

How Do We Respond to God's Word?
~ James 1:16-27

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This past Monday, we had a provincial election in Alberta. By now, you all know the results. People have responded in a variety of ways to the election result. Some people are happy about the results. Some are cautiously optimistic. Some people are generally pessimistic. Some despair or are angry about the results. Some of these folks would likely agree with a hashtag I saw trending on twitter this past Tuesday. It said, "Move to BC." So they are so upset about the election results that they're saying they might move. Then I've seen others who proclaim that Alberta has been saved. It's the only sane province in the country. These reactions are all responses to the same event.

We do this in many areas of life. Say the weather forecasts rain. People respond differently to that forecast. If you planned a day outside with our family at a park, you'll moan at the news of rain. If you a wildfire threatens your region you're joyful in response to a forecast of rain. Or if you're a farmer and your crops need moisture, you rejoice at rain. Or think about watching a movie with a group of people. At the end, people may talk about it. Some people like the movie and some don't. We can respond differently to the same thing.

This reality applies to God and His Word. Think about the Bible specifically. People have different responses to it. People have certainly used the Bible to justify horrible things – like racism, racial superiority, slavery and suppression or devaluation of women. There may be parts of the Bible we struggle with because we read our 21st century beliefs and expectations back into it.

So I'd like to pause for a moment to ask you what do you believe about the Bible? Say there's a scale from 0-10. 0 means you don't believe the Bible is anything unusual. It's just another ancient book written by humans. Say the number 10 represents a complete trust in the Bible as God's Word. You see it as divinely inspired. God worked through the original authors to communicate His Word. So it is trustworthy and authoritative when rightly interpreted. Where would you put yourself on the scale from 0-10? Don't worry, I'm not going to ask for a show of hands and take down names.

Whatever number you gave yourself may reveal how you feel about the Bible. If you're at 0-3, it's unlikely you trust the Bible or think it has anything relevant to say to life today. If you're in the 4-6 range, you might think there is some value in the Bible. But a lot of it can be tossed or just ignored because it doesn't apply to our world today. If you're somewhere between 7-10, you likely value the Bible as God's Word through which He speaks into our lives now.

I ask this because today's Bible passage raises the issue of different responses to God and His Word. I think the passage makes the following claim: **Our response to God's Word can bring blessing or disaster into our lives.** Two of them can lead to disaster. One leads to blessing. There is a surprise in this passage regarding which response leads to what result. Two of the responses lead to obvious results. But one of them, I think, leads to the surprise of this passage. My hope today is that God, by His Spirit and Word, will speak to you what He wants you to hear and respond to this day.

So please find James 1 in your Bibles or on your devices. It's on page 855 in the Bibles here. I invite you to watch or listen for references to deception and words. We will read verses 16-27.

James 1:16-27 (ESV)

¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

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.

Last week we looked at verses 1-12. We learned about enduring trials in a way that glorifies God and opens our lives to His good for us in the midst of them. Verse 12 contains a blessing for those who persevere in trials. Then James shows how temptation works in verses 13-15. He may have included this because temptations are related to trials. When we go through trials we can be tempted to give up on God. Or we can be tempted to blame God for our trials. We can even conclude that God is tempting us. James clarifies this. Temptation appeals to our desires and invites them to seek fulfillment however we want. Temptation does not come from God.

Then we come to verse 16 where James gives a warning about deception. He says, "Do not be deceived my beloved brothers and sisters." I think the connection is don't be deceived into thinking that God brings temptation into your life. The reality is verse 17. God brings good gifts into your life. "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." Every good gift we have received in our lives is ultimately from God. If we grasp this, it can change our view of God. He's not out to get us. He's not out to restrict and control us because He's some dictator. He loves us. He gives us good and perfect gifts.

Then in verse 18, we find James's version of the Gospel. Last week, we noted assumes the Gospel. There's no cross or blood or call to receive Christ as Savior and Lord. But verse 18 is James' description of the gospel. "Of his own will; he (the Father) brought us forth by the word of truth." I agree with those who say that "the word of the truth" is the gospel – the good news that God has sent His Son Jesus to redeem the world; to bring His kingdom and save us from our sins. So the phrase "brought us forth" or "give us birth" or "chose to make us his own children" is new life language. God the Father brought us into this new life as His children by the word of truth. This aligns with Paul's words in Romans 1:16 where he says, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes." James doesn't use the word salvation. But he does talk about new life and first fruits. This is salvation language.

So with the warning to watch out for deception and the assurance that God gives good gifts and the assurance that God does not change and the reality that God gave us new life as his children, we come to verse 19.

“Know this, my beloved brothers: Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” James states three short commands that go completely against our culture and our own sinful tendencies. When something goes wrong or gets in our way, we can be quick to anger, quick to speak and slow to listen. But James says, “Be quick to hear or listen; slow to speak and slow to become angry.” Why? Verse 20. “For the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” Sudden anger can lead to harsh words that can do significant damage. Such a response to life does not align with the righteous life that God desires. Hasty, uncontrolled anger is sin. It violates the standard of conduct that God demands of His people.

