

How to Break the Cycle of Sin

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[0 : 0 0] Our scripture this morning is James chapter 1 verses 18 through 25. It should be printed in your bulletin, but also we will have that on the screen.

James chapter 1 verses 18 through 25. 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 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. 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. This is the word of the Lord.

All right, let's pray. Lord, we know that without the help of the Holy Spirit, we cannot be right readers. We cannot hear your word as you intend. We can't receive it properly. And so we ask today, no matter where we are in our lives, that you would open our hearts to hear the word of truth.

We pray that in Jesus' name. Amen. And so we are in week three of looking at the epistle of James, and in week one we talked about what the nature of a disciple is. So a disciple is a person who follows Jesus and then longs to become like Jesus, more and more Christ-like, and then will go where he tells you to go, do what he tells you to do. And along that path of being a disciple, we learn that we're not exempt. James tells us we're not exempt from suffering. So suffering meets us on ordinary roads, and Christian or not, we will meet suffering. But for the disciple, you can do this cognitive reframe where you count it all joy. You put suffering in the ledger of joy, not because it feels good, but because God says that he can use it to change you, to grow you. Grace grows best in winter. And then in week two, we looked at really the anatomy of sin, so what's going on underneath in the bottom of our hearts. And James says in 13 to 15 that we've got this great problem that he points out is the epithumia, deep desires, epic desires underneath, really underneath at the lowest layer of the soul.

And it's that we want power, comfort, security, and approval more than we want God in our lives. And so we have these deep desires, and they see opportunity called temptation, and they grasp hold, and it gives birth to sin and death in our lives. And so we're in that cycle, constant cycle we're trapped in. Now today, today we learn in verse 18 especially, God, how do you break through that cycle?

[3 : 2 8] And we learn that God breaks the cycle of sin in our lives. He cancels sin. And then the question becomes, if that's true, if you're a follower of Jesus and that's happened for you, you might ask, I ask, why have I not grown more since then? So if it's God who breaks that power in my life, why am I not changed further than I feel like I have been? I've been struggling with the same things decade after decade. And He breaks the power of sin, and then we have the power of canceled sin still reverberating in our lives. What do we do about it? How does He work in us? That's what this passage is about. So how really change occurs in us. So let's look first at verse 18, the turning point.

And then after that, 19 to 25, we'll see three ways to break the cycle of sin in your life. So first, verse 18 is the turning point. Now, what's the turning point? He says in verse 18, of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth. What's the turning point? The answer is, it's the new birth. And you won't see it exactly on the surface of the text at first, but if you look back, if you think back to last week, verse 14, He says that the human heart, we give birth to sin and death. And He uses a birth metaphor. And then here in verse 18, then He says, it says that of God's will He brought us forth. And that word brought us forth is translated in other places even in the Bible as childbirth. It could also be translated as He puts a seed into your soul that then sprouts from the garden, a new plant. He's talking there about being born again, about the new birth. How do you break the cycle of sin? It says, of His own will. It's God's initiative to enter into people's lives and to break the cycle of sin by giving them a new birth. And so this is exactly, remember James' teaching, Jesus' teaching. And so John chapter 3, Jesus says to Nicodemus, you must be born again.

Exactly what He's talking about here. Or in 1 Peter 1, Peter says, by God's will we are born again. Same language, same idea here in the word He brought us forth. And that means that it's, how do we deal with verses 13 to 15, that cycle of deep idolatrous desire that's always producing sin in our lives?

Well, the first thing is God has to enter your life and He has to break you. He has to give you a new heart. He has, you have to be born again from the inside out. He has to come, you need help from, you need help from the outside. And He tells us how He does that. He says, by the word of truth.

And so there, the word of truth is the, what is it? It's the gospel being spoken. And it's the Bible for us, where the gospel is kept and held for all ages for us to hear. And He's, look, He's saying something incredibly profound that we might take as so commonplace that we forget how significant it is.

[6 : 35] But He's saying that the Bible, the word of truth is not mere information. It is what the Holy Spirit actually takes, puts into your soul, and then uses to create entirely new life in you.

