

Which Is Able to Save Your Souls
James 1:21-22

James 1:21-22 reads, “Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls. But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.”

In the opening portion of this paragraph (verses 19-20), we receive an exhortation concerning right relations with those around us. As a whole, this exhortation indicates that we should deny the ways of selfishness in the manner that we relate to one another. Yet selfishness is the natural principle of our hearts. Thus in order to deny our selfishness and in order to relate aright toward one another, we must be delivered from the natural characteristic of selfishness in our hearts and from the spiritual corruption that flows out of it. Yea, our soul, our inner man, needs deliverance from its own, naturally selfish and sinful desires.

So then, by what means can we obtain this spiritual deliverance from the natural corruption of selfishness in our hearts? **James 1:21** gives the answer, saying, “Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.” The conjunction “wherefore” with which this verse begins connects it directly to the exhortation of **verse 19** and the explanation of **verse 20**. Because self-denial in our relations with others is not natural to our selfish hearts, and because the wrath that naturally flows out of our selfishness does not produce the righteousness of God, we need to be delivered from the selfish corruption of our hearts and to be transformed unto the spiritual character of righteousness. Even so, the closing line of **James 1:21** reveals that the Holy Word of God is able to accomplish this deliverance for our souls.

Yet this verse does not specifically refer to God’s Word as the Holy Word of God, but as the *engrafted* Word of God. In so doing, it indicates that the message of this verse is for those who are already saved eternally through faith in Christ. The Word of God is not engrafted (or, implanted) in the hearts of lost sinners. The Word of God is only engrafted (or, implanted) in the hearts of God’s children. Therefore, the deliverance about which this verse speaks in this context must not be viewed as the salvation of our eternal souls from eternal condemnation to hell. Rather, the deliverance about which this verse speaks in this context must be viewed as the salvation of our inner character from the corruption of selfishness.

Grammatically, **James 1:21-22** can be divided into three parts, each providing us with an instruction. First, there is the preparatory instruction to repent of sin – “Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness.” Then there is the central instruction to receive the Word – “And receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.” Finally, there is the extended instruction to respond in obedience – “But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.” Thus the path of deliverance from the selfish corruption of our hearts and of transformation unto the spiritual character of righteousness can be summarized with three words of instruction – *repent, receive, respond*. Central to all of this is our relationship toward God’s Word. We must *repent* of anything contrary to God’s Word. We must *receive* the truth and wisdom of God’s Word. We must *respond* obediently to the instruction of God’s Word.

I. We must *repent* of our sinfulness for preparation.

First, for the deliverance and transformation of our souls (of our inner character), we must repent of our sinfulness for preparation to receive God's Word. The opening portion of **James 1:21** delivers the instruction, "Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness." Herein our sinful corruption is described in a two-fold manner. The first description, "all filthiness," is more general, for the word "filthiness" refers to any type of spiritual defilement and impurity in our hearts and lives. This description is certainly given from the perspective of God's holiness. In the light of God's holiness, all sin of any kind is utter filthiness. Thus our sinful character and conduct is a great offense and hateful abomination in our Lord God's sight. Yea, in His sight our sinfulness rests upon us and defiles us like a disgustingly vile garment. Yet this filthiness does not take hold upon us accidentally from without. Rather, this filthiness flows directly out of the selfish corruption of our own hearts. Indeed, the behavior that comes forth from our selfish hearts is that which truly defiles us spiritually (See **Matthew 15:18-20**).

The second description of our sinful corruption, "superfluity of naughtiness," is more specific. The word "superfluity" refers to that which overflows in super-abundance. The phrase "of naughtiness" then indicates the source for that overflowing super abundance. Finally, the word "naughtiness" refers to a malicious spirit that motivates us to behave against others. In fact, the Greek word that is here translated as "naughtiness" is most often translated as "malice" or "maliciousness" throughout the rest of the New Testament. This word "naughtiness" (or, maliciousness) is a word that speaks of motivation and intention in the mindset of our hearts. It refers to a mindset of meanness that strikes out against others and that pursues the harm of others. In fact, this naughtiness overflows directly from the selfish wrath that so often floods our hearts. Indeed, our selfish wrath does not and cannot produce the righteousness of God in our lives. Rather, our selfish wrath produces an overflowing abundance of naughty meanness and maliciousness in our lives.

Concerning this sinful filthiness that flows out of the selfish corruption of our hearts and concerning this abundant naughtiness (maliciousness) that overflows out of the selfish wrath of our hearts, we are instructed to lay it all apart from us. We must strip it off and cast it away like a disgustingly filthy and vile garment. Indeed, this is a common instruction in God's Word. In **Romans 13:12** the instruction is given, "The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light." Again in **Ephesians 4:22-24** the instruction is given, "That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; and be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness." Yet again in **Colossians 3:8** the instruction is given, "But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth." And yet again in **Hebrews 12:1** the instruction is given, "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us." Finally, in **1 Peter 2:1** the instruction is given, "Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings."

