

Be Doers of the Word, James 1:19-27
Ben Reaach, Three Rivers Grace Church
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This morning we continue in our study of the New Testament letter of James. We're going to finish chapter one today, and the main point in this section is to be doers of the word. And we'll see a Gospel foundation for that command. We'll also see the foolishness of not doing the word. And we'll see several very practical applications of doing the word—how God's Word ought to be transforming our words, and our actions.

The Word of God is immensely powerful and can transform your life in the most remarkable ways, in very practical ways, in the everyday things of life, like how you speak to others and how you treat others. The argument you had with your spouse this week, or maybe this morning. The harsh words you spoke to your kids. The angry attitude you had with your co-worker. The apathy you've had toward those in need. The Bible has something to say about these things, *and* it has the power to transform us, day by day, so that we're becoming more like Jesus, our Savior and Lord.

Now, we need to understand this, at the outset. I want to make sure this is clear. The Christian life is not mainly about cleaning up your character, making you nicer, calmer, more ethical, more generous. Those are effects of being a Christian, but these are not the main thing. You can find any number of self-help books that will give you quick tips on how to make a better you. The Christian faith is radically different than that. Being a Christian is a gift from God, made possible through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ, who died on a cross for our sin and rose from the dead on the third day. Our salvation is a miracle that He does, forgiving our sin and making us new creatures. The exhortations in these verses are an overflow of the miracle that has been done for us and to us. Because we are reborn, this is the proper response. These are specific ways that we live out the new life that God has given to us.

I. Receive the Word

A. Regeneration (verse 18)

Overlapping a bit with Gary's sermon from last Sunday, we see in verse 18 the glorious truth of regeneration. This is one of the good and perfect gifts that come down from the Father of lights. This is also the solution to our sad predicament which was so vividly described in verses 14-15. We have sinful desires, and

that sin will conceive and grow within us and bring forth death. Regeneration is the only solution to this problem. The solution is not in us. But the solution is in God, who is the giver of all good gifts, and who is unchanging. And verse 18 tells us that God caused us to be born again. He is the One who “brought us forth.” The same verb was used in verse 15 to describe desire *giving birth* to sin. In verse 18 it’s the Father who brought us forth. He caused us to be born again. This is what we call regeneration.

Verse 18 makes clear that the origin of regeneration is the will of God. This miracle originates in the will of God. “Of his own will he brought us forth.” It was not an act of our will that brought about regeneration. It was God’s sovereign will—His sovereign choice—that brought us forth.

It’s also important to see in verse 18 *the means* of regeneration. “Of his own will he brought us forth *by the word of truth . . .*” The word of truth is the means by which God causes us to be born again. The word of truth is the Gospel message. God chooses to glorify Himself and glorify His Son by regenerating us *through* the proclamation of this Gospel message. It may happen as a person sits alone reading the Bible. It may happen as a person listens to a Christian friend share their testimony. It could happen in the midst of a small group discussion, or a Sunday School lesson, or a sermon. It could be that a person randomly stumbles across a Gospel tract or some Gospel literature of some kind, or happens upon a church website. We don’t know how or when God will choose to use these various methods of communicating the Good News, but what we know for sure is that regeneration will always be connected somehow to the proclamation of His Word—the truth about salvation through Jesus Christ, which is the message of the Bible.

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, live it out in our daily lives in these very practical and specific ways.

B. Meekness / Humility (verse 21)

It's important to recognize that truly receiving the Word involves receiving it with it with meekness, with humility. There's a way to interact with the word that is not really 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 really 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 just something that you dissect and analyze and use to put others in their place. No, you don't stand over the Word. 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. 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 book that we're going to draw from for our discussions at the men's retreat this year is entitled, *Humble Calvinism*. It's by Pastor Jeff Medders, and the foreword of the book is written by Pastor Ray Ortlund, who I have a lot of respect for. I've benefitted from Ortlund's books as well as his preaching. Ortlund, in the foreword, laments the fact that often those of us who embrace and celebrate the doctrines of grace, reformed theology, there can be an arrogance that goes with that, of feeling superior to other Christians who are not as enlightened as we are. But how ironic and sad that is. The doctrines of grace shouldn't puff us up, they should be profoundly humbling. Ortlund writes this: "If God is big and we are small, if God's power jump-starts us without our help, if the only contribution we make to our salvation is the evil that makes salvation relevant to begin with, if it is God's eternal purpose alone that will sustain us all the way, if our Christianity is all according to Scripture and not our brainstorm, all of grace and not our merits, all by faith and not by demands, all thanks to Christ and no thanks to us, all for the glory of God alone—where does our self-exaltation fit into that picture?" What a great point! As those who rejoice in God's sovereignty and goodness, acknowledging that we were completely dead in our trespasses and sins, there ought to be a humility and meekness about the way we receive the word and in the way we communicate the word to others.

