

B. The Danger of Listless Listening (vv. 19–27)

SUPPORTING IDEA: *This passage warns against pretending instead of listening, deceiving instead of obeying, and talking instead of serving.*

As a college freshman, I sat through a semester-length course named “Orientation.” The grade of pass or fail came from mere attendance and included no other requirement. Various college officials discussed such subjects as “Using College Services,” “How to Study,” and “Planning for the Future.” We took no notes, completed no assignments, and endured no tests. The sole requirement was to sit through the lectures.

This course produced a lot of listless listeners. Since no one demanded anything from us, we did nothing. It was easy to hear the words and ignore the content. A listless listener is someone who can endure a speech, lecture, or sermon without purposing to do a thing. A listless listener can mistake hearing and learning for obeying God.

James warns us against listless listening. We have heard messages from God’s Word, learned new truths, and even been “born again.” James wants to know, Are we still learners who have not yet become doers?

God is not content when his people merely attend Christian lectures. He wants us to absorb his message and change our lives because of it. Listless listening which produces no change is a blight on a Christian’s life. To prevent listless listening, this passage gives a warning (vv. 19–21), a contrast (vv. 22–25), and a demand (vv. 26–27).

1. A Warning Against Ignoring God’s Word (vv. 19–21)

1:19. Christians can pretend to obey God without truly listening to his commands. The readers of James’s letter knew the transforming power of God’s Word, the gospel. James urged them to demonstrate this change, particularly in their speech. He began by courteously addressing them as **My dear brothers**, and then challenged them to **be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry**. The commands probably refer both to our relationships to one another and to God. We are to be quick to hear and slow to talk both toward other people and toward God.

The command to **be quick to listen** calls for an eagerness to hear and obey God’s message. The appeal to be **slow to speak** demands silence until we have understood and applied the message. It is a call for restraint lest we produce hasty, ill-timed reactions. The challenge to be **slow to become angry** warns against hostile, bitter feelings. We cannot hear God if we remain distracted with resentment, hatred, or vengeful attitudes.

Our society encourages us to express our feelings, whether they be good or bad, peaceful or inflammatory, godly or ungodly. James 1:19, however, pictures the wise person as one who listens to God and others, deliberates a response carefully, and answers with cautious words.

1:20. This verse supports the command to be **slow to become angry**. **Man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires**. The anger prohibited by this passage is not so much a flashing, destructive temper as a simmering pot of hostile, mean-spirited feelings.

Human anger wastes the energies of God’s people, produces divisions, and often comes from selfish ambition. The righteousness that God desires includes deeds which are **pure; ... peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere** (Jas. 3:17). Angry words and deeds cannot produce purity and peace. Proverbs 29:22 warns that “an angry man stirs up dissension, and a hot-tempered one commits many sins.” Moses’ murderous anger in

Exodus 2:11–15 resulted in his flight from Egypt and added forty additional years to the misery of the Jews in Egypt (Acts 7:27–32).

The mischievous works of angry Christians prevent the unsaved world from seeing that the God of all the earth does right (Gen. 18:25). It is impossible to look at the disorderly conduct of fighting believers and worship the God they profess to serve. This should make Christians cautious in our display of an angry spirit.

1:21. Believers can make a positive response instead of indulging in the hurtful anger which so easily hinders God’s righteous designs. This verse issues a command and then provides a prerequisite for obeying the command, an incentive for obedience, and a description of our attitude in obedience.

The command is to **accept the word planted in you**. This calls for a warm, open welcome to the influence of God’s message in our lives (1 Thess. 2:13). The prerequisite is to **get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent**. To obey the command we must strip off like a dirty garment any moral indecency and malicious attitudes. Why do this? The incentive for obedience is that God’s **word planted in you can save you**. Obedience to God’s Word promotes holiness and develops godly character. We demonstrate a genuine likeness toward Christ as we get rid of the flaming desires for filth and evil. This shows the presence of a real experience of salvation.

In our obedience we must display humility. We must not quarrel or quibble with God as we receive his message. We must receive the spiritual medicine which our divine physician prescribes for us.

David committed adultery with Bathsheba and carried out a plan to murder her husband (see 2 Sam. 11). For some months he refused to acknowledge his sin until the prophet Nathan boldly said to him, “You are the man” (2 Sam. 12:7). In Psalm 51 we catch a glimpse of a David who has come to his senses and expressed repentance fully. David asked for mercy (Ps. 51:1–2), acknowledged his sin (Ps. 51:3–6), pleaded for cleansing (Ps. 51:7–9), and asked for divine renewal (Ps. 51:10–12). We should respond to the Lord with equal passion.

