

IV. Doers of the Word

October 21/23/24, 2019

James 1:19-27

OT: Ps. 19:7-11; Zech. 3:3-5

NT: Mt. 5:21-22

Aim: To understand that true and undefiled religion starts with hearing the word of God and then doing it; *i.e.*, putting its moral and ethical commands into practice in our daily lives.

Morgan: James' argument in this section is: 'Now that you have been born again your new life should have the characteristics of that new kind of life. This new life must be in obedience to God and in order to do that we must be ready to hear and apply God's Word.'

Moo: Picking up the language of v. 18, James calls on his readers to 'humbly accept' the word (v. 21). This idea he unfolds in vv. 22-27, where he shows that accepting the word requires doing it (vv. 22-24). He then shifts from 'word' to 'law' in order to underscore the demand that God's word makes upon His people (v. 25), and lists three specific ways in which God's word/law needs to be practiced (vv. 26-27).

MacArthur: Here James presents a third test of a true believer. The first was his response to trials (1:2-12). The second was his response to temptation (1:13-18). The third is his response to the truth revealed in the Word of God (1:19-27). When the true disciple hears God's Word, there is an affection for its truth and a desire in his heart to obey it. One of the most reliable evidences of genuine salvation is that hunger for the Word of God (cp. Ps. 42:1). In 1:19-27, James focuses on two major truths relating to that evidence. First, saving faith is marked by a proper reception of Scripture as the Word of God (vv. 19-21). Second, it is marked by a proper reaction to the Word, reflected in an obedient life (vv. 22-27).

A. Reception of the Word (James 1:19-21)

Moo: James has wrapped up his first general exhortation with an allusion to the word of God (v. 18). That 'word' will be the focus of vv. 21-27, where James calls believers to recognize in God's word the demand of obedience that comes to all who claim the blessing of the new birth. But before he turns to this topic, James interjects a brief exhortation about speech and anger.

Moo: The abrupt introduction of a new topic in vv. 19-20 has naturally led commentators to seek to integrate them more fully into the context. The most popular option is to assume that the object of the command 'be quick to listen' is the word of God, mentioned in v. 18 and prominent in vv. 21-25. We would then have to infer the same object of the next, coordinate command. If this were so the command to be 'slow to speak' the word of God would have to have a sense similar to James 3:1: 'Not many of you should presume to be teachers'. But this idea would be difficult to discover without 3:1 – which comes later in the letter. Moreover, the third grammatically parallel command, 'be slow to anger, is difficult to explain on this reading of the verse. But an even better reason for rejecting the 'word of God' interpretation is James's obvious dependence on a widespread Jewish wisdom teaching about speech and anger. The admonition to display wisdom by listening much and talking little is found quite often (cp. Pr. 17:28; 10:19; 11:12, 13; 13:3)... The theme is echoed in Jewish intertestamental literature.... Moreover, these same wisdom books sometimes link hasty speech and unrighteous anger; see, for example, Pr. 17:27.

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[DSB Note: All commentators other than Moo see vv. 19-20 along with v. 21 as related to receiving the word. Moo sees vv. 19-20 as an independent topic and disagrees with the approach of the other commentators.]

1. Hear the Word Eagerly (1:19-20)

a) Transition (1:19a)

¹⁹Know this, my beloved brothers...

(1) Command or Indicative?

Morgan: This terse phrase translates the Greek word *iste*. It may be an indicative ('you know this') or an imperative ('know this'). The sense is probably indicative and refers to the previous section. His readers knew the power of the Word to give birth and they knew that all who are born again are firstfruits of God's abundant grace. In this way, the phrase links the former section with what follows: 'You know the truth of what I have stated. But now we must go beyond this elementary knowledge and be eager to hear and obey this life-giving Word.'

Moo: In place of the NIV's *take note of this*, the NASB has 'this you know.' ... The NASB...reads the same Greek word as the NIV—*iste*, 'you see'—but takes it to be an indicative rather than an imperative. But the imperative is more likely here since this is the kind of verb that James usually pairs with his address of 'my beloved brothers.' This general call to pay attention signals a pause in James's argument as he switches from one topic to another.

MacArthur: 'This you know' refers back to the truths just expressed: first, the general truth of the power of the Word in regenerating believers in the early church and making them entirely new creations; and, second, the subsidiary and marvelous truth that those believers became, in fact, 'the first fruits among His creatures' (v. 18).

Doriani: This simple exhortation contains two riddles. The first riddle concerns its translation. 'Know this' seems to be an imperative, but the Greek form can also be an indicative: 'You know this.' Yet the difference is small; even if 'You know this' is correct, it contains an implicit command: 'You know this—and should act accordingly.'

MacArthur: By addressing his readers as 'my beloved brethren' James clearly indicates his deep compassion and concern for them. Like every wise Christian teacher, he is not simply trying to convince their minds in a purely intellectual way but also is trying to reach their hearts. His affection for them is equally as strong as his obligation to them.

(2) Conclude or Introduce?

Doriani: The second riddle concerns the phrase's connection: Is 'know this' the last word in the teaching on trials (1:12-18)? Or is it the first word in the next section on the word of God (1:19-25)? The best answer is both. James's readers must take to heart what he has said about trials, and they must heed what he says next—about receiving the word and acting upon it.

MacArthur: At this point, James makes a clear transition in emphasis. Because we have experienced the transforming power of God and have been made new creatures, we are to continually submit our lives. In James 1:18, Scripture is called the 'word of truth'; in v. 21, 'the word implanted'; in verse 22, simply 'the word'; in verse 23, figuratively, as 'a mirror'; and in verse 25, 'the perfect law, the law of liberty.'

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b) Exhortations (1:19b)

...let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.

MacArthur: James gives three important commands for the believer who is willing to receive God's Word with submissiveness. All three are deceptively simple.

Morgan: Three grammatically parallel exhortations serve to prepare our hearts to 'receive the Word' (v. 21) properly.

Dorani: At first glance, these verses read like simple wisdom proverbs. Believers need wisdom and knowledge, and we learn more by listening than by speaking. Big talkers are rarely good listeners, and angry talkers may not hear a thing. Therefore, we should be deliberate, not rash, in speech.

(1) Quick to Hear

Morgan: First, we must be *quick to hear*. 'Quick' translates the Greek *tachus*. The idea is that of swiftness, eager to hear so that we may proceed. We need to sit silently and listen to God's Word opened to us. We need to meditate on and ponder over words and sentences. We need to weigh the nuances, examine it word by word, and listen carefully so we can comprehend its meaning.

MacArthur: First, we 'must be quick to hear,' that is, be a careful listener, making sure that we pay attention in order to get the message right.... James's appeal is for believers to seize every opportunity to increase their exposure to Scripture, to take advantage of every privileged occasion to read God's Word or to hear it faithfully preached or taught. The sincere, eager desire for such learning is one of the surest marks of a true child of God.

Hughes: 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 home churches. Thus listening was imperative. Those who were not disciplined in listening ran the risk of spiritual impoverishment.... In so challenging his first-century flock, James has put his finger on a great need in the church today, for many of us are non-listeners.

(2) Slow to Speak

Morgan: Second, we should be *slow to speak*. We have often heard the saying, 'God gave us two ears and one mouth to remind us to listen more than we speak.' We learn while listening, not while speaking. We must learn to spend time in silence preparing our hearts for true worship. We need to keep our mouths closed so our minds will be ready to hear (cp. Pr. 17:27).

MacArthur: Second, the believer who willingly receives the Word with submission must be 'slow to speak.' That characteristic is a companion of the first. You cannot listen carefully while you are talking, or even when you are thinking about what to say.... It seems that 'slow to speak' includes the idea of being careful not to be thinking about one's own thoughts and ideas while someone else is trying to express God's. We cannot really hear God's Word when our minds are on our own thoughts. We need to keep silent inside as well as outside. The primary idea, here, however, is that, when the appropriate time to speak does come, what is said should be carefully thought out. When we speak for the Lord, we should have the gravest concern that

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what we say not only is true but is spoken in a way that both edifies those who hear and honors the Lord in whose behalf we speak.

