

“Beyond Hearing...to Acceptance”– James 1:19-25

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August 9, 2020

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Take a Bible and meet me in James, chapter 1...

Sixty-five years ago A. W. Tozer wrote some scathing words about the church of his day:

“There is an evil which I have seen under the sun....It is the glaring disparity between theology and practice among professing Christians. So wide is the gulf that separates theory from practice in the church that an inquiring stranger who chances upon both would scarcely dream that there was any relation between them. An intelligent observer of our human scene who heard the Sunday morning sermon and later watched the Sunday afternoon conduct of those who had heard it would conclude that he had been examining two distinct and contrary religions....It appears that too many Christians want to enjoy the thrill of feeling right but are not willing to endure the inconveniences of being right.”¹

I wonder what Mr. Tozer would say about the situation of our day? My guess is he would be more frustrated, not less.

Our text today is about exactly this—the disconnect between hearing and putting into practice what we have heard. In just two brief paragraphs, James is going to press us to move from being people who merely hear the Word to people who both accept and apply the Word. Not surprisingly, given the prevalence of people who never go beyond hearing the Word, every instruction he gives in our text this morning goes against the grain of our age.

Let me show you what I mean. Back in June, pastor Neumeyer took us through verses 16 to 18, so I will pick things up in verse 19. You’re invited to follow along as I read. Listen well because, I remind you, this is the Word of God...

“Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. ²¹ Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

²² But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror.

²⁴ For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. ²⁵ But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.” (James 1:19-25)

There’s a lot packed into these verses, some of which James is going to elaborate later in this epistle, but for our purposes I want us to consider how these two paragraphs underscore the importance of accepting and applying the Word of God we hear. Most people who hear the Word, don’t accept it and, unsurprisingly, don’t apply it. The world has enough hearers of the Word. It needs people who embrace and put into practice what they have heard. Indeed, one could argue that this is characteristic of believers in Jesus Christ. We’re no mere hearers or else we deceive ourselves. But since the mind will absorb no more than the pew cushion, I’ve decided to break this passage up into two weeks. We will consider moving from mere hearing to accepting today and then, Lord willing, the movement to application next time.

But before we get to these notions of accepting and applying the Word, we should pause for a moment and consider what exactly James has in mind when he speaks of the “*word*”. The Word of God is all over this passage, isn’t it? We see it in verses 21, 22, 23, and 25. The verse that come right before this passage also mentions the “*word*”. This is a passage that is concerned with the “*word*” and how we handle it. If verse 1 to 18 were largely about how we respond to the trials and temptations of life, verses 19 to 25 are about how we respond to the truth of God’s Word.²

That said, the “*implanted word*” of verse 21 is likely the same “*word of truth*” that brought us new life (i.e., regeneration) in verse 18. What is the “*word of truth*” that brought us forth in life if not the message of the Gospel? This same Gospel that Paul calls the “*word of truth*” in Colossians 1:5, Ephesians 1:13, and 2 Timothy 2:15. Peter told readers that they had been “*born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God*” (1 Pet. 1:23). James is saying, in verse 18, that we were born again by “*the word of truth*,” when we heard and believed the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But this “*word*” is then described in verse 21 as something that has been “*implanted*” in the believer. It’s innate to us, since we were raised to spiritual life in Christ. It’s in us. It’s a part of us. When we were born again by the Word, the Gospel, the Word stays. That’s pretty remarkable wording. John Piper draws an analogy between the Word and the Spirit based on this language.

“[The Word] is treated here the very same way that the Bible treats the Spirit of God himself. We are born again by the Spirit (John 6:63), and we are born again by the word of God. The Spirit dwells in us, and the word is implanted in us. This indwelling Spirit is God’s way to keep us and bring us to heaven. The implanted word is God’s way of preserving and saving our souls in the end. You could not say anything more important about the word than this.”³

Indeed, listen to Paul’s language to the Thessalonian church...

“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.” (1 Thessalonians 2:13)

You see the word is at work in them. The message they received, the word of God, the gospel, is now implanted and working *in* them. When it was received, it took up residence (cf. 1 John 2:14).

And yet James, who describes this word as “*implanted*” in us, also says that we are to “*receive*” this word. That sounds strange, does it not? How do you receive something that is already implanted? Piper points out we wouldn’t speak of other things in this fashion. Take your kidneys for example. Our kidneys were given to us by virtue of our first birth. They are implanted. They are part of us. No one needs to do the work of “*receiving*” their kidneys. You probably don’t give them much thought. They just do their thing without much notice, unless something is wrong with them.

