

James: sermon #3
Hearing and doing God's word
(James 1:19-27)

Introduction

Jesus said, “*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven*” (Matthew 7:21). James develops this theme, noting that the *spiritually immature* are only superficially religious—they do not truly fulfill God's will. In contrast, the *spiritually mature* who have experienced “*birth through the word of truth*” (James 1:18) both hear and do that word. This ‘word of truth’ is the *gospel* which reveals the **Living Word, Jesus, who is truth and salvation**. James describes three responsibilities we have toward this word: we must *receive* it, *practice* it and *share* it. Those who do so, **bring forth fruit in evidence of their new birth in Christ**.

1. Receive the word (1:19–21)

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.

Here James alludes to another teaching of Jesus: the Parable of the Sower (Matt. 13:1–9, 18–23), where Jesus compares the gospel (“*the message about the kingdom*”—Matt. 13:19) to seed and the human heart to soil. There are four kinds of hearts: *the hard heart*, which did not understand or receive the word and therefore bore no fruit; *the shallow heart*, which was very emotional but had no depth, and bore no fruit; *the crowded heart*, which lacked repentance and permitted sin to crowd out the word; and *the fruitful heart*, which received the word, **allowed it to take root, and produced a harvest of fruit**.

The ultimate evidence of our new birth in Christ is a **changed life**, which is expressed principally in **loving ministry to others that is motivated by a heart of love**. In contrast, mere ‘religious’ works are not expressive of God's love and thus do not bring God glory nor God's healing touch to others. The fruit born by Jesus in and through us has in it the seed for more fruit—a harvest that continues to grow and grow (see John 15:1–5).

To have God's word, the gospel, “*planted*” deeply within our hearts, we must *receive* it in the right way. Jesus said, “*Consider carefully what you hear*” (Mark 4:24) and, “*how you listen*” (Luke 8:18). Superficially religious types are “*hearing [but]...do not hear or understand*” (Matt. 13:13). They may attend church but they never seem to receive the word deeply and thus produce fruit. Indeed, it is possible to be “*slow to learn*” (Heb. 5:11) because of spiritual immaturity or hypocrisy. If the

seed of the word is to be truly planted in our hearts, then we must obey James instructions:

a. Be swift to hear (v. 19a)

19a ...Everyone should be quick to listen...

“He who has ears, let him hear” (Matt. 13:9). “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). Just as the servant is quick to hear his master’s voice and the mother to hear her baby’s smallest cry, so the believer **should be quick to hear what God has to say.**

b. Be slow to speak (v. 19b)

19bEveryone should be...slow to speak...

We have two ears and one mouth, which ought to remind us to listen more than we speak. Too many times we argue with God’s Word, if not audibly, at least in our hearts and minds. **“He who holds his tongue is wise” (Prov. 10:19). “A man of knowledge uses words with restraint” (Prov. 17:27).** In the early church, the services were informal; and often the listeners would debate with the speaker. There were even **“fights and quarrels”** among the brethren James was writing to (**James 4:1**).

c. Be slow to wrath (v. 19c-20)

1:19c ...Everyone should be...slow to become angry, 20 for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

Do not get angry at God or his word. **“A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly” (Prov. 14:29).** Many church fights are the result of short tempers and hasty words. There is a godly anger against sin (**Eph. 4:26**); and if we love the Lord, we will hate evil (**Ps. 97:10**). But man’s anger does not produce the righteous life that God desires for us (**James 1:20**). In fact, anger is just the opposite of the patience God wants to produce in our lives (**James 1:3–4**). James warns us against getting angry at God’s word because it **reveals** our sins to us. Like the man who broke the mirror because he disliked the image he saw in it, people **rebel** against the gospel because it tells the truth about God and about humankind.

d. Prepare your heart (v. 21)

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.

James saw the human heart as a garden; if left to itself, the soil would produce only weeds. He urges us to **“pull out the weeds”** and prepare the soil for the implanting of God’s word. It is foolish to try to receive the gospel into an unprepared heart that is full of moral filth and evil. It is not that changing our behavior earns us salvation; rather what James is advocating here is **a change of heart that opens our hearts to the**

implanting of the gospel (the word) which, as Paul notes, is “*the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes*” (Romans 1:16).

How do we prepare the soil of our hearts to receive God’s word? First, by confessing our sinfulness (1 John 1:9). Then, by meditating on God’s love and forgiveness (grace) and asking him to “*plow up*” any hardness in our hearts: “*Break up your unplowed ground and do not sow among thorns*” (Jer. 4:3). This is an attitude of repentant humility (James 1:21)—the **opposite** of the anger against God and his word, which James referred to in **verses 19–20**. When you **receive** the word with humility, you **accept** it, do not argue with it, and **honor** it as the word of God. This **opens** us to this word that enters in, **takes up** residence and **awakens** us to the salvation that is ours in Christ.

2. Practice the word (1:22–25)

22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

The spiritually mature do not merely listen to the word; they **practice** it. **Through living the word we are united experientially to the true life we have in Jesus.** In the previous paragraph, James compared God’s word to **seed**, and now he compares it to a **mirror**. Like a mirror God’s word examines us:

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.

