

# Hearing and Doing the Word

Bible Background • JAMES 1:19–27

Printed Text • JAMES 1:19–27 | Devotional Reading • 1 CORINTHIANS 1:26–31

## Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: **REALIZE** the proof of wisdom is not just in what we say, but what we do, **EXPRESS** compassion for those who are most vulnerable and desire to act on their behalf, and **ENGAGE** in ministry that demonstrates the religion that James describes.

## In Focus

Julian looked out the window as the car pulled away from the police station. He turned and stared at the back of his father’s head. He started to say, “Dad ...?”—but caught a glimpse of his father’s face in the rear-view mirror: stern and angry. He thought better of it. His father always kept silent when he was really angry.

Julian slumped in the back seat. He and his buddies Trent, Conrad, and Vinny had gone out carousing at a bar in the neighborhood where they met Norris, an upperclassman from a rival fraternity. What began as friendly trash-talking turned into not-so-friendly insults, with Julian making the worst of them. Trent told him to back down, but Julian wouldn’t listen. Soon, the argument turned into a fight.

Julian knew how lucky he was that the worst this run-in with the police got him was a court date. He hated to think how his mom reacted when she heard he had been arrested. Julian was almost too embarrassed to breathe when he made phone call to his father to bail him out. Dad always told him to keep a cool head and to think before he spoke. “Son, people will remember you by what you say, but they will know you by what you do,” his father always said.

Julian knew what he first had to say. “Dad?” he said. “I’m sorry.”

*Anger shuts down conversation and gets in the way of relationships. How do we put anger in its proper place?*

## Keep in Mind

“But don’t just listen to God’s word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves” (James 1:22, NLT).

## Words You Should Know

**A. Naughtiness** (v. 21) kakia (Gk.) — Malignity, malice, ill will, desire to injure

**B. Undefined** (v. 27) amiantos (Gk.) — Free from deformity and debasement, having full force and vigor

## Say It Correctly

**Engrafted.** en-GRAFT-ed.

## KJV

**James 1:19** Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath:  
20 For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.  
21 Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.  
22 But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.  
23 For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass:  
24 For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was.  
25 But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.  
26 If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain.  
27 Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

## NLT

**James 1:19** Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry.  
20 Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires.  
21 So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls.  
22 But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves.  
23 For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror.  
24 You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like.  
25 But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.  
26 If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless.  
27 Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.

## The People, Places, and Times

**Widows and Orphans.** In the Mosaic Law, special regard was given to widows and orphans. They were partly dependent on family, especially the eldest son, who received a double portion of the inheritance. They also participated in the third type of tithe, which occurred every three years (Deuteronomy 26:12–13); in gleaning produce left in the field (24:19–21); and in religious feasts (16:14). God proclaimed Himself “married” to the widow and orphan (Psalm 68:5) and condemned those who oppressed them (Malachi 3:5). The New Testament church continued to support widows, though Paul instructed that the younger ones try to remarry.

*Do widows and orphans still require the church's special care today? If so, how do we best help them?*

## Background

James, the half-brother of Jesus, was among the early leaders of the church and was based in Jerusalem. Although the epistle of James is placed toward the end of the New Testament, it is actually the first letter of instruction written to the church—thus the first book of the New Testament written. The primary audience for this epistle was the Christian Jews spread across the world due to persecution in Jerusalem and Rome because of their faith in Christ. The major theme of James' letter is to offer instruction for godly living in the midst of a self-indulgent world. This letter is viewed as a book of wisdom and instruction for Jewish believers. James

appealed for his fellow believers to join outward actions with their inward faith. Scholars believe that James wrote this epistle in the mid-40s AD around the time of the council in Jerusalem (Acts 15). He was one of the first martyrs of the church, executed in AD 62.

