People thought they were pursuing God's agenda, they weren't. They were pursuing their own agenda and not stopping to listen. So how can we avoid that again? How can we make sure that doesn't happen here? Well, three words James gives us.

Receive, respond, submit. Receive, respond, submit. Look at receive first. Verse 21. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls.

I'm not a great gardener, but I do know this much. If you want to plant something that will actually grow and take root, what do you need to do first? You need to remove all the weeds, don't you? Look at the weeds James is talking about here.

The weeds are filthiness and rampant wickedness. What is filthiness and rampant wickedness? At this point we're going to get out all sorts of sins for our minds. But hasn't James already defined them?

Invert the previous verse. The filthiness is being quick to speak. Quick to become angry. That's the rampant wickedness.

[6 : 50] It's being slow to actually listen to other people. That's what we have to put away. That are the weeds that have to go. And what do we have to plant in its place?

What needs to be implanted in its place? Well, it's interesting what James says, isn't it? The word there in verse 19 is to put things off.

I'm sorry, verse 21 rather. Therefore put away, put off all filthiness. It's the language used in taking off clothes. So you expect James then to say, you've taken off these clothes, put on this next set of clothes.

But he doesn't say that, does he? He doesn't talk about clothes. He talks about something being implanted into you. Verse 21. The implanted word. Received with meekness. The implanted word. Now meekness is the absolute opposite of pursuing our own agenda, isn't it? We pursue our own agenda in forceful pride. Meekness is absolutely the opposite.

[7 : 48] Meekness is one of the characteristics of Christ. 2 Corinthians 10 verse 1. Paul talks about speaking to the Corinthians with the meekness or the gentleness of Christ. It's the same word. It's the word he used to describe a horse that's been broken.

Its strength under control. Responding to its owner. So what is to be received with meekness? It's the implanted word which is able to save your souls.

Now God had promised back in the Old Testament, back through the prophet Jeremiah, that one day he would write his law on people's hearts. There's a picture of how human beings are not naturally able to do what God wants.

Naturally we are not slow to become angry. But God promised that because we couldn't keep his law, he would write his law on our hearts.

That would be the implanted word. The law on the wall causes us to sin, doesn't it? It provokes us. You know, there's signs on buses saying, do not put your feet on the seat. I never thought of doing that, but thank you for giving me the idea.

[8 : 51] That's how the law works for us, isn't it? So God promised to implant his word into human hearts, to write his command on our hearts. And that is what is able to save our souls.

No amount of self-discipline, no amount of self-help, no amount of following rules concerning us in changes. It's only receiving with meekness God's implanted word. You see what this word is.

He describes it back in verse 18, back in the other column, just a little bit up, as the word of truth.

The word of truth by which God brought us forth by the word of truth.

That we should be a kind of first fruits as creatures. It's this word that brings new life right within us.

That God uses to make us new people. That's what we need.

That's what needs to be implanted in us. So how do we receive this word? We receive it with meekness, don't we? And do you notice the contrast between verse 19 and verse 21?

[9 : 56] Verse 19 is, be slow to speak. Sorry. Every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. That's obviously, James' people weren't doing that, were they?

They were being very quick to speak, quick to angry, and very slow to hear. James is saying, if you want to actually try and be slow to anger, and quick to listen, then you need to receive God's word. And by the way, you're not going to receive God's word with meekness, if you're not listening to one another. If you're not listening to others, if you're quick to speak, and quick to get angry, and not quick to listen, then you're not receiving anyone else's word at all, are you?

If that's your attitude to other people, then you will not receive God's word with meekness either.

See, all through this letter, James keeps pointing out to us, that actually the way we treat other people, is indicative of what we, the way we're really acting towards God.

We may say, that we love God, and worship him, and want to hear his word, but actually if we're despising other people, not listening to them, then we're not really in a place, where we can receive with meekness, God's implanted word.

[11 : 08] So we need to receive it with meekness, that means listening to others first, so that we will actually be listening to God. But it also means, not just receiving it with meekness, it means repenting, doesn't it?

It means stopping pursuing our own agendas, and instead turning, and accepting God's agenda, instead. It means coming to him for forgiveness. It means confessing our sin, and seeking the forgiveness, that is only available in the Lord Jesus.

He will then send his Holy Spirit, to implant his word in us, and to write his law on our hearts, to bring us forth by the word of truth, to make us new people.

But also accepting this word, can just sound like it's passive, can't it? It sounds very internal. It is internal. When we accept people's food, we take it into us, then it becomes part of us.

That's what it means to have God's word implanted into us. It's taking it in. So it's part of us. But that then, is not just a passive thing, but it becomes active. So having received, the second word James gives us, is to respond.

