

Absorb the Word

Hearing and Doing Part 2
James 1:21 1-11-2015

Summary: The command: Receive (welcome, absorb) the Word so you will be sanctified and ultimately saved. But that requires first stripping off the filth of sin. You use the grace you have to strip off what you can; that enables more receiving, which enables more stripping off, etc.

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James 1:18 He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created. 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, having stripped off all filth and the malice that is so prevalent, humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save your soul.

Introduction: God’s Will for your Life is...Life!

What is God’s will for your life? If you have been seeking the answer to that question, it’s good that you are here because the answer is in James 1:18. If you are a believer, God’s will for your life is ... life!

James 1:18 He chose (willed) to give us birth through the word of truth

God’s will for your life, His desire for you, is for you to have life through His Word. The word *life* refers to health, strength, vitality, growth, vigor, energy, joy – all the various components of life. God’s will for your life is that you have all those things, and that you get them through His Word.

So how is that done? Some people read their Bible and they don’t get much of those things at all. Other people read their Bible and they are abounding in those things. So what is the difference? How can you approach the Scriptures in a way that will fill up your life with life? The answer to that question is so important that James is going to devote the rest of the chapter to it. This is absolutely critical, because if we don’t get this, nothing he says in the rest of the book is going to be much help to us. He is going to point out a bunch of ways that we need to change, but if we don’t know how to draw life from the Word of God, those changes will never happen.

One Command: Accept (Receive)

We have been studying verse by verse through the book of James, and we left off last time at verse 21 of chapter one. When you look at that verse in the English translations, it looks like there are two commands: 1) get rid of filthiness and 2) accept the word. But in the Greek, there is only one command – **accept**. A more literal translation would be, **Therefore, having stripped away all filth and the evil that is so prevalent humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you**. So the command is to **accept the word**. The rest of the verse just answers the questions how? and why? He tells us what to do, how to do it, and why we should do it. And I would like to begin this morning with the last point – why we should obey this command. It is always good to start with the motivation so that when you get to the command itself, you are excited about it.

The Motives: Sanctification and Salvation

So why is it so important for us to accept the Word of God? What is at stake? Why is it so important? I mean, it's not like my salvation is at stake or anything, right? Well, actually, it is. Your salvation is exactly what is at stake.

Salvation

James 1:21 ... humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

Literally, **which can save your soul**. James does not include that at the end of the sentence just to practice his handwriting. The implication is very clear. He is telling us to accept the only thing that can save your soul – implication: if you fail to accept it, your soul will be lost.

Future Salvation

This verse sounds a little strange to us because we typically use the word *save* to refer to conversion. We say, "I was saved five years ago," referring to the time when we were born again. And sometimes you see that word used that way in the Bible. But more often the word "saved" or "salvation" refers to the future aspect of salvation that has not happened yet. The day of your conversion was only part of your salvation. The rest of your salvation will come when Jesus returns and sin is done away with forever and you receive your glorified body. For example:

Romans 13:11 wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.¹

We believed in the past, but we have not received our salvation yet. We have received part of it, but we get the rest when Jesus returns. And what James is saying here is that if you want to be in that group of people who will receive salvation when Jesus returns, you need to be accepting the Word of God now. Once you are born again, this is the path you take to heaven – the path of accepting God's Word. Remember – he is talking to believers here. He is talking to people who have been born again back in verse 18. And he is telling us that we must accept the Word of God because it has power to save our souls.

Now, there are some people who would object to that and say that gives too much credit to the Bible. They say, "The Bible isn't what saves you. Only God can save." It is true only God can save, but the means by which He saves is His Word.

Romans 1:16 I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

¹ Other examples: Ro.5:9, 10; 1 Thes.5:9; 1 Tim.4:16; Heb.9:28; 1 Pe.1:5, 9

Salvation only happens through the power of God, but the power of God comes to us through His Word.

Beware of people who want to put a big separation between God and his Word. It is God's power alone that saves, but our only access to that power is through His Word. So if you have been born again – you are one of those people back in verse 18 who has been given spiritual life through the gospel; your sins are forgiven, you are a child of God, your faith is in the Lord Jesus Christ – even if all that is true of you, if you want to enter heaven when you die, you must continue to accept the Word of God. That is the only thing that has the power to carry you from where you are now into heaven.

Sanctification

So what is at stake here? Nothing less than salvation itself – your eternal destiny. And not only salvation, but also sanctification. Sanctification is the process of changing to become more and more like Jesus – getting rid of sin and growing in personal holiness. That also comes only through accepting God's Word on a continual, ongoing basis. I get that from the word **therefore** at the beginning of verse 21.

In verses 19-20 he tells us about how we need to get rid of anger because anger does not bring about the righteousness of God. Then he says, **therefore** (given the fact that anger does not bring about the righteousness of God), **accept the Word**. The implication is that if you want to get rid of something in your life that is hindering righteousness – if you want to get rid of some sin - the way to do that is through accepting the Word. Accepting the Word will push selfish anger out of your life, it will push other sins out of your life, it will make you more holy and like Jesus, and it will ultimately save your soul. If you fail to accept God's Word, you will not have any of those things.

So there really is a lot at stake. If we fail to accept the Word, we commit spiritual suicide. But if we do live in a pattern of accepting the Word, we will be full of abundant life that is really life, we will grow and become more like Jesus. Sin will be defeated more and more in our lives, and on Judgment Day we will receive the fullness of salvation.

