

Tutored by Truth

Bringing Faith Down To Earth—Part 4

James 1:19-21

Introduction

I have read recently that there are now 3,000 new books published every single day throughout our world.

The number of text messages sent every single day now exceeds the total population of the world.

Technical knowledge which was doubling every 5 years since 1983 is now doubling every 72 hours.

Some of the highest paying jobs in the world today did not exist in the year 2000.

I have learned that if you happen to read the New York Times newspaper for one week, you will be exposed to more information than the average person, living in the 1800's, came across in their entire lifetime.

We are literally inundated with information and the ability to communicate is greater than ever thanks to the world-wide web.

The explosion of online advertising; online business; online shopping; online dating; online commerce; online research. In fact, I read just this past week that the fastest growing segment of education is online.

None of this was even conceived of 25 years ago . . . and I'm glad he did because of the incredible online ministry potential through internet streaming and websites.

Imagine; we are recording this sermon today as it passes through this microphone to a computer where it is being recorded digitally so that it can be edited on a computer, transformed into a digital program that can be emailed to some kind of internet holding site which can be accessed by radio stations so they can send the program via satellite to potential millions of people listening to their radios or online over the internet.

I do not yet know how to podcast anything, but I'm grateful for the technology because 60,000 times this month, a sermon will be downloaded via our web site to people living in 25 different countries to be listened to in English.

The potential for the gospel is incredible.

I read the other day about the buying frenzy of handheld mobile devices that allows you to access the internet while you're on the move—like iPhones or Blackberry's—these handheld devices are expected to outnumber personal computers sometime this year.

The truth is, we are literally swimming in an ocean of information—and therein lies much of the danger.

Our generation has come to prefer sound bites and video clips. The typical television show will never have you watching the same scene for more than 10 seconds.ⁱ

We live in a world where we are bombarded with quick messages—and we can be moved by what we see and hear—we can be moved . . . but not changed. You see, there is a vast difference between information and transformation.

Three thousand books published every day can inform you, encourage you, move you, and even mislead you . . . but only 1 book can transform you.

Writing to his spiritual son in the faith, the Apostle Paul wrote, Timothy, *from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 3:15)*

Other sources of information can entertain you, this book alone can awaken you—from death to life.

Paul went on and told Timothy that these writings were inspired by God—literally

God-breathed—and profitable for four different aspects:

- Profitable for teaching/doctrine—that is, it tells you what to believe;
- Profitable for reproof—that tells you where you are wrong;
- Profitable for correction—that tells you where you are right—literally, it stands you up on your feet;
- Profitable for *training in righteousness; so that the man of God—the believer—may be totally equipped for life.* (2 Timothy 3:16, 17)—that is, it tells you how to do what is right.

I like the way Warren Wiersbe, former pastor of Moody Church, outlined this text when he wrote,

- the Bible is profitable for doctrine—that tells you what’s right;
- it’s profitable for reproof—that tells you what’s not right;
- it’s profitable for correction—that tells you how to get right;
- and for training in righteousness—that tells you how stay right.

No wonder Paul told Timothy to *train himself in the word for the purpose of godliness.* (1 Timothy 4:7).

The word for train is *gumnazo*—it means to exercise—it’s hard work.ⁱⁱ

In fact, the word *gumnazo* gives us our transliterated word, gymnasium—in other words, go into the word and work up a sweat in the study—which creates an entirely different image for the average Christian who would rather hear from God in a text message – something quick.

The average Christian’s idea of devotions is to open the Bible and say, “Okay, Lord—give me a verse for today—something really catchy—speak to me—make it obvious—and we’ve only got 5 minutes.”

“Take Time to be Holy” has been revised in our generation to How to Become Holy . . . in a Hurry.

The Bible isn’t interested in hurrying. It doesn’t work the same way as instant messaging—it intends to transform you by the renewing of your mind—that is, literally changing the way you think (*Roman 12:1-2*).

If we are going to grow up in the faith, as James is ever passionate about, there are a number of things we need to get right, and so far, not surprisingly, James has led off with some major issues.

Thus far, in James chapter 1, we’ve been challenged in **how we respond to difficult trials**; then James moved on to challenge the **way we respond to daily temptation**.