[12 : 16] Verses 22 to 25. Here's the second step, so that we don't end up fighting each other.

Receive this word, and then respond to it. Verse 25, verse 22 rather. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving ourselves.

Many years ago, we had a family holiday, driving through France at one point, and we got lost on the Paris Ring Road, which I believe is a familiar experience of people in crime negotiated, and we were looking for a campsite.

So my father stopped the car, got out, asked some local lady, in his best broken French, where this particular campsite was. She just figured it wildly, gave a long series of instructions, now came back to the car, we were all telling him, in anticipation and bated breath, retired, and wanted to go to bed. He said, so where is it dad? I don't know, I didn't hear, let's just go, I'll find out, I'm sure. It was dark, by the time we reached that campsite, I was only about six at the time, my mother could give you

more details, unsure.

But obviously it's foolishness, they listen to something, and then not respond to it, when you are in need of help. And James says, brothers and sisters, we're in need of help. We need to respond, to what God's word is saying.

[13 : 28] And that's the whole point, James' illustration. You see the illustration, of a man with a mirror, verse 23. 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 is like.

Now I sit there, don't you think, what sort of idiot would do that? Well let me tell you, what sort of idiot would do that. At breakfast the other morning, my wife turned around to me, and said, Stuart, do you know you still have a shaving foam on your ear? I don't know why it's on my ear, I don't shave my ears normally, but there you go, it was there.

And I didn't know that, how did I not know that? I was standing in front of a mirror, shaving. Was it because I'm blind? Well, perhaps I'm a bit daft at times. Or was it more likely, I just kind of assumed, that I knew, what the mirror was going to tell me?

And therefore didn't really pay attention? Could it be that? Could it be that I didn't really think, that the mirror was going to have anything relevant for me? Sometimes we like that in God's word, with God's word, aren't we?

I think it's especially a danger in churches like this, and the other I used to serve in, where we love God's word, don't we? We say we do. We love listening to sermons. Some of you will download sermons and listen from on the way to work.

[14 : 45] That's a good thing. Some of you will read lots of books. That's a good thing. We love God's word. Yet so often, we fail to actually respond to it, don't we?

When James says here that the man forgets, it doesn't necessarily mean that intellectually he couldn't remember what he saw. It means he didn't act upon it. For those of you who are in church this morning, Paul reminded us that that word remember in the Bible is never just about intellectually recalling a hand.

It's like remembering a birthday, isn't it? My daughter turns seven on Tuesday when she says to me, Zoe, Daddy, have you remembered my birthday? She doesn't want me to go, yes, it's the 11th, it's the 10th of November, I need you to date, but 10th of November.

She wants to know there's going to be a present for her when she gets up. And so it is. Scripture tells us to remember. It isn't just mentally recalling things.

When this man forgets, not that he absentmindedly didn't have a clue what he looked like. He didn't act on what he'd seen. He acted on the fact he knew. We can be like that with God's word, can't we?

[15 : 48] And we can make very sophisticated excuses for it, too. We say, well, I'm saved by grace, I'm not under law anymore, so it's okay, I'm forgiven. In fact, somebody accused James of preaching legalism here.

Martin Luther, the great reformer, had a bit of a problem with the book of James for this reason. He called it a right-strawy epistle. It seemed to be going against the gospel of grace, justification by faith.

But let me ask us a couple of questions. If we're arguing with God's word, then are we receiving it meekly? Of course, we're not, are we?

Let me ask another question. If God has implanted his word into us, so we want to obey, so we're ready to obey, because that is the Spirit's work in our heart, then how can we possibly say no?

If we say no, isn't it evidence that the word has not been received into our hearts at all? See, this is, the danger here is we're deceived, isn't it?

[16 : 55] Do you notice how James uses that word twice? Verse 22, be doers of the word, nor hearers only, deceiving yourselves. Then down again in verse 26, talks about someone deceiving their own heart.

It can so easily be deceived. That's why James says we need to respond. We need to respond. We need to be doers and not just hearers. But in case you're worried, that makes you a slave again to the law.

Look at how, look at how James describes God's word, verse 25. The one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets, but no doer who asks,

will be blessed in all his doing.

It's a law of liberty, James says. Now, naturally in our culture we hate the idea of law, don't we? We hate laws, we hate authority over us. That's the spirit of our age. James says, this is a law that is good.

It brings liberty. There's actually a subtle change in James' language here. So far, he's been talking about the word of God, verse 18, verse 21, verses 22 and 23.

