

Ears with Legs

After two weeks on holiday my kids went back to school this week – and while its great having them around to have fun with, by the end of the holidays its been good to send them back to school.

As typically happens when we spend time together they invariably try to stretch the boundaries and we end up in all sorts of fights which include exchanges like:

Didn't you here me? Are you listening to me?

Yeah I heard you !

Why don't you do what you're told ?

Why should I ! or I forgot !

In heated exasperation I yell out **Grow Up!**

They'll tell me that they love me to which I reply **"if they did they'd do what I told them"**.

As their father I'm obviously trying to teach them what's best for them – so that as they get older they can grow up well prepared for the challenges ahead for their lives and to ensure that they live within the rules our society sets – **living free but within boundaries.**

If we reflect on what it is like to be a parent preparing children to stand on their own two feet it gives us some useful insights about what it must be like for God trying to help us to get the most out of our lives now and to get us to obey his rules for our lives. It also gives insights into our rebellious, self centred nature and how hard it is for us to change, and stay that way.

Today we are going to look at growing up & maturing as a Christian by looking at a short section from the Book of James.

But before we do, I think it's worth spending a moment considering who James was and his reason for writing his letter.

While there has been some debate it is pretty well accepted that the book of James was written by Jesus brother James. Interestingly for a man that became a prominent leader in the early Jerusalem Christian Church, he did not appear to believe in his Jesus throughout Jesus' life. However he becomes totally committed after seeing Jesus when he had arisen from the grave.

When we keep in mind that the writings of the New Testament are given to us through people that personally witnessed the risen Jesus we can appreciate the passion and truth behind what they have to say to us –making it all the more compelling – I think sometimes we lose sight of this and don't fully absorb the emotion or faithful nature behind what they are saying and so don't receive it as strongly as we should. Perhaps that's just me.

James writes to the early Jewish Christian Church, the twelve tribes scattered amongst the nations (v1:1) – he writes as their pastor to instruct and encourage them in the face of their difficulties and the impacts these were having on their faith and how they lived their lives.

He particularly encourages them that the tests they are facing are part of the process of their maturing in faith so that they could get the full benefit of their faith and lead lives pleasing to God.

He teaches on a range of matters, but today we are focussing on verse 1:22 where he teaches **on two particular aspects of our faith that we must not take as being mutually exclusive of each other – hearing and doing. Or having Ears with Legs as I've called this sermon.**

Let's have a look at what God has to teach us through James.

You might like to have your Bibles open at page 1196 to follow what we consider – although some extracts will also be up on the screen

James says in verse 1:22

“Do not merely listen to the word & so deceive yourselves. Do what it says”.

I like his direct approach – a very clear, simple statement, but he also emphasises further why we need to do this through verses 23 – 25.

We'll consider all of this by looking at the following 5 questions which verse 22 raises.

1. To what is it that we should listen as faithful Christians?
2. How should we listen?
3. When should we listen?
4. How should we respond to what we hear?
5. What are the consequences of us obeying/disobeying?

To what is that we should be listening as faithful Christians to guide our lives?

James rightly expects there is only one answer to this question and therefore he writes only of us listening to the Word (verse 22) which he goes on in verse 25 to call “the perfect law that gives freedom”.

Just as we expect that new residents to Australia will come and live according to our countries laws and moral codes, God requires us as members of his Church to live according to his rules and guidance – which are given to us through the Bible.

As Paul writes in his 2nd letter to Timothy “**the scriptures are God breathed for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training to equip us for every good work**”. They tell us about the natures of God and Man, and God’s plans from creation to eternity. It tells us the do’s and don’ts for our lives in faith.

The reference to “the law that gives freedom” would have had significant meaning to his audience who had grown up Jewish but were now Christians.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:17 that he came as fulfilment of the old Testament Law, not to abolish it.

He teaches that through fulfilling the Law by living, dying and rising to life again he set us free from our sins. As Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians, “now that faith has come we are no longer under the supervision of the law”. Under the Old Testament we were convicted and sentenced to death in our sin – whereas through Jesus the punishment is paid and we are set free, provided we have faith.

So it is clearly to Gods Word that we should listen - But too often we look to other places for our guidance

- To our own opinions
- The world’s
- Or the Devil’s

In the past year or so we had lots of people, even people who claim to be Christians, who looked to the DaVinci Code novel for their faith guidance – but such things are fiction for entertainment. They are not the truth - but people risk letting them deceive them.