Now beginning at *verse 19*, he will challenge us with **how to respond to divine truth**.

He begins in *verse 19* by saying, “*This you know, my beloved brethren.*” You can understand this as another imperative from James—he’s effectively saying, “You need to know this.” “You need to get this right.”

The average reader skims over it like you do when you download a new computer program or fill out some computer form and you have to click the box that you agree with all the regulations and stipulations and contract legalese before it will finish the update. You skim down those pages—you’re holding down the arrow button, barely reading anything.

I did that this past week on an update to one of my computer programs . . . page after page . . . I’m finally holding that arrow down . . . yea, there are words on the page—and I’m sure I agree and so I got to the end of it and checked, “I agree” . . . for all I know I just signed up for 4 years in the Navy.

James says, “This is something you really need to know . . . make sure you don’t skim anything . . . you’ll need this for the tests of life.”

And James will give five imperatives for the believer as he comes to the word of God to be tutored by the truth.

We’ll call these, “Five Ways to Approach God’s Word for Maximum Spiritual Maturity.”

1. Come with your ears open

James writes in *verse 19*. ***But everyone must be quick to hear.***

Now many readers will immediately take this verse and pull it out of its context and turn it into a general statement—or a wise saying from God—which it is, but it comes with a context.

Don't go home and say to your spouse, "Do I have a theme verse for your life—in fact, I have found the key verse for our marriage—You need to be quick to listen—**James 1:19**."

There are other verses you can give your husband . . . that isn't what James is doing here. He's speaking within the context of responding to the word of God.

In **verse 18**, James told us that it was the word of truth that brought us to life. In the next verse—**verse 21**—James will tell us to receive the word with humility and then in **verse 22** to be doers of the word and not a hearer only.

While it's true that everyone ought to be quick to listen as a general rule in life—James is talking about listening eagerly and readily and primarily to the word of God.

You're facing difficult trials . . . you're facing dangerous temptations—the point is, who are you listening to? Maybe the reason you aren't passing the test or overcoming the temptation is because God's word is the last place you go.ⁱⁱⁱ We listen to everyone else and everything else—and finally, maybe, we listen to the divine tutor which is this divine truth.

So you need to understand that James was commanding them—and us—to literally listen to the word of God.

We understand the date of this epistle was early, which means the New Testament had not yet been completed.

These letters, like the letters of Paul and Peter and James and John were circulated among the believers where they would be read.

The early church services included the public reading of scripture and the verbal instruction in the faith.^{iv}

So when James says that the believer should be quick to listen, he is referring to an attitude as a person listens to the truth of the word—quick to listen, meant the same thing as eager to listen, and for our generation, perhaps like none other, listening is becoming an art of the past.

One author wrote, "the media saturation of our society has a dulling, deadening effect on us; we are bombarded by visual stimulation, which conditions and diminishes our ability to listen. . . western society today [has become] an eye-oriented rather than an ear-orientated culture and as this tendency to depend upon the eye has

grown, our ability to listen has atrophied from disuse.^v

That is true, but the problem James is referring to is as old as the human heart—in any generation. You remember how often the Lord would stop and ask his audience of Pharisees and religious leaders the question, "Have you never heard . . . have you never read?" The obvious answer of course was yes—they had heard—they had read—but they weren't listening.

Their problem wasn't that they were hard of hearing—their problem was they were hard of listening.^{vi}

Hebrews 5:11 calls it "dull of hearing." We have the same problem. You get on that airplane and listen to the flight attendant go over the directions on how to buckle your seat belt and how to strap on the oxygen mask if the cabin pressure changes and how your seat cushion can become a flotation device; you can simply refer to the plastic card in back of the seat in front of you . . . listen, she's the most ignored person on that plane.

I'm not paying her any attention either—and I feel kind of sorry for her—she's got a job where she has to stand up in front of people who aren't listening to a word she's saying. I get paid to do that, too.

But let the plane hit some turbulence and out comes the plastic cards. Suddenly we need to know. We're eager to learn. Say it again!

James says, "How do you plan to grow up—if not survive—if you're not going to listen. There is more turbulence ahead of you than you can imagine . . . a smooth flight through life is a myth".