2. A Contrast of Responses to God’s Command (vv. 22–25)

James 1:19–21 focuses on speech as an area for demonstrating obedience to God’s Word. Here he calls for obedient action as the proper forum for demonstrating commitment to the Lord.

1:22. James’s command is literally to “keep on becoming doers of God’s Word.” He insisted on an obedience which lasts. This does not minimize the importance of hearing God’s Word. It does emphasize strongly the need for acting. Too often Christians view a sermon as an interesting moral or theological lecture. We need to do something other than sitting and listening. Jesus pronounced a blessing only on those “who hear the word of God and obey it” (Luke 11:28).

The command to **listen to** God’s Word describes someone who attends a lecture. The hearer could nod agreeably to the message but do nothing as a result. God wants a listener to become a disciple, an obedient follower of Jesus. One who hears the message without doing anything is self-deceived. Such a listener has made a false estimate of the situation. Jesus warned against this error (Matt. 7:21–27).

1:23–25. James presented a negative and a positive illustration of a response to God’s message. Via a vivid picture of listless listening, verses 23–24 compare those who only hear God’s Word to people who gaze into a mirror and dash away with little memory of what they saw. Mirrors in New Testament times were made of polished metal. People used them to wash their faces, shave their beards, apply cosmetics, and comb their hair. Then they quickly left, giving little thought to the image they had seen. People can repeat this experience in the spiritual realm. We give a quick

glance into God's Word, find a morsel of truth, and jump into another task without remembering or applying what we read.

Verse 25 uses the mirror metaphor with four verbs to picture the response of obedient listeners to God's message. First, obedient people look **intently into the perfect law that gives freedom**. This describes someone who gazes at God's message with a desire to learn. The same verb—translated as **bent over**—pictures the apostle John staring into Jesus' empty tomb (John 20:5). John's look led to an obedient faith (John 20:8).

Second, obedient people **continued to do** what God said. They put God's Word into practice and follow through with commitment. Third, obedient listeners do not forget what they hear. Spiritual amnesia never conquers their minds. Fourth, obedient listeners do what God's message instructs them to do.

Good listening, endurance, clear memory, and obedience characterize committed Christians. They are eager to receive and obey what God tells them to do.

God's Word is **the perfect law that gives freedom**. Obedience to Jesus' commands in Scripture brings freedom from sin and death. Whenever we submit to God's message, this law of liberty produces a disposition to obey God's will joyfully. We have freedom because we truly want to serve God. Jesus promised this freedom in John 8:31–32.

Obedient people are promised a blessing. We do not need to wait for a future blessing. We already have the blessing in our grasp. Doing what God requires brings a blessing with it.

Psalms 1:1–3 summarizes the blessings of obedience. Those who meditate on the Law of the Lord will be “like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.”

3. *The Evidence of Good Listening to God's Word (vv. 26–27)*

SUPPORTING IDEA: *Committed believers demonstrate their obedience with deeds of compassion and inner purity.*

1:26. This verse describes a person who considered himself to be **religious** but did not listen well to God's Word. The person focused on the externals of religious action such as public prayer, fasting, giving, and worship attendance. James did not belittle this action, but he added that inner control of the tongue must accompany outward performance.

Keep a tight rein on his tongue sometimes described the bridle used with a horse. The tongue is compared to an unmanageable horse which needed bit and bridle to tame its excesses. Controlling the tongue is so important that James devoted most of chapter 3 to its use.

James leveled two accusations at the person who practiced outward religion without inner control. First, **he deceives himself**. This repeats the idea of verse 22 in different words. What a pity to find after a lifetime of pseudo-religion that you have only been practicing self-deception!

Second, **his religion is worthless**. Peter used the same word—translated as *empty*—to describe useless pagan practices his readers had followed before they became Christians (1 Pet. 1:18). Religious practices without inner control have no more saving power than paganism.

1:27. Two evidences demonstrate pure religion: deeds of compassion and inner purity. This does not reduce Christianity to mere benevolence. True religion has more features than James has mentioned. The emphasis here is that for God to accept our worship it must be accompanied by loving ministry and a holy life. Both Christians and non-Christians could see and understand this type of evidence.

To **look after orphans and widows** demanded demonstrations of concern and active involvement. The psalmist pictured God as a defender of orphans and widows (Ps. 68:5). Christ used the word for **look after** in Matthew 25:43 to describe the ministry of caring for those in prison. Obeying this appeal calls for more than an occasional visit. It demands genuine compassion and true engagement.

(Not) polluted demands a freedom from contamination by the world. Peter used this word to refer to Christ as “without ... defect” (1 Pet. 1:19). Christians are to model their purity after that of Jesus.

