

Receiving the Word with Profit
James 1:19-21

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Scripture Reading: James 1

Psalters: 349 (1-4), 109 (1-4), 24 (1-3), 89 (1-3)

The text that we will consider is James 1:19-21, where the Holy Spirit says these words to the church: “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.”

How do you listen to a sermon?
How do you listen to a sermon *with profit*?
Listening to sermons is not always easy. It is not easy when, perhaps, the one delivering the sermon does not have an engaging delivery or interesting style. Or perhaps you have not prepared yourself, you are not feeling that much like listening to a sermon.

How do you listen to a sermon with profit?

Well, that is really what is answered in the text before us this morning. And it is good for us to take note of the context in this epistle of James.

Certainly this is a new subject. In the first verses of the chapter, up to this point, James has really, in a sense, been giving an introductory section that has to do with trials in the life of the believer. He says, “We should count it all joy when we fall into trials.” If we are going to find joy in our trials, he says, we need wisdom. And if we are going to have wisdom, we must ask it of God. Everyone needs wisdom for every circumstance in his life. The rich need wisdom. Those who are tempted need wisdom. These are trials that we go through

in our life. We have to understand them properly. And we have to see the wisdom of God in His goodness, His unfailing goodness to us His people. That is what we have to remember in all of the troubles and the trials of life.

James is writing to Christians who have been scattered by persecution. They had to leave their homes. They had to go to remote places, and they often didn’t really know where they were going. Perhaps some of them had suffered physical persecution that brought them troubles in their health. Maybe some of them had lost family members in death. These were the kinds of trials that they were going through. And it might be that one of them would read what James wrote and he would say, “But it’s easy for *you* to say, ‘Count it all joy when you fall into divers temptations and trials,’ but you don’t know what *I* have to go through.”

That is really what James is answering in the verses this morning. This is the connection. It may be that your trials are so difficult that another person cannot know them. But there is one thing that the Word of God, that James, that the Holy Spirit, tells us here that a person can know. He knows this, that in his trials he needs the Word of God. That is what James is talking about here. He is talking about how we can receive the Word of God with profit. In the troubles of life, this is what we need more than anything else, and this is where we ought to go: to the Word of God.

So this morning let us look at the words of the text under the theme: Receiving the Word with Profit.

Notice two things: first of all, the profitable Word; and then, second, How to receive it with profit.

The Profitable Word

I want to begin by demonstrating to you that what James is talking about here is the receiving of the Word with profit. In verses 19 and 20, you have what were really a couple of proverbs: “Wherefore,” James says, “let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.”

This is somewhat the difficulty of interpreting the book of James. Many have said, Well, the book of James is like Proverbs in the Old Testament. And these are just, really, random moral statements—proverbs that have been thrown in there. They present to us general truths that are important for every Christian to remember. Something like, when you read the book of Proverbs, and you have to meditate on each verse by itself because it is really a distinct thought. And some say, Well, that’s what you have in the book of James—it’s just a series of Proverbs.

Though there are similarities to the book of Proverbs, we have to see the connection here to the context. And that will make these words very rich for us. Certainly these are general truths. They are proverbs—very important in the life of the Christian. “Let everyone be swift to hear, slow to speak.” Think of what Solomon says in Proverbs 13:3: “He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his life: but he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction.” “A fool utters all his mind: but a wise man keepeth it in till afterwards” (Prov. 29:11.) And then verse 20: “Seest thou a man that is hasty in his words? There is more hope of a fool than of him.” And Ecclesiastes 7:9:

“Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools.” These are important truths. They are important in our lives; they are important in our homes; they are important in the church; they are important in the workplace; they are important in our marriages. We must be “swift to hear, and slow to speak.” It is a fool that utters all his mind, and who does not take time to listen. That is destructive to relationships, to reputations. It makes it impossible to live with others. If someone gets angry and flies off the handle, it does not help things. Be slow to wrath. Those are important general truths for the Christian life.

But James’ application here, we have to see, is very specific. He is not talking just generally about these truths as they apply in all kinds of areas of your life. He is talking about them in connection with the preaching of the gospel. He is not talking about slowness to speak and swiftness to hear and containing your anger in your marriage relationship, or in your home, or in the church. He is talking about your relation to the preaching of the gospel. As you come to hear the preaching of the gospel, you must be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.

You see that connection here. It is very clear. In verse 19, the very first word is “Wherefore.” James wants us to look back to what he said in the previous verse, where he said that God “of his own will begat us with the word of truth.” He is talking about what God does in the preaching of the gospel. And now he says, “Wherefore.” It is *so* important what God does in the preaching of the gospel—*therefore* you must be, as you come to hear the preaching of the gospel, slow to speak, swift to hear, slow to wrath.