Ortlund quotes from John Newton, the eighteenth-century composer of "Amazing Grace," who wisely wrote to a younger pastor, "Of all people who engage in controversy, we, who are

called Calvinists, are most expressly bound by our own principles to the exercise of gentleness and moderation.”

Listen, if you find yourself searching through Romans so you can then go and bludgeon someone on Twitter, or demolish that free-will proponent on the theology forum, you probably need to check your heart. Yes, there’s a place for defending the truth and for theological debate. But you first need to be receiving the word for your own soul, and receiving the word in humility and meekness so that it’s changing you into the kind of person who can communicate the truth with charity and graciousness.

C. Salvation (verse 21)

The last phrase in verse 21 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.

D. Liberty (verse 25)

One more thing I want to highlight about receiving the word. In verse 18 it’s called “the *word* of truth.” In verse 21 it is “the implanted *word*, which is able to save your souls.” In verse 22 James exhorts us to be doers of the *word*. And then in verse 25 he refers to the word in a new way. He calls it the perfect law, the law of liberty. The word “law” may have mainly negative connotations in our minds. When we think of “law,” we may think of bondage to legalistic rules and regulations. But the perfect law of God, which James speaks of here, is a law that brings freedom. It is the law of liberty. This is simply another way James describes the word of truth, the implanted word.

Here’s what we need to realize: The commands that come to us in God’s word are for our good. God’s not trying to diminish our joy. He instructs us and corrects us and exhorts us with the truth in order to maximize our joy in Him. And as we look into this Book, as we look into this perfect law, it is liberating because it’s here that we discover what will truly satisfy us. For the person who is born again and humbly receiving the word, the biblical commands are not just what we *should* do, but what we *want* to do.

It's with this eagerness and joy that we look into the perfect law, the law of liberty. These are not shackles, but the very opposite of that. These are God's gracious instructions of how to live in liberty, how to enjoy the freedom He has given us in Christ.

II. The Folly of Hearing without Doing

A. Deception (verse 22, 26)

This is mentioned twice in our passage. In verse 22, "But be doers of the word and not hearers only, *deceiving yourselves*." And also in verse 26, "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but *deceives his heart*, this person's religion is worthless." The person who hears the word but does not put it into practice is severely deluded. There is the assumption that hearing the word is all that is involved in Christianity. As long as I go to church, listen to a sermon, read the Bible sometimes, then I'm doing well. If that's your mentality this morning, I want to warn you from this passage that you are deceived. You are wrong. That kind of detached listening to the word is not what Christianity is about. If you stop there, you are deceiving your heart and your religion is worthless (which is how he says it down in verse 26). To say it yet another way, as James does in the next chapter, your faith is dead.

B. Foolish Forgetfulness (verse 24, 25)

Another thing we see about the hearer is that the hearer forgets the word. This is why he is a hearer *only*, because he forgets the word. And James uses this simple and very helpful illustration to show us the absurdity of being a hearer only. This is in verses 23-24. "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. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like." The point of the illustration is to say: if you are a hearer of the word, but then you walk away and at once forget what it says (or at least behave like you have completely forgotten what it says), then there is something very wrong with you. This is not the way it's supposed to be.

The illustration here has to do with a mirror, something we're all familiar with. At the time James was writing, they didn't have mirrors like the ones we have today. They had pieces of polished metal in which they could see their reflection. But both then and today, people look into mirrors to see what they look like. I was looking into the mirror the other day, as our daughter Milaina was showing me how to create a memoji on my phone, so

I can send text messages with little emoticons that look like me. Have you guys done this? It was pretty fun. We were sitting in the van waiting for Noah to finish his cross country practice, and Milaina showed me the memoji she had created for herself. And then she showed me how to do it, and I was sitting there going through all the detailed options, and I found myself looking into the rearview mirror, looking at my face, to try to get these details right. What exactly is the color of my hair? What's the shape of my head, the shape of my ears, my eyebrows, and on and on. There are so many options!

Well, of course, it made me think of this passage. As you looking intently at your face in a mirror, it would be very strange if you walked away and immediately forgot everything about your appearance. What color are your eyes? *I have no idea.* Is your skin light or dark? *Can't remember.* Your hair, is it curly or straight? *You tell me.*

That would be very strange, wouldn't it? In same way, it should be shocking and shameful when we realize we have looked into the mirror of God's Word and then we've gone away and lived like we completely forgot what it says. Why am I grumbling, when I know that God is sovereign and good? Why am I angry? Why did I lose my temper? Why am I anxious? Why did I lash out with my words? Why am I living and talking like I don't know what the Bible says?

The word reveals our sin, and it reveals the only remedy for sin, Jesus Christ. And if we miss that, if we forget that, then we are not looking into God's Word appropriately. We are merely hearers. Let's be reminded this morning, that what we learn this morning, we need to put into practice this afternoon and tonight, and throughout this coming week. And we need to be looking into this mirror daily, and then living each day applying what we've learned.

