

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY

(IN A TIME LIKE THIS)

Faith At Work

James 1:19-27

Charles Itseghosimhe

19 So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; 20 for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God. 21 Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of 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 observing his natural face in a mirror; 24 for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. 25 But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. 26 If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless. 27 Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

Sin presently exists and has existed since the days of James within the body of Christ. As a result, the effectiveness of Christians in the world around us has been crippled; our impact has been neutralized and our influence on the people we know has been nullified.

Many Christians have been so involved in worldliness that we do not notice how it has affected the image of Christ, our reputation, and our ability to live up to our calling.

Imagine being subjected to ridicule, criticism, injustice, corruption, including

physical and spiritual attack (*just because we are Christians*) – and we respond like for like; we pray vengeance on our attackers; we refuse to extend God's mercies to our attackers – we do not respond in a Christlike manner (**Matthew 5:44; Romans 12:17-21**).

Almost everyone knows someone who goes to church services on Sunday and participates in every way, yet lives a sinful life the other six days of the week.

We have heard some people we preach to or some work colleagues or some neighbours or some relatives say he or she goes to church but lives a life not reflecting one who has surrendered to Christ.

This is proof of the destructive power of sin in the church.

James has already dealt with the problems of trials and temptations, but now he expands on the basic theme of his epistle: *Practical Christianity! Faith that works – Working Faith makes a difference in the way we live and act.*

It is his most important presentation. One writer has said, nowhere is James richer than in this wonderful paragraph.

James gives an insight into the ongoing spiritual battle – the battle between our theory and our practice, between our hearing and our doing, and between what we believe and how we behave.

The Book of James makes it clear that real faith does make a difference in the ongoing battle and in the way one lives in his thinking, his disposition (character, temperament, etc), his language, his habits, his choice of friends, etc.

James lay strong emphasis on how much faith we have in God to give over (*release*) the control of our lives to the word or will of our Lord Jesus, and how real is our faith in allowing the word of Christ to bring about real Christian changes to our lives (*since we may claim we have released control*).

OUR RECEPTION OF THE WORD

In the text, James gets down to the bedrock of the religion of our Lord as he discusses the need for being receptive to the word of Christ (*reception of the word of Christ*).

In the physical world, most of us recognize the importance of good reception. You know how frustrating it can be when heavy rain affects our DStv reception and cause a great amount of disruption to our viewing.



There has to be good weather for us to enjoy good DStv reception.

A poor internet connection can create poor audio quality which is the biggest frustration for Virtual Meeting Participants.



There has to be a quality internet connection and audio to enjoy good virtual meeting reception. Reception affects learning.

James lays out the fact that the greatest test of our faith starts with our

attitude toward the word of Christ and our obedience to what the Word says. But we must have a good reception of the Word.

Reception covers willingness to receive the Word, practicing the instructions of the Word, bearing fruits necessary for Christian change, allowing to Word to be firmly rooted in us, and taking hold of our lives.

Acts 17:11 *These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.*

Acts 2:41 *Then those who gladly received his word were baptized, and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.*

Though James is writing to Christians, his message can be applied to unbelievers. It is vitally important that unbelievers have the right attitude toward the word of Christ - to be receptive and obedient to the truth. But we must retain that attitude after we become Christians.

We can ask ourselves the following questions to help us understand James' need for us to be receptive to the word of Christ

How can a non-Christian read **Acts 2:38** and still believe that baptism is not essential?

How can a Christian read **Hebrews 10:25** and believe attendance is unimportant?

How can a Christian read **Matthew 19** and believe one can get a divorce for any reason?

How can a Christian read **Ephesians 5:18** and believe it is an optional thing to abstain or not abstain from alcohol?

How can a Christian read **1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19-20** and believe he can use the body for sexual immorality or can use substances (*alcohol, heroin, cocaine, etc.*) to harm the body?

When the Word comes to us – do we perceive the Word as important and powerful enough to change our minds and lives?

Therefore, the question of the hour is this: *How is our reception of the Word?*

WE MUST BE READY TO RECEIVE THE WORD (JAMES 1:19-21)

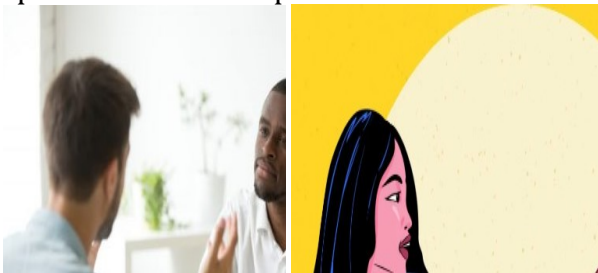
James begins by saying that if we are to have receptive hearts, three things must characterize us. *So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore, lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.*

The first one is swift to hear. Pay attention when someone else (*this includes fellow brethren, parents and children, husbands and wives, and audience in evangelism*) is talking. Demonstrates an eagerness to learn, and a willingness to accept (*open-mindedness or fair-mindedness*). Show one has a sympathetic ear and tender heart. Seeking to know all sides of a matter and the circumstances of the matter.

