

Lesson Four**THE TEST OF RESPONDING TO THE WORD OF GOD****1:19-27**

We are introduced here to the third test which James gives to see how well his readers were doing in their walk with God. The first was their response to trials (1:2-12). The second was their response to temptation (1:13-18). The third is their response to the ministry of the word of God (1:19-27). The reference to the regenerating **“word of truth”** in verse 18 provides the introduction for the subject which James now proceeds to discuss. Having been brought to life by means of the Word, a true faith will rightly relate to that Word. The word in verse 21 has the same meaning as in verse 18. It refers to the message of God’s truth concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ. James uses three figures to describe the Word in this section. As seed (v. 21), as a mirror (v. 23), and a law of liberty (v. 25).

In this section, James sets forth three responsibilities that we have toward God’s word. We are to (1) Receive the Word (1:19-21); (2) Practice the Word (1:22-25); and (3) Share the Word (1:26, 27). We look first at our duty to:

I. RECEIVE THE WORD - vs. 19-21

“Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.”

James calls God’s Word the **“engrafted word”** (v. 21), which means the “implanted word.” Its literal meaning is to plant a seed in the ground. Here James borrows from our Lord’s parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23). He compares God’s Word to seed and the human heart to soil. Warren Wiersbe says of this parable,

Jesus described 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 allowed the Word to take root, and produced a harvest of fruit. (Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary*, Vol. 2, p. 346).

The true evidence of a person’s salvation is visible fruit. This means a changed life, changed character, changed conduct, changed attitude toward God, and a changed ministry toward others. If this seed of the word is to be received into the heart, we must act upon the instructions which James gives us in these verses. He now gives us four things which we can do to prepare our hearts to receive the ministry of the word. They are:

A. Concentrate Our Attention - “be swift to hear.” 1:19a

This expression requires that we are eager and attentive, ready to receive and evaluate the message heard. We are to use every opportunity given us to increase our knowledge of the word of truth. Paul reminded the Romans that **“faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17)**. To listen eagerly is the first step in benefitting from the word of God. Jesus said **“Who hath ears to hear, let him hear!” (Matthew 13:9)**.

B. Control Our Tongues - “slow to speak” - 1:19b

This is an appeal for restraint lest we give hasty, ill-considered reactions to what is heard. It allows time for a fuller apprehension of what has been heard. The need for this exhortation apparently arose out of the free and largely unstructured nature of the early Christian assemblies which permitted personal participation and interaction with others sharing in the service (**1 Corinthians 14:26-33**). Quick reaction to something objectionable, or zeal for what is believed to be the truth, often leads to rash assertion and overstatement, which often tends to distract or obscure the truth. Let us remember that freedom of expression involves serious responsibility. Jesus said in **Matthew 12:36, 37, “That every idle word that man shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.”**

C. Contain Our Anger - “slow to wrath” - 1:19c, 20

This statement exposes the danger involved in hasty and reckless speech. It provokes animosity in others. Robert Johnstone observed that, “Intemperate religious zeal is often accompanied with a train of bad passions, and particularly with great wrath against those who differ from us in opinion.” (Johnstone, *Lectures Exegetical and Practical on the Epistle of James*, pp. 135-136)

Human anger is a natural emotion that responds to anything or anyone who harms or displeases us. The feeling of anger is not always wrong (**Mark 3:5**). In fact the individual who is not stirred at evil is seriously deficient in moral character. But this instinctive feeling needs careful control lest it blaze forth in an unjustified manner. Paul said **“Be ye angry, and sin not.” (Ephesians 4:26)**.

Those being admonished by James would have perhaps justified themselves by saying that they were angry on account of false teaching and unworthy habits, but James is saying that human wrath does not advance spiritual ends even when it appears in the clothes of religious zeal. This is the meaning of verse 20. Whenever we give way to anger, we never further the righteousness we profess to be striving for. An angry spirit covers the truth we are seeking to establish. Many church fights and splits are the result of short tempers and hasty words. Peter, in the garden, was slow to hear, swift to speak, and swift to anger. Consequently, he almost killed a man with a sword. How different church history would have been had he killed that man. He certainly could not have charged his hearers at Pentecost with the crime of killing Jesus, when he himself had killed a man. Before he was allowed to lead Israel out of Egypt, Moses had to spend forty years in the desert for his rash act in killing the Egyptian.

