

A Belief that Behaves: How to Listen to a Sermon

By Haddon Robinson

Speaker 1:

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Haddon Robinson:

Let's pray. Father, we realize that our relationship to you can be as real as a tuition bill that ultimately we must look to you to supply those needs as well as a myriad of other needs we have. We pray for students who feel pressed at this time to pay for their room and board and for their schooling. We ask you for others who look forward to this semester with a sense of anxiety. For some study comes easily, and for others it is close to drudgery.

And yet, because they are here, this is your will for them. And so we pray for them that as they enter into this next semester that they may do so with a sense of being committed to you and obeying you. We pray for the situation in Iran and especially for those hostages. We know that many of them have asked that we pray for them. We pray that you would soften the hearts of the leaders of that country, give wisdom to our President and to his advisors, and grant that that shall come to a peaceable settlement. We pray for Afghanistan and all that is involved there. You have told us to pray for those who are in authority, and so we pray for the Russian leaders, that you would give them insight as to what they are doing.

We pray for the people in the United Nations and for our President and the Congress. Somehow, Lord, we may be delivered from a global conflict and all that that would mean to putting up barriers to the communication of the gospel. Now, Lord, we ask for this time together that it shall be a worthwhile investment of our time. For Jesus sake and our own sakes. We dare to ask it. Amen.

One of the occupational hazards of being a Christian is that you have to listen to a great many sermons. In fact, if my calculations are correct, the average Christian who attends the ordinary services of a Church, plus a special meeting or two during the year, can spend about one week of every year, a period of time amounting to 24 hours a day, seven days of a week, preparing to listen or listening to someone else preach the theological seminaries like Talbot or Denver. We give students courses in homiletics which deal with the preparation and delivery of sermons.

But if you think about it, it takes two to make a sermon. It not only takes the person in the pulpit, it also takes the folks in the pew. And while we're given a great deal of attention to the people who have to preach the sermon, I don't think we've given nearly enough attention to those who have to listen. And yet, in what was probably the first letter written in the New Testament, James writes to the people of his day to give to them and to us some practical down-to-life instruction as to how to make the most out of listening to the word of God.

In James chapter 1, beginning at verse 23--21, James says, "Wherefore putting away all filthiness and the outgrowth of wickedness, receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls, but be doers of the word and not hearers, only deluding your own selves." In the

day in which the New Testament was written, it is estimated that between 10 and 15% of the population could read or write. Most of the people in the ancient world were illiterate, but even a person who could read or write was both fortunate and wealthy if they owned many books of their own. Since each manuscript had to be copied laboriously by hand, it was a privilege to own a library.

And so most of what people learned in the first century, they learned by listening rather than by reading. In fact, even this book of James was probably read to the congregation rather than by the congregation. And so James gives to those people and to us some specific practical instruction as to how to make the most out of listening to the word of God. The first thing that James says that you and I must do to profit from the listening of a sermon is that we need to make a proper preparation. That's what James means, I think, when he says, "Wherefore putting away filthiness and the outgrowth of wickedness, receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls." The word for filthiness here probably refers to inward filth, to those attitudes about life and about others that crop up in our mind, that build barriers between ourselves and people and ourselves in God.

The outgrowth of wickedness is the effect of those attitudes in life, because attitudes have a way of showing up in action, just as belief as a way of showing up in behavior. And James is saying that before we can receive new truth from God, we need to take up out of our lives those things that we already know are contrary to God's word and to God's will. Looking behind what James is saying is the imagery of farming. And what James is telling us is that before there can be seeding, there must first of all be weeding. Now, quite frankly, I am really out of my element

here because I don't know anything about farming. I grew up in the concrete jungles of New York. I have never planted a crop. I have never brought in a harvest. But one thing I do know something about is planting a lawn.