You must be mindful of your relationship to the living Word of God in the preaching of the gospel. This is how you

must come to hear the preaching. He continues that idea in verse 21, which is part of the text we look at this morning, when he says, “Receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your soul.” And so, verses 19 and 20 are not just random thoughts. They are in this whole context of the Word of God and receiving the Word of God. This is how we come—we must come to hear the Word of God with profit.

That is something similar to what Peter says in I Peter 2:1-3. Very similar. Notice what he says: “Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby: if so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious.” Notice the comparison to verse 21 of James: Laying aside...and receiving with meekness the engrafted Word.

And James is not speaking here generally, to all men. This is a word very specifically directed toward *believers*, those who, as Peter puts it, have tasted that the Lord is gracious. He is not talking about man’s preparation of his own heart so that the Word of God can save him. He is talking about those who *have been saved*, who know the graciousness of the Lord, how *they* can receive the Word of God with profit in their lives.

Now, what “word” does James have in mind here in verse 18 when he says, “the word of truth,” and then in verse 21, “the engrafted word”—what does James have in mind? The answer is: He has in mind the public proclamation of the gospel in the preaching. You can see that in the verses that follow, where he talks about hearing the Word and doing the Word. Well, the Word that you hear is the Word that is preached. That is what he is talking about here. And really, what James is doing in the verses before us this morning is telling us, “This is

how you ought to hear the Word.” And then later, in the following verses, he develops it and says, “And not only hear it, but then also do it.”

And so, what we are talking about this morning is how we must hear the Word, the preaching of the gospel. God has chosen the preaching of the gospel, the public proclamation of His Word, the hearing of the Word, as the way to save His church. God does not say, “Well, here’s the program to salvation. Read these ten books.” He does not say, “Well, private praying and reading on your own is the way to be saved.” He does not say, “Art or entertainment or drama or music is the method to convey the gospel for salvation.” But He says, “The preaching of the gospel—that is the means to salvation.”

The Scriptures are very plain on that. The apostle Paul, as you know, was a missionary. He went everywhere preaching the gospel. In Romans 1:16 he says, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth.” And he means this: that, as he preached the gospel, that was the Word, that was the power that saved. In I Corinthians 1:21 he puts it this way: “It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.” The foolishness of preaching! It looks foolish. It looks like folly in the eyes of the world. But this is the way that God has chosen.

You read of that method, God’s method, throughout the Scriptures. In the Old Testament God sent the prophets. We sing in Psalm 122, “The people went up to hear the word of the Lord.” And in the New Testament we read that Jesus came teaching and preaching the gospel. Jesus sent His disciples to preach the gospel. This is the way God has ordained in all of history to save and to build up His people—the preaching of the gospel. It is not my idea. It is not man’s idea. It is God’s idea. It is

God's method of saving His people. The world will mock at it. It will not seem effective. It will not seem like the best way. But it is the God-ordained way. This is what God has decreed.

What is preaching? Well, true preaching, very simply, is a faithful exposition or explanation of the Word of God. The preacher works from the Word and explains it. Nehemiah, chapter 8:8—perhaps this is the best explanation of what preaching is. This is what preaching is: “So they [that is, the priests] read in the book in the law of God distinctly [so they read the Scriptures] and,” Nehemiah continues, “gave the sense and caused them to understand the reading.” They read the Scriptures, and then they gave the meaning or the sense of it, so that the people understood what was said in the Scriptures. That is preaching. It is biblically based. And it must be faithful to the Word of God. Wherever it is faithfully done, whenever the Word of God is preached in truth, there God Himself is speaking to you through the preaching.

That is why God chooses the foolishness of preaching. God Himself speaks through His Word. He puts it in the mouth of His prophets and instruments to convey the meaning of the Word to you.

Paul, when he preached in Thessalonica, said of the people that they received his word, not as the word of men but as it is in truth, the Word of God, which effectually worketh in them that believe. Paul is saying this, that when he preached, God took the words that he had spoken, which were faithful explanations of the Scriptures, and He used it to work faith in the hearts of those who heard so that they believed the gospel.

It is not the eloquence of the words. It is not the energy or the charisma of the minister or the speaker. But it is the faithfulness of what is said to the Word of

God in the Scriptures. That is the power that God uses to work salvation in His people.

