

As Christians, we all seek to grow in our faith. Why? Is it because Peter Oh always says so? Or, is it because that is what everyone else does? What does it mean to have strong faith? The title of the sermon series is “Living by faith.” We are looking at how to live by faith over trials and temptations. We will learn how to deal with materials and other challenges. We will learn to seek wisdom in order to live by faith. So, what is true faith? James taught us in verse 18 how we received faith. *“He [the Father] chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created” (v.18)*. First, the Father has chosen us. We don’t earn faith by ourselves. It is solely by God’s choice. Second, faith comes through the Word of truth. As you know, the Word is logos (Λόγος), Jesus, who created all things in the beginning (cf. John 1:1-2). We have faith through Jesus and in Jesus. Third, faith in Jesus gives us a new identity. Among all creation, we become firstfruits, with whom God is pleased. But, we are not offering ourselves to God just for once. We will continue to offer ourselves to the Lord as the firstfruits in order to glorify Him. How? By living by faith.

After talking about God’s Word in verse 18, now James is talking about us, as he says, *“My dear brothers, take note of this”*, which literally means, *“You must know this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (v.19)*. James knows even if we are born again through the word of truth, we may respond to trials by complaining about them and becoming angry over them. We should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. However, this teaching is not limited just to believers, but it is for all people. This is one of the common things that every religion teaches. Everyone has two ears and one mouth. I think it is God’s design that we should listen twice as much as we speak. It is because communication, how to listen and how to speak, is one of the biggest problems in every relationship. If you ask for the reason for a broken relationship, probably all people say it is because of the lack of communication, not being heard, or being abused. This is a human problem in all countries. For the sake of our relationship, we should learn how to listen.

I am not an expert in communication, but I can think of some types of hearing. In our conversation, we may ignore what we hear. This is bad because there will be no further communication. And sometimes we just pretend to be listening but we don’t. This is bad too because there will be no understanding. At other times, we may listen selectively. We hear only what we want, and if we don’t like it, we decide not to hear. This is another big problem in a broken relationship. We have these attitudes when we are self-centered. We tend to speak more than to listen. Then, how shall we listen to others? Again, I am not an expert, but we can find an ideal one from the Bible. One day, on the way to Galilee, Jesus met a Samaritan woman at the well (cf. John 4:1-26). She was considered an outcast; Jesus was not supposed to talk with her, but the circumstances didn’t matter to Jesus. He initiated the conversation with her. Jesus knew her situation and needs. The focus of the conversation was to fulfill what she needed. This should be our way of listening. We need to initiate our conversation. When we do, our focus is to understand the other person’s difficulties. Our listening should fulfil the other person’s needs. If we do this, I believe there will be less division, separation or hatred. Looking at our nation, community, and even our home, we know that we still have some divisions. This is why we need to learn how to listen to each other. We need to hear more than speak.

Particularly for Christians, James presents a solution for a better relationship. We need to receive the Word in humility. *“Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you”* (v.21). “Filth” refers to all kinds of unclean behavior that lies outside the will of God, including anger, wrath and abusive words. It includes all kinds of evil, which cannot bring about the righteous life that God desires. When we are humble before God, we will revere Him. God is holy and He wants us to be pure. We will do our best to get rid of all moral filth and the evil. This is how we receive the Word. And, the Word will save us.

James is speaking to Christians who are already born again. By the word, “save”, he is not referring to salvation to eternal life, but he is implying “saving your lives or yourselves.” As we learned last week, when we sin in our evil desires, we may experience death, a miserable life. That is the life needed to be saved. By obeying God’s Word, the believer can save his life from the consequences of sin. By obeying God’s Word, the believer can save himself from a broken relationship.

Another way of living by faith is to act on the Word. This is the main theme of the whole book, as the key verse 22 says, *“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”* James says those who listen to the Word without doing it are deceiving themselves. What does it mean? As we are forgiven through Jesus’ sacrifice, we come to church to worship him out of gladness and thanksgiving. Worshiping God is His command, and for that reason we are created. So, worshiping Jesus in the Father’s house is what we must do just as you are doing now. Some people may say using this verse “doing good outside the church is better than worshiping inside the church” but worshiping God cannot be compromised by anything else. When we humbly accept the Word, we will naturally worship God. Here James is pointing out to those who don’t want to change themselves even though they hear the Word. Listening to God’s Word is the first step. It is the beginning of our faithful life. As we listen to the Word, James challenges us to act on it. Living by faith doesn’t mean just merely listening, but it is doing the Word.

*“Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like”* (vv.23-24). This is a great illustration. Even if we are very busy, we don’t forget to look at a mirror before we go out. When you notice something not natural in your face, will you just go out without fixing it? No! I am sure you will fix your face even if you get late for the meeting. If you really don’t have time, you may probably do it while you are driving. It is natural for all human beings. If we see something wrong, we will have to fix it. Likewise, when we look at the mirror of God’s word, it always points out what we need to fix. It always teaches us what we ought to do. By doing what we hear and see from the Bible, we will receive freedom, and we will be blessed. This is what Jesus said too, *“Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock”* (Matthew 7:24-25). There will be rain or winds against us in this life; there will be trials, but those who act on what they hear will not fall because they have a strong foundation. Blessing doesn’t come just by hearing the Word, but by acting on it.

Then, James points out three practical things that Christians are supposed to do as they live by faith. First, we must control our tongues. We have to “*keep a tight rein on our tongue*” because as James later says, “*it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison*” (3:8). A tongue can be easily a deadly weapon for anyone, but true Christians will try to control it because it is God’s command and because an uncontrolled tongue is evil. We also need to “*look after orphans and widows in their distress.*” Orphans and widows represent the helpless and powerless. They are not those who choose to be poor. They are in their distress not by their choice, but just by their life. James encourages and exhorts us to help the helpless and powerless. I believe this is the ministry that our deacons and the whole congregation are involved in. Lastly, we need to “*keep ourselves from being polluted by the world.*” The term, “world” has various meanings, but in this context, the world is a place of evil and danger. We cannot run away from the world. We live in this world, but we should not belong to the world. It means we cannot be influenced by worldly teachings and beliefs. In every generation, there is a popular belief. Even if it is wrong, so many people agree with that principle that we Christians tend to go along with it. We are actually forced to change our Christian value. However, we must examine it through the “perfect law” of God. The law is perfect because it reflects the nature of the holy God. It is perfect because it is God’s will. It is also perfect because we can find true freedom from sin and its consequences when we live according to the law. This is why we need to protect ourselves from worldly teachings so that we may remain pure and holy.

Living by faith is all about transforming. We are not any better than non-Christians. We do make the same mistakes with our tongues. We are selfish. But we have the Word which can transform us from worldly people to godly people, from ineffective believers to influential Christians. It is possible as we are willing to listen to the Word and do what it teaches us. Brothers and sisters, how much has the Word changed you? We may not clearly see our changes, but others do. So, how much do your family and friends notice your change? Is the change a godly change? Will they say you are becoming a true and pious Christian? It is a scary question, isn’t it? This is why we open our Bible again, ask the Holy Spirit to teach us and do what we hear. It is a lifelong process. But, we don’t get discouraged because the Lord Jesus is walking with us. May God bless you as you try to live by faith according to the Word. Amen.