D. Clean Up Our Lives - "lay apart all filthiness" - 1:21

If anger is to be contained, just how can it be achieved? A double activity is required out of us. Negatively, we must remove the hindering sins; and positively we must welcome the Word and its cleansing effect in our lives.

1. The Stripping Off of Our Sins

The first step in controlling anger is the reject that which is wrong. The Greek word here for "**lay apart**" or "**aside**" means to get rid of, to strip off as we would strip off filthy clothing. It is the same word used in **Hebrews 12:1** which says, "**let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us.**" We are to see our sin as moral filth or dirt. We will never get rid of unjust anger until we see it as a moral wrong which hinders us from understanding the word of God. The word "**filthiness**" is related to a term used of wax in the ear which may impair hearing. Moral filthiness is a serious hindrance to our hearing and comprehending the Word of God. We must deal with the overflowing wickedness which is so prevalent in our nature. This is what the expression "superfluity of naughtiness" means in our Authorized Version.

John Calvin understands these sins to be, "the innate evils of our nature, and that . . . we are never wholly cleansed from them in this life, but that they are continually sprouting up, and therefore he requires that care should be constantly taken to eradicate them." (Calvin, *James*, p. 295). Anger has its roots in sin and sin must be rejected as moral wrong in God's eyes.

2. Appropriating the Word

The second step in controlling anger is to meekly receive the implanted word so that we might grow in the holiness and likeness of our Savior Jesus Christ. This is also seen in verse 21. Meekness is opposed to wrathfulness or anger. W. E. Vine says, "It is a temper of spirit in which we accept His dealings with us as good, and therefore without disputing or resisting." (Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Vol. 3, p. 55).

You see it comes down to this. What is it that God wants? God wants quick ears, quiet tongues, and calm tempers. Why does God want this? Because he wants us to have a righteous life, and how are we going to see it happen? By rejecting that which is wrong and by receiving that which is right; His Word of truth!

II. PRACTICE THE WORD - 1: 22-25

"But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholds himself, and goes his way, and straightway forgets what manner of man he was. But whoso looks into the perfect law of liberty, and continues therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed."

As important as the hearing of the Word is, without obedience to its truths, it is not only without benefit, but it becomes a further judgment against its hearers. We must learn the

seriousness of being more than just hearers, we must learn to be doers as well. John understood this truth when he said in 1 John 3:18, **“My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.”** Jesus said, **“Blessed are those who hear the word of God, and keep it.”** (Luke 11:28). In the parable of the two builders (Matthew 7:24-27), Jesus emphasized the difference between hearers who acted upon what they heard and those who did nothing about what they heard. When He had finished the story, He said, **“Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.”**

The Greek word for **“hearers”** is very informative. John MacArthur says it:

. . . was used of those who sat passively in an audience and listened to a singer or speaker. Today it could be used of those who audit a college class, which they are required to attend and presumably listen to, but for which they are not required to do outside study, write papers or take any tests. In other words they are not accountable for what they hear. Tragically, most churches have many “auditors,” - members who willingly expose themselves to the teaching and preaching of the word but have no desire for that knowledge to alter their day-by-day lives. They take advantage of the privilege of hearing God’s word but have no desire for obeying it. When followed consistently, that attitude gives evidence that they are not Christian at all, but only pretenders. Such people, who are merely hearers and not doers, think they belong to God, when in reality, they do not. (MacArthur, *James*, p. 80).

An old Scottish expression speaks of such people as “sermon tasters who never tasted the grace of God.”

