

## Week 4: Hearing and Doing the Word

### The Place of the Passage

In [James 1:19](#), the author turns to the main point he wants to make in his letter—that Christianity is not just about believing certain things or claiming to have faith; it is having your life transformed by the gospel. In other words, being a Christian is not just about hearing God’s word, but also doing it. Of course, that doesn’t mean that hearing the word isn’t important. A mind that is discontent, full of its own opinions, and not ready to listen will not be able to receive God’s word. But once the word is received, it must be put into action. That, finally, is the mark of a Christian.

### The Big Picture

As Christians, we should not only hear the word of God, but also put it into practice.

### Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, [James 1:19–27](#). Then review the listed passages and write your own notes on the following questions. (For further background, see the ESV Study Bible, pages 2392–2393, available online at [www.esvbible.org](http://www.esvbible.org).)

### Hearers of the Word ([James 1:19–21](#))

Reading through the book of James, it is easy to think that he is moralistic in his understanding of what it means to be a Christian. In other words, one can have the impression that he thinks a right relationship with God is all about doing this or doing that. That, however, is a wrong impression. With all his moral instruction and ethical exhortation, James is not telling a person how to become a Christian. How do you know that’s the case? To whom does James address the moral instruction that begins in [James 1:19](#)?

If James is speaking to “beloved brothers” beginning in [James 1:19](#), and if doing is not what makes a person a Christian, what then is it that makes a person a Christian? (Hint: look back at [James 1:18](#).)

There is a common line of reasoning in Scripture that runs from the new birth to the putting off of evil. Paul follows that line of reasoning in [Romans 6:1–14](#), and Peter follows it also in [1 Peter 1:1–23](#). Does James make the same argument? In what verse does he talk about the new birth? In what verse does he talk about “putting away” evil as a result of that new birth?

What kind of mindset does it take to receive the word of God? How would *slowness* to hear, *quickness* to speak, and *quickness* to anger hinder the word from taking root in a person’s heart?

### Doers of the Word ([James 1:22–25](#))

[James 1:22](#) is perhaps the best candidate for a “topic sentence” of James’s letter. More than any other verse, it encapsulates the message James wants to get across to his readers. In fact, the rest of the book will unpack this message of doing the word—not just hearing it—by looking at a number of issues with which James’s readers seem to be struggling. Look through the rest

of the book of James. What kinds of issues do you see James addressing? Explain how each is a matter of putting God's word into practice.

What metaphor does James use to describe a person who only hears the word, but does not do it? What kinds of things characterize a person who would look in a mirror and then immediately forget what he sees (e.g., impatience, refusal to focus, etc.)?

In [James 1:25](#), the author refers to "the perfect law," and then explains what he means by calling it "the law of liberty." What do you think this "perfect law" is? (See the note on [James 1:25](#) in the ESV Study Bible.)

### **True, Practical Religion ([James 1:26–27](#))**

These verses are often used to say that the essence of Christianity is to live a moral life—in other words, that if you simply do these things, you will be saved. Is that a correct understanding of what James is saying here? How do you know?

James gives three examples in these verses of what it means to do the Word. What are they? (Hint: there is one in [James 1:26](#) and two in [James 1:27](#).)

James uses these three particular examples, probably not to say that they are the only fruits of a life transformed by the word of truth, nor even that they are the most important. After all, the New Testament mentions many different fruits that come from a transformed life. Rather, he probably uses them for two reasons: first, because each of these fruits has a long pedigree in Old Testament teaching; and second, because they seem to be particular struggles of James's readers. Find one or two Old Testament passages that teach these same things, and then look through James and find where he addresses each of these ideas again.

Read through the following three sections on Gospel Glimpses, Whole-Bible Connections, and Theological Soundings. Then take time to reflect on the Personal Implications these sections may have for your walk with the Lord.

**Scripture:** Writings regarded by Christians as inspired by God and authoritative in all areas of doctrine and practice.

