

Steadfast Joy: The Book of James

Rejecting Wickedness, Receiving the Word

James 1:21

Mark Vroegop

Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls (James 1:21).

During the last two Sundays, we have taken a break from our study of James to focus our attention on one of our Core Values: “The Call to Go!” Every year we take a few Sundays to remind us of the global focus our church prioritizes. It’s important to remember that:

- There are three billion people who are still unreached with the gospel
- Unreached people are unreached for a reason—it’s hard and expensive
- 97 percent of the world’s unreached people live in the 10/40 Window
- Americans spend more money on Halloween costumes for their pets than the amount given to reach unreached peoples¹

My heart was so blessed to hear from one of our former residents, Luke H., who is now serving in the Middle East; and to hear from other overseas workers recount the challenges of their ministries. Amid all the challenges that we face in the US with COVID and an election this week, I was helped by the reminder that some believers still walk to church for two hours in the dark.

These last two weeks helped broaden my perspective and put my challenges and struggles in perspective. Our prayer time on Sunday night was one of my favorites. I went to bed on Sunday night with a grateful heart.

But Monday still came! And I still have to fight for joyful endurance and pursue godliness. So, I’m glad that we are back in the book of James because this book is helping me consider how to live in a Christlike manner when life is really hard.

Since August, we’ve been walking slowly through this helpful and insightful book. We left our study two weeks ago after considering what it means to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. Hopefully, you remember and have applied “**Stop-Think-Seek**” to situations in which you were tempted to become sinfully angry.

If you’ve seen some growth in your life, praise God! Verse 21 helps us to take further steps.

¹ <http://www.thetravelingteam.org/stats>

Three Exhortations for Steadfast Spiritual Growth

I want to give you three exhortations for spiritual growth from verse 21. They serve as an extension of what James has already said in verses 19-20. There's something to reject, something to receive, and something to remember. Let's look at each of these.

1. Reject

The first exhortation relates to what needs to be rejected. It's directly connected to the statement "put away." Spiritual growth happens when we know what needs to be stopped. The Bible never makes spiritual growth only about stopping certain things, but it is an important element. Perhaps you are familiar with the "put off" and "put on" language in Colossians 3.

The first word in verse 21 is "**Therefore.**" I want to remind you of the importance of that word. It signals an implication or continuation of what has been previously stated. When you read your Bible, look for this word. It's really important.

Why is it here? Paul previously talked about sinful speech and sinful anger, and after making that point clear, James wants us to press on to other things. It's as if James starts with the most obvious sin issues—sinful talking and anger—but he's not satisfied with that. There's more to pursue. Sinful talking and explosive anger are just the start!

What's next in the text? We find the words "**put away.**" Other translations say "get rid of" (NIV) or "ridding yourselves of" (CSB). The word means to "take off" or to "lay aside." You could think of it as taking off a coat. But it's more than that because it's in the aorist tense. This would indicate a reality already accomplished or something that doesn't fit—like we saw with the incompatibility of anger and God's righteousness. It doesn't fit with who you are or what's to be expected (Ex. why are you wearing dirty clothes?)

A few examples from other places in the New Testament:

...to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:22–24).

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator (Col. 3:9–10).

The Christian life is one of continual "putting off." It's an essential part of how spiritual maturity is expressed.

...let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith... (Heb. 12:1–2).

When you become a Christian, you never stop turning away from what remains of your practical wickedness. Wise people understand their need for more wisdom and humble people see how proud they are. Christians understand how much sinfulness remains within them. And they turn from it because of the glorious grace of God. They not only hate sin; they love God's grace!

That's why James says, "...put away **all filthiness and rampant wickedness.**" The term for "wickedness" is translated in multiple places as "malice" (see Eph. 4:31; Col. 3:8; Tit. 3:3; 1 Pet. 2:1). Do you know what malice means? It's the desire to inflict injury, harm, or suffering on another person. It's the violation of the command to love one's neighbor as yourself. So, you could think of it as anything that doesn't fit with the gospel and God's heart.

We're to reject the rampant wickedness around us and the remains of filthiness within us.

Let me encourage you here. What motivates you to reject things that you know are wrong? What pushes you to go deeper? It might start as guilt: "I know this is wrong. I feel convicted." But what if it could be motivated by grace? "I've seen God change how I talk and what happens when I tempted to get angry. I've seen the power of rejecting the wrong things, and I want to see it happen in other ways too." In this way, our repentance and renewal builds – but not based upon guilt but on grace.

That also means that if you have a story where you've seen victory over a sin issue, you should find ways to appropriately and humbly share it because it encourages other people to press on with deeper levels of life change.

Matt Erbaugh says, "Repentance is less about feeling bad over behavior, and more about feeling awe and delight towards God."²

How are you growing in rejecting all filthiness and rampant wickedness? Hardship and suffering can serve to help you see what remains of the filthiness and wickedness in your life. Someone recently asked me: "What's it like pastoring during these days?" I said, "Well, if you are passionate about seeing how sinful we are and trying to help people with sanctification – these are great days!"

Pursuing steadfast spiritual growth means a commitment to reject filthiness and wickedness.

2. **Receive**

There's a second exhortation here that is just as important. Being a follower of Jesus not only means rejecting what is wrong and sinful within us, but it also requires the activity of receiving the grace of God. This "reject-receive" dynamic is all over the New Testament.