Some months ago I assembled a small playset with a sliding board and some climbing sections. I placed it in my backyard for my grandchildren to use. Although the process was not difficult, I constantly referred to the instruction book so I would know where to fit each piece. The writers of the book know how their product should fit together. I needed to follow their directions.

We must follow God’s instructions devotedly if we want to produce a lifestyle honoring to God. Obeying God’s Word demands control of the tongue, a compassion for others, and a separated life. These are the identifying marks of **pure and faultless** religion.

MAIN IDEA REVIEW: *God wants his people to triumph over their trials and to live in obedience to his commandments.*¹

4. The All-Inclusive Doing of the Word ([1:19–27](#))

The practical admonition to be slow to speak follows upon reverencing the word of God that gives life. What is heard in the fellowship of believers should be speech formed by the present and active word of God. Here James introduces his concern with speech, that is, the tongue that functions so prominently in his letter.

(1) Going Fast and Slow ([1:19](#))

¹⁹ **My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,**

[1:19](#) There is a strong egalitarian tone in this admonition. James’s “dear brothers” knew⁹⁷ that “everyone” was to practice the discipline of slow or controlled speech.⁹⁸ Later James encouraged effective and indeed quick action ([2:12](#)). Here the quickness does not refer to acting but rather to listening.

¹ Lea, T.D., 1999. [Hebrews, James](#). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁹⁷ The NIV “take note of this” reflects Gk. ἵνα, which can be indicative or imperative. Some MSS read ὥστε (KJV “wherefore”) in its place, which seems to be a correction for smoother reading. There also is some question whether ἵνα refers to what precedes or what follows. Cf. Johnson, *The Letter of James*, [198–99](#).

⁹⁸ For the problem of hastiness in speech, cf. [Prov 13:3](#); [15:1](#); [29:20](#).

Wherever wisdom is the goal, hearing will be a first virtue. Indeed, “quick” and “slow”⁹⁹ are a frequent tandem in describing qualities of response to life. Learning requires slowness; action requires quickness. In this case the requiring quickness is that which is to be learned by hearing. The required learning is in speaking, in which case wisdom is easily abandoned in favor of self-interest. Anger may not be fully controllable, but it can be checked by avoiding impetuous speech. James connected quickness or rashness of speech and a flaring of anger, an uncontrolled human emotion (cf. [Mark 3:5](#)). By practicing a cautious response to people verbally, wrathful emotions will also be put in check. This connection of quick speech and anger is quite intelligible from the interconnectedness of all human behavior as understood from biblical wisdom. The only way that peace can prevail with the “everyone” to whom the admonitions apply is to be ready listeners and slow commentators, especially in heated situations.

Contrary to some who would defend anger as the last resort for the Christian under trial, James declared they are simply wrong. Paul’s approach, “in your anger do not sin” and “do not let the sun go down on your anger” ([Eph 4:26](#); cf. [Col 3:8](#); [Prov 29:11](#)), is comparable to “be ... slow to become angry.” Anger is dangerous even when expressed in speech. Angry speech is part of the temptation to seek vengeance and was of deep concern to both James and Paul. Is there any suggestion here of a righteous anger for believers? In [Rom 12:19–21](#) Paul was emphatic about not taking vengeance upon enemies. “Leave room for God’s wrath,” he declared.

(2) Discarding Offense and Accepting the Word (1:20–21)

²⁰ for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. ²¹ Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

1:20 James expressed himself clearly and strongly in this verse: “The righteousness of God”¹⁰⁰ (*dikaïosunēn theou*, freely translated by the NIV as “the righteous life that God desires”) cannot be accomplished by human anger. Only God can vindicate the righteous by his anger without becoming involved in sin. Who is not convicted by this verse? “Righteousness” also appears in [2:23](#) and [3:18](#). Whether in relationship with God ([2:23](#)) or in relationship with others ([3:18](#)), anger must be ruled out. Human anger will inhibit the wholehearted trust necessary for the relationship between the believer and God. Human anger will injure the merciful peacemaking required for the relationships among fellow

⁹⁹ ταχύς (“quick,” “prompt”) and βραδύς (“slow”) are naturally related to express types of response, here in terms of hearing and becoming angry. See [3:9](#), [14–16](#); [4:1–2](#), [11](#); cf. [Prov 10:19](#); [16:32](#); [Eccl 5:1–2](#); [Luke 12:21](#); [Rom 16:19](#); [1 Thess 4:9](#); [Sir 2:9](#); [Herm. Man. V. 1.3, 6](#).

