

Listening and Doing

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[0 : 0 0] well let's pray once again for God's help as we come to his word together let's pray heavenly father we thank you that you're a speaking God you've spoken to us in the person of your son and you have through your spirit authored these words for us and we pray therefore earnestly for the work of your spirit among us today that we might be people who do not merely hear the words that you've given to us but absorb them into our whole beings and into every part of life have mercy on us we pray in Jesus name amen a question can anything really change change I wonder if you've ever asked yourself that question can anything really change I'm sure you have there are things in life that are wearisome painful difficult to live with and after a while having dealt with that wearying difficulty for a bit you say to yourself I really wish things could change have you ever wished politics could change for the better everybody promises a new way of doing things no one seems able to step out of the old groove of doing things do you ever wish people could change for the better the great rift in your family which started decades ago over something so trivial nobody can remember it now but continues to grind on have you ever ever wished that could change have you ever wished church could change for the better seems such a simple command of the Lord Jesus doesn't it love one another as I have loved you and yet it's so hard to do have you ever wished you could change for the better or do you find yourself bumping into all the same old deficiencies and inconsistencies and habits of relating to other people that you've always bumped into if you've ever wished for change this morning is a great morning to be here because today's passage is a passage about change in a letter about change

James if you remember is writing to Jewish believers who seem to be under pressure from outside their church but he's writing to them because of bad behavior to one another inside the church family there are loads of examples of nasty behavior in this letter destructive speech horrible favoritism neglect of people in need fighting squabbling it goes on and on how can those sorts of things change well encouragingly James believes that real change can happen look at verse 19 please the heart of today's passages verse 19 to 21 my dear brothers and sisters take note of this everyone should be quick to listen slow to speak slow to become angry pay attention he says be quick to listen slow to speak slow to anger my guess is that that is exactly the opposite of what's going on at the moment they are slow to listen and quick to speak and all too quick to anger don't do those things says James verse 20 because human anger does not produce the righteousness that

God desires therefore and here's the change get rid of all moral filth and the evil that's so prevalent and humbly accepted word planted in you which can save you you see what he wants he wants them to stop speaking and acting in that dysfunctional way and once again turn towards God and humbly receive the gospel message which can he says save them he wants them in short to repent and believe to turn away from the thing they are doing and humbly receive the gospel message again now let me make two preliminary observations there is something tremendously encouraging about this little section notice he thinks that change is really possible it can be done he says God's gospel is really powerful enough to affect change even in the most dysfunctional of relationships but notice also that there is great realism about this though it's possible to change it is not simple and it's not inevitable verses 19 to 21 actually are a potted summary of the whole of this letter stop doing that start believing the gospel again but notice we don't just get three verses we get six chapters of it why because we have all kinds of ways of avoiding gospel change sometimes we deny there's a real issue to be dealt with oh I know that people do behave badly towards one another but that's not me or we recognize there's a problem there but don't want to turn away from it

I know it's there but that person was so unkind to me I don't think I could ever possibly forgive them or we believe that we do need to turn away and pretend that we've done it when in fact we haven't there are all kinds of ways of avoiding gospel change it takes the whole of this letter for James to drill through the defenses and unpick the issues today we're going to get a little taster of how he does that now if you've been with us so far you'll know that this chapter has started very gently and generally one meets many difficulties in life many trials says James it's possible to respond to them single-mindedly with trust in God asking for his help with difficulty it is also possible to respond in a double-minded way looking like you want to go God's way in life well not really wanting to go God's way in life now this week

James zooms in on the person who's in two minds wanting to go both ways what is going on in the double-minded person and what needs to happen well I'm going to look at this under two main headings first when trials become temptations and we're dealing here with verses 13 to 18 when trials become temptations it's based around two negatives look at verse 13 no one should say and look at verse 16 don't be deceived two negative commands what's going on when you feel deep down like responding negatively to life's trials verse 13 when tempted no one should say God is tempting me for God cannot be tempted by evil nor does he tempt anyone he moves from trial verse 12 to temptation verse 13 from the thing that happens in life to my tendency to respond negatively to the thing that happens in life the human heart does not always respond positively towards the trials in life the human heart often says when something difficult comes along this is really horrible

