

# How Is Your Reception?

James 1:19-27

An Expository Sermon

by David Roper

James treats many important subjects in his epistle, but none more important than that in James 1:19-27. One writer has said, "Nowhere is James richer than in this wonderful paragraph."<sup>1</sup> Louis Evans noted, "The sound of trumpets is in James 1:22: 'But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.'" In this passage James gets down to the bedrock of the religion of our Lord as he discusses the need for being *receptive* to His word.

In the physical world most of us recognize the importance of good reception. I don't watch Channel 5 much on TV. Because of an antenna problem, the reception is bad on that channel and it is a strain to watch. When I have to travel in the car, I enjoy the radio during the day. But when evening comes and the airways are bombarded with the superstation signals from Mexico and elsewhere, all spilling over into a dozen other bands, it becomes impossible to receive a single station for any period of time. Trying to listen is a headache.

The importance of good reception is illustrated by a little story I heard one time.<sup>2</sup> An American came in contact with an isolated group of Eskimos. To his surprise, they spoke English—English punctuated with squeals, howls, groans, and squawks. For instance, they would say, "How (squawk, squeal) do you (squeal) do? My name (groan, squawk, squeal) is Joe (howl). What (screech, squeal) is yours?" Rather amazed, the American asked, "Where did you learn to speak English?" Back came the answer: "(Squawk, squeal, groan, howl) Short-wave radio." Reception definitely affected the learning of this group!

But reception of a radio or TV program amounts to nothing as compared with the reception of *God's word*. In James 1:18, James says, "Of his own will he [God] brought us forth *by the word of truth*." (Italics mine.) The question of *this* passage is this: What is our *attitude* toward that word? We have studied concerning tests of our faith. But there is no greater test of our faith than

whether or not we *obey* God's revealed will!

James is writing to *Christians*, not *unbelievers*. It is vitally important that unbelievers have a right attitude toward the word—to be receptive and obedient to the truth. But we must *retain* that attitude after we become Christians. I am sometimes asked, "How can a non-Christian read Acts 2:38 and still believe that baptism is not essential?" I answer, "This can be done in the same way many Christians read Hebrews 10:25 and believe attendance is unimportant or read Matthew 19 and believe they can get a divorce for any reason."

The question of the hour is this: "How's *your* reception?"

## I. WE MUST BE READY TO RECEIVE THE WORD (1:19-21).

James begins by saying that if we are to have receptive hearts, three things must characterize us. He says, "Ye know this, my beloved brethren. But let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God." (James 1:19, 20).

James says to be "swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath." Unfortunately, most of us are the *opposite*: slow to hear, swift to speak, and swift to wrath!

Each of James' instructions is good general advice, but in context each ties in with our reception of God's word.

The first one is "swift to hear." Moffatt has "quick to listen." At least two things are involved here: (1) an eagerness to learn, and (2) a willingness to accept. 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. There is an art to good listening! It has been well said that great *listeners* make great preaching.

The second one is "slow to speak." This does not refer to slowness *when* speaking, but being slow to *start* speaking. The following is good

general advice: "In the multitude of words there wanteth not [or lacketh not] transgression; but he that refraineth his lips doeth wisely (Proverbs 10:19). ". . . let thy words be few" (Ecclesiastes 5:2).

This refers in a special way to the reception of God's word. It is almost impossible to learn as you are talking. Wilson Myner said, "A good listener is not only popular everywhere, but after a while he knows something." 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.

The final one is "slow to wrath." Again this is good general advice. Verse 20 stresses that "the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God." The NIV translates the verse: "Man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires." As a matter of fact, anger or wrath generally produces the exact *opposite* of righteousness. During the emotional turmoil and heated passion of anger, we lose our power to reason, and often say hurtful words and do stupid things.

Looking at them in a general way, these verses tell me two things: (1) A person with a quick temper has nothing to be proud of, and (2) temper *can* be controlled. Verse 20 is in the imperative mood, and God never asks the impossible. "But I buffet my body," said Paul, "and bring it into bondage" (1 Corinthians 9:27), and again he says, "I can do all things in him that strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4:13).

In context, the words "slow to wrath" are primarily concerned about the reception of God's word. Did you know that some people become angry when God's word "hits" them? 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. I have known people who left congregations because they didn't like the preaching on worldliness, divorce, and the like.