It would be a mistake, however, to think of this implanted “*word*” like we think of our kidneys. Piper writes,

“James says, ‘*Receive* the implanted word.’ It is already in you. And you should receive it. It is rooted and planted in you. It brought you life. It is there sustaining that life by feeding faith in Christ. But it is not there like kidneys. It is there like oxygen. It gives life and in giving life, it makes you breathe, and in breathing you receive oxygen. No one says, ‘I have oxygen; look how well it is working in me; it makes me alive; I don’t need to *receive* oxygen.’

The implanted word of God and the external word of God are so united that we live by having it already implanted and we live by receiving it. It is at work in us, as Paul says. And the work it does in us is it makes us want to receive it. Receiving the external word replenishes the power of the implanted word, and the implanted word creates the hunger to receive the external word. And then to make us very

serious about this process, James adds at the end of verse 21 ‘which is able to save your souls.’ What saves our souls? The implanted word, which we receive.”⁴

The Gospel—the message we received from God, that Christ died to save sinners—does indeed save sinners. But we don’t graduate from the Gospel. We go on receiving it. The entire Christian experience is propelled by the Spirit of God using the Gospel of God in the people of God. We need the Gospel like we need oxygen. We breathe it in and out. We don’t merely hear it. We must accept it for it to have any benefit for us. And that’s what I want to consider with you in the rest of our time...

ACCEPTING THE WORD

While the context does suggest the word is at least referring to the Gospel, we know that the Gospel is revealed to us in the pages of God’s Word. In principle, what James says about accepting the Word could be true of all of God’s Word, wherein we perceive the truth of the Gospel. So let’s consider what James tells us that can help facilitate our acceptance of God’s Word at any particular point it speaks to.

Look again at verse 19. Do you see those three instructions? They are key.

“Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger;”
(James 1:19)

“The three commands of v. 19 encapsulate a surprisingly large part of Christian obedience” and, as we shall see in two weeks, “v. 27 epitomizes the whole ‘package’ of God’s will for believers.”⁵ Being quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger all have something to do with self-control and should be characteristic of the Spirit’s work in His people (Gal. 5:23). Let’s consider each of these aspects of self-control in succession, then I will point out a fourth from this text. You might think of these four items as prerequisites, or things that tend to precede, our accepting the Word. If we want to move from merely hearing the Word to accepting its truth, then these are a good place to start. First off, we need...

A Listening Ear

“Be quick to hear”. “Hurry up and listen,” says James.⁶ Of course, no one in church would deny that we need to hear from God through His Word, but even our approach to spiritual things suggests a stubborn resistance to patient listening. The modern person may ask God to speak to them, but the prayer goes something like this: “Lord, I desperately desire to hear from you! You have sixty seconds.”⁷ What a far cry this is from the Psalmist’s “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). We don’t like to wait for anything, least of all, it would seem, the Lord.

Have we forgotten the importance of listening? Have we deceived ourselves into thinking that we don’t need the insight and perspective and correction of others? And especially of God? Have we failed to see our desperate need for all that God has revealed to us in His Word?

A neglect of regular Bible reading would suggest that we have. But even when we are in the Word, that doesn’t mean we are listening. “It is possible to be unfailingly regular in Bible reading, but to achieve no more than to have moved the book-mark forward: this is reading unrelated to an attentive spirit. The word is read but not heard.”⁸ And one of the reasons some people are not very good listeners when it comes to the Word of God is because they absolutely love hearing the sound of their own voice. And that leads to a second thing we should prioritize in our lives if we are to be more accepting of God’s Word, namely...