He has an amazingly high view of the power of the word, the word of truth, when the Holy Spirit is wielding it. Now, a couple things to say about that. One, sometimes there's a narrative, there is a narrative, I think, in contemporary culture, 20th and 21st century culture, that says, you know, there are born-again Christians, and then there are other types of Christians. There's normal Christians, and then there's born-again Christians. And the born-again Christians are the extreme ones that you got to watch out for. But He's teaching the new birth here. And in every book of the New Testament, the new birth is the beginning of the Christian life. There's no such thing as a born-again Christian and a different type of Christian. There's just born-again Christians, or not Christian at all. God has to come into your life from the outside and give you a new heart and reshape your identity by the word. But then I just want to point out again how big of a view James has for the power of the word in a way that in our humdrum life, day after day, we forget, we don't remember. That's why we come to church to be reminded of how big His view of the word is. And He says, you can look for the, look, you can say today, am I born again? Well, one of the evidences of that is in that word, He says, of you become a first fruit. That's in verse 18. You're born again by the word of truth, and then God makes you into a first fruit. That's language from the Old Testament, where the first fruit, the first fruit was the very first crop at the harvest time. And the first fruit, the first crop was dedicated to

God, given to God. And so what is it saying? It's saying you know that you've got the new birth in your life. When? When you say, I am now dedicated to God. My life is not my own anymore. And I know that even though I'm struggling with the cycle of sin in my life, I want my desires to be given over to Him.

I want my behaviors to be given over to Him. That's an evidence that you say, I am not my own. I've been bought with a price. I'm a first fruit of God. So He enters our life, and He breaks that power, and we realize that our life is not our own anymore. Now, the rest of the sermon, verse 19 to 25.

In verse 19 to 25, the question then becomes, okay, if you're a disciple of Jesus today, you've experienced new birth, and you say, but why haven't I changed more? If I've been given a new heart by the Word of Truth, and a new seed has been planted, and it is growing, and the promise here is that it will grow, why am I still battling the same sins? Why have I not grown further than I'd like to? And I think one of the ways you can think about it is through the lens of addiction.

[9 : 41] 13 to 15 really is talking about the addiction we have to idols, the addiction we have to sins. But, you know, if you are an addict, or if you've walked alongside those struggling with addictions of various kinds, what happens? First, there's a trigger. There's a trigger of some kind that draws you in towards the thing that you crave, and then the craving grows, and then you reach out, and there's use. You use a substance and abuse it, and then you feel shame. And then you say, I don't want this anymore. I need help. But then the trigger happens, and the craving reoccurs, and it's a constant cycle of oftentimes of relapse. And in the same way, you need help from the outside. You need that addiction broken. Verse 18 says, God comes in and gives you, He breaks the power of sin. He does. He cancels the debt of sin. But then you know that as addicts to idols, we relapse. It takes years and years for us to grow out of that addiction into freedom. Another way to say it is this. Martin Lloyd-Jones, the great preacher of London, he talked once about, if you think about the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 in the United States. It's the 250th year of the U.S., and so I've been re-watching the Civil War documentary, Ken Burns, so good. And in 1863, Abraham Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation.

And on that day, he announces legally that all the black slaves in America are freed. But you can imagine, if you were a black man in the southern U.S. in my home state of Mississippi, that the day after the Emancipation Proclamation, and you walk into town in that Mississippi Delta community, do you feel free? You know, today you legally are free. God has broken the power and canceled the debt, but he walks into town that day, and because of things outside of him, threats on the outside, but because of patterns and habits inside of him, he doesn't feel free.

What does he have to do? He has to take years to learn freedom. And in the same way, that's what's going on in the Christian life. And so, 19 to 25, how do you break the cycle? Number one, in verses 19 to 21, he tells us, first, that we've got to put things away. We've got to take things off. We've got to... another way to say that positively is he's telling us to cultivate new habits. So, the main idea in this little section is what we do every day really does change who we are.

What we choose to do day in and day out in the little moments really matters so much for who we're becoming. So, the more we're choosing to sin and reenter that cycle of addiction to idols, the more we're growing in vices, even as believers, yes. And the more that we're putting off those vices, those cycles of addiction to idolatry, the more we're becoming like Christ. And so, what we do every day really does matter. One percent difference every day in the way we choose to be like Jesus matters so much in the long run for who we've become in life. And, you know, our culture knows this.

It's a \$10 billion industry, something like that, of the habit industry. James Clear, his famous book, Atomic Habits, is still, I think, flying off the shelves everywhere. And James Clear's thesis is pretty simple. It's that when you choose new habits in your life, small ones, they compound over time. And then eventually, you actually want the things that you're trying to learn to want.