That means that you do not just sit back when you listen to a sermon and accept everything that is said simply because it is preached. You are supposed to listen like the Bereans that we read about in Acts 17. They tested the word. Acts 17:11: these were more noble than those in Thessalonica. In Thessalonica, the Jews argued, and they slandered what Paul said. The Jews in Berea were more noble, in that they received the Word with all readiness of mind. They were meek before the Word. They were ready to receive the Word. That does not mean that they simply absorbed it like sponges. They received it with readiness of mind...and then they searched the Scriptures daily to see whether those things were so.

As hearers, therefore, you must interact with the preaching. That is what James is talking about here in James, chapter 1—how to listen with profit to the preaching of the gospel.

James demonstrates also the power and the profit of the preaching. In several places he tells what the preaching does.

He does that, first of all, in verse 20. Negatively he says this: “The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.” The righteousness of God that he is talking about here is a living obedience to the law of God—a life that is right, in agreement with, the Word of God. How is that produced? He says, “Well, not by the wrath of man.” That's the negative. Positively, it is produced by the preaching of the gospel. The preaching of the gospel gives fruit. Peter says, “That ye may grow thereby.” That is what the preaching does. It works righteousness.

And then, in the end of verse 21, he says that the Word is “able to save your souls.” He is not speaking to the unsaved, as though this is first-time salvation. He is talking about the process of sanctification in

the life of the child of God. You may be saved; you may be regenerated by the Holy Spirit—but that is not the end of God’s work of salvation. He does a work in you, by the Word and the Holy Spirit, both to save you and to make you more holy. Again, it is the Word of God that does that. This is the power of the Word of God—to work righteousness in your life, to save you and sanctify you. The Word has the ability, the power, to do that.

In all of what James says here, perhaps the thing that demonstrates the power of the Word the most is his description of it in verse 21, when he calls it the “engrafted word.” He means by that that the Word of God is something that works deep inside the heart and the soul of the hearers to give them a new life and a new perspective and understanding.

The word “engrafted” is, literally, *implanted*. I think you know what an implant is. Just this past week, I talked to a member of my former congregation who had a pacemaker installed. He had the pacemaker installed because his heart was slow. That pacemaker is really an implant, a half-dollar in size, installed on his chest just below the skin. It sends signals, impulses, to his heart so that his heart beats at a good rate, so that he has energy and is not tired all the time. What does that implant do? It gives him new impulses. Well, that is the idea also of the engrafted Word. The Word comes through the ears and the mind, and God causes it to take deep root in the heart. It gives to us new impulses and new understandings and new desires and new energies. That is what the Word of God does. It is powerful. It works deep within the heart of those who believe. It sends us new spiritual and mental impulses, new directions, new perspectives that otherwise we would not have. The Word of God produces this new life in us. And it does not do that just once. It does so every time we

hear the Word of God, as our hearts are opened by the Spirit to receive it with effectiveness.

The Word, we are told in Hebrews, is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword. That means that the Word of God gives life. It is living. It is quick. Paul speaks of it in II Timothy 3. He is talking here about Scripture. He says that Scripture is given by inspiration of God, all of it, and it is profitable for (and now he is going to talk not just about the words on the page itself, but also about the preaching of it)—it is profitable for reproof (from the preaching); it is profitable for doctrine, that is, for teaching; it is profitable for correction and instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. This is the power and the profit of the Word of God to work these things in the life of the hearer. This is the Word that saves your souls. It becomes implanted in the soul. It changes how we think and feel. It produces righteous living.

Does the Word of God do that in your life and in your heart?

As a believer, as you look at your life, what is it that has brought you to understand the Scriptures the way you do, to have the perspective on holy living that you do? It is the Word of God that you have been taught, that has taken root in your heart, that has given this perspective in your life.

Thank God for His Word. Thank God for the preaching of the gospel.

How to Receive It with Profit

James here is not just talking about the Word and its power and necessity, but he is talking about how we, when we come under the preaching of the gospel, can receive that Word with profit. There are barriers in the sinful heart of man to receive

the Word of God with profit, to prevent it from bearing fruit and taking root.

There is really just one thing that James says here, but he says it in five different ways. The one thing is that we receive with meekness the engrafted Word. But what does that mean? Well, James explains it here in five different ways.