When God's word hits you, the conscience begins to smart. There are at least two ways you can soothe that conscience: You can repent, change your life, receive forgiveness, and thus have peace of mind.<sup>3</sup> Or you can become angry and attack the one who brought the unpleasant truth, thus turning attention from yourself to another, thus easing your conscience. But let it

be clearly understood that the latter course is spiritual suicide!

It does no good to get angry at a barometer when it indicates that a storm is approaching. It does no good to smash the scales when they indicate you are overweight. And it does no good to get angry at the proclaimer of God's word.

When someone preaches "the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15), that person is your *friend*, even when that truth hits you hard. Paul said, "So then am I become your enemy, by telling you the truth?" (Galatians 4:16). Or as Joe Malone puts it: "I'm not your enemy; I'm telling you the truth!"

But how can we have the kind of mind that is receptive, "swift to hear, slow to speak, [and] slow to wrath"? The answer is *preparation*. In verse 21, James uses the illustration of preparing the garden to receive the seed: "Wherefore putting away all filthiness and overflowing of wickedness, receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls."

The word translated "putting away" is commonly used in the New Testament to refer to taking off clothing (Acts 7:58). But since the total picture is that of preparing the seedbed, Moffatt translates the first part of the verse, "So clear away all the foul rank growth. . . ."

When we moved into a new home recently, the ground had not been prepared properly for a lawn. We found out later that the Johnson grass had just been scraped off at the surface and this had been covered with a thin layer of new soil. It was into this that the Bermuda grass seed had been sown. While the new grass was struggling to get a start, the Johnson grass sprang up thick and healthy. My poor wife<sup>4</sup> has almost killed herself trying to destroy the Johnson grass without harming the tender new Bermuda grass. It would have been comparatively easy to destroy the unwanted plants *before* planting the seed; it has been almost impossible to do it after the fact.

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, but 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). Used in a general way, it refers to moral uncleanness.<sup>5</sup>

“Overflowing of wickedness” can easily be illustrated. To get the *feeling* of this phrase, imagine a bubbling cesspool, overflowing in your back yard. Or to stay with the main illustration used in this verse, imagine obnoxious and persistent weeds spreading quickly over all the land that you are trying to cultivate.

“Filthiness” refers to *outward* uncleanness while sin *overflows* from *within* (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*.”<sup>6</sup> (Italics mine.)

The point is that we need to recognize the *loathsomeness* of sin. As long as sin is attractive to us, as long as we want to hold on to it, we will never be in a position to accept truth. But when sin is *repulsive* to us, then we can follow James’ instructions: “. . . receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.”

In contrast with the “wrath” of verses 19 and 20, in contrast with the hardness of heart caused by the wickedness of verse 21, we are told to receive the word “with *meekness*.” Meekness is not weakness; it is, rather, inward strength voluntarily submitting to the will of God. It has been called quiet strength or harnessed power. It is exemplified by the attitude of the Bereans: “They received the word *with all readiness of mind*” (Acts 17:11; italics mine).

In that kind of receptive “soil,” the seed of God’s word (Luke 8:11) can do great things. Much of this is implied in the word “engrafted.” The Greek word translated “engrafted” is a hard word to translate into English. In an effort to convey the full concept of the word, some translations have “planted” or “implanted” or even “rooted.” The picture is not of the new plant that can be easily pulled up and destroyed. The picture is of the plant growing down, becoming firmly rooted and fixed in the soil, and thus becoming strong and healthy. When *God’s word* becomes thus “rooted and fixed” in our hearts and minds, we can have great hope for the future. Thus a paraphrase reads, “The wonderful message we have received . . . is able to save our souls *as it takes hold of our hearts*,”<sup>7</sup> (Italics mine.)

Properly received, God’s word is a *powerful* thing. The last part of verse 21 is a great tribute to that power: “. . . the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” The phrase “which is able” is a participle form of the Greek word translated “power” in Romans 1:16, the Greek word from which we get *dynamic*, *dynamo*, and *dynamite*. In Romans 1:16, God’s word has power to save the unbeliever; in James 1:21, God’s word has power to *continue* to save the child of God.

Surely there is nothing more important than the salvation of our souls! Never call the Bible “a dead book,” nor refer to “the mere word.” God’s word has power!

## II. WE MUST BE READY TO OBEY THE WORD (1: 22-25).

But when *does* that powerful word save us? It would seem obvious that true *reception* of the word includes *obeying* that word. I could hardly be said to be “receptive” to my doctor’s instructions if I failed to obey them. Again, as we have seen, the phrase “implanted word” indicates that the word is growing and having its effect in our *lives*. But it is not necessary to arrive at this conclusion by indirect reasoning. James says plainly: “But be ye *doers* of the word, and not hearers only, deluding your own selves” (James 1:22; italics mine).

