

FAITH THAT WORKS.

2. OBEDIENCE.

James 1:16-27.

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

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 of God. 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 is 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.

If anyone thinks 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 their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Introduction: Obeying God's word.

A thread that runs through much of what we have read from James this morning is the theme of God's word. If you are a Christian, God does not want your profession of faith to be something that has no impact on the way you live. He wants his word to bring about change in your life.

That is what we are going to talk about this morning. To help structure our thoughts as we walk through these verses, here are three questions.

- Where does change come from?
- How does change happen?
- What does change look like?

Where does change come from?

The first three verses answer the question about where change comes from.

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

These three verses provide a transition from what James has been talking about in the previous part of his letter, specifically trials and temptations. One of the things he wants to guard against is that people who are in a time of testing which gives way to sin do not blame God for tempting them. Instead of tempting people to sin, God is a good, unchanging God who is the source of every good and perfect gift. One of the good gifts that he has given is the gift of life which comes through the word of truth.

I think that the best way to understand the expression "word of truth" is that it is referring to the gospel. That is certainly what is usually refers to when you read it in the New Testament. As an

example, Paul talks in his Ephesian letter about how people heard the word of truth, “the gospel of [their] salvation.” It is the good news of the salvation that Jesus has accomplished by laying down his perfect life as a sacrifice for our sins. The announcement of that message is different from the announcement of any other kind of news; because when a person receives this message by believing it, God gives them life.

If you have not responded to the message, in God’s eyes you do not have spiritual life. You are in a dangerous place because you are spiritually dead; you are separated from God. But once you lean your trust in the message that Jesus Christ has lived the life you should have lived and died the death you deserve to die, God gives you life. You become part of the first fruits, the beginning, of what he is doing to restore his fallen creation.

Change comes from God; it starts when he gives us life through the word of truth. The word of truth brings us alive. That is a change. The way James talks about it is as dramatic as the change that occurs for a child when he or she is born. When God’s word of truth starts to work on you, you are different.

That is the starting line. If you don’t cross the starting line the rest of what we talk about today has limited value. It will just be you trying to do something by yourself instead of working along with God in what he has started to do in your life.

That takes us to the second question.

How does change happen?

Verses 19 to 25 talk about how he wants his word to work in our lives. James describes it as the implanted word. God plants this word in our hearts; it is no longer just a word outside of us telling us what to do. It is outside us, but it also starts to work inside us so that it can bring about change. It is as God explained through Jeremiah in the Old Testament, saying that he would write his word on the hearts of his people.

The verses talk about three stages in this work; they are three aspects of what it means for us to allow God’s word to work as his agent for change in our lives.

- Repenting.
- Receiving.
- Responding.

Repenting.

Verses 19 to 21 show us that there are certain kinds of behaviour that are not in line with the changed lives God wants to produce in us through his word.

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 of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

Verse 19 is very wise advice. You may have heard the suggestion that God gave us two ears and a mouth so that we would learn to listen twice as much as we speak. James is not quite saying that, but it is not too far away either!

“Be quick to hear.” That is hard to do when you always want to talk. You probably find yourself in a conversation not really listening because you are just waiting for a pause so that you can jump in and start talking yourself. The ability to hear, to listen, to receive input from outside of yourself is a mark of wisdom.

“Be slow to speak.” It goes right along with the first part. Look at a couple of Proverbs.

Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent. (Proverbs 17:28)

When words are many, transgression is not lacking,
but whoever restrains his lips is prudent. (Proverbs 10:19)

There is wisdom in saying little. The more you say, the more likely you are to say something you should not.

Paul Tripp has written a book called *War of Words*. In the introduction he recalls something that happened when he was sixteen. He was rehearsing for a speech competition. (If you have heard Paul, you will know how good he is with words.) His mother came into the room and asked if she could interrupt him for a moment. "Paul," she said, "God has given you a special ability to communicate, but watch out, because it will also be your greatest struggle."

She understood the book of Proverbs. Proverbs does uphold the positive value of the tongue but it warns about its dangers; and so does James. "Be slow to speak."

"Be slow to anger." It is when this gets mixed up with our speech that we do so much damage. Anger is such a tough issue to deal with. But James warns us that human anger does not produce the righteous life that God is looking for (I believe that is the sense of "the righteousness of God" at this point.) If you are an angry person, your life is unlikely to produce righteousness.

