

Doers of the Word

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois – April 10, 2016

James 1:1-26 ESV

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

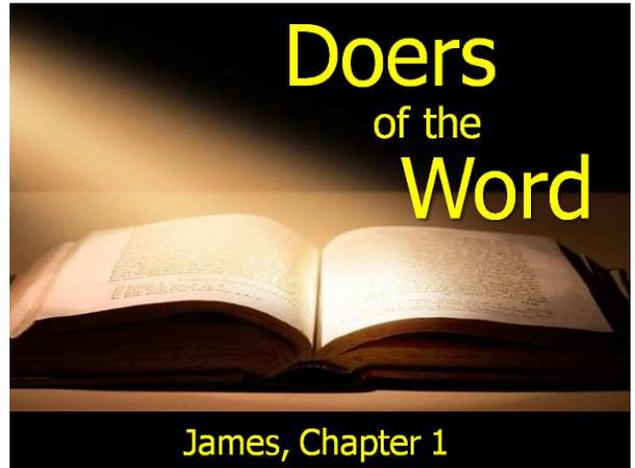
If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

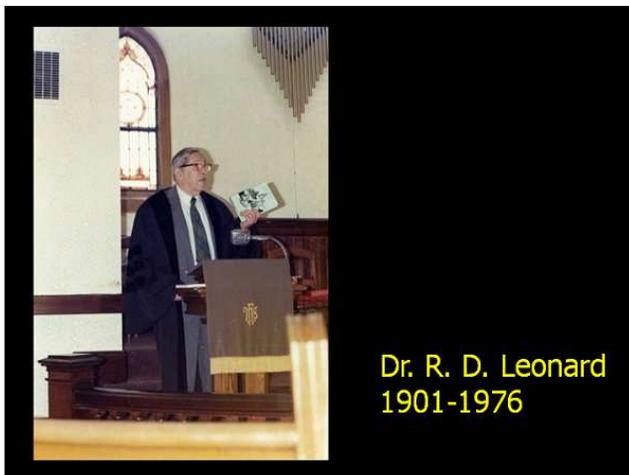
Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.



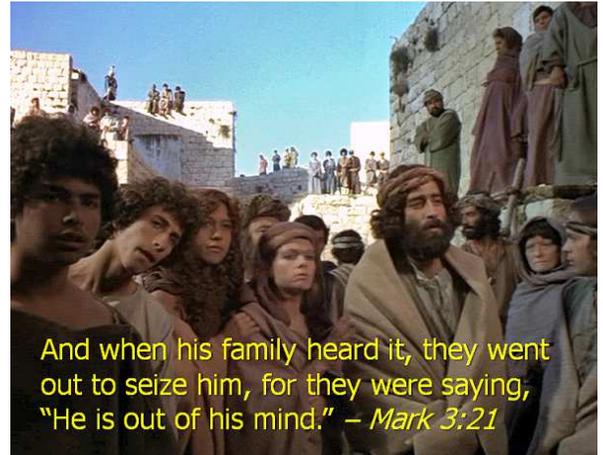
If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.



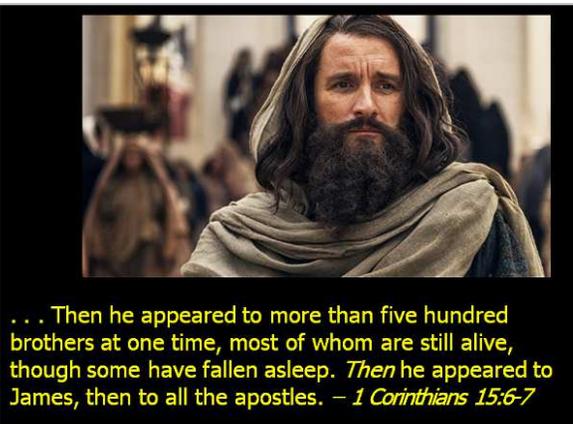
By profession my father was a college professor, but during the time I was growing up he wasn't always able to find a teaching position. So he fell back on his Methodist ordination and got himself appointed as a pastor here and there. And even during those times when he was teaching college he often served as pastor of a church in some small town nearby. He did this partly to give his pre-ministerial students a chance to "break in" under his instruction.