James is saying we should be good listeners of the word of Christ.

Good listening does not include anticipating what someone was going to say and going ahead to give an answer, answering a matter before hearing it (***Proverbs 18:13***).

Good listening builds human relationships. Good listening enhances spiritual relationships.



The person with this quality takes advantage of every opportunity to learn (classes, preaching services, good literature, etc.) and listens with rapt attention, ready to obey.

It has been suggested that God gave us two ears and only one mouth because He

wanted us to listen at least twice as much as we speak.

Let us all learn the art of good listening.

The second one is slow to speak. Admittedly, there are times to keep silent about various matters (***James 1:19***), but there also is “a time to speak” (***Ecclesiastes 3:7***).

We need to develop the ability to watch what we say, say what is right, and say it at the right time.

James wants us to be slow to start speaking. It is an ability to have control over what one says (***Proverbs 10:19, Ecclesiastes 5:2***). It is for our speech to be with grace, seasoned with salt, suitable for an occasion and an audience (***Colossians 4:6***).

The final one is slow to wrath. *No man filled with wrath has ever done the will of God at that moment.* Please ask Cain and Moses (***Genesis 4:5-8, Numbers 20:10***) in the Old Testament.

Why slow to wrath? If we have been able to objectively analyze all we have heard, we upgrade ourselves to the level of controlling our words – we know what to say and what not to say. Then we can avoid saying hurtful words, doing stupid things, and losing our power to reason – these are things we do during the emotional turmoil and heated passion of anger.

James is saying we need to learn the art of self-control, temperance, etc. (***1 Corinthians 9:27, Galatians 5:23***). It is crucial to how our faith works and makes a difference.

The focus here is that when we listen to the word of Christ, the Word may hit us so hard (expose the sins we like to commit), that we may lose our temper, and become angry at the Word and this may result in the following:

1. Hate the speaker of the word of Christ from that moment - resent the preacher or teacher who brought the matter to our attention.
2. Find a way to attack or fault the life of the speaker in order to ease our conscience or turn attention from ourselves to the speaker or others.

3. Set confusion in the place where the word of Christ was spoken
4. Leave a congregation where the word of Christ was spoken
5. Distance ourselves from participating in the activities of the congregation

Jeremiah 36 tells of a king who became so upset at the reading of God's word that he cut out the parts he didn't like and burned them in the fire (**verse 23**).

Why should we be angry at the Word? Let us ask ourselves the following questions:

1. Will I get angry at a bank for notifying me about my low account balance after a debit transaction? Should I go ahead to replace the bank for this?
2. Will I get angry at my phone for indicating that my battery level is low and needs recharging? Should I go ahead to destroy the phone for this?
3. Will I get angry at my weight scale for indicating I am overweight? Should I go ahead to smash the scale for this?

James is saying when the Word hit us so hard, it is always in love (**Ephesians 4:15**). God, His messenger, and His congregation – should not become our enemy (**Galatians 4:16**).

We are expected to repent, change our lifestyles, ask and receive forgiveness, and thus have peace of mind.

James is saying that our faith really makes a difference, our faith is at work - when we are *swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath*.

In **verse 21**, James re-emphasizes the importance of having a quality reception of God's Word.

The Word is able to save, but only if the Christian allows it to become planted (deeply rooted) in his heart. There have to be all rooms of the heart available for the word of Christ to stay, take control, and bring transformation.

This means that the heart must be prepared to receive the Word.

James says *lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness*.

The word translated *lay aside* is commonly used in the New Testament to

refer to taking off clothing (**Acts 7:58**). It is an outward removal.

When we are about to move into a new home – we ensure to do a deep cleaning – remove all unwanted items, fumigate, paint, etc.

James uses the illustration of preparing the garden to receive the seed.

In most gardens, sometimes we have hazardous vegetation (an assemblage of plant species and the ground cover they provide) that is flammable and endangers public safety by creating a fire hazard, which must be cleared away, to enable the garden to receive good seeds.

In physical gardening, we recognize the need to get rid of the bad to give the good the best possible chance. And this is also true in the spiritual realm. We need to eradicate every spiritual trait contrary to God's will to enable us to be able to adequately receive the word of Christ.

James mentions two especially noxious weeds that have to go if we are to receive God's word: filthiness and overflowing of wickedness.

Filthiness is commonly used in the Scriptures to refer to that which is filthy or repulsive, such as clothing (**Zechariah 3:3, 4**).

Filthiness refers to outward uncleanness while sin overflows from within – pride, malice, wickedness, etc. (**Matthew 12:34**). So one paraphrase renders the first part of **verse 21**: *So get rid of all that is wrong in your life, both inside and outside*.

The point is that we need that inward strength (meekness) to voluntarily submit (release control) to the will of God (**Acts 2:41, 17:11**).

