

Undivided in word and deed

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[0 : 00] Today's reading is taken from James 1, verses 19-27.

Thank you.

And the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you which can save you. The 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.

And the evil that is so important.

[2 : 21] So, this is the word of God. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you, Lao Seng, for the excellent Bible reading. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Shall we just make sure that the Bible is open in front of us, the James 1, verses 19-27.

Thank you, Lao Tse, Lao Tse, Lao Tse. Thank you, Lao Tse, Lao Tse. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, indeed, please give us an undivided mind, an undivided heart, an undivided love for you. Help us to be people of the word, people who delight in your word, who wants to take your word to our hearts.

[3 : 30] So may your Holy Spirit be doing that this morning and let the word do its work in us. All this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

What is a counterfeit? Those of you who were at the recent Sunday School conference would have heard me say this, but let me mention it again. What is a counterfeit? It's something that looks like the real thing, but isn't the real thing.

So if I were to go to somewhere in Petaling Street in KL, I could probably pick up a gold watch that looks like a Rolex. The claps, the casing, the crown logo all look authentic.

But if you were to actually pay attention to the details, you would soon figure something out. So for instance, if you were to look closely at the serial number and notice that the numbers just look a little bit fuzzy and it doesn't actually glow, you know you have a counterfeit.

Because you know that the serial numbers on a real Rolex are crystal clear and they even glow from a certain angle or so I'm told. So you might happily believe that you've got a real bargain, you own a real Rolex, when actually what you have is more or less worthless.

[4 : 50] In today's passage, James mentions worthless religion. You see it down 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.

Like those Rolexes, this is religion that looks like the real thing. After all, there were clearly those who assumed that they were truly Christian. And if you wear those Rolexes long enough, you might even convince yourself they're genuine.

But though it might look like the real thing, it's not the real thing. So you end up deceiving yourselves. And James' point is simple.

Worthless religion is what you end up with if you go for counterfeit Christianity. And worthless religion is of absolutely no value in God's economy.

Just like counterfeit currency, it won't be accepted. So that leads to the natural question. How do we tell? How do we know if we are the real thing or not?

[6 : 05] How do we know if we are bearing the marks of authentic Christianity? Or simply wearing the garments of counterfeit Christianity? That's what Pastor James turns his attention to in today's passage.

He helps us to look out for certain markers that show whether we're going for real Christianity or simply counterfeit Christianity. And it all revolves around our attitude to God's word.

I wonder if you notice how central the word is in today's passage. In verse 21, James talks about the word planted in you.

In verses 22 and 23, he says quite a bit about how we should respond to the word. In verse 25, he goes on to mention the perfect law that gives freedom, which in context is a rough synonym for the word.

It's another way of referring to the same thing. All these, of course, are references to the word of God. But even in verses 19 and 26, we find that the focus is still on words.

[7 : 20] There's references to speaking and listening and our tongues. So our attitude to words, and God's word in particular, matters.

This is how we know what is authentic religion. This is how we can work out if we're living as real Christians. What marks us out is our attitude to God's word.

And so let's examine two key markers in relation to God's word that distinguish authentic Christianity from counterfeit Christianity. Firstly, real Christians listen to God's word.

Real Christians listen to God's word. Let's see how James works this out. Look at verse 21.

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.

And I want us to begin by noticing the nature or character of this word. Notice that this word is a gift. It's a word that is planted in you and me.

[8 : 37] You and I didn't plant it in ourselves. Do you remember last week? That incredible gift that God has given to each Christian? Just look back to verse 18, the verse immediately before our passage this morning.

Verse 18. He, God, chose to give us birth through the word of truth. And James now says in verse 21 that this very word of truth is like a seed.

It was sown by God, the gardener, when he made sure the gospel was first proclaimed to us.

Through someone, somewhere, at some moment in time, we heard about Jesus Christ.

And we heard that this anointed king, that's what Christ means, anointed king, that this anointed king chose a strange route to glory.

He chose to die like a grain of wheat that falls to the ground, even though he's God. That's one image that Jesus himself used to describe his mission.

