

James 1. 19-27

How should we listen to talks and sermons? We come here every week and hopefully get to hear some of the teaching from the front. But what is our attitude to the sermon, what do we do with it?

Now, I don't know a lot about wine-tasting. But as far as I understand it, if you are tasting a lot of wines one after another, you are supposed to swirl and sniff and savour, but what you shouldn't do is swallow! I've often wondered about that! It seems pretty bonkers in my humble opinion, to taste the most delicious wine, with the finest bouquet and all that, and then just simply spit it out. Why would you do that? Surely, having tasted the wine, wouldn't you want to swallow it, wouldn't you want to take it in and enjoy it fully?

And so I wonder if sometimes we can listen to talks, or sermons or read books with the same approach as the wine taster? We sample a bit of teaching, we really appreciate it, we think how clear it is, how well applied perhaps? But when all is said and done, we spit it out before it can truly affect our lives? Are we like that...? I know I am!

Well, as Vincent and Ben have already reminded us, the message of James is often challenging and that is certainly the case this morning.

But let's now read all of chapter one of James again before we look at the last few verses of the chapter together.

Read chapter one.

As you read James through, you get the feel that this is more like a sermon than a letter. It is full of earthy illustrations and punchy challenges and application. As we have seen in the last two weeks James listeners have been suffering in various trials. They are being encouraged to keep going. But it seems that there are some who perhaps in the stress of the trial have not been behaving well as believers! There has been back-biting, there has been favouritism, there has been church in-fighting and there has been a desire to merge in to the world and slip under the radar perhaps out of sight of possible persecution. And so James has these two issues in mind as he writes this letter, to encourage his readers to persevere in the face of trials and temptations, and to challenge them to keep living wise and godly lives in the world.

James is wanting to bring his hearers back to the truth of the gospel, back to the word of truth that they have heard from the beginning and to show how that will both encourage them and how it will make a difference to their lives.

This morning we are going to be looking at verses 18-27 of chapter 1 but could I just recap on where we are up to so far in verses 1-18.

I have been trying to work out what the underlying theme of James chapter one is and it seems to me to be a lot about the goodness and kindness of God.

So in verse 5 we are reminded of a generous God who gives wisdom, in verse 9-11, through his kindness he has shown that things are not as they seem- the humble, poor brother is actually more rich than he could really imagine. In verse 12 he is faithful God who promises the crown of life to those who love Him and have shown that love as they have kept going in trials. In verse 13, He is a good God who is not the source of temptation which leads to sin. In Verse 17 He is the source of all that is good and perfect, He is unchangingly good.

And so can you see how that knowing the goodness of God will help us to keep going in the face of trial, and how that same goodness of God will be a pattern for us to follow as we battle with sin, and live out our lives as servants of Jesus. It is both an encouragement to keep going and a stimulus to holy living.

Which bring us to verse 18 where we begin to read about the word of truth. And this word of truth is going to be a bit of a focus for us this morning. If you just scan down over the verses that we read, you will see how often the word- word (!) comes up. Just look down for a moment:

See verse 21, the word planted in you, verse 22, don't merely listen to the word, verse 23 anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man looking in a mirror etc, and verse 25 we read about the man who looks intently into the perfect law (which is again, Gods word).

So why does James begin to talk so much about the word, the word of truth?

Well the word of truth here is basically a reference to the gospel, the good news about God and His kindness to sinners like you and me. In Ephesians 1.13 Paul speaks about how the believers heard "the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation". So it seems James is saying, God has spoken, He has spoken of His goodness in the gospel and it is by those words that you will encouraged and challenged.

So I want us to notice three things this morning about the word of God in these verses.

Firstly it is a **powerful** word that gives life.  
Secondly it is a **planted** word that saves, and,  
Thirdly it is a **perfect** word that brings freedom and blessing.

So, firstly, a powerful word that gives life.

I have been privileged to be present at the birth of three of my four children. Ethan, true to form, shot out so quickly that Vicky didn't even make it to the labour ward and sadly he had arrived before I got to the hospital! But that moment of birth is truly a miracle. That little human life that has been developing in the womb out of sight for 9 months or so, suddenly arrives in the room. Breathing, crying, feeding and so on. One moment there is just mum dad and the midwife, the next moment there is another little person in the room. What a miracle!

