

Faith That Works: Accept The Word Planted In You
By Jason Huff
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Jeremiah 7:1-7; Luke 6:46-49; James 1:19-27

Our final Scripture reading today comes from James 1:19-27. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect word. “My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. 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. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it-- he will be blessed in what he does. If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his 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.”

Is being blunt a strength or a weakness? Depends on who you talk to. We use a lot of couched language in American English. No one dies; they pass away. Disabilities apparently don't exist anymore; they're just “challenges.” Sometimes gentle language is really helpful when someone has felt attacked or demeaned. All too often, we have a tendency to rush in like a bull at a china shop and destroy relationships with a few badly-chosen words.

And yet, bluntness can also be a gift. You need to scream “STOP!” at a child about to cross a busy intersection, not just, “Well, please don't do that.” Sometimes, bluntness cuts through to what's really important. When someone's really bad with money, suggesting a few cuts here and there isn't going to do it when foreclosure is on the horizon. The question, then, is when to be gentle and when to be bold, when to say something and when to say silent.

Today, James speaks plainly, boldly, and bluntly about when to speak at all and what to do with the Word of God. Most of what he says makes perfect sense even now, without a lot of further explanation. (His comments about widows and orphans is curious, and we'll get to that in a minute.) But just because he says it plainly doesn't mean that we easily accept it. We need to study James' message today so that it doesn't just become something we sluff off. His instructions to believers are just as relevant today as they were when they were written.

James starts this section again with his favorite name for his readers – his dear brothers and sisters. He loves us and so he tells us what we need to hear, and he addresses his comments to us as believers. These directives are not for the world at large; they are for the church. They are for the people of God to live as God intends for us to live. Take note, James says, this is important.

“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. 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.” Wow. I don't think we've ever been in more great need of that verse right there. “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.”

Let's give this verse a little context. The political world of James' day was volatile. The Jewish people had been vocally opposed to Roman rule for a long time, but in the era after Jesus, the language got fierce. Remember that within roughly 20-30 years of James' letter, if not less, Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple obliterated, over a million people massacred, because the angry talk against Roman rule built and built and built until there was an outright rebellion that Caesar's forces utterly demolished. We saw in our study of Acts how angry words forced believers out of synagogues and towns, and how that anger turned Saul before his conversion into a persecutor of Christians. No matter what position you held, Jew or Christian, pro-Israel or pro-Roman, there was plenty of debate, plenty to be angry about.

Yet James says, be quick to listen. Take time to hear what others have to say, and really listen – not just waiting for your chance to speak, but attempting to understand another point of view. Be slow to speak – not every situation where you can speak, you should speak. And be slow to anger, because human anger isn't compatible with the godly life of righteousness. James isn't saying never be angry, but be slow to anger – when you are angry, it needs to be for the sake of the Kingdom of God and not your own offense.

Our culture has made it so we expect we can and should say anything at any time, and that feedback should be instantaneous. Our culture, our politicians, our entertainment, makes immense amounts of money by getting people angry. We send a text, a Tweet, a post, and we worry that our Internet isn't working right if we don't get responses right away. We have created a nightmare where we are expected to be quick to speak, slow to listen, and quick to become angry. I don't think I need to detail it for us much more than we already know.

Through James, God is giving us the right way to handle things. Put down the phone. Take a break from texts and messages and emails and clickbait headlines on a regular basis. (Sundays would be a good day as a Sabbath, and more often if you have any say in the matter!) Engage with others. I recognize that I can be at serious fault here. I try to listen well, but I often listen while trying to decide what I can say next to continue the conversation. Not slow to speak.

My friend Jim down at Grosse Pointe has a curious habit, one I'm not sure I've ever discussed with him. I'll say something to him, and I'll often get a few seconds of silence afterwards. That's kind of intimidating on the phone, you know, because we expect that to be polite, we're going to hear words of affirmation that someone's listening (a yep, an I hear ya, an uh-huh) followed up immediately by a comment. Jim doesn't do that. It's taken me a while to get used to that. And yet Jim often has far better things to say in response than most folks I know because he's processing. He's literally being slow to speak and quick to listen.

