



# Not Just Hearers ... But Doers of the Word

Real Faith.  
Real Life.

LESSON

4

Week of January 29

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves (James 1:22).

## Devotional

A current popular myth in evangelical circles is that salvation is based on a personal decision for Christ and that such a decision may or may not result in a changed life. In this paradigm, a child from a Christian home may make a decision at summer camp “to invite Jesus into his heart.” He goes forward at the closing song after a meeting. He gets some follow-up, is given a Bible and told to read it every day. Perhaps when he gets back to his church, he is baptized. He attends church every Sunday, because that’s what his family does.

But as he gets older, he finds church to be boring and irrelevant. He prefers having fun with his worldly friends to hanging out with the church crowd. His friends introduce him to drinking, drugs, pornography, and sex. He drops out of church. He never reads his Bible. He has no desire to know Christ in a deeper way. And yet his parents will say, “But he’s saved, because he made a decision for Christ as a boy at church camp!”

But the important question in situations like this is, “Is there any evidence of a changed heart or new life in Christ?” As we saw in James 1:18, salvation is a matter of God imparting new life through His word of truth. Just as a newborn baby gives clear evidence that he is alive and well, so a new believer gives evidence of his new life in Christ. His desires change. He was a God-hater, alienated from God, hostile toward Him. Now he is a God-lover, reconciled to God, receptive to the truths of God’s Word.

Jesus’ parable of the sower (Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23; Mark 4:3-20; Luke 8:4-15) shows that genuine faith in Christ is not just a flash in the pan. Faith in Christ endures and produces fruit. In that parable, which is probably behind James’ thinking in our text, Jesus described the hard, unresponsive heart as the seed that fell by the roadside. The birds quickly ate it and it did not take root at all. Next He described the seed that fell on the thin, rocky soil. This represents the shallow, impulsive heart. This person receives the

word with joy, but as soon as trials or persecution hit, the person falls away. The third place where the seed fell was on the thorny ground, representing the divided, worldly heart. The thorns eventually choke out the word. The common thing among these three types of soil is that none of them bear fruit. Some look promising for a while, but none produce fruit. I understand Jesus to be saying that none of these types were truly saved.

The fourth type of soil is the receptive heart that hears the word, holds it fast, and bears fruit with perseverance (Luke 8:15). This heart is the only one of the four that represents the new heart that God promises to give under the new covenant (Ezekiel 36:26-27; Jeremiah 31:31-34).

The changes that stem from new life in Christ are congenital in the sense that they grow out of the new heart that God implants by His power. But, these changes are not automatic or effortless. If they were, the New Testament would not contain the many exhortations to spiritual growth that are there. If you have come to faith in Christ, it is crucial for you to cultivate a heart that is receptive to God's Word of truth.

Psalm 78 is a lengthy psalm about Israel's unfaithfulness in the face of God's repeated faithfulness. In verse 8, the psalmist exhorts his generation not to be like their fathers, whom he describes as, "a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation that did not prepare its heart and whose spirit was not faithful to God." Don't be like they were! Prepare your heart to be receptive to God's Word.<sup>1</sup>

## Open it

1. How much time does it take you to get ready every morning? What habits are non-negotiables before you go on with your day?

## Read it

**JAMES 1:19-25**

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<sup>1</sup> Sermon from Pastor Steve Cole entitled "A Receptive Heart" found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-6-receptive-heart-james-119-21>

# Explore it

2. What three commands does James give in James 1:19?
3. What two things must we “put away” and what is one thing must we “receive”?
4. What picture does James give to illustrate our relationship with God’s Word?
5. What happens when we are obedient to what the Word says?

# Apply it

In our text, James tells us how to have a receptive heart. He mentions God’s Word in 1:18, 21, 22, 23, and 25 (“law”). In 1:18, he says that God brings us forth by His word of truth. In 1:22–25, he emphasizes being doers of the word. In our text, 1:19–21, James is talking about receiving the word implanted in our hearts. While his words about being quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger obviously apply to our personal relationships (James will address this in 4:1–2), the primary application in the context has regard to our response to God’s Word. We should be quick to hear it, slow to speak out with our opinions on it (anticipating what James will say in 3:1), and slow to anger when it confronts our sins. Verse 21 adds that we must get rid of all the crud of sin if we want to grow in our salvation. So James is saying here,

**If God has given us new life through His Word, we must prepare our hearts to be receptive to His Word.<sup>2</sup>**

6. On a scale of 1–10, with 10 being the most involved, how would you describe your relationship with the Word of God? Explain your reason.

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<sup>2</sup> ibid

7. One of the foundational beliefs of Christians is that the Bible is God's Word given to lead and guide His people in faith and life. Why then are so many Christians "biblically anemic"?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
8. What can a church do to help create a craving in people when it comes to God's Word?