The Duty: Receive the Implanted Word

Accept

So would you agree that it is pretty important that we understand what this word **accept** means? Let's take a look at that term. I don't know if our English word *accept* is strong enough to convey the meaning of the Greek term. We use the word accept in a passive way, "I don't agree with it, but I guess I have to accept it." But the Greek term here is not a passive idea at all. A better translation would be to welcome, or take, or receive. Receive the Word.

Some gifts don't require any special kind of receiving. When God sends rain, it just lands on everybody the same. Whether you are prepared to receive it or not, everyone gets just as wet. A great number of God's gifts are like that – He just showers them on people. But there are other gifts that, in order to accomplish the purpose of the gift, there has to be a giving and receiving. If you give someone an engagement ring, you generally don't just toss it in their direction. You reach out your hand and offer it to her, but it remains in your hand until she says yes. In order for the transaction to mean anything you have to offer it and she has to welcome it and receive it. The truth of God's Word is like that. God offers it to us, but just hearing it is not the same as receiving it. Receiving it happens when God's Word comes to your heart and finds a great big welcome sign. You not only hear it, but you understand it. And you not only understand it, but you like it. Your entire soul responds to it with a big, "Yes!"

In Luke 8 Jesus told a parable about how the Word of God hits different kinds of people. Different people's hearts are like various kinds of soil. Some hearts are hard, like a walking path. And when the Word of God comes to those people, it is like seeds landing on rock hard ground. It does not penetrate. Hard ground has to be plowed before planting seeds will do any good.

Jeremiah 4:3 Break up your unplowed ground

Some people's hearts won't absorb the truth of God's Word. And when that happens, Jesus said the devil will just come and snatch those truths away from that person. The gospel just sits in his short term memory and the enemy can easily just erase it from his mind, because it never penetrated his heart. To **accept** or **receive** means to let it penetrate.

Jeremiah 9:20 hear the word of the LORD; open your ears to the words of his mouth.²

That word translated **open** is this same word in the Greek translation. Receive it - let it penetrate.

Deuteronomy 30:1 When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart (lit. receive them into your heart) wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, 2 and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, 3 then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes

Here is what is going to happen: you are going to disobey, I am going to punish you by scattering you among the nations, then in that foreign place you will remember My Word. Receive it into your heart, and repent. Then I will restore you.

This response to God's Word is one of the most fundamental markers of a child of God. Unbelievers can understand the Bible, but their hearts do not welcome it.

John 8:37 ... you have no room for my word.

Jesus said that to a group of Pharisees. These are men who very likely had the entire Old Testament memorized. They studied it every day. They were the foremost experts in the world on it. But it had no place in their hearts. It was not received. That is why Jesus said in

Luke 8:18 Consider carefully how you listen.

There is a right way and a wrong way to listen to God's Word. If your listening is not a welcoming and receiving and absorbing of God's Word, it is the wrong kind. And doing it the right way is only possible for people who have the Holy Spirit.

1 Corinthians 2:14 The man without the Spirit does not receive (same word) the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

And that is why they will not receive salvation when Jesus returns.

2 Thessalonians 2:10 They perish because they did not receive (same word) the love of the truth in order to be saved.

And what James is showing us here is that all aspects of salvation depend on receiving the Word. That is how you were converted to begin with – we saw that back in verse 18 – God gave you spiritual life through the Word. Peter says exactly the same thing.

1 Peter 1:23 For you have been born again ... through the living and enduring word of God.

You hear the gospel, and you accept it – that is how salvation begins.³ But it does not end there. Accepting the gospel is not something you do one time when you become a Christian. Accepting the gospel is like eating and digesting food. You start doing it on the day you are born, but no one says, "Oh, I received milk on the day I was born so I don't need to eat now." When you first receive the gospel you

² See also Proverbs 2:1; 4:10.

³ Acts 8:14 The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. Acts 11:1 The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. 1 Thes.2:13 And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

are just taking your first tastes of the Word of truth. But if you want to continue to live you need to keep eating.

1 Peter 2:2 Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, 3 now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

John MacArthur has a great statement on that verse:

Some people read the Bible but they don't read it for nourishment. Some read it traditionally. Because their parents read it, they think they should read it. Some read it superstitiously, like a religious charm thinking it will work magic in their life. Some read it educationally, they want the knowledge of the facts, they want to compile information so they can be fun in a Christian Bible study. Some people read it denominationally, they want to defend their articles of faith, it's for the purpose of proof and refutation that they read it. Some people read it professionally, they want material for their lesson or their sermon. And some people read it inquisitively, they want to satisfy their curiosity and their intellectual pride so they spend time reading the Bible to see how many beasts they can find and how many horns and all of the prophetic ins and outs. But how should it be read? It should be read like a hungry baby sucking with all its strength to draw out the nourishment of its mother's breast.⁴

You have not received the Word until you have taken it in, understood it, your heart has welcomed it and absorbed it and digested it, and you have been fed and nourished and strengthened by it. We need to ask ourselves: "If someone examined my life, would they be able to tell whether or not I really believe what Jesus said when He quoted Deuteronomy 8:3 – **Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Mt.4:4)?**

Implanted Word

So, James tells us to receive the Word. But look how he describes it. Instead of just saying, "Receive the Word," he says **receive the word planted in you**. The Word that we are commanded to welcome and receive and accept, is implanted in us. What does that mean? What does it mean that it is already in me, and if it is already in me, why do I need to receive it? Let's start with the first question. What does it mean to have the Word implanted inside you? I believe the Word is implanted when God enables you to understand it and obey it. I get that from Deuteronomy 30. In that chapter God uses a similar image. He does not say the Word is implanted, but he does say that it is in their mouths and hearts – so it is that same idea of it being inside them. And the point that is being made in that passage is that they are capable of understanding it and obeying it.