¹⁰⁰ δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ: “righteousness of God,” perhaps even the righteousness of God that vindicates those who are oppressed by evil men, certainly, the righteousness willed by God. Cf. OT passages such as [Gen 15:6](#); [Exod 15:13](#); [Deut 33:19](#); [Pss 4:2](#); [9:5](#); [119:62](#), [121](#); [Prov 11:21](#); [Isa 5:7](#); [60:17](#); and NT passages such as [Matt 5:6](#); [John 16:8–10](#); [Acts 24:25](#); [Rom 1:17](#); [3:5](#), [22](#); [10:3](#); [1 Cor 1:30](#); [2 Cor 5:21](#); [Heb 5:13](#); [11:7](#), [33](#); [1 Pet 2:5](#); [1 John 3:10](#); [Rev 22:11](#). In all these passages the context determines the precise meaning of “righteousness,” but there is always the requirement of some righteous action before God and men.

believers and those outside their fellowship. Already James hinted of things to come, in “bring[ing] about”¹⁰¹ that which is righteous before God. As in [1:3–4](#), the tight connection of doing/acting/ becoming appears here.

[1:21](#) If anger is to be rejected as a motive for action before God and men, then the chief causes of anger must be abandoned. James uses the metaphor of taking off¹⁰² and putting away soiled clothes. There is a practical necessity of eliminating everything that is contrary to the word of truth. Likewise Paul commended as a spiritual discipline ridding oneself of everything that is displeasing to God and destructive of the Christian faith. That morally detestable practices must be discarded like a garment tells something important about their nature.

However much evil practices are rooted in the memory and structure of desire within the human soul, they are effectively dealt with as activities distinct from believers themselves. All immoral and moral behaviors are practices that are acquired rather than reflective of an “orientation.” Being moral is necessary, but it always involves intentional acts. This is even more the case with Christian action, for it is closely interwoven with personal faith, prayer, worship, fellowship, and the evangelistic mandate of Christ. Christian obedience is never fully habitual. It requires a daily “putting on Christ” for its realization. Even with a strong doctrine of the new life in Christ, believers are always putting on and putting off ways of living according to the will of God. What a person “wears,” particularly in the expression of values, is a highly personal matter, and the attachment to certain ways are very strong.

What God calls believers to put off, however, they must put off. Otherwise the contradiction to God’s righteousness produces an anger-filled human being. A concrete term for the “moral filth”¹⁰³ of sin is used here (cf. v. [27](#)). Physical dirt and grime denote the vices of the world, that is, those traits and behaviors that are base and low. James may very well have been referring to avarice and malice¹⁰⁴ (the evil impulses behind the sins mentioned in [1:13](#); [3:8](#); [4:3](#)). But since all filthiness is to be discarded, the whole range of morally degenerate behaviors are covered. With the expression “evil that is so prevalent” (lit. “the

¹⁰¹ ἐργάζομαι: “work,” “accomplish,” “bring about.” What the believer is called to do by God is what he recognizes as righteous. The connection with “man” here in the generic sense makes a strong association between violent desire and its incapacity to effect anything truly good; cf. [Ps 106:32](#), [33](#); [John 1:13](#); [Rom 2:9–10](#); [4:5](#); [15:2](#); [2 Cor 7:10](#); [2 Pet 1:21](#).

¹⁰² ἀποτίθημι: “put off” or “away,” “rid oneself of,” as the way of preparing the heart for action. Frequent metaphorical comparisons are found between dress and virtue; e.g., a clean garment for a banquet or little clothing for running a race (cf. [Job 14:4](#); [Zech 3:4](#); [Matt 22:11](#); [Rom 13:12](#); [2 Cor 7:1](#); [Eph 4:22](#), [25](#); [Col 3:8](#); [Heb 12:1](#); [1 Pet 2:1](#); [3:21](#); [Rev 3:4](#), [18](#)). Note this is a participle, at least putting emphasis on the imperative “accept.” It may suggest an assumption that by definition a believer has done so and does “lay aside” evil.

¹⁰³ ῥυπαρία: “filth,” as in the “smirch” or “stain” of avarice in its connection with the prevalence of evil; cf. “our righteousness is as filthy rags” of [Isa 64:6](#).

¹⁰⁴ κακία: “evil,” or “malice,” also [4:4](#), [8](#). Evil behavior overflows from evil residing in the heart, as in the statement “the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart” in [Luke 6:45](#); cf. [Gen 6:5](#); [Prov 1:16](#).

abundance of evil”), James added the idea of a residue,¹⁰⁵ something left over from one’s life prior to conversion. James put before his readers the necessity of repentance. The evil in view here is especially that sin of malice, of doing others harm. Malicious speech is particularly evident in conflicts between believers in the church and must be guarded against. Given the context with the words “anger” and “gentleness,” this seems the best sense (cf. [Eph 4:31](#); [Col 3:8](#)).