Down in Texas, when you plant a lawn, one of the things you have to deal with is Johnson grass. The Republicans think it's well named because once it got in, it took over everything and it was impossible to remove. But if you're going to plant new seeds, you've got to deal with Johnson grass. If you don't, the seed will be choked. So James is saying that before there can be seeding, they must first of all be weeding a plucking up out of our lives of those attitudes and actions that we know are contrary to God's word. That means that when a service is properly planned, there is a period of time before it begins for the congregation to meditate.

A time of quietness isn't given so that we can visit with our friends. It is given so that God can interact with us and show us who we are and where we are and what we have been doing. And if the hymns in a service are properly planned, then some of those hymns should enable us to examine our attitudes and our actions.

Unfortunately, we tend to choose our hymns because we like the tunes, and we can therefore sing our hymns without giving any attention to the words we can stand and sing. When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died, what we're really surveying is the hat of the lady three rows in front of us, two seats over. We're thinking, I didn't think anybody wore hats anymore, and certainly not a hat like that or my richest gain I count, but loss. And we're thinking, if he says one more word about money, I'm going to scream or pour contempt on all my pride.

We're thinking, I've been to Sunday school three weeks in a row and they haven't called on me to pray. I wonder if they appreciate me. It is very easy, isn't it, to sing with our lips what somehow escapes our minds, and we do not take that opportunity to examine ourselves. So the first thing that you and I must do, if we're to make the most out of listening to a sermon is that there needs to be a proper preparation. But the second thing that James says that we must do is not only have a proper preparation, but there needs to be a submissive reception.

That too is found in verse 21, where he says, "Therefore, putting away filthiness in the outgrowth of wickedness, receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls." That word 'receive' is a fairly common one in the Greek. I don't want to make more out of it than it's here, but the word is used in context outside of the Bible in a rather interesting way. For example, the word was used of a young woman who welcomed her lover back from the wars. He'd been off fighting with the Roman legions, and they didn't have very good communication. But finally, justice comes marching home again, and she welcomes him with open, armed, eager, enthusiastic reception.

Or perhaps more to the point, the word was used of people who listened to the reading of a will. It said to those people that they received the will. Imagine what a difference that could make. Next Sunday you come to Church and discover that the woman in the community has died and has left a staggering sum of money to the people in your congregation. Next Sunday, instead of preaching a sermon, the pastor is going to read the will.

I suspect that there'll be a good crowd, and we'd allow the pastor to have a bumbling introduction. Just as long as when he got to reading the will and he got to our name, it was pretty clear about what was in that will for us. Now, when you and I come to hear the word of God, that's how we ought to receive it, with the enthusiasm of welcoming a boyfriend, with the eagerness of listening to a will, because there's a sense in which we do not hear preaching by accident, but that as we listen, there ought to be an eagerness to hear if there is anything in the word of God today that can enrich our lives and to listen with that sense of expectancy to make a great deal of difference.

But of course, the point James is making is that we are to receive the word with meekness. Now, I have not checked the more modern translations, but I suspect they don't even use the word meekness. Because meekness is such a weak word, it certainly isn't going to win any prizes. You don't compliment somebody when you say you're a weak or a meek person.

In fact, if you do a word association test, you find that the next word that pops into your mind after "meek" is "little." You talk about a meek little man. Somebody who doesn't have the intestinal fortitude to squish a grape or if he reached over to pick one up, might screen himself. So when we are told to receive the word with meekness, we don't eagerly respond to that. But the reason we feel that about the word is that we are coming to it out of our English background.

But the word here is a word that has strength to it. The word was used of a horse that won a horse race, and it was sort of that horse that it was the meekest horse in the race. Now, they didn't mean that the horse was too shy to leave the starting grade. They didn't mean it was too

embarrassed to take the lead. What they meant was that the horse was in submission to its rider. One touch of the stick and it bounded forward, one move of the reins and it went from side to side. So meekness means to be in submission to authority.

If you think that meekness is weakness, you ought to talk to Pharaoh. Moses was called the meekest man of his day. But when he stood before Pharaoh and said, "Let my people go," Pharaoh didn't confuse meekness with weaknesses. Weakness, you ought to talk to the money changers in the Temple when our Lord rode into Jerusalem on the donkey on that day of triumph, he is described as meek and lowly riding upon that donkey. But when he went into the temple and attacked the money changers and turned over their tables and spent their money and then scurrying across the floor, they did not confuse meekness with weakness.