When we have good reception of God's word - our faith is at work because the Word will dwell in us richly, becoming firmly rooted and fixed in our lives, taking control of our affairs - we can have great hope for the future. The Word is able to save our souls (**Romans 1:16**).

James, in this epistle of practical Christianity, treats the subject with emphasis on the difference made in the

Christian's daily life by the Word through faith that is working.

WE MUST BE READY TO OBEY THE WORD (JAMES 1: 22-25)

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.

James brings a powerful clarification to the importance of having good reception of the word of Christ.

James is saying that true reception of the Word includes obeying the Word.

Obedience means practicing the Word we claim to have received. It is a continuous exercise – no vacation period.

If we do not practice and if we do not practice continuously, then our faith is not working – our faith will not make any difference in our lives – we will still be members of the church of Christ living both a misbeliever and an unbeliever lifestyle. We are deceiving ourselves.

The worst thing one will do to oneself is to deceive oneself. Such a person is so difficult to *undeceive* than a person deceived by another.

When we deceive ourselves, we are regarded as self-deceived. Self-deceit is a delusion.

The self-deceived one wants to be deceived; he believes what he wants to believe. The self-deceived hears the Word of God, ignores the Word, discounts or waters the Word, and applies the Word to others instead of him or herself.

James says that such a person is extremely foolish.

James says the Word of God is our mirror.

The Word is the law of Christ (**Galatians 6:2**), a law of faith

(**Romans 3:27**), and the law of the Spirit (**Romans 8:2**).

The Word is complete (Perfect is from telos, complete). It satisfies every need in our lives (**2 Timothy 3:16,17**).

The Word gives us freedom and protects the freedom given to us.

The illustration is that of looking at oneself in a mirror. When we look at the physical mirror, if we are honest, we will know if our look is depressing and unkempt or if our dress style is seductive or if our dress is not suitable for an occasion, or if our hair is not combed, or if we need to shave - then we do something about what we see. So, we repair the damage as best we can: we shave; we wash our faces; we comb our hair, we change our dress, we dress modestly, etc.

James is saying the self-deceived person will go to length (spend a great deal of time) to look at the mirror, see his appearance, assumes that the appearance will correct itself miraculously, feel not obligated to do something about his appearance, leaves the focus on what he saw at the mirror, forgets what he saw and turn attention to something else.

James says it is so foolish, ridiculous, and pathetic, to know what needs to be done and not do it.

James says the Word is our mirror. When we receive the Word with all readiness, we have looked into the mirror, the Word shows our appearance (just as we are) which we see, and we do something about it by practicing the instructions of the Word.

We do not turn attention from ourselves to other Christians or the world. We do not class ourselves or compare ourselves with others for such is foolishness (**2 Corinthians 10:12**).

The more we look into the mirror of God, the more we constantly refresh our memory of the instructions from the Word, and we keep making the changes needed by faith.

We must continue to look at God's mirror. Educational psychology tells us that we forget more in the first eight hours after hearing a thing than in the next three

weeks. We must be constantly refreshing our memory of God's truth. And we must continue to do. There is no other way to have God's blessings!

WE MUST BE READY TO LIVE THE WORD (JAMES 1:26, 27)

If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

James says the evidence that our faith is working is in the changes we have allowed the Word to bring into our lives.

Remember he highlighted the three examples of practical Christianity: how we speak, how we serve, and how we separate ourselves from the world.

James emphasized that we cannot be religious, and godly when do not have self-control over our words. We will be deceiving ourselves and our religion is vain. No man can get to heaven on a vain religion.

The people of the world can use the wrong language – vile words, badmouth others, disrespect people (which they ought not to) but they lose respect for us when we speak like them.

James continued that another evidence of our faith working is in our ability to identify and care for those in real need.

He says pure religion is to *visit orphans and widows*. The Greek words allow wider usage indicating people who have real physical, spiritual, or emotional needs (as a result of death, desertion, disease, etc).

The word **visit** infers going to see to take care of needs.

Picture this scene. A good sister visits a mother who has been deathly ill for over a week. There is a coating of dust everywhere. The dishes are piled up in the sink. The baby is crying. Dirty clothes are overflowing the hamper. There is no food in the house. The sister tells amusing stories about her own children for ten or fifteen

minutes and then, glancing at her watch, she excuses herself. As she goes out the door, she says, if you need anything, be sure to let me know. To say the least, this sister has not learned the meaning of the biblical word **visit**!

James says that while we practice this **visit**, we must also stay away from situations where sin abounds, stay away from any kind of sin.

In short, we need to be different from the world! We must have a balanced view of Christianity: Let us love people and also hate spiritual dirt.

CONCLUSION

As we close, let us return to the main thrust of verses 19 through 27: having the proper attitude toward God's word, being receptive to it, obeying it, and living it. James lets us know that doing God's will is not an optional thing not if we want to go to heaven!

Our Christianity and our faith must grow to the level of practicality. God expects us to live our faith – our faith must be at work.

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