Whether James meant that repentance can be repeated for such evil throughout a lifetime or repentance is once and for all is difficult to discern from the text. Doing evil things of course is something that is particularly painful for Christians to admit. But since it is an even greater evil to avoid admitting it, the church and its members must exercise repentance as the only antidote to behavior that contradicts its witness. Here James was calling his hearers to eliminate evil and its old causes.

But eliminating evil and its causes is never the sole or final goal of Christian instruction. There always is a positive exhortation to do the will of God as well. This positive doing begins for James with approving what God has planted¹⁰⁶ within the self. The “word of truth” (v. 18) that gives birth to believers is that which has been implanted. This is the effective¹⁰⁷ divine word (“can”=*dynamai*, “be able”), which itself works salvation.

This notable affirmation is key for developing a theology of the Word of God. The word of the text, Scripture, takes root as the saving word in the heart and mind, shaping and saving the self (“save you” is lit. “save your souls”)¹⁰⁸ for God. In the early history of the church, the word preached was that instrument of transmission from Scripture to heart and mind. Thus the Word of Scripture and the preaching of the word convey the eternal and living Word of God, who is God. James declared that God’s Word saves and actually performs this greatest of all divine works. As is the case throughout this letter, the divine gifts bestow blessing both presently and eschatologically; so the saving work of the Word has both present and eschatological effect (cf. [1:12](#); [2:12–13](#); [3:1](#); [5:5](#), 7).

The implanted Word must be received¹⁰⁹ even though it is already present within the self. The dynamic Word must be “heard” as God speaking presently to the believer. God may be heard through the preaching, rereading, or recitation of a familiar text. Receiving the word in this sense is not entirely passive but entails an active concentration on that which has already determined the faith of the believer. Through “receiving” the word again, renewal and deepening of faith can occur.

¹⁰⁵ περισσεΐα: “excess,” “surplus”; cf. [Ps 17:4](#); [Matt 14:20](#); [15:37](#); [Rom 5:17](#); [1 Cor 5:8](#); [2 Cor 8:2](#); [10:15](#).

¹⁰⁶ ἐμφύω: “rooted in,” another hapax legomenon. Metaphorically the implanted Word in the believer is as a seed planted in the heart; cf. [Deut 11:18](#); [30:14](#); [Job 11:13–14](#); [Jer 31:33](#); [Matt 13:21](#); [15:13](#); [Acts 20:32](#); [Rom 13:14](#); [2 Cor 3:3](#); [Eph 4:24](#); [Col 3:10](#); [1 Thess 2:13](#); [4 Esdr 9:31](#); [Barn 1.2](#); [9.9](#); Ign. [Eph. 17](#); Justin [Apol. 2.8](#), [13](#).

¹⁰⁷ δύναμαι: “able,” as in the power or ability of the gospel to save; cf. [Rom 1:16](#); [1 Cor 1:18](#); [2 Cor 6:7](#).

¹⁰⁸ ψυχή: “soul,” the self that is to be saved, which includes the body, as in [2:14](#); [4:12](#); [5:15](#), [20](#); cf. [Heb 10:39](#).

¹⁰⁹ δέχομαι, “accept,” is here an imperative and is a basic term for active faith in the NT; cf. [Matt 10:40](#); [Luke 8:13](#); [10:8–10](#); [Acts 8:14](#); [11:1](#); [17:11](#); [Gal 4:14](#); [1 Cor 2:14](#); [2 Cor 6:1](#); [1 Thess 1:6](#); [2:13](#).

James qualified this act of receiving with the phrase “in meekness” (NIV “humbly”).¹¹⁰ Just as the emphasis on humility so basic to faith in our letter (v. 9) resonates deeply with the Beatitudes of [Matt 5:3–5](#) and Jesus’ self-description of [11:29](#), so does the call for “meek” reception of God’s Word. Meekness is the opposite of anger and is the product of the gift of wisdom required of all believers. Rather than speaking, the wise believer lets the Lord speak through his Word and through the teachers of his Word who model this virtue.¹¹¹ Later ([3:13](#)) James would require that wise teachers must demonstrate their wisdom through meekness.