And so here in verse 18, the picture is of a birth, it is of life being spoken into existence by the power of God. Where once there was no life, now there is a living breathing Christian person. Ephesians again puts it even more starkly, in chapter two where it says:

"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ..."

So, it is even more remarkable then, because the picture is not just of birth but of resurrection. God speaks His word and it is not simply truth, it is truth that wakens the dead.

Charles Wesley summarised it pretty well in that hymn we sing (?are going to sing), O for a thousand tongues to sing my great redeemers praise. When he goes on to say:

"He speaks, and, listening to His voice,  
New life the dead receive,  
The mournful, broken hearts rejoice,  
The humble poor believe"

So I think the message is this- our spiritual life is not something that we did ourselves. We were dead in sin, we couldn't do anything. We were unresponsive. But God, spoke His powerful word and we are now alive in Him- and the point is this- there is great comfort in that! He has brought us to life, it doesn't depend on us. We may fail and fall, we may be tempted to give up, we may feel that our spiritual life is feeble and weak, but we can be secure in this, He has given us life! And we can be very glad about that!

But then notice secondly, Gods word is a planted word that saves.

Here the picture is different. We move from the labour ward to the farmers field. Here the word of God is planted. It is like a seed that grows. But here there is something different. Whilst I have no say in where or when or to whom I am born, here it seems that I have a part to play in this planting. James says (verse 21) that I am to humbly accept the word planted in me.

There seems to be a contrast set up with the anger he writes about in verse 20, an anger that does not produce the righteousness that God desires, as compared with the humility and meekness with which we receive the word, like a seed planted in good soil that grows into salvation. And its worth noticing here too, that the salvation he speaks about is not just past (that is, something that God **has** done through the work of Christ on the cross), not just future (that is, something that **will be** finally realised when we get to the glory of heaven) but also present. We are right now, being saved as we listen and receive Gods word with humility. We are being changed. The planted word will grow in us.

So look at verse 21 again. See how how our lives must be different. Different morally, different in our speech. We will put off/ get rid of all these things in our lives. The language here is very strong, some versions translate it as rampant wickedness. These are old clothes that we will take off and we will instead live the righteous life that God desires. So as we humbly accept the word, it will change us, our lives will look different.

When we moved house last year there were a number of things that needed doing. There are still a number of things that need doing! One of the problems was a small tree that had seeded itself right by the wall of the corner of the house. One of the first things I did was to cut that tree at the base to try and prevent it from growing any further around the house. Now I have been cutting and sawing and stripping that tree of it branches, I have been persecuting it (!) but it keeps on sprouting, it keeps on growing, there seems to be no stopping it.

And so don't miss the encouragement here too. Once the planted word has taken root, there is no stopping it. Despite persecution or trial, it will keep on and keep on growing. So there is great comfort in that. As we go on humbly receiving this word, it will keep on growing, we will go on being saved until that final day.

And this brings me to the third point this morning:

Gods word is a perfect word that brings freedom and blessing.

Is it not possible to say all the right things, to live the right way, but to take little delight in it? Is it not possible to look alright on the outside, to have a good understanding of the truth of the gospel, but to have no joy?

I think the answer to that is- Yes!

Well, I think this is what James moves onto think about next. Look at what he says then in verse 22. Don't just listen, but do. Don't just listen to the truth, live it out. And as you do that you will be blessed- verse 25.

And he uses the illustration of a person looking in a mirror.

So I don't know how many mirrors you have in your house. We seem to use mirrors a lot these days, not just for checking that we look nice, but also to make our houses seem bigger. But James has in mind someone looking in a mirror, and they see perhaps that there is a line of snot from the babies nose on the shoulder of their fleece, or they see that there is chocolate ice cream on their chin. And they think, I have baby snot on my fleece or "I have chocy ice cream on my chin" and then they walk away from the mirror and get on with their day! They don't change their fleece, they don't wash their face. They have looked in the mirror, and it has made absolutely no difference to what they do.