[9 : 45] And he did it to make spiritually dead people like you and me come alive. For when that seed was sown, when that word was heard, it was firmly planted in the soil of our hearts.

Not all who hear have this word implanted in them, but real Christians do. For once implanted, the word takes root, and new life is born.

The seed sprouts. New birth happens. New hearts are given. A new kind of human being is being produced, as we said last week. That's how real Christians come into being.

Real Christians are new kind of human beings. That's what happened the moment you believe.

That's what happened the moment you acknowledge that only Jesus can save you, and only Jesus can direct your entire life.

Farmers call the physical process germination. Theologians call the spiritual process regeneration. And it's pure gift.

[11 : 01] So all real Christians have this word planted in them. But I wonder if verse 21 still puzzles you. Notice that James says, Humbly accept the word planted in you.

Now that wouldn't sound so strange if he was speaking to non-Christians. We would simply think that he is saying, Oh, receive the gospel. Accept the gospel.

But remember, James is speaking to Christians here. And so he's saying, Receive what you already have.

Receive what is already in you. That sounds strange. What does he mean? Well, think again about seeds.

When they're implanted, they grow roots. And when they grow roots, a plant sprouts. And what do plants do? They grow.

[12 : 05] That's the natural thing for them to do. But for them to grow, they need light, food, and water. And they don't need it just as a one-off.

They keep needing those things. And in fact, the bigger the plant, the more water they need. And the more water they need, the more their roots need to dig deeper to find that water.

That's kind of what's happening here. The word has fertilized us, if you like. But as growing plants, we need to keep receiving the word like we receive light, food, and water.

We need the word to keep working in us, to keep us alive. We need to keep digging deeper into the word. There's a parallel in 1 Thessalonians 2, verse 13, where Paul writes, And we also thank God continually because when you receive the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.

Now notice the logic of this verse of Paul. Paul thanks God for the Thessalonian Christians who have accepted what Paul tells them about Jesus. They've accepted his message as God's word.

[13:40] But it doesn't stop there. That very same word continues to be at work in those believers, nourishing them, cultivating them, developing them.

Or to use another analogy, it's like our relationship to oxygen. We have oxygen inside of us already. It's implanted into the system of our bodies, if you like. But that doesn't mean that we don't need to keep receiving oxygen.

The moment we stop receiving oxygen, we have no life. But if we keep receiving and accepting oxygen, it's preserving us for life.

In a sense, it's saving us. And that's the same with the word. As we accept it, as we breathe in the word, we are being preserved.

[14:48] It's able to save us, as the end of verse 21 puts it. Well, no wonder we need to accept it with humility. It's pure gift.

And that's what we mean when we say that our core convictions as a church is that we are gospel-centered and word-driven. It just means constantly breathing in the gospel.

And the Bible like we do oxygen. Week by week, day by day, second by second. And so we must receive the word and let it do its work in us.

But how does the word do its work? Well, the rest of the paragraph tells us. Look at verse 19. My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this.

Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. It seems at first glance as if James is simply offering a general piece of proverbial wisdom.

[16:00] It's the sort of inspirational quote that you might find on Facebook or on a poster at a hipster cafe. And on one level, that's probably true.

James is giving us this kind of proverbial wisdom. In a sense, it's asking us to internalize what the book of Proverbs says. Let me just give you one example.

Here's Proverbs 17, verse 27 to 28 on the screen. The one who has knowledge uses words with restraint. And whoever has understanding is even-tempered.

Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent and discerning if they hold their tongues. And so the word is doing its work when we internalize verses such as this, which is telling us to exercise self-control rather than committing verbal diarrhea.

We know it all too well, don't we, how words can easily destroy? Some of us here this morning can probably remember hurtful words said to us even though it was many years ago.

[17:12] And we've all probably had the experience where we jump to conclusions because we spoke before we listened, only to be proven wrong.

I can think of a moment earlier this year where I spoke carelessly because I felt irritated that a person wasn't getting involved in something I thought he should, only for his daughter to explain the person's circumstances to me.