Deuteronomy 30:11 Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. 12 It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" 13 Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" 14 No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

So when He says, "It is in you," He means it is within your reach to understand and obey. And one of the great promises in the Old Testament was that in the future, God would institute a new covenant with his people, and when that happened, His Word would be implanted in them in a much greater way. In the New Covenant, all of God's people would have the Word implanted inside them so that it is within their reach.

Jeremiah 31:33 This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.

Does that mean you know what the Bible says without reading it? No. It means you have the ability to understand what it says, to absorb it and welcome it, and to obey it; and you have a far greater ability to

⁴ John MacArthur, "Desiring the Word" sermon on 1 Pe.2:1-3.

do all of that than God's people in the Old Testament had. I believe that is what James means by implanted. The commands of God's Word are within your reach to understand and obey.

The Attitude: Humbly

So, now we know what the command is – receive the Word. And we are motivated to do it for the ultimate salvation of our souls, and for spiritual growth and progress now – past, present, and future salvation. Now let's take a look at how James says this is to be done. First, he requires a certain attitude.

21 ...humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save your soul.

If you want to know how to make God's Word penetrate and absorb into your heart, the starting point is humility.

Isaiah 66:2 This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.

The only way to properly absorb God's Word is to be in awe of it, and to tremble at the thought that these are the very words of Almighty Himself. This is the revelation of His will! The proud listener is seeking to master the Word of God. The humble listener is seeking to be mastered by it. If you approach the Bible with suspicion, or a casual, "maybe I'll accept this; maybe I won't," attitude, your heart will not absorb it. Proud listeners get smarter and smarter and more and more educated about the Bible, but they do not receive much of it – if any. If you wonder, "Why do I keep learning more and more from the Bible, but I can't seem to put it into practice?" it may be due to lack of humility in the way you listen. James brings up the topic of humility numerous times in this book because he knows that pride is a massive problem for us. It causes all kinds of spiritual problems. And one of the biggest is the fact that it makes our hearts crust over with the coating that is Word-resistant.

Proud listening is when you read the Bible from the standpoint of an evaluator – the way you read regular, human books. When a book is written by the human author, you pick it up with the attitude, "I'll see what it says, and then I'll make a decision about whether it's any good. If this writer is telling me to do something, I will evaluate his arguments and then make a decision about whether I want to do it." So in a sense, you are sitting in judgment on that book. It is fine to do that with human books, but it is spiritual suicide to do that with the Bible. No one is in a position to pass judgment on God's Word. And yet, in our pride, that is what we tend to do. And any time you have a perspective of passing judgment on God's law, you are breaking God's law.

James 4:11 ... When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.

Does what you read in the Bible have to measure up to some standard before you will be willing to accept it? What happens when the Bible says something that is the opposite of what seems right to you? Do you trust your gut feeling, or do you trust what the Bible says? What about when the Bible contradicts the majority of scientists? The Bible never contradicts science itself, but it very often contradicts popular scientific opinions. When you read your Bible and it seems to be saying one thing, but the great majority of scientists say something else – which way does your heart go? Is your first impulse to say, "Well, the scientists must be wrong. We're going to have to find a way to interpret the scientific data in a way that fits what the Bible says"? Or is your first impulse to go the other way – "There's no way all those scientists could be wrong. So we're going to have to find a way to interpret the Bible to fit with what the scientists are telling us"? There are some people, that whenever they are trying to harmonize what the Bible says with psychology, or popular scientific theories – it is always the Bible that has to be adjusted to fit those theories rather than the other way around. If that is your approach, that is a sign of a heart that stands above God's Word rather than humbly accepting it.

The humble listener does not pass judgment on the message – nor does he allow the skill of the messenger to affect how much he listens. Proud listeners have to have the message served up on a silver platter. Ask yourself - How skillfully does God's Word have to be presented to you in order for you to be

willing to receive it? If you hear a preacher who really isn't a very good speaker – he's dry, kind of clumsy in his approach, not very funny, his life isn't a very good testimony– but what he is teaching really is the Word of God, can you learn from a guy like that? Are there ever times when you don't accept the message because of the messenger?

Could it be that God has chosen to communicate His Word through weak, fallible, sinful messengers for a reason? Every time I learn something new about preaching or how I could improve, I always feel badly for all the people who have sat under my sermons all these years prior to me learning this new helpful thing. And many times I have wondered, *Why did God make it so that the training ground for preachers is real congregations?* Real congregations with real spiritual needs have to get their spiritual nourishment from men who are involved in a learning process. From a human standpoint, it seems like everyone would have been better off if I could have started my ministry fully trained and highly skilled. Why is it that God set the church up in such a way that the main way that people get fed is through some really crummy Bible teachers? He calls fallible, forgetful, sinful men to this task. Why? Could it be because God knows that the only way His Word can be absorbed into your heart is if you listen humbly? It takes some humility to sit at the feet of a klutz and learn. It takes some meekness to receive the Word as God's Word when it is coming out of the mouth of a man that you have seen make all kinds of mistakes, and who has sinned against you and hurt you, and who is just very ordinary.

Never forget – it is not the messenger who makes the message. I stand up here on this platform behind this pulpit and speak authoritatively every Sunday – but that is not because I am anything. I am just another in a long line that started with Balaam's donkey. And if you are too proud to be able to receive instruction from God through the mouth of a donkey, you are too proud. Humble receiving is when your attitude is, "God, whatever You say, and however You say it, and whatever messenger You use, and whatever the hard implications for me – I'm all ears. More than anything else in the world, I want to know Your thoughts and Your will and Your heart. So whatever You say – I want to have one response: faith."

