



James: Faith that Works
Week 6: James 1:19-27
“Not Hearers Only”
Pastor Onan Coca October 4, 2026

[CALL TO HEAR]

[READ THE TEXT]

James 1:19-27

19 Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. 21 Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. 25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

“People of God, this is the Word of God!”

Congregation - “Thanks be to God!”

[PRAYER OF ENLIGHTENMENT]

Main Point: True religion is the humble reception of God’s Word, evidenced by obedient holiness and active mercy.

- 1. The meek posture before the Word (vv. 19–21)**
- 2. The danger of self-deception (vv. 22–24)**
- 3. The law of liberty and persevering obedience (v. 25)**
- 4. The marks of pure religion (vv. 26–27)**



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Good morning. If I haven't met you, my name is Onan Coca. I'm one of the pastors here at Highlands, along with our lead teaching pastor, Jody May, and our executive pastor, Bill Alderson. It's good to be here with you today under this Word.

Let me begin by asking you if you've ever met a person like this? He's like a bull in a china shop. Boasts, opinions, verdicts, volume. When he finally walks out, everyone he leaves behind exhales in relief. He thinks he is “just being honest.” But in reality, he is just ungoverned.

“A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back.” Proverbs 29:11

Or maybe you've known a person like this? A hard thing happens, and before anyone has prayed, she has posted about it, forwarded it to “friends,” and planted her flag. She calls it “speaking truth.” But in reality, it's unwise haste.

“Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.” (Proverbs 29:20)

This morning, we're not talking about someone's personality; we're talking about a heart with no bridle. The problem isn't that the person cares; it's that they never pause long enough for the Word to get in. In the very famous passage we'll be studying today, James will tell us that a religion with an unbridled tongue is worthless, but as we've already seen in Proverbs, God has been warning us about this for millennia.



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And I’m not here to talk about “other people,” I’m talking about the speed of my own mouth. Of our mouths. James is not giving us a personality upgrade in today's passage. He’s telling us what the implanted Word produces: a Christian who can wait, a Christian who can listen, a Christian who does not confuse loudness with faithfulness.

Last week, Pastor Jody finished the opening section of James by showing us a real reward, not fading earthly riches, but a crown of life for those who endure. He showed us that God never tempts anyone with evil, but that our own hearts are the problem. And then he landed on verse 18: the Father of lights “brought us forth by the word of truth.”

Family, that’s a big deal. Your salvation is not your project. Your salvation is God’s work, a work that he does through His Word.

Verse 21 will say, “receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” James calls it the “implanted Word” because the Word of truth has taken root in us. The Word that brought us forth in verse 18 is now the Word we are commanded to receive, so that it might continue to take root and bear fruit in our lives. “Able to save” isn’t a threat that you might fall out of Christ if you have a bad week. It’s a promise. A promise that the Word that began the work will finish it.

“I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” – Philippians 1:6



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What we’ll see today is that our new birth, growing holiness, and final perseverance all run on the same track. The evidence that the Word is working in you is a life that humbly receives it and obediently does it.

So we are not here to get born again a second time. We are here to learn how a people already born of the Word now live under the Word.

Which brings us to our **Main Point** today:

True religion is the humble reception of God’s Word, evidenced by obedient holiness and active mercy.

I’ve got four sub-points for you that we’ll look at today.

1. The meek posture before the Word (vv. 19–21)
2. The danger of self-deception (vv. 22–24)
3. The law of liberty and persevering obedience (v. 25)
4. The marks of pure religion (vv. 26–27)

As Pastor Jody has already pointed out to us over the last month, James is a small letter with a lot of commands. By all accounts, there are more than fifty commands and perhaps even as many as 60.

In today’s passage, we’ll see at least five of them, so please hear these words from James as commands, not tips:



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- **Know this.**
- **Be** quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.
- **Put away** all filthiness and rampant wickedness.
- **Receive** with meekness the implanted word.
- **Be** doers of the word, and not hearers only.

