

## **THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF GOD'S HOLY WORD**

### **James 1:21-27**

This sermon is the first of a three-part series we're doing on our church's vision statement: *Embrace God's Truth ... Enjoy His People ... Extend His Glory*. This three-fold statement sums up our focus and forward progress as we look to the Lord. That's the key. God will meet us where we are and take us where He wants us to go! Because this has been our vision statement for the last eleven years, I thought it was time for us to have a "vision check-up."

A few years ago I went to the optometrist thinking I might need some prescription glasses. So, he checked my pupils, had me read the eye chart, and performed a few other routine exams. When he was finished, he said, "You're fine." I said, "Really? Because when I close my right eye, my vision gets blurry." He responded, "Well, then, don't close your right eye."

I felt rather dumb at the moment, but the solution was rather simple, wasn't it? The same is true spiritually. To obtain and maintain spiritual vision, we must go to the Great Physician and pray as the psalmist did in Psalm 119, "Open my eyes to see wonderful things in your Word" (v. 18 TLB). The psalmist isn't talking about *physical eyesight*, but about *spiritual insight*.

We see this same sort of language in the New Testament. In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul wrote, "I never stop giving thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers" (v. 16 CSB). Then he says, "I pray for you constantly, asking God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give you wisdom to see clearly and really understand who Christ is and all that he has done for you. I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can see something of the future he has called you to share" (vv. 17-18 TLB). That's my prayer for you.

But you also bear a responsibility. To see clearly, you must listen carefully to God's word – and not just listen carefully, but live accordingly. That's what James emphasizes, and that's why the first part of our vision statement is: "Embrace God's Truth."

When the famous missionary David Livingstone began his trek across Africa, he had 73 books in 3 packs, weighing a total of 180 pounds. After a few hundred miles, the weight of the books became too burdensome, so he unloaded some of them. As he continued his journey, he continued to diminish his library until he had just one book left – his Bible – the one book he could not do without. The same is true for us. Moses declared, "it is no empty word for you, but your very life" (Deut. 32:47).

James reminds us in chapter one verse 18 of his epistle that God, "by his own choice ... gave us birth by the word of truth" (CSB). Paul says in Romans 10:17, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." The "word of Christ" is the "word of truth," for Jesus is the Word Incarnate, the Word made flesh.

Jesus said in John 14:6, “I am ... the truth.” For this reason, Peter begins his first epistle on a note of praise, saying,

<sup>3</sup> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he gave us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup> into an inheritance that is undying, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you. <sup>5</sup> Through faith you are being protected by God’s power for the salvation that is ready to be revealed at the end of time.

- 1 Peter 1:3-5 EHV

Just as we did not bring about our own physical birth, but our parents did, even so we did not bring about our spiritual birth, but our heavenly Father did through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. God made us alive in him. We know we’re alive spiritually because we begin to grow spiritually, just like a baby grows physically, just as she craves and feeds on her mother’s milk. That is why Peter goes on to say,

Like newborn babies, crave the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow up into salvation – if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

- 1 Peter 2:2-3

Instead of continuing old sinful habits and behaviors, “Christians are to crave what nourishes spiritual growth for themselves and others.”<sup>1</sup> That’s what the letter of James is about – getting believers to consistently live out the faith they proclaim.

Beginning in chapter one, verse 21, James says:

<sup>21</sup> Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

<sup>22</sup> But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

<sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. <sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup> Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

- James 1:21-27

As you can see from these verses, the Christian life is intensely practical.

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<sup>1</sup> *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, gen. ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 2541.

**God's Word is meant to *transform* us, not just inform us.**

With that in mind, James tells us what to do.

**1. Take out the trash! (James 1:21a)**

James says in verse 21, "Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness." The "therefore" in v. 21 points back to James' statement in verses 19-20: "Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God." We know from experience how unchecked anger is accompanied by hurtful words and harmful behavior. James wants to make sure we see the effects of sinful anger. It produces only more sin rather than the righteousness that God desires.

That's why James says, "put away *all* filthiness and rampant wickedness." Peter employs the same kind of language in the text we considered earlier. Right before telling us to crave like newborn babies the pure milk of the word, he says,

***Put away*** all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.  
- 1 Peter 2:1

Likewise, in Colossians 3:8 Paul says,

But now you must ***put them all away***: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and filthy language out of your mouth.  
- Colossians 3:8

Whereas Peter and Paul list specific sins, including "filthy language," James lumps them all together saying, "Put away all filthiness..." The term "filthiness" includes every form of impurity, and the word "all" emphasizes the need to get rid of every last bit of it. When parents change their baby's diaper, they do more than remove the dirty diaper. They get a Wet Wipe or wash cloth to remove every trace of filth from their baby's body. Then they put the Wet Wipe, the dirty diaper and everything else that's filthy in the trash. That's what God tells us to do with sin, because the least trace of it is vile to God and is harmful to ourselves and others.

That's what James means by "rampant wickedness" or "overflow of wickedness." Sin contaminates not only you but also those around you. For instance, the author of Hebrews says, "See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no root of bitterness springs up, causing trouble and defiling many" (Heb. 12:15 CSB).

How diligent are you in dealing with sin in your life? Do you hate it? Do you grieve over it? Do you ask the Spirit of God to search you and show you what sins need to be stripped from your life and thrown into the trash? That's how David prayed.

Search me, O God, and know my heart!  
 Try me, and know my thoughts!  
 And see if there be any grievous way in me,  
 And lead me in the way everlasting!