And if you think that meekness is weakness, you have to try to be meek for a week and see how difficult it is. It means to be in submission to authority and in this case, in submission to God. Now, why should you do that? Why should you listen to the Word with a meek spirit? And the answer, James says, is, because this word is able to save your souls. That's the kind of word it is. It is able to save the soul from damnation.

I remember when I was in my teens in College, I was deeply troubled about my relationship with God. I wasn't sure that I was a Christian. And I remember sitting in the lobby of one of the College buildings and two men went past and they were talking to each other and one said to the other, I used to worry about whether or not I was a Christian, but I don't worry about that anymore since that was my problem. I eavesdropped on the conversation. The man went on and

said something like, I discovered that becoming a Christian was taking God at His Word. And I knew that I could take a friend at His Word, a business associate at His Word. And I realized that to be a Christian, you just took God at His Word.

Somehow that conversation, spoken in passing, was like a medicine to my troubled soul. I came to realize that becoming a Christian is betting your soul that when God makes a promise, he means it. That Word of God is able to save your soul from damnation. But in the context of James, I suspect that James is referring to something else. Not only is this word able to save your soul from damnation, but it's also able to save your soul from damage.

For the world through which we walk is like a field mined by an enemy. There are ten thousand spiritual dangers in every side. And as we walk through that field, it's like having mines planted by the enemy. And the Word of God is like a road map that guides us safely through. And as you live in submission to the Word of God, it does save you from ten thousand spiritual dangers, because it's that kind of word able to save your soul from nation and save your soul from damage, you are to receive it with a meek and submissive spirit. That's usually where it ends.

That is, we come and we listen and we leave and the sermon is over. But James says there is a third thing we must do to make the most out of listening to a sermon. Not only a proper preparation and a submissive reception. But there must also be an obedient doing that's what he means when he says in verse 23, but be doers of the word and not hearers, only deluding your own selves. Charles Spurgeon was a noted British preacher, and the people came from all over London in the latter part of the 1008 hundreds to hear him preach.

One day, we're told, a man came puffing into the lobby and went up to an usher and said, "Is the sermon done?" And the usher, knowing the truth of this passage, said, "Well, it still has to be done." And James would agree that having heard the word of God, it is not enough just to hear it. We must also do it. But to hear it and not do it is to be self-deluded. Quite frankly, I do not think there is any greater delusion among the people of God today than the deception that comes from believing that knowing the Bible is equal to obeying the Bible. It's very easy for it to happen on a campus like this or in a Church to believe that knowing biblical truth is equal to doing biblical truth, that is to be deceived because the truth is given to be acted upon.

And in the tradition of outstanding preachers, James illustrates that truth that to hear the truth and not obey it is to be diluted by giving us an illustration. And the illustration of that principle is found in verse 24--23, where he says, "For if anyone is a hero of the word and not a doer, he's like unto a man beholding his natural face in a mirror, where he beholds himself and goes away and straightway forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law, the law of Liberty, and so continues, being not a hero that forgets, but a doer that worketh, This man shall be blessed in his doing."

Now, there are at least two ways of getting an idea of how you look. One is by use of a photograph and the other is by use of a mirror. Generally speaking, a photograph shows us what we want to see. The mirror has a way of showing us what we really are. Last summer you took those pictures down on the beach, and just recently you got them developed. Then you went through the pictures and you decided, that's a good picture. That isn't a very good picture.

Usually you're not talking about the focus, you're talking about you the ones you say, the ones you put into your book, the ones that make you look good, the others, we declare, are bad pictures.

