

Listening and Doing

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[0 : 00] Okay, if you have a Bible with you, we're going to look at James chapter 1, the second half of James chapter 1. A couple of weeks ago we looked at the first 18 verses and tonight we're going to look at the second section from verse 19 to the end of the chapter. So it's James chapter 1 and this will be the basis of our study next week.

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 that God requires. 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 the mirror, who looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he looks like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty and persevere, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. If anyone thinks he is a religious, he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart. This person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in the reflection and to keep oneself unstained from the world. Okay, so it's a great passage, far too much in this passage for just 15 or 20 minutes. But as you know, James is our theme for the year, or encapsulates our theme for the year which is doers of the word but and not hearers only, to suffer well, serve well and speak well. And we're going to look again at this little section. We looked at the whole chapter a couple of weeks ago in church and then we've returned to the first chapter to look at in a little bit more detail as part of our city group studies. So you're going over familiar ground, it's well worth going over. So the theme for this passage, this section, I've taken as being responsive

Christians, okay, being responsive Christians. And that's really very much interwoven into these few verses. See, in Jesus Christ as believers, we're believers here tonight. As believers we're new creations, okay, and we've been new creations ever since we became Christians. That means that not only from the moment we believed, but in an ongoing way, our lives should be different to our lives without Jesus Christ, because our whole identity, our character, our mindset has changed because we're indwelt by the Spirit and we are right with God. Now, you know what, you know when someone is unconscious, if someone's found in the street and they're unconscious, they're often referred to as being unresponsive, you know, you try and shake them and move them or shout at them, but they're unresponsive.

A dead body is also unresponsive. And sometimes if someone's not listening, this is slightly less serious, but if someone's not listening, you sometimes hear the phrase used of them that the lights are on but no one's at home. Slightly derogatory term, or phrase. But that's what I want to challenge us about tonight for ourselves as Christians, one that we're not unresponsive in a sense that we're unconscious Christians, or that we're Christians who are at home but the lights are on but no one's in the house. So there's nothing really happening spiritually. And that's really what James is stirring up in these verses. And I want to look at responsive Christians, the challenge of that, by asking how do we listen in our lives, particularly to Christ, but also within the Christian, or within our community, even

Christian and non Christian actually, because because we're new creations, we learn to communicate in a different way all the time. And so really tonight is focusing on being responsive Christians, but narrowing it down to being responsive listeners and what that means, how we listen in our lives, because how we listen reflects our heart, what comes out from our heart.

[5 : 09] And it reflects how much we grasp the gospel and the change the gospel brings, and actually it reflects how much we understand about the law, the law of God, which is to love God and to love one another. So how do we listen then? And I'm going to look at two areas.

How do we listen to Christ in your heart? How do you how do we listen to Christ in our hearts? And then how do we listen as a Christian in the community? So first, how do we listen to Christ in our hearts? Because faith that we have is a relationship, we all know that's a relationship. And we're not to just be doers of the word, so hearers of the word, but we're to do what it says. And that's obviously the kind of core of this section. And that's simple, isn't it? Don't just listen, but be doers. But it's deeply profound as well.

And we need great wisdom to put that into practice. So how do we listen to Christ in our hearts? This section, it deals with two areas that cover that. It talks about particularly verses 23, 22 to 25. It talks about listening and looking. So listening and looking are two fundamental human, basic human behaviors. You're all doing it tonight. We're all doing it. We're all listening, or maybe not, or maybe we are, maybe we're not. But we're all listening and we're all looking. We do it all the time. It's just, it's part of absolutely everything we are. And so James wants to apply being new creations, belonging to Christ, being doers of the word, to our listening and our looking. Particularly with regard to Christ and His word, applies to Christ and His word. He says, and we remind ourselves, but be doers of the word and not hearers only. And then it goes on to say, be a doer. He is like a man who looks intently as an actual face in the mirror. So there's listening and there's doing here. And that's both are very important. And our listening must be absolutely intentional.

As our looking must be as well. Listening and looking, they come together in this section.

That means we need to listen to God's word and look at God's word and look at Christ and listen to Christ very intentionally. In verse 25 it says, we are to be the people who, the one who looks into the perfect law, looks into the perfect law and the law of liberty and perseveres in that. And there he's talking about being intentional about what we do. The words there mean that we come close and we remain. It means that we look into the word of Christ and we persevere in that. It's not a passing glance that we give to Christ and his word. It's something that's intentionally concentrated. We reflect on it. It becomes part of our way of life. It's not the two minute fix that we so often apply to a reading of scripture. If it's important to us, we make and find the time to be intentionally looking and listening to the word of God and doing so by coming close to it and remaining in it. It's about, it's lingering. It's intentionally lingering in the company of Christ and his word. And we do so also. We listen and look not only intentionally but in such a way that understands ourselves. Verse 24 says for the man, the person who looks at himself and goes away at once forgets what he's like. And there's a real sense here that as men and as women in our lives, we examine ourselves in the light of scripture. And we know who we are as people because it talks about looking in a mirror. We know what our strengths are and our weaknesses, our temptations. We know how to apply scripture into our own lives and into our own hearts. It's not about looking at other people and being comparative. This is about self-examination and using the mirror as a scripture into our own soul. It's about self-awareness. It's about looking at ourselves and where our struggles are and comparing them with the character of God in Christ and his word. And therefore being convicted by that because he's holy as well as finding beauty and encouragement and hope. Because when we look in scripture as a mirror, we recognise it's a two-way mirror because we see ourselves but we also see

[10 : 59] Christ. And it's a great diagnostic but it's also a great cure for us and so it's a helpful and useful place to be. And that intentionality and that working and understanding and being self-aware as we come to scripture is so important as we look and listen spiritually to Christ.

That's why the theme I think that we've decided of having a short and address a sermon and then following it up either from a Sunday sermon or just now on a Wednesday night and then having it the following Wednesday night is intentional on our part because it's so easy, isn't it, to listen to the word preached or to read the Bible with the lights on but nobody being at home. Unconscious, letting it just drift over our heads and away from our hearts. The intentionality is to try and encourage us to when we hear the word to meditate, to be intentional, to think about ourselves, what it's saying about us, what God is saying into our lives and what God is wanting us to learn, reflecting on maybe the week that we've had some of the sins we've committed or the character defects we're aware of and knowing that God is speaking into that so that we recognise that as we read the Bible it becomes that living and interactive reality for us.

It's not like reading any other book, it's not like I read the Bible and I read history and I read novels and it's just one of the books I read and it happens to give me wisdom.

This is the living word of God and so James here is encouraging us to be listening and looking to be not just hearers of the word only and that's really what looking into scripture like a mirror is so important as a picture is an illustration. So it's about looking and listening, concentrated but it also involves being reactionary. Verse 21 reminds us of that, that we are to be those who having looking and listening therefore we put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness, we are doers of the word as well as hearers. I've chosen that word reactionary deliberately because as we look at the word and we are empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit to respond to it, to be responsive listeners, to be active. So reactionary is a good word because I want us to think about being rebels against the status quo of our hearts. We're not content with the same heart all the time, we're wanting to be rebels, we're wanting to change our hearts, we're wanting to put off sin in our lives and it's that great picture of putting off dirty clothes, changing the heart clothes that we have, recognizing from our hearts we've got a different identity, dealing in our lives with the kind of things that are not Christlike. So it talks in verse 20 about being angry, it talks about lust and injustice or evil, filthiness and rampant wickedness, powerful words really but any selfishness, lust, injustice, greed, any of the things that separate us from Jesus and from one another and there needs to be that active sense of again in verse 21 recognizing with meekness the implanted word, that word needs to be embedded, implanted in our lives, we need to be involved in that process of of rooting scripture in our lives and that is that's a that's a that's a spiritual, that's a miraculous act, it's not just being content with some kind of accepted decency that everyone else is happy with, we need a huge amount of wisdom, the older I get the deeper I see the need for change in my heart and the motives that need challenged and that needs great wisdom, it needs less comparison with other people and less judgment about how other people are living their lives. So that's the first thing, we listen to Christ in our hearts by active listening and looking and by reactionary response to the word but also this passage speaks not only about our relationship with the word or with Christ and him as the word but also how therefore as doers of the word we are to be listening as Christians in the community because what we are in our hearts will spill out into our life in society and then in the church community for good or for ill so you think about your life and I think about mine in the church and in the community, are we attractive or are we prickly, are we patient or are we demanding

of others, are we servant hearts or are we dictators, it's a huge challenge you know and it's not good enough to just get away with saying ah but that's just what I'm like and that's just like that's my character, Jesus will not accept that, it's not good enough to be short-tempered or to be grumpy and grisly and caring about others, we have to see our hearts and our weaknesses and our failings and our lovelessness not only to Christ but to one another being challenged by the word and so there are two words here and I'll not go on, I'll try not go on here, two words that reflect how we listen and how we respond to God's word and the first is and it comes through this whole section but it's also mentioned in verse 21 is meekness you know therefore put away all phil in Islam and receive with meekness the implanted word, now that meekness it's also spoken of in James chapter 3 and James goes back to quite a lot of themes, he says who is wise and understanding among you by his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom or in the humility of wisdom, so we respond, we listen responsively by being people who are meek with others, now meekness is taken as a weak word and that's how it's been used often today but I've mentioned this quite often with you guys, it's not, it's a strong word, it's about being submissive but also strong, it's about taming the wild impulses of sin and being reliant on God, it's about being gentle but strong and resilient, it's an animal imagery, it's about the breaking of a horse primarily or breaking of a wild animal to make them tamed and useful and in fact that language is actually used in James where he talks about the person who doesn't keep a tight rein on their or a bridle on their tongue and that's exactly what's being spoken of here and therefore we have this new instinct as we responsively listen to Christ in his word that we respond in the community with meekness and that shows itself before we speak we're to think, if anyone thinks he is religious verse 26 it doesn't bridle his tongue, he deceives us that this person's religion is worthless so we've to think before we speak and therefore we're to control our tongues, we're to be careful about not just how we speak but how we communicate on text or social media on our Facebook or whatever, it's so damaging isn't it if we don't control and bridle our tongue so we, before we speak we think about being in control of what we're saying so often what we say is damaging in families and relationships, gossip, judging, mocking, hateful, hurtful, divisive, you know there's plenty of big talkers but meekness is about being controlled, keeping a tight rein in our tongue before we you know get angry it talks about that as well doesn't it earlier in that verse you know we slow to speak quite to listen slow to anger because so often we speak out of anger and it's not meek humble strength is what meekness is and Moses is regarded to be the most meek man who ever lived

[20 : 54] Exodus, a Deuteronomy 13.3 and he wasn't a weakling by any stretch of the imagination so meekness before we speak and meekness as we listen at the beginning again you know be quick to hear slow to speak listening is a really important way of responding to God's word being patient so we're always quick to jump in quick to fire off a response but listening is the greatest gift I think for the Christian in today's society respecting others listening to them giving others time beginning to understand them hearing people's pain by listening to them that's why the world we live in with identity politics is so damaging identity politics it makes judgment about people depending on the group they belong to it doesn't give any credence it doesn't we're not asked to listen we're not asked to care or can't be concerned it doesn't listen it's damaging for the Christian faith when people categorize Christians all in the same way as either homophobic or hateful or judgmental but it can be equally damaging to any other group and identity of people we mustn't fall into that as Christians we listen to people and we begin to hear their hearts we don't make judgments on them based on their class or their gender or their sexuality or their race or their politics or any other stereotype we see people as images broken images of the living

God but made in his image just as we were and sometimes are and that's a hugely significant and important thing for us today and you know I think a lot of Christians a lot of people put pressure on churches to say we want we want the church to be a voice in society we wanted to speak loudly and to defend our position and that's you know that's that's fair enough at some levels but maybe can I ask you to consider first meekness and the church having the ability to listen and to love and bring the gospel into people's lives and hearts as we get to know them individually and that we don't engage in identity politics or what might go along with that so meekness and lastly compassion as a Christian community our active listening involves being meek that also involves being compassionate verse 27 and one of the most amazing verses in the bible religion that is pure and undefiled before god the father is this to visit orphans and widows in the reflection to keep oneself unstained from the world so we've seen that being unstained from the world and in the holiness of putting god's word into practice but here is this great again the word isn't isn't used compassion here but it reflects the the whole characteristic of compassion compassion that comes from a pure heart isn't that interesting a heart that's that is not unstained by the world that means for us as Christians this is a very challenging verse that we are we are most like Jesus Christ we are most pure the most pure religion is the most pure outworking of our christian faith is when we show care and concern towards the marginalized the weak the vulnerable the emotionally broken and the destitute because that's who the widows and the orphans represent were represented in Jesus day in the time of James's writing it represented those who society rejected or who were marginalized who had no one to stand up for them who had no rights themselves and who were enslaved into poverty and rejection why is that so important because it reflects our understanding of where we were spiritually without Jesus we were exactly the same we were lost broken marginalized destitute spiritually without

Christ and that's where any of us might have been ended up in this world without Jesus any of us might have ended up on the street or destitute or emotionally broken or completely vulnerable without Christ's grace without the concern the common grace of God and also the care of other people so i think that verse challenges us i hope it does it certainly challenges me it challenges us as a church community that are educated self-sufficient professional career orientated as a people it challenges us how do we reflect pure religion in this marginalized and to this marginalized and vulnerable and weak elements of our society how do we do that that may be something worth discussing at city groups in more detail that's why i'm so excited by what's happening with sparkle sisters and the beginnings of work in that area not just ticking boxes or handing out charity but rather seeking to bring the love of Christ and the grace of Christ into these lives of people last night i was a online zoom meeting that russel phillips had organized about for internals he's involved in developing work with international internals in edinburgh who for him english is a second language and he was a meeting just finding out from them how they what their experiences were in coming to an english-speaking churches and how difficult it was for foreign nationals coming to scotland to edinburgh and to be integrated into churches and what are some of the struggles but very interestingly when they were asked you know what some of the difficulties were or what some of the things that were good were or what some of the things that they missed were it was very very basic they said things like all we were looking for was for people to speak to us when we came into the building to welcome us to not treat us as aliens or foreigners to invite us into their homes to show us hospitality to just care for us i was struck by how simple and basic their desires were and how much we should do that that's pure religion it's pure religion just caring for those who are marginalized those in the outside so when we're longing to be back together and when we are back together and when we're meeting in church and people come in that we don't know the first step is not giving them our back is giving them our face is not just retreating into our own circle of friends which is very easy to do in a transient and quickly changing church where we feel there's so many new people all the time but it's a great challenge even in simple little ways city groups small groups a great way of integrating new people or marginalized people or international people or whoever may come in our doors god's word tonight as in any word it certainly challenges me it causes me to repent it's a mirror it's a two-way mirror that exposes my darkness the blackness of my heart remaining but also the beauty of Jesus and the glory of his gospel and we should never walk away from it unchanged and just to i'm not going to say anything about this because times are now but why is it always important to remember these things well because in verse 25 and you might want to spend

time with this in your groups one who looks into the perfect law the law of liberty or freedom and persevere's being no hearer who forgets but i do react he will be blessed in his doing there's freedom and there's blessing that's why we're doers of the work and we don't just close the book and forget about our lives and remain unchanged it brings freedom freedom from all the the pressures of just selfishness and sinful desires and identity issues and crisis and fear of the future and loveless and all these things are freedom forgiveness and newness of life and blessing that's true religion happiness and contentment and peace so it's i think i probably unduly complicated that simple verse by some of my headings but and i know you'll go and read it i know you'll go and read it yourselves it doesn't need it really doesn't need any explanation just rambled on for ages but there's so much great truth here and it really should challenge us to be not just doers of the word but hearers and to just think of how would you define pure religion none of us would have to find it like that i doubt that is pure religion and i'm proud that that is the case and i'm proud of jesus that he has defined it in this way for us so i'm sure you'll have a brilliant time in the city group discussing this passage there's so much in it and invite as many people as you can so that this theme that we have of allowing the word to just soak into our lives and will be important