How then do we strip off and cast away this sinful filthiness and abundant naughtiness? We do so through broken-hearted repentance thereof. In broken-hearted repentance, we must confess all such filthiness and naughtiness unto the Lord our God, that through the almighty power of His abundant grace, He might cleanse away the filthiness and cut away the naughtiness. This we must do definitely, immediately, and completely. We must not simply seek for these selfish, sinful corruptions of our heart to be restrained. Rather, we must seek for them to be removed with a desire that they never return. As **Isaiah 30:22** indicates, we must seek that they be cast away from us “as a menstruous cloth,” forcibly saying, “Get thee hence, and never come back.” This we must do, not just concerning some, but concerning *all* the sinful filthiness and abundant naughtiness of our hearts and lives.

Now, through this repentance of our sinfulness, we prepare ourselves to receive the truth of God’s Word. The contextual order of the instructions in **James 1:21** indicate that the repentance of our sinfulness must precede our reception of God’s Word in preparation for it. (In fact, in the Greek the instruction to “lay aside all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness” is a participial phrase that connects closely with the central instruction to “receive with meekness the engrafted word” and that partakes of its imperatival force.) In like manner, **1 Peter 2:1-2** reveals the same need of repentance for preparation to receive God’s Word. “Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings, as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby.” The truth and wisdom of God’s Holy Word must be discerned spiritually (**1 Corinthians 2:14; Psalm 119:18**). Yet when sin is in our hearts, we are not in a Spirit-filled mindset, but in a selfish, sinful mindset. In such a mindset, our ears are dull of hearing and hearts are dull of receiving. Therefore, before the transforming work of God’s Word can be effectively received into our hearts, we must remove this barrier of spiritual dullness through the repentance of our sinfulness.

II. We must *receive* God’s Word with meekness.

Second, for the deliverance and transformation of our souls (of our inner character), we must receive God’s Word with meekness to learn God’s ways. The closing portion of **James 1:21** delivers the instruction, “And receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.” Having repented of our sinfulness, we must receive God’s truth. Having put off the filthiness and naughtiness of our selfishness, we must then be renewed in the spirit of our mind through the transforming power of God’s Word (**Ephesians 4:22-23**). Indeed, it is the truth of God’s Holy Word that is able to deliver our souls (our inner character) from the sinful corruption of our selfish flesh; and it is the truth of God’s Holy Word that is able to convert our souls (our inner character) unto the pure righteousness of our Lord Jesus Christ. “The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple” (**Psalm 19:7**).

Therefore, we are commanded to receive God’s Word of truth. If the truth of God’s Word is to be effective in delivering our character from sinful corruption and in transforming our character unto Christ’s righteousness, it must be received. We must not be dull of hearing and hard of heart against God’s Word. Rather, we must incline our ears unto the wisdom of God’s Word and apply our hearts to the understanding of God’s will (**Proverbs 2:2**). We must not stop our ears against God’s Word and turn our hearts away from God’s Word.

Rather, we must open our ears toward God's Word and focus our hearts upon God's Word. We must not refuse to receive the commands and corrections of God's Holy Word. Rather, we must be ready to receive the commands and corrections of God's Holy Word. We must not resist the truth of God's Word. Rather, we must receive the truth of God's Word. Yea, we must receive the truth of God's Word with a spirit of meekness, not with hardness of heart, but with humility of heart, not with stubbornness of heart, but with submission of heart.

Those who will not hear and receive the truth of God's Word are described by our Lord as a rebellious people. In **Isaiah 30:9** our Lord declared concerning His people Israel, "That this is a rebellious people, lying children, children that will not hear the law of the LORD." Even so, such a rebellious refusal to hear and receive the truth of God's Word will kindle a great wrath from the Lord our God against us. In **Zechariah 7:11-13** our Lord declared concerning His rebellious people, "But they refused to hearken, and pulled away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they should not hear. Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the law, and the words which the LORD of hosts hath sent in his spirit by the former prophets: therefore came a great wrath from the LORD of hosts. Therefore it is come to pass, that as he cried, and they would not hear; so they cried, and I would not hear, saith the LORD of hosts." Indeed, just as our Lord's wrath was kindled against them, even so it will be kindled against us when we refuse to hear and receive the truth of His Holy Word.

On the other hand, **Psalm 25:9** proclaims, "The meek will he guide in judgment: and the meek will he teach his way." So then, what does it mean to receive the Word with a heart of meekness? It means that we must deny our own self-will and must desire our Lord's true Word. It means that we do not argue against the teaching, reproof, correction, and instruction of God's Word, but that we humbly accept the teaching, reproof, correction, and instruction of God's Word. It means that we do not despise the teaching, reproof, correction, and instruction of God's Word, but that we desire and even delight in the teaching, reproof, correction, and instruction of God's Word. It means that we do not twist the teaching of God's Word to conform unto our thinking, but that we be teachable in relation to God's Word that it may transform our thinking.