### **At-A-Glance**

1. Behaving the Word (James 1:19–20)
2. Living by the Word (vv. 21–25)
3. Representing the Word (vv. 26–27)

## **In Depth**

### **1. Behaving the Word (James 1:19–20)**

In proverb fashion, James instructs believers to “be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath” (v. 19). This letter is written early in the church’s life. The believers are facing persecution for their faith in Jesus Christ. As James offers up his instruction, he most likely bases it on a combination of wisdom Scriptures such as Proverbs 10:19, 4:17, 19, and Ecclesiastes 5:2. Wisdom literature was captured by scribes and passed down orally as Jews met in the synagogues and talked in their homes. James takes the practicality of the proverbs and 1. Behaving the Word (James 1:19–20) 2. Living by the Word (vv. 21–25) 3. Representing the Word (vv. 26–27) relates them to his audience, who also would have heard such lessons as they were growing up. The purpose of reviving such language and instruction in the culture of his day is to usher in a new era (the reign of the kingdom of God) with wisdom from the old. He takes the time to remind them in the midst of persecution and rejection to be patient, seek God for His wisdom, trust God in the midst of trial, and act honorably to best represent their faith in Christ. Also, because his audience is scattered abroad and this letter is most likely written in Greek, James suspects that these believers might be influenced away from their Jewish roots.

He reminds them of those teachings that should influence their behavior, as well as incorporates Jesus’ teachings on how to handle mistreatment and anger (Matthew 5:38–41, 47). James reminds readers that anger does not produce the righteous living that God desires from His people (James 1:20). It does not work in our favor or God’s when we are unable to control our emotions. God is patient and longsuffering with us; therefore, we must do the same for others. Jesus Himself said that offense will come (Matthew 18:7), but it takes the wisdom of God to remain Spirit-led in the midst of adversity and trials. When we act on the principles James outlines—being quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath, limiting anger—then we can make good decisions, keep our relationships intact, and glorify God.

*In your adult life have you remembered or been reminded of a lesson you learned from when you were a child?*

### **2. Living by the Word (vv. 21–25)**

James continues his discourse by providing additional instruction on managing one’s emotions. He appeals to readers to put away worldly lifestyles and behaviors to welcome humility and gladness the Word of God that had planted inside them by the Holy Spirit. He emphasizes that it is by receiving the truth as revealed through Jesus Christ that souls are saved. As the Word of God is planted into hearts, it brings about transformation into the true kingdom living and God’s ways of doing and being. Similarly, Paul wrote that Christians are not to be influenced or live by the patterns and dictates of the world’s system but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:1–2). Only then can we know what is the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God. Likewise, James, whose letter is a forerunner to Paul’s writings, instructs believers to live above reproach. It is important to the early church leaders that Christians live counter to their culture so as to best represent the power of God on earth. Key to the successful reflection of God’s love and grace is to bear the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23). To be doers of the word and not hearers only (v. 22) means to put the engrafted Word of

God into practical application. James said that if we are hearers of the Word and not doers, we only deceive ourselves.

James uses an illustration to further drive home his point of how one can engage in selfdeception about righteous living (vv. 23–24). When a person looks in a mirror, he or she sees an image for a moment, but when away from the mirror, the image is forgotten. The Word of God is our mirror to remind us that without Christ, our image is out of focus. Only when we look in the mirror of the Word and see the righteousness of Christ are we reminded what we are supposed to look like. The Word of God reminds us that we are in Christ but still growing into the knowledge of Him—which requires us to be diligent in study, fervent in prayer, and quick to obey. James went on to say that those who look into the perfect law of liberty, which is freedom in Christ, will live by the Word and be blessed.

*How have you seen or heard of people blaming Christians for not living out their faith?*

### **3. Representing the Word (vv. 26–27)**

James defines what real religion looks like for his audience by providing two contrasting images. He says that those who proclaim to be devout in their beliefs and actions but are unable to control their mouths only deceive themselves. James emphasizes that religion that does not reflect God’s heart is in vain. In other words, it is not enough to give outward expressions of devotion to God when one’s lifestyle does not reflect one’s words. Attending church every Sunday, paying tithes, and serving in ministry should be done out of loving obedience to God and in gratitude for salvation through Jesus Christ, but it is all for nothing if there is no true transformation of the heart. Our works should express our love and reverence and not be a mere duty. God does not want us to pay lip service to love Him; He wants our love to be genuine and thus expressed in how we live and what we do.