Hughes: The second of our triple duties is to be ‘slow to speak.’ 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.... 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 to receive instruction; but the tongue is surrounded with a double row of teeth to hedge it in, and keep it within proper bounds.... Solomon was right: ‘When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent’ (Pr. 10:19).

Hughes: 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.

(3) Slow to Anger

Morgan: The *third* admonition in preparation for receiving the Word is to be *slow to get angry*. The Greek word is *orgē* and generally refers to an infuriated disposition while another Greek word, *thumos* implies more of a violent rage.... Generally, there is a clear connection between talking and anger, and words spoken in anger are more often than not injurious and harmful. A person who keeps up his talking is a poor listener, and a poor listener is subject to failure in keeping anger in check.... But specifically, James seems here to speak of anger as it relates directly to the life-giving Word. He warns us not to be angry at God’s Word because it reveals our sin and challenges our behavior and values. Like a man who stones the prophet for delivering God’s message, this man becomes angry at the Word because it reveals God’s truth to him.

MacArthur: Third, the believer who willingly receives the Word with submission must be ‘slow to anger.’ Anger is a very natural emotion that is an all but automatic response—even for believers who are not spiritually prepared—to anything or anyone that harms or displeases them. *Orgē* (‘anger’) does not refer to an explosive outburst of temper but to an inner, deep resentment that seethes and smolders, often unnoticed by others. It is therefore an anger that only the Lord and the believer know about. Therefore, it is a special danger, in that it can be privately harbored. In this context, James seems to be speaking particularly about anger at a truth in the Word that displeases, that confronts sin or conflicts with a cherished personal belief or standard of behavior. It refers to a disposition hostile to scriptural truth when it does not correspond to one’s own convictions, manifested—even if only inwardly—against those who faithfully teach the Word.

Hughes: The third of the triple duties for those who hope to benefit from the Word is to be ‘slow to anger.’ James knew that often people do not really listen to the Word as it is taught. They

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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! ... The bottom line regarding anger in respect to James’ desire that we profit from the Word is this: *an angry spirit is never a listening, teachable spirit*. Those who live the reverse of the triple duty and are slow to hear, quick to speak, and quick to become angry will not grow in the Word.

c) *Explanation (1:20)*

...²⁰*for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.*

Moo: James now explains (note the *for*) why Christians should be *slow to become angry*: *man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life God desires*. The NIV’s ‘righteous life that God desires’ is a paraphrase of the Greek, which literally translated, says ‘the righteousness of God.’ ... Paul’s well-known use of the phrase ‘righteousness of God’ to summarize the gospel (see, e.g., Rom. 1:17; 3:21-22). Paul refers to an activity of God by which he puts people in right relationship with himself.... But we would be wrong to think that James must be using the phrase in the same way that Paul does. Indeed, perhaps no greater mistake can be made in interpreting James than to read his letter in the light of Paul. James, we must remember, is writing...before Paul had written any of his letters and probably has no direct knowledge of Paul’s teaching. James must be read against the background of the OT, Judaism, and the teaching of Jesus – not the apostle Paul.... The word ‘righteousness’ in James 1:20 must be understood in light of the verb that governs it. And the combination ‘do’ or ‘produce’ righteousness makes it very difficult to think that James could be referring to God’s act or gift of righteousness.... We are on firmer ground in thinking that James uses the phrase ‘produce righteousness’ with the meaning it normally has in the Bible: do what God requires of His people. Jesus use the word ‘righteousness’ in just this sense when He called on His followers to exhibit a ‘righteousness’ exceeding that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law (Mt. 5:20; see also 5:6; 6:33). This meaning makes excellent sense in this verse. James’s very simple point is that human anger does not produce behavior that is pleasing to God.

Morgan: Once again we can hear James echoing the words of his blessed Master in Matthew 5:21-22. Righteousness does not spring out of wrath. Interestingly, James changed the word for man from *anthrōpos* (mankind) to the more specific *anēr*. It moves us from a general, overarching statement to a personal level: ‘An individual’s acts done out of fury and rage do not bring about God’s righteous standards.’ At least three thoughts lie behind this verse: 1) an angry Christian certainly does not reflect God’s righteousness; 2) wrath does not promote the course of righteousness; 3) wrathful man does not practice the kind of conduct approved by God. ‘Work out’ translates *ergazesthai*, and means ‘to effect, bring about, produce’ as in 1:3 where testing *brings about* patience.

Hughes: The rationale for being ‘quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger’ is given in verse 20.... Anger produces an ugly, unrighteous life (cp. Mt. 5:22).... It is eternally true that ‘the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.’ This is why we need to cultivate the triple duty and listen with all we have to God’s Word however it comes, to think well before we speak in response, and to be very slow to anger.

MacArthur: There is, of course, a just anger, a holy indignation against sin, Satan, and anything that dishonors the Lord or assaults His glory (Jn. 2:14-16; cp. Mt. 21:12-13).... But mere

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personal anger, bitterness, and resentment can never serve the cause of Christ, for ‘the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God,’ that is, does not accomplish what is right in God’s eyes. That is especially true when the hostility is against the truth of God’s Word, for that in reality is against God Himself.

Doriani: It is elementary wisdom that anger does not lead to righteousness. There is such a thing as righteous indignation, but our anger is rarely righteous. On the one hand, we often become indignant about trivial things.... Such anger makes it difficult to get along with other people. It also makes it difficult to go along with God, for anger makes us slow to listen and receive His word.

Moo: Does James intend to prohibit all anger of any kind—even what we sometimes called ‘righteous anger’? Probably not. James falls into the wisdom genre at this point.... We can assume that James intends us to read his warning as a general truth that applies in most cases: human anger is not usually pleasing to God, leading as it does to all kinds of sins.

2. Receive the Word Humbly (1:21)

Moo: The point of transition in James’s argument is not immediately clear. Most English translations and commentators put the transition between vv. 21 and 22. But the introduction of the topic of the ‘word’ in v. 21 suggests that it belongs with the material following it. The *therefore* at the beginning of v. 21, on this reading of the sequence of thought may connect the discussion in vv. 21-27 with v. 18 rather than with vv. 19-20. [DSB Note: Moo is the only commentator with this point of view.]

a) Condition (1:21a)

²¹*Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness...*

(1) Therefore Put Away

Moo: The NIV *rid yourselves of* translates a Greek verb (*apotithemai*) that means to ‘take off.’ The word connotes the idea of removing clothes (cp. Acts 7:58), and the imagery is applied metaphorically in the NT to the ‘stripping off’ of the pre-Christian lifestyle from the believer (see Rom. 13:12; Eph. 4:22, 25; Col. 3:8; Heb. 12:1; 1 Pe. 2:1). James’s use of this term is another indication that he is probably citing common early Christian teaching here.

MacArthur: The main verb of this sentence is ‘receive.’ And because this verb (*dechomai*), as well as the related participle (from *apotithēmi*, ‘putting aside’), ae in the aorist tense, the action of the participle is understood to precede that of the main verb. In other words, ‘putting aside’ (more literally, ‘having put aside’) ‘all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness’ is a condition for receiving ‘the word implanted.’ Before God’s Word can produce His righteousness in us, we must renounce and put away the sin in our lives that stands between us and righteousness.

Morgan: Our English translations make this phrase an imperative, but the only imperative verb in the verse is ‘receive.’ ‘Ridding’ is a participle that carries more of an adverbial sense: ‘*after* ridding yourself...receive the Word’ or ‘*by* ridding yourself...receive the Word.’

(2) All Filthiness

MacArthur: ‘Filthiness’ translates *rhuparia*, which refers to any sort of moral defilement or impurity. It is closely related to a term used of wax in the ear, which impairs hearing, and is

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therefore especially appropriate in this context. Moral filthiness is a serious barrier to our clearly hearing and comprehending the Word of God.

Moo: ‘Moral filth’ continues the idea of the clothing imagery suggested by the verb ‘take off.’ The Greek word lying behind the NIV phrase occurs only here in the Bible (*rhyparia*), but James uses the adjective from the same root in 2:2 to characterize the clothes of a poor person. And we find the same term used to describe the garments that the high priest Joshua must discard before being given a new, splendid set of clothes in Zech. 3:3-4. The NIV ‘moral,’ therefore, is an attempt to capture the ethical nuance of a word that basically means ‘filth’ (NLT) or ‘sordidness’ (NRSV). James choose a word that reminds us just how offensive and detestable sin really is.