People who merely listen to the word, are on dangerous ground, they deceive or delude themselves. The word **“deceiving”** denotes a process of self-deception by means of false reasoning. In math, the meaning is that of miscalculation. People who hear the word without obeying it make a serious spiritual miscalculation. If one wants the benefits of the word’s saving power, they must also receive it as a guide for daily living. Like the priest and Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan, who justified their disregard for the injured man, **“hearers only”** rationalize their failure to obey what they hear.

In order to explain this self-deception, James sets forth a contrast between two types of hearers, which we will describe as the “careless hearer” and the “careful hearer.”

A. The Careless Hearer - vs. 23, 24

In order to illustrate his words, James compares the word to a mirror. The mirrors of the first century were made out of highly polished metal. They were not mounted on walls, but placed flat on tables so that the person who wished to see his reflection had to bend over and look down. Even then he would see a very poor reflection of himself. James compares the careless or casual hearer of the word with a man who looks into a mirror and does nothing to improve his

appearance. The person who does nothing more than hear the word, disregards changes he needs to make in his character.

James mentions three mistakes this type of hearer makes as he looks into the mirror of God's word.

- (1) He merely glances at himself: ***"He beholdeth himself and goeth his way."***
- (2) He forgets what he sees: ***"forgetteth what manner of man he was,"***
- (3) He fails to correct what the word tells him to do: ***"manner of man he was."***

B. The Careful Hearer - v. 25

In verse 25, James now moves to the "careful hearer". The word translated ***"looketh into"*** is set in contrast to the casual ***"beholding"*** in verse 24. It pictures a person stooping or bending over to see something better. It means intense looking and careful examination. The same word describes how John and Mary stooped down and looked into the open tomb in which Jesus had been laid (***John 20:5, 11***) because this was a matter of tremendous importance to them. It is also used in ***1 Peter 1:12*** where we are told that the angels desire ***"to look into"*** the glories of salvation that are outside the realm of their personal experience.

Although the figure of the mirror is still in mind, the reality emerges that this man looks ***"into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein."*** The law is a reference to the word of truth of verse 18, and ***"the implanted word"*** of verse 21, and simply ***"the word"*** of verse 22. It is the authoritative body of truth that comprises the foundation of the Christian faith. This "law" James describes as "perfect." It is the final and complete revelation of God in Christ Jesus. Unlike the imperfect metal mirror, this law is able to give the onlooker a true and undistorted revelation of himself.

This law of liberty is not a freedom to sin (***Romans 6:1,2; Galatians 5:13***), but is a freedom from sin to serve God (***Romans 6:22***). D. Edmond Hiebert describes the believer's freedom in this manner:

Submitting himself to its transforming power, this law of liberty works in his life a disposition and ability to do God's will joyfully. It does not promote antinomianism, but promotes obedience without compulsion. In 2:12, the only other place in the New Testament where the designation 'law of liberty' occurs, James associates it with the law of love. The believer is not free from the obligation to do God's will as revealed in His Word, but love works in him the desire to do his Father's will. Men are free when they want to do what they ought to do. This is the 'splendid paradox' of the gospel. (Hiebert, James, p. 136).

III. SHARE THE WORD - 1:26, 27

"If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world."

James concludes this section of his letter by giving three examples of behavior that will flow from the life of the person who is taking God's word seriously. For the third time in this first chapter, he warns his readers about the danger of deception (1:16, 22, 26). It is possible to think you are a religious person, when in reality, you may just be kidding yourself. As we come to the end of this chapter, it is now test time. It is now time to get out our spiritual pens and paper, and to use the words of Paul in I Corinthians 13:15, to **"Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith: prove your own selves."** We are not being allowed to audit the course which James is teaching. We are now fully responsible for what we have heard. Remember Jesus not only said in Mark 4:24, **"Take heed what you hear,"** but He also said, **"Take heed how ye hear,"** in Luke 8:18. It is possible to be **"dull of hearing"** (Hebrews 5:11), and the fault of our failures to receive the Word lies not with the teacher, or the Word, but with us as hearers. James has taught us well. He has loved us, instructed us, warned us, and comforted us, now it is time for us to be tested.

