

# A Place to Stand

James 1: 16 – 26 (Matthew 7: 21 – 29)

## First things first...

Last week we talked about praying for wisdom during times of trial, something that James, the bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ actually commanded us to do. In chapter 1, verse 5, he wrote,

<sup>5</sup> If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. James 1:5 (ESV)

The thing is, in verses 2 and 3, James had already given us God's wisdom for trials.

<sup>2</sup> Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup> for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup> And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. James 1:2–4 (ESV)

And remember, this is not just good advice, it is an apostolic command. It is the word of the Lord. This is what we, as Christians, are exhorted—commanded—to do when we find ourselves “in times of trouble”. Contrary to the arguably more popular advice to just “Let it be...”, when we encounter times of trouble, James tells us to “Count it all joy...” Or, in the words of Paul from Romans chapter 5, we are to

<sup>3</sup> ...rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, <sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, <sup>5</sup> and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. Romans 5:3–5 (ESV)

See, when we ask God for wisdom in the trials and troubles of life, we can rest assured that He will give it to us because, frankly, **He already has**. He has given us His word which is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”<sup>i</sup> And in James chapter 1, verse 18, we are told that this wisdom—this word—from God is actually the very point at which our Christian lives began:

<sup>18</sup> Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth...

(can there really be any question as to whether or not James was a “Calvinist” when it came to soteriology)

<sup>18</sup> Of his own will [**of God's own will**] he [**God**] brought us forth **by the word of truth**, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. James 1:18 (ESV)

Peter put it in the reverse order in First Peter chapter 1, verses 22 and 23. He wrote,

<sup>22</sup> Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, <sup>23</sup> **since you have been born again**, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, **through the living and abiding word of God...** <sup>1</sup> Peter 1:22–23 (ESV)

So, if we are children of God, it is because we “have been born again...through the living and abiding word of God...” If we are the children of God, it is because, “**He** brought us forth **by the word of truth...**”

**Let every person be quick to hear...**

So, when James wrote in verse 19,

<sup>19</sup> **Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear...** James 1:19 (ESV)

he’s not just doling out a heapin’ helpin’ of homespun wisdom, like when your grandma used to say, “Remember, God gave you two ears and one mouth...” That’s true, of course, and even her intention in saying it was probably true, but given that James just referenced “the word of truth” in the preceding verse, and that he would speak of “the implanted word, which is able to save your souls...” in his very next sentence, it’s clear that he had something else in mind when he wrote,

<sup>19</sup> **...let every person be quick to hear...** James 1:20 (ESV)

“Quick to hear what?” we might ask, and we find the answer in both verses 18 and 21: quick to hear “the word of truth”; quick to “receive with meekness”—to hear—“the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” See, it’s that “word”—the word of God, the “holy and divine Scriptures” (as they are called in the Belgic Confession)—where God “makes Himself known to us more openly”—where He gives us wisdom—“as much as we need in this life, for His glory and for the salvation of His own.”<sup>ii</sup> Even so, when we ask God for wisdom, He gives it “generously” and “without reproach”. To those who do not doubt that what He says is true, and are therefore willing to

<sup>21</sup> **...put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save [their] souls.** James 1:21 (ESV)

this book—the Bible—is “the wisdom from above”, that James will speak of in chapter 3, verses 13 through 18, and it, like “every good and every perfect gift” comes down “from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”<sup>iii</sup> This is the wisdom that “is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.”<sup>iv</sup> It is the wisdom that makes us “slow to speak” and “slow to anger”, because “a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace,”<sup>v</sup> and “the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”<sup>vi</sup> That—“the righteous life that God desires”<sup>vii</sup>—comes instead from hearing and doing the word of God.

**Not Hearers ONLY.**

Because this is exactly what it means to

**receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.** James 1:21 (ESV)

We must hear it, yes—“faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ”<sup>viii</sup>—“But,” verse 22,

<sup>22</sup> **...be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.** James 1:22 (ESV)

Then, James follows with a simple illustration.

<sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. James 1:23–24 (ESV)

Of course, mirrors then weren't what they are now, but there has only ever been one reason to look into a mirror. If you look in a mirror and notice that your face is dirty, then you wash. If you look into a mirror and discover that your hair is a mess, then you brush. You look into a mirror to diagnose the state of your appearance, and when you find something wanting, you do what you can to fix it. Likewise, "the implanted word", the "word of truth", "the "perfect law, the law of liberty"; of these, Calvin wrote, "Heavenly doctrine is indeed a mirror in which God presents himself to our view; but so that we may be transformed unto his image..."<sup>ix</sup> So, to look into the Word, and immediately forget that Scripture calls us to action—to be a mere hearer—is to deceive ourselves.

<sup>25</sup> But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres,

(which, you may recall, is what we are called to do when we meet trials),

being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. James 1:25 (ESV)

### **The wise man built his house upon the rock...**

And the text that we read earlier from the Gospel According to Matthew tells us how, because at the end of His "sermon on the mount", Jesus (the half-brother of James), also spoke of the difference between hearing and doing the word. As we read in the story a little earlier, Jesus said,

<sup>24</sup> "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup> And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. <sup>26</sup> And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. <sup>27</sup> And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it." Matthew 7:24–27 (ESV)

So, the difference was not in whether they heard Jesus' words. Both of the people in the parable heard. Nor was the difference found in the trials. Jesus describes both as experiencing the very same trial. Just as God "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust,"<sup>x</sup> in the same way, the rains fall, the floods come, and the winds blow against the houses of believers and unbelievers alike. A raging river is no respecter of persons or property, and we all meet trials of various kinds in this life. So, the difference is not found there either.

Rather, the difference is found in whether or not people will be doers—will "put into practice"<sup>xi</sup>—what they have heard in the word of God, and, of course, in the end result as well. For when the trials came, the one who had built his house on the foundation of doing the word, was left with a place to stand. His house did not fall because it was founded on the rock. But the one who heard and did not put into practice the word of Christ? His house fell, "and great was the fall of it."<sup>xii</sup>

James spoke in similar terms,

<sup>25</sup> ...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. James 1:25 (ESV)

On the other hand,

<sup>26</sup> If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. James 1:26 (ESV)

Once again, this is synecdoche. In the reference to bridling the tongue, one particular aspect of doing the word stands in for all, and this makes sense, because in chapter 2, James would write,

<sup>10</sup> For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. James 2:10 (ESV)

James would expand on this a bit, but if the Lord is willing, we'll consider that next Lord's Day. For now thought, it's clear that if our religion—that system of doctrine on which we rely in life and in death—is worthless, then we stand in a very slippery place. But there is a kind of religion that is not worthless. There is a foundation—a place to stand—a dwelling-place that the trials and struggles of this life cannot destroy. Let me read it again from James chapter 1, verses 22 through 25 as I close.

<sup>22</sup> But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. <sup>25</sup> 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. James 1:22–25 (ESV)

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<sup>i</sup> The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Heb 4:12.  
<sup>ii</sup> Belgic Confession, Article 2, The Psalter Hymnal (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1987, 1988), 818.  
<sup>iii</sup> The Holy Bible: English Standard Version, op. cit., Jas 1:17.  
<sup>iv</sup> Ibid., Jas 3:17.  
<sup>v</sup> Ibid., Jas 3:18.  
<sup>vi</sup> Ibid., Jas 1:20.  
<sup>vii</sup> The Holy Bible: New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), Jas 1:20.  
<sup>viii</sup> The Holy Bible: English Standard Version, op. cit., Ro 10:17.  
<sup>ix</sup> John Calvin and John Owen, Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 297.  
<sup>x</sup> The Holy Bible: English Standard Version, op. cit., Mt 5:45.  
<sup>xi</sup> Ibid., Mat 7:24,26.  
<sup>xii</sup> Ibid., Mat 7:27.