

James 1(21) – The Biblical Antidote to Anger

James 1:19-20 seems to be a set of isolated exhortations about anger, but the context of this passage has to do with our relationship with the Word of God. This is about submitting to God's Word, getting into alignment with God's will. Vs.18 teaches us that the Word is how we are born again, how we become part of the kingdom of God. And the Word of God is also how we grow, and the Word of God is what equips us to mature through the trials we face in life.

Now having said that, these verses do have something to say about why we have such trouble with anger. The Word exposes the truth that is in your heart (Hebrews 4:12), and preachers of the Word (2 Timothy 4:2), are called to reprove (expose), rebuke (correct), and exhort (encourage). But if we fail to submit, and we resist and rebel, we develop this deep seated anger against what God is trying to do, and it spills over and out into other areas of our life. We wonder why we are so prone to fits of anger, or why we overact at times to simple things, and it is because of this very thing James is warning about. We aren't really receiving the Word.

Therefore – because of what we have seen in vs.19-20, we then apply what we see in vs.21. This passage is teaching us about preparing our hearts to receive the Word of God, so that it might flourish in our lives. In vs.19-20 we saw three aspects that define the proper attitude and response of a Christian to God's Word. Knowing this unlocks the reason why we often struggle with anger, because the answer to anger is a proper attitude and response to God's Word.

In vs.19 we saw that we must 1) be hungry for God's Word, and have a submissive and teachable spirit, 2) be willing to listen and learn God's Word before we are so eager to speak for God and teach His Word, and 3) be repentant not resistant to God's Word. We have to be ready to listen to the truth (quick to hear), ready to learn the truth (slow to speak), and ready to live the truth (slow to anger). Because (vs.20), we know that a resistant, rebellious anger against God's Word and God's way is not going to lead you into God's will. Because we know that Christians were born again to love, learn, and live the Word of God, and to be going against God's will is what creates such a conflict in your life, and it spills over into fear, frustration, resentment and rebellion, outbursts of anger and a soul full of rage.

So therefore, knowing these things, we do what vs.21 instructs us to do. This will help us to be truly receptive to God's Word, to glorify God with our lives, and to squash the deep seated anger in our lives. This doesn't mean we won't ever get aggravated. It doesn't mean you never get upset. It doesn't mean we never have stress. It doesn't mean you will never get angry. What it means is that we will process it rightly. The effects of episodic anger are less in a person who has a humble disposition than they are with someone who has an angry disposition.

There are two types of anger. This is a good, godly, grieving anger, like Jesus displayed when He saw the effects of sin in people's lives. And then there is a sinful, selfish anger, which we display because we feel dishonored, insulted, or wronged. This is the type of anger we are employing when we resist God's Word, we are angry because it has exposed some cherished sin or stubborn selfishness in our lives. We don't want to change; we want to justify ourselves instead of just deny ourselves. We play the blame game against God, pointing to the sins of others, trying to redefine what sin is, talking about our rights, and liberty, and legalism, and so forth.

As we have said, the answer to anger is a proper attitude and response to God's Word. However, there is a necessary preparation to receiving the Word of God. Bible study is work, it takes discipline, and there is more to preparation than just having your Bible open, with the right tools available and saying a prayer before you begin and after you are done. People can be "knowing" the Word of God and not growing in the Word of God. "Receiving the Word" does not just mean understanding what the Word says, but doing it, in other words, acting in accordance with it. People can be advancing academically not but experientially (i.e., obedience). They are just as angry and unspiritual as they ever were and even more so at times. It takes the right attitude.

The goal of receiving God's Word is not mere academic knowledge. The goal is to be conformed to the righteousness of God, thereby glorifying God, as vs.20 indicates. What does that look like? It means the character of Christ is seen in your life (cf. 1 Timothy 1:5 – *The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith*).

For the Christian, the Bible is not just some tool to use for behavioral modification; it is a treasure that we must trust to transform our lives. The Word of God is inspired and empowered by the Spirit of God, and to resist God's Word is to grieve the Holy Spirit, and to dull your reception of God's transforming power. The Word of God was essential in saving your soul (vs.18), and it is just as essential in changing your life. You won't grow in grace without it.

