

James 1:22-25

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] What are the great longings and aspirations of the human soul? What is it that we long and strive for? I guess different folks might give different answers to that question, even amongst us here this morning. There may even be cultural or generational variations in the answers that would be given. What is your answer? What do you most long for or aspire to?

I'm pretty sure that even over time and culture and across generations, some common or shared longings are present. We long to be free. Men and women have always longed to be free. Perhaps less stirring, but a universal and cross-cultural aspiration is that very simple human desire to be happy. I just want to be happy is something that many folk have said and maybe many more have thought, maybe longingly. I just want to be happy. Is that you? Do you just want to be happy? Me too.

Freedom and happiness. They're easy enough to identify, but a lot less straightforward to procure and guard and enjoy. Intriguingly, in the couple of verses that we'll be considering this morning, James, the author of the letter, points out for us the road to freedom and the secret of happiness.

Can you see him speak about or make reference certainly to these themes in the verses that we have read? Verse 25, but the man who looks intently into the perfect law, that gives freedom. At the moment we're not working out what he means by that, simply noting that he sees this as an outcome that we can know and enjoy. We can enjoy freedom. And then he also speaks of happiness or blessedness.

At the end of verse 25, speaking about the man who not only listens but who does God's Word, what does he say about him? He will be blessed in what he does. He will enjoy happiness in his life.

[2 : 48] Freedom, happiness, freedom, happiness, blessing. So, these great longings and aspirations that we all have have to do with what James is talking about here. And so, it would be a good idea to listen carefully to what he has to say about them. And I think we can summarize the whole matter of what James is saying, the argument that James is making. We can summarize it all in one sentence. Freedom and happiness are to be found in listening to what God says, and in doing what God commands.

Listening to what God says, and doing what God commands. But we need to flesh this out a little in the light of what James says in these four verses, verses 22 to verse 25. And the way we're going to flesh it out is by posing and answering four questions to the text. First of all, we're going to ask the question, where do we hear God's voice? And we're going to explore much more briefly how we are to listen to God's voice, having identified where it is that we can hear it. How are we to listen?

Then maybe the crux of the matter, how are we to respond to God's voice? And then finally, what are the outcomes of the two possible responses that James identifies? And so, these are the questions that we're going to be considering and trying to answer in the next few minutes.

First of all, where do we hear God's voice? Now, for some, the call to hear God's voice may appear to be no more than a cruel or fanciful tease. Well, that's all very well. I have to listen or I have to hear God's voice and do it, and then I'll be happy. Then I'll be free. But where am I going to hear the voice of God? How am I supposed to hear God's voice? Indeed, the very idea of hearing God's voice is often spoken of in terms of people who have kind of lost the place. Is it not just crazy people who hear God's voice and then go and commit some unspeakable atrocity? That's the way we speak about the very notion of hearing God's voice so often. We need to be clear on how and where we can hear God's voice. And James identifies God's voice with what he calls the Word. Verse 22, do not merely listen to the Word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. The Word. This is what we're to read. This is what we're to listen to. This is what we're to pay attention to. But what is the Word? Well, James has used the same language already. Notice in verse 21, he speaks about the Word planted in you. Going back a little bit more in verse 18, he speaks of how God chose to give us birth through the Word of truth. This expression, the Word of truth, is best understood in the light of what

Paul says in his letter to the Colossians in chapter 1. And I'll just read verses 5 and 6, where we see what this Word of truth is identified very clearly with. So, I'm just simply reading from this first chapter of Colossians, of this you have heard before in the Word of truth, comma, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing, as it also does among you since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.

[6 : 44] The voice or Word of God that we need to listen to is the gospel, the evangel, the good news. This is the good news about Jesus, who He is, and what He has done. This is the good news that we find from Genesis right through to Revelation, from the beginning to the end of the Bible. It is the good news about the God of grace and the grace that brings life. This is where we hear God's Word in the Bible, in the good news of the gospel that we find contained in the Bible. So, we hear God's voice as we listen to the Word. But James, in these verses, also identifies the voice of God in another way or using another expression. He speaks of the perfect law. Notice there in verse 25, but the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom. Now, it seems clear as we read these verses that the Word that He speaks of in verse 22 and the perfect law that He speaks of in verse 25 are to be seen as two names for the same material, the same voice, the same Word of God. But each expression highlights a particular characteristic of the material or message from God. And if we move on to this expression, the perfect law that we are to look intently into and listen carefully to, well, the word law points to commandments that are to be obeyed, the ethical demands that God places upon us in the Bible.

And to speak of this law as perfect is possibly simply acknowledging that it is perfect. It is God's law, and it is without fault or blemish of any kind. Or it may be that James, in using this expression, the perfect law has in mind or has in the background the manner in which Jesus provided a perfect interpretation of the law in His teachings, and very especially in the material that we find in what is known as the Sermon on the Mount that we read from just a few moments ago. So, in answering the first question that we've posed, where do we hear God's voice? Well, we hear God's voice in His Word. We hear God's voice as we look intently into His perfect law, into the Bible and into the gospel, the good news that the Bible contains, but also including the laws and commandments that He has given us that might guide us in the manner that we should live. Let's move on to the second question. How are we to listen to God's voice? It's one thing, and a very important thing, to identify God's voice, but how are we to listen to His voice? And to address this matter, James compares listening to God's voice or reading God's

Word to looking in a mirror. This is the comparison that he makes or the illustration that he employs. So, how are we to look in a mirror if it is going to serve any useful purpose? Well, we need to look carefully in the mirror. And what do we see when we look in a mirror? Well, it's simple enough. We see ourselves. We see our blemishes as well as, hopefully, one or two redeeming features. Well, how are we to look into God's Word if we are to hear His voice clearly? Well, we need to look into God's Word. We need to study it carefully or intently, to use the language that we find there in verse 25. And what do we see when we look in the mirror of God's Word? Well, we see ourselves. We see what God is like. We see what God has done for us. We see what God requires of us. And if we continue using the picture of the mirror, we see what God wants us to look like and what we need to do to look like and become what God wants us to look like and become. We see all these things when we look intently into His Word or perfect law.

So, we're to look carefully and intently into God's Word. But let's move on to really the heart of the matter, which is the third question that we're posing. How are we to respond to God's voice? Well, James, as he develops the illustration of looking in the mirror, identifies two alternatives. The first is that we can forget what we see and do nothing. And the second option is that we can note what we see and do something about it. Well, let's think about the first one. We can forget and do nothing.

Let's think about looking in a mirror. Imagine me looking in the mirror this morning. What did I see as I looked into the mirror? Apart from my youthful good looks. I know that's what you were all thinking.

[12:12] But no, apart from that, what did I see? Well, imagine, and I'm going to invite you to imagine here. Imagine if I were to have spotted maybe just a little bit of blood in the color of my shirt, the product of a careless shave. Or imagine if on my tie I'd seen a blob of strawberry jam, which I probably wouldn't have noticed on this tie. But anyway, let's call it blackberry jam.

Anyway, I'd seen those things as I looked in the mirror. What should I do in the light of what I've seen? Do I walk away and do nothing? Well, obviously not. I need to identify what needs to be done, and I need to do it. I need to change my shirt and, at the very least, wipe my tie with a damp cloth.

Doing nothing is not an option, or in any case, it's not a very good option. To do nothing is to make a mockery of looking in the mirror in the first place. If I do nothing, the question is, well, why did you bother looking? What was the point of having a mirror? What's the point of looking in a mirror? If you look in it, you see something that needs to be done, but you simply walk away and do nothing. It serves no purpose. And James is warning against such an approach to God's Word, and it's easily done. In fact, I think we do it all the time. You come to church, you listen to the sermon, you hear God's commands, you understand in a measure what has been said, and then you go home, we go home, I go home, and do nothing. You quickly forget and just carry on as before. Or maybe at home you read the Bible. It's good if you do that. You hear God directing you in the matter of some duty to be performed or some sin to be repented of, but you walk away and you do nothing. Such a response makes a mockery of listening to God's voice. Indeed, it is to mock God Himself. Well, that's one response to God's Word. You can forget and do nothing. Or, and this is what James recommends, obviously, you can take note and do something. What is involved in this right response to God's Word?

Well, we can maybe identify some of the elements that James identifies in this right response to God's Word. It involves, of course, this looking intently. You could argue that even the one who walks away and does nothing may have done that, possibly, but it certainly involves looking intently so that we can be clear on what God is saying to us. But then James also uses this language of continuing to do this. There in verse 25, but the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues to do this, this persevering in intently hearing what God has to say.

It's possible that in using this language, James already has in mind the idea of doing. It's as if he envisages a process whereby we listen and do, listen and do, listen and do, and both kind of feed off each other this continual process, listening, doing, listening, doing, listening, doing. I think that's the idea that James has in mind when he uses that language of continuing to do so. He also speaks about not forgetting in that same verse, taking careful and deliberate note. We sometimes imagine when we think about forgetting, we sometimes imagine that if we forget to do something, somehow that frees us from moral responsibility, for some duty ignored, and it doesn't. Oh, I forgot. Oh, that's okay then. You forgot. It wasn't deliberate. It wasn't malicious. You just forgot. Well, forgetting also carries moral responsibility. You know, when Jack didn't tidy up his bedroom, he couldn't have said to his mom, oh, I forgot. Oh, that's okay then, Jack. You forgot.

[16 : 14] Poor wee pet. No, forgetting isn't good enough. And so James says, not forgetting. But then, of course, you know, the climax of this right response is doing what God's Word says. We need to be doers of God's Word. You can have copious notes of a thousand sermons, but if you fail to do what God commands, you haven't just fallen short. You haven't even got going. You're all dressed up with nowhere to go, or at least no desire to go. We are to do what God commands in His perfect law.

When He commands us to repent, we need to repent. When He commands us to trust in Jesus, we need to trust in Jesus. When He commands us to love our enemies, we need to love our enemies.

When He commands us to forgive, we need to forgive. When He commands us to be patient, we need to be patient. When He commands us to consider it pure joy when we face trials of many kinds, we need to consider it pure joy when we face trials of many kinds. And, of course, understanding what He goes on to say, as we've been thinking about just a few weeks ago. When He commands us to look after orphans and widows in their distress, as He does in the following verses, we need to look after orphans and widows in their distress. Well, I think you get the picture.

And it's called obedience. Obedience is at the heart of Christian discipleship. And I think we can maybe identify three overlapping reasons for why obedience is so much at the heart of what it is to be a Christian. First of all, obedience is an act of pure trust. You see, obedience is our way of saying to God, you know best. If you tell me that this is what I have to do, then even if I think it's a piece of nonsense, I'm going to do it because you know best. And what is that? That is trusting God.

It's trusting God when we say, well, it's going to be difficult for me to obey. It's going to carry, as far as I can tell, some pretty negative consequences obeying, but I'm going to do it because I trust you. So, obedience is an act of trust. But, of course, obedience is also an expression of deep love. What was it Jesus said to us or says to us? If you love me, obey my commandments.

[18 : 29] It's not some draconian condition that he's putting on us. Prove your love by doing everything I say. Rather, he's saying, look, this is a way you can give expression to the love that you have for me.

And obedience, of course, is the evidence of genuine faith. And note that this insistence on doing is not some novel idea peculiar to James. James is simply echoing the teaching of Jesus himself on many occasions. But if I just focus on one, in Luke's gospel in chapter 11 and in verse 28, having given teaching on different matters, Jesus concludes his discourse with these words, blessed are those who hear the Word of God and obey it. And James is doing nothing more than simply repeating that truth that Jesus had already expressed. Final question that we want to pose and answer, what are the outcomes of the two possible responses? Well, let's start with the first. What are the outcomes of forgetting and doing nothing? What is the outcome for those who respond to God's Word in this way?

And it's best to be honest with yourself. If that's where you are, then listen carefully to what the outcome of this is. Well, what does James tell us there in verse 22? Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Now, I'm not suggesting this is the only outcome, but this is the outcome that is identified by James. One outcome of listening, forgetting and doing nothing is self-deception, self-deception. I think we can identify a couple of forms that this self-deception can take.

First of all, the self-deception can take the form of a false sense of spiritual security. We think we're right with God because we're in church, and we read the Bible from time to time. We seem to be ticking the right boxes, but in the absence of obedience, in the absence of doing, we're just kidding ourselves if we think we're right with God. And so, we deceive ourselves in this matter, in terms of our sense of spiritual security of whose we are and whom we serve. Well, whose we are depends on whom we serve, and if we're not serving, then that puts into question our very identity.

And so, James is very, very, what would we say, very serious on this matter. He's saying, careful, careful that you're not deceiving yourselves as to who you are. I think another way in which we deceive ourselves, and I'm not sure if this is something that James has in mind, but I think another way in which we can deceive ourselves when we forget and do nothing is that we end up with a very poor appreciation of the beauty of the gospel. As I say, this is maybe less obvious, but let me try and explain what I mean by that. In the absence of doing, in the absence of obeying God, we will fail to experience how good the good news is. If we fail to obey the command to repent, then we won't experience what forgiveness is. If we fail to obey the command to go and to serve God and to tell others about Jesus, and we could go on, then we will fail to experience God's upholding and enabling and strengthening as we do all of these things. And maybe after a while, we'll think, well, this gospel is not that great. It hasn't done that much for my life. It's pretty much the way it's always been. Well, yes, of course, because you're not doing it. And so, in the failure or in the absence of doing it, then you're not experiencing all the good that comes with it. And so, you're deceiving yourself as to the very nature of the gospel.

[22 : 35] Another thing maybe to just mention in the passing, and this I don't think is James' principal point, but this response of listening and forgetting also has a consequence that we deceive others.

There are those who know that we are Christians or that we profess to be Christians, but if we fail to do what God commands, we are presenting to the world a false impression or gross misrepresentation of the gospel. We are deceiving others. This outcome, self-deception, is a serious matter. It strikes at our very identity. Are we Christians at all? Just this morning, as I was kind of looking over at my notes for, you know, the last time, I also noticed a news item on the BBC website. It's on the front page of the BBC website. I guess if you go home today, you'll find that it's still there.

And the news item was about a museum in France that has just made a disturbing discovery. It's today's news item. I guess this is in the last few days. And the disturbing discovery is that half of its paintings in this museum, over half of its paintings are fakes. Some of you may have noticed that one. It's the Etienne Terroux Museum. Not very good pronunciation, but anyway, in the town of Elne.

Again, I don't know if that's pronounced properly. And this museum or art gallery is dedicated to the said Etienne Terroux. He is the painter, and he is from the town where the museum is.

Over half of the paintings are fake. You know, the town council, I think, run the museum. They must be gutted at this very unwelcome discovery. But as I saw that news item, and as it was juxtaposed to my thinking about this passage in James, it did lead me to wonder what that might have to say to us as part of this Christian congregation of those who profess to be Christians. Not only our congregation, what about the other Christian congregations in our city? How many of us are actually fakes?

[24 : 44] It's a disturbing thought. And yet it's the question that James calls us to pose. Are you actually a fake? We look like the real deal, but actually we're fakes. We listen, but we fail to do.

Because the upside for us is that we can change. A fake painting will always be a fake painting, but you can change. I can change. You can start to listen and do if that is what you are not doing at present. But let's move on to the final thing. What are the outcomes for those who do listen and obey? What James commends us to do. Those who do what God commands and instructs. Well, this takes us full circle to where we began. The outcomes for those who listen and obey are freedom and blessedness, freedom and happiness. James speaks of God's Word, that which we have to listen to, that which we have to do. He speaks of it as the perfect law that gives freedom. Now, the idea, the very idea, the very notion that obedience to law is liberating would be considered by many today as just nonsense. You know, we're constantly fed with the notion that freedom consists of being liberated from the constraints of rules and prohibitions. Our own society, Scotland, glories in its liberation from the stultifying oppression of Christian morality. What freedom we now enjoy, that we don't have to obey all these terrible rules that the church imposed in such a draconian way on us. How we have suffered.

Our own, our very psyche apparently is damaged by it. But now we're free. So we're told. We, as a society, and often as individuals, approvingly echo the words of Henley's poem, Invictus, I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul. I am free, and I can do as I please with my life, with my body, with my money and my future, me, myself, and I. That's freedom, so we're told. But the biblical concept of freedom is so very different. The freedom that God desires for you is the freedom to be everything that God would have you be. True freedom is to be found in total submission to God and to His perfect law. True freedom is to be enjoyed as God helps and enables us to live that life of obedience to His will. The outcome for those who listen and obey is freedom.

And it's happiness. He will be, she will be blessed in what he does, in what she does, there at the end of verse 25. This blessedness, this happiness is present in what he does now. As he listens and obeys, he will be blessed. It's a happiness that is experienced, we might say, on the job. He will be blessed in what he does. Indeed, it's only experienced in the doing. In the absence of the doing, we will be deprived of the blessedness. It's only as we do, it's only as we obey, it's only as we act that we experience the blessedness that James speaks of. God wants you to be happy, and he provides the instructions you need to follow in order to be fulfilled and happy.

Going back thousands of years, cast yourself back. Imagine yourself there on the east bank of the Jordan, as the people of Israel were about to enter the promised land. Moses was giving the task of reminding them of the law, the Ten Commandments that God had given them 40 years previously before their wanderings in the desert. And the intriguing part that relates to what we are discovering this morning is the reason that God gives to encourage the people to obey. And listen carefully as I simply read the relevant couple of verses which are in Deuteronomy chapter 6 and verses 1 to 3. So, I've set out the context in which these words are spoken to God's people. What does God say to them, and what does He say to us? These are the commands, decrees, and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess. Why? So that you, your children, and their children, after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all His decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey, so that it may go well with you, and that you may increase greatly in the land flowing with milk and honey, and so it goes on. But very especially, why? Why obey? Why obey all these commandments, so that it may go well with you, so that you may enjoy freedom and blessing and happiness?

[29 : 56] Do you want to be free? Do you want to be blessed? Do you want to be happy? Do you want it to go well with you? Then listen and obey. Hear and do. Take note and act. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the manner in which it addresses us in language that we can understand, with concepts that are clear to us, with a logic that is inescapable and compelling. And we pray that we would be those who listen carefully, but very especially we pray that we would be those who do joyfully and gratefully, and as a result enjoy the freedom and the blessing and the happiness that comes with and alongside our obedience. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.