

# **(SUNDAY) How The Mature Receive Wisdom—James 1:19-26**

**19 Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. 21 Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.**

**22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 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. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. 25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.**

**26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.  
(James 1:19–27, ESV)**

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In our previous study of James, we heard James's frank explainer on the anatomy of sin. Desires are enticed by temptation—and when the desire conceives, it gives birth to sin which, when fully grown, brings forth death (1:14-15). But James did not think our corrupted desires inevitably set the course of our destiny. Instead, he saw believers as children whom God birthed by his word of truth (1:17-18). Every good and perfect gift flows from the Father of lights to his children so they can become mature. This maturation

process will lead to the transformation of our desires, which leads James to teach us how that transformation comes.

For James, a major source of transformation is God's wisdom. He has already presented God as the ultimate source of wisdom, especially the kind of wisdom that's needed in the type of hard times his audience lived in, but now he declares a bit more about where God's wisdom is found (1:5-8). As I said, James already alluded to God's "word of truth" (1:18). In this brief section, James goes on to refer to God's word of truth as the implanted word, meaning it is like a seed within each believer that can grow up to produce orchards of fruit in the form of godly character and gospel impact (1:21). James also referred to God's word as the perfect law, and the law of liberty, meaning it is truth that sets us free like the original law set Israel free from Egypt (1:21, 25).

So James envisioned God as a loving Father who stands ready to shape his children with his voice. He is ready to make us wise, strengthen us against error, and stand with us as we grow into maturity. A good dad is there to teach his kids to tie their shoelaces when they are young and how to make a budget when they are older. In a similar way, our heavenly Father is ready to shape us into further and deeper levels of maturity, and he wants to do this over the course of the entirety of our natural lives. And James sees God's word as a chief instrument in that maturation process.

So it's clear that James viewed the word as from God, potentially liberating, and able to transform. But how? How does the mature person receive the wisdom of God's word? How does it get into their bloodstream? How does it become their new operating system? How does God's wisdom become second nature?

# Hear It (1:19-21)

**19 Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. 21 Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. (James 1:19–21, ESV)**

The mature person receives wisdom by hearing the wisdom of God's word. By calling it the *implanted* word, James gives us a massive hint at how he sees God's word. He thinks of it like Jesus did when he gave the parable of the sower. The farmer sowed his seed on four types of ground, and only one type of soil bore lasting fruit (Matt. 13:1-23). The seed of God's word has everything required within it to bring forth a great harvest in our lives, but the soil of our hearts must be ready to receive it. James saw the word of God this way.

And as James unfolds his exhortations regarding our interaction with the Father's word and wisdom, he does not spend his time on tactics but on the heart. In other words, you might expect him to break down some best practices for interacting with the word: talks on Bible reading plans, tips for journaling, and exhortations to Scripture memorization. But James doesn't go there. We can safely assume James would be in favor of all those tactics, but he knows that if the heart is not prepared, the tactics will eventually lose their energy. So James went straight for our heart attitudes when we approach the word.

In the Old Testament story of David, there was a long period when he was on the run from an insane king named Saul. David was innocent, and his sweet character and previous victories in battle drew many warriors to his side. One day, as he sat encamped with his men, he began longing out loud for a drink from the water of his hometown springs (2 Sam. 23:15). When his three mightiest men heard his words, they formed a pact and went to risk their lives to bring David a jug filled with that water. There was such a strong bond between the future king and his men, and they hung on his every word. They were hungry for his word and humble as they responded to it. They couldn't wait to hear what he said. Nothing he asked of them was beneath them. Even a slight suggestion or vocalized dream was enough to drive them to action. James's vision of the mature person is similar to David's mighty men. The mature are hungry for the word and have humility as they approach the word—they are quick to hear it, slow to speak arguments against it, and slow to defensive anger about it (1:19).

Maturity cannot be found without the Father's wisdom, so we must be quick to hear his wisdom, desiring eagerly to see what he has to say. Maturity cannot be found without the Father's wisdom, so we must be slow to speak in response, meaning our first reflex is to allow the word to confront, correct, and challenge our thinking. Maturity cannot be found without the Father's wisdom, so we must be slow to anger when we hear the Father's voice, meaning we are not defensive and self-justifying, nor are we surprised and angry when others don't live up to God's wisdom (1:19).