### **Gospel Glimpses**

**MY BELOVED BROTHERS.** "Brothers" is a term that Christians used for one another to refer to their mutual union with Christ and their inclusion in God's family. It is a natural companion to Christians' practice—taught by Jesus in his prayer in [Matthew 6](#)—of calling God their "Father." James's use of the term here shows us that he is addressing his book to people who are already Christians. He is not telling them what it takes to bring one into a relationship with God. Rather, he's telling them what a life transformed by the word of truth will look like. The new birth that God gives will issue in a life of obedience.

**THE IMPLANTED WORD IS ABLE TO SAVE YOUR SOULS.** Again, James affirms his understanding that it is the word of the gospel that saves.

### **Whole-Bible Connections**

**THE WISDOM OF HEARING, SPEAKING, AND ANGER.** James draws heavily on Old Testament Wisdom Literature throughout his book—especially Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. His exhortations to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger so that we may be ready to receive the Word of God have deep roots in Wisdom Literature. [Ecclesiastes 5:2](#), for example, says, “Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few.” [Proverbs 10:19](#) says, “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.”

**THE IMPLANTED WORD.** One of the great promises God made to his people regarding the new covenant is that his word would no longer be written on stone tablets, but rather would take up residence in their hearts. In [Jeremiah 31:33](#) he says, “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” God also declares in [Ezekiel 11:19–20](#): “I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them.” With his reference to “the implanted word,” James is picking up on one of God’s most exhilarating promises to renew and save his people!

**VISIT ORPHANS AND WIDOWS.** One of God’s most celebrated characteristics in the Old Testament is his particular concern for those who are most helpless. Moreover, because he shows that kind of concern, he expects his people to do the same. We can see this very clearly in [Deuteronomy 10:18–19](#). Speaking of God, Moses says, “He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.” And that description of God is followed immediately by this command: “Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.” The point is simple but crucial: The people of God should be like God.

### **Theological Soundings**

**THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD AND BROTHERHOOD OF MAN?** Some Christians have used the language of “brotherhood” to refer to all of humanity, regardless of whether a person is a believer in Christ. After all, they reason, God is the father of all by virtue of his having created us all. It’s easy to see the logic at work in that argument, but that is not how the Bible uses the term “brother.” “Brother” and “sister” are terms of address reserved for those who are also united to Christ by faith (and, of course, for those who are blood relatives). Moreover, to call God “Father” is the special privilege of those who are reconciled to him through Christ and adopted into his family.

**PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE SALVATION.** James says that the implanted word is “able to save your souls.” That is a very interesting way of talking to Christians! After all, aren’t they already saved? What does James mean by referring to a future salvation? Actually, the Bible uses all three tenses—past, present, and future—to refer to God’s work of salvation in our lives. We have been saved ([Eph. 2:5](#)), we are being saved ([1 Cor. 15:2](#)), and we will be saved in the end ([Matt. 10:22](#)). God’s work of salvation is all-encompassing, including justification, sanctification, and glorification ([Rom. 8:29–30](#)).

**Adoption:** Legal process by which a person gives the status of a son or daughter to another person who is not his or her child by birth. The New Testament uses the term to

describe the act by which God makes believers his children through the atoning death and resurrection of his one and only true Son, Jesus (see [Romans 8](#); [Galatians 4](#)).

**Justification:** The act of God's grace in bringing sinners into a new covenant relationship with himself and counting them as righteous before him through the forgiveness of sins ([Rom. 3:20–26](#)).

**Sanctification:** The process of being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. This process begins immediately after regeneration and continues throughout a Christian's life.

**Glorification:** The work of God in believers to bring them to the ultimate and perfect stage of salvation—Christlikeness—following his justification and sanctification of them ([Rom. 8:29–30](#)). Glorification includes believers receiving imperishable resurrection bodies at Christ's return ([1 Cor. 15:42–44](#)).

### **Personal Implications**

Take time to reflect on the implications of [James 1:19–27](#) for your own life today. Take note of the personal implications for your walk with the Lord regarding (1) the Gospel Glimpses, (2) the Whole-Bible Connections, (3) the Theological Soundings, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses
2. Whole-Bible Connections
3. Theological Soundings
4. [James 1:19–27](#)

### **As You Finish This Unit . . .**

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you engage in this study of James. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and to note things to review again in the future.