Through Faith

That is the bottom line. If you are listening to the message with a humble heart, you will believe it and trust it enough to follow it.

Hebrews 4:2 ...the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.

You receive God's Word when your heart responds with simple, unconditional trust.

The Preparation: Strip off Sin

So we have seen the command and the motivation and the attitude – but before any of that can happen, there is a prerequisite. Before you can ever receive God's Word, some preparation is required. God's Word is kind of like vitamins A, D, K, and E. Those vitamins are fat soluble, which means they will not be absorbed by your body unless you eat something with some fat in it. If you just take those vitamins, and don't eat any fat, the vitamins will just pass right through your system without being absorbed into your body. Just as vitamins are not automatically absorbed into your body just because you swallow them, so it is with God's Word. You can read, and read, and read and even memorize and study and try as hard as you can to receive it and absorb it, and it can still all pass right through your system without accomplishing anything if you are not properly prepared. There are some things you need to do before taking in God's Word in order for it to be absorbed into your system. Like Jeremiah said, the soil of your heart has to be plowed in order for the seed of God's Word to germinate.

So how is that done? What preparations need to be made? In Exodus 19, God told Moses that He was going to come down and speak to the people directly. So He told Moses to give the people a couple days to prepare.

Exodus 19:10 And the LORD said to Moses, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes 11 and be ready by the third day

God wanted all of them to wash their clothes. Why do you suppose God required that? He was teaching them a principle about how to listen when He speaks. In order to interact with God we must be clean. When you have lingering sin in your life that has not been dealt with, it disrupts communication with God in both directions. We know it hinders our prayers.

Psalm 66:18 If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

Unrepentant sin makes God unwilling to listen to us. But it also ruins our ability to listen to God. In order to properly hear God’s voice, you need to approach Him with clean hands and a pure heart. And God was teaching them that in a symbolic way by requiring that they wash their clothes before He came down to speak to them. James is teaching us the same principle here. Before your heart will be able to absorb what you read in the Bible, you have to first strip off the filthiness and sin. When it says to **get rid of** that filthiness (or your Bible might say put it off) – that is the normal word for taking off clothes. Our sins get so they are wrapped around us like a garment and we have to strip them off.

Filth

James refers to them as **filth**. That is a pretty strong term. He is reminding us of what sin is. Sometimes we forget about the contaminating effect of sin. People commit some gross, sexual sin and they feel dirty or filthy. Or they say some really bad words and they feel dirty. But they don’t feel dirty after coveting something, or after grumbling and complaining about something. When they think about moral filth, the first thing that springs to mind is not usually their irritable, grumpy mood last night. But that is exactly the context - anger. Anger is filthy. Resentment is dirty. Irritability is trashy and smutty. There are not clean sins and dirty sins – only dirty ones. Holding on to anger, giving someone the cold shoulder or the silent treatment – that is immorality. It is vile and it is contaminating and God will not speak to a heart that is slimed with that kind of filth.

You have to strip off that filth, and the other thing James mentions that you have to strip off is the **evil that is so prevalent**. That word translated **evil** can refer to general evil or it can refer to malice. Usually when it is in the context of anger they translate it malice. And that is the context here, so I am convinced that is what James is referring to here. Strip off the filth and strip off the malice that is so prevalent. Malice is when you have ill will toward someone. You are unhappy with them, so you hope they get what’s coming to them. Something in you would actually smile if something painful happen to that person. That is malice. And James says it is so prevalent. There is tons of it. It is everywhere. It is so common, but it has to be stripped off before you will be able to receive God’s Word. When you have a heart that is hostile toward someone, or closed toward someone, the truth of Scripture will not penetrate. There are so many people who come to God in their morning devotions and say, “Speak to me, God,” but God is saying, “No – not until you go reconcile with that person you’re mad at.”

When you come to God’s Word, you have to come prepared. You can have a bad attitude toward your roommate and come to a lecture on calculus and understand it just fine. You can have bitterness in your heart and watch a documentary on American history and not have any problem. But you cannot come to God’s Word with those things in your heart and expect to hear from God.

Peter makes exactly the same point in his book. He even uses this same word for stripping off clothes. 1 Peter 2:2 is a famous verse – like newborn babies, crave pure, spiritual milk. But that is the second half of a sentence. Do you know what the first half of the sentence is?

1 Peter 2:1 Therefore, having stripped off all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. 2 Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation

You cannot properly crave the milk of God's Word until you strip off sin, because all sins are appetite suppressants.

Satisfying vs. Spoiling Appetite

Think about this – what is the difference between satisfying your appetite and spoiling your appetite? Either way you eat food. Spoiling your appetite is when you eat something that isn't satisfying at all, but it does take away your hunger, so you can't enjoy the things that really would satisfy. That is what sin does – it spoils, rather than satisfies, your appetite. So many Christians have no appetite for the Thanksgiving dinner of God's Word because they ate a loaf of Wonder Bread for breakfast. That is what sin does. It does not really satisfy, but it takes away your ability to really enjoy God's Word. Those sins are like a loaf of Wonder Bread. They fill up your stomach and destroy your ability to take in God's Word. And so Peter says, “After you have stripped off all these sins, then crave pure, spiritual milk.” The craving will never happen as long as those sins are continuing. And he got that from James. James says, “After you have stripped off these sins, then receive the Word.” (I think James was one of Peter's favorite books. It's a good thing they didn't have the plagiarism laws back then because I think Peter would have gotten in trouble with the way he stole the material from James.)⁵

This is one of the many reasons why you never want to have an attitude that says, “I'll go ahead with this sin now, and I'll just ask forgiveness later – after I've enjoyed the sin.” Maybe God will be gracious and grant you a truly repentant heart later; you will be forgiven, but the damage to your appetite remains. Now you have that much smaller capacity to desire and absorb God's Word.