I don't know if that's intentional or not. But I've seen it make a difference in how we communicate. I feel heard. And when I do, I listen better to what he has to say, too. It's not an easy habit to build, especially because it breaks some of our socially unspoken rules about having a discussion. And yet, wouldn't you like to really feel heard? Wouldn't you like to live without regret of what you said in anger and haste? I would. Let's see if we can't purposefully put this command of James' into action.

Watching our patterns of speech and anger are directly connected to us getting rid of moral filth and evil. The wording here is literally of muck and garbage; it's the stuff that you wash off your clothes after a hard day's work in the fields. The world is contaminated and contaminating. Get it off, James says! Wash off any trace of the world's gunk on you. The culture then was bad, it's worse now, get out of the muck and don't get back in, James warns.

The flip side of that is humbly accepting the word planted in you, which can save you. This is the Word of God that James and the apostles were so desperate to spread, the word of Christ's salvation, the word of new hope in the God of Israel, the word of a new teaching with authority that gives us a new way to live. We accept it in humility, not believing we can save ourselves but accepting the truth that only Christ can save us from our sin. We declare our complete dependence on Him.

In the original Greek, it reads that the Word has the power to save souls. It is not just that the word *can* save you. It's that it has the power to do so, fully, completely. Believe what you have been taught and continue in it. Read it and grow in it every day. It's God's message to you, to all His children, and through it the seed sprouts into faith that blossoms into repentance and turning to God in heart and mind and action; it becomes salvation.

Do not deny the power of God's Word. You might think you're not good at memorizing things. The Holy Spirit is your guide to God's Word, though, and if you have the Holy Spirit, you have someone who will help you with you at all times. God's Word over and over again speaks – to me, to Catha, to fellow believers, to people around the world. God's Word encourages us, convicts us, warns us, challenges us, comforts us, and through believing it we are saved for eternal life. I pray that we would all come to truly love God's Word to us.

Now for a key theme James will return to. "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." James compares those who only hear the Word of God but don't put it into practice as people who forget what they look like as soon as they look away. I've done that – have you? You think you've gotten ready for a special evening out, and you look away, and then you're looking at the mirror in the car. Did I get that hair in place just right? But it's also pretty absurd. I can't remember from the bathroom to the car what I looked like?

In the same way, if we come to church, go to Bible study, hear all the words but don't actually do them, that's absurd too. If you went to Michigan and studied electrical engineering and went to all the classes and heard all the lectures but didn't actually learn how to become an engineer or put any of that learning into practice, we'd all say it was a waste of time and money. James is saying the same thing...only it's worse, because to not practice the Word of God is to go spiritually bankrupts and risk your soul.

In comparison, though, we'll be blessed if we look into the true law of God intently, remember it, and put it into practice. James isn't talking specifically about the law of Moses; he's talking about the whole of what God has taught us through His Word. Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. Live as a devoted follower listening to the Spirit, helping those who are oppressed and in need, avoiding evil. The details are all in there. God's blessing is on anyone who is willing to practice what's been preached.

I've been amazed at the repairs I've been able to do around our home in the last few years just by watching YouTube instructions. Listen to the instructions, pay attention, follow them carefully, and voila! Toilets and drains and car doors and garage doors, all fixed! It's funny how much we are blessed when we follow basic instructions for repairs. James is saying the same thing about our souls.

I don't watch Bob Villa because I get a kick out of his show, though I imagine some people do. I watch to find out how to fix my problem. In the same way, God's Word isn't there for entertainment. It isn't there just to be heard. Nobody's saved by just hearing God's Word. We're saved by faith in that word shown by practice. And James will come back around to that very topic in a couple of weeks.