[7 : 51] I'm not happy which of course are true and valid statements but we very quickly move on to other things this is not what I signed up for I'm going to stop trusting God now I do not want to look at this with godly wisdom I don't care what God has promised for my future I do not want to ask for God's help with this difficulty now I want to be for example bitter or angry or resentful I know that kind of anger is not right in fact it might even be sinful but if God wanted me not to be overcome by bitterness why did he bring this thing into my life now how could he expect me to behave any other way than that which I want see it's very easy to blame our actions on our circumstances let me give you a really trivial example I used to work in hospital I was often up late in night in hospital and when people are up late at night and tired and busy they tend to rub one another up the wrong way from time to time

I found myself getting angry inside and every time there was this inward dialogue what's up with you then? I'm angry what are you angry about?

everything who are you angry with? everyone well why don't you ask God for help? you know he always he know he always helps you when you ask for help I don't want to I want to be angry I've every right to be angry I didn't sign up for this being up late at night with these ill people thing well actually you did ask God for help and every time I didn't want to and every time eventually I asked God and he helped now that is a trivial example and it would be comic if it weren't so typical of my response in every area of life it's difficult it's unfair it's an outrage I didn't sign up for this difficult thing to which God says yeah you did actually remember Jesus words if anyone would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me you signed up for the Jesus way of doing things in life a cross carrying everyday pattern a pattern of life marked by injustice and unfairness and hardship that's what you signed up for when you became a Christian you signed up for glory in the future not comfort now remember what God has promised you a crown of life perfection of character in a perfected world for all those who follow after the pattern of his magnificent son and yet I very quickly say make it nice now God then I'll trust you and then I won't be angry and then I'll love my brothers and sisters make it nice now and if I'm responding badly

I'm tempted to say to God well you brought the circumstances along what else did you expect me to do but respond this way incidentally that's very like the Garden of Eden isn't it remember Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden what does Adam say to God when he sins well if you hadn't brought this woman along and what does Eve say to God well if you will make animals and snakes and that kind of thing what do you expect see they blame God's providence for their problems and their bad behavior human experience is full of such examples if God had wanted me to be cheerful instead of a grumbler why did he make my life the way it is now if he wanted me to be content why did he make my financial circumstances so stretching if he wanted me to be kind and patient and faithful why did he give me such a difficult spouse if he wanted me to love my Christian brothers and sisters deeply from the heart why did he bring these ones along there's no way that God could expect me to behave differently given what he's given me in life if he wants me to be godly let him change things then I'll be godly in response to that

James says verse 13 come off it no one squeezes God into sinning and God doesn't squeeze us into sinning either God is not in the business of making us respond badly in life where does that temptation actually come from well verse 14 each person is tempted when they're dragged away by their own evil desire the temptation to respond wrongly to circumstances comes not from out there but from in here if I find myself not being godly it's me that's doing that not God now folks let me say this just as gently as I can for there are many very difficult things to face in life there are many painful evil things that are deeply unfair there are some things that will happen to you that are so difficult that constant day by day hour by hour turning to God is needed just to keep your head above water all the same our circumstances are not the cause of our bad behavior sometimes it seems a little thing to respond that kind of way to God but James in characteristic fashion looks down the line look at verse 15 then after desire has conceived it gives birth to sin and sin when it's grown up gives birth to death he pictures a family tree parent child grandchild one leads to another leads to another that well if God had wanted me to behave better he should have made life nicer for me seems a small thing but says

[14:12] James look where it leads in the end when it grows up when it takes on its final form now in fact God is not a person who wants us to do evil things in life what is he really like and what has he really done and what does he really want he goes on verse 16 what is God really like don't be deceived my dear brothers and sisters every good and perfect gift is from above coming down from the father of the heavenly lights who does not change like shifting shadows what is God really like he is as fixed in his goodness of character as the stars are fixed in their arrangement in the heavens that's how steadily good he is the thing that God brings into our life are not a product of meanness or inconstancy or trickiness or sleight of hand no all that

God brings into life is part of his design of a route to maturity in the end and a crown of life what is God really like whether we can perceive it or not God is unchangeably generous as a giver what has God really done verse 18 he chose to give us birth through the word of truth notice the contrast with verse 15 human desire gives birth to sin and death God's gracious choice has given birth to something completely different through the suffering and death of Jesus God has started his people out on a different path to a different destiny not death but life something quite undeserved entirely of his own initiative and what does he want from us in the meantime well he wants verse 18 for us to be a kind of first fruits of all he created not squabbling and fighting