The Bible gives us a perfect image of what we should be like compared to what we are – so that we are clear and certain about what we need to change or do to become more pleasing to God, which is the appropriate response to our faith.

To look anywhere else is useless – elsewhere we can get distorted, misleading or foggy images – like looking into one of those mirrors at Luna Park or a fair that make you fatter or thinner or taller or into the mirror after a shower that's all steamed up.

Even if the images are clear they are not God's image and so are irrelevant.

God's Word is an amazing mirror reflecting what's inside of us, not just our physical exterior.

Our looking elsewhere for wisdom reflects how much we struggle in our immaturity to be obedient.

But ignorance is not bliss!!

How then should we listen to the Word?

In verse 22 and 25 James tells us to **look intently at the Word not merely**.

When we look at something intently we are focussed; trying to get something out of the process

As Christians, we are trying to gain wisdom in our faith so that we can lead lives more pleasing to God and strengthen our faith so that we can better deal with the worlds daily challenges.

To look merely lacks any real purpose.

As James suggests, when we look merely we fail to gain any real, lasting benefit – it is perhaps a habit only, providing no real response. But if we look intently all sorts of things might be observed.

For instance, in our physical lives, if we have a regular process of looking intently at our face in the mirror we might detect skin conditions that need attention. To merely look we might never notice something that becomes life threatening. And so it is with our faith lives.

To help us appreciate what it is to listen intently it is worth considering James words in verse 1:19 – he tells us “**to be quick to listen and slow to speak**”.

To be a good listener we need to learn to keep quiet and pay attention to the speaker – we need to make the focus the speaker not us.

Perhaps you can remember a conversation with someone that wouldn't let you get a word in despite you having something important to say – you go away thinking of them as rude or unfriendly, but they go away thinking how great that you listened to them – especially if you responded at various times to show you were taking in what they said. Perhaps you've been the beneficiary of that position too, and so can appreciate how good it can feel.

Too often in our relationship with God we are so caught up in our world that we do not listen to him – rather we have to humble ourselves before God, making our worlds smaller and focusing on letting him speak to us.

If we just keep talking over him we do not show our respect or love and we fail to hear his guidance.

Listening intently is a great way of showing a kind of serving love to one another – by doing so we show that the other person is more important than us.

As John put it in John 3:30, in our relationship with Jesus “**He must become greater: I must become less**”.

Listen intently to the Word.

When should we listen to the Word?

James tells us in verse 25 that we need **to continue to look intently** into God's Word.

Friends' living in Christ is a continuous process – we are not in faith if we think we can choose to be in it one day, out the next and so on as we please.

Growing in a mature faith is like any change process-it needs to be kept going. If we do not, we risk stagnating or relapsing to our former selves.

Sustained change takes effort – think how many New Years resolutions fall quickly away or weight loss is regained after a crash diet.

We often need help along the way – and so we meet with others to study the Bible and to encourage each other in our Christian lives.

How should we respond to God's Word?

James tells us in verse 22 to **“do what the Word says”**.

We are not just to hear and then walk away like a person looking in the mirror – taking no real notice of what he has seen. We must not forget what it says.

Reading and studying the Bible is all very well but our truly faithful response is to do what it says – Jesus specifically calls on us to obey his commands – and as a role model and teacher he is our perfect example, he not only spoke the word he lived it, no matter how demanding.

Friends, if we are looking intently into the bible and do not feel compelled to change by doing what it says, we should ask ourselves whether we really have faith.

Too many people mark their Bibles with highlighter or pencil underlining as they read it but their lives do not mark them as Christians – As those in faith we need to do what the word commands of us and let our lives be shining examples to others.

None of this is saying that you are saved by works rather than by coming to faith, but that an important and natural consequence of having come to faith is to try to live according to God's commands.

So what then does it mean to do what the Word Says?

In simple terms Paul tells us through his letter to the Ephesians to “**Be imitators of God**”, living lives of sacrificial love, like Jesus did. In doing this he tells us we need to change from our old sinful selves to become like God.