This is how a person comes to faith in Jesus. Mark's gospel summarizes the Gospel in this way: "repent and believe" (Mark 1:15). Christianity involves rejecting what is wrong and receiving what is right and true. Being a follower of Jesus means turning and trusting.

² <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-heart-of-true-repentance>

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But this doesn't stop as you grow in discipleship; it's the 1-2 step of basic Christian discipleship.

A few examples:

- In Colossians 3 it sounds like, "...put to death what is earthly in you...put on...compassionate hearts, kindness..."
- In Hebrews 12 it sounds like, "...lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance..."
- In Ephesians 4 it sounds like, "...put off your old self and be renewed in the spirit of your minds...put away falsehood...speak the truth."

We see the same dynamic or equation in James 1:21. It says: **"...receive with meekness the implanted word."** We are to reject and receive. What are we to receive? The text is clear – the implanted Word. First and foremost, this is referring to the revelation of God through his Word—the Scriptures. The Bible is God's declaration of what he is like, what we are like, and what true righteousness looks like.

Can I just remind you how important the Bible is for your life?

- "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17).
- "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness..." (2 Tim. 3:16).
- "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105).
- "How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word" (Psalm 119:9).
- "...preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim. 4:2).
- "Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day" (Psalm 119:107).

It is the Word that gives life! This is how James started his letter: "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures" (James 1:18).

One of the things that I loved about our prayer gathering last Sunday was starting by reading the Scriptures together. My heart was weary as I came into that prayer meeting. I was fighting for joyful endurance. And as we read the Bible, my heart kept saying, "Yes, it's true. Yes, it's true. Yes, it's true." And it helped my soul. I was receiving the Word.

Amazingly, James calls this the **"implanted"** word. This does not mean that we are to receive a truth that is within us. It's not "your truth" or "my truth" that matters. And it's not that we have the truth within us. This concept is not designed to make you excited about yourself. Rather, it's meant to cause you to be stunned at what God does.

So, what does "implanted" mean? It is likely a reference to the promise of the new covenant (see Jer. 31:33) where God promises to put his law in the minds of his people and to write it on their hearts. James is referring to how God implants the word into the hearts of believers. In other words, it means that God changes the disposition of the heart of a Christian. As he or she hears the Word, it lands

differently. It is a glorious thought that God is the one who is planting the seed of the Word, and as the Word is declared, taught, or discussed we are engaging with the glorious truth of his revelation. But any time that we understand anything, it is only because of his kindness and grace.

That's why our posture is so important. James says, "...**receive with meekness.**" It means to receive the Word with humility. This relates to your posture when it comes to the Bible. What might this sound like? Consider the following prayerful statements:

- "I'm the biggest sinner I know. God, I need your Word today."
- "Your Word changed me. Keep changing me, Lord!"
- "My heart can be prone to not listen, help me receive the Word today."
- "God, I'm ready to see where I'm wrong and respond to you."
- "I need the Word for my soul today, God!"

What's your posture with the Scriptures? Do you see the value of the Word in your life? Do you love the Word? Don't neglect the presence and the power of the Word in your life. As you reject what is wrong, fill your mind and heart with the miraculous, life-changing Word.

3. Remember

The final exhortation relates to the connection that we need to make between our endurance and the Scriptures. There's something to remember. There's something that we probably already "know" but we need to apply it more readily.

We are to remember that this word is "**able to save your souls.**"

It's important to understand that James is not using the word "save" in the sense that of a person coming to faith in Christ for the first time. Rather, he is referring to the culmination of the Christian life. In other words, he's talking about "salvation" in a total sense.

James is fairly consistent here in referring to salvation in this manner. For example:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? (James 2:14)

Throughout his letter, James is not only interested in people who come to faith, but in what real faith looks like. James is concerned about perseverance more than he is concerned about profession. Not that profession doesn't matter.

Don't forget that James is writing to a group of people who are facing suffering and hardship. So, I'm sure one question they are wrestling with is how to make it through this difficulty. And he reminds them about something that I surely need during these challenging days: **the Word is able to save me.**

That means we approach the Bible with a deep sense of urgency. We must remember that the priority of the Word must be maintained as we face pressures of many kinds. We need to read the Word, hear

the Word, memorize the Word, and talk about the Word because it is how we will persevere through difficulty.

But this also means to have deep-seated confidence. We may not know what the future holds and we may be tired, wondering how we will make it, but here's what Paul said to Timothy:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching (2 Tim. 4:1–2).

It is the Word that God uses to save us. So, we need to be reminded that more than a vaccine, more than our candidate in office, more than job security, more than certainty about anything, we can follow Jesus with the singular confidence that the Word is able to save you and me.

We keep rejecting what's wrong, keep receiving the word, and keep remembering that this is God's plan.

Martin Luther faced incredible difficulties and pressure when he wrote "A Mighty Fortress is our God." Consider the last two verses:

And though this world, with devils filled,
should threaten to undo us,
we will not fear, for God has willed
his truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim,
we tremble not for him;
his rage we can endure,
for lo! his doom is sure;
one little word shall fell him.

That Word above all earthly powers
no thanks to them abideth;
the Spirit and the gifts are ours
through him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go,
this mortal life also;
the body they may kill:
God's truth abideth still;
his kingdom is forever

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