God wants now the beginnings of a demonstration of that perfection that will one day be fully rolled out because of the work of Jesus does God bring bad things to happen to us in life in order that we respond badly quite the opposite says James let's step back and just breathe for a moment our first section when trials become temptations what is James doing in this section well he's making this point I think that in behind our different responses to trials are two different views of God on the one hand a view of God that sees him as someone who puts me in difficult circumstances which don't really look as though they're for my good and can't really expect that

I'll react well to those on the other hand a view that God is a God who's graciously brought a life giving word into my chaotic life through his spirit and longs to see good fruit from that now same circumstances you see totally different mental picture of God leading to different sorts of behaviors why is James doing this well he's just about to tell them to stop behaving badly verse 19 this adds a new dimension a vertical dimension and the point that he's making here is that fundamentally it's our picture of God that drives the way we relate to one another let's face it brothers and sisters human beings can be a real trial I can be a real trial but when in trial

I am tempted to lash out to retaliate to sharpen up my tongue and use it destructively I have to be reminded that I have a problem not merely with my human being on the horizontal plane fundamentally my problem is with my view of God on the vertical plane if I want to behave destructively to his people that demonstrates an attitude to his character not merely to them now that is a very uncomfortable connection to make isn't it because sometimes I really want to be able to think of myself as a person who really does love God while behaving badly towards my brothers and sisters while reacting negatively towards them while speaking negatively about them James will not allow that kind of division of being that's the double mindedness

[19:50] God my my dear brothers and sisters take note of this everyone should be quick to listen slow to speak slow to anger because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires why change the way you behave towards one another because that human relationship is fundamentally a God issue relating that way is not what God desires so when I speak and act destructively towards my brothers and sisters I show that I am not doing what God wants doesn't matter what I think and says James verse 21 therefore get rid of all moral filth and the evil that's so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you which can save you stop doing what you're doing put that behavior away humbly receive the gospel message again now that's been quite a long point but it's an important point temptations there's an attitude to God involved in that not merely a reaction to people second section verse 22 to the end and we'll be a bit quicker here this section deals with the danger of self deception do not merely listen to the word

I take it he means the gospel word there 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 the 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 I take it he's still talking about the gospel there and continues in it not forgetting what they've heard but doing it they will be blessed in what they do the point is a very simple one James knows that it is easy to listen to the gospel message and agree with it in your head and yet not do anything in response it's all too easy to hear it and think that you've taken it to heart and yet it doesn't change anything and so he uses this illustration of a mirror he pictures two men one who looks into a of this illustration well some have said the point is that one just glances at the mirror but the bloke who looks into

God's word looks deeply into God's word so that the issue here is not looking deeply enough into God's word so applications spend loads of time in the Bible deeply in the Bible and that will do things I don't think that's the point that's being made here the words here do not imply that the chap looking in the mirror just glances in the mirror no the point that's being made here is that one person responds to what he's seen and the other person does not respond to what he's seen so picture a bloke getting up in the morning he's feeling a bit rough it was a late night last night he looks in the mirror he sees well it's not good greasy hair bits sticking out all over the place a couple of days with a stubble eyebrows all over the place and he has a huge spot right on the end of his nose and he thinks I'm really glad

I remember to look in the mirror so he gets on with getting ready to go out to work he has breakfast he brushes his teeth he puts his clothes on he takes the dog for a walk and off he goes to work and yet of course he's not ready to work for he has not responded to what he saw in the mirror he seen the problems of the hair and the eyebrows and the zit on the nose but he has not given any attention to those things yet in some way he has thought that looking in the mirror was enough to deal with the problem when of course one only looks in the mirror in order to take action to what one finds there action with the flannel and the razor and the shampoo a mirror is an agent of change that's the point the person who looks in the mirror in the morning and doesn't deal with what he or she sees might as well have not looked in the mirror disturbing isn't there about a person who having seen all that stuff in the mirror does nothing in response now put your hands up if you didn't look in the mirror this morning but you may be able to tell the people who didn't look in the mirror this morning by having a look around the congregation this morning who has taken action who is not everyone who looks in the mirror takes imagine going out with a huge zit on your nose if you knew it was there what is

James doing here he's making their current behavior seem as stupidly absurd as it really is what kind of blindness what kind of internal disconnection is involved if a person sees a facial issue and doesn't take action so what kind of self deception is going on when people who call themselves gospel believers behave with carelessness pride malice towards one another what kind of blindness is going on there can you imagine anyone doing that says James well of course we can imagine someone doing that Christians behaving badly towards other Christians the callous indifference the dismissive attitude the arrogant word the malicious gossip the long held grudges and resentments the frank hostility one does not have to look far from that for that how unusual is it not unusual how absurd is it it's as blind as looking in the mirror and not dealing with the spot

