

James: Faith That Works – Part 3
From Hearing to Living – James 1:19-27
Crosspoint – Dave Spooner – January 25, 2025

Introduction:

- James is often described as the most practical book in the New Testament, and that is true, but it is not because James is simplistic. It is because James understands something profoundly important about faith: real faith always presses itself into real life. James does not write to settle abstract theological debates. He writes to shape actual people, and in this passage for today, he addresses how we interact with God's Word, how we respond, how we speak, and how we live in the world.
- James is writing to believers who have already heard the gospel and confessed faith in Christ. He is not trying to convert them. He is trying to clarify what genuine faith looks like once we are exposed to the Word of God. And the question driving this entire passage is not, "Do you believe the Word of God?" The question is, "What happens to God's Word after you hear it?"
- That question matters more than we often realize. It is possible to be surrounded by Scripture, exposed to preaching, and familiar with Christian language and still remain largely unchanged. James is deeply concerned about that possibility. He knows that faith can become verbal without becoming vital, and that religious exposure can actually harden a person if it never leads to obedience. These are very serious things, and the Holy Spirit brings our attention to this reality through the writing of James.
- So in James 1:19-27 (page 1043), James walks us through a movement that is both simple and searching. First, he addresses how we **receive** God's Word. Then he confronts whether we **respond** to God's Word. Finally, he shows us how the Word must **reshape everyday life** if faith is real. Receive. Respond. Live. **Real faith doesn't just believe the truth—it lives the truth.**

Receive the Word with a Teachable Heart

James 1:19-21 NIV

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, 20 because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. 21 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.

- You know I regularly challenge you to be reading the Word of God on your own. And in order for the Word to really impact and transform us, we must have the heart and mind attitude to receive it. There are people who read the Bible, and it does not seem to make any difference, and it does not sink in. James helps us with this.
- In this section about interacting with the Word of God, James begins with posture, our mindset when we approach and interact with the Word. This is the position of our hearts. Before he speaks about obedience, he speaks about attentiveness. "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." James is not primarily offering communication advice here, though it certainly applies to relationships. He is addressing our posture before God, how we respond when God speaks through His Word.
- To be "quick to listen" is not about speed; it is about readiness. It describes a heart that comes to Scripture expecting to be addressed, corrected, and shaped.

- We all know what selective hearing looks like. A child can hear the ice cream truck from three blocks away, but somehow cannot hear their name being called from the next room. Adults do it too. We hear affirmation clearly, but correction seems to need repeating. The issue isn't hearing ability; it's interest. James is saying the same thing spiritually. The problem is not that we cannot hear God's Word; the problem is that we do not always *welcome* it.
- That is why James says we must be "slow to speak." This confronts our instinct to interrupt God, to explain, qualify, justify, or defend ourselves before we have actually listened. Many of us are far more practiced at talking to God than listening to Him. We pray easily, but we listen selectively. James urges restraint. Listening requires patience. It requires silence. It requires submission.
- Then James adds, "slow to become angry," because anger is often the signal that listening has stopped. Anger surfaces when Scripture presses on our will, exposes our pride, or challenges our habits. We fight back against it, or try to rationalize what it says, or try to change the Word instead of changing our thoughts or actions. James is clear: human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires. Anger hardens the heart, and a hardened heart cannot receive the Word.
- So James calls for the removal of the things that keep us from receiving the Word as it is. "Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent." The imagery is vivid. James is describing the deliberate stripping away of what contaminates the heart. There are sins, patterns, and attachments that actively resist the Word. Unless those are removed, the Word will not take root. This calls for self-examination and repentance. This is the hard and transformative work of the Spirit, and we must give ourselves over to it so that we will be changed, healed, and made whole.
- James tells us that we must "humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you." The Word is not merely external instruction; it has been planted within us. The same Word that gave us new birth continues to shape, rescue, and restore us. This literally means it can lead us to salvation, and in order for it to do so, the Word must be welcomed. It must be received with humility, not resistance.
- Before James ever tells us what to do, he tells us how to listen—because obedience begins with a teachable heart. We must ask God for this and pray for the same in others. Humility and obedience towards the Word, recognizing that it is "above you," will lead you towards becoming like Christ. Whereas a posture of pride and self-justification towards the Word, thinking that the Word is "beneath us," will lead us to become an unchanged, self-justified, puffed-up Pharisee or Sadducee.
- May God grant us all teachable, humble hearts when we interact with the Word of God.