A Controlled Tongue

There is a popular aphorism that suggests “it is better to keep silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt.”⁹ Some people seem to open their mouths just enough to change feet. A famous Stoic philosopher, Zeno, said “We have two ears and one mouth, therefore we should listen twice as much as we speak.” A Jewish Rabbi said it even more memorably, “Men have two ears but one tongue, that they should hear more than they speak. The ears are always open, ever ready to receive instruction; but the tongue is surrounded with a double row of teeth to hedge it in, and keep it within proper bounds.”¹⁰ James is more direct and terse—“*be quick to hear, slow to speak...*”

When James instructs us to be “*slow to speak*,” he doesn’t mean that we are to speak sloooooowwwly. He means that we should not be so eager to speak. We should hesitate. We should delay for the sake of hearing the perspective of others. Once again we see how counter-cultural this is. People in our day tend to be quick to speak and slow to listen. Speak louder so you can drown out any alternative voices. This is the exact opposite of what James instructs, “*be quick to hear, slow to speak*” (1:19).¹¹ However, being “slow to speak” doesn’t mean we are never to speak. There are contexts where Christians are called to speak up and proclaim truth. Not every context. But many.

There is no easy way to discern which contexts those may be, but I have found in my own life there is a principle that has served me well. Years ago, when considering the Sermon on the Mount, I was struck by how Jesus could say, “*let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven*” (Matt. 5:16) and then go on to give example after example of not doing our righteous deeds in secret, to avoid the eyes of others (e.g., 6:1). I remember asking which is it—do we do our deeds before the watching world or behind the door in the secret place? And the answer, it seems to me, is yes. Jesus seems to be suggesting that some deeds will be seen (and that’s okay) and some should not be. But that raises another question—how do we know if we find ourselves in a situation that calls for hiding or showing?

By God’s grace I came across the counsel of A. B. Bruce, a 19th century Scottish theologian, who advised the people of his day to “show when tempted to hide, and hide when tempted to show.” There are probably exceptions, but those exceptions prove the rule. Generally speaking when I am tempted to want to do something so that people will notice it and think of me in a certain kind of way, that’s a hiding situation. That’s a do the deed anonymously kind of action. And when I am tempted to do nothing because of fear of what others might think, that is often a situation I should act. It’s not perfect, but I have found Bruce’s principle a helpful aid in navigating which biblical principle should be steering the ship in a given situation—showing or hiding.

Perhaps that principle has broader application when it comes to our words. Maybe those moments when we are afraid to, let’s say, share the truth of God’s Word are actually the moments when we most need to proclaim it. And maybe those moments when we are so tempted to speak up and add to the noise are actually moments when we should be controlling our tongue and exercising our ears. In any case, if we are going to speak up, let’s at least have something worth saying—something biblical.

The third thing that James mentions in verse 19 is that we should be “*slow to anger*,” which leads to our third heading...

A Calm Spirit

The call to be slow to anger is really just a call to be like the Lord. Recall the way the Lord is described in Exodus 34, when encountered by Moses.

“The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.’” (Exodus 34:6-7)

Anyone else just love that “*slow to anger*” is on that description? In Hebrew the idiom, or figure of speech, that stands behind the translation “*slow to anger*” is actually “long of nose,” and it is a common description of God. All of our lives, I think we would agree, bear witness to the truth that God is “*slow to anger*”. James is telling us to be like God in this respect. And he’s not the only one in the Bible to do so. In Proverbs, for example, we read:

“Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.” (Proverbs 16:32)

In Ecclesiastes, it says,

“Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools.” (Ecclesiastes 7:9)

And given how much James draws on Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, it’s hard to imagine he didn’t have these words in mind when he tells us to be slow to anger...

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.” (Matthew 5:21-26)

No wonder James tells us to be “*slow to anger*...”

However, just like being “*slow to speak*” doesn’t mean never speaking, but reserving words to the proper contexts, so too being “*slow to anger*” does not mean never be angry, because there are times when anger is called for, particularly when others are subjected to harm or the reputation of God is being slandered. Jesus demonstrates such righteous indignation at points. But Paul does instruct us to not sin in our anger and to put it to bed before we ourselves call it a night (Eph. 4:26).

But whenever the topic of righteous indignation comes up, I’ve noticed how quick we all seem to be at drawing the conclusion that our anger is of that sort. Perhaps that’s because we are so quick to assert ourselves and spout justifications, but so slow to listen and admit other alternatives. Maybe your anger is not as justified as you like to think. It might be in some rare instance. “Too often, however, we appeal erroneously to the concept of righteous indignation to justify what are self-centered attempts to get our own way, disguised in pious language.”¹² I agree with J. A. Motyer, who suggested that

“Most of us would have to confess that holy anger belongs in a state of sanctification to which we have not attained. James is writing of us and to us: your anger does not bring about the righteous plans of God. It is a salutary reminder and a merited rebuke.”¹³

James is pretty unequivocal in verse 20, isn't he? “[F]or the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”¹⁴ Yet how many causes—how many just causes—are undertaken in a spirit of anger, human anger? What a difference it would make to our day, if James was given more of a voice than the meaningless dribble that masquerades as wisdom on our media channels—social or otherwise. How much rioting and vandalism and harm would cease if we humbly would accept that “*the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God*”?

Before we move to the next point, let me mention that it's possible that James has deliberately put this instruction about anger after his instructions about listening and speaking to highlight the relationship between the three. Could it be that many people—maybe you—are so prone to anger because they are so quick to speak and so slow to listen? Should we be surprised in a day when everyone wants to be a talking head and active listening seems like a lost art that rage would be the characteristic of our age? It's hard to be teachable when you are angry. And when listening ceases and talking flows freely, anger is sure to follow. “When our listening slows, it is not only our speaking that can quicken but also our tempers.”¹⁵ Solomon was right, “*When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent*” (Prov. 10:19). Clearly, there is a relationship between each of these instructions. “The great talker is rarely a great listener, and never is the ear more firmly closed than when anger takes over.”¹⁶

And if anger is not the appropriate response, then what is? That's what verse 21 answers. Note the conjunction “*therefore*” at the beginning of the verses. Righteousness is not effected through human anger, “*therefore*,” verse 21, give us a different strategy. It's a strategy of repentance. “*Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness...*” And now we come to our fourth prerequisite...

A Clean Heart

Michael Andrus once made the following comments:

“I fear that the principal reason many Christians do not welcome the Word of God, do not read it, and do not study it is that their lives are too compromised by moral filth and evil—from TV, movies, the internet, unhealthy relationships, etc. One simply cannot find joy and satisfaction in the Word of God if it is always speaking conviction to one's lifestyle...

As a matter of fact, I have long thought that most people who claim to have intellectual problems with the Bible don't have any such thing. They have moral problems with it. If you knew what was going on in their lives you would realize quickly that their beliefs and behavior just couldn't co-exist, so they jettisoned their beliefs and continued their behavior.”¹⁷

He is right. I have seen this pattern play out more times than I can count. But please note that James tells us to do precisely the opposite.

“*Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.*” (James 1:21).

But, you see, it has to be one or the other. You jettison the filth or you jettison the Word. And most people choose to jettison the latter because it conflicts with the former. They don't listen because their listening is pained by conviction. But if only they would linger, they might discover the sweet salve of the Gospel.

You may have heard of one of the English reformers by the name of Thomas Bilney, who live 500 years ago. If you were to ask him about the source of his spiritual power, he would have spoken of “his encounter and ongoing experience of God's word.”¹⁸ In one of his letters, he describes one of the turning points in his life like this:

“I chanced upon this sentence of St. Paul (oh most sweet and comfortable sentence to my soul!) in 1 Timothy 1: ‘It is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be embraced, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am the chief and principal.’ This one sentence, through God’s instruction and inward working, which I did not then perceive, did so exhilarate my heart, being before wounded with the guilt of my sins, and being almost in despair, that...immediately I...felt a marvelous comfort and quietness, in so much that ‘my bruised bones leaped for joy.’ After this, the Scriptures began to be more pleasant to me than the honey or the honeycomb.”¹⁹

Yes, the Word can be painful and convicting. But we must linger because it proves to be sweet because, if we will listen and follow its lead, it will always carry us to Christ and His cross, a place of healing and victory and forgiveness of sin. There is mercy for sinners and grace for the brokenhearted. And it’s found in Jesus, the center and climax of all of God’s Word. But that doesn’t mean repentance will not be called for. It will. Each of us is called, with God’s help, to, as James says, “*put away all filth and rampant wickedness...*”²⁰

I wonder what would be included in that filthiness and rampant wickedness? Probably what comes to your mind would qualify. But let’s not forget to include on the list a failure to listen, an eagerness to speak, and the brewing anger we often feel toward others. These are moral evils too! They should be met with repentance. “If we are slow to hear God’s Word, quick to speak, and quick to anger, moral filth is not only our lot, but our destiny.”²¹ In other words, more sin is sure to follow.

