



### 3. The Danger of Deception (James 1:16-27)

If you can remember from a few weeks back, we started a series in the Letter of James. It was an important letter, written to Jewish Christians. Error and discouragement was creeping into their communities and it had to be stopped. Many of the issues developed later in the letter appear here in chapter 1. So for example in our first sermon in the series we found words of encouragement to never give up, but to persevere in the faith. The second sermon developed that more because many of these Christians were facing temptations that they feared would overwhelm them.

We saw that problems and temptations are par for the course for Christians. In fact, if you want to grow as a Christian, perseverance through trials and problems and the ability to see temptations for what they are and run from them are all part of the growth process.

To put it bluntly, if you say you are a believer and never have problems, and are never conscious of temptations – then are you a believer? The letter of James I'm afraid is about as blunt as that and through the generations it has been a problematic letter because it asks hard moral questions that make Christians feel uncomfortable. Sadly we often prefer to live in self-deception rather than to face up to what God is saying.

Which nicely brings us to the third theme in James 1: deception, especially self-deception. James uses the word three times:

- 16 Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. 17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*
- 22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*
- 26 If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.*

We live in a world of deception. There are people out there who would deceive us. There are the obvious ones – the high pressure salesmen, the confidence tricksters, some politicians, religious cults. But Satan is more deceptive than that. He uses people and situations in ways that would draw us from our faith. In the end, it is not just the capacity of others to deceive us, but our own capacity to be deceived – our capacity for self-deception.

“Do not be deceived my beloved brothers”. So how can we be deceived? Let's look more closely at the three verses I just read so that we can avoid deception.

#### The deception that it's God's fault, not mine

*16 Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. 17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. 18 He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.*

This picks up where we were last time. *Jam 1:13 Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.* Whose fault is it when we are tempted and succumb to it – it's ours – we are responsible for that. God is responsible for that which is good in our lives.

The greatest liberating truth of the NT is that our relationship to God is brought about by grace – every good and perfect gift is from above. We have a God who created the heavens (the heavenly lights) who does not change. He makes His promises and they stick. James uses some interesting words here. Here we have the creator creating in us life. James uses words of Jesus that they are

familiar with – He gave us birth through the word of truth. Just as God spoke creation into being, He speaks life into us spiritually. In Jeremiah 1 verse 8 Israel was described as the firstfruits of all God created. James uses the same expression here for Christians. What does it mean. The firstfruits were offered at the beginning of harvest to give God thanks for the harvest he was going to provide (Ex23:13-19). Whatever they were, they were God's and they represented the promises of God that He was going to provide the harvest they needed that year.

In Christ, God has given us new birth through faith and we are His, we are allocated as an offering to Him. We are the first part of a greater harvest that has eternal consequences. We have that eternal hope. Why? Because through faith in the death of Jesus on the cross we have come into the benefit of that.

What an amazing God we have! What an amazing Saviour! Right at the heart of James message is that if we have come into this faith, then it's life-changing. We've found ourselves constantly coming back to this theme several times over the past year or so. We have entered into a new life in Christ. What started at Calvary will one day be finished and we will see creation completed.

New means new. For those James was writing this to, the Christian faith was uncharted territory. They had embraced grace. And it was new to them. How should they then live? Should they be *antinomian* (without law or moral code) like their Roman neighbours around them and not worry too much about morals? Many Christians did act that way as we know from other parts of the NT, particularly the Corinthian letters. And James says, don't deceive yourselves. God has given you birth into something completely different! Their allegiance should be to the one who has forgiven them new life.

The problem is that they had already watered down the truth with the values of the society around them. In fact, it is one of the the greatest temptations around to succumb to, which is why James says: *19 My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, 20 for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. 21 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.*

Last time we talked about different types of temptation but one of the worst is temptation to be the same as everyone else. It's not just the peer pressure of teenagers which we laugh at – the hoodies, the trainers, the attitude – it's our own adult desire to be like everyone else – nice house, nice car – lots of stuff. In themselves there is nothing wrong with having things' it's just that we take on the values that they come with. The main characteristic of the church in Britain I would say is sameness with the world. We hear the same values in our churches and amongst God's people and in the idolatry of modern materialism. I don't know how many times we have looked at scripture in the past year and have found that as God's people that we are called to live exemplary lives. We are different and people should see it and we will find out what that means in a minute. Our lives must speak out who we are. What do our lives say to people this morning.

Yet we have a God who says "Be holy as I am holy". (1 Pet 1:16, Lev 11:44) "Be different as I am different". What do we and our church say in how we act. Does it reflect the sameness of this materialistic world or are you different? What about our church?

What is the difference in the lives of the people of God. Surely it should be to be liberating, different, hopeful – all the values that appeal to a nation where fear, greed, selfishness and hopelessness are the order of the day.