Morgan: ‘Filthiness’ is a rare word in the New Testament; in fact, it is used only here and in 2:2 where James talks about the man with dirty clothes. It was also a medical term used at the time for earwax, which, if allowed to build up, could cause dull hearing. This idea fits quite well here.

(3) And Rampant Wickedness

Morgan: ‘Evil’ (or wickedness, malice) is sin with a vicious nature that is bent on doing harm to others. It is the depravity of a mind that is opposed to humanity and just dealings. This ‘wickedness’ refers to hidden sins, motives, and attitudes that corrupt the behavior of people... Before we can receive the Word we must confess our sins. We must put aside all filthiness and wickedness that remains in our lives that we are aware of. Removal of ‘all that remains of wickedness’ refers to the sin that shaped our motives and attitudes and that lies beneath the surface of our lives.

MacArthur: ‘Wickedness’ is from *kakia*, which denotes moral evil and corruption in general, especially in regard to intent. It pertains to sin that is deliberate and determined. It may reside in the heart for a long time before being expressed outwardly, and may, in fact, never be expressed outwardly. It therefore includes the many ‘hidden’ sins that only the Lord and the individual are aware of. Although *perisseia* can carry the idea of ‘remains,’ or surplus, in this context it seems better rendered as the ‘abundance,’ ‘excess,’ or ‘prevalence’ of wickedness. The idea is that of confessing repenting of, and eliminating every vestige and semblance of evil that corrupts our lives, reduces our hunger for the Word, and clouds our understanding of it.

Moo: Coupled with ‘moral filth’ is *the evil that is so prevalent*. This somewhat stiff NIV rendering seeks to capture the idea of ‘abundant’ or ‘surplus’ of evil that the Greek suggests... The Greek word involved (*perisseia*) is used three other times in the NT (Rom. 5:17; 2 Cor. 8:2; 10:15), each time with the meaning ‘abundance.’ James warns believers that putting off sin involves a fight against a foe that takes many different forms. Like an army with many soldiers, sin attacks us persistently and in many guises. Knock down one sin, and another quickly arises to take its place in the spiritual conflict in which we are engaged.

(4) Application

Hughes: An unwillingness to listen, a sinful tongue, and unrighteous anger are *moral evils*. 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. Thus, if we wish to receive and benefit from the Word, we must get rid of the sins it has revealed to us. If the Word is not active and alive to us, we must do a spiritual house-cleaning. Is the Bible relevant? Do you thrill to read it? Is it sweet to your soul? Do you find

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that it is always unfolding more riches? If not, toss out the sins James has highlighted and open yourselves to God's Word. Once we have done this, we are ready for the positive command.

Doriani: When James *first* commands that we put away wickedness, and tells us to receive the word and its salvation *second*, he seems to imply that reform is a precondition to hearing the word with faith. But no one can put off wickedness *before* receiving the word. Rather, it is the word, implanted in our hearts and saving us, that enables us to put off wickedness. To solve this problem, notice first that to put off filth is to put away the old sinful way of life. In the Bible, physical filth often stands for spiritual filth (cp. Is. 64:6; Zech. 3:3-9; Eph. 4:22-24; 5:26-27)... So James commands us to put away spiritual evil in all its forms. How can we do this? Ultimately, James says, the word of God must do this work. Through the word, God gives birth to His children (1:18). It discloses our true condition. It describes our need of God's mercy and directs us to that mercy. It says no one can simply 'put off all...wickedness.' The word of God, implanted in the heart, can change a heart.

b) Command (1:21b)

...and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

Moo: NT authors who use the imagery of 'putting off' to refer to sin often complete the metaphor by calling on believers to 'put on' a new suit of clothes – the righteous living to which Christ calls us. James, significantly, abandons the imagery at this point, using as his positive command the verb *accept* or 'receive.' He does so because he wants to focus attention on a more basic issue than the adopting of a new code of behavior: the influence of God's word in producing that new kind of behavior.

Morgan: 'Receive' carries with it a sense of urgency and it denotes more than just an act of acceptance; the idea is that of a warm welcome (cp. Rom. 14-15). Three aspects are spelled out about warmly receiving the Word.

(1) The Manner

...and receive with meekness...

Morgan: First, the *manner* in which the Word should be received is 'with meekness' or humility. It is the opposite of being 'quick to speak and quick to be angry' (v. 19).

MacArthur: Finally, James declares that true believers willingly receive God's Word 'in humility.' 'Humility' translates *prautēs*, which is often rendered as 'meekness' or 'gentleness.' The adjective form is most commonly rendered 'meek' or 'gentle,' as in the third Beatitude (Mt. 5:5). But 'humility' seems most appropriate here, because the idea is clearly that of selfless receptiveness, of putting self, as well as sins, aside.... Among other things, humility includes the very important quality of teachableness, which obviously is of utmost importance in regard to hearing and understanding God's Word. The faithful Christian is able to 'receive the word implanted' with a submissive, gentle, and teachable spirit, cleansed of pride, resentment, anger, and every form of moral corruption.

Doriani: We readily understand the second command: to receive the word 'with meekness.' It means to listen well. To be meek is to shun argument and to be gentle, docile, and teachable before the word. The term for 'meekness' is *prautēs*, and it can mean 'meekness,' 'gentleness,' or even 'humility' (see Mt. 5:5; 11:29; 21:5). But it seems that this should be the first command,

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since no one can put away filth and wickedness on his own. One must first receive the implanted word ‘which can save you.’

Hughes: If we have been unhearing, our tongues out of control, building up anger and moral filth, the Word has not been flourishing as it was meant to do. But it will prosper if, having cast out the sin, we ‘receive with meekness the implanted word.’ By *humble* acceptance James means the opposite of self-assertiveness—teachableness—welcoming the Word with open arms.

Moo: The command to *accept the word implanted in you* is not a command to unbelievers to be converted, ... but to believers to allow the word to influence them in all parts of their lives. By adding the word *humbly* to the command, James reminds us that we need to be open and receptive to the work in the heart.

(2) The Method

...*the implanted word*...

Hughes: God’s Word was not native to our hearts, but it has been implanted in us.

Dorani: He says ‘receive the implanted word,’ not ‘work at removing sin.’ This is how transformation occurs: the implanted word takes root deep within us and transforms us. It brings conviction of sin and assurance of mercy. It instills faith and creates new life, so that good fruit inevitably follows.

Morgan: *Second*, the *nature* of the Word is that it is ‘implanted’ or ‘engrafted.’ The adjective is found only here in the New Testament and comes from *emphuton*, a compound term meaning ‘to grow or ‘plant in.’ God graciously brought us to birth through His Word and now He desires to implant more of it in our hearts so that our Christian experience matches the new birth we received (cp. 1 Pe. 2:1-2).

MacArthur: ‘Implanted’ is from *emphutos*, which has the literal meaning of planting a seed into the ground. Here it is used metaphorically of God’s Word being ‘implanted’ and taking root in the heart of a believer (the ‘good soil’ of Mt. 13:8, 23) at the time of salvation.... Yet despite its already being within us, we must continually receive it, in the sense of allowing it to direct and control our lives.

Moo: *Emphytos* will have the sense ‘implanted.’ ... The word is not something that all people have within them from birth onward, but an entity that has taken up residence within believers. James likely draws this striking conception of the implanted word from the famous new covenant prophecy of Jeremiah (Jer. 31:33; cp. Ez. 36:24-32).... James’s language reminds his readers that they have experienced the fulfillment of that wonderful promise. But it also reminds them that the word that has saved them cannot be dispensed with after conversion. God plants it within His people, making it a permanent, inseparable part of the believer, a guiding and commanding presence within.

(3) The Motive

...*which is able to save your souls*.

