

**Introduction:**

- A. *“My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”* Do we have any introverts here? (Not that we expect you to stand up and say so.) My brother, Larry, is a staunch introvert. He wrote, *“When the verse “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak” was read there was a roar among the introverts in the crowd – whooping, and clapping and some exuberant high fives. For this is OUR verse. Our manifesto. The high truth baked into the very heart of who we are as introverts. But of course no one else in the congregation noticed our celebration because it was hidden behind our faraway gazes, stoic faces and the great depth of silence that adorns our lives.”*
- B. **Turn to James 1:19**... Actually, these words don't have much to do with introverts. Those two commands come with a third, “and slow to become angry.” James isn't actually talking about being more quiet and reserved. He's talking about our response to anger, which is what we feel when we're under pressure—someone accuses us or ruins our work. Things don't go like they're supposed to or people don't do what they promised you they'd do. You're scared or frustrated or just plain tired. There's a shot, quick sizzle and then... *Boom!* Shrapnel flies. People are hurt. And we are shown up as thugs.
- C. James isn't writing this just so that we'd all get along or to help you keep your blood pressure down. He's writing this because he wants believers to be righteous. He says so in **v.20**, *“because human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires.”* God says, *“Be holy because I am holy.”* **If you are a Christian your goal is to be righteous and set apart for God**—to become more and more like Jesus, to be holy. Anger, among many other things, undercuts our progress in righteousness.
- D. In fact, since we're talking about things that stymie our growth in righteousness, James says in **v.21**, *“Therefore, get rid of **all** moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent [or*

*that still remains in you]. So let's get this straight: to be a righteous person means... well... we have to do everything right and do it out of wholehearted love for God. So when you're tempted to anger, keep your cool. And clear out all the other junk in your life. Just stop it! Show some self-control! Shape up! Just do it!*

Outside of church that is what most people think sermons do. The preacher tells you the right thing to do, gives you a slap on your spiritual fanny, and sends you out as better men and women. *How's that workin' for you?*

- E. Paradoxically, no Christian ever makes any progress toward righteousness till we realize that we aren't good at it. There is no Christian so dangerous as the person who thinks they are. James pounds away at our pride throughout this book till he gets to **4:10**, "*Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.*" **Our passage today shows us just how God does that—how God lifts us up and enables us to actually produce righteousness.**

V.21...

**I. TO DO RIGHT UNDER PRESSURE WE MUST HUMBLY ACCEPT THE WORD PLANTED IN US (1:19-21)**

- A. Let's start with the word "humbly". A proud heart is barren ground. Nothing good can grow there. We don't have to be crushed by our failures to be humble. We can humble ourselves. We can and do bow before God and his Word and bring it into our waiting souls. We can pray for wisdom, then see it in the Bible, and humbly do what it says. But I'm afraid that it often takes a damaging failure before we're willing to "*humbly accept the word.*" Sometimes there's not much growth till after we pray, "*O Lord, what a mess I've made! I am so low.*"

It's amazing how much of the word we can take in without any of it germinating. We can read vast swaths of Scripture, study verb endings, construct temples of theology, all without actually becoming more righteous. My heart has to be soft—pulverized sometimes—not just

humbled but humiliated sometimes—before God’s Word starts growing righteousness in me.

- B. “Humbly accept the word planted in you.” The first word that God plants in us in the good news of salvation. *“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.”* When we humbly accept that word, the Holy Spirit himself comes to live in us—he is *planted* in us—and his life begins to grow in us.

The word from God keeps working like that. The Holy Spirit takes the Word of God and brings it to life in us. Let me give you an example. Let’s say you’re terribly worried about something—how to pay the bills or the turmoil in your company. You read **Phil 4:6-7...** *“Wow, that’s for me!”* you think. So you pray it into your heart the way a gardener presses a flower bulb into the soil. *“Lord, you say to make my requests known to you so here they are—every angle on this pressure that I can think of... And you say to do it with thanksgiving, so thank you for this verse. Thank you that a trial like this can refine my faith. Thank you that you won’t leave me alone.”* And you obediently thank God for everything you can think of related to your request. Then, *“Lord, I’ve done what you ask so I will wait for the peace you promise. I know you may not fix my problem but you have promised your peace, the very thing I cannot generate by myself.”* You plant God’s word in your heart and wait for it to grow the goodness you cannot grow alone.

- C. *“Humbly accept the word planted in you, **which can save you.**”* This gospel word saves us when we put our faith in Christ but salvation is also a continuing process. We call that sanctification—the process of growing holy.

Vv.22-25...

## II. TO DO RIGHT UNDER PRESSURE RESPOND TO THE MIRROR OF SCRIPTURE (1:22-25)

- A. Illus.: Andras Tamas is the name they gave the man in 1947 in a Russian psychiatric hospital. He had been in the German army and had been captured in 1944, but the

Russian authorities had mistaken his native Hungarian language for the gibberish of a lunatic and had him committed. Then they forgot about him. For 53 years. In the late 1990s a psychiatrist at the hospital began to realize what had happened and helped Tamas to gradually recover the memories of who he is and where he came from. He returned home to Budapest as a war hero, “the last prisoner of World War II.”