Typically we kids, with my mother, attended the “city church,” but quite often we would go with Dad to whatever local church he happened to be preaching in. As a result, while growing up I heard plenty of my father’s sermons. That is, we sort of “heard” them, although often during the service Mother would give my brother and me paper and pencils, and we drew pictures of trains while my father was preaching. Nevertheless, once in a while something Dad said during church would stick with me. And one of these “nuggets” concerned the Book of James. The Letter of James, Dad said, isn’t really a letter; actually, it’s a sermon. And, said my father, if for some reason the preacher doesn’t show up for church, just have somebody get up and read the Book of James because it will be as good a sermon as you’d be likely to get from any preacher.

Who was James? As we all know, he was the brother of Jesus. We forget, sometimes, that Jesus had several brothers and sisters. Two of his siblings, James and Judah (or Jude), wrote books in our New Testament. But apparently during the time Jesus was preaching in Galilee his family wasn’t too thrilled about that, because they came and tried to take him home thinking he was acting rather strangely. Indeed, by the normal course of their Jewish life at that time what Jesus was doing was strange, because he was announcing that God’s kingdom — for which most Jews were looking to the future — had already appeared. The operation of God’s kingdom was visible in Jesus’ own teaching and, most dramatically, in the way people got healed through faith in him.



But that didn’t seem to impress James and the others, nor even their mother, until Jesus rose from the dead. You know how it is; of all people, family members can be the least impressed with our importance. My children haven’t bothered to read my novels (except, of course, the daughter who was my co-author for one of them), and Shirley Anne’s children are indifferent to her poetry (except one, who’s also a writer). So our family members can be the last ones in line to ask for our autographs. And it seems that’s the way it was with James and Jesus — until, of course, Jesus was raised from the dead and began to appear to his disciples. And, even then, James was apparently one of the last to meet the risen Lord. Paul reports the resurrection appearances this way:



For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter’s name in Aramaic], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles (1 Corinthians 15:3-7).

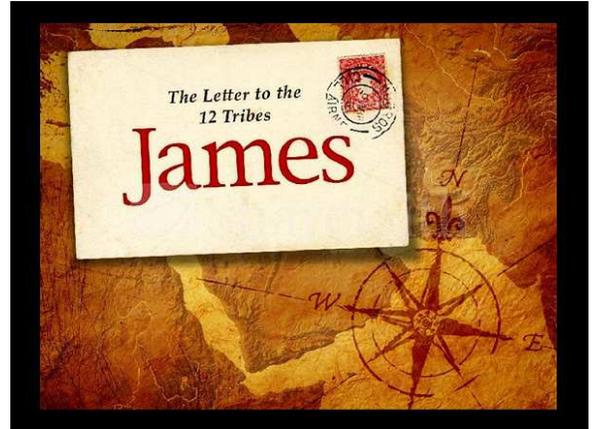
So James wasn’t a believer until some time after Jesus rose — we don’t know how long, but within forty days of the resurrection, before the Ascension when Jesus’ earthly appearances mostly ceased. But once James met his brother as risen Lord and Messiah, everything changed. Within a few years

he had become a leader of the church in Jerusalem, so much so that according to the Book of Acts (chapter 15) he was the major decision-maker when the issue came up as to whether the Christian faith could be presented to non-Jews without requiring them to observe Jewish customs. And, though a faithful Jew, James still recognized that Gentiles don’t need to become Jews in order to follow Jesus. Only some minimal, common sense provisions were required. He said, “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For the law of

Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath" (Acts 15:19-21).

So James, once a skeptic, became one of the apostles of Messiah Jesus. Later tradition holds that he was a man of deep prayer — so much so that his knees were calloused, like a camel's, from extensive kneeling. And, according to the historian Josephus, James met a martyr's death around the year 62 when a Jewish high priest accused him of breaking the Law of Moses and had him stoned.

Meanwhile James found time to write this letter, or sermon, that's preserved in our New Testament. We don't know to whom he wrote it; it's addressed to "the twelve tribes in the dispersion," but that could refer to Christian believers anywhere because the church understood itself as the faithful Israel — what Paul called "the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16). It's a general letter, but it looks like James had some specific problems in mind when he wrote, as we shall see. If we think of this letter as a sermon, we note that James offers some good illustrations taken from everyday life to drive home his point: the waves and wind of the sea, a mirror, the horse and its bridle, the ship's rudder, the scorching sun, fire, a grapevine, the fresh-water spring, a business trip to another city. And he illustrates with examples of great men from the Hebrew Scriptures: Abraham, Job, Elijah. If we had to preach James as a sermon on its own, we wouldn't have to add any illustrations because James does that for us.



James calls himself "a servant of the Lord Jesus the Messiah," but he doesn't offer us much commentary on Jesus and his resurrection. He alludes only briefly to the coming judgment of the Lord and to receiving "the crown of life." He doesn't offer a developing theological argument, the way Paul does in his letters. Instead, James deals with the practical living of the Christian life, the attitudes we need to display and what it means to be faithful to the Lord. He *writes as a pastor* concerned about the everyday life of the church. That's why his book is so valuable to us; the church in any age is apt to fall into dysfunctional patterns that compromise the gospel, and James provides a much-needed corrective. Over these five Sundays, until Pentecost, we'll be looking at each of the five chapters in this book and applying what James says to our own life as a community of believers. As my Dad said, James is a kind of sermon and, in many ways, his book preaches itself. So we'll just be lifting up some of the main points for further comment.

Today we're looking at chapter 1, and one of the first topics James deals with is that of testing, or trials: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds" (1:2). Older versions may read, "when ye fall into divers temptations." That can be misleading. The Greek word here is *peirasmos*, which refers to testing, particularly testing of our faith. James isn't referring to moral temptation, the temptation to sin by doing something we shouldn't do. He's talking about the testing, or trial, that comes because of *persecution* — and the church James was leading certainly saw plenty of that. (As we noted, James was to lose his life due to persecution for his faith in Jesus.)

Sometimes Christians speak of the trials they're going through, and by trials they mean things like illness, family problems, financial pressure, and the like. They may say, "That's just the cross I have to bear." When the New Testament writers refer to trials and testing, that's not usually the sort of thing they mean. Instead, they're talking about *persecution by the enemies of the faith*. If James refers to temptation, he means the temptation to give in to persecution, to compromise the faith. And we can be tempted that way out of fear, or out of a desire to protect ourselves from criticism or misunderstanding by those who are hostile to the faith or ignorant of it. Such testing never comes from the Lord. As James says, "Each person is tempted when he is *lured and enticed by his own desire*" (1:14) — the desire to be approved and accepted by unbelievers.

In the earliest years of the church, persecution came from the Jewish authorities; and James lived in Jerusalem, where that authority was most prominent. Later on, in most cases not even till the second century, persecution was to come from the Roman authority because the confession of the Lordship of Jesus

confronted Caesar's claims to lordship. The gospel of the kingdom of God, a rule made real and effective through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, always comes as a threat to other powers that claim total control over our lives. Their response is to persecute Christian believers because they don't "buy into" the values the prevailing culture is imposing on them.

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. – James 1:12



So today, in the Middle East, Christians are under persecution by totalitarian Islamic states. And, in our own nation, Christians are persecuted when they oppose abortion, or so-called "gay marriage" — things that run counter to the way the Creator designed his universe. Those are matters in the national and world news, but you and I may have to deal with such trials on a local scale from friends, family members, or fellow citizens who have no place for God in their lives and despise us because of our commitment to the faith. Those trials may come in the form of *simple indifference* to the Christian message, or *lack of response* to our witness for Jesus. Perhaps we can be thankful that we don't have to endure this testing to the extent James and his congregation had to withstand it, or

as Christians do today in many parts of the world. But it's there, and we can take heart from what James says a little later on: "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life" (1:12).

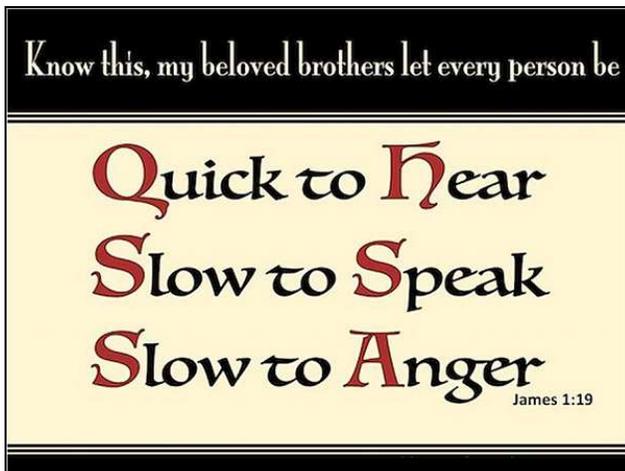
That phrase, "the crown of life," leads us to a new thought. What did Jesus come to do for us? In John 10:10, Jesus says, "I came *that they may have life* and have it abundantly." The resurrection of Jesus opens up the life of the new creation, God's renewal of a universe that was corrupted by human sin and disobedience. Living that renewed life is our "crown" — not the crown of a ruler, the diadem, but the *stephanos*, the crown awarded to the winner of a contest. The goal of all our efforts to live the Christian life isn't just heaven, but *that life itself* right here — the resurrection which Paul told the Philippians he was pressing toward (Philippians 3:8-14). In the resurrection of Jesus, creation is being restored to its original goodness. Discussing the resurrection Paul writes to the Corinthians, "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:22-23). And whoever belongs to Jesus belongs to that first appearance of the new creation; as James says, "Of [God's] own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures" (1:18).



Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. – James 1:18

It's a matter of how you see yourself. Do you think of yourself as a member of Adam's dying world, a "child of sorrow and of woe" as the song says? Or do you see yourself as an overcome, a receiver of the "crown of life," a member of the new world God established here when he raised his Messiah from the dead? As Paul writes, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Or better, *ei tis en christo, kaine ktisis* — "For anyone who is in Christ, the creation is renewed." Much of the counsel James gives us in his letter is advice on how to make real the new-creation life that Jesus, his brother, brought back into the world. We'll see plenty of examples as we proceed. So if James isn't the deep philosophical mind we find in the apostle Paul, what he says to us stands on the basis of the same reality Paul explores: "the word of truth," the gospel of the resurrection of Messiah Jesus.

James moves on to a very practical matter: the pattern of our conversation with other people. He begins his discussion this way: "Know this, my beloved brothers . . ." (1:19). The first principle of all our behavior within the Christian community is that *we're a family*, brothers and sisters in the faith. The church isn't supposed to be an auditorium where we come as spectators to watch somebody perform. The church is a *household* where each member is invited to share the common life. And James' entire letter is devoted to how this is supposed to work out.



So James gives us advice on how to relate to each other: "Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger" (1:19). It's so easy, through thoughtless speech or sarcasm, to "put down" other members of our church family — and it's so tempting to respond to such talk in anger and resentment. So, James says, let's concentrate on *listening to others* instead of talking, and if we do hear something that offends us let's not get all worked up about it.

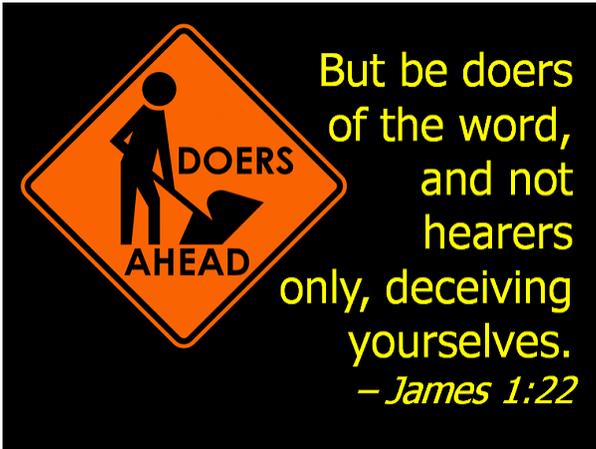
Some people *do* love to talk, especially about themselves. I recall visiting with different Christians of my acquaintance, and when I came away from the conversation I knew all about *their* life history and *their* opinions but they hadn't learned much of anything about me, because they never

stopped to listen. And, I'm sure, on many occasions I was the guilty party in this respect. Listening to others — especially listening for the unspoken heart cry of discouragement or disappointment or need — is an art we all need to develop. And it's also an art to learn to throw off perceived criticism or some kind of putdown, and not let anger fester in our souls. Following James' advice here would have saved many a church from division or even dissolution.

What gives us the ability to be "quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger?" James tells us: "Receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (1:21). When the Word of God gets "implanted" in us, when we absorb it into our thinking and let it shape our outlook on life, then we come to look at everything in a different way, especially our relationships. At the very beginning of his letter, James warned us about being "double-minded" — wanting to call ourselves Christians, but taking our cue from the prevailing culture when it comes to how we think and how we actually conduct our lives. That's what the prophet Elijah called "limping between two opinions" (1 Kings 18:21). For example, do we pray about a matter that concerns us, knowing we ought to pray in faith, and then just say, "Well, I *hope* it works out, but I don't know . . ."? If we seesaw between faith and doubt, James says, there's no way we'll ever receive anything from the Lord. That's why we need to "receive the implanted word" so the Scriptures shape the way we see ourselves and our world, and govern how we speak about, and deal with, the various issue in our life.



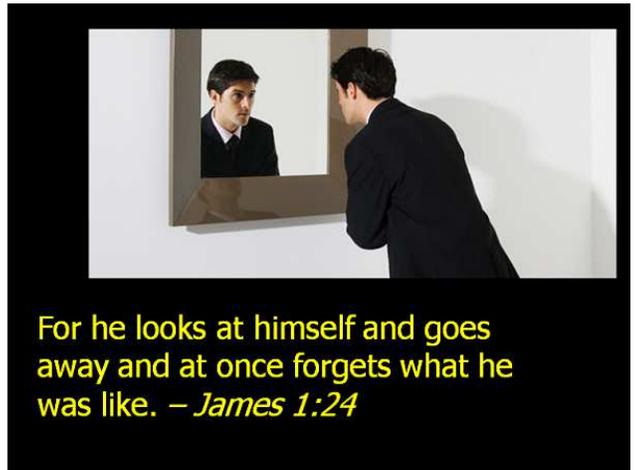
You can walk around all springtime with a packet of carrot seeds in your purse or pocket, but unless you plant those seeds in your garden you'll never see any carrots. It's the same with the Word of God. We can listen to it week after week, but until we "plant" it and act it out nothing will happen. We might say, we can "hear it till kingdom come" — but if all we do is hear it, the kingdom *won't* be coming. Which brings us to what's probably the most famous verse in the Book of James: "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (1:22).



When my family was living in Detroit in the 1950s we attended St. James Methodist Church, and the church newsletter was called "The Doer." And "doing the Word" is indeed the theme throughout this epistle, for it's through *doing the Word* that the resurrection life of Jesus becomes reality in our life. We can think of hundreds of examples where perhaps we "hear" but we don't *do*. Does the Word say "Forgive," but we hold onto resentment? Does the Word say "Rejoice!" but we sit on our hands during worship? Does the Word say "Give!" but we withhold? Does the Word say "Have faith!" but we live in fear of what might happen? Does the Word say "Follow!" but we hang back?

James compares the Word to a mirror; we can look into it and it shows us what the Lord sees in us, and how we're called to reflect his glory; but then we walk away and forget what we're really like as people made in his image. Whoever does this is deceiving himself, says James; "For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like" (1:24) I think James is holding up that mirror to us, not to show us how far we've fallen from what the Lord has in mind for us but rather the opposite. The mirror of God's Word shows us *what our potential is*, and how we can attain that resurrection life the gospel of Jesus brings us.

That's why James calls the Word the "the perfect law, the law of liberty" (1:25). The philosopher Spinoza once said, "Freedom is the recognition of necessity." Liberty is knowing what you really *need* to do, or not do, so you can be free in all other areas. A totalitarian regime says, "You *must* do this, you *must* do that" — and if everything is permitted, eventually everything will be required. The Word of God isn't like that. The Word says, "Here are a few things you shouldn't do, and a few things you ought to do, and the rest is your decision." Under the laws of Caesar (or the Federal government) we're slaves. But under Law of Christ, we're free.



James has one final word in this chapter, a word about *religion*. With many preachers "religion" has a bad name, but not with James. Why not? Because "religion" is what binds people together; the word is related to the word *ligament*, that which binds the bones of our body together. And the church is a body, so we need religion, "the tie that binds" as the song says. One practice that marked the earliest Christian church was the way the body cared for the helpless among them, especially the widows and orphans — those who had no other help. And another mark of the earliest church was the way Christians didn't follow the ways of the prevailing culture, whatever it was whether Jewish or Greek or Roman. Instead, they "marched to a different drumbeat," the calling of the gospel of Jesus. These practices tied the body together. So James adds this reminder: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (1:27). And these things, and others like them (as we will discover when we read on) are part of what it means to be "doers of the word, and not hearers only."