### INSTRUCTIONS ON ACCEPTING THE WORD

#### Step #1: Listen

The first duty is to be "quick to hear." 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.<sup>3</sup>

9. What things keep us from being good listeners to the Word of God?

Obviously, something must be done if we are to maintain and enhance our ability to hear God's Word. Briefly there are at least five things that will help make us "quick to hear."

- **We must work at truly listening to others.** Listening requires an intense interest in the other person. As Simon Kistemaker says: "Listening is loving the neighbor as oneself; his concerns and problems are sufficiently important to be heard." This requires eye contact and sensitivity to the other's gestures and moods and silences.
- **We must limit our exposure to the visual media.** If we do not control our time, the media will! And if they do, they will impair our ability to hear.
- **We must read God's Word, and that involves more than advancing a bookmark.** It means "hearing" as we read.

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<sup>3</sup> Hughes, R. Kent. James (ESV Edition): Faith That Works (Preaching the Word) (p. 57). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

- **We must slow down and take time to listen**, perhaps praying Samuel’s eager words, “Speak, for your servant hears” (1 Samuel 3: 10).
- **We must prepare for worship and the hearing of God’s Word.** For many, the time before Sunday church is the most stress-filled time of the week. I may be wrong, but I suspect there are more fights in Christian households on Sunday mornings than at any other time. We must prepare not to have this happen, beginning the night before.

Ever so practical, Pastor James says we must “be quick to hear.” This is a continuous command (present act imperative)— that is, we are to keep at it. It is the first duty of those who would profit by the Word.<sup>4</sup>

10. Which of the five disciplines above will help you personally to become a better listener of God’s Word? What things must change in your life for that to become a reality?

### **Step #2: Talk Less**

The churches to which James wrote were unstructured and thus both invited personal participation and created a climate where abuse was possible. The speaker could be easily interrupted, and hasty unthought-through comments could detract from the ministry. James commands those who had such tendencies to be “slow to speak.”

James is not barring a friendly, fast-paced conversation or repartee. Neither is he suggesting that Christians are to be inarticulate. But he is enjoining the common-sense principle to think before you speak. The ancient world understood this, though many disregarded it. Zeno, the Stoic philosopher, said, “We have two ears and one mouth, therefore we should listen twice as much as we speak.” The rabbis put it even better: “This is the reason why we have two ears and only one mouth, that we may hear more and speak less. 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.”

If you’ve opened your mouth only “to change feet” as much as I have, this advice rings so true! I’ve never had to take back something I didn’t say. The tragedy is, even though you take your words back, they never really completely return. Solomon was right: “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent” (Proverbs 10: 19). **Our natural tendency in respect to God’s Word is to be slow to hear and quick to speak.** Not fully understanding because of faulty listening, we are quick to jump to wrong conclusions, quick to judge, quick to say the worst, quick to offer advice. We so naturally pronounce opinions and verdicts on every situation and person. But we must keep in mind that “slow to speak” is an ongoing command from the Holy Spirit himself.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> ibid

<sup>5</sup> ibid

11. When have you spoken too quickly only to regret it? What happened after you spoke that brought about regret for your words?
  
12. How can small groups become susceptible to error because of its members being “too quick to speak”? What can be done to minimize this possibility?
  
13. Read James 3:1. How can joining this verse to James 1:19 help us to understand the role of Pastors and Elders and our response to them?

**Step #3: Don't Get Angry**

James knew that often people do not really listen to the Word as it is taught. They foolishly speak out without thinking; one gets angry, another gets angry, and the church is no longer a lighthouse but a towering inferno! We jump to our feet and shout, “I’m not angry!”— our faces flushed with rage, veins popping— and then stomp from the room, slamming the door behind us, proving how un-angry we are!

We rationalize our anger, calling it frankness or attributing it to our upbringing or the pressure we are under— but anger like this is sin (Ephesians 4:31; Colossians 3:8; Titus 1:7). Here wise Solomon again gives advice: “A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back” (Proverbs 29:11). And, “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).<sup>6</sup>

14. What might cause a Christian to become angry at the teachings of the Bible?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
15. How can sinful anger of one impact an entire church’s response to the Word?

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<sup>6</sup> ibid

16. Which one of the commands of James 1:19–20 is hardest for you to obey? Why?

#### **Step # 4: Clean Things Up**

“Therefore” links verse 21 as the conclusion to verses 19 and 20. “Putting aside” is a term used for taking off filthy clothes. “All filthiness and all that remains of wickedness” (NAS) expands from the sins of verse 19 to include all sorts of disobedience to God’s Word. The word translated “all that remains”(NAS) is literally, “abundance,” but it’s clear that James does not mean that you can keep some wickedness, as long as you get rid of any extra wickedness! Either it’s a figure of speech that means, “the whole dirty mass of wickedness,” or it means to get rid of every trace of it.