If I had just held my tongue for a minute longer and simply listened, I would have saved myself embarrassment and more than that, I would have saved myself slipping into sin and hurting somebody else.

the daughter was very gracious to me. And I would have saved myself getting needlessly angry. As James explains, verse 20, human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

If the word is working in us, we expect God's righteousness to be put on display. But when the word is not at work in us, well, we display our unrighteousness instead.

[18:27] Elsewhere in the Bible, of course, we do know that it's possible to have righteous anger. It's not necessarily the case that all anger produces bad fruit.

we should get angry at false child marriage, for instance. But Pastor James is not stupid. He knows that 98% of the time, we cannot claim that our anger is righteous anger.

Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent. So yes, I think on one level, James is offering us general proverbial wisdom.

But I think on another level, he's actually doing more than that. He's saying, yes, in general, be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry, like the book of Proverbs says.

And he will come back to this theme in chapter 3. But more than that, he's saying, in particular, be quick to listen, not just to each other, but to God's word.

[19 : 48] Notice the larger context. The focus in verse 18, right before verse 19, where we find this little proverbial saying, the focus in verse 18 is on the word of truth.

And then, at the end of this paragraph, he answered with this main exhortation in verse 21 to humbly accept the word. The focus is on God's word.

And so James is saying, yes, be quick to listen, but be especially quick to listen to God's word. Be ready to keep listening.

Be ready to let God's word be your final authority and guide in every area of your life. There's no picking and choosing.

So when God says, consider it joy when you face trials because you know it will produce endurance and perseverance, be quick to listen.

[20 : 52] When God says, believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position as children of Christ. Be quick to listen. When Jesus says, if your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off.

Be ruthless with your sin. Be quick to listen. And to be quick to listen means that we have to be listening in the first place.

that's the mark of a real Christian. That's a sign the word is truly at work in you, that your Bibles are open. And the reverse is true.

Are you consistently showing a lack of interest in a sermon that is faithfully seeking to explain the Bible in its context? Are you seeking out sermons that has only jokes, anecdotes, and inspirational quotes?

Are you always avoiding studying the Bible, whether with others or on your own? Do you prefer Christian groups that major on social activities but never touch the Bible?

[22 : 05] Are you secretly saying to yourself, I know it already, so I don't have to open the Bible and listen to it any longer? Well, if so, that's a warning sign.

I'm not talking about a missed quiet time here or there, or the fact that we sometimes struggle with concentration on a Sunday. I'm talking about a persistent lack of listening.

Real Christians listen to God's word because it is life to them. It's oxygen. Are you listening? And we have to really listen.

Imagine that you told me that you love Star Wars. You keep going on and on to me about all the movies and the books and how it's superior to Star Trek, which you actually hate.

But on your birthday, I bought you Star Trek stuff instead. When asked why, I just say, oh, but in my mind I know you really love Star Trek.

[23 : 13] You're just pretending you don't like it. You'd be offended, weren't you? Because I've twisted your words and your meaning.

But that's what we can do to God's word. We all have certain frameworks and filters that we bring to the text. That's not a problem in itself.

But it's when we allow those frameworks to override the text, to filter what it says so that it says what we want it to say, rather than letting the text of Scripture correct our frameworks.

That's a problem. That's not listening. That's imposing our meaning like I did to that person with Star Trek. And that's why it's so important to us for God's Spirit to help us overcome that, to read the Scriptures in community, to learn to read the Bible properly and check that it's being read in context of the whole Bible.

We need to listen properly. It's especially challenging if we have a certain framework on particular issues that we've held for decades.

[24 : 31] but if we're shown from the Scriptures that that way of thinking about, let's say, the Holy Spirit or that way of thinking about, let's say, the social justice or a certain tradition or what the priorities of the Christian life should be, if we're shown from the Scriptures that our way of thinking is flawed, well, we must be ready to listen humbly to God.

We must be ready to adjust our thinking even if we've taught that certain way for 30 years. It might take a while. It might be a real struggle.

That's okay. That's understandable. That's to be expected. But the key point is, are we ready to let God correct us? As the British theologian, Michael Ovi, was born not saying, are we willing to let God disagree with us?

Or are we simply quick to get angry if God's word contradicts what we think? Are we quick to talk back to him? Your sexual ethics is nonsense, we might say to God.