(3) *The Liberating Mirror (1:22–25)*

²² Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³ Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵ But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

[1:22](#) If the Word implanted is dynamic, working salvation, it is imperative that believers do what the Word says (the verse in Gk. reads lit., “Become doers of the word and not only hearers, deceiving yourselves”). Certainly there is a sense of development or growth here. Being doers¹¹² of the Word involves becoming,¹¹³ but the force here is in being who one is because the Word is resident within. Disciples are to “receive” the Word of God by “being” believers who do what that Word requires. In [4:11](#) James used a similar phrase, “doer of the law” (NIV “keeping it”), which shows the interchangeableness of Word and law in Christ (cf. [1:25](#)). This matter of being a doer (cf. [2:7](#); [5:14](#)) captures James’s burden for his hearers.

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¹¹⁰ πραΰτης: “gentleness,” receiving the Word with goodwill or with receptiveness, as in [3:13](#); cf. [Matt 5:5](#); [Gal 5:23](#); [2 Tim 2:25](#); [1 Pet 3:15](#).

¹¹¹ This teachability as the purpose of meekness for both believers and teachers is reflected in many NT texts (e.g., [1 Cor 4:21](#); [Gal 5:23](#); [Eph 4:2](#); [Col 3:12](#); [2 Tim 2:25](#)).

¹¹² ποιητής: “doer.” This sense is somewhat lost in the imperative of the translation “do what it [the Word] says.” James perhaps was hearkening back to the original giving of the law at Sinai and Israel’s response, “We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey” ([Exod 24:7](#); cf. [Deut 28:58](#); [29:28](#); [Ezek 33:32](#); [Matt 7:24](#); [Luke 6:46](#); [11:28](#); [John 13:17](#); [Rom 2:13](#)). Since Christ brings a new law, note [Rom 8:2](#); [1 Cor 9:21](#); [Gal 6:2](#). Note the contrast with ἀκροατής (“listener”), as in someone who attends a lecture, as distinguished from a μαθητής, a “follower” or disciple who hears and does the word of the master. These are nouns of action and ought to be highlighted in this way.

¹¹³ γίνομαι (“become”). The sense of becoming might be better here than “be,” especially since the imperative “be” is not found elsewhere in the NT. The sense of “become” suggests the correctibility and teachability that James presupposed in the writing of his letter.

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Disciples cannot be hearers only, like those in the parable of the sower ([Matt 13:3–9](#)) who have no rooting of the Word. The problem of self-deception¹¹⁴ recurs here. Believers can act against the Word of God and sin. Yet they simply must do what it says. For James, fruit must be produced, that is, acts of mercy. Hearing, listening to the Word of God, is right, but it can become wrong when another type of self-deception arises. Doing what Scripture says is not a question of acting quickly or slowly but acting at all. To be a hearer or to have faith only (cf. [2:24](#)) is self-deceiving. Faith must be demonstrated (cf. [3:13](#)), and to miss this is a fundamental flaw in understanding. No one who has called upon God for wisdom can or should think undemonstrated faith is true. James used exhortation then to point out how easily his hearers could fall from the wisdom they required to live out true faith through action. Knowledge by itself only “puffs up” ([1 Cor 8:1](#)).

1:23 James illustrated his teaching with reference to a man who looks intently at his reflection in a mirror. This analogy is a negative one, picturing those who only listen but remain inactive and therefore unresponsive. Unlike Paul’s use of mirror as a metaphor in [1 Cor 13:12](#), where the reflected image of God is dim,¹¹⁵ James’s reflected image of the creature is clear. The Word of God has penetrated the creaturely world in the form of Scripture and is highly effective in revealing the true nature of that world. This revelation is most of all the case with its hearers or readers, the men and women God intends to save.

Some believers merely glance¹¹⁶ into the mirror of truth without letting God’s wisdom do its work on them. The “mirror” is key for understanding this section of James. In the ancient world the mirror,¹¹⁷ a specially shaped piece of polished metal, was used to inspect or decorate one’s body. The ancient literature is replete with references to the mirror and its use as a metaphor for moral development. There is a double mistake implied here by the believer who does not act upon the Word. First, the Word is being treated like a mere vision, a “theory,” in the sense of a detached mental image with no connection to the external world. The Word is like a theory, but it is a practical one that both reflects reality, that is, the natural face, and directs the beholder to act in a certain way. The second mistake we make regarding the

¹¹⁴ παραλογίζομαι: “misconstrue,” in this case “deceive” oneself; cf. [Gen 29:25](#); [31:41](#); [Josh 9:22](#); [1 Sam 28:12](#). [Col 2:4](#) is the only other NT passage where this word appears; there the sense of “defraud” also is present. The deception leads to a bad exchange. Mere profession is wrong and leads to a loss of blessedness.