James’ thought here is the same as Paul’s, when he tells us to put off the old self (or man) and to put on the new self (Ephesians 4:22–24). We all bring baggage from our old way of life over into the Christian life. Usually, we’re blind to much of it. We don’t realize that we’re displeasing God by our thoughts, words, or actions. As we begin to read God’s Word, it convicts us of areas that we didn’t even know were sin. When this happens, the receptive heart cleans out the crud of sin and puts on the clean clothes of new life in Christ. If you don’t do this, the crud will prevent you from growing as a Christian.<sup>7</sup>

17. What type of baggage and garbage (filthiness and wickedness) do you bring with you as you approach the Scriptures? How do these sins impact what you receive from the Word?

#### **Step 5: Receive the Word**

The picture here is that of the parable of the sower, scattering the seed of the word. Will your heart be good soil that receives the seed and bears fruit, or will it be one of the other kinds of soil that is unproductive? Once the seed falls into the good soil, it still needs to be nurtured in order to bear fruit. The seed must be watered and weeds must be pulled. It must be protected from the birds or from being trampled under foot.

The word translated humility is a difficult word to translate. Often the NASB translates it as gentleness (a fruit of the Spirit, Galatians 5:23). The King James uses meekness. The Greek word has the idea of strength in submission or strength under control. It was used of Alexander the Great’s horse, which was powerfully strong, but totally submissive and responsive to the master’s touch. The believer with this

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<sup>7</sup> Sermon from Pastor Steve Cole entitled “A Receptive Heart” found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-6-receptive-heart-james-119-21>

quality can be very strong, as Jesus and Paul were, and yet completely submissive and sensitive to the Lord's command.

When James says that the word implanted "is able to save your souls," he is viewing salvation as the entire process of the Christian life, culminating in our "ultimate deliverance from sin and death that takes place at the time of Christ's return in glory."<sup>8</sup>

18. How can humility and meekness help us to "receive the word"? When has pride caused you to trust your own thinking instead of God's Word?

**Step: #6 Look in the Mirror**

**"But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves"** (v. 22).

The real challenge for most of us is not in the doing, but in the deceiving. The worst lies are the ones you tell yourself. It's one thing to deceive other people. That's bad enough. But it is profoundly dangerous to lie to yourself. When John wrote his first epistle, he tackled this topic right out of the box. Three times in 1 John 1 the apostle repeats the phrase "If we say":

**"If we say, 'We have fellowship with Him,' yet we walk in darkness"** (v. 6).

**"If we say, 'We have no sin'"** (v. 8).

**"If we say, 'We don't have any sin'"** (v. 10).

Every deception starts with the man in the mirror. If you lie to a friend, that's bad, but at least you know what you've done. If you lie to yourself, you're probably not even aware of it. No wonder the psalmist confessed, **"How can I know all the sins lurking in my heart? Cleanse me from these hidden faults"** (Psalm 19:12 NLT). Only the Lord himself can deliver us because He alone sees the part hidden from our own view.

**Unless I am regularly contradicted by God's Word, I am not engaging it.** God's Word is like a sword (Hebrews 4:12-13). Swords cut. Good swords are razor sharp. Even a slight touch draws blood.

19. Describe a time when you were convicted about your sin by the Word of God. What role did the Scriptures play in changing your ways?

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<sup>8</sup> ibid

James begins with an illustration all men will understand. Most guys I know (I'm certainly in this category) spend as little time as possible looking in the mirror. We shower, we shave, we comb our hair, we take a quick look and say, "Close enough." And off we go.

If the Bible is a mirror that reveals our true condition, too many of us walk away thinking we're better than we really are. While it may be okay to say, "Close enough" when it comes to our appearance, it's deadly to say that about our spiritual life. **The real danger here is forgetting.**

We read "Love one another," but then we forget. We read "Pray without ceasing," but then we forget. We read "Rejoice always," but then we forget. We read "In all things give thanks," but then we forget. We must "look intently" into the truth of God. **We must not forget what we have heard.** Note that the Bible is called the "perfect law of freedom." That sounds very archaic to modern ears. We don't equate law with freedom. We think the law restricts our freedom by telling us what not to do. That's partly true.

After all, eight of the Ten Commandments are in the negative. The law puts limits on our behavior. It tells us not to worship other gods, not to make idols, not to misuse God's name, not to murder, not to commit adultery, not to steal, not to bear false witness, and not to covet. But those laws were given by God to protect us from our own sinful impulses. In a deep sense, we do not "break" the Ten Commandments. We are broken by them when we disobey.<sup>9</sup>

20. In what area in your life are you not doing what God's Word is calling you to do?

What is causing your hesitancy to obey God?

What are the potential consequences of your disobedience?

How could your small group help you with this area of struggle?

**Some of us need to pray, "Lord, make me willing to be willing to be changed by your Word." Pray that simple prayer and then get ready to be changed. Lord Jesus, you came to show us a better way. Help us to delight in what you have given us. Make us willing to be willing to hear what you are saying in your Word. Amen.**<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sermon by Ray Pritchard entitled "Four Steps to Better Bible Listening" found @ <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/four-steps-to-better-bible-listening/>

<sup>10</sup> ibid