

Studying for Transformation

September 25, 2022

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

James 1:19-25

Session Outline

1. Receive the Word (James 1:19-21)
2. Be Hearers and Doers (James 1:22-25)
3. Be Transformed (Romans 12:1-2)

Theological Theme

God's Word is full of information that we need to know, but unless we are being transformed by it we are missing the point. We are to receive the Word and then apply it to our lives as doers of the Word.



Leader Guide

Studying for Transformation

Introduction

How do you know if someone really understands what you tell them? Is it when they can repeat facts back to you? Not necessarily. Anyone who has raised kids or trained someone in a new skill can testify that merely repeating facts does not equal understanding. It can be frustrating to realize that although you have given your best in teaching or instructing, your listeners are not getting the point.

Think about it this way. When you teach or tell someone something, it is hard to know if they are receiving those instructions fully, but when you observe their actions after, things become clearer. It comes down to application. Although someone may look like they are listening, unless their actions line up with what you said, did they really hear you? There are even times when people can repeat back to you the instructions given and yet, if they don't follow through with the correct behavior then there is no application and no real understanding. Unfortunately, this doesn't just apply to daily life instructions; sometimes it's the way we approach the Bible too. James addressed this issue in detail as we will study today.

- ❓ How do you feel when you know the person you're talking to is not paying attention?
- ❓ How do you know if someone is really hearing you when you talk or give instructions?

Session Summary


The Word of God is full of answers and instructions for living the Christian life. Anyone who wants to live for the Lord should look to Scripture as a guideline for everything. As God's love letter to His children, it is meant to be studied, received, and applied to our lives. The ultimate goal of knowing God's Word is transformation. The more time we spend in the Word, the more we know God and the more we should become like Jesus.

1. Receive the Word (James 1:19-21)


Time studying the Bible is valuable for all believers. It is the best way to know God better because it is His written Word to us. There is no flaw in it and, as we have studied already, it is living, active, and applicable for daily living. To allow the Word to do what it's meant to in our lives, we must learn how to receive it most effectively. You have probably experienced a time when you listened to someone teach or read something but later realized you didn't retain any of the information. When that happens, that word read or spoken was not received correctly.

Receiving the Word of God is key and has been an issue for thousands of years. James wrote his book in a very practical manner to the average believer, and it speaks strongly to our subject today. In the first chapter of James, he addressed trials, temptations, and how to have a living faith. We all want to make the best use of our lives, and no one wants to waste time. So that means we are wise to dig into what James had to say about hearing and receiving the Word of God and then move into applying and doing what we have heard.

A good rule of thumb for everyone is to be quick to listen and slow to speak. One way to remember this truth is that we have two ears and one mouth. So, it stands to reason that we should listen twice as much as we speak, especially when we are talking about hearing the Word of God. James gave practical advice for believers with the challenge to be hearers of the Word who pay attention to what God says and guard what comes out of their own mouths. While this concept seems simple, it can be challenging for us to hear what we need to from the Lord and to keep a guard over our mouths at the same time.

 What kinds of things make it difficult to hear God's voice?

The world is full of noise and voices that are constantly calling us to do this or that. It can be tough to find the right voice to listen to. While the world offers numerous and continual distractions, sometimes the voices that are distracting us from hearing God are the ones in our own heads. Finding quiet moments in busy days makes it tough to sit calmly and hear from the Lord. Then if we do find the time to have a conversation with God, we struggle to turn our thoughts off from our schedules and to do lists long enough to actually hear from Him. But what if Scripture was the first thing we heard each day? Before we hear from anyone else and before we have anything to say, what if we first listen to what God might have to say to us?

 How can hearing from God first change the way we hear and listen to others?

Not only do we need to hear God's Word, but we need to receive it and allow it to change the way we live our lives. James listed some of the things that will have no place in our lives when we are listening to God and obeying His Word. Scripture is to be implanted into the life of a believer and not just as external truth. It has been written on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33). That means we have the power within us, through His Word and His Spirit, to put away the works of the flesh. This is what it means to die to self-daily and live in obedience to Christ.



Application: What needs to change for you to hear and receive God's Word most effectively?

The Blessing of Receiving

In the contrast between the hearer of the word who looks at his own face in a mirror and yet forgets, and the doer of the word who looks intently into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres, the distinction is found in whether the one who looks allows "the perfect law of freedom" (the gospel) to shape his life's course. The person who hears and does "the word" puts faith into action and is blessed; his worship influences his life.

2. Be Hearers and Doers (James 1:22-25)

We are to hear God's Word and receive it. The goal is to let it sink deeply into our lives and take root so that it can live and grow. This is the concept of the Word being implanted. When you take a seed and want to see it grow and flourish in your flowerbed or yard, there are some things you do so the seed will have the best chance of surviving and growing. You must be intentional about the planting process. Think of it like preparing the ground so the seed will be received.

Once the planting has happened then the seed must be nourished so it can transform into the plant it is designed to be. A good gardener will give that seed the right amount of water and sunlight so that it can flourish. Sometimes you may even need to protect the baby seedling from harm if adverse weather approaches. People cover their flowering bushes when a late frost is coming because they know how fragile new growth can be. Whatever the situation, the lesson is the same. If you want to see growth and transformation of the seed, then implanting it into the soil is the place to start.

Once God's Word is implanted in us, our faith in Christ should move us to action. It is not just a theory or head knowledge that we seek. James made it clear that real faith will be followed by action. The genuineness of our faith will be proven by our obedience. Without being obedient, God's Word is just an inspirational idea. James said that if you call yourself a Christian and don't put the Word into practice, you are deceiving yourself.





How do we deceive ourselves if we hear the Word but don't obey it?

It is easy to say you believe something but another thing to live consistently with what you say you believe. We can talk about trusting God no matter what and be bold about what the Bible says but what happens when real life hits? When things don't go as planned or you face opposition from the world for your faith? Those are the moments that

our faith either becomes real or shows us that we are deceiving ourselves. James knew this would be a challenge, and he wanted to equip believers to be solid in their faith so they could stand firm regardless of what circumstances they faced.


James used an interesting illustration to make his point. He compared hearers of the Word who don't act on the Word to a person looking in a mirror but then forgetting who he or she is. This is the same thing we do when we only observe God's words but never put them into practice. We do this when we read and talk about our faith inside the walls of the church but never engage in gospel conversations with coworkers and friends. We do this when we sing about God's grace shown to us but never extend grace to the people around us. Scripture demands and deserves a response. True believers should respond to God's Word with our actions and stop settling for just knowing more information about God. It is not about earning God's grace—that is a free gift—but when you have received new life in Him, your life will show it. Note that James said when you do this, you will be blessed.

-  How would you explain the mirror analogy James used? How do we do this when we only hear God's Word but don't respond in obedience?
-  Application: What do you need to be more intentional about so that you are not just hearing the Word of God but also doing it?

3. Be Transformed (Romans 12:1-2)

Once you realize the connection between hearing the Word and doing the Word, you may wonder what it looks like or even why it matters. Paul made it clear in Romans that living the Christian life is more than just knowing more. It is also more than just doing good things. People outside of a relationship with Jesus can know more information and do good things. So, what's the big deal about hearing and doing? It all comes down to the end goal and why we are studying to know more and respond with action.

Paul summed it up with the word transformation. James wrote that hearing and doing go together. When both of those happen, you begin to see you are being transformed into the likeness of Jesus. That is the goal and Paul told us how to see transformation take place.

-  How do you see that hearing and doing God's Word brings transformation? How does Romans 12:1-2 help us understand this process?

The motivation to be intentional about everything is found in verse 1. Paul said that his appeal to believers sprung from remembering or was “in view” of what God has already done for us. Our commitment to knowing Scripture and living it out like Jesus did should be based on our gratitude for all of God’s mercies to us. Think about all the ways the Lord has shown His great love for us—the forgiveness for our sins and the redeeming grace we receive because of Jesus’s on the cross. It is because of His mercy to us that we should be committed to living the way that He instructs.



What are some of the mercies you have personally received from God?