James further explains that “pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction” (from James 1:27). God is always intentional in wanting His people to live selflessly by caring for the needs of others. Showing mercy to those who are marginalized is true religion—devotion to God—in practice. In the culture of the early church, those who had no one to care for them had no means to move out of their social station. The love of God is so great that He made provision for them through those called by His name. God always commanded His people to care for the least, and Jesus was intentional to bring His ministry to the poorest of the population.

James closes this part of the discourse by stressing that believers should keep themselves “unspotted” from the world, not allowing the world’s way of living to be their marker. Only through active participation with the Holy Spirit can one live a life that is unspotted, unstained from the world. As Christians, we are not to live according to the world’s standards, which run contrary to the Word of God; instead, we are to reflect the living Word, Jesus Christ, who came to do the will of Him who sent Him (John 5:30).

*Examine yourself to see if your participation in church is done in love or obligation. What do you need to change to perform your ministries out of love again?*

### **Search the Scriptures**

1. How does James advise believers to behave (James 1:19)?
2. How does James recommend believers use the Word of God (v. 22)?

### **Discuss the Meaning**

1. Discuss what true religion looks like in today’s context. How would James evaluate the body of Christ today? What would he say about how we treat widows and orphans?
2. How does one remain unspotted from the world in today’s culture? Is it possible?

## **Liberating Lesson**

At one time or another, we are all guilty of only talking a good game when it comes to living according to godly principles, representing the best of Christ in our sphere of influence, being concerned about the world around us and having great intentions on being more helpful to those in need. In today's lesson, James calls us to not just be hearers of the Word but also to carry it out in our everyday lives in our thoughts and deeds. Often, we can get stuck because there is so much to be done; it can be an overwhelming task to change the world—let alone ourselves! When we embrace change in baby steps, taking one action at a time and doing it consistently, transformation takes place.

## **Application for Activation**

Really listen for God's instruction through the preached Word and in your time of personal devotion and Bible study. Take time to be quiet before the Lord and write down what He is speaking to you through the Holy Spirit. As you listen, take steps to move in God's direction. Make a conscious effort to assess habits, behaviors, and actions that do not line up with the Word of God. Repent, and ask the Holy Spirit to help you act differently. Be patient with yourself. Trust that God has heard you and that His Word will change your heart if you yield to His way.

## **Follow the Spirit**

What God wants me to do:

---

---

---

---

## **Remember Your Thoughts**

Special insights I have learned:

---

---

---

---

## **More Light on the Text**

### **James 1:19–27**

**19 Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: 20 For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.**

James began by acknowledging that the ones to whom he is writing were also children of God the Father and righteous Judge. Therefore, there exists a bond of love between Him and them. It is from that sense of love that James admonishes the believers to remember, to hear the Word of God that had already been entrusted to them so that they would not fall under His judgment. James knows that a zealotlike fervor for rebellion is sweeping throughout the region, and many are being influenced by its call for violence against Rome. He does not want those who follow Christ to be caught up in the hostility and anger in the same manner as those who do not belong to the risen Lord. God's Word is powerful. It has the ability to change hearts and affect the character, but it should not be shared hastily with others until its work in the hearer is evident. James also admonished believers to be slow to wrath (Gk. *orge*, or-GAY; any violent emotion, especially anger), so that, by their lives and actions, they would demonstrate that a different message is at work in their hearts. James understands that people's anger inhibits the development of God's righteous work within him.

**21 Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.**

Evil flows from within us and expresses itself in our actions toward others. James instructs the believers to put off all “filthiness” (Gk. rhuparia, roo-pah-REE-ah; defilement or dishonor) as though it were a dirty, useless garment. The work of righteousness would then begin to show itself and help to empower the believers to hold in check their abundance (KJV: “superfluity”) of “naughtiness” (Gk. kakia, kah-KEE-ah; malignity, malice, ill will, desire to injure). Such a state can only be accomplished in believers when they welcome the Word of God with true humility. God’s Word then attaches itself to the very core fabric of our being and begins the work of transforming our evil nature into one pleasing to our righteous God and Savior.

**22 But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. 23 For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: 24 For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was.**

James’ admonition for believers is to demonstrate to others how the Word of God is at work within them. They are to do this by the way they live before others and by making a habit of doing the Word. Living out the Word of God in this fashion also provides evidence for the believers that they are not pretending or playing at being righteous, thereby deluding themselves. James offers the analogy of one looking at his face in a mirror (KJV: “glass”). The best mirrors of the day were made out of Corinthian brass, but the image reflected back was often distorted. It would have been easy, then, for the individual to look at the reflection of the face he has had since birth (Gk. genesis, GHEH-neh-sees, “natural”) but then turn away and forget what he looks like or what he had become.

**25 But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.**

James contrasts the natural man with the spiritual man (see John 3:6). The Word of God, which produces the spiritual man, perfects the law and sets man free from his sinful nature or natural self. But in order for the Word of God to have its desired effect, believers need to “continueth” (Gk. parameno, pah-rah- MEH-no; to always be near) in that Word. The act of gazing intently into the Word of God enables believers to retain the image of what the Holy Spirit is producing within them. The blessing for the believer is founded upon the actions that flow from the changed life that is the product of the Holy Spirit’s work. This blessing manifests itself in the deeds of the believer that are a result of having built inwardly upon the solid ground of the Word of God.

**26 If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man’s religion is vain.**

For James, true religion is evidenced by the fruit that religion produces in the individual. A true believer, one who has permitted the Word of God to take root within themselves, will not be like the zealots who made uncontrolled and impassioned speeches against Roman occupation. Instead, that person will “bridleth” (Gk. chalinagoge, khah-LEE-nah-go-GEH-oh; to hold in check or restrain) his tongue. The word that James uses for “religious” (Gk. threskos, thrace-KOCE) refers to giving scrupulous attention to the details of worship. This would include being careful of one’s actions and one’s speech when involved in religious activities. However, if one does not control his tongue when not engaging in religious activities, then that individual is only deceiving his own “heart” (Gk. kardia, kar-DEE-ah; the center and seat of spiritual life). For that individual, religion is in “vain” (Gk. mataios, MAH-tie-occe), which means his religion is useless and of no purpose.

**27 Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.**

James closes his counsel by explaining to believers that the type of religion that pleases God is both “pure” (Gk. katharos, kah-thah- ROCE; free from corrupt desire, sin, and guilt) and “undefiled” (Gk. amiantos, ah-MEE-antocce; free from deformity and debasement, having full force and vigor). The evidence that one possesses a religion that merits God’s favor is found through the actions of caring for (KJV: “visiting”) the fatherless and

widows in times of distress, actions that reflect the work of the Holy Spirit on one's character. By encouraging believers to show concern for widows and the fatherless, James is reminding them that their heavenly Father identified Himself as the God of the fatherless and the widow (Psalm 68:5).

# Daily Bible Readings

## MONDAY

Impartial Relationships with One Another  
(Leviticus 19:13–18)

## TUESDAY

Praised for Steadfast Faith in Persecution  
(2 Thessalonians 1:3–5, 11–12)

## WEDNESDAY

The Poor Blessed; the Rich Criticized  
(Luke 6:20–26)

## THURSDAY

Suffering for Doing the Right Thing  
(1 Peter 3:13–19)

## FRIDAY

God's Choice—the Foolish, Weak, Lowly  
(1 Corinthians 1:26–31)

## SATURDAY

Treat the Rich and Poor Impartially  
(James 2:1–7)

## SUNDAY

The Wise Hear and Do Good  
(James 1:19–27)