

During Lent this year, I want to focus on one of my favorite books in the Bible, James, taking one chapter each Sunday. James is often referred to as the Proverbs of the New Testament, and is full of practical guidance and moral instructions for each one of us. It is commonly believed that the author is the half-brother of Jesus Christ, who initially didn't believe that his older brother was actually the Messiah, and misunderstood the purpose of His ministry until Jesus appeared to him following His crucifixion and resurrection. After that James became the leader of the Christian Church in Jerusalem. This morning, let's start our study of James in the first chapter and see what advice he has about living the Christian life in verses 16 through 25.

Read James 1:16-25

James does not attempt to give us a deep, theological description of God. Rather, in two short sentences in verses 17 and 18, he draws back the curtain and gives us a beautiful statement about our Lord. He tells us that our God is a gracious God; He is the giver of every good and perfect gift, in other words everything good comes from God. Or as we often say: "God is good, all the time; all the time, God is good!" In Genesis 1:31, it is stated that "God saw everything that He had made, and it was very good." In the Lord's Prayer, we have those familiar words: "Give us this day our daily bread." These words remind us that we are dependent on God for everything, and here James is telling us that God wants nothing but the best for us. God is the source of every blessing, everything good.

The great British preacher Charles Spurgeon went to the countryside to visit a friend who had built a new barn, and on the top of the barn roof was a weather vane with the words: "God is Love." Spurgeon asked his friend: "What do you mean by putting that scripture text on the weather vane? Do you mean that God's love is as changeable as the wind?" "Oh, no," replied the man, "I mean to say that God is love no matter which way the wind blows." In these verses, James reaffirms that God and His love for us are unchangeable.

Now verse 19 has always had a special place in my heart, because it applies to me: "Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger." Now I know this is hard for some of you to believe, but I like to talk. So, I have to constantly work on my listening skills. The ancient philosopher Zeno once said: "We have two ears and only one mouth, therefore we should listen twice as much as we speak." Or put another way: "Your ears aren't made to shut, but your mouth is." To be slow to speak, slow to anger, and quick to listen is always a good policy for life.

How often do we speak or interrupt the other person before they are finished talking? Some people just love to hear the sound of their own voice. Here in verse 19, James gives us his version of the Sermon on the Mount. Pay attention. Listen. Absorb what you have heard. Speak only after some thought. Do not get angry.

A high school class on music appreciation was asked the difference between listening and hearing. At first there was no response. Finally, a hand went up and a student offered this wise definition: "Listening is wanting to hear," not a bad description.

The advice in verse 19 may also be understood as referring to the disputes and differences that Christians have among themselves. Remember there are always two sides to any argument or issue. James is telling us that we should be quick to hear the reason and truth on both sides of an argument, and then be slow to speak, and when we do speak, let there be no anger. If we are to control our words, then we must first control our emotions. How many times have we said something in the heat of an argument that we later regretted. Speak when you are angry, and you will make the best speech that you will ever regret.

When James wrote this advice, communication between people was really only face to face. However, modern technology has amplified the significance of this guidance. Every day you hear about somebody who got into trouble because of some comment that they posted on Facebook, twitter, X, or email. In this world of instant communication, we have forgotten the old advice of taking a few deep breaths and cooling off before responding or reacting to a comment or situation. There's an old saying: "A spoken word and a thrown stone cannot be recalled." A modern version of this saying is: "A tweet, a text or an email cannot be retrieved."

I remember the advice of a former boss who told me that if you had the urge to write a nasty letter, then go ahead and write it. But first put it in the top drawer of your desk and wait three days before sending it. If after three days, you still felt that it was the right thing to do, then send it. As you might expect, most of those letters were torn up before the three-day deadline.

But is this what James really meant by this verse? As I researched this passage, I discovered a little different interpretation. James might have been talking about a person's readiness or eagerness to listen to God's Word. Listening is not the easiest thing for some people.

For example, four-year-old Jason was visiting his grandparents. Grandpa was in his study reading when Jason walked in carrying a peach. He said something, but Grandpa was so focused on what he was reading that he didn't hear him. Jason handed his grandfather the peach. Thinking that his wife had sent him a snack, Grandpa took it and ate it. Just as he swallowed the last bite, Jason, with his lip quivering, said: "But, Grandpa, I didn't want you to eat it. I just wanted you to get the worm out." Grandpa heard him this time!

Thus, James may have been referring to an attitude of reverent and quiet attention to the Word of God. There is no doubt that James, in addition to being inspired by God to write this letter, was also drawing from his experience. James was also a pastor, the head of the Christian Church in Jerusalem, and he had had the opportunity to observe firsthand the different ways in

which Christians practiced their faith. He had seen some people develop disappointing and even dangerous habits with regards to their faith and how they lived the Christian life.

