

Word Power!
James 1:19-27

Slide 1

There are a lot of lessons that can be learned in the field of medicine. By collecting a list of symptoms and various indicators throughout the body, a doctor can diagnose and treat a disease with remarkable accuracy.

As the field advances, more diseases, which often proved fatal in the past, are becoming treatable today. The secret is treating the disease instead of the symptoms.

The problems we face in our lives as Christians are similar. Too often we attempt to diagnose our spiritual diseases by treating only one symptom at a time.

We load ourselves down with the antibiotics of more involvement or more faithful attendance rather than face the reality that unconfessed sin may lie at the heart of the problem.

The Bible offers answers to the problems of Christians. The Holy Spirit is ready to reveal the cause of our spiritual maladies.

Our own brothers and sisters are available to pray for and counsel us in our difficulties.

Yet, too often we rush to conclusions or try a new spiritual fad. After which, we find ourselves no better off and usually a little more out of sorts than before. This is why Christians need to mature in their faith.

We need to deal with the spiritual weaknesses in our lives and treat the diseases of dysfunctional faith, rather than throw “quick fixes” at the symptoms and maintain the status quo of immaturity and spiritual anemia.

James understood this problem. In the midst of persecution, he wrote to the dispersed Jewish believers of his day offering spiritual guidance and wise counsel for living empowered lives.

The thing we would do well to understand is that their difficulties are not unlike our difficulties today.

In his letter, James discussed the *“word of truth”* that led to salvation and adoption as children of God. He understood its power, as illustrated in Hebrews 4.

Hebrews 4:12, *“For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”*

So, today we’re going to look at four ways to act on *“the Word”* in order to live empowered lives.

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First, we must understand that listening to the Word brings righteousness. In a practical sense, verses nineteen and twenty are good advice for everyday living.

James 1:19-20, *“My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.”*

Our ability to listen more, talk less, and be less aggressive lies in our receptiveness to God’s Word, but how does this advice figure into our understanding of God and His word?

Amy Carmichael, an Irish Christian missionary in India, said, *“If no word from God has ever hurt you, then you are not very familiar with God’s word.”*

Carmichael knew well the necessity of not only hearing the Word, but the reality of listening to what it said.

We've all been engaged in arguments where our eagerness to get in our blows meant cutting off the other person in mid-sentence or when we've hung up on someone with a fiery vengeance.

This is a good example of what James called, "*the wrath of man.*" The end result of controlled, quiet listening is ultimately the righteousness of God.

The process of listening to what God has to say is not a mindless task. The sense of listening to the Word is one of reception and processing of the Word, but how we go about doing this?

We must engage ourselves in the regular habit of absorbing God's Word. In other words, we must approach it with the attitude that God is speaking directly to us through the text.

Think about it. Who here has never been rebellious in some way? Who has never broken one of God's commandments? Who has not violated at least one of the precepts Jesus offered in the Sermon on the Mount?

Listen to what God's saying in every situation. Don't try to rebut the sword of the Spirit as He probes your heart.

Usually when someone asks a personal question that hits too close for comfort, we respond, "Don't go there."

It means that we're being forced to consider things with which we're uncomfortable. Rather than consider them, we simply post a verbal "No Trespassing" sign.

That's what I believe James was addressing when said be "*slow to speak*." We must allow the Word to penetrate every area of our lives, even the secret, hidden areas where no one else is allowed to go.

Finally, we must refuse to allow ourselves to get mad at God when things hit close to home.

Everyone has lived in some state of denial from time to time. Aggressive denial is known as the "*wrath of man*" in the context of James.

Some people deal with this problem by removing themselves from the stimulus. Removing oneself from God's Word is not a good idea.

The only logical conclusion is to assume that God's Word is right, that we are by necessity wrong, and adjust to the correctness of the Word. The result of this is the "*righteousness of God*."

It's hard to define "*righteousness*" as any more than "the state of being in a right relationship."

I've studied Isaiah 64:6 where the prophet says, "*all our righteous acts are like filthy rags*" and still find myself coming up short on understanding.

Yet, as we listen to God's Word, God establishes a relationship with us, His children, that's completely uninhibited and perfect.

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Next, we must understand that receiving the Word brings salvation. Donald Whitney devotes two chapters in his book, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, to a discussion of Bible intake.

He breaks this down into hearing, reading, studying, memorizing, meditating, and applying Scripture. If you think it sounds complicated, I agree with you.

What does our Scripture for today say about “receiving the Word?” Verse twenty-one says explicitly, *“Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”*

Many commentators have linked this verse to the parable of the Sower, the seed, and the soils found in Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8.

These passages refer to the need for openness in the life of a believer in order for the Gospel to prosper.

Consider this verse in light of offering specific instructions to both the negative and positive aspects of the command. Remember, before a person can receive the Word, he or she must do away with carnal things.

Different translations present these vices in different ways, but the consensus leans toward morally questionable behaviors and downright badness.

The person who tells people to come to Jesus just as they are and never mentions the changes that must take place afterward does lost people a great disservice. Regeneration must lead to sanctification.

If you’re still doing the same things you were doing when you joined the church twenty years ago, then you may want to have a look at the decision you made.

Part of allowing the Word to take root and grow in us is preparing the soil of our lives to receive it.

Those of us who have gardens know that the weeds must go in order for the plants to grow. The same is true of us spiritually. James says to put them away.

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Yet it's not just receiving the Word, but our attitude about receiving it. Do you see the word, "humbly" or other translations may say "*with meekness*" there in verse 21?

I'm guilty of reading Scripture, particularly the verses related to salvation and being saved, with an almost flippant attitude.

If we're honest, we all have the capacity to treat the Word with little respect. Yet, the Bible says to receive the Word humbly, with meekness.

When I visited a Catholic church, I was impressed with the way the priest treated the Bible and the general reverence of the acts of worship.

I've also watched events from the Vatican on television, and there, too, the respect for the Scriptures was demonstrated in word and deed.

We might do well to take a lesson in meekness from the believers who're a part of this tradition. The result of putting away carnal instincts and receiving the Word humbly is salvation of the soul.

Matthew 10:28, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

Paul understood this concept. Our earthly bodies are temporary. We're born to die. Our teeth can't stand up to the foods we eat, our eyes can't continue to see things clearly.

Our bones can't handle the stresses we put on them, our hearts can't pump blood to all the parts of our bodies because of the fat in our diet, and so on and so forth.

Paul said it this way in 2 Corinthians 5:8, *"We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord."*

Even the great hymns of our faith teach that salvation of the soul is more important than that of the body.

Martin Luther wrote, *"Let goods and kindred go / This mortal life also / The body they may kill / God's truth abideth still / His kingdom is forever."*

Those words from *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* remind us that no matter what we face, it's the condition of our eternal souls that matters most to God.

The only way to attain salvation for our souls is to embrace the Word of God as it is implanted in us through our faith in Christ Jesus.

Let me make this as simple as I can. Once we receive Christ as our Savior, our next responsibility is to set aside the foolish, sinful things of our past as quickly as possible and fill our lives with a diet of Scripture.

This is accomplished through regular reading, study, and attention to teaching. The first two we may do on our own, but the latter requires the fellowship of the church.

Attention to teaching is best accomplished through Sunday School and actually listening to the message in worship.

I've come to appreciate 1 Corinthians 1:21 in recent years, which says, *"For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe."*

If you are going to receive the Word, it must become a part of who you are.

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A third way we are to act on the Word is to obey it because obeying the Word brings blessing. Verses twenty-two through twenty-five encompass some of the most quoted phrases in the New Testament.

All of us have heard at some point the phrase, *"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves"* or as the NIV states it, *"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."*

The message is simple, but the details are less specific. It's not until we comprehend verse twenty-five that earlier verses become clear.

James 1:25, *"But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do."*

Now, Martin Luther was critical of James because he believed the book glorified works more than the believer's justification by grace through faith.

In order to understand Luther's sentiment, we must understand that Luther advanced the teaching that a person enters a relationship with God not on merits or good deeds, but simply because God graciously receives him or her through faith in Jesus.

Luther wanted people to understand that even if a person does not produce a great multitude of good deeds, his standing with God was still the same.

Hear me today: there is no kind of deed you or I can do to earn God's favor. Our salvation is still by grace through faith.

Ephesians 2:8-9, *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."*

However, the natural by-product of a believer's growing life in Christ ought to be good works. So, what kind of effects should the Word have on us?

James says that to simply listen to the Word and never act on it is like looking in the mirror and forgetting what you see.

Our modern society tends to take mirrors for granted. We have them on our dressers, over our sinks, on the sides and in the center of our cars.

But what do we see? We seem to be happiest when there is no negative change in our appearance. As long as there is no new pimple, no new gray hair, or we still have hair, we're happy.

However, as change comes, especially drastic change, we panic at the sight of ourselves.

James says that our time in the Word ought to be a time of comparison and examination. It ought to leave us saying to ourselves, *"I've gotta do something about that."*

Our time in the Word ought to have us making mental notes to change our agendas and take action on some things that are out of order.

As we compare our lives with the image the Word gives us of ourselves, we ought to be adjusting to meet God's standard. Which reminds me of Amos in the Old Testament.

Amos 7:7-8, "This is what he showed me: The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord asked me, "What do you see, Amos?" "A plumb line," I replied. Then the Lord said, "Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer."

God was set His standard alongside the lifestyle of His people, but they had ignored it. He had allowed them ample time with ample warning to make adjustments, but they had ignored them as well.

Now, God was telling Amos that He was ready to evaluate their work and pass judgment on it.

I wonder what God sees when he looks at the works of our hands today. Are we doing the things that please Him or are we simply paying Him lip service in the name of our religion.

The Bible says that we ought to be taking God's Word and doing what it says to do.

It's not enough to simply listen to the Word and receive the Word if we're not willing to obey the Word. In the over-quoted words of Nike, *"Just do it."*

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Finally, living the Word brings holiness. Every religious person throughout history has sought to reach a level of enlightenment of some kind.

Many are stirred by the mystique and otherworldliness of people like the Dalai Lama and Mother Teresa.

Men like Pope John Paul II and Billy Graham have impressed us with their uniquely reserved personalities.

In a sense, each of these people have seemed to arrive at some elevated state of consciousness. They have each apparently had some kind of religious epiphany where everything “came together.”

Their state of holiness is awe inspiring, but let me tell you the achievement of holiness for all Christians is both attainable and real.

The beautiful thing is that we don't have to be some exalted personage in order for holiness to be a part of who we are.

James makes this painfully clear in the last two verses of chapter one. He begins by addressing the perceived holiness of others, and he concludes with the reality of true holiness.

James 1:26-27, “Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

The initial point of reference is the believer who has two major problems: a) he gives the appearance of being very devout, and b) he has a hard time keeping his mouth shut.

I've seen some beautiful people in my day who have opened their mouths and ruined my opinion of them in no time flat. I'm personally learning the value of keeping my own mouth shut.

A man once said, “It is far better for people to see you and wonder about your level of intelligence than for them to hear you and remove all doubts from their minds.”

The first evidence of a holy life in the Word is our silence. I can't emphasize this enough. Decide now to listen completely and eagerly before you speak.

After all, God made us with twice as many ears as we have mouth. Surely, He had a reason for it.

James concludes by giving two primary examples of living the Word: a) caring for the needs of widows and orphans, and b) keeping oneself clean from the ungodly influences of the world.

What are the ramifications of these behaviors? I believe they represent the threefold relationship God desires of His people.

Consider a right triangle with God at the top. The Christian is at the base directly beneath God. The world is at the other point.

Our role as believers is to relate not only to God properly in our personal lives, but to relate to those around us properly.

In living this way, we point them to God. This has been the pattern God has used throughout history. It's been God's way since long before we came onto the scene.

If we're to say that living the Word brings holiness, then we must understand the difference between being Christ's representatives and a modern concept that equates us with Christ Himself in our relations to the world.

I'm hesitant to support this "incarnational" view of ministry. This view readily embraces slogans like, "*You are the only Bible some people will ever read,*" or "*Be the hands of Christ to one in need.*"

I want to be quick to say that I go as a representative of Jesus with the Holy Spirit dwelling inside me, but I am no more Jesus than my wristwatch is me nor will it ever be me.

Now, you may say I've oversimplified my case, but I must be clear: like the steeple on a million churches around this world, I will do my part to point lost people to God, but I'm not nor will I ever be God.

He's perfect; I am flawed by sin. He's exalted; I'm lowly. He's pure; I'm stained. It is only by the blood of Christ that I have any standing at all with God.

I can't now nor ever hope to be any more than a sinner saved by grace, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, and surrendered to the work of the Lord.

Slide 7

Conclusion

So, have you considered your position in Christ, particularly as it relates to God's Word.

Are you currently engaged in the regular discipline of listening to God's Word and what it says about you in order to attain to God's righteousness?

Is your life fertile soil for the receiving of God's Word that brings salvation? Are you busy obeying God's Word as you look into it for instruction, so that you may experience the blessings of God?

Finally, are you living God's Word on a daily basis in an effort to come to a level of holiness that only God can bring?

The book of James is a call to maturity. Today, I believe God is challenging us to take hold of His Word.

He's calling His people to apply the Scriptures and to endure its analysis of us, to receive the truths of the Bible and to do what it says to do.

God's telling us to take this treasure He has given us and put it to the test. We read these words at the beginning, and it seems fitting that we should read them again now:

Hebrews 4:12, "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

What will you do with His Word today?