Failure to listen, being too quick to speak, having a quick temper: none of these lines up with how God wants us to live. But James then talks in verse 21 about filthiness (or shabby behaviour) and rampant wickedness that we need to get rid of as we prepare to receive the word. If we are determined to hold on to things like this, how can we expect the word to do its work?

Receiving.

In contrast to that, we are to meekly receive the word. We come to it with an attitude of submission and acceptance and we receive it into our hearts.

How does that happen?

The primary means that James refers to is hearing. He also talks about careful consideration. In our lives there needs to be a place for listening, reading, and considering.

If we jump to Paul for a moment, he told Timothy, in his leadership of the church at Ephesus, to give attention to the public reading of Scripture. He told him to preach the word. Churches need to do this. They need to provide opportunities where the Bible is heard and where it is proclaimed.

We have a privilege beyond what James' readers had. We have Bibles. Many of us have multiple Bibles. We have our AVs, our NIVs, our NIV study Bible, our NLT, our Message, our ESVs. There are Bibles with names like the Leadership Bible, the Spirit-Filled Bible, the Student Bible, the Women's Study Bible. There is black leather, brown imitation leather, pink glow in the dark covers. There will probably soon be a left handed golfer's Bible.

But the question is whether we read any of them. If you are going to change, you need to know that change happens when we receive the word.

But here is the big challenge.

Responding.

For James this is the key part. We need to do something with what we receive. If we don't, he says, we are deceiving ourselves. Look at verses 22 to 25.

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 is 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.

You and I have the choice between living a life of deception, in which we are actually the ones who are being deceived, and living a life that will lead to God's blessing. We deceive ourselves when we take the word in but don't do what it says: we are blessed when we do what it says. If you don't do what the word says, according to James you have not really received it.

James gives us the example of the mirror. We all have them; most of us look at ourselves in them; some of us pay a great deal of attention to them. There are people who study their image and then walk away, forgetting what they have seen. The implication may be that they do care enough to do anything; it is possible that there is nothing in particular to worry about. Certainly if the person has seen a blob of marmalade after breakfast, or (dread of dreads) a spot has appeared on the end of his chin, he goes away and forgets about it. Looking in the mirror makes no impact on the rest of this person's day. He may as well not have looked. That is what is happening with the person who hears something from the word of God, or who sees something in the word of God, but walks away without making any adjustment to his life.

James wants to see a faith that works. He wants to see obedience as evidence that a person has received God's word. There is a person who looks, who perseveres, who does not forget, but acts on what he sees. That is the kind of person who will know the blessing of God.

Let's think about self-deception for a moment. Think of Samson. God had gifted this man with extraordinary strength. He tore a lion to pieces with his bare hands. He caught 300 foxes and tied their tails together. He struck down 1000 men with the jaw of a donkey. He pulled up the doors and bars of a city gate and carried them to the top of a hill. He is famous for the story of his relationship with Delilah. She betrayed him. He was certainly foolish to allow her to know the secret of his strength, but when she had his head shaved (in defiance of the terms of the vow that bound him to God), his strength left. You read these terrible words:

But he did not know that the Lord had left him. (Judges 16:20).

When he was attacked he assumed that he could blow away his attackers as he had always been able to do; but the Lord had left him. He was captured, blinded and became a figure of fun until God once again used him at the end of his life.

What is so dangerous is the assumption that everything is going to be all right. Jesus spoke of people who will knock on the door of heaven, desperate to get in, but told to leave. They talk about all they have done in Jesus' name, but Jesus will say that he never knew them. It is interesting that the next thing Jesus does after talking about those people is tell the story of the two builders (Matthew 7, at the end of the Sermon on the Mount.) One was wise and one was foolish. One had a house that stood the test of the storm, while the other had his house swept away. They both built houses. Both heard the words of Jesus. One did the words, the other did not.

Several years ago I listened to someone talk about a Christian book she had read. She said the book had changed her life. That comment bothered me because I knew her and I had not seen much change. God knows her heart and she was not falling into exactly the place that James is describing here: she was determined to obey him. But I think her comment illustrated for me the danger that we think because we have heard something or understood something that we have changed. Perhaps change has begun. But perhaps it has not. There is a sense in which we can only be sure that change has taken place when change has taken place.

Don't assume that everything is as it should be. If no change is happening in your life, don't assume that spiritually all is well.