When James tells us to be “swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger,” he may have been talking about hearing the Word of Truth. In the following verses, he warns us to be aware of the danger of “swift hearing.” We are not to make the hearing of God’s Word an end unto itself. You have heard the old saying “in one ear and out the other.” James is talking about Christians who love to hear the Word, but never get around to putting it into practice.

With regards to this issue, Christians fall into two general categories. First, some Christians faithfully listen to the Word and even feel a “spiritual high” because of what they hear, but they never apply the truth of God’s Word to their lives. They are like the thorny, weedy, and rocky soils that Jesus discussed in the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13 in which the seeds sowed by the farmer never took root. And then there are other Christians who are like the good soil in the parable where the Word takes root and their life and behavior reflect the teachings of Jesus Christ.

In verse 22, James tells us to “be doers of the Word, and not hearers only.” One translation of the Bible puts it this way: “Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourself. Do what it says.” Note that the verb tense is present, meaning “keep on being doers of the Word.” No one becomes an accomplished “doer of the Word” in one action or overnight. It is a process of development and growth. Many Christians are like wooden fence posts instead of trees. If we plant a tree, it begins to grow; if we set a post, it begins to decay. We must walk the talk; daily putting God’s Word into action.

Here James is referring to people who go to church and think that simply listening to the reading of the Word of God and the sermon makes them a Christian. They have shut their eyes to the fact that what is read and heard in church must then be actually lived out in their daily life. It’s a lot like thinking that sitting in a garage makes you a car. James reminds us that what we have heard from the teachings of Jesus and from our quiet time with God must be lived out in our daily lives, or there is no point in hearing it at all. The “doers of the word” are those who take what they have heard and with the power of the Holy Spirit translate it into every day, practical illustrations of what God can and will do in one’s life.

In verses 23 through 25, James provides an excellent illustration on applying God’s Word to our lives. He compares it to a man who looks at himself in a mirror and walking away, immediately forgets what he looks like. Christians who merely “hear” the Word of God and do nothing are like this. They hear the Word but soon forget it, and it has no influence on them and their lives. There is no change in their life or behavior. James implies that the Word of God is like a spiritual mirror to our soul. When Christians look into the mirror of the Word, they see the

correct and complete picture of their soul. They see themselves as God sees them. They see the areas of their lives that need to be changed. As a mirror shows us the spots and blemishes on our face, so the Word of God shows us our sins and shortcomings. It shows us what needs to be changed if we are truly going to be the person God wants us to be.

God's Word not only shows us where we are at the present time, but it also shows us what we can become. In the original translation of this text from Greek, there is an interesting play on words here. The word in verse 24 is translated "beholdeth," which suggests only a passing glance. While the word in verse 25 is translated "looketh into," which implies a serious look and close examination. In verse 25, James is suggesting that if we are to be truly blessed and live life as God intended then we need to seriously study His Word and then apply it to our daily lives. We need to make it our instruction manual and our roadmap for life.

Several couples were invited to the home of some mutual friends for dinner. After the meal the host took his guests to the garage to show them his "pride and joy," a beautifully restored antique car. Over the years, the owner had traveled across several states to find the missing handles, lights, and other parts. The upholstery had been replaced with the same kind of material the car had when it was new. And a firm that specialized in restoring antiques cars had painted it to match the original paint job. However, rebuilding the engine had been the greatest expense and challenge. The car was so old that replacement parts were no longer available, so parts had to be custom-made at a machine shop. After three years of labor and great expense, the car had been restored like new. For the entertainment of his guests, the host proudly cranked the engine. It started with the first turn and the motor hummed smoothly, never missing a beat.

Then one of the guests said: "We have known you for years, yet we never knew you owned this beautiful car, let alone that you restored it! Why don't you use it; take it out and drive it?" The host replied: "Oh, I don't want to drive this car. I just like to hear the sound of a well-tuned engine." Many people have religion like that; they suffer from "static" Christianity. It doesn't go anywhere! Their theology is sound enough; they have a "well-tuned" faith. But their religion makes no difference in how they act or what they say. James addresses this problem, contending that ours should be a religion that works; we are to be doers of the Word!

As Christians we are blessed. This blessing does not lie in knowing, but in doing the will of God. We must walk the talk. Remember the old Nike tennis shoe commercial: "Just do it." Let us work and strive to put God's Word and Jesus' teachings into practice not only today, but every day of our lives. Amen.