Upward Spiral

Strip off the sin in your life – especially sins connected with anger – and that will put you in a position where you can humbly receive and absorb the Word of God which can save your soul. Now, at this point you might be thinking, “Wait a minute – I thought receiving the Word was the solution to anger. I thought accepting and receiving the Word is what you have to do in order to get rid of sin. But if the prerequisite for accepting the Word is stripping off sin, is that a catch 22?” No, it's not a catch 22. It is another one of those wonderful upward spirals that we find so often in Scripture. We saw one earlier in chapter one with perseverance in suffering. You used a little bit of strength you have right now to persevere through small trials, and that gives you even more perseverance which enables you to persevere through bigger trials, which gives you even more perseverance, etc. This works the same way. You use whatever grace you have right now to strip off sin in your life, that enables you to receive more of the Word of God, which enables you to strip off even more sin, which makes you more receptive to the Word, and each one keeps feeding the other and you become more and more like Jesus Christ.

“But that sounds like works-righteousness. Isn't that too much human effort? I can't strip off sin – only the Holy Spirit can do that. Why is James telling us to do it? Doesn't James understand about grace? If I strip off sin by my own efforts, how does that glorify God?”

If you have been taught that grace means lack of human effort, you have been misled about grace. That is not what grace means. Grace does not mean that you put forth no effort, and just wait for God to do it. Grace is a gift from God that enables effort. So the more grace you get, the harder you work.

1 Corinthians 15:10 ...his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them

Works-righteousness is not when someone works really hard at righteousness. Works-righteousness is when someone puts his trust and confidence in his own efforts rather than in God. We work hard, but we don't put our trust in our hard work. If you ever get confused about how relying on the power of the Holy Spirit fits together with your own human efforts, it is really very simple. Just work as hard as you

⁵ For example, compare Jas.1:2-4 with 1 Pe.1:6-7 and Jas.1:18 with 1 Pe.1:23, and Jas.1:21 with 1 Pe.1:1-2.

can, but don't put your confidence in your own work. Put all your confidence in the God who supplies the grace that enables you to work.

So how does God get the glory if we are working hard to strip off sin? He gets the glory when we realize that all our successes in stripping off sin, and all our successes in humbly receiving His Word, are due to the fact that His Word is implanted in us. It is not out of your reach. Why? How did the ability to receive and obey God's Word get planted inside me?

18 He chose to give us birth through the word of truth

God planted it there. So every single time you obey God's Word, let it remind you that your ability to do that is due to God's gracious gift of the implanting of His Word in your heart that enables you to obey it and receive more of it. All the power is from Him, and flows through us. So He gets all the glory and all the praise; and we get life and salvation.

Benediction: Colossians 3:15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly

Application Questions (James 1:25)

1. Some truths from God's Word have really penetrated our hearts, and those things just seem true to us. But there are sometimes other things in the Bible that we think, "The Bible says it so it's true," but our behavior, desires, and feelings seem to indicate that our soul is not really convinced of that truth. Do you have any of those in your life right now?
2. Which is more urgent in your life right now – increasing your learning of God's Word, or humbling your heart to be more receptive?
3. If you could permanently strip off one particular sin for good in your life right now, which one would you pick?

Devotionals

Day 1

Preparation:

Pray S.I.O.U.S.

S is for Seek

Psalm 119:176 I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commands.

All our seeking after God will be worthless if He does not seek us. Begin by asking God to come near to you.

I is for Incline

Psalm 119:36 Incline my heart toward your statutes.

Inclination has to do with what you like and dislike. We do not observe life with a detached, robotic analysis. We have a sense of liking and being attracted to some things and disliking and being inclined away from others.

Before you open your Bible take a moment to remind yourself that you could begin reading, come across some wonderful truth about God, and be bored by it. Horror! What could be worse than being unable to be delighted by the glory of God? Before reading, ask the Lord to incline your heart toward whatever it is He is about to show you so that when you see it you will love it.

O is for Open

Psalm 119:18 Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law.

When you read something in Scripture about God and it does not thrill your soul and cause great joy, peace, comfort, or awe, there is only one explanation: your eyes are blind to what is wonderful about that truth. Every truth about God in Scripture would absolutely thrill you if your eyes were opened to see what is so wonderful about it. And only God can do that. So before reading, pray—“God, open my eyes.”

U is for Unite

Psalm 86:11 Unite my heart, that I may fear your name.

When we come to the Word of God, we usually come with a scattered, distracted heart. We must pray, “Dear God, please unite my heart so for this brief little time I can focus my entire being on You.”

S is for Satisfy

Psalm 90:14 Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.

The presence of God is like food—it always satisfies the soul. If you go away from your time in the Word unsatisfied, then, it is because you did not experience the presence of God. It is good, before we open the Bible, to remind ourselves of the purpose of coming to God's banquet table. The goal is not just to gather information, but to leave the table with our souls satisfied!

Scripture Reading:

Psalm 119:41-64

Sermon segment:

James 1:21 ... humbly receive the word planted in you, which can save your soul.