¹¹⁵ Paul used the analogy of the mirror to convey the imperfection or incompleteness of human perception of God and his truth. Next to this is the anticipation of seeing God “face to face,” where perception will be changed from dimness to absolute clarity; cf. [2 Cor 3:18](#); [Sir 12:11](#); [Wis 7:26](#). The analogy of the mirror held an honored place within the traditions of the ancient pagan philosophers and poets (Plato, [Rep. 7](#); Euripedes *Hipp.* 427–30; Seneca *QNat* 1.17; Epictetus *Diss.* 2.14) and continues into the works of early Christian theologians (e.g., [PsClem. 13–16](#)).

¹¹⁶ κατανοέω: “glance,” “observe,” “look at.” Here as in [Acts 7:31f.](#); [Ps 93:9](#) the term indicates perception. Tragically, this kind of person ignores what he has perceived, resulting in a detachment from what is observed, in this case the truth about himself.

¹¹⁷ ἔσοπτρον: “mirror,” here standing for God’s law, which reveals who we truly are over and against our self-deceived notions (see v. [26](#)).

Word is to ignore its message once it is received. The mere glancing at the Word without corrective action is of little use.

1:24 Such an unconcerned quick checking and leaving, almost to see if the Word still condemns him, is meant to convey how terribly wrong this exercise is. The abruptness of the process is intensified by the immediate forgetting of what was seen. Johnson highlights this point quite well by the striking dialogue with such a person: “What were you like?” “I forget.”¹¹⁸ By implication, the failure of this man is that he does not recognize the necessity of remembering, that is, of acting. Although the image of wisdom in a great teacher also could serve as a mirror for beholding one’s natural condition, the Word of God does so here.

1:25 In contrast, the believer who learns about himself and what God requires by concentrating on the mirror of the Word will be blessed. The sense here is of an intense looking¹¹⁹ into Scripture for the purpose of self-change. The exercise is one of careful attention to learn what is wrong and to discern what ought to be done to correct it. This kind of continual gazing into the Word—which is really a kind of hearing—guards against forgetting and motivates doing. Only by remembering to do what Scripture says, as one continues hearing/reading it, can one apply it to life. “Apply yourself to the Word so you may be able to apply the Word to your life” is the proper motto here. Every believer walks back into life and away from moments of hearing the Word of God in preaching or reading, but not in the same way. Through humble, attentive, and continual exposure to the Word of God the believer will find a quickness to apply it both in the midst of trials of faith and in the temptation to give in to wealth and privilege (**2:2**).

What James referred to as the “Word” in vv. **18, 21, 22, 23** he calls the “law” here.¹²⁰ As the “Word” brings new life according to v. **18**, so “the law” here is what sets us free¹²¹ (lit. “the perfect law of freedom”). The combination of law and freedom points to the free obedience of the Christian life and echoes Paul’s theology of freedom in Christ (cf. **Rom 6:18–22; 2 Cor 3:17; Gal 2:4; 5:1, 13–14; 6:2**). The

¹¹⁸ ἐπιλανθάνω: “forget.” Although infrequently used in Scripture, forgetting and remembering are essentially opposing values related to the ignoring and acquiring of wisdom; cf. **Hermas Vis. 3.12.2**; Johnson, *The Letter of James*, **208**.

¹¹⁹ παρακύπτω: “look more closely at”—by bending over, “peer;” cf. **Gen 26:8; 1 Chr 16:29; Prov 7:6; Song of Songs 2:9; John 20:1; 1 Pet 1:12; Sir 21:23**. The verb is associated with the training in virtue connected with the analogy of the mirror. Together with παραμένω (“continues,” “remain beside”), παρακύπτω gives the sense of intent looking into to learn what is there and to apply what is learned to the self rather than flippant consideration without learning and applying; cf. **Deut 27:26; Luke 2:19, 51; 8:15; John 8:31**.

¹²⁰ νόμος: “law”; cf. **Prov 6:23; Rom 7:14, 16; 1 Tim 1:8**. That James even added the important word “perfect” virtually equates it with the law of love. Cf. **Gal 6:2; 1 Cor 7:10, 25; 9:21; Barn. 2:6**; Iren. *Adv. haer. IV.34.4; 37.1; 13.2*.

¹²¹ ἐλευθερία: “freedom,” is one of the most important linkages for the commonality with Paul’s understanding of the new law in Christ, where the gospel is the law of liberty anticipated by the prophets’ amplification of the law; cf. **Jer 31:33; Exod 35:5; Deut 28:47; Pss 1:2; 40:8; Rom 3:27**. James would define this notion further in **2:12**, in close agreement with Paul (e.g., **Gal 5:1, 13–14; Rom 13:10**).

law is “perfect” in that it participates in the goodness of God and is essential to his gifts bestowed in wisdom to believers.

