

Loyalty in Listening
James 1:19b-25

Well brothers and sisters, at the risk of starting this message by stating the obvious... words have power! And that power is their ability to communicate things; to describe reality, to share feelings, to ask questions, to give answers, to express emotions, to require obedience, to hold accountable, to confirm commitments, to pledge allegiance, and so much more...

And if someone is good with words, if they are a clear communicator and an effective speaker, then the power of their words is increased. Their words are more convincing, persuasive, convicting and compelling, and appealing, and they will accomplish a great deal through them.

But there are limits to the power of our words, anyone who is parenting a young child can tell you that! I came across a quote about that while preparing this message which said “A good way to prepare for parenting is to talk to rocks, because children have similar listening habits!”

For example, when it comes to finishing their brussel sprouts at dinnertime... you can command, you can cajole, you can plead, you can bribe, but no amount of words have the power to make your three-year-old finish those brussel sprouts.

So maybe you try threatening them – but unless your own words have the power to bring you to action, and you follow through on your threat – they are just empty words, and your kid knows it – and the brussel sprouts remain uneaten.

So, while our words have the power to facilitate communication – communication requires cooperation, words alone cannot compel or coerce. Our words do not have the physical power to move things like the Force in Star Wars, or control like the voice of the Bene Gesserit in Dune, it requires reciprocity.

So for successful communication to take place our words must be heard by someone... and those who hear our words must receive them and then determine how they will respond to them. Likewise, as we hear the words of others, we must

decide if we will receive them, and how we will respond to them.

And this truth about words is the underlying dynamic that James is working with in our scripture passage this morning, with one exception brothers and sisters... there is a categorical difference between our words and the word of God. Now again – this is stating the obvious, but let's make the obvious more articulate and review those differences.

Starting at the very beginning, God spoke His word and He brings something out of nothing. God speaks His word and brings structure and order out of the chaos and void, and God continues to speak His word and upholds the very existence of the reality which He has created.

So God's Word is categorically different from ours in that it has all of God's power in It. God's Word accomplishes what He speaks it to do. You see brothers and sisters, our words are just words – but God's word.... is His creating, ordering and sustaining power, His Word in creation.

God speaks to Adam and Eve, His word gives purpose and meaning and authority... to rule over the earth and multiply. He set the boundaries and expectations and consequences in stewarding the Garden of Eden.

And then God's word brought conviction and curse as a consequence for Adam and Eve's rebellion, and God's word initiates redemption, deliverance and renewal with the promise of crushing the head of the serpent.

And then God's reveals God Himself to Noah, Abraham, Moses and Israel, through His word, making promises and giving His Law. And God's word comes to the prophets to indict Israel for breaking the law, to repent and obey, and to promise Messianic forgiveness and deliverance from their sin.

So, God's word is categorically different from ours in how it brings to fulfillment what God has promised. Our words are just words – but God's word, is His life-giving law and commands, and His forgiveness and grace, mercy eventually revealed as His Word in Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, when our words are written down, they're still just words, but God's word – as it has been written down in the Law and the Prophets and in the words of the apostles, are scripture! And as 2 Tim 3:16 says *“all scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness”* so that we are equipped for the good works which will follow our being made wise for salvation in Christ Jesus.

So, we have God's word in Creation, God's word in Jesus, and God's word in Scripture, and as we have read in today's scripture passage, James 1:21 tells us – we have God's word planted in us as well.

And that's another difference between our words and God's word brothers and sisters. God has specifically spoken a word to us, a word – which as Heb 4:12 says *“is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”* This is what theologians like to call regeneration. It is a word from God that you don't

even hear – because you're spiritually dead – but it penetrates, gets into you, to the very core of your being, planting a spark of spiritual life.

And that was the good news from last week. In spite of how our ordinary desires give birth to death, God gives us new birth to bring us life through His word.

And that good news continues this week brothers and sisters. Today we hear and discover that this word is not temporary – but that it has been planted in us, it is the internal word of God.

And it is going to sprout and put down roots and grow – and as it does what Heb 4:12 says in sorting out our thoughts and attitudes it enables us to respond in faith to the external word of God.

This is why Romans 10:17 says *“faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through... [not our ears, but through] the word about Christ.”* That word of truth in us, it hears the message of the gospel and responds and produces

the gift of faith in our hearts to believe it! What God requires – He provides – He is a giving God!

The external word that comes from reading scripture, the preaching of the gospel, the teaching of scripture, singing praise, hymns and spiritual songs to each other, praying the scriptures and so on... as well as encountering God's Word in creation through our 4B glasses... it all stimulates the internal word planted in us.