The “hearers” in this verse are far different from those who are “swift to hear” (v. 19). These hearers are sermon-tasters with a lecture-attender mentality, whose *lives* are not affected by what they hear.

It has always been far easier to fill our buildings with hearers than with doers. We have far too many homiletic-hearers, sermon-samplers, lecture-listeners, evangelistic-evaluators, didactic-dissectors, and preacher-puller-aparts, who do not *apply* the message to *themselves*, who “go away” unaffected.

Such individuals, says James, are self-deceived.

We have nothing but contempt for the deceiver, who takes advantage of others, and nothing but pity for the deceived. But what about those who are *self-deceived*? They are at the same time the most despicable and the most to be pitied—for it is a thousand times harder to undeceive the one who has been deceived by self than it is the one who has been deceived by another.

The self-deceived one *wants* to be deceived; he believes what he *wants* to believe. The truth may be preached, and most eloquently, but the self-deceived one manages to ignore it, discount it, or apply it to others.

Such a man, James continues, is extremely foolish. Jesus compared this type of individual with a foolish man building his house on the shifting sand (Matthew 7:26, 27). James uses *this* illustration: "For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a mirror: for he beholdeth himself, and goeth away, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was" (James 1:23, 24).

The illustration is that of looking at oneself in a *mirror*. In those days, mirrors weren't made of glass (as the KJV would seem to indicate), but rather some kind of polished metal. But they were still sufficient to see oneself.

The phrase "natural face" refers to the one you are born with, the one other people have to look at. When I see the phrase, I think of this bit of doggerel from my youth:

I know my face ain't no star;  
I know how ugly it are,  
But I don't mind it,  
'Cause I'm behind it;  
It's the folks in front that get the jar.

Sometimes I *do* look at that "natural face"—when I look in the mirror, especially in the morning. There is that face, puffy with sleep and covered with a scruffy stubble. There are the bloodshot eyes, filled with sleep. And there is the tousled hair with the perennial cowlick.

That "natural face" doesn't do much for me, but as addled as I am when I first wake up, I still have enough common sense to know that that depressing look in the mirror will do me no good unless I *do* something about what I see. So I repair the damage as best I can: I shave; I wash my face; I comb my hair. But if I were like the foolish man depicted in verse 24, I would look at myself and then go away, having done nothing about what I had seen, and even *forgetting* what I had seen.

Let me underline where this man's foolishness lay. We might think that this man didn't really get a good look at himself. But the words "beholding" and "beholdeth" in verses 23 and

24 do not refer to a quick glance, but to a lengthy contemplation. This man *did* get a good look at himself. So in what way was he foolish? He then *did nothing about it*.

I don't know *why* he did nothing about what he saw. Maybe he didn't recognize the reflected image as himself. I am told that some of the primitive tribes in New Guinea have no mirrors. When visitors take pictures, the natives are able to recognize others in the pictures, but not themselves.

Maybe he did nothing about what he saw because he had some confused idea that the situation would correct itself "somehow," "some-way." In other words, he felt no personal obligation.

Probably the best suggestion as to why he did nothing about it ties in with the phrase "he . . . goeth away." He turned to other things and immediately became so involved that he forgot "what manner of man he was." It is not uncommon for people to hear God's truth and be moved for the moment. But then they leave and are quickly caught up in the world again, and the moment is gone—sometimes forever.

*Whatever* the reason, James indicates that it is foolish, ridiculous, pathetic, to *know* what needs to be done, and not to do it.

In contrast to that, James then speaks of the man who looks into "the mirror" and *does something* about what he sees: "But he that looketh into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and so continueth, being not a hearer that forgetteth but a doer that worketh, this man shall be blessed in his doing" (James 1:25).

This verse contains another tribute to God's word. "The perfect law, the law of liberty" spoken of here is the same as "the word of truth" in verse 18 and "the implanted word" in verse 21. Verse 25 tells us three things about God's word.

First, it is a "law" because it contains commands from our King Jesus. The New Testament is not a legal system as was the Old Testament, but it still contains "laws," basic principles which must guide our lives. Thus we read of "the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2), "a law of faith" (Romans 3:27), "the law of the Spirit" (Romans 8:2).

Second, it is not only a "law"; it is a "perfect law." "Perfect" is from *telos*, "last" or "end" or "complete." The New Testament is God's final revelation to earth dwellers, satisfying every

spiritual need (2 Timothy 3:16, 17).

Finally, it is the “perfect law, the law of *liberty*.” The words *law* and *liberty* may appear to be contradictory, but real liberty and freedom come only when there are laws that protect our freedom. The only really *free* people spiritually are those who have voluntarily submitted themselves to the service of God because of their love and appreciation.

But now this “perfect law of liberty” is compared to a *mirror*.

A mirror can have many purposes. A mirror can be used in a periscope to look at *others*—and that is the only way some use the Bible. Or a mirror can be used to reflect sunlight (to flash a signal or to blind someone)—and some always turn the spotlight of the word in another direction. But basically a mirror is designed to look at oneself, and *that* is the primary way James says we ought to use God’s word!

If I will take the time to look at myself in the mirror of God’s word, comparing my life with its teachings, I will see myself—not necessarily as I would like to be, but *as I really am*.

But that look will not help me if I do nothing about it. Nor will it bless me if I stop looking and forget “what manner of man” I am. James says, “But he that looketh into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and so *continueth*, being not a hearer that forgetteth but a *doer* that worketh, *this man* shall be blessed in his doing,” (Italics mine.)

We must “continue” in two things. We must continue to “look.” 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!

### III. WE MUST BE READY TO LIVE THE WORD (1:26, 27).<sup>8</sup>

What is the sort of thing involved in doing the word? In the next two verses, James gives three illustrations of being an attentive doer instead of a forgetful hearer, three examples of *practical* Christianity: how we *speak*, how we *serve*, and how we *separate* ourselves from the world.

Notice his illustration concerning *speaking*: “If any man thinketh himself to be religious, while he bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth

his heart, this man’s religion is vain” (James 1:26).

We have already noted that James told us to be “slow to speak.” Chapter 3 deals with the tongue. James knew what a preacher-acquaintance of mine found out from taking an extensive poll: Although people in the *world* may not use the language they should, they still have no respect for someone who claims to be a *Christian* and yet does not “bridle his tongue.”

The words *religious* and *religion* in verse 26 come from a Greek word that refers to the *outward* manifestation of religion—external rites or services. So the man pictured goes to “the services.” He sings, he prays and gives, he partakes of the Lord’s Supper. But when he leaves, he has an “unbridled tongue” (or a “runaway tongue” as Donald Fream puts it). He uses vile language; he badmouths others; he praises himself; he fills the air with useless words.

Two things are true of him, says James: He is self-deceived like the fellow we noted in verse 22—for he, too, is a hearer and not a doer, And his religion is “vain”—empty, useless. No man can get to heaven “on a vain religion”! As someone has said, he gets caught in his own “mouthtrap.”

Notice his illustration about *sharing*: “Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, . . .” (James 1:27).

In contrast with *vain*, empty, religion, James tells about “pure” and “undefiled” religion that meets God’s approval. There is no attempt to cover *every* aspect of “pure religion,” but James *does* give illustrations of both the positive and negative sides of the religion of Christ.

On the positive side, James says that we are to help people, to share what we have: “Pure religion . . . is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, . . .”

The word translated “fatherless” is the word from which we get *orphan*. The root meaning of the word translated “widow” is “I need.” The English words indicate those who have lost the father or husband by *death*, but the *Greek* words will allow wider usage.<sup>10</sup> Death is not the only word starting with “d” that can remove the breadwinner. There is also *desertion*, *drink*, *disease*, *dope*, *divorce*, and *delinquency*. The point being made is that these are people *in real need*, repre-

sentative of all who have physical, spiritual, or emotional needs. Brother Marshall Keeble used to say that the passage says we are to visit the widows in their *affliction*, not in their affection.

And what is the response of “pure religion” to these needs? The ASV and KJV have “visit.” Note that this word is not limited to a social call. Think of all the passages that refer to God “*visiting*” His people—to punish or to bless. The word *visit* infers “going to see to take care of needs.” Thus Moffatt translates *visit* as “to care for,” while Goodspeed has “look after” and the NEB has “go to the help of.” In some cases a friendly call *may* be what is needed, but many times there are other needs, some of which are very pressing.

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, “And 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!*

But there is also another side to this “pure religion.”

There is *separating*: “Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27; italics mine).

Years ago, many of the people I knew tended to be more negative than positive in their religion, so when I preached on James 1:27, I generally reversed the order of the verse. After talking about being unspotted from the world, I then noted that this alone was not sufficient. We also had to be *positive*—to be showing positive concern for people. I even wondered sometimes why God used the order that He did; the other order seemed to be more appropriate.