Morgan: *Third*, the *motive* for receiving the Word is that it is able to ‘save your souls.’ Three aspects of salvation are in view here. The *past* aspect is that of salvation – God used His Word, the truth of the gospel, to bring us to birth. The *present* aspect is that the Word aids in our sanctification – it is a constant resource that builds up the believer and gives him freedom from

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sin's dominion.... Finally, the Word has power to keep us for *future* salvation – our glorification when we are in Christ's presence and forever free from the presence of sin!

MacArthur: 'Able to save your souls' first refers back to our initial salvation in which the Word brought the truth of the gospel to an unsaved heart, showing us the way of salvation and saving us from the *penalty* of sin (cp. 1 Pe. 1:23). It is also able to save by being a constant resource of God's truth that the Holy Spirit uses to guard believers' souls from being snatched out of God's family by protecting us from the *power* and *dominion* of sin. Finally, it is able to lead us to ultimate and complete salvation, when we are glorified with Christ in heaven, forever separated from the *presence* of sin.

Dorani: The saving work of the word extends far beyond the day of salvation. In the New Testament, salvation has three aspects: 1) Salvation is a past event, for Christ accomplished our salvation in the past. We receive that salvation the day we believe (Lk. 19:9; Acts 4:12; 2 Cor. 6:2; Titus 3:5). 2) Salvation is a future event, because our deliverance is never complete until Christ returns, judges men and angels, sends evildoers away from His presence, and restores the heavens and the earth (Mt. 25:31ff.; Rom. 5:9-10; Heb. 9:28; 1 Pe. 1:5). 3) Salvation is a present reality, something we seize and work out day by day (Phil. 2:12). James knows salvation is past, present, and future, but his concern in our text is the present. The word of God empowers daily growth as we travel the road of salvation.

Moo: James refers to 'the salvation of your souls' (a literal translation). As so often in the OT, 'soul' (Greek *psyche*; Hebrew *nephesh*) probably does not here refer to a 'part' of the human being, but to the human being as a whole; the NIV rendering *which can save you*, is therefore probably on target. We should especially note that James here portrays salvation as future from the standpoint of the believer.

B. Response to the Word (James 1:22-27)

MacArthur: As important as the proper reception of the Word of God is, without obedience to its truth it is not only without benefit but becomes a further judgment against its readers. It is essential to hear the Word with an attitude of submission, but even that is not enough. Obedience to the Word is the most basic spiritual requirement and is the common denominator for all true believers. The bottom line of true spiritual life is not a momentary feeling of compliance or commitment but long-term obedience to Scripture (cp. Jn. 8:31).

Moo: James's exhortation to Christians to 'accept' the implanted word (v. 21) is the main point of vv. 21-27. But, typical of his concern that believers demonstrate the reality of faith in obedient lives, James goes on to specify just what it means to 'accept' the word. Essentially, James argues in vv. 22-25 to 'accept' the word means to 'do' it. 'Doing' frames vv. 22-25.

Hughes: We have discussed accepting the Word. Now we will consider *doing the Word*. Together, these two topics express the spiritual logic of James' flow of thought: the *hearing* of the Word must be followed by *obedience*; truly *accepting* God's word logically means *doing* it.

Morgan: The remaining verses in James 1 present the right attitude toward the Word. In verses 22-27 we have: 1) a command to be *doers* of the Word; 2) an illustration of one who is a hearer but not a doer; and 3) a practical application of what it means to be doers of the Word.

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1. The Principle (1:22)

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

a) *Be Active Doers (1:22a)*

²²*But be doers of the word...*

Morgan: The command here is not simply ‘be,’ but ‘become’ (from the verb *ginomai*). And it is present tense: ‘become people who do the Word and continue in it.’

MacArthur: A more literal translation of the present middle imperative tense of *ginomai* (‘prove yourselves’) is ‘be continually’ or ‘keep striving to be,’ ‘doers of the word.’ ... The substantive form of *poiētē* (‘doers’) carries the characterization of the whole personality, all of a person’s inner being—mind, soul, spirit, and emotions.... James is speaking of Christian ‘doers of the word,’ emphasizing what they are rather than just what they do. There are people whose very lives are dedicated not only to learning God’s Word but also to faithful and continual obedience to it.

Dorani: Doers of the word are active. We may translate James 1:22, ‘*Become* a doer,’ for James expects his people to turn their profession of faith into action. The verb for ‘be’ or ‘become’ is *ginomai*. Theology must lead to practice; faith must lead to deeds (2:24).

Moo: James insists, listening to God’s word must lead to ‘doing it. Only then are we truly ‘accepting’ the word’ (cp. Rom. 2:13; Lk. 11:28)... No one emphasized as strongly as Jesus the need for people touched by God’s grace to respond with a radical, world-renouncing obedience. Both the gracious initiative of God and the grateful response of human beings are necessary aspects of the gospel. The word, through which we are born into new life (v. 18) and which becomes implanted in us (v. 21), is a word that must be put into practice.

b) *Not Merely Hearers (1:22b)*

...and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

(1) Hearers Only

Morgan: James has shown the wisdom of good listening; now he balances the injunction with a negative: ‘not hearers only.’ ... ‘Hearer’ (*akroatai*) was used in ancient times to refer to those who were ‘professional’ listeners, following lecturers and orators around to listen to them but never being moved by their words. Hearing without doing is useless. It is self-deceptive. James may even be referring to sympathetic hearers in the synagogues who never became real disciples. Be quick to receive and continue humbly in the implanted Word.

MacArthur: The Greek word *akroatēs* (‘hearers’) was used of those who sat passively in an audience and listened to a singer or speaker. Today, it could be used of those who audit a college class which they are required to attend and presumably listen to, but for which they are not required to do outside study, write papers, or take any tests. In other words, they are not held accountable for what they hear. Tragically, most churches have many ‘auditors,’ members who willingly expose themselves to the teaching and preaching of the Word but have no desire for that knowledge to alter their day-by-day lives. They take advantage of the privilege of hearing God’s Word but have no desire for obeying it. When followed consistently that attitude gives evidence that they are not Christians at all, but only pretenders. Such people, who are ‘merely hearers’ and not also doers, think they belong to God, when, in reality, they do not.

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Moo: We should note that James’s concern with doing does not mean that he thinks hearing the word is unnecessary. It is not listening to the word that James opposes or diminishes, but *merely* listening.

(2) Self-Deceived

Morgan: The word James uses for ‘delude’ (*paralogizomai*) means ‘to reason beside the point, to misjudge, to miscalculate and therefore to deceive oneself by fallacious reasoning.’ He deludes himself by cheating himself in his reasoning processes.

MacArthur: Any response to the Word other than faithful, unqualified obedience is self-deceptive. *Paralogizomai* (‘delude’) literally means to reason beside, or alongside, and therefore refers to incorrect reckoning or reasoning, often including the idea of deliberate false reasoning for the purpose of deceiving. In mathematics, the meaning is that of miscalculation. Professing Christians who hear the Word without obeying it make a serious spiritual miscalculation which causes them to ‘delude themselves.’ They are self-deceived.... In order to explain this self-deception, James uses a simple analogy (1:23-24).

Moo: Paul uses this same verb in Col. 2:4 (its only other occurrence in the NT), where he warns the Colossian Christians about false teachers who ‘deceive’ people ‘by fine-sounding arguments.’ The idea of ‘deceive’ in these context is clear: to be ‘deceived’ is to be blinded to the reality of one’s true religious state. People can think that they are right with God when they really are not. And so it is for those people who ‘hear’ the word—regular church attenders, seminary students, and even seminary professors—but do not ‘do’ it. They are mistaken in thinking they are right with God.

Dorani: If we fail to connect creed and conduct, James says, we *deceive ourselves*. The Greek term can also mean *defraud*. Both translations make sense. We *deceive* ourselves if we say we hear the word, but do not follow it. We also *defraud* ourselves if we fail to heed the word, for we miss the opportunity to gain maturity by laying hold of the word.

2. The Picture (1:23-25)

Hughes: If we are going to profit from God’s Word, we must accept and do it. To enforce the importance of this, James employs two examples, based on the rich simile of a mirror—again one positive and one negative.

