

The Transformed Life

(James 1:19-2:4)

Introduction

James began his letter with a call to persevere during trials. Genuine Christian faith at work in difficult times produces spiritual maturity. James shifted his focus in verses 1:19 to 2:4 to introduce a high expectation for maturing believers. A growing faith influences how Christians live day by day.

The Christian life is one of transformation, not just information. The overarching message of James is that our faith will express itself in our works. Life is difficult - even for Christians. In life, especially when facing trials and temptations, we'll constantly face the same decision: Will we do what God's Word says? That question will present itself in different circumstances, but underneath the surface the central point is the same. **True belief causes Christians to live out their faith according to God's Word.** We don't passively hear the Word. Rather, action should always follow genuine heart change. James points out that God's Word is that guide on how to go about putting faith into action.

James' short letter is full of commands. In this portion of James the question is How do you respond to Jesus' work as you receive the implanted word. James' readers of this letter have been dispersed because of persecution and were undergoing trials and the testing of their faith.

1. Hearer of the Word

Let's examine James 1:19-21 -Identify the three qualities that will increase our ability to hear.

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

James instructed believers to listen, speak thoughtfully, and avoid anger as specific ways to heed gospel truth. A humble Christian relinquishes those attitudes that hinder a relationship with God. The believer turns to God's Word, which has the power to change lives.

You may have heard the saying, “God gave us two ears and one mouth, and we should use them in proportion.” Often the angrier we get, the less we listen. James warned us human anger does not accomplish God’s righteousness.

Proverbs 29:22 - *“A man of wrath stirs up strife, and one given to anger causes much transgression.”*

Ephesians 4:26-27a - *“Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.”*

James did not say never get angry but be “slow to anger” (v 19). The anger Paul talked about in Ephesians would not stir up conflict or increase rebellion, since that would be sinful.

Hearing the truth - truly receiving it in such a way that it takes root and produces a spiritual life - will transform your life. The growth rate isn’t the same for everyone, but true believers in Jesus will produce fruit.

One fruit of our new lives in Christ is a desire for truth and righteousness. God’s truth and His righteousness are life-giving. In the midst of trials, temptations, and the pressures of life, our opinions, arguments, and self-righteous efforts will never accomplish godly change. Not for ourselves. Not for anyone.

James instructed his audience to be quick to listen. But that doesn’t mean we should only listen. James will emphasize the importance of acting on what we hear in this next passage.

2. Be Doers of 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 word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But for 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.”*

Hearing in a way that matters — in which God’s truth is implanted in our heart, taking root and bearing fruit — will result in righteous activity. What you believe directs the way you live.

Someone who only listens to the Word without doing anything about it is like a college student who audits a course but doesn’t receive any credit for it. But

even worse, according to verse 22, they are deceiving themselves, which would be like a college student who expected to get credit for a course for which he/she didn't do any work.

James used another vivid word picture for this same concept in verses 23 and 24. He paints the picture of a man looking in a mirror at his reflection.

Looking intently at his natural face in a mirror and then forgetting what he looked like demonstrated the folly of examining oneself in God's mirror of the implanted word and then doing nothing about it. When one sees imperfections (as when looking in a mirror), common sense says something should be done about it. James' illustration indicates that hearers of the Word who were not doers knew what the Word says, but they refused to act on it. To look in the mirror and forget to do what it indicates needs to be done, represents being confronted by the Word of God and refusing to obey the demands.

“Moral instruction without a captivating vision of beauty will only produce whitewashed tombs and rebels.” (Beau Hughes)

What does he mean? How does this statement help us to think about religion and our relationship with God.

A right understanding of our identity affects our lives. James identified our language, relationships, and attitudes as visible reflections of what is in our hearts.

Perfect Law (v25): The “Perfect Law” is the gospel. The word “law” here refers to the Old Testament law as it has been interpreted and fulfilled in Christ. Though the Old Testament was “holy and righteous and good: (**Romans 7:12**), it had no power by itself to enable sinful people to conform to it. Thus, the Old Testament law did not liberate godly people but enslaved them. But the “Perfect Law” when it comes along with the Word of the Gospel had the power of the Holy Spirit to change hearts. True freedom is freedom to obey God and do what pleases him. The law of Christ provides freedom from sin through the gospel.

