

One of my pet hates are people who when I have a discussion have lots of suggestions for me but then very rarely do you see them actually do anything. They'll sit and give advice or their thoughts on a situation, talk till the cows come home, but when it comes to applying it into action, they're sitting back observing or then too busy to engage. This is an issue seen in every day life and the church is not exempt. And this is where we are today with James – he wants to get people to be more active in their faith. Let's look at what he says.

In verse 19 James says "Take note of this". Essentially he wants us to stop for a minute and consider what he is saying. To take note of something means you need to stop what you're doing. In other words, slow down. It is so easy to be the reverse of James' command. It is easy to be quick to speak and quick to anger. We need to slow down and listen to what others have to say. But more importantly and more relevant to the context, we need to listen to the word of truth (1:18). How often do we stop and listen to what God has to say through his Word. We are often moving so fast and are so busy we will not stop and listen to the word of the Lord. Even now we may not be focusing on the word of the Lord, but on what we are going to do this afternoon, what we are going to eat for lunch. We simply need to slow down. It's impossible to take James' words - to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger until we slow our lives down and focus on God. I always have to remember that I have not been built with a set of wheels attached to my body – I'm not designed to run at full pelt all the time, and therefore James knows that in order that we can be more effective for the work of the Kingdom we need to stop for a minute and take note.

He also says in verse 19 to be slow to anger. A bit like a spring coil if we just keep tightening ourselves by doing so much, eventually something is going to blow. We have so much to do that we are wound tight and every little thing sets us off. Let's stop squeezing God out by doing so much, by being too busy, and by having no time. Slow down and pray. Slow down and read the word of God. Slow down and come to worship. Slow down and come to small groups each week.

Sometimes we can get caught in the trap of doing so much in church life – in our services to God - instead of sharing the load across the body of the church. So I'd encourage all of you who are involved a lot in church life to take a good look at what you are doing and ask yourself the question – am I on a short fuse maybe because I'm involved in too many things.

James then goes on in verse 21 and says to get rid of all moral filth. He's calling for a spiritual house cleaning. It is a picture similar to taking off filthy clothes after a long day working outside. This is the proper response to the word of the Lord and being quick to listen. Learn from the Lord and put away all that's not righteous and pure. The true Christian does not allow immoral, filthy behaviour to remain in his or her life. Now many of us may assess our lives and think, well I'm not sleeping around, I'm not stealing and therefore ignore these words as if they don't apply. But in all of us there are aspects to our lives that need a house clean – it could be how we talk about people behind their backs, how we gossip, how we abuse our bodies by eating too much junk or not caring for our bodies with regular exercise. All of us need to get rid of the things that constrain us from a deeper walk with God. For the word of God to work, it must be planted in a heart that is not full of weeds. Jesus taught a parable about the condition of the hearts of people who hear the word. The weeds will choke out the word so that it will not have its proper effect.

I worry that for the majority of people who come to church, they allow the Word of God that is read each week to go in, but then go away the rest of the week and allow other things to sink in like newspapers or TV or the internet, and never pick up the Word of God until the next Sunday. James is telling us to get rid of all those things and let God's Word sink into our hearts so that it will influence every part of our lives.

Verse 22 – 25 remind us that hearing the word must be followed by obedience. With the word of God implanted in our hearts, it must sprout, grow, and bear fruit. Putting the seed in the ground is not the goal. Bearing fruit from the planted seed is the goal. I've vegetables in my conservatory at the moment, but they won't bare fruit unless I am constantly looking after them. The same should be said for our hearts. They need fed, they need pruned.

James uses this brilliant illustration of a mirror, and he's right. Who would look at themselves and then not fix something about themselves. If that was the case what would be the point of having a mirror. Similarly in life, a person hears what God says about their life and identifies the problems, but then just carries on regardless. And I think this is a deep problem for the Church. We come to worship and we hear what we need to do. The word of God exposes our lives and we are made aware of the flaws and mistakes that we have in our lives. But rather than fixing our flaws, we walk out the door forgetting that God convicted our hearts with a message that was supposed to spur us to change our lives.

By contrast, the Christian keeps looking and doing. The Christian looks in the mirror, sees the flaw, and goes off to fix the problem. The Christian is always studying, always examining, and always fixing. And this is the one who James says is blessed.

And so finally, James defines for us what God accepts as pure religion (verse 26 & 27). It's the control of the tongue, the care of those less fortunate and those who seek after purity.

The tongue is such a dangerous part of the body which needs to be controlled. James will go into more detail about controlling the tongue in chapter 3. He uses the picture of the bridle on the tongue. The tongue is supposed to be reined in. Verse 19 reminds us that we are to be "slow to speak." We must watch what we say and think about what we say. Ask yourself every time you speak – is it necessary, is it encouraging, does it glorify God. If not, then consider reining in your tongue.

James then picks up on the issue of compassion for those less fortunate in society. Orphans and widows were the most helpless people in Jewish society. They had no one to provide food or clothing for them. The scriptures are filled with this teaching from the Old Testament to the New Testament. Listen to 1 John 3:17-18 *If anyone has this world's goods and sees his brother in need but closes his eyes to his need—how can God's love reside in him? Little children, we must not love with word or speech, but with truth and action. (1 John 3:17–18)*. Let's remember that we don't need the ministries of this church to be the only means of offering compassion – how can we address this amongst our neighbours?

Finally, James tells us to keep ourselves from being polluted by the world. Folks, we must be distinct and different from the world. It is not popular today to go against the tide of what society considered as right. But we must be fed by the Word of God alone, and more often that will mean we are going against how today's culture operates.

1dt September 2021 James 1:17-27 Hear, Read, Mark, Learn

So let's consider all this today in our own lives, and reflect on whether at the start of a new term there are things we need to look at in the mirror about our own lives and review. It's a good time to do this. As James says, let's stop and take note. Let's put away those things that do not give glory to God in our lives. Let's hear the Word of God and be obedient to it.

I want to finish with an old Collect which I think sums up perfectly today what James is getting at, so let's pray :

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.