

# WHEN YOU LISTEN

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## James 1:16-27

Do you long to experience the fullness of the blessing of God, but feel like your fighting against all sorts of different obstacles? I think that's the vibe you get from the story of Jacob in the book of Genesis. From the very outset, Jacob is scrapping and fighting to make the most of his life. His whole childhood is spent contending with his older brother Esau. In dishonesty and deception he outwits Esau to claim the blessing of his father. Once he leaves home he spends 14 years — 14 years — in a battle of wits with his Father-in-Law Laban. He is tricked into years of hard labour before he finally gets the last laugh. Year after year, Jacob's life is marked by these cunning plans to claim for himself the blessings of God.

The great irony of all this, however, is that in the middle of all Jacob's striving, he receives the vision of Genesis 28. In that vision, God shows Jacob that he doesn't have to work *up* to win God's blessings. That ladder coming down from heaven is a picture of God's blessing coming down from him, freely offered to be simply received. And that vision is underlined by God's words of promise. God says, "I will be with you...I will give you...I...I...I..." Jacob doesn't have to *do* anything, he simply has to trust God's word. This lesson will take Jacob a whole life-time to learn: *God's purposes are fulfilled through his word of promise, not through merely human wisdom and power.*

Now, why would we start today with a random recap of the story of Jacob? Well — and here's some Bible trivia for you — the english name *James* in our Bibles is actually a translation of the name Jacob.

In the Greek New Testament, the book of James is the book: IAKKOBOS. This is "Jacob's" letter. And in God's providence, it just so happens that the lesson of Jacob's story is echoed in the message of "Jacob's" letter.

As James writes to Christians scattered around the world, he addresses them in the midst of many kinds of trials. These scattered believers could easily feel like the whole world is against them and wonder how on earth all their trials fit with the plans of God. And so James wants them to know: *God's purposes will be fulfilled in and through them by HIS WORD of promise and not through merely human wisdom and power.*

Just like Jacob, Christians don't need to work *up* to earn God's blessings. For every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father of the heavenly lights. (Verse 16)

We don't need to resort to trickery or deception or anger of any other worldly strategy. *For God's purposes are fulfilled as his people humbly hear and do his Word.* And in this passage, James gives us two images to help us know what it really means to listen and to do his word. James says the Word is like a seed, which we receive. Planted in our hearts it grows the good fruit of the gospel.

And the Word is also like a mirror, which reflects the truth to us — the truth about ourselves and the truth about the world. And as we search it intently, it will help us to change our lives to fit the reality which we see in God's Word.

Today, we're going to consider each of those images as James presents them to us. And as we do, may God work in us so that our stories—both as individuals and as a church—would be characterised by the humble listening and the patient doing of God's Word.

## 1. Humbly Receiving the Word

So firstly, James speaks as the Word like a seed, which must be humbly received. In particular, I think James is contrasting two different responses to the many kinds of trials that he has spoken about already in chapter 1.

In trials, and maybe especially the trials we face *because* of our faith in Jesus, there is always the temptation to respond in anger. We can lash out with angry words to defend ourselves. We could even respond with violent actions, doing to our enemies what they have already done to us. Our instinctive response to trials is to *do* something about it. To take matters into our own hands, to get out of the trial whatever the cost.

James says, “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger *does not produce the righteousness that God desires*. Therefore, 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.”

Outrage and anger and a lack of listening and constant talking are just as prevalent today as they were in the first century. Sometimes you get the sense that anger is even lifted up as a noble and necessary virtue. The way to really get things done is to get really worked up about it.

And it’s so easy for us as Christians to be sucked into a culture of righteous indignation. We can think that our own zeal can usher in the Kingdom. But James tells us that this just doesn’t work. Anger is a dead-end—a lie sold to us by the devil. In chapter 3 James will say just that: “such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual and demonic.”