But time has gone by. We have a generation raised on “positive thinking,” and suddenly James’ order seems very appropriate. Many of those I know now believe that just as long as your heart is good and you are generous, your

*lifestyle* is not all that important. So James is speaking to *today’s* generation. Earlier he told everyone to put away “all filthiness and overflowing of wickedness” (v. 21), and now he tells every man to keep himself “unspotted from the world”!

A young man once stopped his newly cleaned car in front of a house, walked up to the house, and asked if he could park there. The man of the house told him, “You can *park* your nice clean car here, but you can’t *drive it away*.” The young man thought it was a joke and left his car while he went about his business. He returned a few hours later to find his car covered with mud. He had parked by two mudholes, and the passing traffic had done the rest. He did *not* drive a clean car away! The world today is *filled* with sin “mudholes.” What a challenge to keep from getting unspotted!

It is so great a challenge that some think it impossible and don’t even try. But we don’t use that reasoning in other areas. Our planet is greatly polluted, but most of us still try to keep physically clean. Disease germs abound all around us, but most of us still try to keep well. Certainly it is *hard* to stay unspotted from the world, but again I use Paul’s words: “I can do all things in him.”

To stay “unspotted,” we need to stay away from situations where sin abounds—stay away from “big” sins, “little” sins, the obviously sinful, and even the questionable. And we need always to stay close to Jesus, so that our “robes” might be constantly “washed . . . white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:14). In short, we need to be *different* from the world!

If we are to live the word, we must have *both* the positive and negative in our lives. Once a high-society lady went with a social worker to the wrong side of the tracks to do “her bit” for charity. As they were departing, after leaving a supply of food, clothing, and other items, a ragged little urchin raced by them almost knocking the well-dressed woman down. The matron was repulsed and said to the social worker: “Why isn’t he cleaned up? Doesn’t his mother love him?” The social worker replied: “Yes, his mother loves him. Some people love children but don’t hate dirt.” And then she added, “And there are some people who hate dirt but don’t love children.” May God help *us* to be the kind

of people who have a *balanced* view of Christianity: Let us *love people and also hate spiritual "dirt."*

## CONCLUSION

As I close, let me return to the main thrust of verses 19 through 27: having *the proper attitude* toward God's word, being receptive to it, obeying it, *living* it. Perhaps more than other New Testament writers, James stresses that when God says something, we had better *do* it! One writer informs us that in the 108 verses in the book, there are at least 60 commands for Christians. Another scholar has noted that for the size of the book, James uses the *imperative mood* more than other inspired writers. James lets us know that doing God's will is not an *optional* thing—not if we want to go to heaven!

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>A.T. Robertson, *Studies in the Epistle of James*. rev. and ed. Hever F. Peacock (Nashville: Broadman Press, n.d.), p. 60.

<sup>2</sup>Use if it is fitting for the occasion.

<sup>3</sup>See Acts 2:37 ff.

<sup>4</sup>Yes, I know I am giving away the fact that my wife does most of the lawn work.

<sup>5</sup>Specifically, it can refer to the sin of avarice or greed.

<sup>6</sup>The Living Bible.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>By strict homiletic rules, this is really a sub-point under the second main heading, but your listeners will neither know nor care.

<sup>9</sup>J. W. Roberts, *A Commentary on the General Epistle of James* (Austin, Tex.: R.B. Sweet Co., 1963), p. 33.

## Visual-Aid Notes

In this section, James uses many visual images, and others are suggested in the illustrations I give. An *object* talk may go well. Here are some objects that can be used:

### INTRODUCTION: A Radio or TV

- I. RECEIVE: Eyes and ears, a knife, a barometer, scales, gardening tools (and a weed or two?)
- II. OBEY: A medicine bottle, a mirror (maybe one of metal), a tie pulled to one side and then straightened (or hair mussed and recombed), a simple periscope (or two mirrors to demonstrate the principle)
- III. LIVE: A bridle, a dirty dish, clothing with spots of dirt

If an object talk is done, key-word cards should be used with the main points on them so that the *point* being made each time will not be lost. (If one has a hook-n-loop board, the main points *and* the objects can be displayed together on the board.)

Of course, *pictures* of the above objects can be used on the chalkboard, flannel or magnet board, or overhead projector.

©Copyright, 1982, 2004 by Truth for Today  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED