

Obedience

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Date: 29 January 2023

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[0 : 00] Well, did you know that selective hearing or selective hearing deficiency is actually a thing? I'm sure we're all familiar with the term selective hearing.

It's when someone is able to hear what they want to hear, but conveniently is unable to hear what they don't want to hear. And we joke about it when it comes to interactions, perhaps between parents and children or between couples.

For example, children will always hear things like, would you like some cake or let's go and play in the park? Or would you like to stay up later this evening?

But they never hear things like do your homework, tidy your room, time for bed. And yet it's not just children who have this issue, selective hearing. We have it as adults as well, like when it comes to household chores or when it comes to things to do in our work or really anything we don't want to do.

Many things that are said can just fall upon deaf ears. But if there is something that is to our advantage, then we're all ears. Selective hearing, obey when it suits you and disobey when it doesn't.

[1 : 10] And we might joke about it, but it is a real thing. It's also called selective auditory attention, where our brain hears and interprets things we need to hear, but at the same time can tune out speakers, words or other sounds.

Now, selective hearing is one thing when it comes to what people have to say to us, but it is a far more serious thing when it comes to what God has to say to us.

Because we can be selective when it comes to hearing God's word, which is actually the problem that James wants to tackle in his letter. Because being a Christian is not just about hearing God's word, but it is about doing it.

And that's why we've called our series in James Faith that Works, because real, genuine, true faith is seen by what we do. And so we've already seen how James is concerned about double-mindedness in his letter.

It leads to thinking, speaking, and living that is inconsistent with faith in God. But what God wants for his people is for them to be perfect, mature, and complete, or whole.

[2 : 22] And so how is this going to happen? Well, the way to avoid double-mindedness and to become whole is to have a faith that works, a faith that hears God's word and then obeys it.

And so James drives this point home in our text this afternoon. We must receive God's word. We must do what God's word says by living it out in our lives.

And so there are three points for us to follow through this passage today. The first is receiving God's word, verse 19 to 21. Second is doing God's word, 22 to 25.

And then thirdly, living God's word, verse 26 and 27. So receiving God's word, doing God's word, and living God's word. First of all, let's look at receiving God's word in 19 to 21.

Now there's a link to what James is saying here to what he said just before, which we looked at last week. And the link is with the repetition of the word. So if you look back, verse 18, he said, God chose to give us birth through the word of truth.

[3 : 29] Now, verse 21, he says that we are to humbly accept the word planted in you. So let's see that in verse 19 to 21. He says, Now James here, as he addresses the people, he's calling them brothers and sisters.

So he is speaking to fellow believers, and he's speaking about receiving God's word. And so he begins by emphasizing the importance of listening. Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak.

And of course, that's true. It's often said that we've got two ears and one mouth because we're to spend more time listening than we are talking. And our culture today is characterized, I think, by the opposite of what James says here.

In our culture, everybody is quick to speak, but slow to listen, whether in conversation with people or about people, whether in person or on social media.

We're good at talking, speaking, bad at listening. But I don't think James is simply making a general point here all about listening, because the context is all about hearing and doing God's word.

[4 : 56] And so he is perhaps warning that if we're not good at listening to people, if we do more talking than listening by thinking that our words, our thoughts, our opinions are so important, then the danger is that we won't be humble enough to listen to what God has to say.

Because if we like the sound of our voice, our own voice, too much, we might lack the humility not only to listen to others, but more importantly, the humility to listen to God.

But as well as being slow to speak, we need to be slow to become angry. And of course, this is also true. But again, I don't think James is making a general point about just controlling our anger here, although that is important.

Because what he wants us to do is to hear and obey God's word. And so being easily angered, clearly, is going to hinder us from hearing what God has to say.

James says human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. And so our uncontrolled speech or our uncontrolled anger will prevent us from receiving God's word.

[6 : 07] And letting God's word produce the kind of righteousness that God desires. And that's why James says in verse 21, Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

So James is saying there's something else here, and that something is sin. And it stops us hearing, receiving, accepting God's word.

That's why he says get rid of all moral filth. Now the phrase get rid here has this sense of stripping off. And it's something that we do with our dirty clothes.

So every Saturday, our boys come home from rugby at school, and their kit is covered in mud, often blood as well. And so they take off the kit, then they put it in the washing basket, because they can't walk around all day with filthy clothes on.

And this is the kind of picture that James is painting for us. He's saying we should strip off all the filthiness, all the sin in our lives, and instead we should clothe ourselves with the kind of lifestyle that God's word shows us.

[7 : 20] Because living according to our sinful desires will deafen us and eventually harden us to what God has to say to us.

For the soil of our soul, in a sense, will not be in any fit state to receive God's word. And so James urges us to humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

And so the language here suggests that God's word is like a seed that embeds itself in our heart. And it grows and it produces fruit in our lives.

And so we need the input of God's word going into our minds and into our hearts if there is ever going to be a good output in our lives. Because without the right input, God's word, the output is going to be wrong.

Whether it's in what we say, the amount and the content of our speech, whether it's in what we feel, the anger that can rage within and suddenly burst out, or whether it is in what we do, the moral filth and the evil that James speaks of.

[8 : 29] If God's word is not planted within, then it's hardly surprising that our speaking or our feeling or our living, our behavior won't be what it could be.

But when we receive God's word and when God's word takes root within, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, then our lives are shaped into what they should be.

And so James encourages his readers here, including us, to have an attitude of humble acceptance of God's word. And all of God's word in its entirety.

Because we can arrogantly think that we somehow know better than God about how we should live our lives. And in our double-mindedness, we can try and accept the bits of the Bible that we like, missing the bits that are challenging or the bits we don't like.

And so James's message could not be more relevant for the church today, given the way that some denominations are clearly rejecting the truth of God's word by wanting to bless what God would

forbid.

[9 : 38] And isn't it so tragic when professing Christians, ministers, churches, denominations refuse to humbly accept God's word and the clarity of what it says, and refuse to accept its authority over our lives, and instead think that we know better than God.

But James says that in place of all moral filth and evil, we must humbly accept the word planted in us. Because at the end of the day, he's saying it's the word that saves us.

So in order to make us perfect, mature, complete, whole, God wants to do a deep work in us. He wants to implant his word in our lives so that over time, our speech, our habits, our behavior, will produce the kind of righteousness that God desires.

And so how are we, how are you, how am I, receiving God's word? So that book in your lap or that Bible app on your phone, how much of a priority is that in our lives?

Are we giving time to listening to God, to receiving and accepting his word? That's our first point.

The second is doing God's word. In verse 22 to 25, receiving God's word means doing what it says.

[11 : 04] So verse 22, do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves, do what it says. So we might think that just listening to God's word will do us good.

And of course it does. But James insists that if we don't obey it, then we're deceiving ourselves.

He's saying it's no good hearing the word if we don't do what it says.

Because when God speaks, he doesn't just want us to listen, but he wants us to obey. So his word is not just for head information, it is for heart transformation that is then seen in our lives.

And that's why mere exposure to the word is never enough. Because James makes the distinction between listening and doing. So for example, we might go to church every Sunday and hear the word being preached, and that's a good thing.

But we may assume that the implication of belonging to a Bible teaching church means that we are automatically becoming mature Christians.

[12 : 13] But James is saying the two don't necessarily go together. Now, of course, there is a connection between hearing the word and spiritual growth, but it's not automatic, is it?

And I've even seen this happen in a church that took great pride because it had a Bible teaching ministry for over 50 years. And so the assumption was because the Bible is faithfully taught here every Sunday, we are a notch above all the other Christians around us.

We are mature. And yet some of those who'd been there for decades, even holding positions of leadership, lack the kind of grace that comes from hearing God's word and obeying it and seeing it lived out in life.

And so this is the kind of self-deception that we're all prone to if we're not careful. Reading the Bible, listening to sermons, even agreeing with every word that is said isn't the same as obeying it, is it?

Because if we don't find that God's word is constantly challenging everything in our lives, so our thoughts, words, desires, attitudes, actions, if God's word isn't challenging everything, James would say to us, you're deceiving yourself by failing to do what it says.

[13 : 33] And he illustrates this in verse 23 and 24. He says, So apparently mirrors in the ancient world weren't made of glass, like mirrors today are, but they were made of polished metal.

And the purpose of any mirror, of course, is to give us a reflection of ourselves so that we can see what we are really like. And I'm sure, without fail, everybody in here looked in the mirror this morning.

There's nobody who didn't look in a mirror this morning. And what did you see when you looked in the mirror? Hair all over the place, stubble, spots, drool. And so when we look in the mirror to see what we're like, we need to assess the damage to some extent so that we can then change, so that there can be some improvement in our appearance.

So we shave or we wash, we brush our hair, put on makeup, whatever. And we look better. Well, some of us look better as a result because the mirror has revealed our true selves to us.

But imagine if you looked in the mirror and you just walked away and you ignored what the mirror revealed to you without changing anything. Well, it would be unthinkable, wouldn't it?

[14 : 58] Nobody does that. We all do something as a result of what we see. And so James is saying God's word is really like a mirror for our lives because it reveals what we are really like.

It shows up our sin. It confronts us with everything we don't like about ourselves. What's wrong? Why? So that we can do something about it. Because when we've been confronted by the truth

about ourselves, we simply can't carry on regardless.

We've got to do something. And so God's word forces us to take notice of ourselves so that we change. And James tells us why this matters in verse 25.

But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues in it, not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it, they will be blessed in what they do.

So what does he mean, the perfect law that gives freedom? Well, he's not changing subject here. He is still talking about God's word because God's word is the perfect law that brings freedom.

[16:03] Because what God commands us to do doesn't restrict our lives, but it actually gives freedom and it gives liberty. And so God's law is perfect because God himself is perfect.

And God's law, therefore, is a reflection of his character. So all of God's law is good for us. And so when God says, honor your father and mother, you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony.

Now all the other laws and commands, all of these commands are for our benefit and they're for our blessing because God knows what is best for us.

And so when God gives do's and don'ts, it's out of love for us and it is for our flourishing as human beings. And so it's never obedience to his law that enslaves us or restricts us.

And it's when we disobey that we become enslaved and restricted by sin. And yet this is the opposite of how our culture sees it, isn't it?

[17:16] And it's even against the inclinations of our hearts because our culture says to us, well, you must decide what is right for you. And so we think that laws restrict our freedom.

They take away our autonomy and they stop us from doing what we feel is right and what we would want to do. But because God's law is perfect, then the only way to be free is to live according to it. That's the only way to be all that we were meant to be. Just think of a car owner's manual. When you read a car owner manual, if you're sad like me and you do those kinds of things, when you read it, you discover this is not trying to restrict me in any sense here by telling me you must take the handbrake off before you drive, you must put petrol in instead of diesel, you must have this pressure in your tires.

And we don't resent being given a list of do's and don'ts when it comes to how we operate our car because this is what gives our car the best performance and the most enjoyment comes from driving it in the way that it's meant to be driven.

And so God made himself, sorry, he made us for himself and so life works best when we listen to him and we do what he says.

[18:40] And from my own pastoral experience, I've discovered that most pastoral problems that people have really start when a person stops reading and then obeying God's word.

Because that's when the sin that they find themselves caught up in and entangled in, it all comes back to when they stopped listening and hearing and doing and obeying God's word.

And so James tells us God's word when planted in us grows and it saves us. God's word, he says, like a mirror, reveals our true selves, tells us what we must do.

And God's word gives freedom and it brings blessing to our lives. That's why we must do what God says. And so, firstly, there's receiving God's word, secondly, doing God's word, and then thirdly, living God's word, verse 26 and 27.

What James does is give three examples of what it looks like to receive God's word and do what it says. So, verse 26, those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves and their religion is worthless.

[20:02] Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Notice how he uses the word religious and religion here because there's a kind of religion, James is saying, that is worthless and there's a kind of religion, he's saying, that is acceptable to God because it's true religion.

And so, true religion, the kind that is acceptable to God, is seen in a lifestyle that's obedient to God. And so, he shows us what this is like with three concrete examples.

And they're all areas that James will return to later in his letter. So, the three examples are controlling the tongue, helping the needy, and then separating from sin. So, first of all, controlling the tongue which is in there in verse 26.

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves and their religion is worthless. So, what he's saying is no matter what you claim to believe, if you can't control your tongue, your speech, the words you say, your religion is worthless. [21 : 19] That is, it is futile, it is empty, it is useless. And so, he illustrates this through controlling a horse. He's talking about a bridle or a bit.

So, just as the bridle, the bit, controls the horse, so he's saying we must keep a tight rein on our tongues because we can betray our claim to know God by the way that we speak. And it might be harsh criticism, it might be arrogant speech, it might be juicy gossip, it might be spiteful words, or it might be blatant lies. Would someone listening to us and the words we say and the way we say them, would they be able to tell that we know God? or would our words suggest that we don't even know God at all? Because James says our words indicate just how much our religion is actually worth. Words we say, words we text, words we email, words we fill our social media feeds with all through the week, all of these words all the way through the week say much more about us as a person and how much we know God than turning up religiously to church on a Sunday. [22 : 41] And if we're not aware of this, James says, well, you just deceive yourselves. So controlling the tongue is the first example. The second is helping the needy. Verse 27, living God's word means helping those in need.

So he says, religion that God our Father accepts is pure and faultless as this, to look after orphans and widows in their distress. So he's saying, look after orphans and widows. Essentially, look after those who are vulnerable and helpless. And in the context of the Bible, orphans and widows were especially needy because there was no social welfare system. And so they had few rights, they had very little power and hardly any status. But James says, true religion that is acceptable to God involves looking after them. Now why might that be? Well, because it reflects the very nature of God. All the way through the Old Testament, God himself is a father to the fatherless and a defender of widows. [23 : 49] Deuteronomy says that he defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And so God expects his people to imitate his concern for those who are in need.

And so to what extent do we look after those who are in need, whoever they may be? How good are we at helping those who possibly just can't give us back anything in return, whether as an individual or as our family or as our church?

Because James says, this is a good indicator how you help the needy of how much your religion is actually worth. So controlling the tongue, helping the needy and then thirdly separating from sin. James says God's people are to keep themselves from being polluted by the world. And again, this is the religion that God accepts as pure and faultless. James wants us to be unstained from the world because the world can have this kind of contaminating effect and influence on us if we're not careful.

So just think about your weekly intake. What is it that you watch? What is it that you read? What is it that you listen to? Where do you go on the internet for fun, for downtime?

[25 : 14] Because it can all shape our thinking. It can influence our desires. It can change our perspectives. It can impact our living. And therefore, it can lead us into sin.

And so we can be polluted by the world. And the opposite, of course, is, well, we can be purified by the word. So what is it?

Is it the world or is it the word? Because if we're not listening to the word and doing what it says, then we will be polluted by the world.

And so true religion that is pure and acceptable, that is pleasing to God, is outward, but it's also inward. It involves social responsibility, but it also involves a personal piety.

It will be heard on our lips and how we control our tongues. It will be seen in our lives and how we help those who are in need. And it will be known by our loves, by how we separate from sin.

[26 : 18] And of course, by giving these three examples, controlling the tongue, helping the needy, separating from sin, James is not suggesting that this encompasses everything when it comes to true religion, but it certainly can't mean less than this, can it?

And so receiving God's word and doing God's word and living God's word is what we're called to do. And yet the problem is as we read what James has to say, we're well aware that we fail to do this.

We don't humbly accept what God says. And we don't do all that God requires. No matter how hard we try, we fail.

And so there is a problem, isn't there, with our hypocritical religion. We know it's not true, real, genuine religion because there's so much hypocrisy in our lives.

Our sin and our failure to obey God is clear to us. And our sin always deserves God's punishment. And yet the good news that James is pointing towards is that there is one who has done everything that God requires.

[27 : 33] Jesus Christ is the only one who has perfectly and wholeheartedly obeyed God in everything. And why did he do it? He did it for us. He lived the life that we can never live, a life in perfect obedience to God.

And he died on a cross to forgive us of all of our sinful disobedience. And so we are saved through what Jesus has done for us.

Not by what we do or by how we live our lives. And yet when we are saved and out of gratitude for all that God has done for us, there will be a desire in our hearts that delights to obey God's word, that wants to hear what God has to say to us, who realizes that living by God's word, that by doing what God says, that is how we find freedom.

And that is how we know what freedom is like. And so, as we close, the challenge for us all is, how is God's word changing you?

How is it changing me? What is it that we need to do as a result of reading God's word? Is there something we need to stop in our lives?

[28 : 57] Is there something we need to start because of what we have heard God say? God speaks. And when God speaks, we must listen.

And we must obey all that God tells us to do.