One of the most amazing dimensions of this story is that not only did this man not know his real name any more, he also **had not seen his own face in 53 years**. So according to the paper, “*For hours, the old man studies the face in the mirror. The deep-set eyes. The gray stubble on the chin. The furrows of the brow. It is his face, but it is a startling revelation.*” (*Chicago Tribune*, 9/6/00, by Tom Hundley)

That is what it is like when we begin looking into the Bible. We see ourselves for the first time. You never see yourself as you really are until you see yourself in Scripture. The Bible is the mirror of our hearts. We look into Scripture and we don’t just see Abraham or David, the psalms, prophecies, and doctrines. **We see ourselves without make-up or masks**. We see stains and ugliness that we didn’t know were within us. We see the frailty and littleness. We also see the love and grace God has given us. We begin to notice our family resemblance to Christ. We see how richly God has dressed us—our God-given crown of beauty and garment of praise. That, too, is crucial to our righteousness—to know who we are in God’s eyes.

So, the first thing is, we must read and study our Bibles, looking at ourselves in its mirror.

- B. Look again at **v.25**, “*But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.*” Typically, we don’t think of laws giving freedom. We think of laws as *restricting* freedom for the common good. **But God’s law actually sets us free**.
- C. **V.25** ends, “*they will be blessed in what they do.*” Remember how James began? “*Consider it pure joy when*

*you face trials.*” And **v.12**, “*Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.*” As Christians, we don’t pursue righteousness because we *have* to. We get to be righteous! That’s the freedom! Long live liberty! Through Jesus we can live in the land of the free!

To begin with, we’re freed of guilt. What’s more, God loves us without conditions; we don’t have to win him. Then God’s word, planted in our hearts, along with our efforts to do right starts to produce a real goodness in us. There is deep peace in being good people. There is a relief to it, a kind of surprise and joy at the dignity and grace that comes with it. Righteousness makes us strong and worshipful, and frees us from our suffocating self-absorption.

**SUMMARY:** So look into the mirror of God’s Word and see yourself as you are. Like the man in the story, “*It is his face, but it is a startling revelation.*”

**V.26...** A little later James talks much more about the tongue, so we won’t focus on that now. His point is that religion—a person’s belief about God—doesn’t count for much if they can’t do right.

### **III. THE MEASURE OF OUR RELIGION IS NOT ONLY WHAT WE BELIEVE BUT WHAT WE DO (1:26-29)**

**V.27**, “*Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*”

**A.** God expects our religion—our profession of faith—to be evident in what we do. James has just told us what makes our religion come to life—humbly accepting the seed of the word and responding what the mirror of the word shows us. When we do those things we will change. Our tongue, for example, will come under God’s control. But Scripture has long held out these two measures of true faith: “*to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*” I’m going to take these in reverse order.

- B. *“To keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”* I grew up in a church culture where we were always hearing about worldliness. To keep from the world’s pollution we lived with a variety of rules intended to insulate us from the world. We didn’t dance because so much dancing happened in very worldly environments. We didn’t play cards because cards had ties to organized gambling. Movies were off limits. So was drinking. Then many of us threw the baby out with the bathwater. We disdained all those rules—often for good reasons—but we forgot that worldliness is still dangerous.

James was steeped in the Old Testament so he undoubtedly thought about all the laws of God that guarded holiness—in worship, in business, in dealing with unbelievers, in religion. But we know specifically what dangers James had in mind here because he tells them to us so plainly in this letter. He writes in these pages about anger, unbridled talk, status seeking, quarrels, boasting about a future we can’t control, and oppressing people who are weaker than us. There are lots of things that can pollute us, but those are the ones on his mind as he wrote. Those things—all that spring from within us—are a kind of moral cesspool. When we do those things they stain and spot our religion. They turn us into hypocrites. So we must keep ourselves from them.

- C. The other measure of our religion is *“to look after orphans and widows in their distress.”* Our heavenly Father measures our religion by how we treat the fatherless and the forsaken.

This verse has roots deep in the OT. More than 20 times the OT Scriptures speaks of how we are to treat “the fatherless and the widow.” In that society, of course, any home without a father and husband was in deep trouble, for the man was the defender and breadwinner. So all those OT verses stress two specific duties of a godly society—to defend these defenseless people against injustice, and to see that they are fed.

We don't need a DNA test to see if God is our Father. James says that the proof of our Paternity is how we respond to the fatherless and forsaken. It is the fatherhood of God that lays the backdrop for this instruction.

Time for a check: Is there any specific way in which you “look after” the fatherless or forsaken in their distress? We can do this by giving to organizations that work with impoverished people like World Vision's Compassion projects, or like She Is Safe, who work with trafficking victims, or Love INC in their work nearby. We can also do it by befriending people—single moms who need some help or friendship, widows and widowers who are no longer invited to couples gatherings, single people who want to know families, immigrants who don't know how to navigate through a new culture and country, kids who have no father figures or stable families. There are a lot of kids like that around us!

Illus.: Bobb Biehl, in his book, *Mentoring*, writes about **George Caywood** who grew up to be a solid Christian leader. But when he was 15 he was just an ordinary church kid. Then one day he came home from school to find that his father had committed suicide.

Biehl asked George one time, *“George, tell me something. When you were 15, what difference would it have made if one of the men in your church had come up to you, put his arm around you and said, ‘You know, George, there is no way on the face of the earth that I can even begin to understand what you are feeling right now. I haven't lost my daddy, but I want you to know that I believe in you, George... Whatever you choose to become in life, I want to be one of your life mentors, one of your lifelong friends.’”*

The tears dripped off George's chin as Bob reiterated his question, *“George, what difference would it have made if that had happened when you were 15?”*

His mouth quivered as he said, *“All the difference in the world. It would have made all the difference in the world.”* [p.6; ill]s]