First, we must be swift to hear the Word of God, the preaching. There ought to be an urgency and a desire and a readiness in us to hear the Word of God. In the world, when a new movie is released, or some popular singer has a new track, there is a kind of an enthusiasm to get it, to see it. That is swiftness to hear. We ought to have the same swiftness to hear—not for the entertainment and the things of the world, but for the Word of God. That is the antithesis here. That is the opposite. We ought to be swift to hear the Word of God. There ought to be an eagerness, a readiness, to receive the Word of God. The saints of Berea received with readiness of mind the Word of God. The person who is regenerate, who has had the Word implanted in him, who has the life of Christ in him, who has tasted that the Lord is good, is enthusiastic about hearing the preaching of the gospel. He pursues every opportunity to hear it. He is diligent in church attendance. He is attentive. He puts his energy into listening to the Word, to learning from it. Swift to hear the Word of God.

He will be swift to hear for *himself*—because that is where the Word is engrafted. In the heart of *me!* I need to be swift to hear the Word of God, not first for others, not first so I can see everything that is wrong out there. But I need to be swift to hear the Word of God for myself, in my heart, in my life, to draw the applications of the Word to me. Swift to hear for himself. We always like to hear things about others—gossip, things that can put others down a bit. Swiftness to hear the Word of God is first

this, that we are swift to hear what it has to say to *me*. That is what James means by being swift to hear.

Let me say something here about the church in history. From the time of the Reformation, the Reformed and the Presbyterian practice was that believers would prepare in their homes to hear the Word of God on the Sabbath. On Saturday evening or Sunday morning a father would gather the family around to contemplate with them where they were going, what was going to happen. Think about that. We are going to church. We are going to hear the Word of God. This is the agent, the powerful agent, that God uses to save. So we need to pray for the preaching of the gospel; we need to pray for the preacher; we need to pray for open hearts to receive the Word of God. Swift to hear. A readiness. An eagerness to hear the Word of God.

And then James says, in the second place, that we need to be slow to speak. He has in mind here those who always have the answers. They are quick to give the answers to all kinds of things. They have everything figured out. They are quick to justify themselves, quick to argue, quick to give opinion. That is the way of folly. The fool utters all his mind. The wise man keeps it in till after. Being quick to speak is foolish generally. It is *especially* foolish when one comes to the Word of God and is swift to speak.

We need to be slow to speak. That is, we must not come to the Word of God thinking that we have it all figured out, that we know what the minister ought to be saying today. We already formulate arguments, disagreements, in our hearts and minds, against what is being said. This is what James is saying: You cannot listen profitably to the Word of God when you are sitting there arguing with it the whole time. We need to be slow to speak when it comes to the Word of God.

In chapter 3, verse 1, James comes back to this same idea when he begins to talk about the tongue. He says this: “My brethren, be not many masters.” He means, do not all of you try to be teachers of others. Be not many masters. Be listeners. Swift to hear, slow to speak. There ought to be a proper reluctance in the child of God to utter the Word of God as though he knows what the Word of God says and means. What James is talking about here is pride. So often our pride and our person really get in the way of the Word of God as we hear it. We do not want to hear it because we think that we already know. That is our pride. We get in the way of the message of the Word of God by being swift to speak. We do not have the proper reluctance to utter what we think is truth. So: swift to hear, slow to speak.

And then slow to anger, slow to wrath. James gives a reason here: “For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.” This is what James means. Sometimes we react in anger when we are confronted with something. Anger is something that can be provoked. James is saying that, sometimes, when we hear the Word of God it can be aggravating. We must not react to the Word of God when we are aggravated. We must be slow to wrath as we hear the Word of God. Sometimes when truth is preached from the Bible it goes against our natural thinking, or when the requirements of the Word of God are preached, and it is convicting, we react to it with wrath, with anger.

Let me give some examples. The Word of God speaks against laziness, it speaks against gossip, and it speaks against jealousy. It tells us how we are to keep the Sabbath, to love the neighbor, and to control the tongue. And when we hear that Word we bristle, because we do not want to hear it. Or this, that a doctrine hard to receive is preached. The depravity of human nature,

perhaps, and it is preached in such a way that it applies to *you*. This is who *you* are. Or the hard truth of predestination is preached, and it goes against our thinking and against how we have been trained to think about God as a God of love. How can God love and hate? We do not want to hear that Word of God. And we get angry. James says: Slow to anger as you hear the Word of God. When the Word comes, you must check yourself that you do not get angry. Angry reactions to the Word of God, James says in verse 20, do not lead to righteous living, but to unrighteous living. Your angry reaction to the Word of God as you sit under it will flow over into your angry living against the Word of God in your life. Just think of how many people have left the church because the preaching made them mad. And where are they now? We must check how we hear the Word of God, that we are not angry in our reaction. None of us likes to hear the truth about ourselves. None of us likes to hear how it applies to our lives. Slow to anger—unless we are slow to anger under the preaching of the gospel, it will not be beneficial in our lives.