By instructing us to consider what God has done for us and to respond by offering ourselves up as living sacrifices, Paul reinforced the hearing and doing that James wrote about. Sacrifices were typically brought alive to the altar where they then lost their life as part of the sacrifice ritual. In presenting your body as a living sacrifice the implication is that you are not only a willing sacrifice, but you are also an ongoing sacrifice. This is not a one time only offering. We are to offer ourselves daily on the altar of sacrifice so that we are living for Him and not according to our selfish desires or sin nature. This is to become a way of life for the Christ follower who wants to live in a way that pleases the Lord. It means hearing the Word and doing the Word.

When you begin to hear and do the Word, you will start seeing transformation happening in your life. That is exactly what we want to experience but it is not always easy. Transformation is a process therefore it takes time, effort, and energy. There will be obstacles that arise to slow you down or stop the transformation from taking place. You always have the choice to pursue transformation or the opposite—conformation to the world. Sadly, many believers spend more time conforming to what the world wants than we do to what God desires for us. Conformation is easier, quicker, and gains more accolades from the world. Transformation takes intentionality and time and draws persecution more than celebration from the world. But the rewards of transformation are life changing and eternal. When you seek to be more like Jesus, your life will display proof of that. You will be living out what it means to be a hearer as well as doer of the Word. People around you will notice, and God will bless you for your obedience as you live out His good, pleasing, and acceptable will.



Application: What is the pattern of your life—conforming or transforming? What needs to change based on the passages we’ve studied today?

Conclusion

With anything God instructs us to do, the world does not like when God's people live in obedience. It looks different and is countercultural, but that is exactly what we are commanded to do. The world doesn't need Christians trying to be as much like the world as we can while still having Jesus as our Savior, the world needs to see people living out what they say they believe in a real, authentic, and sometimes imperfect way.

When we are being transformed into the likeness of Christ, others are encouraged in their faith and drawn to know Him more. The lost will be attracted to what we have when we live consistently with our faith and are motivated by the mercy we have received.

- ❓ How does a transformed life draw people to faith? How has this been attractive to you in other people?
- ❓ How do you need to be more intentional in making transformation your goal?
- ❓ Who is God calling you to have a gospel conversation with this week? How can I do what He calls me to do? To whom, as a group or as an individual, is God leading us to minister to? What does obedience look like?

Prayer of Response

Thank the Lord for the mercies you have received from Him. Pray for wisdom to recognize where you need to be more focused on transformation than you have been on conforming to the world. Confess any ways that you have been guilty of only being a hearer of God's Word and commit to obeying what God is prompting you to do differently.

Additional Resources

- *Exalting Jesus in James* by David Platt
- *Be Mature* by Warren Wiersbe
- *The Letter of James* by Douglas Moo

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



DxD This Week

Call to Action

Memorize 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Apply the questions to the passage; and write out specific ways God is leading you to obedience and share it with someone.

For Next Week

Memorize

But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

- James 1:22

Historical Context of James

Purpose

As a general epistle, James was addressed to a broad audience (Jewish Christians) rather than a specific audience (e.g., Christians at Ephesus only). There is an obvious concern to address internal and external difficulties being faced by Jewish Christian congregations. Externally they were facing trials (1:2), particularly oppression of various sorts exerted by wealthy landowners. It does not appear that the oppression was religious in nature. Internally it appears that dissension was caused by a lack of self-control (1:13–17), uncontrolled speech, and false teachings that led to a misunderstanding of true religion (1:19–27; 2:1–4; 3:1–8), favoritism toward the wealthy (2:1–13), and selfish ambition that led to murder and criticism (4:1–12).

Author

James is named as the author in 1:1. A number of New Testament personalities were named James, but only three are candidates for the authorship of this book. James the son of Zebedee died in AD 44, too early to have been the author. No tradition names James the son of Alphaeus (Mk 3:18) as the author. This leaves James the brother of Jesus, also called James the Just (Mk 6:3; Ac 1:14; 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; 1Co 15:7; Gl 2:9, 12), as the most likely candidate.

This James is identified as the brother of Jesus in Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3; and Galatians 1:19. Though he was not a follower of Christ during his earthly ministry (Jn 7:3–5), a post-resurrection appearance convinced James that Jesus is indeed the Christ (Ac 1:14; 1Co 15:7). James later led the Jerusalem church (Gl 2:9, 12), exercising great influence there (Ac 1:14; 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; 1Co 15:7; Gl 2:9, 12).