We use mirrors **to see ourselves**. As we look into the mirror of God’s word, **we see ourselves as we really are**. James mentions several mistakes people make as they look into the mirror of God’s word:

1). They merely glance at themselves. They do not pause to fully understand the personal implications of God’s word. For example, casually reading scripture is of limited value because we don’t take it personally, **letting it reveal our deepest needs.**

2). They forget what they see. If they were looking deeply enough into their hearts, what they would see would be unforgettable! Remember how saints in the Bible responded as they came face-to-face through the word with their sinfulness before God: “*Woe to me...I am ruined*” (Isa. 6:5). Peter cried, “*Go away from me Lord; I am a sinful man!*” (Luke 5:8).

3). They fail to obey what the word tells them to do. They think that **hearing** is the same as **doing**, and it is not. **Knowledge without positive application is of**

little value. After seeing ourselves in the mirror of God's word, we must remember what we are and what God says, and we must then **do the Word**. The blessing comes in the doing, not in the mere hearing or reading of the word. "***This man shall be blessed in his doing***" (James 1:25, literal translation). The emphasis in James is on the **practical application** of the word, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Why does James call God's word, "***the perfect law that gives freedom***"? (James 1:25). Because **yielding to (obeying, practicing) God's word sets us free**: "***Everyone who sins is a slave of sin***" said Jesus (John 8:34), and, "***If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free***" (John 8:31–32). Jesus is God's ultimate (living) word, the embodiment of God's will and way (the fulfillment of God's law). We are to obey Jesus, and that means believe in him, trust him and follow him. In our union with the triune God in Jesus we have our true identity and perfect freedom.

But that freedom can be diminished and distorted. To avoid that, God's word **holds up** a mirror **and exposes** our unbelief and hostility toward Jesus, and it **bids** us repent. We should **invite** and **embrace** this role of God's word in our lives: "***Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting***" (Ps. 139:23–24). "***If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us***" (1 John 1:8).

So our first responsibility is to **receive** the word. Then, we must **practice** the word; otherwise we are deceiving ourselves. This then leads to a third responsibility...

3. Share the word (James 1:26–27)

26a If anyone considers himself religious...

Let's stop there and consider James' use of the word **religious**. This word is only infrequently used in the New Testament and means, in general, "***outward service to a god.***" There are many such religious practices in the world that are a **poor substitute** for true religion which here James defines **as sharing God's word with others through speech, service, and separation from the world.**

a. Speech (v. 26)

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.

There are many references to speech in this letter, giving the impression that the tongue was a serious problem in early Christian assemblies (see James 1:19; 2:12; 3:1–3, 14–18; 4:11–12). It is the tongue that **reveals** the heart (Matt. 12:34–35); if the heart is right, the speech will be right. A controlled tongue means a controlled body (James 3:1ff). **True religion leads to the expression of love, not anger, through the words we share.**

b. Service (v. 27a)

27a Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress...

After we have seen ourselves and Christ in us, in the mirror of the word, **we must see others and their needs**. Isaiah first saw the Lord, then himself, and then the people to whom he would minister and cried out to God, “***Here am I. Send me!***” (Isa. 6:1–8). Words are no substitute for loving service to others (James 2:14–18; 1 John 3:11–18).

c. Separation from the world (v. 27b)

27b ...and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

By “***the world***” James means Godless society. Satan is the prince of this world (John 14:30), and those who walk in the darkness of the Godless world are “***people of this world***” (Luke 16:8). But the people of God who walk in the light that is theirs in Christ, are ***in*** the world physically but not ***of*** the world spiritually (John 17:11–16). They are sent ***into*** the world to help those in the world to know Jesus who is their savior (John 17:18). It is by being separate from the world in the sense of not succumbing to its evil that we are best able to serve the world that does not (yet) know its Savior. There is a wrong “***friendship with the world***” (James 4:4), which leads to a destructive love for the world (1 John 2:15–17), a conforming to the world’s evils (Rom. 12:1–2) and ultimately a sharing in the world’s condemnation (1 Cor. 11:32).

Illustration: Lot illustrates this downward spiral. First he pitched his tent toward Sodom, and then moved into Sodom. Before long, Sodom moved into him and he lost his testimony even with his own family. When judgment fell on Sodom, Lot lost everything. It was Abraham, **the separated believer**, the friend of God, who had a greater ministry to the people than did Lot, the friend of the world. **We need not embrace the world’s evil in order to minister to the world**. Jesus was “***without blemish or defect***” (1 Peter 1:19), yet he was the **friend** of publicans and sinners. **The best way to minister to the needs of the world is to keep ourselves pure from the defilement of the world.**

Conclusion

What a blessing to have had our minds and hearts opened to **receive** the word of truth. We have heard it—let us continue to **hear!** And let us be **faithful to do it**—to obey the gospel—to **allow Jesus to live in and through us**. In doing so He will be **producing his fruit of righteousness** in us and the world around us will be blessed.

Sermon Series is provided by Ted Johnston via the Senior Pastor Team of Tom and Alberta Ecker to assist ... Bible studies in series covering a book of the Bible.

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