Moo: Is James contrasting: 1) *what* the two people look at; 2) *how* they look at it; or 3) *what the result* of their looking is? ... This point becomes clear in verse 24. Here James notes the *results* of the look into the mirror he as described in v. 23.... These results are clearly contrasted with what James says of the person who looks into the perfect law in v. 25.

a) The Hearer (1:23-24)

(1) Looking into a Mirror (1:23)

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.*

(a) Look

Hughes: This hypothetical man begins well enough. As James indicates, he is ‘a hearer of the word.’ This is good. After all, there are multitudes who simply do not listen, especially in our

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visually-oriented, post-literate society that is not only unwilling to listen but has often lost the ability to hear. James' man listens, and his listening has some positive effect.... The verb 'looks' in verse 23 suggests 'attentive scrutiny of an object.' He has truly seen himself as he is and has also glimpsed God and salvation. But he ends tragically.

MacArthur: *Katanoēō* ('looks') is a strengthened form of the verb *noēō*, which means simply to perceive or look at something. The compound verb James uses here, however, carries the additional idea of careful cautious, consideration of what is being looked at.

Moo: The verb *katanoēō* is used to depict the action of the 'hearer only' looking at his reflection in the mirror; while the verb *paraklyptō* occurs in v. 25 to describe the 'doer' who looks at the perfect law. Noting this shift, many interpreters think that James intends to contrast the hasty glance that one gives to oneself in a mirror with the careful, intent observation that one gives to the law of God.... However attractive this view might be, it finds little support in the words that James uses here. The verb for 'look' in vv. 23-24 simply does not have the connotation of a hasty or superficial glance.... This verb usually means 'consider carefully,' 'contemplate' (Lk. 11:24, 27; 20:23; 11:6; Rom. 4:19; Heb. 3:1; 10:24).... We should probably, then, not find any great significance in James's shift from one verb for 'seeing' to another in these verses. The point of his analogy lies elsewhere.

(b) Mirror

Morgan: 'Mirror' is from *esoptrōi*, a compound form from *eis*, 'into' and *optō* 'to look.' Ancient mirrors were made of polished metal (usually silver, copper, or tin). The Word of God is like a mirror as it reflects what is taking place in our hearts. It shows us areas in our inner lives that need to be corrected. 'Natural face' is literally 'face of his birth, the face he was born with.'

Hughes: Ancient mirrors were not like today's glass mirrors, but were polished metal—bronze or even silver and gold. But they did enable someone to get a good look at himself. What the man sees here is literally 'the face of his birth.' ... He sees his nose, eyes, whiskers, wrinkles, blemishes—everything. And the longer he looks, the more he sees. The mirror, like the proverbial camera, does not lie.

MacArthur: In New Testament times, mirrors were typically made of highly polished brass or bronze, although a wealthy person could buy one of silver or gold. But even the most expensive mirrors were primitive compared to glass ones, which were not developed until the fourteenth century. Consequently, those early mirrors gave a dim and distorted reflection of the person using them. But by carefully turning the mirror and finding the best light, a person could eventually see a fairly accurate image of his face, and that is the idea James has in mind. By careful and patient observation, as indicated by *katanoēō*, he could eventually discover what he actually looked like.

(2) Forgetting His Appearance (1:24)

²⁴*For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.*

[DSB Examples: a man who cuts himself shaving, but does not clean away all the blood until it stops bleeding; a woman putting on makeup in the car gets lipstick all over her face when the car hits a bump.]

MacArthur: It is that forgetfulness which is the point of the analogy. Whether because of distraction, not being pleased with what was seen, or simply because of a poor memory, all the

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Careful looking suddenly becomes wasted. Whatever the original purpose was for looking at oneself, what is seen is quickly forgotten. A person who looks at God's Word, even if it is carefully and accurately done, and yet does not apply the truths he has discovered to his own life, is like someone who immediately forgets what he has just seen in a mirror—except that the consequences are immeasurably worse.

Moo: The success of James's analogy presumes that both the person who looks in the mirror and the person who looks into God's word are capable of two different responses. The 'hearer only' is faulted for not acting on what he sees in the mirror (implying that he could act on it if he chose), while the 'doer' of v. 25 is commended for putting into effect what he has seen in God's law (implying that he could ignore it if he chose). The key failure of the 'hearer only,' then, is forgetting. We touch here on a pervasive and important biblical theme. The Lord constantly warned the people of Israel not to 'forget' His mighty acts on their behalf but to 'remember' His mercies and His law (Ex. 13:3; Num. 15:39; Dt. 6:12; 8:2; Mal. 4:4)... To 'remember' God, His acts, and His teachings, is to contemplate them in such a way that they make a lasting impression on the heart and mind. The person who 'forgets' what he has seen in God's word is one who reads or listens superficially, not imprinting the message on the soul.

Morgan: James then goes on to state the problem: he does nothing about what he sees... 'Looking' in verse 23 is present tense, but now he switches to the aorist tense (action stated simply with no continuation): he merely 'glances' at himself, has now gone away (perfect tense – happened and remains that way) and straightway 'forgets' what he saw. 'Just a glance and off he goes.' All that he saw in the Word of God is now out of sight and out of mind. If we do not act quickly on what we see or hear in God's Word, we may forget it and not be obedient. Our tendency is to forget what we do not like in ourselves when we come under the steady, pure light of God's truth.

Hughes: Admittedly, looking in the mirror at oneself is not always a pleasant experience... But spiritually, it is catastrophic whenever we stop looking. The man here sees his reflection in the mirror, contemplates his appearance, and goes on his way. There is no real effect on his life. He has failed to respond to God's Word. He has gotten no more lasting benefit from God's Word than a passing look. The solemn truth is, unless the Word has made a change in our lives, it has not really entered our lives. God's Word becomes a millstone if we do not make it a milestone.

(3) Application

Hughes: In James, the 'mirror' is God's Word, and when we look into God's Word we see the *heart of our birth*—ourselves as we really are—our very souls. We not only see that we are sinners, but we begin to see the awful depth of our sin., Previously our conscience showed us part of the picture, but now we can see there is no part of us that is not tainted by sin... The mirror ministry of God's Word, which is rooted in showing us what we are, is essential. But there is also a danger here, because we can be deluded into thinking we have accomplished all God requires by hearing His Word.

Dorani: The metaphor suggests two things. First, Scripture is like a mirror to our souls. Just as we gaze in a physical mirror to inspect and perhaps improve our physical appearance, so we should gaze into the spiritual mirror to inspect and improve our spiritual appearance. Second, like a mirror, Scripture discloses our sin, our need for repentance, and the promise of grace. It reveals our need for amendment. Therefore, we should remember what we see long enough to mend what is amiss. We can beautify our souls by dispatching our sins and vices. But it is folly

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to see our flaws, then forget them at once.... As a mirror shows physical flaws, so the word is a mirror for the soul. It shows moral and spiritual flaws so that we can remedy them. But to profit from Scripture as a mirror, we must remember what we see and act accordingly.

b) *The Doer (1:25)*

(1) The Law (1:25a)

²⁵*But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres...*

(a) *Look*

Moo: As James completes his contrast between the ‘hearer only’ and the ‘doer,’ he abandons the simile of vv. 23-24.... James straightforwardly describes that doer. This person is one who *looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom*.... The verb has the basic meaning of ‘stoop down’ but comes to be applied especially to the action of ‘looking by bending over.’ This sense is preserved in John 20:11, where Mary is said to have ‘bend over to look into the tomb’ (cp. Jn. 20:5; Lk. 24:12).

MacArthur: James here uses an even stronger verb for looking than in verse 23. *Parakuptō* (‘look intently’) means to bend over and carefully examine something from the clearest possible vantage point. It is the verb used by Luke to describe Peter’s looking into the empty tomb after Jesus’ resurrection (Lk. 24:12) and by John of both Peter’s and Mary’s looking into the same tomb (Jn. 20:5, 11).

Morgan: ‘Gazes’ is *parakupsas*, ‘to stoop and gaze intently into.’ It is the same verb used when Peter and Mary peered into the empty tomb (Jn. 20:5, 11). This person gazes (not glances) into the ‘perfect law of liberty.’ This designation resembles the teachings of Jesus and shows that the law and liberty can and do coincide.