The problem for James hearers were not that they were evil people who were into anger, gossip and sexual impropriety. Like us, they probably felt that they were OK. They worshipped Christ and probably thought their church had a lot going for it. But they had sold out in many respects to the world. They deceived themselves by thinking that it was alright to tolerate some of the world's values in the way they behaved. But they were the people of God, the firstfruits of what He had created. How could they turn

What does God think about that. I'll tell you. If you read the prophecy of Amos you'll find that the people worshipped God faithfully – even if it wasn't the way that God had ordained! They were prosperous so God must be blessing them mustn't He? Yet their lives were also full of idolatry and

their society full of injustice. They lived what I called *a la carte lives*. You all know what an a la carte menu is. We chose from this kind of menu the bits we like – the bits that suit us. They were proud of the way they worshipped, yet they tolerated things in their lives which they laughed off as unimportant.

God destroyed Israel for those sins. They knew what God said but ignored it because they thought that being OK in a few respects was acceptable to a holy God who said “Be holy as I am holy”

For the church Britain in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and for this church and for our lives the message remains the same. We have been given birth by the word of truth. We are God’s firstfruits. How can we let even a little of the world’s values in – it’s anger and it’s moral filth. Yet we do. Israel didn’t escape when they failed to repent? What about us?

### The deception that it doesn’t matter what you do

*22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 23 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 24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 25 But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it--he will be blessed in what he does.*

The second deception follows on from the first. The idea is that as long as you have the right words, the rest doesn’t matter. If you go and listen to stirring sermons from the word of God. If you are encouraged by how God speaks to you, then that’s OK. *22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says* I recall a few years ago being part of a church that experienced a move of the Spirit. Services were amazing and everyone sensed that God was moving. People got healed, people got saved. Amazing stuff. People started coming week after week to packed evening services to see the next miracle. The main problem was that they were just spectators. The word was going forth that THEY had to change and they didn’t. Within 6 months the church had collapsed and the Pastor gone. They listened to the word and they did not do it. The judgement of God fell there I believe.

Don’t just listen do. One of the biggest criticism of God’s people is that we are hypocrites. Sometimes that just isn’t justified but often it is. We are called to be holy. We are called to be transformed people. But we are an *a la carte* people. We give God the bits we want and not the lot as He desires.

It’s like if we invite Him into our homes to clean it up . We say, Lord, our house is yours to deal with as you wish and then only keep Him in the living room “hoover up in there Lord”. Maybe reluctantly we allow Him to do some drying up in the kitchen. But there are some rooms that are private - ours. He doesn’t get in those.

The word of God is not *a la carte*. It does matter how we live and the one who made us the firstfruits of His creation wants all of us, not just the bits we are prepared to surrender. How shall we escape, personally and as a nation if we abandon those things which are the characteristics of a holy God. We are called to be *different*. If we believe in a transforming Saviour, then we have a call to be transformed (Rom 12:2) and that means to be different from the world around us because we have been redeemed from it.

It’s rather like our mirror sketch this morning It’s absurd that you would forget what we look like even if we have a mirror. It was an absurd sketch. James says – it’s absurd that Christians, having tasted of the grace of God, still live like the world. But that’s exactly what’s going on. We know what God requires of us, yet we don’t live it. Then we wonder why the church is dying in our land. We wonder why we see no blessing. We wonder why the world finds us so unattractive. We wonder why no-one comes to Christ. James’ answer is simple we’ve looked into the glory of Christ and have turned our faces away to the idolatry of materialism and the values of our society.

**The deception that words don't matter**

***26 If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.***

Sticks and stones may break my bones but names can never hurt me. So goes the old saying. If doing is more important than listening, then what we say doesn't matter then? Another deception. Words destroy people. What comes out of you reflects what's inside of you. We all know characters that say what they think; please or offend. They may be amusing but in truth words can hurt people deeply.

Do words matter? They surely do. What comes out of us reflects what's inside.

How do I sum up this morning It's by repudiating a lie that because God is gracious, it doesn't matter how we live, what we do or don't do and what we say. It does. God has destroyed nations because of the kind of things that we readily do.

Do we want to make a difference in our families? Do we want to make a difference in our neighborhoods? Do we want to make a difference in this town? Then we must live as the people of God. We live like the people of God – as the people He has made us to be. We must discern His will and do it.

We seem to be coming back to this point quite a lot at the moment. The reason that we do is that it is the message of scripture. God wants a holy bride – different – acceptable to Him. God wants a people he can use. And that means He challenges every part of our lives.

The alternative is a simple one. If we don't, then what's already happened will be continued until our candlestick is wiped out.