James is telling you to receive the only thing that can save your soul – implication: if you fail to accept it, your soul will be lost. James is speaking to believers (v.18), but he still sets forth salvation as the reason why we need to continue to receive God's Word. Once you are born again, this is the path you take to heaven – the path of accepting God's Word. So what is at stake here? Nothing less than salvation itself – your eternal destiny. And not only salvation, but also sanctification. Sanctification is the process of changing to become more and more like Jesus – getting rid of sin and growing in personal holiness. That also comes only through accepting God's Word on a continual, ongoing basis. I get that from the word **therefore** at the beginning of verse 21. In verses 19-20, he tells us about how we need to get rid of anger because anger does not bring about the righteousness of God. Then he says, **therefore** (given the fact that anger does not bring about the righteousness of God), **accept the Word**. The implication is that if you want to get rid of something in your life that is hindering righteousness – if you want to get rid of some sin - the way to do that is through accepting the Word. Accepting the Word will push selfish anger out of your life, it will push other sins out of your life, it will make you more holy and like Jesus, and it will ultimately save your soul. If you fail to accept God's Word, you won't have any of those things.

So there really is a lot at stake. If we fail to accept the Word, we commit spiritual suicide. But if we do live in a pattern of accepting the Word, we will be full of abundant life that is really life, we will grow and become more like Jesus, sin will be defeated more and more in our lives, and on Judgment Day we will receive the fullness of salvation.

Memorize James 1:21. Say it 10 times from memory word for word.

Prayer:

Go back to the portion you read in Psalm 119 today and talk to God about what you read. Ask Him to give you a heart like the psalmist had toward His Word.

Doing: Do not be a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the Word (James 1:22-25)

- Write down at least one specific thing you will do to do to put what you have learned from God's Word into practice.
- Check this box when you have done it.

Fellowship:

Try to have a conversation with someone today about the most helpful thoughts that came out of your time with the Lord today.

Further Study:

One of the most important things you can do with the Word of God is to learn how to interpret it. The Bible does you no good at all if you misinterpret it. Without the skills of interpretation, the truth of Scripture will remain locked up out of your reach. Resources for learning how to interpret the Bible:

Read How to Read the Bible for all it's Worth by Fee and Stewart

Or, for a more detailed study: "How to Interpret the Bible" class on Food for Your Soul

Day 2

Preparation:

Pray S.I.O.U.S.

Scripture Reading:

Psalm 119:65-96

Sermon segment:

James 1:21 Therefore, having stripped off all filth and the malice that is so prevalent, humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save your soul.

The word translated **receive** means to welcome or take or receive to one's self. It is an active idea. Some gifts don't require any special kind of receiving. When God sends rain, it just lands on everybody the same. Whether you are prepared to receive it or not, everyone gets just as wet. A great number of God's gifts are like that – He just showers them on people. But there are other gifts that, in order to accomplish the purpose of the gift, there has to be a giving and receiving. If you give someone an engagement ring, you generally don't just toss it in their direction. You reach out your hand and offer it to her, but it remains in your hand until she says yes. In order for the transaction to mean anything you have to offer it and she has to welcome it and receive it. The truth of God's Word is like that. God offers it to us, but just hearing it is not the same as receiving it. Receiving it happens when God's Word comes to your heart and finds a great big welcome sign. You not only hear it, but you understand it. And you not only understand it, but you like it. Your entire soul responds to it with a big, "Yes!"

In Luke 8, Jesus told a parable about how the Word of God hits different kinds of people. Different people's hearts are like various kinds of soil. Some hearts are hard, like a walking path. And when the Word of God comes to those people, it is like seeds landing on rock hard ground. It does not penetrate. Hard ground has to be plowed before planting seeds will do any good.

Jeremiah 4:3 Break up your unplowed ground

Jeremiah 9:20 hear the word of the LORD; open your ears to the words of his mouth.⁶

That word translated **open** is this same word in the Greek translation. Receive it - let it penetrate.

⁶ See also Proverbs 2:1, 4:10.

Accepting the gospel is not something you do one time when you become a Christian. Accepting the gospel is like eating and digesting food. You start doing it on the day you are born, but no one says, “Oh, I received milk on the day I was born so I don’t need to eat now.” When you first receive the gospel you are just taking your first tastes of the Word of truth. But if you want to continue to live you need to keep eating.

1 Peter 2:2 Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, 3 now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

John MacArthur has a great statement on that verse:

Some people read the Bible but they don't read it for nourishment. Some read it traditionally. Because their parents read it, they think they should read it. Some read it superstitiously, like a religious charm thinking it will work magic in their life. Some read it educationally, they want the knowledge of the facts, they want to compile information so they can be fun in a Christian Bible study. Some people read it denominationally, they want to defend their articles of faith, it's for the purpose of proof and refutation that they read it. Some people read it professionally, they want material for their lesson or their sermon. And some people read it inquisitively, they want to satisfy their curiosity and their intellectual pride so they spend time reading the Bible to see how many beasts they can find and how many horns and all of the prophetic ins and outs. But how should it be read? It should be read like a hungry baby sucking with all its strength to draw out the nourishment of its mother's breast.⁷

You have not received the Word until you have taken it in, understood it, your heart has welcomed it and absorbed it and digested it, and you have been fed and nourished and strengthened by it. We need to ask ourselves: “If someone examined my life, would they be able to tell whether or not I really believe what Jesus said when He quoted Deuteronomy 8:3 – **Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God** (Mt.4:4)?

Review James 1:21. Say it 10 times from memory word for word.

Prayer:

Go back to the portion you read in Psalm 119 today and talk to God about what you read. Ask Him to give you a heart like the psalmist had toward His Word.

Doing: Do not be a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the Word (James 1:22-25)

- Write down at least one specific thing you will do to do to put what you have learned from God’s Word into practice.
- Check this box when you have done it.

Fellowship:

Try to have a conversation with someone today about the most helpful thoughts that came out of your time with the Lord today.

⁷ John MacArthur, “Desiring the Word” sermon on 1 Pe.2:1-3.