Hughes: Turning from the follow if the first man, James now treats us to the wisdom of the second.... This man is a superior listener. In describing him as one who ‘looks’ into God’s Word, James uses a word that pictures the man as bending over a mirror on a table and looking with a studied, penetrating look. The first man’s look involved some laudable scrutiny, but this second man is gripped by what he sees and *keeps on looking*. This word is used twice in John 20:5, 11 to first describe Peter as he bent over and looked into the empty tomb and then Mary Magdalene when she wept and likewise bent over to look in the tomb. This is an absorbing look.

(b) *Law*

Moo: One of the most striking, yet easily overlooked, aspects of this passage is the introduction of the word ‘law’ in this verse. Up to this point, James has spoken about the ‘word’ of God (vv. 18, 21, 22, 23).... Why has he shifted to this different word here? ... James’s ‘law’ does not refer to the law of Moses as such, but to the law of Moses as interpreted and supplemented by Christ. Perhaps, then, the addition of the word ‘perfect’ connotes the law in its eschatological, ‘perfected’ form, while the qualification ‘that gives freedom’ refers to the new covenant promise of the law written on the heart (Jer. 31:31-34) ... accompanied by a work of the Spirit enabling obedience to that law for the first time.

Morgan: Three thoughts about the Word are expressed by this phrase. First, it is ‘perfect.’ Second, the Word of God is the law in the sense that it is the sole body of truth that reveals the will of God for His people. It is the rule or standard by which the Christian life is to be

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regulated. Third, ‘liberty’ (*elutherias*) expresses the liberating power of the Word.... Christ’s new law sets us free inwardly and outwardly to live as we ought. In what sounds like an oxymoron to a sinful world, it is only through God’s law that we can really live free.

MacArthur: ‘The perfect law,’ so called because Scripture is inerrant, sufficient, and comprehensive (cp. Ps. 19:7-9), encompasses all of God’s revealed Word. But by referring to it as ‘law,’ James laid particular emphasis on the Lord’s commands to men, His requirement for the genuine and positive response of obedience to those commands. And by referring to the Word as ‘the law of liberty,’ James focused on its redemptive power in freeing believers *from the* bondage of sin and then freeing them *to* righteous obedience (Jn. 8:34-36). It allows us to serve God not out of fear or mere sense of duty but out of gratitude and love.... God’s law is thought of by some as bringing bondage; but in reality, it brings great liberty (cp. Rom. 6:16-18).

Hughes: ‘The perfect law, the law of liberty’ is a fuller designation of ‘the word of truth’ (1:18), ‘the implanted word’ (1:21), and ‘the word’ (1:22). It encompasses the Old Testament Scriptures, but since it is ‘perfect,’ it includes the teaching of Christ—the gospel—for Jesus fulfilled the Law (Mt. 5:17). This Word radiates liberating power, for it is ‘the perfect law, the law of liberty.’

Doriani: The law is *perfect* because it reflects God’s perfect character.... God’s law is also perfect because it is perfectly suited to life in this world.... When we follow the law, we flourish.... James also describes the law as ‘the law of liberty.’ That is, the law is a source of liberty. Yes, the law limits our freedom in a way. The law against false witness forbids that we say whatever we please, whenever we please. But truth-telling also gives freedom. If children tell the truth, it grants their parents freedom to trust them.... The law is liberating because it is so perfectly suited to human life.

(2) The Blessing (1:25b)

...being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

Morgan: One can hear James echoing the words of his Master again – ‘blessed’ is the word *Makarios*, the word Jesus used in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5. The good listener takes time and the trouble to ‘look intently’ or ‘gaze’ into God’s Word and consider the implications for his life. He takes his time and peers into the Word to grasp its meaning and make application to his personal life.

MacArthur: The genuine believer sees things as they really are, and his will is brought into union with God’s will. He loves to do what the Bible commands him to do, because that is the will of his heavenly Father. God’s blessing results from a believer’s obedience.... The only way to a spiritually blessed and prosperous life is through faithful study and application of God’s Word.

Hughes: James closes with a beatitude: ‘he will be blessed in his doing.’ ... *Doing* God’s Word is the key to blessing and happiness. ‘If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them’ (Jn. 13:17).

Doriani: So James blesses those who gaze into the law, remember it, and do it. Real blessing lies in doing God’s will, not simply knowing it (cp. Lk. 11:28).

Moo: It is the one who looks intently into the law and perseveres in it who is blessed *in what he does*.... The blessing is more likely to refer to future blessing – the salvation that comes when one ‘accepts’ the word (v. 21).

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(3) Application

Doriani: Reviewing James 1:23-25, we see this contrast: One man observes his face in a mirror, goes away, and forgets what he looks like. Another observes the perfect law, perseveres remembers, and acts upon it. The first man deceives himself. The second man is blessed. Believers must not be content to read the Bible and rush away. When we read Scripture, we gaze into it and abide by it. It deserves our attention because: 1) it is perfect; and 2) it gives liberty.

MacArthur: For him it is not merely an exercise of curiosity, as with the forgetful person just mentioned. When he discovers a truth, he ‘abides by it’ [‘perseveres’], understanding that this is the purpose for the Lord’s revealing it to men., God did not reveal His Word simply to be learned, but to be obeyed and applied. The key to James’s analogy is this: the faithful hearer and doer of the Word does not study the mirror itself but rather what the mirror reveals, namely, God’s revealed will and truth.

Hughes: As this man bends over it in soul-absorbing study, he seems more deeply than the first viewed the mirror image of his soul. His imperfect spiritual features are forever impressed upon him. He thus becomes truly poor in spirit, for he knows what he is. He does not outgrow this, but rather his self-knowledge grows deeper. He knows that in his natural self, apart from God, there dwells no good thing. He recognizes, ‘Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?’ (Rom. 7:24).

Hughes: This understanding of self from the mirror of God’s Word is enhanced as he also sees the reflection of a totally holy, transcendent, awesome God who makes demands on his soul. And, finally, this double-mirrored knowledge of self and God enables him to understand the necessity of atoning forgiveness from God. In his reception of the free grace of God he experiences the full work of ‘the perfect law, the law of liberty.’ He is free to do as he ought.

Hughes: This brings us to the apex of James’ argument in our text where the man is described as ‘doing’ the Word. He lives in profound obedience. He keeps looking and doing, looking and doing, looking and doing. He has become part of a God-created process in which knowledge followed by obedience brings more knowledge. Biblically, true knowledge demands action. They cannot be separated. But here we must face an ominous truth: when we have been given spiritual instruction from the mirror of God’s Word and do not act upon it, we imperil our spiritual health.

3. The Practice (1:26-27)

MacArthur: Moving away from the analogy of the mirror, James makes clear that the doer of the Word is not simply someone who is involved in religious activity.

Doriani: Paul knew religious talk could be cheap (cp. 1 Cor. 7:19). James agrees. What impresses him is devotion to God that manifests itself in concrete acts of love and righteousness. He mentions three tokens of true spirituality in James 1:26-27, one in negative terms, two in positive.... This threefold test of true religion fits James perfectly. It suits his emphasis on doing God’s will.... True religion: 1) controls the tongue; 2) looks after widows and orphans in distress; and 3) remains unpolluted by the world.

Hughes: James has powerfully driven home the point that if we are merely *hearers* of the Word, we have deluded ourselves, for we must also be *doers* of the Word. Now he issues a further warning against the danger of deceiving ourselves with false religious doings. The doings are not bad in themselves, but the practice of them can delude believers with a deceptively

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comfortable sense of religiosity.... James puts forth three penetrating dimensions of ‘religion’ that is acceptable to God. These challenge those who think themselves safely religious.

Morgan: James moves now from the general to the particular.... Verse 22 stated how easy it is to be self-deceived about true spirituality. So, to strengthen his case, he applies the injunction to be ‘doers of the Word’ to three specific concerns: 1) controlling the tongue; 2) showing compassion to the needy; and 3) manifesting moral purity and integrity. No doubt James isolated these three because of problematic situations in the community of faith to which he wrote.

Moo: The matters James mentions in these verses were undoubtedly problems among the Christians to whom he is writing. But they are also frequently mentioned in Scripture as key components of a biblical lifestyle.

a) *Control of Oneself (1:26)*

(1) Religious Practice (1:26a)

²⁶*If anyone thinks he is religious...*

Morgan: ‘Religious’ is from the Greek *thrēskos*, which refers to external religious rituals, ceremonies, liturgies, and the like. The term is found elsewhere only twice in the New Testament (Acts 26:5; Col. 2:18), each of with negative connotations. By contrast, the word normally used for genuine, God-honoring worship is *eusebeia*.

MacArthur: ‘Religious’ is from *thrēskos*, which refers to external religious rituals, liturgies, routines, and ceremonies. The famous Jewish historian Josephus used the word to describe worship in the temple at Jerusalem. Paul used the noun form of this term when speaking of his former life as a zealous Pharisee (Acts 26:5). By contrast, the word most commonly used in the New Testament for genuine God-honoring and God-pleasing worship is *eusebeia*, whose basic meaning is that of godliness and holiness. Such things as attending church services and activities, doing volunteer work, following various rituals and ceremonies, saying prayers, and even having right theology have no spiritual value in themselves apart from true saving faith and honorable motives to glorify the Lord.

Moo: The words ‘religious’ (v. 26) and ‘religion’ (v. 27) are rare in the NT (Acts 26:5; Col. 2:18); and for much the same reason that many Christians avoid them. For they are very general in meaning, referring to worship in general, and especially often to the outward practice of ceremonies in honor of a god. Among Jewish writers, the words often referred to the cultic worship of the temple. Perhaps James deliberately chooses such broad terms in order to sharpen his point: *anyone* who has a claim to genuine religious experience must submit those claims to these tests.

Dorani: To this day, religious people may profess orthodox doctrines and faithfully attend their churches. But the proof of their religion lies in behavior, Hames says. He unfolds the meaning of these marks of true religion—controlling the tongue, caring for the needy, and shunning the world’s pollution—throughout chapters 2-4.

(2) Unbridled Tongue (1:26b)

...and does not bridle his tongue...

Morgan: First, true religion that ‘does’ the Word involves *controlling the tongue*. The application weaves together what has already been said (v. 19) and what he will say in a more

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expanded form in chapter 3. ‘Bridle’ is a vivid compound word (*chalinagōgōn*), meaning ‘to lead with a bridle’ like one would do with a horse. James regards the tongue as an unruly horse that needs bit and bridle held fast by the master to take control of it. The unyielding tongue is allowed to run loose and say whatever pops into the mind of a spiteful heart.

MacArthur: The person who trusts in these outward things sooner or later will expose his faithlessness with his mouth, because he does not have the inner power to ‘bridle his tongue.’ Trusting in those things to please God and receive His blessing are deceptive and ‘worthless.’ Even if a ritual or liturgy is biblical in its wording it is as futile as pagan idolatry unless the heart is right with the Lord. A corrupt and unholy heart eventually will be exposed by corrupt and unholy speech.

Hughes: James compares the tongue to a powerful, rearing horse that will take off on a wild ride if the reins are not kept taut.... There are actually people who consider themselves ‘religious’ (they are very proper in worship) but who have galloping tongues and thus are in a state of perpetual self-deception. In fact, all their religious worship is ‘worthless’—an exercise in futility.... An out-of-control tongue suggests bogus religious devotion, no matter how well one’s devotion is carried out (cp. Mt. 12:33-34).... *The tongue will inevitably reveal what is on the inside.* That which is within will ultimately come forth. This is especially true under stress, when the tongue is compulsively revealing.... [Many different] sins spew from the unbridled tongue, but what James’ metaphor points to most is the uncontrolled slanderous tongue—carping, critical, judgmental. The outwardly religious person characteristically avoids filth and lying, but falls easily to slander.

Moo: James is the only Biblical author to use the imagery of the reins, or the bridle, in relationship to the tongue (see also 3:2), but the idea is clear enough. The bridle, along with the bit, was the instrument by which the rider controlled his horse, and it is a natural image of both control and direction (see 2 Kgs. 19:28; Is. 30:28; 37:29). So a person whose religion is the ‘genuine article’ will manifest that fact by being careful in what he or she says.

Doriani: First, *true religion bridles the tongue.* Angry talk, gossip, and deception are leading failures of speech, but James develops quite a litany of verbal sins. His concern for the proper and improper uses of the tongue pervade the letter (cp. 1:13-14; 2:3-4; 2:16; 2:18; 3:9; 4:11; 4:13). ... The tongue, James says, boasts and curses and sparks the conflicts that prove that it is set on fire by hell itself. Yet heirs of true religion will reign in these sins.

(3) Worthless Religion (1:26c)

...but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless.

Morgan: Religious activity minus a disciplined tongue reveals a heart that is deceived.... There is nothing so empty as pouring forth a great flood of religious words with little reality of personal experience in them. Such religion is *mataios*, ‘empty, vain, come to nothing.’ James’ word is the same as the one used in the Septuagint for the worship of idols. In other words, religion without controlled, godly speech is empty and pointless, as unprofitable as bowing before an idol.

Moo: Failure to control one’s speech, James asserts, means that one is ‘deceiving’ oneself about having true religion (see v. 22); that kind of religion is *worthless*. This word translates a Greek word (*mataios*) that is often used in Scripture to characterize idolatry as ‘vain’ or ‘meaningless’

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(in the NT, see Acts 14:15; Rom. 1:21; Eph. 4:17; perhaps 1 Pe. 1:18). The ‘religion’ that people who do not control their speech have is no better, James suggests, than idolatry.

Hughes: James does not mean that those who *sometimes* fall into this sin have a worthless religion, for all are guilty at times. But he is saying that if anyone’s tongue is *habitually* unbridled, though his church attendance be impeccable, his Bible knowledge envied, his prayers many, his tithes exemplary, and though he ‘thinks he is religious...[he] deceives his heart, [and] this person’s religion is worthless.’

b) Concern for Others (1:27ab)

(1) True Religion (1:27a)

²⁷*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this...*

Morgan: Attending church services, doing volunteer work, tithing, observing rituals and ceremonies, saying prayers – all of these outward expressions of religion are well and good. But *true* religion, that which pleases God, means we are willing to be selfless and have genuine concern for the welfare of others, especially those in need. ‘Pure’ is from *katharos*; its synonym is *amiantos*, ‘undefiled.’ Cleanliness and the absence of contamination are what James has in mind. And this purity of religion must pass the litmus test of ‘our God and Father.’ For religious performance to impress other people is one thing; to be judged by God as pure and undefiled is quite another

MacArthur: *Katharos* (‘pure’) and *amiantos* (‘undefiled’) are synonyms, the first emphasizing cleanliness, the second denoting a freedom from contamination. James is not speaking of what may seem best to us, best to the world, or even best to fellow believers, but what is best ‘in the sight of our God and Father.’ The genuineness of anyone’s religion is not determined by his or her own qualifications or standards, but by God’s. The greatest spiritual mistake of the scribes, Pharisees, and other Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus was in that very regard. They had replaced God’s standards in the Law with their own man-made traditions.

Hughes: Religious observances, no matter how perfectly observed and appropriately reverent, are empty if there is no concern for the needy. We may participate in an elegant call to worship and prayer, heartily sing the *Gloria Patri*, solemnly repeat the Apostle’s Creed, join together on a grand hymn, reverently pray the Lord’s Prayer, and listen attentively to the Word preached, but if we ignore the needy, our worship is ashes on the altar (cp. Is. 1:11-17).

(2) True Compassion (1:27b)

...to visit orphans and widows in their affliction...

Morgan: Second, being a doer of the Word means *showing compassion to the needy...* ‘To visit’ is from *episkeptomai* and means ‘to look in on, to inspect.’ It is present tense – this should be the habit of one’s religious life.

MacArthur: *Episkeptomai* (‘to visit’) means much more than to drop by for a chat. It carries the ideas of caring for others, exercising oversight on their behalf, and of helping them in whatever way is needed. It is from the same root as *episkopos*, which means ‘overseer’ and is sometimes translated ‘bishop.’ ... *Episkeptomai* is used frequently in the New Testament of God’s visiting His people in order to help, strengthen, and encourage them (see, e.g., Lk. 1:68, 78; 7:16; Acts 15:14).