Now, as we move forward today, I want you to keep one question in the back of your mind: *When I walked out of here last Sunday, what actually changed?*

Let's dive back into our text. Look with me at **James 1:19-21**

19 Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. 21 Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

Our first point today is,

1. The meek posture before the Word (James 1:19–21)

There we read, **DO this**. Be quick to hear. Slow to speak. Slow to anger. This is our first command in the text.

And we've heard this wisdom before, **“Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly” (Proverbs 14:29).**

“If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.” (Proverbs 18:13).



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Friends, you can win the argument with your spouse in the kitchen and hinder the righteous life God is forming in your home. You can be right in content and wrong in spirit because man’s anger doesn’t produce the righteousness of God. James certainly has our relationships with the people around us in view, but in this paragraph, his immediate concern is how we hear God. “Quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” is how the soil of your heart is prepared to receive the Word.

Next, we are to “put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness.” Or as the KJV so wonderfully says it, perhaps my favorite sentence ever written in the English language, “lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness.”

Pastor Jody reminded us last week that it’s not what goes into a man that defiles him. Jesus explained this in Mark 7. The Pharisees were worried about unwashed hands, but Jesus was worried about an unclean heart. “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. 21 For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, 22 coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. 23 All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” (Mark 7:20–23).

Slow to speak and slow to anger are heart diagnostics. The filth that James is telling us to **put away** is not, first, the mess that’s out there. What he’s talking about is what keeps rising from within our own hearts. The filth that defiles us comes from within.

That’s why he tells us to **receive the Word with meekness**. The Word has to reach the heart.



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“The Word must be a living implanting, by which it becomes, as it were, united with our heart.”

“If we desire to be the living plantation of God, we must subdue our proud hearts and be humble.”

“Meekness is humility and the readiness of a mind disposed to learn.”

— John Calvin, *Commentary on James 1:21*

John Calvin, commenting on this verse, says the Word must be “a living implanting, by which it becomes, as it were, united with our heart.” Meekness, he says, is “humility and the readiness of a mind disposed to learn.” Church, if we want to be the living plantation of God, we must subdue our proud hearts because the Word will not take root in a heart that insists on remaining in charge.

Jesus already told us this. Do you remember the parable of the sower in Matthew 13?

A sower went out to sow. Some seed fell on the path, and the birds ate it. Some fell on rocky ground and withered. Some fell among thorns, and the cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things choked it. Some fell on good soil and bore fruit (**Matthew 13:3–8, 18–23**).

James is planted firmly in that parable. God's Word is not meant to remain on the surface of our lives. It is meant to take root, bear fruit, and change us. Pride and rage may be the hard path, shallow hearing the rocky ground, and meekness looks like the broken, tender ground where the Word takes root.



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Peter says the same thing in 1 Peter chapter 1: “You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Peter 1:23).

Do this. Take this off. Receive this. This isn’t legalism. This is good soil.

With humble hearts, sit under the text before you speak about it. A people who will not be quiet before the Word of God will not be doers of the Word.

Now, James moves to the

2. The danger of self-deception (James 1:22–24)

22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.

The command is not “try harder.” It’s “stop deceiving yourself.”

Puritan pastor Thomas Manton, commenting on this passage, said, “The doers of the Word are the **best** listeners. It is good when we hear things that are to be done and do things that are to be heard. That knowledge is best that is most practical, and that hearing is best **that ends in practice.**” – Thomas Manton, *Practical Commentary, or Exposition with Notes on the Epistle of James*

A Sunday church service can be the mirror that James is describing. Family worship can be that mirror. A marked-up Bible can be that mirror. But Monday could be amnesia.



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That's the question I asked you to keep in the back of your mind today. *When you walked out of here last Sunday, what actually changed?* If you can't name it, it doesn't make you a bad Christian. You might just be the man in the mirror. You looked. You saw. You left. You forgot what the Word showed you.

In Matthew 7:24–26, Jesus said the one who hears His words and does them builds on a rock. The one who hears and does not do them builds on sand. Both men heard the same sermon, and they both built their houses. The difference between the two is in the **doing**.

In Ezekiel chapter 33, verses 30-32, the prophet saw a people sitting as God's people sit, they heard the Word, they gave lip service to the Word, they pretended to care about the Word, but they would not obey it.