And so James counsels us to take a different path. Instead of taking matters into our hands, he tells us to humbly take the word of truth into our hearts. Instead of speaking out quickly, we should listen quickly and intently to the promises of God. Instead of rising up in anger, James encourages us to persevere with righteousness. For God’s purposes will be fulfilled by the power of *his* Word, which James says is planted *in us*.

It's in this way that the Word is like a seed. And here James is borrowing an image from his brother Jesus. Jesus once said to his disciples that the Kingdom of God is like a tiny little mustard seed. It's planted in the ground and then produces a glorious tree, that spreads out and covers the whole earth. And I think James is getting at a similar thing. How will God's kingdom grow? How will the righteousness of God be produced? How will the message of the gospel spread out to the very ends of the earth?

**Through the life-creating power of the little seed.** The word of the gospel is not something big and impressive by the standards of this world. We proclaim that the crucified Jesus has been made King over all the earth. How foolish! How strange! And the life of the church is not loud and intimidating. We spend our time quietly listening to God speak in the Scriptures, and learning to love one another as Jesus has loved us.

It doesn't seem like much. And in the middle of a trial it might even seem like madness. But when that seed is planted in the fertile ground of receptive hearts, it *will* grow.

Instead of anger and outrage and indignation, God grows in us the fruit of love and joy and peace.

Instead of a community of deception and suspicion, God's church will be marked by kindness, generosity, faithfulness.

Instead of lashing out in violent speech and action, we will become a people of gentleness and self-control.

And through growth and transformation, Jesus says the world around us will also be transformed as his Kingdom grows.

Now, a seed will grow slowly, yes, but surely. For that little seed is filled with the life-giving power of God. As individuals hear the gospel and receive it. And as churches hear the gospel and put it into practice. New life bursts into bloom.

And history testifies to the truth of Jesus' promise and James's wisdom. For the scattered and scared Christians that James was writing to in this letter could hardly have been any less impressive or powerful. But over centuries the seed of the gospel has grown and grown, and it continues to grow today. Jesus' kingdom has spread even to us here and now, not through a show of anger or display of strength, but through the gospel, taught and lived in the life of the church.

Like Jacob, our own strategies and schemes, our own anger and outrage cannot save us. In fact they will only drag us and others down into much deeper mess. As the author Marilynne Robinson observes, "A little too much anger, too often or at the wrong time, can destroy more than you would ever imagine." But the word of truth, planted in us, really can rescue us. Both from our own unrighteousness, and ultimately from every trial. You could say that a little seed of gospel truth, listened to often enough and at the right time can bring about a greater transformation than you would ever imagine. So James urges us, with meekness and humility to receive the Word of God.

## 2. Intently Searching The Word

The word is like a seed. And James also says the Word is like a mirror.

Look again from verse 22:

*“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 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.”*

Receiving the word, is not simply a matter of having it or hearing it. James says that true reception of the word will lead us to put it into practice. To not merely listen to the word but do what it says.

For as we look into God’s Word it reflects back to us the truth about ourselves and the truth about the world.

This is why James calls us to look intently into the *perfect law that gives freedom*. For only the God’s word can show us how to live in God’s world as we were created to live. And if we listen to God’s word but don’t change our lives based on what we hear, we’re like the guy who sees in the mirror that he’s put his shirt on backwards but then just leaves the house without turning it the right way round. That’s not freedom, that’s just foolishness, and God calls us to know the full and free life that comes from conforming our lives to reality. And so we must look again and again into the mirror of the word. And we must really look intently, with the intention of recognising ourselves, and reordering our whole lives around the truth.

The internet is full of random trivialities, and one of my favourites is the twitter account: people selling mirrors. They post pictures that people have taken trying to sell their mirrors. And the results are hilarious.