Similarly Jesus himself tells us to stop sinning and in probably one the most well known passages of the Bible, Matthew 22:37-40, he tells us to “**Love the Lord with all we’ve got and to Love our neighbour as ourselves.**” This encapsulates all his teaching.

In his letter James talks about us needing to avoid getting angry, quarrelling or fighting and to watch what we say amongst other things.

But to gain a deeper understanding of what it is to be like God , what we should do and what we should not and to gain the full encouragement of the Bible we need to read it intently – but we won’t do that further now or we’ll be here a very long time.

What are the consequences of doing what James tells us or not doing them?

If we do not do what he tells us we risk deceiving ourselves – **deceiving is a particularly strong word which tells we can be led into error, or even danger through misrepresentation of the truth.**

God, through James, wants us to be strong in our faith, getting the full measure of its joy – if we are weak in our faith we risk being tossed around by the daily challenges we face – In **verse 1:6** James compares it to be being tossed around like a wave in the wind, similarly, Paul in his letter to the Ephesians likens it to being like an infant tossed in the sea – An immense struggle, in which we risk drowning if we are not strong.

Through verse 12 James compares this struggle to the joy we can have by living faithfully now to fulfil our calling to **receive the crown of life, ultimately** joining him in heaven. **To be blessed as James tells us in verse 25.** This is a unique spiritual joy that only those in faith can share.

In the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Matthew Ch5, Jesus explains about who is blessed and how – referred to as the beatitudes. I won't go into that now but encourage you to read it later for yourselves

All in faith are blessed – but our joy in our faith grows as our faith becomes a more dominant part of our lives.

Let me share with you some recent experience in my life that shows how our joy increases as our faith grows.

Some of you may know that over the past year or so I have been made redundant from work twice as a result of business takeovers. That's unfortunately life these days.

That was quite a challenging time and I'm disappointed to be able to say that **in the early stages of dealing with it my faith response was not the best** - I worried or became anxious as I contemplated what would happen. But through the following year I have been spending much more time studying the Bible, talking about its meaning with friends and family and coming to rely much more heavily on God, such that a passage from Philippians 4, which is over there on the wall, has become a great comfort to me: It says "**Do not be anxious about anything**" – and through this growth I have gained his peace which transcends my understanding.

Early this year I took on a contract role which was also extremely challenging – but this time I approached my daily work in a different way to ever before – I made it a matter of practice every day before I drove out of the garage to sit in the car and pray for God's guidance to deal with matters that would come before me each day – a couple of times I started driving down the street and realised I had not stopped to pray - so I pulled over and prayed.

And you know what? the only bad days I had, that I can remember, were when I did not pray.

Did all things go well? – no – there were some quite trying days to deal with but I never felt overwhelmed - I knew God was equipping me to do what would come before me and not to worry about the things I could not control – **none of that was going to kill me!**

But behaviours quickly change – now that role is finished and I have not been getting in the car each day my prayer life has receded – to maintain change requires ongoing effort – thanks to preparing this talk I have gotten a much needed kick in the tail.

Is everything in my life the way I would have it ? – not if it were just according to my plans – but everything is good when I know it is happening in Christ. My life is so much more enjoyable. I feel so greatly blessed.

I want to encourage you to share in the increasing joy that growing in Christ brings to the faithful.

So to sum up – what has James reminded us?

We need to have ears with legs!

For those that have come to faith our obedient response needs to be:

1. To continue to intently listen to the Word and not to forget what it says

2. We must do what it says

- Sacrificially loving God and all others

As I said earlier, hearing and doing are not to be seen as mutually exclusive of each other; we must do both, not just one or the other. We cannot do until we have heard but having heard we must act.

Through doing this we can live freely and joyfully as we grow in maturity of our faith and bring Glory and Honour to God.

[Pause]

Let's pray

Dear Father

Thank you for choosing to give us a new life through your Word. [James 1:18]

Help us to grow up strong in our faith so that we may be blessed through persevering under the trials that we have to deal with every day – please help us to grow in our faith so that we may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. [James1:4]

Help us to listen intently and continuously to your word, not forgetting what it says, so that we will not be deceived but so that we will be brought to do what it says – and through this be richly blessed through gaining the full measure of the joy that being in faith with you brings, helping others to know you and come to you and above all, bringing honour and glory to you.

We ask all these things in Jesus name. Amen