To receive God's Word with meekness means that we receive the truth of God's Word with an absolute conviction of its divine origin, "as it is in truth, the word of God" (**1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 3:16**). It means that we receive the truth of God's Word with unwavering belief in its absolute truth (**Psalm 19:9; 119:128**). It means that we receive the truth of God's Word with a ready mind to learn its wisdom (**Acts 17:11; Proverbs 2:1-4**). It means that we receive the truth of God's Word with a daily diligence to study its teaching (**Acts 17:11; 2 Timothy 2:15**). It means that we receive the truth of God's Word with a hungry desire to grow spiritually thereby (**1 Peter 2:2; Psalm 119:131**). It means that we receive the truth of God's Word with a loving delight to mediate therein continually (**Psalm 1:2; 119:47-48**). It means that we receive the truth of God's Word with a yielded response to its piercing correction (**Hebrews 4:12; Psalm 19:10**). It means that we receive the truth of God's Word with a humble submission to its divine authority, observing "to do according to all that is written therein" (**Joshua 1:8**).

Now, **James 1:21** indicates specifically that the content which we are to “receive with meekness” is “the engrafted word.” Certainly, this “engrafted word” is a reference to the Holy Word of God. Yet with this reference to God’s Word as “the engrafted word,” we are brought to an illustration of spiritual truth. When we placed our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior, God the Holy Spirit regenerated our spirit and came to indwell us permanently. At that moment of regeneration and indwelling, God the Holy Spirit engrafted (or, implanted) the seed of God’s Word into our hearts. Yea, at the moment that we received the gospel of Christ through faith, the seed of God’s Word spiritually germinated in our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit and began to take root therein. At that moment the Lord our God, through His Holy Spirit, put His Word in our inner man and wrote His Word in our hearts (**Jeremiah 31:33**). Thus the living seed of God’s Word is already implanted in the hearts of us who are God’s children. Yea, it is already implanted in our hearts as a vital element of our new spiritual life in Christ.

Yet we are instructed to “receive with meekness” that which is already implanted. Why is it necessary for us to receive that which we already have? It is necessary to continue receiving “the engrafted word” in order that it may continually take deeper root within our hearts as the governing principle of our hearts and lives. Having received the gospel truth through faith, we are not done with the truth of God’s Word. Rather, we have just begun with the truth of God’s Word. The seed of God’s Word has now become a principle of correction, instruction, and direction in our hearts for our lives. Thus we must yield ourselves more and more to be governed, guided, and guarded thereby. Yea, we must yield ourselves more and more to be transformed in character thereby. We must allow the truth of God’s Word to become more and more rooted as the governing principle of our hearts so that we might bring forth the fruit of righteousness in our lives.

We must not neglect the truth of God’s Word, hardening our heart as stone against it and allowing it only to take shallow root in our hearts, so that we spiritually wither in time of tribulation and testing (**Luke 8:6, 13**). We must not be distracted from the truth of God’s Word, refusing to separate ourselves from that which it reproves and allowing it to be choked out by the “cares and riches and pleasures of this life,” so that we spiritually bring forth no fruit unto maturity (**Luke 8:7, 14**). Rather, we must purposefully open our hearts toward the truth of God’s Word, maintaining “an honest and good heart” of humble submission toward it and allowing it to develop and direct our character, so that we bring forth much spiritual fruit unto righteousness for our Lord’s glory (**Luke 8:8, 15**). We must welcome the transforming work of God’s Word in our hearts, receiving it with meekness.

III. We must *respond* to God’s Word in obedience.

Third, for the deliverance and transformation of our souls (of our inner character), we must respond to God’s Word in obedience to follow God’s will. **James 1:22** delivers the instruction, “But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.” Having repented of our sinfulness and having received God’s Word with meekness, we must then respond to God’s Word with obedience. We must be “doers of the word, and not hearers only.” This instruction connects to the previous instruction of **verse 21** with the contrasting conjunction “but.” Yet this instruction is not set in direct contrast with the previous instruction of **verse 21**. Rather, this instruction is set in contrast to the false belief that receiving the Word is an end in itself. Receiving the truth of God’s Word with meek-

ness is of great importance to our Christian walk. Yet receiving the truth of God's Word is not enough in itself. Rather, receiving the truth of God's Word leads directly to the responsibility of obedience to the truth of God's Word. Even so, the contrasting conjunction "but" with which this instruction begins places this instruction in direct contrast and direct opposition to any hearing of the Word that does not result in active doing of the Word.

Indeed, a readiness of mind and an attentiveness of heart to the truth of God's Word is necessary. Yet the truth of God's Word has not truly been received with meekness until it is put into practice. The truth and teaching of God's Holy Word is practical by its very nature. In fact, the Lord our God gave us His Word with the specific intent that we should be corrected by it from our unrighteous conduct and that we should be instructed by it unto righteous conduct. Even so, **Deuteronomy 29:29** declares, "The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law." Obedience to God's Word is one of the most foundational responsibilities of our daily Christian walk. It is the great desire of the Lord our God for our lives. Even so, in **Deuteronomy 5:29** our Lord proclaimed, "O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them, and with their children for ever!" Indeed, active obedience is the whole reason that we are receive God's Word, and learn God's Word, and meditate on God's Word. Even so, **Joshua 1:8** states, "This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, [Why?] that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success."

Yet the instruction of **James 1:22** is not simply that we be *doing* the Word, but that we be *doers* of the Word. The focus of the instruction is not simply upon our activity of doing, but is even more upon our character as doers. It is not a focus simply upon what we do, but more upon who we are. It is not a focus simply upon the performance that we are to do, but more upon the person that we are to be. Obedient doing of God's Word must become a foundational characteristic of our hearts and lives. It must become an integral part of our very character. We must be characterized by obedience. We must be characterized by responding to the truth of God's Word with obedient doing. Yea, we must continually pursue after being doers of the Word. We must continually and systematically pursue after an obedient character every step of our daily walk. Obedient doing of God's Word must be our habitual occupation and our primary business in everything that we do, whether it be an activity of religion, an activity of responsibility, an activity of relationship, or an activity of recreation. In everything, we should be known by all as doers of God's Word. Yea, we should be known as doers always.

On the other hand, we should not be hearers only. Certainly, we should be hearers attentively. Yet we should never be hearers only. We should never allow hearing the Word to become an end in itself. The idea of a "hearer only" is that of an auditor. It is that of an individual who only attends a class to hear the information of the class, but who does not join the class and thus become accountable for the requirements of the class. We are not to be "auditors" of God's Word. We are not simply to audit the teaching of God's Word. Rather, we are faithfully to apply the teaching of God's Word unto our daily lives. We are not simply to expose ourselves unto the teaching of God's Word in order to fill our minds with Biblical information. Rather, we are to delight ourselves in the teaching of God's

Word in order to transform our character unto righteous living. Indeed, favorable and frequent hearing of God's Word is of no spiritual value in our lives if it is not followed by fervent and faithful doing of God's Word. Certainly, we cannot possibly grow forward in our Christian walk without feeding daily upon the truth and teaching of God's Word. Yet our reception of God's truth will only be spiritually effective in our hearts and lives as we respond to it with obedience.

In **Matthew 7:24-27** our Lord Jesus Christ made this abundantly clear, saying, "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. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it." To be a hearer only, and not a doer also, is the way of the spiritual fool. It is the foolishness of building our lives upon sand without spiritual foundation. A strong spiritual foundation does not come from knowing the truth of God's Word. Rather, a strong spiritual foundation comes from obeying the truth of God's Word. Thus to be a hearer only, and not a doer also, will bring our lives to spiritual ruin. Indeed, great will be the spiritual fall and failure of our lives.

Even so, those who are hearers only engage in self-deception. They engage in the fallacy of thinking that mental assent and attentiveness to God's Word is all that is required. They come to a false conclusion by false reasoning. Yea, they lead themselves astray from the path of truth by their own false reasoning. They yield to the temptation of thinking that they have a faithful walk with God simply because they frequently and favorably hear the message of God's Word. They yield to the temptation of thinking that great knowledge of God's truth equals a spiritual walk, and they become self-satisfied with their growth in knowledge. Yet although their heads may be filled with an abundance of Biblical information, if they are not actually walking in faithful, fervent obedience, their true relationship with God is far different than they imagine it to be. Hearers only convince themselves that much hearing produces spiritual transformation. Yet much hearing without obedient doing only produces self-delusion. Such individuals deceive themselves into thinking that they have truly received the Word because of their much hearing. Yet they have not truly received God's Word at all, for they have not allowed it to take deeper root in their hearts so as to govern their character and guide their conduct. Indeed, they may honor the Lord with their mouth; but their heart is far from Him. Yea, they may think that they are under the favor of the Lord because of their much hearing. Yet in truth they are under the chastening of the Lord because they have forsaken obedience.

Our Lord's favor is not poured out for our frequent hearing, but for our faithful obeying. Even so, in **John 14:23-24** our Lord Jesus Christ declared, "Jesus answered and said unto him, If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him. He that loveth me not keepeth not my sayings: and the word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's which sent me." Again in **John 15:10** He declared, "If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love." Yet again in **John 15:14** He declared, "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you."