A. The Test of Self-Control In Our Speech - v. 26

In verses 22-25, James rebuked a **"hearing"** of the Word that does not lead to a **"doing"** of the Word. Here in verse 26, he rebukes a religious **"doing"** which leaves the inner life unchanged. The expression **"seem to be religious"** may also be translated **"thinks of himself as being religious."** The word **"religious"** and **"religion"** in verses 26 and 27 refers to the externals of religious action such as public prayer, fasting, giving, worship attendance, etc. James does not belittle these actions, but adds that inward control of the tongue must accompany outward activity. The person who thinks he is a Christian just because he participates in external religious activities, will sooner or later reveal his faithlessness with his mouth because he has no inward power of the Spirit and the Word to bridle his tongue.

James uses the comparison of an unmanageable horse which needs a bit and bridle to control its excessive behaviors. James considered the controlling of the tongue so important to true religion that he devotes most of the third chapter to its use.

The unbridled tongue engages in gossip, lying, cursing, swearing, slander, and filthy language. Men may think that the rash word, the shading of the truth, the subtle suggestion, the off-colored joke as being of no significance, but from God's perspective, they violate the greatest commandment of all; that being to love the Lord thy God, and one's neighbor as thyself.

James levels two accusations at the person who practices outward religion without inner control. First, he deceives himself. This is a repetition of verse 22. Second, his religion is vain or worthless. In the Greek Septuagint, this word is used to describe pagan idols and idol worship. Religious practices without inner control have no more saving power than paganism.

B. The Test of Self-Sacrifice In Our Service of Others - v. 27a

James now contrasts what is worthless religion with what is genuine religion. Pure and faultless religion is revealed by one's social compassion for the needy and helpless. This will necessitate the self-sacrifice of time, talents and money on the believer's part. Genuine religion has a positive social concern as seen in the words, **"to visit the fatherless (orphans) and widows in their affliction"**. These two groups represented the most needy classes in the ancient society. They were unprotected because they had no guardian or wage-earner. In expressing compassion for these needy groups, Christians shared the attitude of God's own loving heart. In Psalm 68:5, we

read of God that He is **“a father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation.”**

“To visit” means more than a friendly social call. It means to oversee or look after. It has the aim of caring for and supplying the needs of those in distress. Such love-prompted social deeds have always been a means of furthering the gospel. The needy today may comprise the widows and orphans, the handicapped, or the homeless, impoverished people in countries of distress, or immigrants trying to adjust to a new life. What about it? Do you pass the test of true religion? Is your heart moved with compassion when you see the needs of others? Is it enough to move you to action? The primary tasks of the church are to preach the gospel, minister the ordinances, and to oversee the needs of the poor.

C. The Test of Self-Denial In Separation From The World - v. 27b

The expression **“to keep himself unspotted from the world”** balances the need for social concern with the obligation for personal purity. While the believer is to be compassionately involved with the social problems of his day, he is not to allow the culture that produced these problems to have any impact on his life. By the **“world”**, James does not mean the material creation, but the world of unredeemed humanity as separated from God and in rebellion to His will. James states in James 4:4, **“Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.”**

We live in a world hostile to the things of God. But Jesus did not pray that we should be removed from the world but kept from the evil. (John 17:15).

Godly religion, that is, Biblical Christianity, is a matter of holy obedience to God’s Word. It consists of self-control of our inner man, self-sacrifice to meet the needs of others, and self-denial toward the goals and thinking of this ungodly world.

A concise summation of the materials covered in the first chapter of James can be given in this manner:

“Greetings, my afflicted brethren, carefully evaluate your trials and maintain a positive attitude when you encounter these testings of your faith. For your trials will produce in you a character of perseverance which will lead to maturity. If you lack insight into your sufferings, ask God for wisdom to learn the lessons that He is teaching you. You will get a crown of life after your trials are over. Don’t blame God for your being attracted to evil. God is the source of everything good: and be sure you do not merely hear God’s Word, but do it!”