It's not good news to people who need to be true to themselves. But only if we were slow to speak and quick to listen, if only we were patient and we dug a bit deeper into the scriptures, well, we would realize that God says no to certain sexual acts precisely because he wants to say yes to a richer vision of relationships, of what it means to be truly human.

[26 : 13] That is for our good if we were slow to speak and quick to listen. Are we quick to interrupt God and bargain with him?

You know God, you know that verse about not giving up meeting together to encourage one another? That's optional, right? What about this? I'll give more to charity next time, then I can skip that instruction, okay?

James also talks about caring for the poor, right? But we need to listen to the whole counsel of God. We need to be willing to let God disagree with us.

We must not gag him. And that will be a sign that we are living as real Christians and not settling for counterfeit Christianity. That's the first key marker.

Real Christians listen to God's word. Here's the second. Secondly, real Christians live out God's word.

[27 : 23] As the word does its work in us, it will end up getting us to work out the implications of our salvation. Verse 22, do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves.

Do what it says. Now, notice, it's not either or. It's not you don't need to listen, you don't need to study God's word, you don't need to pay attention, you only need to do.

That's not what James says. He says instead, do not merely listen. So it's a both and.

Here's a great analogy I once heard another pastor give. Just think about cycling. I believe we have some keen cyclists in our congregation and the bicycle is a great invention, isn't it?

It's a great mode of transportation. You can go to your friend's house down the road, you can go to the park nearby, you can bypass heavy traffic. But imagine that you're about to cycle and one of your pedals fall off.

[28 : 34] So you say, oh well, no biggie. Why don't I try to move on one pedal? Well, picture the scene, you trying to ride your bike on one pedal.

How did it go? Probably not well at all. You make very little progress. You don't go anywhere. You need both pedals.

And what James is saying here is that you need both pedals in the Christian life. Listen to God's word, live out God's word. Listen to God's word, live out God's word.

Listen to God's word, live out God's word. That's how it works. To go anywhere, to make progress, it's constantly listen to God's word, live out God's word.

No point having one without the other. A few of us are like me. I enjoy reading, I don't mind studying, I'm nerdy, I like theology.

[29 : 37] Well, that's one pedal, but I need the other to move. Probably more of you are not like me, that's probably a good thing.

You're not bookish, you're glad to leave school behind, you're just all action, that's how you're wired. But you need the other pedal too. You need to listen, you need to study.

Otherwise, your actions are futile, out, they lead nowhere. Or your direction is wrong, they lead somewhere, but far from God. So we must connect listening and living together.

Doctrine and deed. Listening leads to living. Doctrine leads to deeds. It's not one versus the other, they are undivided.

otherwise, James says, we're deceiving ourselves. We're fooling ourselves. And to hammer this home, he gives us this illustration, verses 23 and 24.

[30 : 50] 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.

It's like someone peering into a mirror, who notices that there's still some shaving cream on his chin, a bit of soya sauce near the lips, some leftover makeup on her cheeks, but then goes to work without doing anything about it and completely forgetting about it.

We fail to act, and that's silly. Notice again we have both pedals at work here. We need to look at the mirror of the word before we act.

We need information. We need instruction. We need illumination. We need to listen. And when we look at God's word, the mirror, it gives us all those.

The word directs us and discloses our sin to us. It helps us to see what is wrong with us, spiritually speaking. We all have blind spots, but the Holy Spirit uses the word to expose that.

[32 : 11] As we read the Bible, the Bible actually reads us. I once had the experience in Bible College where one evening, I was reading my own sermon which I had already preached weeks before.

But as I read it, I found the explanation of God's word convicting me, almost as if I was just listening to somebody else. I can't remember now what the exact issue was, but I remember knowing that I had to change.

The word exposed me. In fact, last night when I was looking through this sermon again, I had that same experience that I needed to do what I preach.

God's word is living and active. So we need to listen. We need to act. It would be foolish if there's revelation without alteration.

For when we don't obey, we deny ourselves of good things. Look at verse 25. James' point is simple.