Yet these verses don't completely forbid anger. Sometimes anger is the appropriate response to injustice or exploitation of oppressed people. God describes Himself in Exodus 34:6 like this. “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” We see God's slowness to anger by His waiting hundreds of years before punishing Israel for her unfaithfulness. His anger is always right and holy.

But our anger is seldom righteous. It can result from our own immaturity or not getting what we want when we want it. These three commands are designed to moderate or govern especially our anger. Instead of being quick to anger resulting in quick speaking before listening, the Lord commands us to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.

Then notice verse 21. “Put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness.” The NIV says, “Get rid of all moral filth and the evil which is so prevalent.” The NLT says, “Get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives.” The word translated “to put away” is often used to describe “taking off a set of clothes.” Then you would put on another set. It is used throughout the New Testament to portray the putting off our old pre-Christian patterns of behavior and to put on the ways of Christ. The word “filthiness” is used only here. It pictures clothes soiled with dirt. But it's deeper meaning is moral defilement or spiritual stains on our

souls. Wickedness refers to evil character. Rampant or excess refers to an overabundance of this filth or wickedness.

Now many of us are not used to this kind of language today. We would agree that this describes serial killers and the worst criminals but not ordinary people. But our discomfort with this description might indicate our increasing comfort with sin and that which defiles our soul. James says we need to intentionally put that stuff off or put it away from our lives.

Instead at the end of verse 21 “Receive with meekness or humility the implanted word which is able to save your souls.” It’s like we need something external to come and cleanse us. We need this word that can save our souls. We receive such a word with meekness or humility. That doesn’t mean “be a doormat or practice a wimpy submissiveness to whatever comes along.” It involves a willingness to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. This implanted word is the gospel that has taken up residence within us. To receive this word will mean to take it in deeply so it replaces those evil desires that lead us to filthiness and wickedness.

All of this leads up to what I think is the central verse of this passage. Here we will talk about the possible responses to God’s Word. So James 1:22. “But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” But even though you might humbly receive the implanted word, make sure you do it or act on it. If you only hear it and don’t do anything with it, you deceive yourselves.”

So I think there are three possible responses to God’s Word. **Response 1 – Not hearing God’s Word.** Refusing to Hear God’s Word. Not listening to God’s Word. If you put yourself on the scale between 0 and 3 earlier, this might describe you. You may not really be interested in God’s Word. You may not believe in God. You may not like much of what the Bible says. So you’re not really interested in God’s Word. If this is you, I think you’re being honest with your doubts and concerns. You’re being honest with what you really believe.

Next I’m going to give you **Response 3 – Hearing and Doing God’s Word.** This would describe people who may have put themselves in the 7-10 range earlier. You believe the Bible is God’s Word. You also believe that when Gods speaks we need to listen carefully and obey it. You take it seriously

and you want to act on it. That's what James commands in 1:22. So I would argue that Response 1 and Response 3 are the opposite ends of the scale.

Then we come to response 2. This is where we discover the surprise. **Response 2 – Hearing God's Word.** Now if you look at those responses what is the natural opposite to response 1 – Not hearing God's Word? It's response 2. Hearing God's Word. So that's not surprising. But the surprise comes in the results James assigns to the responses.

So say we listed these 3 responses to God's Word. Then we were told that each response leads either to disaster or blessing according to God. So we've got the disaster result and the blessing result. If you had to assign expected results to each response, what might we do.

Well response 1 would lead to disaster in God's eyes because that person is cutting themselves off from God's wisdom, truth, guidance and love found in His Word. Response 3 we would likely assign the result of blessing. If someone hears and does God's word, He promises blessing. But what about response 2? Wouldn't we think "Hearing God's Word" would result in blessing? Don't we need to hear God's word before we can act on it. Yes.

But look again at verse 22 to see what happens if we don't do God's Word. "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." The NIV says, "Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." The New Living Translation says "And remember, it is a message to obey, not just to listen to. If you don't obey you are only fooling yourself."

So if we hear God's Word and don't do what it says, we're somehow deceiving ourselves. Remember the command back in verse 16? "Do not be deceived." To deceive means "to mislead by a false appearance or statement."¹ So if we hear or listen to God's Word and don't do what it says, we are misleading ourselves by a false appearance."

Well, how could that be? James gives us an example in verses 23 and 24. "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. For

¹ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/deceive>

he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.” Now I don’t know about you, but when I read that example, I don’t really get it at first. How is looking in a mirror and then forgetting what I look like a problem? Don’t we all do that? We look at the mirror in the morning and then we go out into our day. Unless you’re an extreme narcissist, you don’t spend the rest of the day looking at yourself in a mirror. This example might not make sense at first.

I think to make sense of this, we must consider the differences between mirrors in the first century and mirrors today. Our mirrors reflect our image perfectly. You can see your face as it really looks. Everyone uses a mirror and can check their appearance. In the first century, mirrors were not close to the same quality. They were made of polished bronze or copper. They produced dim and warped reflections. You could not simply glance at that type of mirror and learn much. You had to stare for a while to get a clearer picture of what you looked like. Then you could see that you have a patch of dirt on your forehead that you didn’t notice. Or your beard or eyebrows or hair is getting out of control. Or there’s a blemish on your face that needs some treatment.