How about you? Are you humbly hungry for your Father's voice? Any dad will tell you how amazing it is when their children's hearts are soft towards them. When a child becomes humble, hungry for parental guidance and direction,

wisdom can take root and maturity can develop. Let's grow as a people who are quick to hear our Father's wisdom, slow to speak our objections to our Father's wisdom, and slow to be angry or defensive about his honest wisdom for our lives.

You might need to begin with the knowledge that, as James said, the righteousness of God can't be produced by unrighteous anger. James isn't talking about a right standing with God, but right living before the world. You just can't live the righteous life based on your own thoughts and wisdom. You must tap into the Father's wisdom by humbly accepting it.

And you might need to, as James said, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness so you can receive the word (1:21). If we want life for our souls, we must remove every obstacle that gets in the way of the word (1:21). So we weed the garden of our hearts as we feed on the nutrients of our Father's wisdom. We look inward to find practices and inputs that are choking out the power of the seed of the word, and we continually put away those practices and inputs so we can hear our Father's voice.

# Practice It

## (1:22-25)

**22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 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. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. 25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing. (James 1:22–25, ESV)**

The mature person receives wisdom by practicing the wisdom of God's word. It's in this section we learn a bit more about James's view of the Father's wisdom or word—he calls it the perfect law of liberty (1:25). He has more to say on this concept in a couple of paragraphs later in his letter, but for now we can say that James thought of God's word as something that liberates, something to be obeyed and something that is without error. Jesus said the law should not be ignored, and James held that same view (see Matt. 5:17-20).

To understand his view of the word, one must consider the first installment of the law and the liberty that was attached to it. After their radical and miraculous exodus from Egypt, God gave the law to his people at Mt. Sinai. Observance of God's law would make them into a different people who could serve as a kingdom of priests introducing the nations to God (Ex. 19:5-6). But it was a law that set them free. Egypt and Egypt's ways had been grooved into them; their synapses had been reshaped by centuries of Egyptian culture and slavery. They needed a new law, a new rule for life, that could rewire their mentality and bring them to freedom. So God gave them the Ten and many other laws to help them live in the freedom he had won for them.

And to James, acting on the Father's wisdom, this perfect law of liberty, leads to a blessing—he will be blessed in his doing, James said (1:25). So we must be doers of the word, and not hearers only (1:22). One cannot, of course, do the word unless they hear it, and James has just told us how important hearing it

is, but all that hearing must lead to action. As Jesus said, "Blessed...are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:28).

James's logic might make us think of Jesus' concluding words to his Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:24-27). To hear the word and do it is to be like a man who built his house on the rock while hearing the word and neglecting it is to be like a man who built his house on the sand. When the storm came, each house experienced totally different outcomes. The house on the rock—the person who acted out the word—stood in the storm. The house on the sand—the person who neglected the word—fell hard in the storm.

Do you see obedience to the Father's wisdom as something that leads to blessing? This takes us back to James's concept of God as the Father of lights from whom comes every good and every perfect gift (1:17). Do you see the life God wills for his children as a life of blessing, or do you perceive him as keeping good and perfect gifts from his children by asking them to live such miserable lives of obedience? I want to be clear that I'm not talking about obedience to various forms of legalism or extra-biblical church customs, things Christians have picked up along the way that have nothing to do with the Bible, but the wisdom the Father gives us in his word.

And if acting on the Father's wisdom leads to a blessing, inaction leads to self-deception. James said we deceive ourselves when all we do is hear the word without obedience. He used a metaphor of a man gazing at his natural face in a mirror, only to forget what he looks like after walking away (1:23-24). This is what it's like when the mirror of God's word is held up to our lives, and we walk away unchanged: we study it, take notes about it, say amen to it, and then walk away without any intention of obeying it.

There is a devastating line in Ezekiel that addresses this same situation. Like many of the prophets, Ezekiel was not widely received by his generation. He fascinated people, but not many heeded his warnings. At one point, God told him that people were talking about him and his message in their homes, inviting each other to go listen to the prophet. But God said, "So my people come pretending to be sincere and sit before you. They listen to your words, but they have no intention of doing what you say...You are very entertaining to them, like someone who sings love songs with a beautiful voice or plays fine music on an instrument. They hear what you say, but they don't act on it!"(Ezekiel 33:31–32, NLT).

But James gives us hope with his words. Contrary to the defeatist attitudes of many modern believers, we aren't destined to lives of disobedience but of progressive transformation as we persevere in the word (1:25). There will be plenty of failures, but by his grace, we can walk with him in obedience. Just as Jesus told the man with the withered hand to stretch it out, knowing that his power would meet the man in his obedience, God's power is there for us when we step out to obey (Mark 3:1-6).

# Expect

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# (1:26-27)

26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is



**pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (James 1:26–27, ESV)**

The mature person receives wisdom by expecting the wisdom of God's word to produce something in their life. You have likely heard the Christian maxim, "It's not a religion, but a relationship." James comes along, however, and says there are definite marks of religion that is pure and undefiled before God that anyone who thinks he is religious should pay attention to (1:26-27).

What is James saying? To understand James, we must acknowledge that he uses a different definition of "religion" than we do. It's not a word you will find very often in the Bible—in these two verses, James doubled its usage in Scripture. And when James used it, he was not giving us a comprehensive list of every spiritual practice endorsed in the Bible, but a general picture of what a heart relationship with God is bound to produce.

In other words, he is not saying that Christianity can be boiled down to loving orphans and widows. There are three complementary attributes mentioned in just this paragraph—controlled speech, care for the hurting, and personal godliness—and the rest of James and the Bible tell us so much more about what a walk with God looks like. So don't stop praying, attending church, reading the word, serving, or giving just yet.

James expects a relationship with God to produce these three religious outworkings. First, he expected a relationship with the Father's wisdom to produce controlled speech. He said the person whose religion does not help them bridle their tongue has a worthless religion (1:26). This is real talk coming

from James—the heart is deceptive, telling us that we are pretty holy even while we decimate people near and far with our words.

I got a good laugh out of one scholar who ranted in 2008 about the modern ways people practice unbridled speech: "In this age of quasi-illiterate text-messaging, out-of-control email, overused cell phones, endless personal websites, blogsites and "facebook," and the inanity of most of what is posted on [myspace.com](http://myspace.com), it is easy to spend large amounts of time producing or imbibing just vain drive!"<sup>1</sup> If he only knew! It hasn't gotten any better!

Second, James expected a relationship with the Father's wisdom to produce practical care for the hurting in our churches and societies. He said pure and undefiled religion visits orphans and widows in their affliction (1:27). In that ancient society, widows and orphans had little means of support, so the church needed to do its best to alleviate their pain. James will talk more about the practical care Christians should give to others later in his letter, but this concept flows perfectly with the crux of Micah's exhortations from the Old Testament era.

He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?  
(Micah 6:8)

Pastor Mike Casey has a core story that has helped shape his ministry. In the fictitious tale, two men are walking along the shoreline while talking to each other. On the sandy beach, thousands of starfish had washed ashore. As they walked, one man kept picking up a starfish here and there, throwing them back into the water. The other man challenged him: "Look at all these starfish.

You aren't making any difference!" The other picked up another and threw it into the water. "Yeah, but I just made a difference to that one," he said.

Finally, James expected a relationship with the Father's wisdom to produce personal godliness. He said the mature must keep oneself unstained from the world (1:27).

What a robust person James envisioned! Their inner heart has been so changed and transformed that they have great control over their words. Their actions are loving and sacrificial as they help people in need. And they have a healthy relationship with the world, walking through it and its challenges without being stained by it.

They have heard the word. They constantly practice the word. And this is the amazing result of the word. Their Father's wisdom has shaped them. You've heard the phrase, "like father, like son," and that's precisely what James has described. Let's go get our Father's wisdom!

[1] Blomberg, Craig L., and Mariam J. Kamell. James. Zondervan, 2008.