[33 : 35] Obedience brings freedom. Obedience brings blessing. blessing. Not in a transactional sense, if I do it, I'll get blessing.

But in a parallel sense, as I obey, I am blessed. Do you feel like your Christian life is stuck lately? Do you feel bored?

Well, let me ask you, are you obeying? Are you living out God's word? Because living out God's word is always stretching. It takes you out of your comfort zone.

I mean, consider trials to be joy. That's stretching, isn't it? Be devoted to one another in love. Be faithful in prayer. Practice hospitality.

Those are all things that God says. And that's all stretching, isn't it? If you were to truly live it out, considering how to welcome others, how to challenge people to live out their faith, to think how to serve them practically, how to share the gospel with them, it makes life more busy, more inconvenient.

[34 : 48] But I tell you what, if we were really stepping out in faith and obedience, that would mean that the Christian life is never boring. It's always an adventure, because it's always teaching us to be dependent on God, to obey, all his commands.

You would have noticed that James refers to the word as law here. Why? Well, the scholars debate, but perhaps one reason is because James wants to highlight to us again that the word invites us to do something, to obey, to live it out.

He wants to take us away from the attitude of, hmm, this passage isn't relevant to me, to the attitude of, God, your word is always relevant, but sometimes I'm blind to its relevance.

Would you help me apply this? And as a result of working those pedals, listening to God's word, living out God's word, we find true freedom.

Too often, our default mode is that God's word is constraining, it's stifling, it's inhibiting. But imagine playing badminton, but without any rules.

[36 : 14] Soon you will be arguing about who should serve from where, whether that was in or out, whether that was really a service fault or not. It leads to chaos.

And frustration. But when you have rules, you can enjoy that classic match between Lee Chong Wei and Chen Lung, because it's clear what is in and out, especially with Hawkeye.

It actually leads to freedom to play the game well and enjoyment of the game. That's what God's word is actually like. When we live by God's word, we are led to freedom and enjoyment and that makes sense, doesn't it?

If God is the father who gives generously and without fault, it makes sense that his word will lead to freedom and enjoyment. So real Christians live out God's word.

That's the second marker. And when we listen and live out God's word, we can be confident that we won't have worthless religion. The evidence will be there.

[37 : 24] what will happen is verse 27. To look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

James is actually going to major on both points in the coming chapters, so I won't say much more here. But notice that God's word will transform us in every area. Some Christians think that other Christians care too much about social justice and not enough about personal character.

Other Christians think the reverse, that too many Christians only worry about individual ethics, but not the social implications of the gospel. Well, James says real Christians are undivided in their concern for both, although how they express it will look different from individual to individual.

But as James finishes this section, well, he reminds us we need to listen. We need to listen to all of God's word.

Are you picking and choosing which parts to listen? Well, don't deceive yourself, James says. Don't be satisfied with the counterfeit. And we don't just merely listen.

[38 : 52] We need to live it out. Have you confused knowledge of God's word with obedience of God's word?

Well, remember, we need both pedals. But don't ever forget, this is the word that was planted in you.

It's pure gift. It comes from God. It's his doing. And you can trust that as you keep humbly accepting God's word in you, the word will do its work.

God will grow you into a beautiful plant. And accepting God's word means accepting the central message of God's word, the grace found in the Lord Jesus.

The fact that we can run to Jesus, find forgiveness there, find redemption there, and find the power, the resurrection power to live for him there.

[40 : 03] So keep our eyes fixed on him, and let's paddle together. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we pray that this morning we would not merely listen to the word, and so deceive ourselves.

We pray we will not be like that person who looks at his face in the mirror, and after looking at himself or herself, goes away and immediately forgets what they look like.

But Father, help us to humbly accept the word planted in us. We pray that we would indeed remember that it is all pure gift.

And Father, we just pray that we would indeed continue to cycle, to work those two pedals, to listen to your word, to live out your word.

Father, perhaps there are a number of us who are beginning to realize that perhaps we are not actually Christians. We pray that your word will do its work in them too, that they will accept your gift purely from you, and they will be ready to live for you as people who are undivided in heart and mind.

[41 : 42] All this we pray in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.