

# Living Through A Pandemic

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Now, let's turn back today to James chapter 1, and you may have noticed today that our theme, the theme or the title of this sermon is living through a pandemic.

And also, I was, in doing so, was introducing our theme for the year. Last year we looked at 2020 being a year of encouragement, if you'll remember.

And this year, we're going to look at a slightly different theme, but one that's quite similar as well. It's about being doers of the word and not only hearers.

So that's kind of the theme for the sermon, being doers of the word and not hearers only, with a subtitle, I guess, living through a pandemic.

And right at the very start, what I want to state and stress is that this is not a try-harder theme.

[ 1 : 0 7 ] There is never and can't be, and it isn't useful to have an intention in preaching to heap guilt on one another by just encouraging us to try and do a bit better, try harder.

It's not a do-better theme. And it's easy sometimes to think that that is all that matters and to listen in that way, and therefore to feel as we all do inadequate and not up to the task.

Last year, we talked about encouragement, talking, walking and sharing. And it's very similar in many ways, and I'll break down three things that I hope we can do as doers from this chapter, doers of the word and not hearers only.

But I guess what I'm hoping that we'll think about more together is how we live our lives and how that therefore impacts on our ability to share our faith in the midst of this struggle, in the midst of this pandemic.

We will be probably in the same position at least six months from now. One way, there may be tweaks and changes, but we're going to be living with this pandemic for a while. And so, in many ways, our theme for the year and my thinking is related to being in that position.

[ 2 : 3 8 ] And how we are presenting ourselves as believers to others and as a church to the world that watches or maybe sometimes doesn't watch.

But my encouragement will be not, it's not a trying harder and do better. It's an encouragement for all of us to run back into the arms of Jesus and to know that He alone can transform our lives against all the odds and enable us to flourish in this time of drought, suffering, isolation and struggle, leading us to joy and maturity.

And that's a huge challenge to consider this morning. How are we going to live as Christians in the foreseeable future?

Tomorrow, one day at a time, let's take it. One day, and then tomorrow, if God blesses us with that day, how can we flourish?

Not just survive. And what is the calling of the church at a time like this? And yes, I'm including you all in the church.

[ 3 : 51 ] We're all individuals. Maybe sometimes you don't feel very much part of the church. Maybe you think we're the church, the official establishment or whatever, and you're not really part of that or you feel distanced from it.

But everyone belongs to the church. You are part of the family, part of God's kingdom. You are the bride of Christ.

Whether we sometimes recognize that or not, or we distinguish between the institution and the spiritual reality of what the church is, but nonetheless, we are part of this body of people together.

Now, there are some leaders in the church, maybe at a national level and in different places who have argued that during this pandemic, the church is being denied its right to gather, and that is persecution.

The state has overstretched its authority, and we should obey God and not men. We should agitate and complain and demand our rights.

[ 4 : 51 ] Now I would encourage you to read last week's email from the church that's sent out by the church with its attachment letter from our moderator, which explains very powerfully and very graciously and winsomely a different path to take that we believe as leaders in the church is the right one, that we have a higher calling, a spiritual calling, which is to be doers of the word, not only hearers and to fix our eyes on Jesus.

Now James is a great book. We're going to be looking at it between now and the summer at Engine Room. There's enough, there's five chapters, which we're going to take a month at a time that will take us more or less up to the summer.

And so we'll be looking at it in more detail. Today I'm just looking at this wider theme for the year, be doers of the word, not hearers only, but we will base it from sections of this first chapter without going into great detail, but we'll do so at our Engine Room.

So be doers of the word and hearers only, and I'm going to have three elements to that as there was three elements to the encouragement last year talking, walking and sharing, and they're similar.

The first is, and you've heard this quite a lot from me recently, is that we are to suffer well. As doers of the word, not hearers only, we're to suffer well, verses two and three.

[ 6 : 25 ] Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete, mature and complete lacking in nothing.

So suffering well, we're to suffer well, we're facing many trials in these days, just as those to whom this letter of James was written.

And James, under the influence and power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God says, count it all joy, brothers and sisters, the church, he says.

Right from the very beginning, that shows us the impossibility of this being a try harder, do better theme and challenge, because you can't legalistically be joyful.

It's impossible just to try harder being full of joy, because joy is something that is an act of the will that comes from a changed reality in our lives.

[ 7 : 38 ] Joy, the word here, joy, it stems from the same root as the word grace in the New Testament. And really, in Bible terms, when it speaks about joy, it's speaking about our response that comes from an awareness of God's grace in our lives.