Here are a few of my favourites. [slides]

The ridiculousness of these pictures comes from the fact that you really can't properly approach a mirror as a detached observer. It's not meant to be photographed and admired. It is designed to be looked into, to draw you in that you would actually look *at yourself*. And the same is true of the mirror of the Bible. Yes the Bible is historically interesting, and literarily brilliant, and theologically rich. But if we approach it merely as a piece of history, or a work of art, or a treatise on theology we miss the point. God speaks to us in the Bible so that we would look into it, to draw us in so that we would actually look at ourselves and so be transformed by the truth.

And so what James is saying here about the Bible is something so important for us to hear, because it is so easy to forget. The Bible is full of information. But it is *practical* information, that changes how we live. First and foremost, the Bible tells the story of God's work in Christ. The Lord Jesus is the shape and content of everything in the Scriptures. But to insist on the centrality of Christ is not a narrow insistence because Christ is not narrow. He's cosmic. And following him encompasses all of life.

And so true religion, James says, will not be characterised by just saying the right things, or knowing the right information. True religion, is religion conformed to the reality of Christ. James says 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. 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.*

True religion will be marked by the love of Christ for the least and the last and the last. And true religion will not follow after the wisdom of the world but will cling to the truth of Christ. We will move confidently out *into* the world, but we will remain distinct *from* the world. Like the lord Jesus we will stoop down to serve the outsider and the outcast, and we won't give in to the temptation to grasp for glory, or raise ourselves up by our own strength. Because the Lord Jesus shows us that this is how reality works.

This is the pattern of the life of Christ, and it is the path to freedom. And as we see this pattern repeated again and again in the story of the Bible, we will start to see all of reality through the lens of the gospel. And day by day, and moment by moment, we will find ourselves choosing the way of the cross, not the way of our own glory. We will start to look more quickly to the needs of others than our own. We'll recognise and turn away from the empty promises of the world. We'll reject the lies of the devil and the twisted desires of our hearts. And we will grow to depend on God's word of promise and not our own wisdom and power. Because we will know more and more that we can trust God our Father to lift us up and give us life.

This, too, will be a slow process of growing and maturity. Just as it takes a baby months and years to recognise themselves in a mirror, and then several more years to really understand how this works; we will need to keep patiently looking into the Scriptures, not always seeing ourselves clearly, not always knowing how to put it into practice. But we'll keep looking because we trust that our kind Father desires to grow us up, making us mature and complete, more and more like our older brother Jesus.

The Word of God is like a mirror and so 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.*

## James's Letter → Our Stories

And so can I ask you again. Do you long to experience the fullness of the blessing of God, but feel like your fighting against all sorts of different obstacles? Well, in his letter, James shows us the way forward. Not through our own strength and strategies, but through humbly listening to the word, and looking intently into the word. Receiving what God says to us in his word, hearing it, and putting it into practice.

And to finish today, let's consider how that plays out in our stories. As individuals, as a church, and even as a whole society.

So, individually, in our own Christian walk, we long for greater personal intimacy with God, greater progress in our righteousness, and to know God's purpose in all that we do. And the great temptation is to seek a short cut. A "life-hack" as the kids say these days, to fast-track our growth and godliness. But James here has shown us the slow and patient path of Christian progress. You will grow as you cultivate the seed of the gospel in your heart. You will grow as you look intently into the mirror of Scripture and conform your life to what you see.

Why? Because Christian growth does not come from adding more and more on to what you already have. Instead it comes by going deeper into what God has already given to you. We don't need tricks or trade-secrets, for we already have all that we need to grow: the Word of truth. As Dane Ortlund says:

*Christian growth is bringing what you do and say and even feel into line with who, in fact, you already are [in Christ].*

And so Christian growth will not be particularly sexy or spectacular. Like watching a seed grow it will not immediately take your breath away. But it will, through patience and perseverance, grow to *be* something breathtakingly beautiful. And so brother or sister, keep receiving the Word however you can, keep hearing in as many different ways as possible, keep looking intently into the Bible and asking God to help you see yourself

clearly, and transform you powerfully. And as you do, God will work wonders in your life. As the writer to the Hebrews says, “We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.”