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Morgan: *Orphanos* means bereft of father or mother or both. It is used only here and in John 14:18. Together with widows, orphans represented all those who were without defense, protection, or provision. We must remember that no social security or welfare or government aid existed in those days. The loss of a husband or parents often meant total disaster. The text calls for more than a single instance of helping those in need; the idea is that of the church assuming responsibility for the support of those truly bereft.

MacArthur: Generally, the neediest people in the early church were ‘orphans and widows.’ There were no life insurance or welfare programs to support them. Jobs for either group were scarce, and if they had no close kin, or at least no one to help them, they were in desperate straits. But the principle applies to anyone in need. Because such people without parents and husbands are unable to reciprocate in any way, caring for them reveals true sacrificial love.

Hughes: ‘Orphans and widows’ were the most helpless people in Jewish society, their ‘affliction’ (literally ‘pressure’) coming from their desperate need of food and clothing. James uses them as representative of all who are in need.... James is telling us that our care for the needy must not just be by supporting social programs or through the hands of others—but *personally*. We are to be involved in their ‘affliction—the pressures that squeeze them in their circumstances—pressures due to illness or fractured relationships or unemployment or family tensions. James insists that *acceptable religion* reaches out to people in their needs.

Moo: ‘Looking after widows and orphans’ picks up a frequent OT refrain. In the ancient world, with an absence of money-making possibilities for women and any kind of social welfare, widows and orphans were helpless to provide for themselves. A mark of Israel’s obedience, therefore, was to be a special concern for these helpless people (cp. Ex. 22:22; Dt. 15:29, Is. 1:10-17; Ps. 68:5).

Dorani: Second, *true religion visits the widow*’ (e.g., Dt. 24:19-21; Jer. 7:6; 22:3), but whatever the label, orphans and widows form a pair. They represent the poor, defenseless members of society. They suffer poverty and exploitation. While mankind exploits the defenseless, God protects them. He is ‘a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows’ (Ps. 68:5). Care for orphans and widows is essential to true religion for several reasons. Above all, kindness to them is *pure* kindness. It is mercy for the sake of mercy, because those who help widows and orphans cannot expect to receive anything tangible in return.... Further, kindness to the needy is God-like. *We* sustain aliens, widows, and orphans because *He* sustains aliens, widows, and orphans (Ps. 146:9).... We should care for orphans because the gospel teaches that we once were and still are poor.

c) *Cleanliness before the World (1:27c)*

...and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Morgan: ‘To keep’ translates a present tense Greek infinitive. The idea is ‘to keep on keeping oneself’ uncontaminated by the world., ‘Free from contamination’ is a bit tedious, but it serves to relate accurately what James has in mind by his use of *aspilos*. The idea is that of being ‘unstained or unspotted’ by a world full of moral filth and slime (cp. Phil. 2:15).... The word ‘world’ (*kosmos*) carries a wide range of meaning in the New Testament (i.e., the created order, the ‘world’ of mankind, etc.), but James uses it in the sense of the spirit of the age – every age – which reflects a godless and immoral agenda against Christ.

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MacArthur: ‘To keep’ translates a form of the Greek verb *tēreō*, indicating regular, continuous action. In other words, keeping ‘oneself unstained by the world’ is the perpetual obligation of Christians, allowing for no exception or qualification.... *Kosmos* (‘world’) has the basic meaning of order, arrangement, and sometimes of adornment. In the New Testament it is used figuratively of the earth (see Mt. 13:35; Jn. 21:25) and the universe (see 1 Tim. 6:7; Heb. 4:3; 9:26). But most often it is used to represent fallen mankind in general and its ungodly spiritual systems of philosophy, morals, and values (see Jn. 7:7; 8:23; 14:30; 1 Cor. 2:12; Gal. 4:3; Col. 2:8). That is the sense in which James uses the term in the present text.

Moo: The third mark of true religion is more general than the other two and also less concrete: *to keep oneself from being polluted by the world*. James is careful not to give the impression that religion pleasing to God consists simply in outward acts or in social action. The ‘world’ is a common biblical way of referring to the ungodly worldview and lifestyle that characterizes human life in its estrangement from the creator. Christians who have ended that estrangement by accepting the reconciling work of God in Christ must constantly work to distance themselves from the way of life that surrounds us on every side – to keep themselves ‘spotless’ (a literal rendering of the Greek word here) from the world’s contaminating influence.

Dorani: Third, *true religion is unstained by the world*. James advocates separation *in* the world, not *from* the world. From one perspective, the world is simply God’s creation. But the world is also a system of thought, a system of values.... James expects his people to remain pure while staying in this world. We do not stay pure by abandoning society.... The heirs of true religion neither flee the world nor let it corrupt them. Physically we dwell in the world, but morally, we keep our distance. We test all things and hold fast to what is good (1 Th. 5:21). Thus true religion remains undefiled.

d) Application

MacArthur: Those who belong to God are to be characterized by moral and spiritual purity by ‘unstained’ and unblemished holiness (cp. 1 Pe. 1:17b-19).... Neither James nor Peter is speaking of sinless perfection, a human spiritual condition solely manifested by Jesus in His incarnation.... Every Christian falls short of the Lord’s standards (cp. Rom. 7:14-25).... Even the most faithful and loving believers does not always show as much compassion as he should, love his fellow believers as he should, or love God as he should. James is speaking of the basic orientation of our lives, of our central commitment and allegiance. If that allegiance is right, then our deepest desire will be to love and care for others and to confess our selfish sin to the Lord when we do not.

Morgan: Two caveats come to mind. *First*, James is not suggesting here a theology of ‘sinless perfection.’ As long as we live in this fallen world we will be susceptible to sin. Thank God for 1 John 1:9. But a person who has experienced true saving grace will forever have a different attitude toward sin – he will eschew it and desire to be more like his sinless Lord. *Second*, this admonition is not a call for the followers of Jesus to withdraw and sequester themselves away from the lost world in which we live (cp. Jn. 17:15).... Rather, he calls for Jesus’ followers to live radically different lives so that we may point people to Christ.

4. Summary

MacArthur: Godly religion, that is, biblical Christianity, is a matter of holy obedience to God’s Word—reflected, among other ways, but our honesty in regard to ourselves, by our selflessness

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in regard to the needs of others, and by our uncompromising moral and spiritual stand in regard to the world.

Hughes: James shows us that acceptable religion is three-dimensional. First, it means keeping a tight rein on the tongue. We must be free from gossip and slander or our religion is worthless. Second, true religion means hands-on caring for the victims of the pressures of life. Third, acceptable religion is a pure life. The three dimensions of acceptable religion involve our *words*, our *hands*, and our *hearts*.

Doriani: James 1:26-27 both concludes James 1 and introduces James 2. These two verses offer a final word on genuine faith. Earlier paragraphs said genuine faith perseveres through trials and receives the word, as a means of persevering. Now James specifies the behavior that genuine faith will manifest. These marks of real faith become themes that James explores throughout his letter. Good deeds to the poor and needy dominate 2:14-26, control of the tongue is the theme of 3:1-12, and staying unstained by the world governs 3:13-5:6.

Moo: James has grown progressively more practical and specific in his call to respond appropriately to the word of God. ‘Accept the word’ (v. 21) becomes ‘do the word’ (v. 22), which becomes ‘do the law.’ Verses 26-27 culminate this progression as James suggests three ways in which believers can do the word/law. These three manifestations of obedience to the word introduce or touch on key ideas that James will return to again in the letter: 1) controlling the tongue (1:19-20; 3:1-12; 4:11-12); 2) concern for the ‘helpless’ (2:1-13, 15-16; cp. 5:1-6); 3) avoidance of ‘worldliness’ (4:4-10). And the idea of these verses – that true religion is manifested in a life-style of obedience to God – becomes the leitmotif of the next four chapters. To some extent, then, these verses set the agenda for the rest of the letter.

For next time: Read James 2:1-13.