So with that kind of mirror and the discovery made about your face as you look at that mirror, hear this verse again. Verse 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.” So this person has taken the time to see their face in the mirror and note anything that needs attention. But then what do they do? Verse 24. “For he looks at himself and goes away at once and forgets what he was like.” They looked intently at their face in the mirror. They saw the blemishes and whatever needed attention. Then they look away and forget about it almost as if there weren’t any blemishes. But there are blemishes. But they choose to live as if they aren’t even though they just saw them. To deceive is to “mislead by a false appearance or statement.” Maybe the false statement is “I don’t have any blemishes on my face or dirt. I don’t need a haircut.” That’s self-deception. It means to live as if something isn’t true even though deep down we know it is.

Think about what that means for people who hear God’s word but don’t do anything in response to it. James says we deceive ourselves when we do that. Maybe the self-deception goes something like this. “I am good with God and in my Christian walk because I heard God’s Word today. I listened to it. I

gave my time. I have done my part.” We can do this as individuals. Churches can do this. Churches can engage in self-deception if we only hear God’s Word and don’t do it. We debate it and study it and turn it over and stake our positions. But we might not do it.

But be doers of the word and not hearers only deceiving yourselves. In the last three verses, James gives examples of doers and hearers only of the Word. Verse 25 describes a doer. “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 person looks intently at the perfect law, God’s Word. They look long enough to understand it. They persevere in it and then they obey it. That’s a doer of the word.

Verse 26 describes one who only hears. “If anyone thinks he’s religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart; (there’s deception again), this person’s religion is worthless.” This one hurts. This one touches on acceptable suburban middle-class sins. We don’t do murder, carjacking, stealing, kidnapping or deal drugs. But is it really that big of a deal to gossip about people; to have some fun tearing someone down behind their back.” We don’t call it gossip or slander. It’s just interesting info so we can pray for the person. “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless.” If we think that acceptable middle-class sins like gossip, greed, slander and lying are no big deal, we deceive our hearts.

He concludes with verse 27 and gives a couple examples of doers. “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” Visiting orphans and widows did not only involve dropping by for tea. It mean to visit for the sake of empathy and help. In that society, these were the most vulnerable people. They couldn’t even give you tea. That’s exactly the point. God’s people must have a heart for and act on that heart to minister to those oppressed and vulnerable in our neighborhoods. But doing also involves resisting the stain of the world. The world here doesn’t mean planet earth. It

means the systems, beliefs and powers opposed to God and overseen by the devil. So we engage in the work of keeping ourselves unstained from that. That's doing.

So we started with the claim "Our response to God's word can lead to blessing or disaster in our lives." If we respond by hearing and doing, it will lead to blessing. But if we respond by hearing and not doing, it can lead to disaster. It's self-deception. It leads us away from God. It can lead many churchgoers to Heel. The devil loves it when people in church only hear God's word and don't do it. What a brilliant deception. So do not be deceived my brothers and sisters. k they're Christians. But I've got them.

So how might we become hearers and doers of the Word? We talked last week about something we need to guard against when reading James. Since James assumes the Gospel, we can miss the need for the Gospel. We can conclude that this letter says – "Learn these commands and try really hard to follow them on your own. That will make you okay with God." But God's law demands perfect obedience. None of us can do this perfectly.

Let's be honest. Every person in this room and watching online has at least once heard or read God's commands and not done them. We have chosen to ignore. We may have chosen to go ahead anyway. We may have minimized God's Word so we could do what we want. None of us have kept God's law perfectly. We can't do this on our own.

But what did Jesus do? He lived His life and never sinned. 1 Peter 2:22 – "He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth." 1 John 3:5 – "You know that he appeared to take away sins and in him there is no sin." Hebrews 4:15 – "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." He never sinned. He perfectly fulfilled all of God's holy word.

So the good news in all of this is first that Jesus paid for our sin when we were hearers only but not doers of God's Word. The second bit of good news is that when we put our trust in Him, He empowers us to obey. He changes our hearts. He changes our desires. He grows us to be more and more like Himself through the power of the Holy Spirit. We can't be hearers and doers of the

word perfectly in our own strength. But Jesus was. When we trust and depend on Him, we can receive power to hear and do His word.

So how might we respond? Think about where you put yourself on the scale of belief in God and His word. Wherever you're at on that scale, I invite you to talk to God about in prayer. Or maybe you need to talk to another Christian about it. Friends, if someone comes to you and says, "I'm a 0 to 3 on that scale," don't condemn them. Don't get angry. Thank them for being honest. Then go on a journey together to explore the reasons behind their doubts and concerns. If you don't have anyone to talk to about this, please send me your doubts and concerns. I or one of the pastors will make time to explore this with you.

If you're in the 4-6 range, I invite to do the same thing. Talk to God about it. Talk to another friend about it honestly. Let me know about it. I'll see how we can help. If you're a 7-10, ask God to continue His grace in your life. Ask Him if there is any word that He's commanded recently that you've only heard and not obeyed. Then thank Jesus that by Him you are forgiven and empowered to begin that obedience journey. Let's come to the Lord now.