

Receive the Word: James 1: 19-21
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If anyone ever suggests to you that the Bible is no longer relevant in our day, point them to the letter of James, which we've been studying for several weeks now. It's amazing to me as I read and study the Bible, and specifically as I've been studying this letter, that these things that were written thousands of years ago are still so applicable to my life and to your life. Many things have changed in the world, but the Word of God never changes. And even though our lives today are very different than the life that James lived in the first century, the human heart is still the same. We wrestle with the same sins as those who have gone before us. Therefore, as we look into God's Word, which never changes, and we read these specific commands directed at the human heart, we are faced with truths that are just as applicable to us as they were to those in the first century. Don't ever think that this is just a dusty old book with no relevance for today. The word of God is living and active (Hebrews 4:12), and we must receive it and apply it to our lives. In James 1:21, which is one of the verses we'll look at this morning, it says, "receive with meekness the implanted word." And that is my prayer for us this morning, that we would recognize the importance and relevance of God's Word in our lives, and that we would humbly place ourselves under the Word and let the Word speak with authority and conviction into our hearts. Let's humble ourselves to receive the Word.

Last week we studied verses 16-18 of James 1, and in verse 18 James introduced the theme of "the word of truth," which he's going to continue in verse 21, and verses 22-25. In verse 18 he is speaking of regeneration—being born again. The Father "brought us forth by the word of truth . . ." That's the language of giving birth, giving new life. God did this by means of the Word—the Gospel. God changed our hearts so that we now hate what we used to love, and love what we used to hate. We have turned away from our old sinful way of life, and we are trusting in Christ and following Him. This is what happens in the life of a person who has been born again. Verse 18 states the reality of God's regenerating work in our lives.

Now, in the verses we're going to look at this morning, James gives us some clear commands. And one of the commands, in verse 21, is that we must "receive with meekness the implanted word." Isn't that interesting? God is the One who caused us to be born again. He is the One who implanted the Word within us. But there is also this command that comes to us that we must *receive* the implanted Word. So the word of truth—the Gospel—which is

revealed to us in this Book, is not only the means by which God regenerates us, but also the means by which He sanctifies us and sustains us to the end. God implanted this Word within us, and we are to continually receive it and obey it and live it out in our daily lives in these very practical and specific ways.

As we look at these very practical and specific commands from God's Word, let us humbly receive this word. My sincere hope and desire is that we will be sanctified through the Word. I pray that we will be more like Jesus as a result of humbly receiving the Word this morning.

In these verses I see 5 very clear and specific admonitions. I'll summarize them like this, and then we'll go through them one by one. First, listen carefully. Second, speak thoughtfully. Third, live peacefully. Those three are from verses 19-20. Then in verse 21, put away immorality. And finally, receive the Word.

I. Listen Carefully

James begins this new section by exhorting his beloved brothers to "know this." The Greek form of that verb could be translated either as an indicative or an imperative. The verb is written the same way in the indicative and the imperative, so we have to make a decision based on the context. The NASB renders it, "This you know," taking it as an indicative. But it seems better to read this as an imperative, because James usually uses an imperative with the words "my brothers" or "my beloved brothers." He's getting our attention here and preparing us to hear and heed these commands.

The first command is, "let every person be quick to hear." In other words, listen carefully. Be a careful listener. This is a common theme in Proverbs, and I'll be quoting several verses from Proverbs in relation to these three commands in James 1:19-20. Listen carefully, speak thoughtfully, live peacefully—these are all commands that we see over and over again in Proverbs. Let me make three comments about careful listening.

1) Careful listening exhibits wisdom.

Proverbs 12:15 says, "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man *listens* to advice." Wise individuals are willing and eager to listen to others, because the wise person realizes that others possess helpful and insightful wisdom. There's obviously a humility that's required here. We need to realize that we don't know it all, and therefore we need to shut our mouths and listen to others.

To be a humble listener is so identified with wisdom that it's even possible for a fool to appear wise if he will just keep silent. Proverbs 17:28 tells us this: "Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent." So even if you're not wise, you may appear wise if

you will just listen more than you talk. Of course, the point is not to appear wise. The point is to be wise, and this is the second thing I want to point out about careful listening.

2) Careful listening is a way to gain wisdom.

Proverbs 1:5—“Let the wise *hear* and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance.” We can’t learn if we’re always talking. We learn when we are listening. When we listen we will increase in learning.

We must also be willing to receive a rebuke. We must listen to correction. Proverbs 19:20—“Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future.” And Proverbs 13:1—“A wise son hears his father’s instruction, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke.” If we are going to gain wisdom, we must be willing to listen to a rebuke. It’s not easy, and it’s not enjoyable at the moment. But when a brother or sister in Christ comes to us and speaks the truth in love to us about a sin in our lives, we need to take that to heart. Through that loving rebuke we will grow in wisdom. We will grow in holiness. That correction will be a powerful means by which God will sanctify us.

3) Careful listening exhibits love.

Think about these words from 1 Corinthians 13 in light of listening to others. Think about listening carefully to your Christian brothers and sisters as well as unbelievers and how these characteristics of love are manifested in listening. 1 Corinthians 13:4-7—“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Most of these things don’t happen apart from listening. When we truly listen to people, whether they are sharing with us a great joy or a great sorrow, they will know that we care about them and love them because we are taking the time to listen. What an awesome way to minister to one another and to the hurting world around us. Take the time to listen. Take a genuine interest in the people around you, and love them by listening to them.

II. Speak Thoughtfully

The second admonition in James 1:19 is that we must be “slow to speak.” In other words, speak thoughtfully. This command and the first are two sides of the same coin. We are to be quick to hear and slow to speak. As you know, this is why we have two ears and only one mouth. We should be eager to listen—quick to listen. We should NOT be quick to speak, though. Rather, we should be slow to speak. We should listen and think, and *then* speak. Two comments about speaking thoughtfully.

1) Thoughtful words exhibit wisdom.

Careful listening and thoughtful words: these are two sides of the same coin, and they both exhibit wisdom. These are two characteristics of the wise person. Proverbs 17:27—“Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.” This doesn’t mean that we are always silent. But we must restrain our words. We shouldn’t just blurt out whatever comes to our minds. We need to exercise restraint to think first and then speak.

And Proverbs 10:19—“When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.” If you speak without exercising restraint, you can guarantee that you’re going to sin in what you say. If you don’t give thoughtful consideration to your speech, you are going to fall into all kinds of sin. You may fall into gossip or slander or crude joking. When we fail to think before we speak, sin is inevitable. Surely we will come to the end of the day and wish we could take back something we said. Let us be wise and think before we speak.

2) Thoughtful words are helpful words.

Not only do we want to avoid sin in our speech, we also want to bless others with helpful words. Proverbs 12:18—“There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” Couple this with careful listening, and our speech can be a tremendous means of grace to others. When we listen carefully and then speak thoughtfully, this will comfort, encourage, and bring healing to the people God brings into our lives.

III. Live Peacefully

The third thing that James mentions is anger. He tells us to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. He instructs us to listen carefully, speak thoughtfully, and live peacefully. This issue of anger is closely related to our speech, because it is so common for the anger in our hearts to overflow in our speech. A woman once told a preacher, “I have a bad temper, but at least it’s over in a minute.” To which the preacher replied, “Like a shotgun blast. It’s over in a second, but look at all the damage it does.” Anger can well up within our hearts, and then our words become the shotgun blasts of that anger. We lash out with harsh words toward a spouse or parent or child or friend or co-worker or complete stranger. Often times, it doesn’t have much to do with the other person. There’s sinful anger in our own hearts, and we unload those frustrations on anyone who happens to be in the vicinity.

Proverbs 29:11—“A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back.” Also Proverbs 16:32—“Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.”

There is so much wisdom and power in being the kind of person who is slow to anger. Don't let yourself be controlled by sinful anger. Live peacefully with those around you.

James then gives us a reason for this in verse 20. He says we should be slow to anger, “*for* the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires.” In other words, man's anger does not please God. This is not according to God's will. It is not how He desires for us to behave.

Someone might ask the question: What about righteous anger? Wasn't Jesus angry with the people who were buying and selling in the temple (Mark 11:15)? And wasn't He also angry with the Pharisees because of their hard hearts? In Mark 3, when the Pharisees were watching to see if Jesus would heal on the Sabbath, it says that Jesus “looked around at them *with anger*, grieved at their hardness of heart . . .” (verse 5). We also read Paul's instruction in Ephesians 4:26, which suggests there is such a thing as righteous anger. It says, “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.”

From these verses I think it's clear that there *is* such a thing as righteous anger, and Jesus models this for us. He was angry, and yet He remained sinless in everything He did. And Ephesians 4:26 suggests that it is possible for us to be angry without sinning, although we should probably acknowledge that this is rare in our lives. James says we should be “*slow* to anger.” It will be appropriate at times for us to feel angry, but even then it should involve self-control and thoughtfulness and restraint. We are to be *slow* to anger because the anger of man—the sinful anger of the flesh—is dishonoring to God.

Here's a helpful way of distinguishing righteous anger and sinful anger. One person said it like this: “If we would be angry and not sin, we must be angry at nothing but sin.” In this way, we follow Jesus' example. He was angry with the sin committed by those who were buying and selling in the temple, and He was angry with the hard-hearted Pharisees. Sinful anger, on the other hand, gets upset with all kinds of things that are not necessarily sin. We get all bent out of shape over things that don't cater to our personal preferences. We get irritated and annoyed by petty things. That's the anger that so often arises within us, and we need to confess that before God and seek His forgiveness and His grace to help us overcome that anger.

Even when our anger is directed at sin, though, that anger can still be sinful if we are not trusting that God is a just Judge. It

may be that someone has sinned against you, and you are holding a grudge against that person. Maybe that person's sin hurt you very deeply. But if you are holding a grudge, then you are sinning by not trusting that God is perfectly just. God is a just Judge, and He will see to it that every sin is dealt with appropriately. For those who never put their faith in Jesus Christ, they will suffer in hell for eternity. That will be the punishment for their sin. And for those of us who are trusting Jesus and following Him, our sin was punished on the cross. Therefore, it's not our place to hold grudges or try to take our own revenge. God will deal with every sin, and we must leave that to Him.

I think these things will help us be slow to anger, if we realize that we should only be angry at sin, and even then we must remember that God will deal justly with every sin.

James instructs us in verses 19-20 to listen carefully, speak thoughtfully, and live peacefully.

IV. Put Away Immorality

It's appropriate at this point to ask the question, "How do we become individuals who listen carefully and speak thoughtfully and live peacefully?" And James answers that question in verse 21. If you're going to heed the commands of verses 19-20, this is what needs to happen in your life. First, you need to put away immorality. And second, you need to receive the Word.

James gives us a negative command and positive command. The negative command is to put away immorality. The verb for "put away" conveys the idea of removing a robe or clothing of some kind, and it's used in the New Testament to refer to taking off the old self. In Ephesians 4:21-24 this image is used of putting off the old self and putting on the new self: "assuming that you have heard about [Christ] and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to *put off* your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."

Similarly, James tells us that we need to "put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness." He says this very simply and bluntly, and we need to hear this. We need to examine our hearts and see what kind of moral filth and rampant wickedness remains there, and we need to seek God's grace to put it out of our lives. We need to strip ourselves of those things that characterized our former life.

Look honestly into your life—the things you think about, the way you spend your time, the way you spend your money, the way you speak, the way you act around others, the things you do when you're all alone. Is there any kind of financial dishonesty in your

life, or sexual immorality, or racial prejudice, gossip, anger, lust, drunkenness, jealousy, hatred. Examine your soul, and pray that God would reveal your sin to you. In our sin we can be so blind to our own sin. But we need to look honestly at ourselves and then fight to remove these things from our lives.

V. Receive the Word

Finally, and positively, we must receive the Word. James writes, “receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” It was by means of the word that God caused us to be born again. We saw that in verse 18. And now, we are commanded to receive this implanted word—the word of the Gospel which is revealed to us in the Bible. It was by this word that we were born again, and it is also by this word that we are sustained each day. This word was the means by which we were born again, and it is also the means by which we are sanctified.

I want to ask you this morning: what place does the word have in your life? Are you receiving the word on a daily basis? Do you read it and study it and meditate on it and pray over it and memorize it? Or is the Bible something that you look at only when you’re at church? Or maybe you open the Bible every once in awhile when the mood strikes you or when you’re having a difficult time and you need some guidance.

Listen, some of you say that you want to have a closer walk with God. You want to grow in your faith, and you wonder why that’s not happening in your life. But how do you expect to grow if you’re not receiving the word? If you’re not spending regular time in God’s word, you’re not going to grow spiritually. The Bible must be at the very core of your personal life. We need to be hearing and applying the Gospel message to our lives every day. We need to be reminded over and over and over again that we are sinners, and that Jesus died for sinners, and that those who trust in Him will be forgiven.

This message is not only for unbelievers. Some of us may think that, or at least act like that’s true. We may think that the basic truths of the Gospel are meant for the unbelieving world around us, but once a person becomes a Christian he or she moves on to other things. But the word by which we were born again is also the word by which we are sanctified and sustained to the end. I exhort you, brothers and sisters, to receive the word, and receive the word, and keep receiving the word.

It’s important not simply to receive the word, but James adds that we need to receive it with meekness, or with humility. There’s a way to interact with the word that is not receiving the word. If we interact with the word merely on an intellectual level, and if we do so proudly, never allowing the word to impact our own lives, then we are not receiving the word. It’s a scary reality

that one can have a wealth of biblical knowledge without ever being changed by the biblical Gospel. Don't let that be true of you. Don't proudly act as though you are over the word, and the word is something that you dissect and analyze. It's the other way around. The word is over us, and it dissects and analyzes our lives. It reveals sin in our lives and exhorts us to cling to Christ. It is the Word of God, and therefore has complete authority over us. So we cannot receive the word in any other way than meekly and humbly. We need to come to the word with teachable hearts. We need to listen to sermons with teachable hearts. We need to come to small group and Sunday School with teachable hearts. Receive *with meekness* the implanted word.

The last phrase in the verse shows us the eternal significance of receiving the word. The implanted word is able to save our souls. This is a reference to our end time salvation—the ultimate deliverance from sin and evil that we will experience when Christ returns. We have already seen that the word is God's means of regenerating us. In verse 18, “he brought us forth by the word of truth.” And now we see that the word is also the means by which He preserves us to the end. The word encourages us and convicts us and gives us hope, and it is God's means of sustaining our faith. In this way, humbly receiving the word is an essential component of the Christian life.

In closing, I exhort us again to receive the word. May our hearts be the good soil that Jesus described in the parable of the sower. He said, “those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it (receive it, same verbal root as James 1:21) and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.” Likewise, we should be like the Bereans, who “received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11). And finally, Paul's words from 1 Thessalonians 2:13. “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.” I also thank God for this, that this body of believers recognizes the importance and significance of the word of God, and that the word is at work within us. I pray that we will continue to receive the word, with meekness and eagerness, and that God will use the word in our lives to produce much fruit for His glory and for our joy.