Day 3

Preparation:

Pray S.I.O.U.S.

Scripture Reading:

Psalms 119:97-128

Sermon segment:

21 ...humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save your soul.

If you want to know how to make God's Word penetrate and absorb into your heart, the starting point is humility.

Isaiah 66:2 This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.

The only way to properly absorb God's Word is to be in awe of it, and to tremble at the thought that these are the very words of Almighty Himself. This is the revelation of His will!

If you approach the Bible with suspicion, or a casual, "maybe I'll accept this; maybe I won't," attitude, your heart won't absorb it. Proud listeners get smarter and smarter and more and more educated about the Bible, but they don't receive much of it – if any. If you wonder, "Why do I keep learning more and more from the Bible, but I can't seem to put it into practice?" it may be due to lack of humility in the way you listen. Pride makes our hearts crust over with a coating that is Word-resistant.

Proud listening is when you read the Bible from the standpoint of an evaluator – the way you read regular, human books.

"I'll see what it says, and then I'll make a decision about whether it's any good. If this writer is telling me to do something, I will evaluate his arguments and then make a decision about whether I want to do it."

So in a sense, you are sitting in judgment on that book. It is fine to do that with human books, but it is spiritual suicide to do that with the Bible. No one is in a position to pass judgment on God's Word. And yet, in our pride, that is what we tend to do. And any time you have a perspective of passing judgment on God's law, you are breaking God's law.

James 4:11 ... When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.

Does what you read in the Bible have to measure up to some standard before you will be willing to accept it? What happens when the Bible says something that is the opposite of what seems right to you? Do you trust your gut feeling, or do you trust what the Bible says?

What about when the Bible contradicts the majority of scientists? There are some people, that whenever they are trying to harmonize what the Bible says with psychology, or popular scientific theories – it is always the Bible that has to be adjusted to fit those theories rather than the other way around. If that is your approach, that is a sign of a heart that stands above God's Word rather than humbly accepting it.

The humble listener does not pass judgment on the message – nor does he allow the skill of the messenger to affect how much he listens. Proud listeners have to have the message served up a silver platter. Ask yourself - How skillfully does God's Word have to be presented to you in order for you to be willing to receive it? If you hear a preacher who really is not a very good speaker – he's dry, kind of clumsy in his approach, not very funny, his life isn't a very good testimony – but what he is teaching really is the Word of God, can you learn from a guy like that? Are there ever times when you don't accept the message because of the messenger?

Why has God chosen to communicate His Word through weak, fallible, sinful messengers? Could it be because God knows that the only way His Word can be absorbed into your heart is if you listen humbly? It takes some humility to sit at the feet of a klutz and learn. It takes some meekness to receive the Word as God's Word when it's coming out of the mouth of a man that you have seen make all kinds of mistakes, and who has sinned against you and hurt you, and who is just very ordinary. God once spoke through Balaam's donkey. If you are too proud to be able to receive instruction from God through the mouth of a donkey, you are too proud.

Humble receiving is when you're attitude is, "God, whatever You say, and however You say it, and whatever messenger You use, and whatever the hard implications for me – I'm all ears. More than anything else in the world, I want to know Your thoughts and Your will and Your heart. So whatever You say – I want to have one response: faith." That is the bottom line. If you are listening to the message with a humble heart, you will believe it and trust it enough to follow it.

Hebrews 4:2 ...the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.

You receive God's Word when your heart responds with simple, unconditional trust.

Review James 1:19-21 one time from memory

Prayer:

Go back to the portion you read in Psalm 119 today and talk to God about what you read. Ask Him to give you a heart like the psalmist had toward His Word.

Doing: Do not be a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the Word (James 1:22-25)

- Write down at least one specific thing you will do to do to put what you have learned from God's Word into practice.
- Check this box when you have done it.

Fellowship:

Try to have a conversation with someone today about the most helpful thoughts that came out of your time with the Lord today.

Day 4

Preparation:

Pray S.I.O.U.S.

Scripture Reading:

Psalm 119:129-152

Sermon segment:

Before you can ever receive God's Word, some preparation is required. Like Jeremiah said, the soil of your heart has to be plowed in order for the seed of God's Word to germinate. In Exodus 19, God told Moses that He was going to come down and speak to the people directly, and He told him to have the people wash their clothes in preparation (Ex.19:10). He was teaching them a principle about how to listen when He speaks. In order to interact with God we must be clean. When you have lingering sin in your life that has not been dealt with, it disrupts communication with God in both directions. We know it hinders our prayers.

Psalm 66:18 If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

Unrepentant sin makes God unwilling to listen to us. But it also ruins our ability to listen to God. In order to properly hear God's voice, you need to approach Him with clean hands and a pure heart. And God was teaching them that in a symbolic way by requiring that they wash their clothes before He came down to speak to them. James is teaching us the same principle here. Before your heart will be able to absorb what you read in the Bible, you have to first strip off the filthiness and sin. When it says to **get rid of** that filthiness (or your Bible might say put it off) – that is the normal word for taking off clothes. Our sins get so they are wrapped around us like a garment and we have to strip them off.

James refers to them as **filth**. He is reminding us of what sin is – all sin. People think of sexual sin as being dirty, but they don't feel dirty after coveting something, or after grumbling and complaining about something. When they think about moral filth, the first thing that springs to mind isn't usually their irritable, grumpy mood last night. But that is exactly the context - anger. Anger is filthy. Resentment is dirty. Irritability is trashy and smutty. There are not clean sins and dirty sins – only dirty ones. Holding on to anger, giving someone the cold shoulder or the silent treatment – that is immorality. It is vile and it is contaminating and God will not speak to a heart that is slimed with that kind of filth.