Respond to the Word with Obedient Faith

James 1:22-25 NIV

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. 23 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror 24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. 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.

- James now moves from posture to response. “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” James names a uniquely religious danger: self-deception. This is not ignorance. This is believing everything is fine when it is not.
- Listening to Scripture feels productive. It feels spiritual. But hearing without responding creates illusion, not transformation. Knowledge without obedience dulls the conscience rather than sharpening it.
- James illustrates this with the image of a mirror. God’s Word reveals reality. It shows us who we are, our sin, our misalignment, our need for change. The problem is not that the mirror is unclear. The problem is walking away unchanged.
- We often want Scripture to function like a window; something we look *through* to evaluate the world and other people. James insists Scripture is a mirror, something we look *into* so that we must deal with ourselves. The danger is not misunderstanding the Word; the danger is using it everywhere except where it is meant to work first.
- James contrasts that with the one who “looks intently” into the Word and “continues in it.” This person lingers. He stays under Scripture’s authority. He allows the Word to examine him as much as he examines the Word. It might be a really good reminder for us to glue a small mirror piece to the cover of our Bibles.
- James calls Scripture “the perfect law that gives freedom.” That sounds backwards to us. We often associate law with restriction and freedom with autonomy (doing whatever we want to do). James insists that obedience liberates because it aligns us with true reality. God’s Word frees us from the slavery of sin and self-deception and positions us to walk in the way of true life and freedom.
- Think of it like a medical diagnosis. Imagine going to a doctor, receiving an accurate diagnosis and a clear treatment plan, nodding in agreement—and then never taking the medication or getting treatment. The problem was not the diagnosis. The problem was not with the doctor. The problem was that nothing changed. James says that hearing God’s Word without obedience does not leave us neutral; it leaves us untreated and in the same condition we were in before, which will only get worse over time if it is not addressed.
- James is clear: we are not blessed by what we know. We are blessed by what we live, what we do. Faith that saves is faith that acts, not perfectly, but genuinely. Real faith is expressed in the Word, shaping our thoughts, attitudes, and actions.
- May God help us to receive the Word with teachable, humble hearts, and to respond to the Word with obedient faith. In this, we will receive the blessing that comes from God through His Word.

Live the Word with Visible Faith

James 1:26-27 NIV

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. 27 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.

- James now brings everything down into everyday life. He has pressed us to hear the Word, to receive the Word, and to do the Word. Now he shows us what faith looks like when the Word has truly taken root.
- First, James points to our speech. “Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves.” James begins here because our words

are often the quickest and clearest indicator of what is happening in our hearts. Scripture consistently makes this connection. Proverbs tells us that “the tongue has the power of life and death” (Prov 18:21), and Jesus himself said, “Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt 12:34).

- James is not saying our words *create* our hearts. He is saying our words *reveal* them. Pressure reveals contents. When we are tired, disappointed, or under stress, what comes out of our mouths exposes what is still in our hearts.
- That is why James later says the tongue cannot be tamed apart from a transformed heart. A faith that never reshapes our speech has not yet reshaped our lives. When praise and bitterness, worship and contempt flow easily from the same mouth, James says something is deeply wrong. As Jesus warned, “By your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt 12:36-37). Our words are an indication of our hearts. Lord help us to seriously examine them, not just what is coming out of our mouths, but what is contained in our hearts.
- Second, James points to compassion. “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress.” These are not random examples. Throughout Scripture, orphans and widows represent those with no leverage, no protection, no power, and no ability to repay kindness. God repeatedly identifies himself as their defender. He calls himself “a father to the fatherless and a defender of widows” (Ps 68:5), and the prophets rebuked God’s people whenever worship was disconnected from care for the vulnerable.
- James echoes and reinforces these thoughts. Faith that remains thought, theology, or theory, but never moves toward people in need, is not the faith Scripture describes or endorses. God calls us to care for people, especially the most vulnerable, those at a distance, and those who are up close. Jesus made this unmistakably clear when he said that whatever we do for “the least of these,” we do for him (Matt 25:40). James is not defining faith by what we claim to value, but by who we actually move toward in practice.
- Finally, James points to holiness. “And to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” True faith does not only move outward in mercy; it also moves inward in discernment. The word James uses here refers to something that stains and clings. James is not calling believers to withdraw from the world, but to live in it without being shaped by it. Scripture consistently makes this same call, urging us not to conform to the pattern of this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom 12:2, see also 2 Cor 6:17, 1 John 2:15-17, James 4.4).
- Holiness is not isolation from the world; it is allowing the good of God in us to change the world in a Godward direction, not to have the evil in the world to change us in a sinful direction.
- James gives us a whole-life picture of authentic Christianity. Faith shows up in our words, in our mercy, and in our character. These are not optional extras. They are the natural fruit of a life shaped by the Word of God. As Jesus said, “By their fruit you will recognize them” (Matt 7:16).

Conclusion

- This is where James leaves us, not with a checklist, but with a mirror. He is not asking whether we *say* the right things or whether we *believe* the right things. He is asking whether the Word of God has actually taken hold of our lives.
- Which leads us to the unavoidable question: **What happens to God’s Word once it reaches you?** Does it stop at hearing? Does it stall at agreement? Does it break down in

argument? Or does it move all the way into our hearts and then is reflected in our speech, compassion, and holiness?

- James has been clear from the beginning. Faith that listens but does not live is not finished faith. And so, as we come to the end of this passage, James presses us one final time, not to try harder, but to take God's Word seriously enough to let it change us. This takes humility, asking for help from the Holy Spirit.
- The Lord is not looking for just informed hearers; He is looking for obedient disciples. The Word of God has been planted in you. The question is not whether the seed is alive, but whether the soil is good for the seed to thrive.
- Are we listening with humility? Responding with obedience? Living with visible faith?
- This passage does not crush us; it shows us the truth and offers us a reflection of true reality. And it points us to Jesus, the One who perfectly heard the Father, spoke words of grace and truth, moved toward the vulnerable, and remained unstained by the world. And now, by His Spirit, He lives in us.
- So do not merely hear the Word, let it take root in the soil of your soul so that it will produce fruit in you and through you, for the glory of God and the good of all.

Our prayer team is available to pray with you after the service, near the “prayer” sign at the front of the sanctuary, and in the prayer room next to the offices. Also, you can send your prayer request to prayer@crosspointrockford.com

Questions for Growth Groups

1. James is not primarily asking whether we believe God's Word, but what happens after we hear it. Where do you most often see a breakdown for yourself: at hearing, receiving, responding, or living?
2. James emphasizes posture before action: “quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry.” Which of these is most challenging for you when interacting with God's Word, and why?
3. The sermon described how anger, defensiveness, or self-justification can harden our hearts toward Scripture. What are some subtle ways you've noticed yourself resisting God's Word rather than receiving it humbly?
4. James compares God's Word to a mirror, not a window. Can you share an example of a time when Scripture exposed something in you that required a response rather than just reflection?
5. The sermon emphasized that we are not blessed by what we know, but by what we do. How do you guard against the danger of spiritual self-deception, feeling spiritually healthy without corresponding obedience?
6. James gives three visible expressions of living faith: speech, compassion, and holiness. Which of these do you sense the Holy Spirit inviting you to examine more closely right now?
7. The conclusion asked whether the “soil” of our hearts is receptive to the Word that has been planted. What practical step could you take this week to cultivate healthier soil for God's Word to take root and bear fruit?