Then there are two more things that James mentions in verse 21. First of all, he says that we must receive the Word of God with purity, or, in these words: “Lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness.” Those last words are hard English words. They mean simply this: the overflowing of evil. We have to lay aside all filthiness and the overflowing of evil. James is talking here about barriers in our life to receiving the Word of God and the preaching of the gospel effectively. He has talked about the barriers in our heart and in our attitude as we come to hear the preaching of the gospel. We need to be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. And now he goes from the barriers in our heart and attitude to our life more broadly. James is saying this: If you

have sin in your life, and if you live in sin unrepentantly, that is going to be a barrier to hearing the Word of God effectively. Thus he moves to your life. By filthiness he means anything that is impure in your life and in your thoughts. He has in mind here particularly sexual impurities—the jokes and the pictures and the movies and the songs and the advertising of the world in which we live—all filled with sexual overtones that have an immense and a captivating power over the mind. Just read Proverbs 7 and you see it—the power of sexual filth on the mind. The word that is used here, “lay apart all filthiness,” is the same word in the Greek that is used for “earwax,” which builds up in your ear and restricts your hearing. James is saying that the filthiness of the world is like that. It has the power to captivate the mind so that you are blocking out the Word of God.

And then “superfluity of naughtiness.” He means this: there is an overflowing fountain of evil within you. He says that you must lay that aside—lay aside that overflowing fountain of evil. He means this, that whenever you come to hear the Word of God, you must be aware that there is remaining sin in you. And not just remaining sin, like remnants, but a constant fountain of sin in our hearts that we need to repent of continually, because if we are living in sin without repentance, we are hardening ourselves to the Word of God and we will not hear the Word of God with profit.

So, to put on the Word, to receive the Word, you must first lay aside sin, you must live in repentance. That is the fourth thing.

And that brings us to the last, which is a kind of summary, where James says, “receive with meekness the engrafted word.” What is meekness? Well, meekness is, first of all, humility, that is, a low view of myself—a humble awareness of who I am before God and of my sinfulness. Meekness is this,

that a person has come to the end of self. He does not see any worth in himself or any acceptability of who he is or what he has done before God, for salvation. That is meekness. Meekness is a willingness to submit to the Word of God, to bow before the Word of God, to come under the authority of God. That is meekness. That is really the sum of it. A meek person, as he comes to the preaching of the gospel, is one who comes with a teachable spirit—without pride, without a readiness to speak, without closed ears. He is swift to hear, he is slow to speak, he is ready to be taught of the Lord.

That is not something that comes easy. It is not something that comes easy, even though you have been under the Word for years. The Scriptures tell us in I Corinthians 8 that knowledge puffeth up. Perhaps the more we know, the harder it is to hear the Word of God with profit. We need to come to the Word of God with the freshness of our first love, with a childlike faith in the Word of God. Your coming to hear the Word of God effectively does not depend on how much you know in your mind before you hear it. It comes down to this: In your meekness you know your unworthiness before God and who you are. Then you receive the Word of God with effectiveness.

So all of these are necessary for hearing the preaching of the Word with profit, for receiving it with meekness.

How do you receive the Word? Is there a readiness, an eagerness, to hear the Word of God? Are you slow to speak in your opinions against the Word of God? Do you find yourself reacting, rising up in anger against the things that are spoken from the Word of God? Do you lay aside all filthiness? Are you aware of the fountain of sin so that you live in repentance?

This is how to receive the Word with profit. All of you sit in the pew. You look

from the pew to the pulpit. You hear different men and you analyze their different gifts and styles. But here the Word of God looks from the pulpit to the pew.

There are two kinds of listeners. There are the ones who are ready to hear the Word of God, who are deeply interested in what is being said, who do not rise up in argument and anger, who are teachable. And there are those who are the stone-faced, hardened, hostile to the Word of God, whose hearts are closed to being taught.

Which kind of hearer of the Word of God are you?

Let us pray that we may be the eager and the teachable, the ready of mind to receive the Word of God, because then, as James goes on to say, we will not only be hearers, we will also be doers. The Word will have fruit, it will be profitable in our lives. Amen.

Let us pray.

Father, we thank Thee for the preaching of the gospel and for what it has done for us and is doing in us. Continue by this engrafted Word to work faith and obedience in our lives. And help us, as we come under the Word, to come with the proper attitude of meekness and humility, that we might grow thereby. We pray it for Jesus' sake, Amen.