As the internal word is stimulated it creates new and greater desires for more of God's external word, which then in turn increasingly stirs up the internal word and back and forth it goes, more and more of the word on the inside and out, all connect by the gift of our faith.

Maybe you've experienced this in how you are starting to get more and more out of listening to sermons or studying the bible... as you continue to listen to sermons and study the bible – you going from strength to strength – it's what we call a virtuous cycle!

So, having reviewed the critical distinction between the power of our words and the power of God's word, and understanding how God's internal and external word are working together in us and on us, we can return to the underlying dynamic of cooperative communication to learn how to participate with God's word in ways that work with it and not against it.

And that is simply to listen, receive and respond, and do so having cultivated a loyal spirit of humble cooperation.

So, James tells us that we should be quick to listen and slow to speak. Now it's easy to think James is just rephrasing that old adage to think (listen) before you speak. Or to avoid looking foolish by making sure you understand someone fully before you respond to them – but that's not it.

What James means is that we need to make ourselves eager to engage in the practice of listening **for and to the word**. You see brothers and sisters if we have the word with-in us, the word in scripture, the word in Jesus, and the word in Creation

we are surrounded by a veritable symphony of the word at all times!

This is why we say God's ability to speak to us is far greater than our inability to hear. So we must cultivate the practice of listening and do so eagerly, be ready - quick- to do so anywhere, anytime, with anything.

Being eager – quick- to listen for the word means that we're clearing away the distractions that keep us from listening. We get focused so that we're able to catch the soft whispers, the nuanced harmonies, the gentle rhythms of the word – so that the word does not have to shout overtop everything else, yell at us, to get our attention.

And, James says we should be slow to speak, our speaking response to all the external stimuli coming at us should be dulled, so we do not react and respond to every noise coming at us – but we can take time to listen and discern if it is the word of God. It's hard to think and discern if we are busy

engaging and responding to every sight and sound that comes our way.

Now if this was James' advice to early Christians who lived in a world without the media and social media, how much more do we need to put limits on the “noise” coming at us 24/7 in our day and age. We have to watch how much we are “speaking back” to everything coming our way because it distracts us from recognizing when the external word is coming to us.

James also says the same thing about our proclivity towards getting angry, getting riled up, and having our buttons pushed. We should be slow – dull, insensate – towards getting angry. The reason is stating the obvious again - our outrage does not accomplish the righteousness God desires.

In other words, it conflicts with the work of the internal word in us. It is one of those ordinary desires we were warned about last week Sunday – who doesn't get angry?!

Now what is the internal righteousness that God desires brothers and sisters? A calm, peaceful, loving, unfazed disposition? Well that's certainly nice, and its not unbiblical, but do you remember what Romans 1:17 says about righteousness? *"The righteous will live by faith!"*

When you are angry, you're not living by faith! Living by faith, especially in the midst of trials and events that want to stir you up to anger, is how you stay loyal and show your loyalty to Christ. As Heb 11:6 says *"without faith, it is impossible to please God."*

When you are easily stirred to outrage and indignation, then your internal desires will always be running rampant, spewing the foetid and foul pollution of spitefulness, bitterness, malice and ill will, not a conducive spirit or attitude to living by the faith of the internal word.

So James says clear that out! Get rid of that stuff internally – and you can do this brothers and sisters! This moral filth and evil do not support the internal word, but they can't stop it.

The good news is the internal word will help you judge those evil thoughts and filthy attitudes of your heart, Heb 4:12 again, so you can clear them out. As Titus 2:12 says *"It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age."*

So, now that we are eager to engage in listening for the word – whether it be in scripture, in Christ, in the creation... and we've desensitized our overstimulated tendencies to respond externally through talking, and internally with anger... we have cultivated that humble spirit of cooperation, and we are ready to receive more of the word.

But as the word comes to us brothers and sisters and as we receive it, don't depend on your own intellect, your own ability to reason and make sense of it. Rather, as James says *"In humility accept the word planted in you which can save you..."* This is why we see PhD level bible scholars who can study the bible, read it in the ancient languages back and forth and upside down, but they don't have the faith to believe in

Jesus as the savior! They don't have the word planted in them to save them, or if they do – they are insisting on relying upon their own intellect and understanding, but that does not produce faith in Christ.

Paul says the same thing about the Jews of his day in 2 Corinthians 2:15 *“when Moses (Law, God’s word) is read, a veil covers their hearts.”* However, the good news is that *“whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.”* You can understand and see the word and know the savior through faith.