III. Obey the Word

Now that we've seen the Gospel foundation for these practical, real-life, instructions. And we've seen the foolishness of interacting with God's Word in a superficial way. Now let's look at these very practical commands, and let's listen with humility and with a desire to put these into practice.

A. Listen Carefully (verse 19)

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 verse 19. Listen carefully, speak thoughtfully, live peacefully—these are all commands that we see over and over again in Proverbs.

Proverbs 12:15 says, “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man *listens* to advice.” 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 his mouth shut. 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 just to appear wise. The point is to be wise, and listening carefully will help to grow us in wisdom.

Proverbs 1:5 says, “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.

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.

Listening carefully is also a powerful way to show love to others. 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.

B. Speak Thoughtfully (verse 19)

The next 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. After all, God gave us two ears and only one mouth. God must want us to listen at least twice

as much as we talk. 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.

Proverbs 17:27 says, “Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding.” And Proverbs 10:19, “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.” 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.

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.

In a couple weeks we’re having a Table Talk, a book discussion of Paul Tripp’s book entitled, *War of Words: Getting to the Heart of Your Communication Struggles*. Jamen Walker, one of our elders, will be leading this. He read this book some time ago, and recommended it for our edification. Near the beginning of book, Paul Tripp has some questions for self-examination, questions that are very relevant to the verse we’re looking at here. Let me read you a few of these questions.

Does your talk with others lead to biblical problem solving? Does your talk have a “stand together” or a “me against them” posture? Do your words encourage others to be open and honest about their thoughts and feelings? Are you approachable and teachable or defensive and self-protective when talking with others? Does your talk encourage faith and personal spiritual growth in those around you? Do your words reflect a willingness to serve others or a demand that they serve you? As you face the struggles of talk, do you do so with a recognition of the gospel—God’s forgiveness, his enabling grace, and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit?

Those are some helpful ways to begin thinking about how you can grow in listening carefully and speaking thoughtfully.

C. Live Peacefully (verse 19)

The third thing that James mentions in verse 19 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's so common for the anger in our hearts to spew out in our speech.

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? 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 (there are horrible injustices in the world, like human trafficking and abortion and various kinds of abuse and corruption and prejudice). It's right that we're angered by these things.

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—like a traffic jam or a long line at the grocery. We get irritated and annoyed by petty things—the computer or TV isn’t working properly, or a co-worker or family member isn’t working properly—and it drives us crazy! 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, 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 need to trust Him with that.

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.

D. Put Away Immorality (verse 21, 27)

We see this in verse 21, “put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness.” And in verse 27, the instruction to keep yourself unstained from the world. Focusing on verse 21, 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.” This can be a very effective strategy for fighting temptation. When you’re feeling the urge to sin in your words or in your thoughts or in any other way, remind yourself who you are in Christ. You have a new identity. And you need to very intentionally, day by day, be putting away that old self and putting on the new self.

E. Serve Those in Need (verse 27)

We conclude with yet another very practical outworking of our life in Christ, the life of doing the Word, not just hearing the Word. Verse 27 gives two examples of what this changed life will include, the life of one who is born again, who has been brought forth by the word of truth and who is humbly receiving the word. In contrast to the worthless religion of verse 26, verse 27 says, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction . . .” James is getting very specific about the kind of deeds that will be produced in the person who is a doer of the word. It’s not an exhaustive list, but James helps us understand the kinds of activities that the doer of the word will be engaged in. Our Christian lives will include many things, but one thing that will not be absent is compassion for the needy. Doers of the word will reach out to help others, especially those who are helpless and disadvantaged.

In this way, we reflect the nature of our heavenly Father. Psalm 68:5 describes Him in this way: “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.” If we are truly His children, then we will resemble Him. And we will have this kind of compassion for the most needy and helpless individuals in our society. We need to ask ourselves, Do I only look out for number one, or am I seeking to serve others, especially those who will never be able to pay me back or return the favor?

This may involve visiting those who are sick, or being involved in a prison ministry, or helping the homeless, or considering adoption, or helping the elderly, or ministering to the needs of recent immigrants in our country, or traveling to other countries to help those who are impoverished. The needs are all around us. The possibilities are endless. And we need to examine our hearts and pray that God would conform us more and more to His likeness, so that we have His compassion for the orphan and the widow.

What I hope you’ll take away this morning is the realization that the Bible is strong and mighty to change your life. And it ought to be changing your life, week by week and month by month. Receive the Word, brothers and sisters! Don’t just hear,

do! Don't merely listen to the Word, obey! The Father brought us forth by the word of truth. Now we must receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save our souls. Consider this week, in very tangible ways, how the implanted word will transform you into a person who listens carefully, speaks thoughtfully, lives peacefully, who puts away immorality, and who serves those in need.