They have seen the mess they are in, they have seen the issues, but they have done nothing about it. We can be so like this when it comes to hearing the word of truth. We are very good at listening. We can sit through sermons, we can attend conferences, we can discuss the ins and outs of a particular verse, but it make no difference to our lives. Perhaps we are shown up some area of our lives where we are not living out Gods love and Gods grace. Perhaps the word of truth shows up our pride or arrogance, an area of bitterness towards a brother or sister, a grumpy or sulky spirit... but we walk away unchanged. Perhaps there is a challenge to share our faith in obedience to the command of Jesus and we hear it... but we don't do it.

And I think this is where the message this morning rubs and causes us some discomfort. Or, at least, it does for me.

So what is James answer to this.

You see the flow of what he says: don't be like that, but be like this. Don't be like that person who walks away from the mirror without changing, but be like the man who looks intently and is changed. What does he look at? He looks at: The perfect law, or the perfect word that brings freedom.

So this law that frees us, this seems to be a strange thing for James to say doesn't it? We talk more about being bound by the law. I am bound by the law of the land to drive at 70 MPH on the motorway- a law which, as my children will tell you I do – of course- keep all the time! But here James talks about a perfect law that frees us. In what sense are we freed by this law?

Well, firstly, what law is James referring to? And why does he call it a perfect law?

I think to answer that question we need think back to Jeremiah and chapter 31 and remind ourselves again of Gods promise of a new and wonderful covenant with his people, when he would write His law on their hearts. They would be given new soft hearts that would receive and internalise Gods law. No more would the law be something that was externally enforced but it would be a law that His people would desire to keep, a law that they would love to keep. Psalm 19 talks of this perfect law that will revive the soul, a sweet and precious law that brings joy to the heart.

It is the fulfilled law that Jesus talks about in the sermon on the mount. Jesus said He had come to fulfil the law, to show us that the law must be obeyed from the heart.

But how does it free us?

I think in two ways: firstly, it is Gods law for the people He has made. And as such we will be living according to the makers instructions. We will be living as God intended us to live. We will be enjoying the fullness of life that God has created for us and there is freedom in that.

But there is more.

James talks about deceiving yourself. In fact twice he mentions deceiving yourself, both in verse 22 and in verse 26. And he seems to be saying, that if we listen, but don't follow that up with action then we are in serious danger of thinking we are something that we are not. We might think we are good and living in the light of the gospel truth, but actually we are not. Our lives are not consistent with what we hear and with what we say. We are in a

sense living a double life. We say one thing and we do another. We listen to a talk and we nod in agreement, but it makes no difference to our lives. And I think that there is no freedom in that. There is no joy in that sort of life because we are constantly hearing one thing and doing another. Isn't that actually a really tiring and restricting way of running your life? The point I am trying to make is that there is freedom in obedience because you are being what you say you are. And that is freedom! You are living out what you listen to. There is freedom in being consistent.

And so I think James is saying:

If you spend your life listening to stuff that you are not doing, then you are being disobedient, you are deceiving yourself (into thinking you are something that you are not) and you are losing out on freedom and joy! You are missing out on the blessing that God has for you as you walk in his ways, as you live out what you listen to!

So he says, keep doing what you hear. Don't stop obeying.

And James is immensely practical isn't he? He doesn't just leave it there. He goes on to say what this sort of life will look like.

You have heard that God is kind and good and generous. You have been shown that as you have listened to the word of truth, as you have understood the gospel.

So now, keep looking at the Father, look at what He does and copy it!

Don't say stuff that you will regret later. Rein in your tongue. Speak words that are full of grace, the same grace that you have heard in the words of God.

Copy His kindness to the fatherless and the widows. Don't ignore the plight of the poor around you. Don't turn away from the vulnerable. Don't hold tightly to your riches. How can you see the kindness of God to you and not be kind to those who you see in need!

Copy His holiness as you keep yourselves pure in the world. How can you see the goodness and holiness of God and yet try and blend in with the majority, living a life that is indistinguishable from the world.

Hear God's word of grace, receive it in your hearts, live it out and be blessed.

Lets pray.

Do not get drunk on wine... instead be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5)