Vs.19-20 are dealing with having the right mindset (hungry, teachable, submissive), and vs.21 deals with creating the right environment, so that we can truly receive God's Word. Even if we are following what vs.19-20 say, if we will not do what vs.21 says, the Word of God will not flourish in our lives. So what does vs.21 teach us?

put away all filthiness – This is painting a word picture, it speaks of removing a garment (cf. Romans 13:12 / Ephesians 4:22, 25 / Colossians 3:8 / Hebrews 12:1 / 1 Peter 2:1). Put away the garments of sin. This isn't clean your life up, and then you can receive the Word. This is getting ready to receive the Word, which cleans up our life. The first thing to do is to put the dirty clothes away. You don't put on the new clothes until you take the old ones off. Stop walking around in those old clothes you used to wear. The things that used to characterize your life are not to be the things that characterize your life now. You're playing for a different team now, so take off that old jersey. If you keep walking the way you used to, you won't get to where God wants to lead you. Sin hinders your spiritual growth. The root for this word "filthiness" gives a picture of wax filling the ears. Don't let yourself get deaf to the Word of God.

and rampant wickedness – this is talking about an abundance, an excess, a superfluous amount of sin. This means we don't just deal with those obvious, outer, evident sins and things like that. It means that we must also deal with where the overflow happens, we have to be honest before God and confess the sins of our heart. We may appear to be dealing with sin by our behavior in front of other people but secretly, in our hearts, we still hold certain desires that are contrary to the Word of God. People can put the dirty clothes away, but they don't really want to wear the new clothes, or they want to wear a little of that old jewelry they used to. Do you understand the metaphor? We can put on the new uniform and still be rooting for the other team. We resist forgiving people, we keep that bitterness, our thoughts and our motives are impure, we plot, and scheme, we lie, we are hypocritical, we're proud, we still lust for the wickedness of the world.

Instead of allowing God's Word to expose it and remove it from your life, you hold on to it in your heart. Lot's wife looked back at Sodom because her heart never really left.

We need to hate sin as sin. No one wants to walk around dirty and smelly and unclean. We should think that anything that displeases God is like wet, filthy, dirty mud on our clothes. We need to treat wickedness like a stinky stain on our new suit. Others might not even see it, but we know that it smells. It bothers us. We want to get rid of it. That's how we should treat sin. Stop having fun with sin; it's like having a feud with God.

and receive with meekness – So there is a putting off, and now we see that there is a putting on. Specifically, what we put on is humility. Think of the difference between someone who is receiving the Word and someone who isn't; it is humility vs. hostility. It is repentance vs. resistance. It is reception vs. rebellion. True humility means we are choosing to hear God no matter what area He speaks to in our life. This is not passive acceptance, but active acceptance. We are actively seeking to submit ourselves to God's Word, wanting to be taught that we might be transformed, looking for opportunities to be conformed to the character of Christ.

When we won't submit to some area that God's Word confronts us on, then we are not in a humble state, and we are creating conflict, an angry state. If you think that you can just keep going on in that sin and then just open your Bible and really learn something from it, you are deceived. Oh you might get some academic understanding, but you won't know God any better. And when you don't believe that you can be deceived, that's when you already are.

the implanted word – So there is a putting off, and there is a putting on, and there is also a putting in. Now the Greek text implies that we already have the Word implanted, but we must receive it by faith, meaning obedience and all that we have been teaching with this passage. That is how we "put it in" (cf. Philippians 2:12-13). We have to make space for it, not crowd it out. The cares of this world will choke out the seed. We need to put it into practice, not put it into our pocket. Use it or lose it. We need to water the soil of our soul.

which is able to save your souls – The term "soul" speaks of the whole person. This is not just about our initial repentance, and being saved, but also our ongoing repentance, and growing in godliness. You see, the Word is what saves us, but the Word also changes us. A saving faith leads to a living faith. You don't have to be angry. The Word can rescue your soul from sin and the distraction, deception, and destruction that goes with it. You don't have to be the way you've always been, and you don't have to be the same way just because your family was that way.

Let's think about all we have said and see if we can crystallize it for you. When you are hungry, holy, and humble, then you are ready to receive the Word of God, and when you put it into practice, it will absolutely, positively flourish in your life, and squash out that deep seated anger in your life. And the wonderful result of this is that you will glorify God and yes, you will be happy. Hallelujah! Hungry, holy, humble, and happy is a lot better than apathetic, awful, antagonistic, and angry. But remember, as the old song says, trust and obey, for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey. You don't argue with the Word of God, you respond to the Word of God like you believe it. That is the biblical antidote to anger.