[13 : 27] But it takes a long time. It's small, compounding habits. Now, there's a better James, the epistle, this James. And the Bible said that, has been saying that for centuries. But what the Bible does, what the gospel does, unlike what atomic habits can do, is the real truth is that you've got to have a new heart as the basis of that practice. And once you get the new birth, then James is telling you now, now it's time to take things off first. And what does he say to take off here in the passage? He says, take away this. It doesn't sound like that at first, but he says, be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. In verse 19. Now, that's a take something away command. How so? Because he's saying when the gospel gets a hold of your heart, and when you experience the new birth, being quick to hear, slow to speak, means you're becoming a person who can say, I know that there is no longer a primacy to my opinions. So, it's taking away pride and the need to actually assert an opinion, and instead being slow to speak, quick to listen. Why? Because the gospel is doing that work in your life that says, I know I'm not my own anymore. I know that I have to be reshaped by something outside of me more. So, I've said this the past couple weeks, but when you're reading through James, it feels like he's getting to a new topic every paragraph, but he's not right here. Instead, when he says, quick to listen, slow to speak, what's he talking about? Quick to listen to what?

And in the previous verse, he said, you're being changed by the word of truth. What's he talking about? He's not just generically saying, stop talking so much in conversation. That is an application.

But what's he talking about? He's saying, be quick to listen to the word and slow to speak. So, in other words, when you become a believer, what do you put away? You put away your own opinions.

You put away your need to assert yourself, and you say, I want to be more shaped by listening to the Bible than by anything else in my life. And you know that, you know, there are things you come to the Bible at times, and you say, boy, I don't know what to do with this. I struggle with some of the things that I'm learning about here in the Bible. And that's when he comes and says, but take on the humility that says, slow to assert my opinion, quick to receive the word, quick to receive what God let me be shaped more by that than by anything else. And then he says, therefore, you can become slow to anger. And really, that's just an application of that practice, because the more we're being shaped by the word, typically what happens is our anger tends to be quelled. It goes down. The word that he uses here for anger is a very particular word, not always the most common for anger in Greek, but it's a word that has this kind of metaphor built into it of fruit growing and growing and growing and not being picked to where it's so ready to be plucked that the juices are bursting out the sides. It's the same.

That's a nice thing to think about, but this isn't actually a nice image. The better way to say it may be that the word he uses for anger is like a balloon being overinflated, and the tiniest little touch is going to pop it. He's saying, you know, you're becoming a doer of the word when you're far less reactive and far more responsive. So reactivity means that when that person says something that sounds to me so idiotic, I can't wait to tell them what they should be thinking.

[17 : 08] That's reactivity. That's anger swelling. But every time when you're being shaped by the word and saying, I know that my pride is quick to react, and instead I want to become a wise, responsive person shaped by God's word, then you're not about to be poked and blow up. Instead, you're slow. It doesn't look, it doesn't say never angry, right? It says slow to anger. So there are right and good times to be angry. Jesus was. But the difference in a person shaped by the word is that you're slow to anger, knowing exactly what to get angry at in the right ways. He says, you know, the anger of humanity when we burst never produces the righteousness of God. That means never produces the justice of God in a situation. You're not bringing about justice in reactivity. Now, all he's doing here is saying, these are evidences of new birth in your life. This is what it means to be putting on the word and taking things off. And so you can see how he really says that at the end of this section.

He says down in verse 21, therefore put away, there it is, put off. Now it's just everything, all your sins, filthiness, rampant wickedness, and instead receive with humility, meekness, the implanted word. So he's saying receive the word constantly with humility so that you can be focusing on putting off the constant cycles of sin in your life, whether they be sins of speech or sins of anger or anything else. The word put away, take something off there, is a word for taking off muddy clothing. A couple years ago, my sister and brother-in-law were here, and I'm not sure if I convinced him or he convinced me, but I'll say he convinced me to, in the middle of winter, late December, just before Christmas, to go on a long run. And I'm not a runner. And he wanted to cap it off by hiking Arthur's seat at the end. And it was a, it was a bad decision. And we went out, we ran farther than I'm able to run. And it started raining very shortly in, and it was late December. And it was the only time in my life I've ever been genuinely, I mean genuinely concerned about frostbite.

And we, the whole, the whole way we knew we should quit. This is not intelligent. And we looked at each other and not, neither of us would, you know, because of pride. And we did, we did it. And when we got back, I'll never forget, it's, I've never felt so ready to take off, to take off, right? When you come from a run and your shoes got wet and they're, the squish is happening every time you push and you're soaked and you're muddy, you cannot get that off fast enough to try to get something warm back onto your body, right? That's what's being used here. You know that you're walking in a place of the new birth is working, and you're, the seed, the word implanted is growing when you are really desiring to strip off rampant sin, cycles of sin in your life. Now, the second way to break the cycle of sin of three is, then he says, not only take things off, but then put on, all right? So, the Bible never, never, never, the gospel never leaves you by just saying, stop it. And so, you could stop right there and think

I'm saying, stop it. Be better. But the Bible never does that. It does say, work on taking off the cycle of sin in your life, but then it says, how? By receiving the implanted word. So, then it says, receive the implanted word so that you can be a doer of that word, not simply a hearer. And what is he telling us that? He's saying you don't just need mortification, to put it in theological terms, you need nourishment. Mortification, taking off is not enough. You're never actually going to take off unless you put in. You need nourishment to actually work on that. And so, there's a chorus line throughout this passage. Verse 18, you're born again by the word of truth. Just notice how often the word shows up here. Born again by the word of truth. Verse 21, receive the implanted word. And then verse 22, be a doer of the word. So, the real line throughout the whole is the word, the word, the word.

