

James 1:19-21

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Believers are delivered from spiritual downfall by rejecting evil and receiving the implanted word to grow in the righteousness of God.

In many ways, this passage is a re-emphasis and transition as James again offers the essential theme in his letter, that the choice a believer makes of what perspective to choose has monumental consequences. We can either choose a true perspective, and gain incredible rewards of life, including the crown of life. Or we can choose sin, and reap the sordid reward of death (of all varieties).

James refers to the previous assertion in verses 17-19 that all good gifts come from God. There is no lasting goodness from this world. What comes from the world is sin leading to death. What comes from our own desires/lusts is sin leading to death. True life comes from God. James notes that *This you know, my beloved brethren*. James is speaking to believing Jews. They know both the scriptures, as well as knowing that Jesus is the Messiah. Having set forth the dire consequences of giving in to our flesh, and knowing that all good things come from God, the reader is now prepared to take action. The action James offers seems at first glance to be off-topic. James says:

But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.

This leaves us to ask, “What is the connection between listening to other people and avoiding being deceived by the world, following our own lusts and falling into sin, with the resulting consequence of death?” How can listening to people connect us with the things of God? Wouldn’t listening to people be more likely to lead us away from God than toward God?

The answer lies in the next verse, where James commands his listeners:

Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.

The key to setting aside the *filthiness* and *wickedness* that dwells within us, in our old man, the flesh, is to replace it with *the word implanted* within us. Somewhat like getting a heart transplant. And how do we *receive the word implanted*? We have to listen to God, to hear His word and *in humility* receive it. And how do we learn to listen to God, whom we cannot see? We first learn to listen to other people, whom we can see. This is the connection with the prior verse, where James tells *everyone* to be *quick to hear* and *slow to speak*. By learning to listen to others, see their perspective, and evaluate what is or is not true about it, we develop the skill to listen to God, understand wisdom, and ingest it into our lives.

So we now see that James has connected us with all three things we control:

- We control who or what we trust. James has exhorted us to trust God, who gives wisdom and good gifts to all who ask and receive in faith. If we trust that God’s reward is true and better than anything the world can give, we are on the right track.
- We control what perspective we choose. James has exhorted us to choose a perspective that views all circumstances as trials, and rejoice that we have the opportunity to overcome them and mature in our faith, which leads to the greatest rewards available in this life, as well as in the age that is to come.
- We control what we do. James is now exhorting us first to learn to listen to other people. To see their perspective, which may or may not be true. That in turn trains us to listen to God, to see His perspective, which is always true. We should then *receive the word* of God and have it *implanted* in our souls. This in turn will deliver us from choosing to follow the lust within us, the *filthiness* and *wickedness* in our old nature.

The *filthiness and all that remains of wickedness* James exhorts us to be *putting aside* is nothing less than our “own lust” from James 1:14. This “lust” leads to sin, which is birthed and grows up to become death (James 1:14-15). We cannot rid ourselves of our old nature, what the Apostle Paul refers to as the “flesh” (Romans 7:15-20). We cannot be rid of it, but we can be *putting it aside*. That James uses *putting* rather than “put” indicates the reality that this is an ongoing action. It is a continuous need. Setting aside the flesh is not a one-time event. The lust is always there, so it requires a continuous effort of *putting aside*.

How do we put aside the *filthiness* and the *wickedness* that is the “lust” within us? We replace it with the abiding word of God.

The abiding word of God must be received *in humility*. *Humility* is seeing reality as it is. That will always mean seeing the world the same way God sees it, for God is the source and essence of the truth (Deuteronomy 32:4; Romans 2:2; 1 John 4:6). Truly listening to another person requires us not only to hear their words, but to comprehend their perspective; to see what they see. Their perspective might or might not be true. But when we come to God *in humility*, then we come to gain God’s perspective, for His ways are always right and true. God’s ways will, accordingly, always lead us to our true self-interest.

This paradox, to set aside self in order to gain our greatest fulfillment, echoes the teachings of Jesus, who taught His disciples:

“If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.”
(Matthew 16:24-25).

James gives us a practical starter kit for Christian living by framing a variety of essential truths in the context of aspiring to maturity, while warning believers of the danger of wandering from the truth. The book is concerned with growing spiritually and practically in the Christian faith. In verses 19-21 of chapter 1, James is focused on the same point, but he is moving it to an internalized and personal experience as *the righteousness of God*.

James stated that *the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God*. This makes clear that we are not speaking of being justified in the sight of God. Those who believe are reckoned to have the *righteousness of God* by faith in Jesus Christ, and are placed into His body (Romans 3:22-23). There is nothing we can do to *achieve* righteousness in God's sight. However, we can achieve experiencing the righteousness of God by walking in the obedience of faith, allowing the resurrection power of Jesus to flow through us.

James is pointing us to pursue an ongoing active walk of faith such that the *righteousness of God* becomes our experience. We exhibit the *righteousness of God* when we walk in His ways, by faith.

Experiencing the fruit of the righteousness of God requires walking by faith (Romans 1:16-17). This is the process of being sanctified. It is in this way that the *righteousness of God* is something we can *achieve*. It is important to note that the world's way of achieving "righteousness" (according to the world's definition) is through the *anger of man*. Humans are prone to use anger, and violence, to attempt to control others and bend them to their will. Worldly "righteousness" is to "line up" our deeds with the values and demands of the world. Those demands are often enforced through *anger* and violence. This is the world's way. This is not the way of the kingdom of God.