[17 : 59] But now he refers to God's law because he wants us to catch the authority that God's law has, God's word has. And he describes it as a perfect law. Perfect because it reflects God's character.

Perfect because it's been fulfilled perfectly in the Lord Jesus Christ. Perfect because through Christ those of us who believe in him now have his spirit in us, so this law becomes something we can keep, not something that makes us slaves.

And therefore, he describes it as a law of liberty, meaning the law that brings liberty and freedom, not a law that constrains and enslaves. Now, if we went out tonight and asked people, what does freedom mean for you?

What does freedom mean for us? What do you think would be the response most people would give? I think most people would say that freedom is about being able to do whatever I want to do. And yet we only need to reflect on that for a minute, see that's nonsense, isn't it?

You know what it's like when you get to a big roundabout, like some of these ones on the A40, you're not far from here. And if someone thinks, I'm just going to do what I want to do, and sneaks through the lights and sits on the yellow box junction, what happens to that roundabout?

[19 : 08] You could be queuing for hours, can't you? You're trying to get over it, because everyone starts doing it, everyone blocks it, you can't get anywhere. It's because everybody's doing what they want to do. We see that generally in life, don't we?

As we pursue our own agendas, we hurt other people, block other people, thwart other people, and end up ruining ourselves as well.

Freedom is not being free to do whatever we want, is it? True freedom is freedom from selfishness. Johnny Depp, the actor, when he talked about when his first child was born, he told the interviewer, when I was holding my first child, I felt it was a truly liberating moment.

I felt free for the first time. They define that as being, as my first selfless thought ever. My first selfless thought.

There, Johnny Depp in that moment got the idea of what freedom is. Freedom is being free from our selfishness, free from being turned in on ourselves. This is what God's law written on our hearts does for us.

[20 : 14] It sets us free. It's the perfect law, the law of liberty, the law that brings liberty. So you want to know what liberty looks like? You want to know what true freedom is, James says?

It's not pursuing your own agenda. Rather, it's responding to God's word, responding to God's commands. So there's an obvious question for me and for you, isn't there?

Are we dearers of God's word or hearers only? I have to ask myself, what's changed in my life in the last six months given what God's word has said to me? What's changed in your life?

Has God been speaking to you about relationships with certain people? Has God's word altered the way you think about money? How you use it?

How you think about it? How have you responded to God's word in terms of your ambitions? Your priorities? Has God's word done anything to your attitude to work?

[21 : 14] To your work or other peoples? It's hard to change, isn't it? But then God is writing his law in our hearts. So it might be hard, but it is possible. But do you notice the word James uses here in verse 25?

The one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres. We've got a fine example of perseverance tonight, haven't we? Stephen Pan persevering for 41 years, six months and seven days, or whatever it was, in London City Mission.

That's perseverance, isn't it? We need to persevere in God's word as he writes it on our heart that he would change us, make us more like Jesus. And then his obedience is possible because God is writing his law in our hearts.

It's also desirable. See what James says there at the end of the verse? He will be blessed in his doing. Not blessed in his hearing only, but in his doing.

Everyone looks for blessing, don't they? Everyone wants to be blessed, everyone wants to feel loved, respected, significant. Some people look for that in their careers, some people look for it in their families, some people look for it in their possessions.

[22 : 23] James says, this is where true blessing is. Being approved and loved and accepted by God and enjoying walking in his ways, that's true blessing. We're blessed not in our hearing, but in our doing.

Receive with meekness, respond with action. And the third word, submit. Look down to verses 26 and 27. This is how we need to avoid arouse and catastrophe in the church, but also spiritual shipwreck in our own lives personally.

Submit to someone else's evaluation. The company I used to work for many years ago, they had an employee welfare scheme where every two years they'd send you for a medical. And I remember going to my first employment medical thinking, this is a bit of a waste of time, isn't it?

And yes, inevitably the nurse told me I should be eating less fatty food and doing more exercise and less sugar and all this kind of stuff. And then she got the blood test results and said, oh, by the way, you need to go and see your GP.

There's something not right about your kidney function. I feel fine. Okay, I'd better go to your GP.

So I did, and as many of you will know, what was it? About 15 years later, I had a kidney transplant.

[23 : 36] It's a good job I went to that original employment medical. It showed up a problem in the early stages, but it showed it up. I had to submit to somebody else's evaluation.

And James says you need to submit to God's evaluation, not your own. Look at the contrast between verse 26 and verse 27. Verse 26, if anyone thinks he is religious and does not bribe his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

we can deceive ourselves into thinking we're doing all the right things and our religion be worthless.

James rapidly takes us through three areas where we need to submit to God's evaluation.