And here's the point—if you want to grow up, don't be eager to listen to everyone else; first and foremost, listen to your Tutor—the word of God which is able to equip you for life.

2. Your mouth closed

James goes on to say, you approach God's word in order to grow up, with your ears open and, **secondly, with your mouth closed.**

Notice **verse 19**—*you need to know this—everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak.*

The adjectives, *quick* and *slow* do not describe our action but our attitude, and in this context, the reference to being slow to speak means you are slow to talk back. That's the idea.

Frankly, you may not like what God's word is saying. You might want to argue with God's word—if not audibly, in your hearts and minds.^{vii}

Keep in mind the context here in the first century where the early church services were informal; often the listeners would speak up and even debate with the preacher.^{viii}

This seems to be exactly what happened to Paul in Ephesus when he told Timothy, "Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds . . . he vigorously opposed our teaching—literally, our words. (2 Timothy 4:15)

You can imagine Paul preaching the truth and Alexander standing up and verbally opposing him.

While you may not do that here today while I'm preaching—and I appreciate that—you might be doing it in your heart. You might be sitting down on the outside, but standing up on the inside. You're talking back to the word in your heart.

God's words are inconvenient; they are uncomfortable; they are demanding. And we are tempted to talk back.

One of the marks of immaturity is the inability to keep from talking, when we believe we have something to say, right?

It really doesn't matter how old you get, but it does start really young doesn't it. I don't know if they do this anymore for elementary school, but on our report cards growing up you had on one side the place for the grades and on the other side a place for attitude and behavior.

I don't know about your parents, but mine cared more about that side than the grade side. I could get a B+ in Spelling, but if the teacher wrote on the opposite side of the report card, "Talks too much in class . . . disruptive in class; has difficulty remaining quiet in class." I remember all those.

That B+ didn't matter. My parents ignored that and focused on the other side. They were so twisted.

They even had me memorize the classic quote by Abraham Lincoln—better to be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt.

One of the marks of spiritual immaturity is the inability to keep from talking, when we really should be listening, and the context here is that spiritual maturity is demonstrated and gained when instead of talking back to the word, we keep quiet.

Job was in for massive transformation—at a time when he was peerless among the wise men of the east. He was the epitome of maturity. Then he was thrown into turbulence like you've never seen before—all 7 children killed; his revenue sources destroyed; his health replaced with running, open sores.

His friends came along and began talking. And Job talked too, primarily with the attitude that God needed to explain Himself. And God finally comes along and speaks—not revealing the answers to Job's problems but a revelation of God's sovereignty and purpose and Job responds with, "*I lay my hand upon my mouth . . . what can I say to you?*" (Job 40:4)

When you're in trials and in the midst of temptations, a mark of growing maturity is a growing ability to not talk back to your Tutor . . . but to be still and know that He is God.

James says in *verse 19*, *keep your ears open and your mouth closed* and then the third way to gain the most from your tutor, the word of God is to,

3. Keep your spirit teachable

You see the implied digression. It begins with not listening; it proceeds to talking back and then finally, it explodes in anger and effectively shuts down the process of maturing.

The context is anger with God because of what His word demands.

The problem was, we weren't really listening in the first place—and then we caught a tidbit or two and misunderstood it or didn't like it and starting talking back. But life didn't get any better and the trials just kept coming and the temptations never slowed down and so we finally the lid came off—"Lord, what in the world are you thinking?!"

James goes on to tap us on the shoulder and say in *verse 20*. ***Hello—the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.***

You can understand James to be saying, “Anger with God does not bring about right living before God—it hijacks the process.”

In other words, when you are angry with God for the turbulence in your life, you’re going in the opposite direction.

When you don’t get what you believe you deserve or want, and get angry with God, you accomplish nothing—in fact, you only make things worse. James says, “Anger with God won’t help!”

Let me ask you—has your child ever thrown a temper tantrum? It is bedtime and they didn’t get the snack they wanted. So they pitched a fit. Were you impressed by their tantrum? Did you watch and think, my, what depth of emotion—what amazing passion—what clarity of expression . . . okay, okay, you can have some chocolate candy before you go to bed—that was such a great performance! Not likely.

My mother used to tell me, “If you don’t quit crying like that I’ll give you something to cry about.” Where did parents learn that? And why do we repeat it?! The truth is, your temper accomplished nothing but bringing you more trouble than before.

So here’s the progression in the wrong direction—you refuse to listen; you talk back to God’s divinely inspired tutor and then you get angry with God for not coming through—and you do not fulfill the righteousness of God—in other words, you will not mature, but remain immature.

Conscious, chosen immaturity is going to set you up for even more trouble, as we’ll see in a moment.

Don’t forget he’s writing to Christians. Jewish Christians who’ve had their lives turned upside down, remember? They are among the *diaspora*—*verse 1*—the dispersed—the disinherited—the distant and removed from their homeland.

Everything James has said so far has not been easy to say and much harder to hear.

I think it’s almost humorous how James starts out in *verse 19* so kindly with, “***my dearly loved brethren***”—in other words, I love you so

don’t get mad at me when I tell you the hard truth.

Like Paul who asked the Galatian believers, “***Have I become your enemy by telling you the truth?***” (*Galatians 4:16*).

Don’t shoot the messenger!

Here’s James’ point—an angry spirit is never a teachable spirit.^x

We approach the tutor of divine truth with open ears, a closed mouth, a teachable spirit—fourth—we come to be tutored by the word with clean hands.

4. Clean hands

James writes in *verse 21*, ***Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted.***

The Apostle Paul uses the same idea of putting aside sin as if it were taking off dirty, putrid clothing.

He wrote to the Ephesians, “***In reference to your former manner of life, lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind and put on the new self, which in God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.***” (*Ephesians 4:22-24*)

Again to the Colossians he wrote, “***Put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice slander and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self...***” (*Colossians 3:8-9*)

You can’t help but notice how specific your Divine Tutor is—the Bible names sin, doesn’t it? And it doesn’t refer to sin as “wrong choices, or human weakness, or an unfortunate decision”.

The writers of divine scripture call it what it is. The word James uses here translated filthiness is the word *rhuparia* (ρυπαρια) which was a word used of both dirty clothing and moral defilement.^x Put aside things and actions that are morally defiling.

I found it interesting that the root word for filthiness was used by the Greeks to refer to wax in someone’s ears—which fits this context perfectly.

In other words, sin in our lives which we refuse to put off acts as wax in our ears,

preventing the word of truth from reaching our hearts. Which is another way of saying, whenever you confess and forsake sin, you effectively clean out your ears so that you can hear the word of God.^{xi}

The word James uses here for *wickedness* is a word that denotes moral evil and corruption which may never be expressed outwardly, but may reside in the heart as one of many “hidden” sins that only the Lord and the individual are aware of.^{xii}

The words in *verse 21* translated, “**and all that remains of wickedness**” means to deal with the abundance—the excess—the prevalence.”

That doesn’t mean you’re going to get rid of it all and achieve perfection—it’s a battle through life—but it does mean that you are willing to deal with all the excess that remains in you and around you.

James is saying that spiritual maturity means you are growing more and more intolerant of both external sins of the flesh and internal, hidden sins of the heart.

One of the marks of maturing in the Lord is that you are growing more and more troubled over sins that never before bothered you.

I read of an incident in India, perhaps much like a setting in the first century. An unbelieving skeptic was listening to an evangelist preach about the burden of sin and he interrupted the evangelist and sarcastically said, “I feel no burden of sin. Tell me, how heavy is it? Eighty pounds? Ten pounds?” The evangelist answered with a question, “Tell me, if you laid 100 pounds on a corpse, would it feel the load?” The man responded, “Well, no, it is dead.” The evangelist said, “Exactly, that spirit too is dead which feels no load of sin.”^{xiii}

James had every reason to believe that these dispersed Jewish Christians were struggling with their propensity—their bent to sin—as believers they could feel the slightest sin.

And he’s speaking with the firmness of the divine tutor—which says here to deal with it . . . clean house . . . make no excuse for sin!

This is an imperative—an exclamation point—we are to put aside all filthiness and

wickedness as we come before the divine tutor of truth in order to grow up.

One author commented, there are certain things which God does not choose to do for us. We are supposed to exercise every bit of our will and determination—and find the cooperating power of the Holy Spirit once we do—to put away the filth and the wickedness from our lives.^{xiv} God requires that we clean house.

The Greek expositor, Spiros Zodhiates, in his word studies through the Book of James told the story of a Christian who attended prayer meeting every week at his little church. And every time he would confess the same things and then he would close by saying, “O Lord, the cobwebs have come between you and me; please clear them away.” Every week he’d confess the same sins and then say, “Lord please clear away the cobwebs.” Finally, an older Christian prayed right afterwards, “Lord, would you have him kill the spider.”^{xv}

Not a bad idea . . . deal with sin—clean house. Like the man who came to me a couple of weeks ago and talked about the radical changes he was going through to clean up his life—not so he could be saved, but so that he could mature as a son. And what liberation, he spoke of . . . what freedom. The hard thing *is* the right path, especially in this generation.

I learned in my research that more than 7 million people each year go online to Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary. And one of the top 10 words looked up, is the word, ‘integrity’. One college professor commented on this interesting search by saying, “Perhaps integrity is becoming so scarce, its definition is now unfamiliar.”^{xvi}

A clean Christian is of great benefit to the church today—and to the world around us which is in desperate need of a living demonstration of integrity never before has the need been so ripe for someone that James describes here—someone with clean hands . . . a passion for purity . . . someone who demonstrates integrity.

There’s one more way to hear from God’s word and mature. You come with open ears and a closed mouth and a teachable spirit and clean hands and finally, a humble heart.

5. A heart humble

James writes again in *verse 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.*

Receive the word implanted.

How do you receive something that's already implanted within you? The planting of the seed has already taken place—the living word of truth—like a seed, it's been buried in the soil of your believing heart at conversion. So receive it—which means, welcome it—nurture it—water it—tend to it—take care of it, James writes and it will save/or rescue your souls.

James isn't talking about being rescued for heaven in this context, but being rescued through life.

You want to be saved misery and guilt and sorrow and consequences because of rebellion and disobedience? Welcome the tutor . . . put out the welcome mat in your life for the word of God.

What does it take to put out the welcome mat? According to James here, it takes an attitude of humility.

The person with this attitude says, "I need to know more . . . I want to listen more . . . I need to speak less and hear better . . . Lord, I'm still . . . I'm here . . . I'm open . . . I'm ready . . . I'm repentant . . . I'm an open book to your inspired Book—my tutor . . . I'm ready to grow some more. I'm ready for the Spirit of God to train my ears to hear from His word.

A famous naturalist was walking through a busy downtown street in New York with his friend when he stopped and said, "Did you hear that cricket?" His friend laughed and said, "Are you kidding? How could you possibly have heard a cricket with all this noise and traffic around us?" The naturalist thought a

moment and then said, "Well I suppose you hear whatever you've been trained to hear." They walked along some more and then the man said, "Let me prove something to you" and he took out a quarter and dropped it on the sidewalk. Instantly, people turned and looked.^{xvii}

What are you trained to hear?

James here wants us whenever troubled, to listen to the Word—our divine tutor—for passages of thanksgiving and praise. When we are troubled, to dig here for words of comfort, encouragement and strength; in times of confusion, to search for wisdom and direction; when tempted, to search out God's standards of purity and righteousness and for power to resist; the Word becomes the source of deliverance from temptations and trials. It becomes our most welcome friend, not only because of what it preserves and protects us from, but also because of what it delivers us to—intimate, loving communion with our heavenly Lord.^{xviii}

Ladies and Gentlemen, the question is not, should we have anything to do with this book, but, how can we live and grow without it? We can't!

And so, like young Samuel who was beginning to really mature, we learn to say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant—your slave—is ready to listen."

I am willing to follow Dr. James' prescription for approaching the Word:

- my heart is humbled with anticipation;
- my hands are cleansed with fresh forgiveness;
- my spirit is teachable,
- my mouth is closed and
- my ears are open.

I'm ready for another session with my divinely inspired tutor, who will teach me God's unfailing truth.

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