But we won’t apply the Word of God and do the work of repentance until we change our approach to God’s Word, until we approach it with the humility and meekness that James speaks of in verse 21. How do we receive the Word with humility? Well, don’t you see, that’s what this passage is all about. We won’t receive the Word with meekness if we never come to listen. We won’t receive the Word with meekness if, when we come, we are quick to speak. We won’t receive the Word with meekness if we are driven by anger and passions of the flesh. But that’s often not how we approach the Word. As David Platt captures,

“Be humble as you approach the Word, not coming with your defenses up, which leads to anger and resistance to the Word. Don’t we often approach God’s Word talking and not listening? Don’t we often come to God’s Word thinking, ‘Here’s what I want it to say’? Don’t we often come to the Word looking to justify ourselves? We’re like people in an argument who are not really listening to one another, but instead we’re consumed with formulating what we’re going to say in response. We are not quick to hear and slow to speak but loathe to listen and anxious to argue. We hear a verse like Luke 12:33, ‘Sell all your possessions and give to the poor,’ and we’re already thinking, ‘How do I get around that?’”²²

But, you see, brothers and sisters, our goal should never be to get around the Word of God. Our goal should always be to receive it with meekness. Is that how you approach the Word?

Perhaps this week, when you find yourself opening the Word of God (which I’m going to assume that you’re going to make some time to do), you begin with these verses of James on your mind. You pray and ask God to make you eager to hear and that He would give you ears open to the truth. You confess your eagerness to speak and ask Him to grant you self-control and restraint, so you won’t drown out His voice with your words. You confess you anger and repent of it, leaving the altar if necessary, to make things right with those you have offended or those who have offended you before you proceed in God’s Word. And you ask the Lord to search you and use His word as a mirror that might expose any filthiness of sin and rampant wickedness that displeases Him. Then read. Listen. Because when you read the Word you are hearing His voice. And if you approach it in this way, then, by God’s grace, you just may accept it as Gospel...

Let’s pray...

¹ A. W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous* (Chicago: Moody, 1955, repr. 2015), 51-53.

² David Platt, *Exalting Jesus in James* (CCE; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 16.

³ John Piper, "Receive with Meekness the Implanted Word," a sermon preached on January 6, 2008, and accessed on August 8, 2020, at: <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/receive-with-meekness-the-implanted-word>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 83.

⁶ Ibid., 85. R. Kent Hughes reminds us that: "This was particularly important to the Jewish church because, apart from the Old Testament, there were no canonical Scriptures at this early date. Virtually all communication of the gospel was oral, when they met together in their house churches. Thus listening was imperative. Those who were not disciplined in listening ran the risk of spiritual impoverishment. It is not too dramatic to say that ready listeners gained for themselves a life-giving spiritual advantage." R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith that Works* (PW; Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 63.

⁷ Ibid., 64.

⁸ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James* (BST; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 64-65.

⁹ William F. Brosend II, *James and Jude* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 98.

¹⁰ Hughes, 65-66.

¹¹ An interesting Jewish parallel can be found in Sirach 5:11—"Be quick to hear but deliberate in answering."

¹² Blomberg and Kamell, 97.

¹³ Motyer, 66.

¹⁴ "If one accepts a later date for the epistle within the lifetime of James, he could have written this verse in opposition to the Zealot movement. In this situation, the righteousness of God, now understood as employing a subjective genitive, would refer to his saving activity and rule, which cannot be ushered in by violence or anger." Blomberg and Kamell, 86.

¹⁵ Sam Allberry, *James For You* (The Good Book Company, 2015), 42.

¹⁶ Motyer, 65.

¹⁷ Michael P. Andrus, "When Religion Is Worthless (of I Believe in Christian Living)," a sermon preached on June 15, 2008, and accessed online as of August 8, 2020, at: <https://firstfreewichita.org/sermons/sermon/2008-06-15/-when-religion-is-worthless--or-i-believe-in-christian-living->.

¹⁸ Piper, "Receive with Meekness the Implanted Word."

¹⁹ Thomas Bilney, cited by Piper, "Receive with Meekness the Implanted Word."

²⁰ This language of putting away or putting off is common language in the New Testament, especially in Paul and Peter's writings, for conversion and baptism—the idea of "stripping off" the garments of our sinful old-self that we might be clothed in the righteousness of Christ through faith (cf. Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:8; 1 Pet. 2:1). It's possible that James has this imagery in mind here as well when he calls them to "*put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness*".

²¹ Hughes, 68.

²² Platt, 16.