A few years ago, I was in another part of the country and I was staying in a home. And while I was there, I saw behind the piano a picture of a rather beautiful woman. Made the mistake of asking my hostess, who the subject of the picture was. And she told me, rather isolated that it was a picture of her. In fact, even worse, it was a recent picture of her. It seemed to me that any real resemblance between that picture and that woman was almost coincidental. She was, well, she was heavy, at least a little short for her weight. And the photographer had taken his brush and he knocked off about £20, straightened her teeth, fixed her hair, and she thought that was a good picture. But it wasn't a very good picture of her. It was a picture that showed her what she wanted to see.

Madam Schumann Hank was a well known singer, and once she was in a small town and needed some publicity, pictures made. So she went to the local photographer. He was honored to have this famous personage in his studio. And as he was setting up the camera, he said that, "Madam, I only hope I can do you justice." And she replied, "Young man, I did not come here for justice. I came here for mercy." And that's often why we go to a photographer, because the picture shows us what we want to see. But a mirror, a mirror has a way of showing us what we really are. When you get up in the morning fighting that battle of mind over mattress and stagger into the bathroom, those little nubs sticking out that's you your hair rolled up as though you're getting a

message from outer space, that's you the pillow streaks still fresh on your face, that's you mirror just tells it as it is.

Now, obviously, when you look at a mirror, you have a lot of choices. One thing you can do when you look at a mirror is to smash the mirror. There are some mornings when I think that's a viable alternative. I think I am accurate when I say that one reason that some people attack the Bible is because it does give them an accurate reflection of what they are. They don't like what they see. And so the alternative then is to smash the mirror, to attack the book, to be rid of it. Of course, the point James is making is that you can look in a mirror and see that there is something wrong, but then do nothing about it. And to look in a mirror and then not correct something wrong is to be self deceived. It's a kind of stupidity, quite frankly. I think that we as Christians often do that. And I am honest when I say that I think it would be better not to study the Bible at all than to study the Bible and not do anything about what it tells you. Because people who study the Bible and are not obedient to it live in the worst of both worlds.

They end up just feeling guilty, ill at ease, upset. I mentioned in the hour in the gymnasium that my wife and I have had some difficulty putting our act together. Another time we have had problems is when we go out to a dinner party, my wife will come sidling up to me and she'll say, don't look now, but your socks don't match your suit. I don't carry a spare pair of socks around. I mean, that information doesn't help me at all. It just makes me miserable.

For the rest of the evening, I walk around stiff legged, hoping nobody will notice. It's like somebody comes up to you and tells you there's a rip in your trousers. So for the rest of the

evening you back up against every available wall. You don't have needle and thread, you don't have a spare pair of pants. All that information does is to upset you, make you ill at ease. And that's true with people who know the Bible. They know there's something wrong, but if they don't correct it, it just makes them miserable. But the third thing you can do with a mirror is to see that there is something wrong and then to allow the mirror to do its work, that is, to correct it.

And that's what James says, what he says in verse 24, for he that holds himself verse 25. But he that looks into the perfect law, the law of Liberty. And so continues being that a hero that forgets, but a doer that works, this man shall be blessed in his doing. There's an interesting contrast between the word and the Greek used for the word look in verse 25 and the word for behold in verse 23. The word for look in verse 25 is the word that is used in John 20 of the disciples who come to the tomb of our Lord. And they kneel outside and peer into its darkness to see what is there. It has the idea of intensity about it, the word behold in contrast about the idea of a glance just looking quickly and off you go.

So he says, the man or woman that looks into the perfect law, the law of Liberty, and continues, being not a hero that forgets, but a doer that works, this man shall be blessed in his doing. I think it's interesting to see the way that James refers to the word of God. He calls it the perfect law of Liberty. At first glance, there seems to be a contradiction there. That is, when I think of law, I think of 55 miles an hour, radar and force. I think of Liberty. I think of going as fast as you want to go, provided you can pay for the gasoline. And James brings them together. He talks about the perfect law of Liberty. It seems to have a contradiction to it.

Well, my wife and I enjoy playing tennis. I really ought not stand here and lie to you. My wife and I enjoy going down to the tennis court and hitting the ball back and forth to each other. In fact, there are times when we go down to the tennis court in the morning that they haven't put up the net yet, and that hasn't bothered us at all. I mean, I hit the ball to her and then she hits the ball. Well, that isn't true. I hit the ball to her, she chases it. She hits the ball to me and I chase it. When I was in Dallas, we used to go to the World Championship of tennis, and you watch those athletes play. And there are times when the ball comes shooting across the net and hits just outside the line and you can see the aggravation of the tennis player, or there are times when he serves and the ball is a lead ball just hits the net and the service has to be done again, let's see a kind of aggravation.

Imagine what would happen if I went up to Jimmy Connors and said, "Jimmy, I know you're really concerned about your spiritual life. It's obvious to me as you're playing that game when that ball hit outside that bothered you. I noticed in your surge you were hitting the net and the net was getting in your way. Now my wife and I, we have a solution. Why don't you just hang the lines, get rid of the net. That really works for us. We never get aggravated about things like that." Spectate said to me. "Robinson, I don't know what it is you and your wife play, but it's not tennis because you can't play tennis without the lines.

You can't play the game without the net. It's the lines that set you free to play, just as you can't play football without the sidelines." You really cannot take the ball and run up into the stands because the defensive players are after you. You can't play baseball without the foul lines. Those lines, those laws, those rules set you free to play. And the word of God is the perfect law of

Liberty. These teachings of the scripture are not given to restrict you, to tie you down, but to set you free to be the kind of person you were designed to be.

And as you live in submission to the scriptures, you discover that you become free in your life. And if you live in disobedience to the Scriptures, you sense that you are bound. So he says, he that peers into the perfect law of Liberty and continues being not a hero that forgets, but a doer that works. This man shall be blessed in his doing.

As a footnote, I am intrigued with the word "hearer." It was used by a man or a woman who listened to a lecture. And maybe I'm showing my defensiveness as a professor when I say that I can see people listening to lectures and somehow the lecture goes in the ear and down the arm into the notebook. But the exam reveals that somehow the thing never got into the life. It's easy to listen, to take notes, but not remember, not put it into practice. And James says that the person who puts it into practice, this man shall be blessed in his doing. Let me say one thing before I say another. I always do that. But I'm just pointing that out to you right now.

I think when you are benefited by a ministry in the Scriptures, by your pastor, by a professor in class, that it's perfectly appropriate to tell the person that you've appreciated what they have done. Some Christians don't do that. We think, I guess, that if we compliment somebody, that will fill them with pride and they'll go over the brink, down into the chasm of destruction, well, that's their problem. Your problem is to express it.

The writer of Proverbs says, as the Crucible for silver and the furnace for gold. So a person is known by his deeds. And one of the things that ought to characterize us is the people of God is expressing open, honest appreciation. I'm not talking about flattery. Flattery is soft soap, and soft soap is 90% lie. I'm talking about honest appreciation. I think we ought to express it. I think we ought to do it as often as we can. I think it's good to express appreciation.

So in the light of that, I know that often when a message is over, what people say to you is, that was a real blessing. Now don't worry about that. Don't get hung up. Preachers take their compliments any way they can get them. But James would say, look, you really don't know that at 12:00 on Sunday morning because the blessing is not in the hearing. The blessing is in the doing. You really only know that a sermon is a blessing at 12:30 on Tuesday or Thursday or Saturday, when you take that truth and put it into your life.

A blessing is not being emotionally moved. It's not being entertained or stimulated. The blessing in hearing the word of God is in the doing. And then James makes that principle specific. I think in the last three verses of the chapter, he says, if any man thinks himself to be religious while he bridles not his tongue, but to see that his heart this man's religion is vain, pure religion, and under file before our God and Father is this to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

Now here is a person who comes to church, and he considers himself religious. After all, he's in church, sings to him. He listens to the sermon. But James says that man may be deceived because the test of true religion, one of the tests is to listen to the way he talks. That is truth when it is

active in our lives, affects our speech. The way you talk to a roommate or to a parent or to a friend or the way you talk about a roommate or a parent or a friend.

You can sit under the word of God and discover that the test of religion is not that you sit in Church. The test of religion isn't the way you talk or the test of your religion. It can be in the acts that you do for pure religion and under file before our God and Father is this to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction. That phrase, the fatherless and widows, comes out of the Old Testament, for example, Psalm 68. And it was a phrase that was used for those who are unfortunate, in other words, for those who can't pay you back if you visit orphans, if you visit widows, you do it because you're a benefit to them, because they benefit you.

And the third test of applied Christianity, not only the way you speak and the way you visit, but your whole motivation. You keep yourself unspotted from the world. Ultimately, that's what worldliness is, and that is to live and love and choose on the same basis that men and women who don't know God live and love and choose. When that's what makes Sammy run, then Sammy's a whirlwind. In fact, James goes on in the next chapter to apply that to favoritism in a Church, you respond to people like the worlding responds, then it doesn't matter how much Bible you know or how religious you seem to be, that religion is vague, it's defiled.

And a person who thinks he's religious but has a loose tongue, there's no concern for the unfortunate and whose motivation is like that of those who know not God is deceived. You see, it's putting the truth into practice that makes the difference. Well, how does all this work? My desk in Denver, I have a bit of poetry that says Tommy Snooks and Betty Brooks were walking

out on Sunday, said Tommy Snooks to Betty Brooks, "Tomorrow will be Monday." That has got to be the ultimate low in social conversation. But for people who preach and for those who listen, that's not that bad to keep in mind.

And that is tomorrow will be Monday, and the truth that it is to be effective must work itself out in Monday morning's world. In this case, however, this truth will work itself out next Sunday. Sunday comes and I don't know about you, but I can get off to seminary at 630 every day of the week. But when it comes to getting to Church at 11:00 on Sunday morning, point becomes hectic. Perhaps next Sunday you will remember that James has a word for you, that it's wise to set the alarm just a bit earlier to get to Church so that you have a chance to allow God to weed up out of your life the attitudes and actions already contrary to his will, that you will prepare yourself to listen to the sermon.

And then as you listen, you will do so with an eagerness. In fact, you'll do so with a submissiveness. You'll hear the word of God and allow your life and thinking to be shaped by it. And when the sermon is over, you'll realize that it's not over yet, that it still has to be done. You'll take the truth and ask yourself, how can I Act upon this this afternoon or tomorrow to make it a part of my experience? And you'll do that and you'll discover as you do, that's where the blessing of preaching is because you and I are only blessed when we practice what the preacher preaches. Okay, we have a couple of minutes. I'd be glad to handle any questions you might have. Any comments you might want to make in a few minutes that are left to us.

James talks about hearing the word. He is talking about someone who preaches the scriptures. I am not telling you to listen to your preacher and do what he tells you to do. If you do that, you may end up a neurotic mess. The authority for preaching does not come from an authoritarian personality. It comes from somebody who preaches the word of God as he preaches the sermon. He ought to be showing you in the scriptures where he's getting it? From a Christian, you ought to obey what God says, not necessarily what somebody who says he's speaking for God says there is more nonsense preached in our churches on a given Sunday Than the world can contain.

You better be careful that you hear me. Well, that I am talking about someone preaching the word of God and not just somebody saying he's preaching the word of God. A lot of our churches, the text is read and it's kind of like the national anthem at the football game, but he stands up and salutes it. But then for the rest of the afternoon, you forget about it and play the game. I believe theologically that expository preaching is the only kind of preaching that demands authority.

That's what we're about at Denver seminary. I think our students have to leave knowing the word and knowing how to preach it. I think that it's the rape of the highest sort of the word of God For somebody to stand up and proclaim in the name of God from a passage what God is not saying, better still just to tell people, look, I don't know what God says about this. I'll give you my opinion. They did that. At least everybody is honest. We know what we're dealing with. So hear me. Well, I'm not just talking about listening to a sermon. I'm talking about listening to the preaching of the word of God. I can hear the rumble in your stomachs. I dismissed.