James then goes back to his original topic for a moment – “If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.” I think the word *religious* here might throw us off because the word *religion* has some negative connotations in modern society. Often people associate *religion* with people behaving badly and blaming it on their *religion*. But the word in Greek is also synonymous with devout behavior and devotion to God, and it includes worship. Does someone say he's devout but speaks without thinking all the time? Maybe he's not as holy as he thinks he is. His worship has no value to God because what he says betrays what he really thinks.

Do we think of that much? What we say not only reflects what we think, it affects what we think. When we say things, we take thoughts and make them more concrete. It's one thing to think you love someone and another to say it out loud. It's one thing to think you hate someone and another to say it out loud. If your words are not kind and thoughtful, guided by your faith and slow to anger, it affects your worship.

God doesn't accept our worship because He has to do so. God accepts worship as faithful when it reflects a genuine desire to know Him more, to reconcile with Him when we've sinned, to become closer with Him. God knows the heart. It's best if we do not assume God is happy with us just because we attend a service; instead, He's happy when we live out His ways.

So what does proper worship and devotion look like? What does God accept as pure and faultless? It's surprising because James says nothing about a worship service or a Sunday school or a Bible study. He says it is “to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” It doesn't mean those other things aren't important, but that meaningful time spent with God in worship and study will be reflected in the things you do.

I want us to take a moment to reflect on the phrase, “to look after orphans and widows in their distress.” There’s a certain sense in which we can take this literally, but we also need to go past the literal sense. In the ancient Near East, widows and orphans were the ones most vulnerable, and God shows special concern for them, mentioning care for them as part of what His people should do in the law of Moses, in the Psalms, and through the prophets.

In Israelite law (not dictated by God), women did not have the right to testify. They had no legal standing. When a husband died, his widow often was left with nothing as others in his family claimed his property. The legal courts of the day were not on the side of children, either. They needed someone to speak up for them, to help them – because not only did they lose their homes and property, with the loss of a father and husband there was already a loss of livelihood. Widows and orphans were often at the mercy of their extended families and communities, who themselves were often extremely tight on funds for the basic necessities of life.

Society has changed in countless ways since then. Some widows have plenty of money. Some orphans have family structures where they are accepted. It is not directly about those who have those qualifications. What it is about is this: *how are we serving the least, the last, and the lost in our community?* How do we care for the families where there is no father figure present, where money is constantly tight? How do we provide for those in our neighborhoods who can’t physically take care of their property? How do we show the love of Christ to those who are in some way oppressed or impoverished – financially, physically, emotionally, spiritually?

This is an area that we as CrossWay need to address. We have come together a lot to study and worship. We are good at fellowship when we have the chance! We have cared for those in our congregation when they had times of need. But what more should we be doing? We’ve often focused on our lack of a building and a place to do ministry. And yet we don’t need a place to reach out. We don’t need a place to join with others feeding the hungry or meeting needs wherever they are. Does it look like CrossWay, with our name on it? Maybe, maybe not. It doesn’t really matter. We should be making a Kingdom difference wherever we go. We should be looking for places to serve. Because that’s the kind of worship and devotion God really wants – worship that leads us to taking care of others, loving our neighbors as ourselves.

The other part of pure worship and religion is staying unpolluted by the world. Another way of saying it is pure and spotless. The world wants to suck us in, to make us like itself, full of its lusts and angers and hatreds and jealousies. Real worship is to steer clear of worldliness. That’s tough. What’s important for us to understand is that it’s not items found in the world that are worldly. A book or a song or a movie can help us worship and lead us to minister, or it can teach us to hate and lust. Friends can help guide us into a greater relationship with God, or they can steer us towards sin. In all things, may we be looking to be wise so that we can appreciate the goodness of God’s creation and the people He made without falling into the traps of the world and its ungodly desires.

Friends, as we close, may we in all things humbly accept the Word of God planted in us and live out what it says. If we do so – if we fully commit to living in the path Christ set before us – we will find our patterns of speech, thought, and action coming in line. It will take work, but we will see the benefits of living a righteous life before God and others.