- Psalm 139:23-24

Just as babies need their parents' help in getting clean, so we need the help of our heavenly Father. Scripture says, "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). To be forgiven and cleansed, we must call sin for what it is and seek the Lord's forgiveness and help. "Ask, and it will be given to you" (Matt. 7:7).

Are you remembering to take out the trash? If you leave it lying around, it's going to stink up the house. The same is true of the household of faith. Taking out the trash is everyone's responsibility. And it's not something we're to do just once a week (on Sunday) but every day, moment by moment, with God's help. If we want to experience the transformative power of God's Word, we must "put away" all sins. We must *take out the trash!*

## 2. Take in the truth! (James 1:21b)

That's what James goes on to say in the second half of verse 21: "And receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls." Peter follows the same sequence in his epistle. After telling us to *put away* all sorts of sins, he says, "Like newborn babies, crave the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow up into salvation...." (1 Pet. 2:2-3). To experience the transforming power of God in our lives, we must not only *take out the trash* but also *take in the truth*. We sang about that moments ago. Remember the first few lines of the song:

*Speak, O Lord, as we come to You, to receive the food of your holy Word.  
 Take your truth, plant deep in us. Shape and fashion us in your likeness.*

Yet notice that James refers to the truth of Scripture as "the implanted word." The people to whom he is writing had already been given the message of salvation. It had already been planted in them. But if a plant isn't properly tended to, it will die. Jesus gave a similar illustration from nature in the Parable of the Sower (Matt. 13). The seed of God's word was extravagantly sown, but most of the soils were not receptive. That's the danger James is warning us about here. Those who hear God's word but neglect it will die a spiritual death. The problem is not a lack of power in the Word. It's a lack of reception in the heart.

James says we are to receive the implanted word "with meekness," with humility. The Greek term is *prautes*, which denotes a mild disposition, a gentle spirit. The Greek scholar W. E. Vine describes it as "that temper of spirit in which we accept

[God's] dealings with us as good, and therefore without disputing or resisting."<sup>2</sup> Instead of *resisting* God's word, we're to *receive* it – take it to heart.

Why? Because the “implanted word ... is able to save [our] souls.” Simon Kistemaker points out, “the verb *to save* implies not merely the salvation of the soul but also the restoration of life.... To save, then, means to make a person whole and complete in every respect.”<sup>3</sup> Isn't that what David said in Psalm 19? “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul” (Ps. 19:7a). God's word spares us not only from damnation in eternity but also from needless damage in this life!

When we first trusted in Christ as our Savior, we humbly acknowledged that we were sinners in need of God's grace. James is saying that we need such humility every time we approach God's Word, if we would benefit from its teaching.

To experience the transforming power of God's Word, we must *take out the trash* and *take in the truth*. But there's one other thing we must do, and that is:

### 3. Take on the traits! (James 1:22-27)

James goes on to say in verse 22, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” A proper preparation for the Word and a humble reception of the Word is to be followed by prompt obedience to the Word. The truth of Scripture is to characterize our lives. Some may think, “Of course. Isn't that *obvious*?” Yes, but just because it's *obvious* doesn't mean it always *occurs*.

People think they're good Christians because they consistently go to church and hear God's Word. But James says if you hear the Word but don't do it, you're self-deceived. He then uses another everyday occurrence to illustrate his point.

<sup>23</sup> For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. <sup>24</sup> You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. <sup>25</sup> But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.

- James 1:23-25 NLT

My guess is that most of you looked in the mirror before coming to church this morning. When the mirror said, in essence, “Comb your hair ... brush your teeth ... blow your nose ... shave your face!” you did something about it. Otherwise, why bother looking into the mirror? The same is true when it comes to Scripture. If you want to benefit from God's Word, you must not only hear it but also obey it.

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<sup>2</sup> *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (New York: Revell, 1940), 3:55. Cited by John MacArthur, Jr., *James*. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1998), 75.

<sup>3</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, *James, Epistles of John, Peter, and Jude*. New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, fourth printing, 2007), 59.

In verses 26-27, James spells out the practical implications of this principle:

<sup>26</sup> If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup> Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.

- James 1:26-27 NLT

True godliness reveals itself in our *conversations*, as we control our tongues, through our *compassion*, as we care for those in need, and through our *commitment* to Christ as we keep ourselves from worldliness. You see, true godliness is both internal and external. It permeates every aspect of our lives. It was never intended to do less.

### **God's Word is meant to *transform* us, not just inform us.**

Some time ago, I was cleaning out the drawers of my desk, and in the back of one drawer I found a pocket-size Gideon Bible. I opened it and found some introductory statements that I hadn't read in a long while. They reminded me of just how precious and powerful God's Word is, and why we should *embrace it*. I'd like to close by reading these solemn words to you:

*The Bible contains the mind of God, the state of man, the way of salvation, the doom of sinners, and the happiness of believers. Its doctrines are holy, its precepts are binding, its histories are true, and its decisions are immutable. Read it to be wise, believe it to be safe, and practice it to be holy. It contains light to direct you, food to support you, and comfort to cheer you.*

*It is the traveler's map, the pilgrim's staff, the pilot's compass, the soldier's sword, and the Christian's charter. Here Paradise is restored, Heaven opened, and the gates of hell disclosed.*

*Christ is its grand subject, our good the design, and the glory of God its end.*

*It should fill the memory, rule the heart, and guide the feet. Read it slowly, frequently, and prayerfully. It is a mine of wealth, a paradise of glory, and a river of pleasure. It is given you in life, will be opened at the judgment, and be remembered forever. It involves the highest responsibility, will reward the greatest labor, and will condemn all who trifle with its sacred contents.*