[26 : 11] I was speaking with a minister friend some time ago an older man he said my great fear is that people come to church every Sunday and nod at the truth they put ticks beside all the things they agree with crosses beside those things they don't nothing changes when they leave how terrible to get to a stage in life where the gospel message makes no more demands on me than it already has when I do not expect God to rule over me for change anymore where I expect the Bible to confront me but not transform me when I do not expect that my life will be in disagreement with the Bible and I'll need to change terrible place to get to but that's where James's hearers are don't just listen do it and so aware is he of the possibility of inaction that he spells out what that might look like verses 26 27

I think these are situationally driven by the way this is what I mean things from James to this particular situation those who consider themselves religious and don't keep a tight rein in their tongues deceive themselves what use is that religion as we know in this letter bad speech is a really big issue religion that God our father accepts as pure and faultless is this to look after orphans and widows in their distress and keep oneself from being polluted by the world we know that these people are dismissive of low status people and on a high status people it's a particular issue for them James is spelling out what the change might mean for these people well friends our time has gone we're at the end we've dipped our toe in James chapter 1 we've dipped our toes in a letter which is a really a rather nasty pond full of relational dysfunction let me ask as we close this question can change really happen

James is writing because he believes it can what God has done in Christ through the gospel applied to God's life by the spirit can change things but change is not straightforward or simple if it were we wouldn't need this kind of letter in the Bible at all it would be just really simple to change sometimes change is made doubly difficult by the fact that the difficulties that have come to us in life have come to us at the hands of God's people again this letter assumes that that's what's happened sometimes hurts at the hands of God's people are particularly difficult to deal with very painful to get over if they were easy this letter would not be necessary so in closing what to do if we want to change let me say three things first do not forget

God's wonderfully generous character God is tremendously kind he does not treat us as our sins deserve he is a steadily generous giver he's given us his son who endured great hostility for our salvation from those who ought to have received him he's given us his gospel he's implied his gospel to life to our lives through his spirit he's a wonderfully generous giver none of that deserved nothing will help us more in our attitude to our brothers and sisters than to be reminded of God's undeserved generosity towards us don't forget God's generous character second don't forget God's ultimate plan James has said that God promises a crown of life in the future to those who love him from where you're standing now that may seem a long way off and you may not be able to get even close to seeing how the things that

God has brought into your life now could possibly be part of his plan to lead you to a crown of life if that's you consider for a moment Jesus and all that happened to him in the whole of the created order could you find anything more wicked to do than murder the creator and what could be more unjust than condemning the sinless one but even now we can see how those tremendously wicked things have been woven right into the center of God's rescuing plan evil things which God is big enough to take up and weave into the heart of his plan if he can do that with that kind of wickedness then he can also do that with all the difficulties that come to you in life that's a great encouragement do not forget

[31 : 48] God's ultimate plan he is well big enough to cope with the things that you can't understand and can't see the purpose of he has got a plan in the end and third do not forget that people matter deeply to God people are easily dismissed our attitude to people is easily minimized but so important are our relationships with one another that God says our relationships with one another our attitudes to one another speak to us about our attitudes to him himself don't forget God's generous character don't forget his ultimate plan and don't forget that people matter very deeply to him let's pray for his help in taking his word to heart God cannot be tempted by evil nor does he tempt anyone every good and perfect gift is from above coming down from the father of the heavenly lights he chose to give us birth through the word of truth that we might be a kind of first roots of all he created my dear brothers and sisters take note of this everyone should be quick to listen slow to speak slow to anger because human anger does not produce the righteousness that

God desires just a moment to reflect on what God has said to us and then I'll pray for us God we thank you that you're a wonderfully generous giver quite undeserved you have given to us such riches in your son we pray that you would please bring the truth of your character to bear on our lives in such a way that we are quick to listen slow to speak slow to anger we pray that you'd help us to bear with one another in love to be patient to be kind to love one another as you have loved us help help us if we've been wronged by one another or by other people to continue to remember your generous character your ultimate plan and that people matter to you very deeply indeed by your spirit would you graciously grant us change in life we ask this for your name's sake amen for to to to take and continue to make good ■ for to to to to to to to to