The word of God comes to us to bring us life and to change us. There are probably some of us who want the life part of that, but we don't want the change part. According to what James is saying here, it is only those people who put what they receive into action who have really received the word.

And that takes me to the third question.

What does change look like?

Verses 26 and 27 fill in the detail of what change looks like.

If anyone thinks 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 their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

You notice that the paragraph begins with more explanation of what it means to deceive yourself. This time it is the person who claims he is religious but has no control over his tongue. That person's religion is worthless.

When James talks about religion he is using a word that talks about the external rituals and observances of a religious system. If you apply it to Christianity, it would be a person who attends church and sings the songs. If that is as far as it goes and there is no impact on the person's life, it is worthless religion.

There are three elements to what James describes. They are not all there is to an effective Christian life, but a fully effective Christian life cannot be any less than this.

- A controlled tongue.
- Compassion on the needy.
- Being unstained by the world.

Religious observance that works itself out in these ways is pure and undefiled in the sight of God. Please notice that our lives are lived out in the sight of God. He notices. What we do matters. How we use our tongues, whether or not our hearts are compassionate, and the measure of our holiness all count in his eyes.

James will touch on all three of these things later in the letter, but we should fill in a few details before we leave this. This is what change looks like.

A controlled tongue.

We have already seen it ("be slow to speak") and we will see it again in chapter 3. If you are a professing Christian who does not have any control over your tongue, something is wrong.

Your problem may be angry words that cut their hearers to pieces. Your problem may be exaggeration that makes you look better than you are. Your problem may be vulgar and coarse talk that gets a laugh but dishonours God. You will know that change is happening by the way your words your words are different.

Compassion for the needy.

Pure religion (or "faith that works") keeps an eye out for the widow and orphan. These are needy people who have no one to watch out for them or stand up for them. They represent the vulnerable people. In our globalised world we might add refugees, or those whose countries are blighted by famine and disease.

Together the widows and the fatherless are a theme throughout Scripture. The compassion of the Old Testament Law provided for them; God is a father to the fatherless and protector of the fatherless; the societal sins of the Old Testament included the exploitation of these groups.

If our religious profession is not leading us to demonstrate compassion to those who are weak and vulnerable, there is something wrong with us.

Unstained by the world.

I think that people talk about "worldliness" a lot less today than they did a few decades ago. You wonder if a truce has broken out; somehow we have discovered that the world is not as bad as previous generations thought it was, so we can lighten up.

When the New Testament writers talk about the world they mean a system that governs the way people live. At best it leaves God out; at worst it stands against him. It is a way of life. It is all

around us. Later in the letter James will say that to be a friend of the world is to be an enemy of God. Here it says that God wants us to keep ourselves unstained by its influence. It is another way of describing holiness.

How would you know what the world's influence looks like? We will have the opportunity to go into this in more detail later in the series, but I think it has at least three main ways of operating. (You will see these in the way the serpent tempted Eve, and in the way John writes about the world in his first letter.)

These are three worldly motivations.

- If it looks good, get it.
- If it feels good, do it.
- If it makes you feel good about yourself, you need it.

There is much that could be said about these three motivations, and I am just mentioning them for now. God wants you to be on your guard; if you notice yourself living like this, be careful. Change means a life that is unstained by the world.

Conclusion.

Would it not be marvelous if God just changed us with the click of his fingers! Imagine you wake up tomorrow and there is no temptation! There are no lustful thoughts. You don't lose your temper. You behave with warmth and kindness towards everyone you meet. There is an uninterrupted song in your heart. Someone is rude to you and you respond with gentleness. There is no sense of arrogance. And you never look back.

There are probably not many of us who have experienced change like that. It is more likely to be a series of steps. There is an ongoing battle with sin. Perhaps you have seen progress in one area but another is more difficult. We cannot forget that on our good days we are never so good that we do not need the gospel and on our bad days we are never so bad that the gospel cannot reach us.

James is telling us to let God's word do his work in our hearts. Receive it and obey it.

Has God spoken to you this morning? Has he convicted you about your words? Or your lack of compassion? Perhaps he has put his finger on signs that you are being stained by the world. It is wonderful if you have seen something today that you have never seen before. But the only way you can be sure you have received the word is when you do what it says. I'd like to encourage you to take one thing. Write it down. Work out what God's word is saying to you on this. Consider his word. Don't forget it. Start to do what it says.