

Sermon Summary | Sunday 25th January 2026 | James 1.19-27

These verses ask: is the Word of God shaping my life, or am I merely hearing it? James is not interested in religious consumption. He is not writing to people who simply need more information, more ideas, or more spiritual content. He wants mature disciples: people whose lives are being changed by the Word they hear.

First, James calls us to receive the Word. He begins with posture: “Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.” Spiritual maturity begins with teachability. A mature Christian listens not as a critic, ready to assess and judge, but as a student ready to be corrected and changed. Consumer Christianity listens for what seems helpful or interesting. Disciples listen in order to obey.

James also warns us to be slow to anger, because “the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” Our anger often feels righteous, necessary, and strong, but much of it is the self-defending its own territory. Anger may be forceful, but it is rarely healing. So James calls us to repent: to put away filthiness and wickedness, and to receive with meekness the implanted Word, which is able to save our souls. The Word is not mere instruction or opinion. It is God’s saving Word, planted in us to remake what grows in our lives.

Second, James calls us to obey the Word. “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” The danger is not simply ignorance, but self-deception. We can sit under preaching for years, know Christian vocabulary, agree with doctrine, and enjoy sermons, yet remain immature if we hear but do not obey.

James gives the image of a mirror. The Word shows us the truth about ourselves, not the edited version but the real one. To hear God’s Word and do nothing is like looking in a mirror, seeing what needs attention, walking away, and forgetting. It is absurd, but it is also spiritually dangerous. The blessing belongs not to the one who merely hears, but to the one who looks intently into “the perfect law, the law of liberty,” perseveres, and acts.

This matters because God’s commands are not cages. They are the way of freedom. A train is most free when it runs on the tracks; off the tracks it is not liberated, but ruined. Sin promises freedom and delivers bondage. God commands obedience and leads us into life. So the question becomes personal: what have I heard from God that I have not obeyed? An apology, a habit to stop, a relationship to repair, a lie to confess, generosity to practise, or a boundary to set? Mature disciples do not merely collect insights. They take steps.

Third, James calls us to display the Word. He gives three visible tests of mature religion. The first test is the tongue. If someone thinks they are religious but does not bridle their tongue, their religion is worthless. Words are powerful. They can bless or crush. They reveal the heart. Spiritual maturity involves restraint from gossip, constant criticism, deceit, and careless speech.

The second test is mercy: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction. In James’s world, they were among the most vulnerable and easily overlooked. Mercy is the opposite of consumer Christianity. Consumers ask, “What do I get?” Mercy asks, “Who needs me?” A mature church moves towards the lonely, the poor, the refugee, those in debt, those needing support, and those who cannot repay kindness.

The third test is holiness: keeping oneself unstained from the world. This is not withdrawal from creation or society, but resistance to patterns opposed to God: status, greed, pride, envy, sexual sin, comparison, approval addiction, and money as security. We do not have to dive into dirty water to be stained; sometimes we simply get splashed. So we need to practise what God gives us: generosity, simplicity, rest, accountability, confession, and obedience.

James is not saying we obey in order to be saved. God's saving Word comes first; the obedient life follows. Jesus is the fulfilment of this passage. He received the Father's Word perfectly, obeyed completely, spoke with truth and grace, moved towards the vulnerable, and remained unstained by the world. Yet at the cross, he bore our stains, failures, disobedience, anger, and self-deception, so that we might be forgiven and set free. When we fail, we do not hide. We return to Christ, repent, and receive the Word again.

Questions for personal reflection

1. Where am I most tempted to hear God's Word, agree with it, even appreciate it — but then walk away without obeying?
2. Which visible area of maturity most needs attention in my life at the moment: my tongue, my mercy towards the vulnerable, or my resistance to the world's patterns?