[A particular word to parents:

As much attention to your kids soaking in the Scriptures as succeeding at school? Do you urge and help them to practice looking into the Bible as much as you urge them and help them to practice an instrument? Do you make it as easy as possible for them to go deep into the Word at youth group, or kids church, as you do for them to do well at soccer or basketball or netball?

I know that as parents you want your kids to flourish in the faith, and that it must seem like you're constantly swimming against the cultural stream. And with your kids as much as anything else, there are no tricks or trade secrets to protect your kids from trial in the Christian life. But in the Word of God there is everything you and your children need to persevere through trials, that they might grow up to be mature and complete in every way. They might not be top of the class, or a clarinet prodigy, or a soccer star. They will be so much more, a child of God, who lacks for nothing in the kingdom of heaven.]

What, then, about us as a church. If you're anything like me, you long for our church to be a place of vital faith. For the light of the gospel to shine out through us, and for more and more people to know the good news of Jesus. How wonderful would it be for our church to be full to overflowing with people exploring Christianity, coming to faith in Christ, and learning to follow Jesus in all of our life?

And if you're anything like me you might wish for some ministry silver bullet to catapult our church into stratospheric growth. Let me know if you find one, but I'm pretty sure there is not a silver bullet. There's no magic formula that makes churches grow.

But there is a seed. And there is a mirror. And as we devote ourselves to hearing and doing what God says to us in his word, our church *will* be fruitful in whatever way God determines that to be. It won't be sexy and spectacular. But again, it will be beautiful. James has given us the blueprint: care for widows and orphans, keeping ourselves unpolluted by the world. Will we be a church that learns to see the needy in our midst and visits them in their distress?

Will we be a church that acts like the world around us:

striving for status,  
grasping for glory,  
consumed by outrage,  
bursting out in anger,  
never listening,  
always speaking?

Or will be a church that follows the way of Christ:

stooping to serve  
lifting up the lowly  
giving generously  
offering forgiveness,  
quick to listen,  
slow to speak,  
slow to become angry?

For if we follow the way of Christ, we will be a church pleasing to our Father in heaven, and who will be used by him to further his purposes in the world — whatever that may look like.

And finally, we can think even bigger. For I think many of us long not just for the transformation of our church, but for the changing of our culture. Don't you long for our suburb and our city to be marked by genuine faith in Jesus, and for the love of Jesus to be lived out at every level of society? Don't you long for God's kingdom to come *on earth as it is in heaven*?

And don't you feel great sadness at the hostility and the ignorance that so many have towards the gospel? Maybe you even face the trial of family or friends or colleagues rejecting you because of your faith in Christ?

What hope do we have in the face of a world set against the good news of Jesus? I can tell you it will not be your angry Facebook post about the latest Christian scandal in the paper. It will not be the clever put down of your unbelieving friend. It will not be the tit-for-tat with your family member over dinner. It won't even be your water-tight apologetics arguments that win you the debate every time.

We may feel like we are in the midst of unprecedented social change — and that may or may not be true — but we must believe that the wisdom of James remains unchanged. The world was once changed by the quiet and faithful witness of Christians and churches who were, at heart, hearers and doers of the word. And it can be again. We must simply be who we are — followers of Christ and the family of God — and we must do what we do — teach and preach, sing and pray, love and serve, break bread and share fellowship. And who knows what God will do in us and through us?

The Old Testament Jacob was indeed blessed by God. And through him and his family God did indeed bless the whole world. But only when Jacob gave up all his strategising and scheming and trickery and deception and started to simply depend on the promises of God. It was only when Jacob lost his swagger and began to limp that God was able to lift him up. It was only when he started *listening* that he could really receive what God wanted to give him.

And the New Testament Jacob tells us the very same thing:

*My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. Therefore, 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.*