The Christian life is one of active obedience. When you hear God's Word, respond in obedience. All of the Bible study in the world is useless if it doesn't transform your affections and your actions. As we discussed in Sunday school this past Sunday, Paul wanted the Philippians to see what they gained from the act of giving and to think of their giving as a partnership in the gospel ministry, not just meeting his physical needs. Contentment in our lives frees us to partner with others in the gospel ministry as a result of our transformed lives and allows us to grow in the grace of God as we freely give and serve others.

Knowledge can begin to harden your heart if your perspective is primarily focused inward. If your spiritual life is all input with no output, you start to spoil, like the roots to a potted plant without a drain. The right amount of water is life-giving to a potted plant. Too much water will begin to poison the same plant. There has to be a healthy balance between what's poured into the plant and its ability to absorb what it's received for healthy growth and ultimately for reproduction — flowers, fruit, seeds or new shoots.

Let's look at another warning Paul gave to Christians who were growing arrogant and self-centered in their so-called spiritual maturity: "...all of us possess knowledge. This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up."

(1 Corinthians 8:1). Paul was talking to the Corinthians about their arrogance as a problem.

James left no room in his letter for the idea of hearing the truth and not doing what it says. He didn't want his readers to deceive themselves into thinking they could be Christians merely by believing the right things about Jesus. Following Jesus requires action. As a disciple, you not only have to believe that Christ is worth following, but you also have to take steps of faith to deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow him daily. (Luke 9:23)

3. Example of Doers

Once James established the importance of being doers of the word, he then gave his readers a specific example of how to be a doer.

James 1: 26-27 — *"If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. 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."*

"Useless" in verse 26 - "futile"; "pointless"; "in vain"; "purposeless"; "impractical"; "to no avail"; "hopeless"

In addition to the tongue, a Christian demonstrates his faith through "pure and undefiled religion". James listed things in verse 27 that demonstrate genuine faith in Christ. Specifically, James used the example of a religion that will "look after orphans and widows in their distress. In the first century culture, orphans and widows had no standing in society or any ability by which to support themselves. To "look after" means "to assist" and is often used in Scripture to refer to God's coming to deliver His people from crisis.

Mathew 25:35-36 — *“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.”*

Luke 1:68 — *“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people...”*

Assisting orphans and widows in their distress can be messy, expensive, and thankless. The genuine Christian expresses the heart of Jesus by caring for those who hurt.

The next example of pure and undefiled religions is **“to keep oneself unstained by the world”**. In this context the world depicts a system of values influenced by evil, centered on self, and opposed to God. To be unstained by this world requires a diligent, daily focus on God’s purposes.

Being a doer has two components: **putting away filthiness** and **seeking pure religion**. By religion James was talking about a devoted life that is pleasing to God.

Putting Away Filthiness: In verse 21 the phrase “Put away all filthiness,” calls to mind an image like dirty laundry. Everyone has dirty laundry or dirty little secrets, which are just cultural euphemisms for sin. What James called “rampant wickedness” includes obvious filthiness and stains that Christians easily recognize as sinful and must repent of and abstain from.

Seeking Pure Religion: Throughout generations and cultures, people have asked the question, What should a relationship with God look like? James’s answer is shocking in that it doesn’t focus on behaviors to appease the divine. Instead, it offers a simple description of controlling the tongue and caring for other people. A right relationship with God will be evident in right relationships with other people.

Jesus said people would know His disciples by their love for one another (John 13:35). Christlike love is most evident in relationships in which the other people have nothing to offer in return. This kind of love is countercultural. It’s selfless. It’s righteous. God expects us to go out of our way to love the overlooked, marginalized, vulnerable and needy.

Question: Why? Because that's exactly what the Creator did for us.

Romans 5:8 — “but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Philippians 2:4-9 — “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.”

A second example of a Doer:

James 2:1-4 — “My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or “sit down at my feet,” have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”

James calls on Christian brothers to “to show no partiality.” (“favoritism”) The phrase denotes discrimination toward people. It implies judgement of a person based on outward appearances. Preferential treatment of people based on appearance, race, economic status, or social standing fails Jesus’ love standard. Love, not discrimination, brings glory and honor to an exalted Lord Jesus Christ. Preferential Treatment of people dishonors God. Jesus never judged people on how they looked. He looked at the heart.

Psalm 23:3 - “He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

Isaiah 43:7 - “everyone who is called by my name whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

John 17:1 - “When Jesus had spoken these words, “he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you.”

1 Corinthians 10:31 - “So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”