The *righteousness of God* is achieved through seeking to understand others, listening to them, then treating them in a manner consistent with God's word. It is achieved through pursuing all deeds from a perspective of love (1 Corinthians 13:3).

In James's way of thinking, becoming like Christ isn't simply a matter of doing righteous things, but rather of living from the inside out as one who can be described as exhibiting *the righteousness of God*. This requires replacing our internal "lusts" with the abiding *word* of God, *implanted* in our souls. When we live by the word of God, rather than the lust of the flesh, it is *able to save* our souls from the *filthiness* and *wickedness* of our own lusts that desire to lead us to take actions that have the consequence of death.

This passage about being *quick to hear* (James 1:19b) is sandwiched between two important points; (1) James is addressing *beloved brethren* (James 1:19a), and (2) James is concerned about the outcome of their living righteously as the salvation of their *souls* or lives (James 1:20). The *beloved brethren* are already believers, and as such are guaranteed to live with Jesus in heaven (John 3:16; John 5:24, John 10:27-29; John 14:16; Romans 8:38-39; 2 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 1:36; Col 1:13-14). This is our great gift from being adopted into the family of God, from the giver of all good, the Father Himself (James 1:16-18).

Since the *beloved brethren* are secure in the Father's love, then the phrase *save your souls* (lives) must refer to their *souls* being delivered from something other than eternal judgement to hell. It is always important to understand a word in its context. When we see the word "save" or "salvation" we need to discern from the context what or whom is being saved from what or whom. The word *save* (Greek "sozo") means "something is being delivered from something," as in Acts 28:4, where Paul is stated to be "saved" from the sea. In that case Paul was delivered from drowning. Another example is the woman who was "sozo" from a blood flow (Matthew

9:21). In this instance translators correctly translate “sozo” as “made well” or “healed” because the woman is being delivered from an illness by touching Jesus’ garment.

What is being delivered from what in James 1:20? The believer’s *soul* or life is being delivered from his or her own lust, which leads to sin and death (James 1:13-15). The believer’s *soul* is being delivered from *wickedness* and *filthiness* which dwells in our flesh. The way to be delivered from the adverse consequences of sin and death spoken of in James 1:13-15 is to replace the path directed by the lustful flesh with the way of the abiding word of God.

James emphasizes the importance of this understanding to advance his concern for the growth of the believer, to lead them to a mature faith. James’s entire letter presumes the *beloved brethren* already have God’s full acceptance as children of the Father.

By earlier saying, *This you know, my beloved brethren*, James begins with acknowledging both respect and a common understanding. Now he moves to being practical with the three-fold poetic form which exhorts us to be *quick, slow, and slow*. *Quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger*. Proverbial wisdom often uses a pithy form that is at once both obvious and profound. The Stoic, Epictetus, is known for offering that we were given two ears and one mouth so that we might listen twice as much as we speak.

The first two items, *quick* and *slow* anticipate the power and humility of listening and pausing before speaking. Speaking itself is an easy way to fall into sin, as James develops in his third chapter. The book of Proverbs affirms the same point,

“When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable,
But he who restrains his lips is wise.”
(Proverbs 10:19)

The third item, *slow to anger*, is bridged from the second, *slow to speak*, since anger is commonly displayed first in words. Moreover, words spoken in anger are often harsh and stir up anger in others.

“A gentle answer turns away wrath,
But a harsh word stirs up anger.”
(Proverbs 15:1)

As a subpoint, James connects the previous verses with the righteousness of God by asserting that *the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God*. While it may be obvious, he is clearly connecting the relationship between one’s inner life and one’s outer life. Here too is a place to *know* this (James 1:19a) and *not be deceived* (James 1:16). We can use this directive to inform an exercise of self-examination. When we are expressing the *anger of man*, we are not moving from, or toward, *the righteousness of God*.

Does that mean all anger is bad? Apparently not, since the scripture describes God as being angry (Deuteronomy 33:21; Joshua 23:16). The key is to be *slow to anger*, and to be angry for the proper reason. The *anger of man* is self-centric. We are quick to anger because we have been

inconvenienced, or we are attempting to control others. God is *slow to anger*, so we should be *slow to anger*. If we are to be angry, it should be in opposition to injustice or false teaching, and spur us to stand for the righteousness of God.

James elevates the Word of God by instructing his readers to *in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls*. In 1:17 we are *brought forth*, or born, by *the word of truth*. Here we are grown by the *implanted word*. The picture of something being planted instantly suggests that it is to grow from that point onward. The Word of God is that which grows within us when it is nurtured and lived out, where our very life (soul) is delivered and preserved from the temptations of sin to thrive as the righteousness of God.

The word translated *souls* is the Greek word “*psuche*,” from which we get the English “*psyche*.” It refers to the essence of who we are as people. About half the time it is translated “*life*.” James has here elevated a great paradox, that we carry within us the source of our own destruction. We have a lustful *wickedness* that leads us to adopt perspectives and take actions that lead to death. However, through an act of faith, and an acquisition of wisdom, we can set aside this internal source of destruction, and replace it with the abiding word of God. This transplant of truth in place of deception saves us from ourselves, and delivers us from being separated from the great blessings God desires to pour out upon us.

The heart of James’s message is to chart out a clear path to arrive at a destination of a mature faith. The growth of the believer is the core of James’ message, and will continue to be the emphasis in the remainder of his letter. Indeed, much of James’ epistle is about putting off wickedness and putting on righteousness, to switch from the errant path toward death that is native to our old man to the righteous path to life (James 5:20).

Biblical Text

¹⁹ ***This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger;*** ²⁰ ***for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.***

²¹ ***Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.***