Setting

James was probably written between AD 48 and 52, though nothing in the epistle suggests a more precise date. James's death in AD 62 or 66 means the epistle was written before this time. Similarities to Gospel traditions and Pauline themes are suggestive. If Mark was written around AD 65 and time is allowed for the events of Acts 15 and 21 to have occurred between Paul's first and second missionary journeys, a date between AD 48 and 52 seems most likely.

Special Features

The book of James is a wonderful companion piece to the teachings of Jesus as recorded in the four Gospels. James has a strong ethical emphasis that is consistent with the moral teachings Jesus gave to his disciples. James also mirrors the sometimes harsh denunciations that Jesus spoke against religious hypocrisy. Like Jesus's teachings, the book of James is both a source of exhortation and comfort, reproof and encouragement. Finally, James is known for being extremely practical, yet it contains some of the most profound theological truths of the New Testament.

Extended Commentary

James 1:19-25

1:19. Christians can pretend to obey God without truly listening to his commands. The readers of James's letter knew the transforming power of God's Word, the gospel. James urged them to demonstrate this change, particularly in their speech. He began by courteously addressing them as My dear brothers, and then challenged them to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. The commands probably refer both to our relationships to one another and to God. We are to be quick to hear and slow to talk both toward other people and toward God.

The command to be quick to listen calls for an eagerness to hear and obey God's message. The appeal to be slow to speak demands silence until we have understood and applied the message. It is a call for restraint lest we produce hasty, ill-timed reactions. The challenge to be slow to become angry warns against hostile, bitter feelings. We cannot hear God if we remain distracted with resentment, hatred, or vengeful attitudes.

Our society encourages us to express our feelings, whether they be good or bad, peaceful or inflammatory, godly or ungodly. James 1:19, however, pictures the wise person as one who listens to God and others, deliberates a response carefully, and answers with cautious words.

1:20. This verse supports the command to be slow to become angry. Man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. The anger prohibited by this passage is not so much a flashing, destructive temper as a simmering pot of hostile, mean-spirited feelings.

Human anger wastes the energies of God's people, produces divisions, and often comes from selfish ambition. The righteousness that God desires includes deeds which are pure; ... peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere (Jas. 3:17). Angry words and deeds cannot produce purity and peace. Proverbs 29:22 warns that "an angry man stirs up dissension, and a hot-tempered one commits many sins." Moses' murderous anger in Exodus 2:11-15 resulted in his flight from Egypt and added forty additional years to the misery of the Jews in Egypt (Acts 7:27-32).

The mischievous works of angry Christians prevent the unsaved world from seeing that the God of all the earth does right (Gen. 18:25). It is impossible to look at the disorderly conduct of fighting believers and worship the God they profess to serve. This should make Christians cautious in our display of an angry spirit.

1:21. Believers can make a positive response instead of indulging in the hurtful anger which so easily hinders God's righteous designs. This verse issues a command and then provides a prerequisite for obeying the command, an incentive for obedience, and a description of our attitude in obedience.

The command is to accept the word planted in you. This calls for a warm, open welcome to the influence of God's message in our lives (1 Thess. 2:13). The prerequisite is to get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent. To obey the command we must strip off like a dirty garment any moral indecency and malicious attitudes. Why do this? The incentive for obedience is that God's word planted in you can save you. Obedience to God's Word promotes holiness and develops godly character. We demonstrate a genuine likeness toward Christ as we get rid of the flaming desires for filth and evil. This shows the presence of a real experience of salvation.

In our obedience we must display humility. We must not quarrel or quibble with God as we receive his message. We must receive the spiritual medicine which our divine physician prescribes for us.

David committed adultery with Bathsheba and carried out a plan to murder her husband (see 2 Sam. 11). For some months he refused to acknowledge his sin until the prophet Nathan boldly said to him, “You are the man” (2 Sam. 12:7). In Psalm 51 we catch a glimpse of a David who has come to his senses and expressed repentance fully. David asked for mercy (Ps. 51:1–2), acknowledged his sin (Ps. 51:3–6), pleaded for cleansing (Ps. 51:7–9), and asked for divine renewal (Ps. 51:10–12). We should respond to the Lord with equal passion.