Some years ago, I had a conversation with someone who told me that the Apostle Paul and James did not seem to agree. But the reality is that they are singing the same song in a different key. Paul answers the man who thinks he can *earn* standing with God. James answers the man who thinks he can *claim* standing with God while his life stays unchanged.

Paul teaches us that we are justified by faith apart from works. James teaches us that the faith that justifies is never alone. We are not saved by works; we are saved for good works! Root and fruit. They come from the same tree, planted in the good soil.



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Paul is preaching to the man with a résumé. James is preaching to the man with a sermon outline and an unchanged life. If there is no doing, James doesn't say the gospel failed; he says the Word was heard, but it wasn't received.

Last year, as we walked through 1 Corinthians, we learned from Paul that you can have all knowledge and all gifts, but if you have not love, you are nothing (*1 Corinthians 13:1–2*). That's James's forgotten face, just said in a different way.

Thankfully, James does not leave us with the forgotten face. He shows us the man who stays in the mirror and does not forget. Which brings us to our third point,

3. The law of liberty and persevering obedience (James 1:25)

“But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.”

This is not a new Moses, and it's not a new way to get saved. The perfect law, the law of liberty, is the Word that exposes and frees. For those of us already in Christ, the moral law is our rule of life; it's how we live. It's not a ladder into the family, or chains of slavery; it's God's good truth, and it's freedom to walk in it.

Listen to Psalm 19:7, which says, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul” (Psalm 19:7).

Or Psalm 119:32, “I will run in the way of your commandments when you enlarge my heart” (Psalm 119:32).



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And Jesus explained in John chapter 8, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31–32).

Liberty is not autonomy from God’s standard; **liberty is the power to conform to God’s standard.** It’s the freedom to do what He has told us to do.

Perseverance in verse 25 is a refusal to forget. We’re focused on the mirror, and we’re not going to forget what we see. **We don’t do this to become accepted.** We do this because we’ve already been accepted in the Beloved. Ephesians 2:8-10 says,

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:8–10).

Further, Ezekiel 36:27 tells us, “I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes” (Ezekiel 36:27).

This is new-creation power, supplied by God Himself. So, brothers and sisters, **look into the law of liberty and keep your eyes fixed there.**

This brings us to our fourth and final point today,



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4. The marks of pure religion (James 1:26–27)

“If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”

James refuses to split what God has joined together. Obedient holiness means keep yourself unstained from this world by obeying God’s Word. Even when the world tells you that Word is archaic, out of place, or bigoted. Active mercy means doing the good works that God has placed in front of you, like visiting orphans and widows in their affliction.

As you can see, James does not allow us to keep a private Christianity.

You’ve probably heard it said that “*Christianity is a relationship, not a religion.*” That line is half true and dangerous. Christianity is a relationship. The Father brought us forth, He has made us a family, and we are beloved brothers and sisters. We love because He first loved us, it’s true, but James will not let you use “relationship” as a way to dodge obedience. He calls what we are talking about religion, and then he tells us what kind of religion God accepts.

Religion that is only talk, or only attendance, is worthless. Religion that hears the Word, receives it with meekness, bridles the tongue, visits the afflicted, and keeps itself unstained is pure before the Father. So yes, it is a relationship, but it’s also a religion: to be heard, obeyed, and lived out. Otherwise, it’s worthless.



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And worthless religion has a sound. It's the ungoverned mouth in the parking lot or the member who never misses a Sunday but also never checks on the saint who cannot get there.

It starts with the tongue; how you speak to your spouse, your children, your church family. Proverbs 13:3 says, **“Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life” (Proverbs 13:3).**

In Matthew 12:36–37, Jesus tells us that we will give an account for every careless word we speak. James will come back to this topic later in chapter 3, where he calls the tongue a dangerous fire, but he's planting the warning now so that we can't claim a religion that God does not recognize.

Jesus said it this way in Luke 6: **“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit... The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:43–45).**

A bridled tongue is good fruit. Visiting the afflicted is good fruit. Staying unstained from this world is good fruit. But worthless religion is like a tree promising tasty apples but only giving thorns.

If the Word has been received with meekness, the mouth and the hands will testify to the heart.



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From 1 Corinthians 13

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1–3).

You can be present, well spoken, and generous, but if your tongue is unbridled and your heart is closed to the afflicted, then your religion is worthless. Knowledge without love is nothing, and hearing without doing is just self-deception.

The two specific marks of true religion that James calls us to in this passage are to visit the afflicted and to keep ourselves unstained from this world. The people of God have long known this to be true. Isaiah 1:17 says,

“Learn to do good; seek justice... bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause” (Isaiah 1:17).

And Micah 6:8 agrees,

“What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8).

Church, don’t leave James’ words 2000 years in the past.

So what does this look like in our body?



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It looks like the aging saint who no longer drives, or the widow who sits alone after the service, or the young child who needs an adult presence in their lives. Pure religion has an address this week. Pick one and go.

And keep yourself unstained from the world. **“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Romans 12:2).**

Before we close, I want to step on just one or two toes – if you’ll let me – with a practical example.

For some of us, our devices and our screens have become a stain that may not be very visible to the rest of the world, but it’s still a stain. Not because a phone is evil, but because **it trains the heart to be quick to speak, slow to hear, and absent from those who need us.** If the Word is going to be received with meekness, something has to be put away. For some of us, this might be where we need to start.

Family, holiness without mercy is a lie. Mercy without holiness is worldliness. James won’t let us choose between the two.

“We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). The widow is not a project that earns your standing. She is a neighbor because the Father visited you when you were orphaned from Him.

“So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13). Christ has already secured our acceptance before God. The Spirit writes that love on the heart the Word has already implanted.



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Hear the Word. Receive it with meekness. Bridle your tongue. Do the good works before you. Visit the afflicted. Keep yourself unstained. These aren't separate commands; it's one Christian life under one Word.

Jesus is the only One who has perfectly lived this text. He was quick to hear the Father: “Not my will, but yours, be done” (*Luke 22:42; John 5:30*). He received the Word with meekness (*Matthew 11:29; Isaiah 50:4–5*). He was the perfect Hearer and Doer of God's Word (*John 8:29; Hebrews 10:7*). When reviled, He did not revile in return (*1 Peter 2:23*). He visited us in our affliction (*Luke 4:18; Luke 1:68*). He kept Himself unstained (*Hebrews 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22*), and then bore our sin in our place, “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (*2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24*).

Brothers and sisters, Christ's Word frees His people into obedient life (*John 8:31–32; James 1:25*). The Spirit who raised Jesus dwells in you (*Romans 8:11*). The implanted Word does not produce a people who know more but love less (*1 Corinthians 13:2*). It produces the love that makes hearing become doing (*James 1:22; Galatians 5:6*).

The church that hears, receives with meekness, and goes out to do will not have a worthless religion but a faith that works.

So, after everything we've seen in James 1:19–27, let me give you the main point one more time:

Main Point:

True religion is the humble reception of God's Word, evidenced by obedient holiness and active mercy.



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Call to Obey

As we come to our call to obey today, I have three suggestions for you to consider.

These are not experiments. This is the shape of a people the Word has already brought forth.

1. Receive the Word with a quiet house.

This week, put away the noise that chokes meek reception. Slow your speech. In your home, open the Bible and listen first. Read God’s Word expecting to hear from the Lord.

2. Stop walking away from the mirror.

Last Sunday’s question is this Sunday’s assignment. Before Wednesday, answer it: ***What did the Word require of us this morning, and what will we actually change?*** Write it down, then **Do it.**

3. Practice a religion that has a tongue and a hand.

Bridle what you say in the house and in the world. Then give pure religion an address: one overlooked saint, one visit, one stain you will actually put away.

You are not doing this to become His. You are His. The Father wants a people who know Him, with an active religion that changes them when the service is over. The implanted Word is able to save your souls. Receive it. Do it. And go in the strength of the One who first became a Hearer and a Doer for you.

Let’s pray.



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[CLOSING PRAYER]

[COMMUNION]

[BENEDICTION]

[RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY]

Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible

John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*

J. Alec Motyer, *The Message of James*