So humbly receive the word planted in you and let It guide you to as you listen, hear, read, and study the scriptures and the creation and focus on Jesus. Your faith and trust and reliance upon Jesus will grow because the internal word will illumine the external word, word recognizes word, or as Psalm 42:7 says *“deep calls to deep.”*

I can't say it any better than God's word already does in Prov 3:5-6 brothers and sisters *“Trust in the Lord with all your*

heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight!”

Now, just a word of caution here brothers and sisters, how do we know if we are following that internal word in understanding the external word? We don't want to fall into that trap of personally interpreting the scriptures so they line up to justify our own internal desires instead of the internal word. That's another way that we can “reverse-blame God” for our temptations as we learned about last Sunday.

Fortunately, James has anticipated this subtle but deadly trap. So in vs. 22 he says *“do not merely “listen” to the word, and so deceive yourselves, do what it says!”*

Now I have to be honest, before I studied James for this sermon series, I always took this exhortation to mean that you shouldn't just read the bible and without applying it to your life in some practical way, right? If you're doing a bible study – you better have a question that asks “how will you put what you've learned from this study into action?” Now this is good

wisdom for running bible studies, but its not what James actually means here.

To “listen” to the word planted in you, which can save you, and to do what it says” is what the Apostle John explains in 1 John 3:23 *“this is God’s command (word): to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.”* This is what we must do.

And to help us understand this better, James gives us the metaphor of the mirror. Now again I used to read this and think it was an indictment of something like reading bible verses for your morning devotions, but then you just forget about them for the rest of the day. You don’t forget what you look like after looking in the mirror do you – no! So how can you forget the bible verses that you’ve read? Come on – try to do a bit better with remembering!

But again, that’s not what James means. Studying one’s reflection in the mirror as a metaphor for looking intently into

the word means that you are going to see all your flaws and shortcomings revealed to you in God’s word.

You’ll see where you’ve broken His laws, both in the letter and in the spirit of His law. You’ll see where you’ve committed idolatry – turning good things into god things that we worship instead of Him. You’ll see every way in which your heart is deceitful and beyond cure.

And you’ll come across truths that will confront and contradict what you believe about reality. The truth of creation that contradicts evolution, and defines what it means to be male and female, and give design to marriage and human sexuality. You’ll come across the truth about who God is – and the truth that you... are not god.

In short looking intently into the perfect law is only going to expose your imperfections, but... this is what makes us wise for salvation in Jesus Christ. That’s why this is the perfect law that brings freedom.

In spite of all our failings, shortcomings and plain our sinfulness, God provides Jesus Christ as our substitute, to free us from His judgement on sin. Looking into the word you will see testimony of how Jesus succeeds wherever it is that we fail! You will hear the good news that He stands in your place before God and that you benefit from this substitution simply by receiving it in faith!

Humbly accept the word planted in you which can save you!

So, to look into the mirror and then go away forgetting what you look like is to go right back to our self-righteousness. To believe that we are not sinful, that the good intentions and the good deeds we've done in this life will balance us out in the positive before God's judgement.

To forget what you look like is to forget that you need Jesus – not just as the forgiver of your sins, but as your substitute before God in every area of your life!

So, if you want to have a question to help apply whatever verse you read for your morning devotional, ask how it reveals your sin, how it points you to trust in Christ's forgiveness and how it encourages you to trust and live in such a way that show you believe He is your substitute? This is actually great way to continue to remember what you look like and why it is that you need Jesus.

And if you do this James says that you will be blessed in all you do – and again its not because you're finding all sorts of bible verses that give you helpful advice to apply to all the different areas of your life...

First and foremost because you have the growing confidence that not only have all your past sins been forgiven by Christ, but that in all that you do... whether it is in your work, whether it is in your recreation, whether it is in your relationships, or in your thoughts or feelings - Christ stands as your substitute before God!

You will see more and more that compared to you, Christ is perfectly faithful and loyal to God the Father, so that is what God see when He sees you at work, at play, at home, or out running errands.

Christ even stands in your place – as we heard back in August- as you continue to confess your sins. Offering His one-time perfect confession of sin at His baptism to cover your sin-riddled self-interested, half-hearted, only doing it cuz I got caught confessions.

So humbly accept the word planted in you which can save you brothers and sisters... This is all about God's Word – and how else do we respond loyally to it – we listen, we receive, we obey.

So, let me give you more of the word to close this off – so that you will indeed be blessed in all your do. Because Jesus is your savior and substitute;

Colossians 3:23-24 "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving."

1 Corinthians 10:31 "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

And lastly Romans 12:1 "in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship."

May the internal word of truth give you faith to receive this external word of scripture and the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Be loyal in listening this morning brothers and sisters, and you will be blessed in all things. Amen