It's the response of our hearts when we have come to trust and experience the beauty of God's grace. Now, James doesn't say much about God's atoning work.

It's not stated in any detail or at all, really, in James, because it's a practical book. And it is absolutely the case that God's atoning work in Jesus Christ is the foundation of this book.

It's the motivation for the being doers of the Word and not only hearers. And so the joy that we have comes from our knowledge of God's grace in us, knowing that He suffered to rescue us from our own selves and from our death.

He learned obedience. He looked to His Father. He depended on the Spirit. He bore our sins on the cross so that we might know His love, His grace, His compassion, His forgiveness, His help.

[ 9 : 03 ] And that's our foundation. That's our hope. That's our perspective. That's our comfort. That's our strength that we see a purpose in all that He is doing, even in our suffering.

We know that He is... our faith is being tried and tested in order to strengthen it and to remove all from our heart that makes it impure and weak.

We are stripped back at these times to reveal what's in our hearts, to reveal where our foundation lies, to make us mature and to remove the idols.

Just in the next letter, 1 Peter chapter 1, we've got that great section which says, blessed, and He founds it in the same way, blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ according to His great mercy.

He's caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, unfading, kept in heaven for you.

[ 10 : 15 ] And it goes on to say, and this you rejoice, rejoice the same word, though now for a little while if necessary you've been grieved by various trials so that the testing, that the tested genuine of your faith, more precious than gold that perishes though it's tested by fire may be found to result in praise and glory and honor in the revelation of Jesus.

It is exactly the same point that's been made by Peter in the next letter. And it is this recognition that suffering has a purpose and is being used by the Lord to change and mold and transfer us, transform us and to prepare us to be stronger and better.

So we're encouraged and we're challenged to suffer well because of the joy or the grace that enables us to have joy whatever the outward circumstances are.

He is with us, He is in us, and He is in this circumstance we find ourselves in. And so my encouragement to you and to myself and challenge is suffer well, suffer well.

They to nurses and doctors and teachers and parents and children, the elderly, the isolated. Those of you who are under much, much more pressure than I am under, for example, I ask you to cry out to Christ, to sense His Spirit in His very being, to know His grace and the joy of what He has gifted you, sustaining you and leading you through.

[ 12 : 02 ] Swear well among your colleagues. Lean on Him in the darkness. You may feel your stumbling, but may His light from you shine all the brighter as you cry out to Him and as you are committed and understand His overwhelming commitment to love you and to take you through.

It will transform the perspective we have in suffering. And I simply ask myself and you to cast yourself and your burdens and your suffering on Him in prayer, to trust Him and know His promises and know that He is molding and maturing and completing His work in us through these times.

And may we suffer well as a church by helping one another to build a relationship to Christ and trusting ourselves to the Father, praying together, praying for our nation and praying to see His beauty and His promises so that others might see us suffering well through this.

He will take us through. It's a great theme of Scripture and sometimes we ask, well, I don't know how to witness to my faith. I'm not great at sharing my faith.

This will be a...this is a time when our foundations will reveal themselves in our response to what is happening around us.

[ 13 : 46 ] But can I also say in the second place, serve well, verse 22, but...and this is really the overarching theme, be doers of the Word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

Again this can't be a call to buck up or to try harder. And it's simply a recognition of genuine faith will be the outwork...will be the outworking of the fruit of the Spirit that is in our hearts.

Genuine faith will out what is in and what is in our hearts will come out in the way we live. It's reflecting the spiritual company we keep and who it is, the influences, how we live.

You know, because we are all doers, every day we are doing, we are acting, and what James is simply saying is that we can't be only hearing or listening to the Word and not allowing it to soak into our hearts and lives, therefore coming out and transforming action.

Then he goes on to give that illustration of the person who looks in the mirror and then goes away and forgets about what he's like and doesn't change. And you know, can you imagine this morning if I got up and I went down and had breakfast in the house and it was wheat of bicks and I dribbled a big lump of wheat of bicks onto my beard and then I went to the mirror to get ready to come out to the church here.

[ 15 : 32 ] And I said, oh, I've got a big lump of wheat of bicks on my beard there. I'll need to do something about that. And then just left. I said, I'll deal with that later. I came in and put my jacket on, came in and recorded and did this sermon.

This big lump of wheat of bicks on my beard. You think, well, it's ridiculous. You know, looking at yourself and seeing something needing to be done and just not bothering to do it.

There would be, you know, this clarity, big bit of wheat of bicks and as you spoke to people, it would be embarrassing.

And we find that Christ's word is like a mirror to our soul, absolutely a mirror to our soul. And it shows us where we need to go and how we need to change.

And He says His word should transform us. There's no point in reading, listening to His word or hearing His word but not listening in that it doesn't transform our hearts and our lives.

[ 16 : 44 ] I mean, that's very much one of the motivations behind the city group. Looking at either a previous sermon or looking forward to a chapter that we're going to read, the encouragement to remember God's word that we receive in preaching or that we read in our own Bible studies and moving, allowing it to move our lives forward, allowing it to transform us.

So when asking the questions, what's He saying? God knows us when we come to His word and He knows what we need to hear. And so He said, what is God saying to me? How does God want to change me?

How does He want me to move forward and be transformed? You know, there's a great danger of passivism that we open the word, we read it, we close it and we've done our job.

That we listen to a sermon, we go home, we forget all about it. It makes no difference, no transformation. It's not a living word, it's not an active moving word. There's a danger sometimes of bibliography that we worship the Word, the Bible as a word, as a book.

But it makes no transformational relational difference because it's a dead word. It's not a living word to us in our hearts because it's not...we've ceased to see it as the living, transforming, spirit-filled Word of God.

[ 18 : 09 ] And at a time like this, we can be challenged to ask, are we enslaved to our circumstances? Are we dependent on false hopes or are we doers of the Word?

Because we've been set free, as He says in this passage, and we've been able to live by grace, by grace alone, by dependence on God.

We can love Him and we can love one another. Of this servant spirit, this serving well by being doers of God's Word, not just hearers.

So at a time like this, within the church community and beyond, a selfless spirit, loving others, seeing their needs, reaching out in their loneliness, their fears, their confusion, being aware of the mental health issues among many at a time like this, the battles and the struggles, touching lives with simple acts, cups of cold water, comfort, presence.

I know presence is...I don't mean presence as in Christmas presence, presence as in E-N-C-E at the end, our company. Now, I know that company is difficult at this time, but we can still, through the restrictions, connect with people one way or another.

[ 19 : 30 ] By reaching out, we can serve well by heeding the restrictions, sensitively, by praying for our leaders, by making a meal, maybe for a nurse or a doctor, or someone who's right on the front line, by writing a note, by making a phone call to maybe your child's teacher or your colleague who you may be aware is really struggling at home to work and to homeschool and to cope, setting free to be self-forgetful.

And in that, there's great reward and great healing for ourselves, the importance of being doers of the Word and not hearers only serving well.

So suffer well, serve well, and also lastly, speak well. Verse 26, powerful words.

If anyone thinks he's religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

James has a lot to say about the tongue, about speaking, and that is so relevant in our day. I think more probably, maybe it's always relevant entirely, but it seems that there's more opportunities to share or to speak or to give an opinion or to comment on everything and the whole world can hear that.

[ 21 : 10 ] And the tongue, I think, in this verse surely also covers our social media input or output, should I say, as doers of the Word and not hearers only, what is the content of our social media output like?

It's our conversation like. How do we speak to or how do we speak about other people? How about those in authority and how we speak about them and the motives that we question constantly about them?

What about our fellow Christians? What about leaders in the church or our neighbors or our colleagues or our family? Do we apply that glorious fruit of the Spirit of self-control and of all the others of love and joy and peace and patience and meekness and gentleness and faithfulness?

Do we apply that to how we speak? It's a tight reign that James recognizes we need to have on our tongues. It's like the bridle for a horse.

It's a reign that keeps us from being, not reflecting what's in our hearts because that isn't it? It's what comes out.

[ 22 : 33 ] What we speak reflects what comes out of our heart and that's hugely instructive to others about what is there.

He is arguing against false religion, religion that's worthless, he says, if we are unable to see the need for transformation in our conversation and what we say.

In other words, he's warning the Jewish believers from the twelve tribes in the dispersion to whom he's writing, not to be fake Jews. You know, we speak about fake news and there's so much about it just now in our society about untruth and about just making things up.

It's a pandemic in our world today. A different one is not speaking truth.

And so he's not speaking about fake news so much as warning against being fake Jews, fake believers, and maybe if we belong to the flock of God, he's warning us not to be fake Jews.

[ 23 : 42 ] Sorry, I had to get that in. But let's not be armchair believers. Let's not be those who don't allow grace to transform who we are and to be full of joy.

So we speak well. How do we do that? How do we do it by the best part of speaking well? Ironically, it's listening. Verse 19, Know this, my beloved brothers, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.

Listen well. Listen well during this pandemic. Hear the... listen for the cries of others or their hearts. Listen to what might be behind their anxiety, their attitudes, their grumblings.

Listen well in love. And question well. Questioning is a great way to get into people's hearts, to find out about their lives, to open up their fears and to open up their needs.

And that requires time and it requires commitment and conviction. And then speak with courage, with loving, humble courage.

[ 24 : 58 ] Speak to each other about Christ, about our needs, about our longings, confessing even our sins, honestly, openly, meaningfully, naturally.

And pray for the courage and wisdom to speak to others about our beloved Savior and the joy. And we've got to be very careful with that, that we're not insensitive and that we're not shallow in what we see or that we're not dismissing suffering.

We're not dismissing suffering. We're not saying suffering isn't real and doesn't matter and isn't something to recoil from, but we're saying that we have a foundation in it and through it and it's not randomly purposeless and destructive when we have our trust and our reliance on the living God.

And we are showing people that He is real in our hearts. So suffer well. Serve well and speak well. That is the under theme below being doers of the Word and hearers and not only hearers.

It's a subtitle, the subtext of our theme for the year. Now, James is a huge challenge, is a wonderful book, huge challenge. It's a great challenge for us to search for the beauty and the glory of Christ so that our lives are transformed by Him.

[ 26 : 31 ] It's a huge challenge to allow Him to capture our hearts because that's the foundation for all our action, for everything that we do, that He's captured our heart amidst all the suffering and all the battles and all the struggles and all the doubts and fears.

We take it into His presence. We listen for His Word. We are transformed by it. We're moved by it. We're touched by it. And it's living and real and it's relational.

So if you consider yourself a Christian, but it makes absolutely no difference to your life, no difference to your response to this time, for example, no difference to your heart, to your speech, to your actions, to your worship, maybe you need to think again.

And if you're not a Christian, I am delighted that you are watching this morning or whenever you're tuning in. I'm delighted that you are. And I pray that you will see Christ as the spiritual vaccine that you need.

I don't want to make that sound medical or clinical, but to use the image of what we're going through to recognize He alone is the one who's taken the virus of your sin, which is destructive and will end up in your death and your spiritual separation from God forever.

[ 28 : 08 ] He has taken that and experienced that separation and suffered on your behalf and paid the price so that you can receive Him. And no life, yes, there will still be suffering, but there will be purpose and hope and promises to take you through offering a new life now and eternally.

And may it be that as Christians this year, we see the significance of joy transforming our hearts or transforming our lives so that whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, we can be assured that we're not alone, that God will take them and mold them and will transform them and will use them to mature us so that we are lacking nothing, to test us to bring to the surface like the silver that is heated to a high degree, to bring up the impurities so that they can be skimmed off the top and it can be made pure, so that our hearts through suffering can have all the impurities brought to the surface exposed for the deception and the false hopes that they provide and the poor foundation that they are, the sand that they are underneath us and can encourage us to find in Christ what we need day to day to day, that we are a people who speak well, who serve well and who suffer well because Jesus Christ is the foundation of our lives.

And I guess that's why I'm pleading that even if you've never been as a Christian before to our Friday morning that you will either the engine room or Friday morning or that you will pray with others, but you will think of coming to be dependent in that very public way as we depend together on Him and that we sacrifice in order to do so.

It's hugely significant and challenging for us all. May we be doers of the Word and not hearers only. Let's pray.

Father, God help us, we pray. Teach us your way. Guide us so that we might do the impossible. We read this chapter and it says, be joyful in suffering.

[ 30 : 42 ] We find that so hard or counting it all joy. Lord, we pray that you would help us to see that that joy can only come when our hearts have been transformed and are being transformed by your grace, by the significance of the living God coming among us, living our life, suffering like us yet without sin, being tested and tempted and yet receiving all that sin on the cross, all our sin and taking the wrath of God and the just punishment of God for us in it so that we might live.

Lord, help us to see that. Take away deception from our hearts. Take away casual Christian living or rebellious unchanged heart that is self-centered and not self-forgetful.

And Lord, bless us, we pray. And help us, each of us, help us to help one another because we need that. Amen.