The word has the power to change you. The word has the power to break the cycle of sin. I can't reiterate it enough how big of a view James has for what the Bible can do in your life.

[21 : 42] The first question is, are you receiving the word regularly? You come on Sundays and receive the word, and then the calling invitation is throughout the week, receive the implanted word. Why does he say it like that? Because he's saying the word has already been implanted by the Spirit. You've been given a new heart through the word, through the gospel, but you've got to also receive the implanted word over and over and over again to receive the cycle of change in your life. Now, here's another way to say that. What he's saying to us is the gospel that saves you, that gives you new birth, is the same gospel that changes you. So, what is the word of truth here? He's really talking about the gospel, and he's saying you never graduate from the gospel.

The gospel that gives you new birth is the gospel that changes you throughout your life. He's calling on us to preach the gospel to ourselves every single day, to re-receive the implanted word over and over and over again. And he's talking about the Bible, yes, but you know that in Luke 24, Jesus sits down with the disciples, and he says to them that the Torah, the five books of Moses, the writings, all the psalms and the wisdom literature, and the prophets, he says, are all about him. And then we know that the rest of the New Testament is all about him. And so, the Old Testament is the gospel concealed. The New Testament is the gospel revealed. The whole Bible is gospel. And so, he's saying, actually, re-receive the Bible every day by re-receiving the gospel every single day over and over and over again. That's how you become a doer of the word. So, willpower is not the point. No, not willpower, but receiving nourishment and being changed. Being changed by the gospel every single day is the point of becoming a doer, not just a hearer, but somebody who does the word. It means you're training your heart to live out of new habits, to live out of gospel proclamation every day. Let me give you an example to make that more clear. It requires taking the word every day, preaching the gospel to yourself, and using the gospel to specifically address the sin issues in your life. So, let me do that with anger. What's the difference in... He doesn't say, become a doer of the rules. He says, become a doer of the word.

Don't just let the rules abide in your heart. Let the gospel abide in your heart. That's what he means. What's the difference? Take anger. Moralism says... If you struggle with anger, what does moralism say?

Moralism says, be nicer. Count to ten. Count backwards from a hundred when that person's saying that thing to you again, right? Try harder. The gospel... What does the gospel say when you have the habit of the gospel in your heart shaping you? The gospel says something like, God was angry at my sin, but He poured out His anger upon Jesus Christ for me.

God was angry at my sin, but He was so patient with me by destroying His Son in my place. And you say, so today, I want to put away my anger. Today, I want to put away my impatience and trade it for it. See, that's living out of the gospel, not out of the rules. Living out of the gospel, not out of moralism. That's what it means to become a doer of the word. That's what he's talking about here. Lastly, break the cycle. Then he says... Now, he gets more specific here at the very end as we finish, and he says, breaking the cycle means seeing the law of liberty, looking at the law of liberty. Now, again, it sounds like we're talking about something different, but we're not here.

[25 : 23] He ends this section by giving us a warning, and the warning is through this metaphor. He says, don't be deceived. A person who is not becoming a doer of the word is like a man who looks in a mirror, gazes at his face very intently, walks away, and forgets what he looks like. Now, if you're a first century person, Greco-Roman person, that's pretty easy to do because most people never looked at a mirror in the first century. So, if you're poor, you don't have a mirror. You look at a lake to see what you look like, and of course, if the lake is moving at all, you can't see what you look... So, most people didn't know what they looked like. And if you did have the money to see a mirror, they were not good mirrors like we have. They were, you know, full of flaws and things. You couldn't really see. You had to look through scratches and all sorts of problems. So, it's far easier for a first century person to get this than us. It'd be very difficult for you to forget what you look like today. There's mirrors everywhere. What is he talking about, though? He's talking about here a metaphor, illustration for two ways to receive the word, okay? So, stick with this idea for a moment because it has depths to it, but it's freeing.