James 1:19–21 focuses on speech as an area for demonstrating obedience to God’s Word. Here he calls for obedient action as the proper forum for demonstrating commitment to the Lord.

1:22. James’s command is literally to “keep on becoming doers of God’s Word.” He insisted on an obedience which lasts. This does not minimize the importance of hearing God’s Word. It does emphasize strongly the need for acting. Too often Christians view a sermon as an interesting moral or theological lecture. We need to do something other than sitting and listening. Jesus pronounced a blessing only on those “who hear the word of God and obey it” (Luke 11:28).

The command to listen to God’s Word describes someone who attends a lecture. The hearer could nod agreeably to the message but do nothing as a result. God wants a listener to become a disciple, an obedient follower of Jesus. One who hears the message without doing anything is self-deceived. Such a listener has made a false estimate of the situation. Jesus warned against this error (Matt. 7:21–27).

1:23–25. James presented a negative and a positive illustration of a response to God’s message. Via a vivid picture of listless listening, verses 23–24 compare those who only hear God’s Word to people who gaze into a mirror and dash away with little memory of what they saw. Mirrors in New Testament times were made of polished metal. People used them to wash their faces, shave their beards, apply cosmetics, and comb their hair. Then they quickly left, giving little thought to the image they had seen. People can repeat this experience in the spiritual realm. We give a quick glance into God’s Word, find a morsel of truth, and jump into another task without remembering or applying what we read.

Verse 25 uses the mirror metaphor with four verbs to picture the response of obedient listeners to God’s message. First, obedient people look intently into the perfect law that gives freedom. This describes someone who gazes at God’s message with a desire to learn. The same verb—translated as bent over—pictures the apostle John staring into Jesus’ empty tomb (John 20:5). John’s look led to an obedient faith (John 20:8).

Second, obedient people continued to do what God said. They put God’s Word into practice and follow through with commitment. Third, obedient listeners do not forget what they hear. Spiritual amnesia never conquers their minds. Fourth, obedient listeners do what God’s message instructs them to do.

Good listening, endurance, clear memory, and obedience characterize committed Christians. They are eager to receive and obey what God tells them to do.

God’s Word is the perfect law that gives freedom. Obedience to Jesus’ commands in Scripture brings freedom from sin and death. Whenever we submit to God’s message, this law of liberty produces a disposition to obey God’s will joyfully. We have freedom because we truly want to serve God. Jesus promised this freedom in John 8:31–32.

Obedient people are promised a blessing. We do not need to wait for a future blessing. We already have the blessing in our grasp. Doing what God requires brings a blessing with it.

Psalm 1:1–3 summarizes the blessings of obedience. Those who meditate on the Law of the Lord will be “like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.”¹¹

References

1. Thomas Lea, *Hebrews & James*, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999).

Author Bio

Thomas Lea (Hebrews & James)

Thomas D. Lea (Th.D. Southwestern Seminary) is the author of numerous articles and the coauthor of commentaries on 1 Corinthians and 1-2 Peter, and Jude.

David Platt (Exalting Jesus in James)

David Platt is the author of three New York Times bestsellers, including *Radical*. He is lead pastor at McLean Bible Church in metro Washington, D.C., the former president of the IMB (International Mission Board), and founder of Radical Inc., a global center for the unreached that serves churches in accomplishing the mission of Christ. Platt received his master of divinity (MDiv), master of theology (ThM), and doctor of philosophy (PhD) from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. He lives in Virginia with his wife and their children.

Warren Wiersbe (Be Mature)

Warren W. Wiersbe, former pastor of the Moody Church and general director of *Back to the Bible*, has traveled widely as a Bible teacher and conference speaker. Because of his encouragement to those in ministry, Dr. Wiersbe is often referred to as “the pastor’s pastor.” He has ministered in churches and conferences throughout the United States as well as in Canada, Central and South America, and Europe. Dr. Wiersbe has written over 150 books, including the popular BE series of commentaries on every book of the Bible, which has sold more than four million copies. At the 2002 Christian Booksellers Convention, he was awarded the Gold Medallion Lifetime Achievement Award by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association. Dr. Wiersbe and his wife, Betty, live in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Douglas Moo (The Letter of James)

Douglas Moo is professor of New Testament and director of the Ph.D. in Theological Studies Program at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois.