

## **Hearing and Doing the Word**

**(19) You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; (20)for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. (21)Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.**

**(22) But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. (23)For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; (24)for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. (25)But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.**

**(26) If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. (27)Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.**

### 1. **Can anger ever be righteous? (1.19-21)**

**(19) You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger;** James turns now to the 'beloved' and reflects on the way in which they might conduct themselves. He introduces this section with a series of aphorisms: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. Just as verse 16 in the previous passage stressed the importance of not being deceived, so now he urges his readers to understand the importance of these instructions. Even in the face of trials and temptations, true patience and endurance demands that we should be quick to listen and slow to speak. Note the addition of the phrase 'slow to anger'. Is James disqualifying all anger, or only anger for the wrong reasons? Or is he describing that deep-seated anger and internal rage that prevents us from being truly attentive to the other? We see parallels to this advice in the OT: Ps 37.8, Prov. 14.29, 16.32, 29.11; Eccl. 7.9; Ecclus. 1.21-22, 27.30, 30.24, and also in pagan literature (cf. Cicero, *Ep.* 30.13: 'when the mind is most under anger's influence is just the time when you should be most careful to bridle your tongue'). The Rule of St Benedict speaks of the virtue of *taciturnitas* and the importance of holding one's tongue. James goes on to speak about anger in the next verse.

**(20) for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.** The Hebrew Bible does allow for righteous anger (e.g. Psalm 4.4, Ecclus 1.22 'unrighteous anger cannot be justified'. Moses is angry (Exodus 32.19) and Jeremiah (Jer. 6.11). God is sometimes described as angry or full of wrath: Exod. 4.14, Deut. 1.37, Josh. 22.18. Jesus condemns anger in Matthew 5.21-26 ('if you are angry with your brother or sister, you are liable for judgement') but he angrily makes protest in the temple and rebukes the scribes and Pharisees. And yet here, James is saying that anger does not accord with God's will. The phrase 'God's righteousness' is rather ambiguous: does it mean 'the righteousness of God' (a subjective genitive to use the technical grammatical term) or 'the righteousness for God' (an objective genitive). In other words, is James describing God's own righteousness (God's saving activity), or the righteousness which God demands of us (our human response)?

**(21) Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.** James speaks of 'dirtiness' and 'an excess of wickedness'. It is interesting to reflect on the language of purity in relation to moral conduct. (cf. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*). But there may also be a hint of baptismal ritual in these words as well. The Greek verb for 'rid yourselves' is used in other contexts in the New Testament (e.g. Rom. 13.12; Eph. 4.21-22, 4.25; Col. 3.8; Heb. 12.1; 1 Pet. 2.1). But what does James mean by 'the implanted word'? Having laid aside all vices, the way is cleared in order to receive 'the implanted word'. A divine gift? It must be received with meekness, with the humility that is reminiscent of Jesus' words in Matthew 5.3. Kierkegaard notes: 'for only the pure in heart can see God, and therefore, draw nigh to him; and only by God's drawing nigh to them can they maintain this purity'. For Kierkegaard, 'purity of heart' is 'to will only one thing in truth'. An allusion to the single heartedness we considered in James 1.7-8.

### 2. **Hearing and Doing (1.22-25)**

**(22) But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.** This is the heart of James' message and much of the letter elaborates on this theme. His readers are not just to hear the word but to be doers of it (c.f. Luke 11.28, 'Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it!') Often this is characterised in terms of a significant point of departure from Paul (works/faith righteousness) but note this passage from Romans 2.13: 'For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be made righteous'. Lancelot Andrewes once complained of 'the common error' that 'sermon-hearing is the *consummatum est* of all Christianity', and warned those who imagined that if they heard 'sermons duly, all is safe'.

**(23) For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror;** James' analogy of a mirror is used frequently in Jewish and Hellenistic literature. A mirror is used to examine one's body, often with the intention of making adjustments to correct one's appearance. In a similar way, looking into the 'perfect law' should lead one to make necessary corrections in one's life.

**(24) for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.** Looking into a mirror was commonly associated with self-knowledge. We may contemplate our appearance and imagine how we look to the outside world, but we are also judged by our actions. There is an intimate relationship between action and intention.

(25) **But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.** James continues with the analogy of the mirror but develops it. Now we look ‘into the perfect law’, which is the law of liberty. But this passage confronts us with some interesting questions about the relationship between law and freedom. What is the law here to which James refers? Is it the Torah? Or the laws of nature? What do you think?

3. **True Religion (1.26-27)**

(26) **If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.** James doesn’t really spell out what exactly he has in view when he speaks about keeping a tight rein on the tongue. One of the desert fathers thought he meant ‘hypocrisy’, Gregory the Great thought he meant ‘idle talk’. Bede thought that James was urging restraint from slanders, lies, blasphemies, foolishness, verbosity, and all speech reading to sin. Bishop Butler, in the eighteenth century, identified James’ words with the sin of ‘talkativeness’, a disposition to be talking ‘abstracted from consideration of what is to be said; with very little or no regard to, or thought of doing, either good or harm’. Dale Allison wonders if Butler was influenced by the thought of ‘Talkative’ in Bunyan’s *Pilgrims Progress* – a character who constantly and cheerfully chats on all subjects for the sheer sake of the conversation rather than saying anything worthwhile. But can silence sometimes be dangerous too?

(27) **Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.** James uses the language of ritual worship (*threskeia*) but applies it to speak of moral action. ‘Works of love’ are the manifestation of true religion.

(1) Can anger ever be righteous?

(2) What does James mean by ‘the implanted word’ (v.21)?

(3) Do you find James’ analogy of the mirror helpful in terms of thinking about the spiritual life?

(4) What does it mean to be ‘a doer of the Word’?

(5) Does the law offer freedom?

(6) James refers often to the danger of the tongue. Words and speech are a constant source of fascination to the writer. But can silence be dangerous too?