There's one way to receive the word, to come back to the word day in and day out, and it's like a man looking at a mirror, walking away, forgetting what he looks like. And what is that way of coming to the word? It works like this. You come to the word, and you read the Sermon on the Mount, and it says, be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. And it says, if you look at a woman with lust or a man with lust, you've already committed adultery in your heart. Or if you get angry at the wrong person unjustly, in the wrong way, you've committed murder in your heart. Or if you looked at your neighbor and you said, I wish I had their life, I wish I had their stuff, you've committed envy, covetousness in your heart. That's the first way you come to the word. You look at it, and you say, oh, wow, this is a mirror, and it's showing me my ugliness. I read about lust, adultery. I read about murder. I read about being perfect, and I say, I see, like the picture of Dorian Gray. I see my ugliness. The word becomes a mirror that shows us the depths of our sin, and we see our natural face, who we really are. The man looks in the mirror, and he sees conviction. That's what it's talking about, conviction of sin. You may come here week by week and say, at the end of the sermon, maybe every once in a while, I do actually feel conviction of sin. I do actually feel that I've got an idol of approval or comfort or security that I love far more than God. And then you walk away, and 15 minutes after tea and coffee, what happens?

You forget what you looked like. You forget that you need to change. You forget the conviction of sin that you had in your life. It's not there anymore, and you just live day in and day out and never focus on actually mortifying the sins in your life. That's the man who, the natural man who sees his face in the mirror, walks away, forgets the conviction of sin that the word brought to him.

So he says, therefore, you've got to come back to the word again and see it in a second way. And that second way is what he calls the law of liberty in this passage. And what is that way?

It's that when you come to the passage, you come to the Bible over and over again a second time. You could do it like this. You look at the Sermon on the Mount again, and it says, you must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. And what do you do? Now it's not just conviction. What do you say? He was perfect for me. You come back to the command about lust, and you say, I'm convicted of that. But then you look through the text, not just as a mirror, but as a window. And you see him, and you say, he came and obeyed every law on my behalf and still was crushed for me. You see, when you come back a second time to look for the law of liberty, it means that you're coming to see that no longer is the word just conviction. It's also a window to see that Jesus Christ obeyed the law at every point for me and was still crushed by it on my behalf. Therefore, now when I come to the law, it's no longer condemning. It's now liberty. You see, but because he took every bit of it for me and obeyed every bit of it for me, now the law of the Bible, the Sermon on the

[29 : 46] Mount, the rules of James that he's telling me, it's not condemnation. It now is a place of liberty for me. In other words, he's saying, when you see that the word is a window to the Christ who died and rose again for you, you can look at the advice, take off your sins, be perfect, and you can say, that doesn't crush me anymore. It frees me. It unleashes me. It means that because I don't owe debt to God anymore, Jesus paid my debt. Now the law is just there to change my life and grow me, make me more and more human, you know, more and more like Jesus, more and more like who I was made to be. It becomes the law of liberty, you see. Now that's, I'll finish with this word, that is totally countercultural to our moment where freedom, liberty, law, our moment, the 21st century, never wants to put law together with liberty, with freedom. No, law constrains, law hinders you in. Freedom instead in the 21st century is the maximization of choice. It's that you want to be able to do what you want as much as you want with no constraints. But the Bible and every other wisdom that's ever been comes and says, no, no, no, true freedom is what? It's the law that sets you. It's to know that you're bounded, you're becoming who you're supposed to be. The new birth sets you free, breaking the cycle of sin over and over, looking at the Bible and saying, I'm no longer condemned, I'm free to obey, creates a new person that truly is free. Imagine a fish, and you go to that fish and you say, fish, that's how I talk to fish, fish. The fish, the culture has shown me that anybody can be anything they want to be, and I want you to experience real freedom. And you take that fish and you take it out of the water and you say, there's, everybody in your life has been telling you you're constrained by your culture.

You know, you're constrained by the rules around you, and you take that fish and you say, I'm going to set you free. You take it out of the water, you put it on the land. And is that fish free? No, that fish has been imprisoned by death. And in the same way, we are imprisoned by maximization of choice. We are imprisoned by the proliferation of choice when we have idols in our heart, but when we see Christ, the true law of liberty, we're set free. No longer any condemnation. Now we can obey, we can grow, we can become like Him. We can do it on the ground of justification. That's the freedom of being a disciple. Let us pray. Father, we ask that You would set us free today. We need freedom from our idols, our sins. We need new birth, and we need the third use of the law. We need to see that the Sermon on the Mount has now become for us no longer condemnation, but victory and freedom and a way to grow into joy forevermore. So, teach us that as we sing. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.