

Our passage today in the letter of James, would best be titled, **Passing the Hearing Test!**

It is only a personal opinion, but I think the the loss of hearing is greater in magnitude than the loss of sight. Evidence shows, those with impaired hearing are able to laugh at their impediment, than those with loss of sight.

Some of you may remember the Hollywood sitcom of the 1960s-70s called **The Golden Girls?** In one episode, the matriarch Sophia talked about someone she had met. she said, ***I thought he was trying to pick me up. Then I realised he wanted to know if his hearing aid was turned on.***

I love the cartoon in which an elderly couple are sitting on a swing bench on their porch, holding hands looking out on a moonlit night, and he looks at her wistfully and says, ***In the moonlight, your teeth looks like pearls!*** She withdraws her hand from his clasp, looks at him and says, ***Who is Pearl? And what were you doing with her on a moonlit night?***

We could go on, but let me end with this, my favourite: an elderly lady was spotted wearing a black, baggy t-shirt sporting the message: ***I am hard of hearing and very near sighted. Please flirt aggressively!***

Our letter-writer James writes with humour, but his humour can pass us by, because we often take a very serious view of everything in the Bible. This book is full of humour, because God **does** have a sense of humour, which is often lost on us.

At the start of his letter, James throws in a large dose of reality, reminding us that trials in life come at us like waves on the seashore, but we must learn to handle trials with faith in God who shows no favouritism, but

rewards everyone who loves Him and trusts the work of His Son on the cross, with His promised Crown of Life, to witness His purpose in creation: that we should be the **first-fruits** of God's creation, that we should be the people whom God first made us to be.

The word **conversion** is used very superficially, mostly to mean a change from being a not-so-good person, to becoming a good person; other words and phrase associated with conversion are, "*transformation*" and "*born again*". I agree, these terms are used glibly, but it should not detract from its seriousness.

God's concern for us is not that we **appear** to become a different person, a stereo-type of a person who is caricatured as either *happy-clappy* or *born-again*.

God's real concern is, our character is restored to His original creation, by being **born-again** to be that person.

You remember, after the cataclysmic flood which covered the whole earth and rearranged the continents to the shape and position we have today¹, God said to Noah, **As long as the earth remains, there will be springtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, day and night.**²

Everything God created is to be to us, a reminder of two things: one, a reminder of the person and character of God Himself, and two, as an *aide-mémoire*, a help to jog our memory of God's plan to restore us into the men and women God intended us to be.

¹ Genesis 7:11

² Genesis 8:22

So, when God promised, ***As long as the earth remains, there will be springtime and harvest***, He has given us the cycle of plant life (*seed, death, germination, sprout, growth, fruit, harvest*) to remind us, we are made to bear fruit, not just any fruit, but ***first-fruit***, the fruit we were intended to yield, at creation.

Gathering together Jesus' message in His parables, we find, the ***seed*** is the Word of God; in order for the Word of God to take root in us, we must first ***die*** to ourselves, our plans and ambitions, hopes and dreams must first be surrendered and sacrificed on the altar; the rule of a sin sacrifice is, it must be burned completely until no blood is left, ***no life is left, nothing of the self is left.***³

Only through death of the self, comes new life in Christ. The seed, the Word of God breaks open, it sprouts for everyone to see new birth, it grows and during growth any part which has no life is pruned and cut away to encourage proper growth, and then first-fruits appear, which when fully ripe, become part of the harvest.

James opens this section with this powerful statement, ***God chose to give birth to us by giving us His True Word. Out of all creation, WE became God's prized possession (we became a kind of first-fruit of all His creatures)***⁴

The rest of this section will not make sense until we grasp this fundamental Truth about God and His plan for us, that the journey of life through trials and difficulties is to take us into God's presence where God waits to reward us with the Crown of Life. This results in being made

³ Leviticus 6:30 and potter passages in the book

⁴ James 1:18

perfect in Christ, by which we **become** the first-fruits of God's creation, the fruit He first intended for us to be.

James then reveals "true religion", the genuine, authentic religion God intends us to practice and live by.

This authentic religion is **not** about God's commands to do this, and not do that; the religion God wants us to live by has three hallmarks of character, and all three are about our attitude towards God's Word.

First, is **hearing the Word**. James encourages us to **hear** the Word of God. There are several audio Bibles, like David Suchet's brassy clipped voice reading through each book of the Bible. I have noticed recently, several new audio Bibles have entered the market, the latest being one called Dwell.

During James' time, the Synagogue was the place where the Word of God was read all day, every day; people passed by and "heard" the Word of God being read. Nothing wrong with that except, James is referring to an **active hearing** of the Word of God, not listening to it as background speech, like a television switched on all day.

I have noticed, people who have the TV or the radio on all day listening to the news, or talk shows the likes of Jeremy Kyle, have a negative outlook on life; everything is bad: the world is going to pot, not an ounce of human decency anywhere, no one can be trusted anymore ...

James' family descendants should probably file a copyright infringement case against those who make money selling the sign which reads, **Always remember to put brain into gear, before engaging the mouth.**

This is James' message. Hear the Word of God with intent, and you will find yourself steering clear of anger, rage, bitterness, irritation, all of which are selfish and self-centred by their very nature. **Human bitterness and anger (which are self-centred) do not produce the righteousness of God.**

The second hallmark of character which makes God's true religion, is to be **do-ers of the Word**, to act on what we have heard. Strengthen and deepen your relationship with God, doing what His Word teaches. If you have heard God's word, then act on it.

Not to act on what we hear writes James, is like the person who examines themselves intently in front of a mirror, only to forget what they look like when they walk away. But the one who acts on what they hear, is one who enjoys the blessing of God.

Godly character is developed by first, hearing the Word of God and immersing ourselves into it, making its language of positivity and hope our own, then to act on what we have heard, to live the hope we hear in the Word of God.

Finally, to focus our "**do-ing**" should be people in need, people who are victims of the laws and system of this broken world, who suffer because of injustice done to them, who are in pain because imperfect laws have made them broken people, people like widows and orphans who have no one to turn to, who depend on the nectar of human kindness and expressions of mercy.

In the final two verses of chapter 1, James issues a clarion call: be careful not to practice an empty religion by serving a **cause**; instead practice a genuine religion by serving **people**.

Many fund-raising efforts are driven by celebrities for **causes** like climate change, poverty, education ... How much better would it be if the same amount of time money and effort went to care for individuals, those whose lives are torn apart by war, those unable to fend for themselves, provide for themselves, and take care of their families.

God's heart goes out to such people for whom the broken and imperfect systems have failed; He wants us to be His instruments of love, mercy and grace to all people.

To pass God's hearing test, He invites you to practice this true religion: start by making a deliberate, concentrated effort to hear God's timeless and ageless Word which gives hope and positivity; then practice what you hear it by reaching out to people whom God really cares for because no one else does.

Will you take Him up on His offer?

AMEN