You have to strip off that filth, and the other thing James mentions that you have to strip off is the **evil that is so prevalent**. That word translated **evil** can refer to general evil or it can refer to malice. Usually when it is in the context of anger they translate it malice. And that is the context here, so I am convinced that is what James is referring to here. Strip off the filth and strip off the malice that is so prevalent. Malice is when you have ill will toward someone. You are unhappy with them, so you hope they get what's coming to them. Something in you would actually smile if something painful happen to that person. That is malice. And James says it is so prevalent. There are tons of it. It is everywhere. It is so common, but it has to be stripped off before you will be able to receive God's Word. When you have a heart that is hostile toward someone, or closed toward someone, the truth of Scripture won't penetrate. There are so many people who come to God in their morning devotions and say, "Speak to me, God," but God is saying, "No – not until you go reconcile with that person you're mad at."

When you come to God's Word, you have to come prepared. Peter makes the same point in his book. 1 Peter 2:2 is a famous verse – like newborn babies, crave pure, spiritual milk. But that is the second half of a sentence. Do you know what the first half of the sentence is?

1 Peter 2:1 Therefore, having stripped off all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. 2 Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation

You cannot properly crave the milk of God's Word until you strip off sin, because all sins are appetite suppressants.

Think about this – what is the difference between satisfying your appetite and spoiling your appetite? Either way you eat food. Spoiling your appetite is when you eat something that isn't satisfying at all, but it does take away your hunger, so you cannot enjoy the things that really would satisfy. That is what sin does – it spoils, rather than satisfies, your appetite. So many Christians have no appetite for the Thanksgiving dinner of God's Word because they ate a loaf of Wonder Bread for breakfast. That is what sin does.

It does not really satisfy, but it takes away your ability to really enjoy God's Word. Those sins are like a loaf of Wonder Bread. They fill up your stomach and destroy your ability to take in God's Word. And so Peter says, "After you have stripped off all these sins, then crave pure, spiritual milk." The craving will never happen as long as those sins are continuing. And he got that from James. James says, "After you have stripped off these sins, then receive the Word."

This is one of the many reasons why you never want to have an attitude that says, "I'll go ahead with this sin now, and I'll just ask forgiveness later – after I've enjoyed the sin." Maybe God will be gracious and grant you a truly repentant heart later; you will be forgiven, but the damage to your appetite remains. Now you have that much smaller capacity to desire and absorb God's Word.

Review James 1:19-21 one time from memory

Prayer:

Go back to the portion you read in Psalm 119 today and talk to God about what you read. Ask Him to give you a heart like the psalmist had toward His Word.

Doing: Do not be a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the Word (James 1:22-25)

- Write down at least one specific thing you will do to do to put what you have learned from God's Word into practice.
- Check this box when you have done it.

Fellowship:

Try to have a conversation with someone today about the most helpful thoughts that came out of your time with the Lord today.

Day 5

Preparation:

Pray S.I.O.U.S.

Scripture Reading:

Psalm 119:153-176

Sermon segment:

The way to overcome anger (and other sins) in your life is by receiving God's Word. But stripping off those sins is a prerequisite for being able to receive God's Word. Is that a catch 22? No, it's not a catch 22. It is another one of those wonderful upward spirals that we find so often in Scripture. We saw one earlier in chapter one with perseverance in suffering. You used a little bit of strength you have right now to persevere through small trials, and that gives you even more perseverance which enables you to persevere through bigger trials, which gives you even more perseverance, etc. This works the same way. You use whatever grace you have right now to strip off sin in your life, that enables you to receive more

of the Word of God, which enables you to strip off even more sin, which makes you more receptive to the Word, and each one keeps feeding the other and you become more and more like Jesus Christ.

“But that sounds like works-righteousness. Isn’t that too much human effort? I can’t strip off sin – only the Holy Spirit can do that. Why is James telling us to do it? Doesn’t James understand about grace? If I strip off sin by my own efforts, how does that glorify God?”

If you have been taught that grace means lack of human effort, you have been misled about grace. That is not what grace means. Grace does not mean that you put forth no effort, and just wait for God to do it. Grace is a gift from God that enables effort. So the more grace you get, the harder you work.

1 Corinthians 15:10 ...his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them

Works-righteousness is not when someone works really hard at righteousness. Works-righteousness is when someone puts his trust and confidence in his own efforts rather than in God. We work hard, but we don’t put our trust in our hard work. If you ever get confused about how relying on the power of the Holy Spirit fits together with your own human efforts, it is really very simple. Just work as hard as you can, but don’t put your confidence in your own work. Put all your confidence in the God who supplies the grace that enables you to work.

So how does God get the glory if we are working hard to strip off sin? He gets the glory when we realize that all our successes in stripping off sin, and all our successes in humbly receiving His Word, are due to the fact that His Word is implanted in us. It is not out of your reach. Why? How did the ability to receive and obey God’s Word get planted inside me?

18 He chose to give us birth through the word of truth

God planted it there. So every single time you obey God’s Word, let it remind you that your ability to do that is due to God’s gracious gift of the implanting of His Word in your heart that enables you to obey it and receive more of it. All the power is from Him, and flows through us. So He gets all the glory and all the praise; and we get life and salvation.

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Prayer:

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Doing: Do not be a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the Word (James 1:22-25)

- Write down at least one specific thing you will do to do to put what you have learned from God’s Word into practice.
- Check this box when you have done it.

Fellowship:

Try to have a conversation with someone today about the most helpful thoughts that came out of your time with the Lord today.