Now actually in the next three chapters of the book he unpacks these first. We'll only look at them very briefly. The first area is speech, verse 26. Do you think you're religious? Yet what are you actually saying?

What words are you using? How are you speaking to other people? What do you say when that guy calls you up on the road? What do you say when your children are cheating?

[24 : 40] What do you say whatever the situation is for you? Now why does James focus on speech? Doesn't it go back to what Jesus said?

It's out of the overflow of our hearts that the mouth speaks. Do you want to know what's really going on our hearts? Yeah, take yourself for the day. James points to our speech.

And secondly he points to how we relate to what we do with the need. Look at verse 27. Religion that is pure and under far before God the Father is this. To have great theology no, that's not what he says, is it?

Is this. To listen to all the servants no, it's not that either. To visit orphans and widows and their affliction and to keep oneself unstained from the world. Now to visit orphans and widows and their affliction orphans and widows are two great categories of needy people in the Old Testament and the Roman world of James' day.

So really it's saying how you respond to those in need around you. And when he says visit doesn't this mean pop your head round the door and say hi to them. A visit is a word in the Old Testament loaded with meaning.

[25 : 50] God visited the people in Egypt as he came to rescue them from slavery. Exodus chapter 4 verse 31. It's the word Zechariah uses in Luke chapter 1 as he looks forward to the birth of the Lord Jesus.

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for he has visited and redeemed his people. For God to visit like God remembering means God taking action. So the kind of religion that appeals to God that pleases God is to take action for those in need.

Widows and orphans refugees and immigrants. people in the church family primarily to then beyond that especially in the global church family.

That's what God approves of because that's what God is like. We don't do this so God will love us but because God has loved us and visited us in our need in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So the first two tests how do we control our tongues? Secondly how do we help the needy especially the needy among God's people? And the third little test there. Little test. Verse 27 at the

end.

[27 : 01] And to keep oneself unstained from the world. The world constantly pursues its own agenda around us doesn't it? It's the mark of the world going its own way leaving God out of the picture.

We can so easily be sullied by that. Our attitudes and our desires are so easily influenced by them. As we read on through this letter we'll see how James' audience were influenced.

James talks about their selfish ambition their boasting their covering up their sin chapter 3 verse 14 their coveting fighting and quarreling chapter 4 verse 1. See don't deceive yourself James says.

Don't deceive yourself. Check your attitudes. Are you being affected stained by the world around? See for those of us who profess faith in Christ we need to receive that word implanted into us.

We need to respond to that word. And we need to submit ourselves to God's evaluation. And not deceive ourselves in thinking we're in a good church we're in a good place we must be alright.

[28 : 06] Now for those of us who are not yet followers of Jesus this is an important message for us too. For you too. I've heard people say if there is a God out there and if there is a judgement I'm sure I'll be alright because I'm a nice person.

I'm hinting to my neighbours I try and tell the truth I'm pretty honest I'm not a bad person. I do my best. How often do you think that?

I do my best. But is that what God wants? Look at these tests here. How do we control our tongues? How do you deal with the needy people around you?

Are you unstained by the world? The truth is none of us are actually like that. God wants something bigger and better for us. Here's a look back to verse 18 for a second. Of his own will of God's own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be kind of first fruits of his creatures.

See God's will ultimately is to make us new. To make us into the people he originally intended us to be before we rebelled against him as a race and went our own way and pursued our own agenda.

[29 : 14] The only way to have that is not through our own effort we cannot change our own hearts but through receiving amidst this implanted word.

This message of the Lord Jesus Christ. This message of the one whose speech was perfect. Who Peter says of him 1 Peter 2 verse 22 he committed no sin neither was deceit found in his mouth.

This Lord Jesus his tongue was always under control. Did he help the poor and needy? Oh he certainly did. He gave his life to rescue us from the deep need to escape God's judgment.

Was he unstained by the world? Oh he certainly was. He was a lamb without blemish. He committed no sin and no deceit was found in his mouth. It's only to accept the message of the Lord Jesus with meekness.

Coming to him seeking the forgiveness only available through the one who died on the cross for us. Only through accepting him as our Lord and Savior do we have that word implanted in us written on our hearts to change us and make us new people.

[30 : 21] That is the offer that is here for us tonight. Not merely be hearers of the word but doers also. Now they mean for some who have never come to Christ for forgiveness before.

There's a chance for you to do that tonight. Receive the word implanted. Respond to his word. Submit to his evaluation. Let us not deceive ourselves but come to him for salvation and forgiveness.

let's pray. ready. CONGRATIST CONGRATIST CONGRATIST CONGRATIST CONGRATIST
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