This was James’s first occasion to use the word “law,” and it had a special meaning with him. Law stands by itself in [2:9–11](#) and [4:11](#) but also appears as the “royal law” in [2:8](#) and the “law that gives freedom” in [2:12](#). The New Testament conveys the understanding that Christ brought a “new law,” in the sense that he fulfilled and placed the law upon a new basis in himself ([1 Cor 9:21](#)). To serve him is to serve the law; to truly serve the law is therefore to serve him. The same would go for studying the law and thus to be studying him. James made a personal connection not with the life of Christ but rather with the lives of past exemplars of faith who trusted in the Lord (cf. [2:20–26](#); [5:10–11](#), [16–18](#)) and thus can be said to have trusted Christ. The law and keeping the law as testimony to the active Word that makes the believer free is in view here. The absence of a reference in James to any law other than that contained within the Ten Commandments or that which sums them up in acts of love and mercy supports such an understanding of law.

The blessing (cf. [1:12](#)) follows closely the words of Jesus, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it” ([Luke 11:28](#)). In the Lord’s thinking, this obedience also can apply to his own words (cf. [Matt 7:24](#); [Luke 6:47](#)). The blessing promised here is in the doing and as a result of the doing. These two senses need not be separated. For to know what one’s purpose is as a creature of God is itself blessedness. This is the result of the freedom brought by the law of God.

There is always a direct connection between receiving the gifts of God and doing the will of God according to his Word. Those who are blessed by God live in the union of truth and action, which is their joy. This knowledge is the joy of their union with God and those they have the duty to serve. In this way their blessedness is the fulfillment of God’s purpose and is also the well-being of those they are to visit who are in distress (v. [27](#)). In this compliment of the perfect generosity of God and of the whole-hearted obedience of the believer, we see real blessedness attained in relationship with God through his Word.

(4) Worthless Religion and Genuine Religion ([1:26–27](#))

²⁶ If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. 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.

[1:26](#) Another important turn in James’s message against self-deception ([1:6–7](#), [14](#), [16](#), [22](#)) is this teaching on “worthless religion.”¹²² One of the chief characteristics of self-deception in the Christian life

¹²² The hapax legomenon θρησκός (“religious”) is obviously derived from θρησκεία, “religion,” which appears in the next verse and signifies a relationship with divine reality. James should not be seen here as making some kind of apologetic for the religious status of Christianity within the Gentile world. Evangelicals, on the other hand, should not see their emphasis on personal relationship with God as nonreligious. The real question about religion for James was: Which is true religion and which is vain? The great problem connected with self-deception here is that what “seems” to a believer to be “religious” turns out not to be so at all; rather, it is just the opposite (cf. [Acts 26:5](#); [Col 2:18](#); [4 Macc 5:6](#), [12](#); Josephus [Ant. 4.4.4](#); [5.10.1](#); [9.13.3](#); [Wis 14:18](#), [27](#); [1 Clement 1.45](#); Eusebius [Eccl. hist. 1.4](#)).

is that believers can make an empty show of religious devotion.¹²³ Depending on how the term is modified, “religion” is used as both the characterization of a way of life that embodies bad faith and also a way of life that embodies true faith. The problem then is both the appearance and the intent of religion in James’s understanding. One can seem to be religious, that is, rightly related to God, and yet in the most basic way be failing to be so.

The self-deceiving brother is religious, but the character of his religion is disreputable. Such religion has always been a problem for the church; and now at the end of the twentieth century, with so many names for Christianity and with what Christians do besmirched by those whose religious practice is empty, perhaps we can return to a healthy use of the word “religion.” Religion is the external, observable qualities of the life of faith in Christ. In this very important sense, the “religion” of the Christian and the Christian community is indispensable, but only if it is true to the faith. This is what the Letter of James is all about. Talk of the accountability of believers to the Word of God and to one another in the church is, after all, talk about religious observances practiced with sincerity. The tongue becomes the test case for true religion.

The tongue must be controlled—though not stifled. The image used here involves the harnessing¹²⁴ of a horse at the mouth. It is not that the tongue or speech is at all bad; James would later affirm it as an instrument of blessing. Unfortunately, an unrestrained tongue is a highly destructive force and an instrument of deception. A strong confessional theme underlies this chapter and indeed the entire book. What is said of God and to God is always a claim about relationship and the truth. By drawing attention to the tongue, James avoided a comparison over the quantity and quality of obedient works. Instead, confession of faith, of sin, and of need before God and others means that the control of the tongue, of speech, stands axiomatically for true religion. Control of the tongue stands for control of the whole self against temptation to indulge evil desire and to become deceptive about one’s own double-mindedness. Control of the tongue also stands for persevering under trial, praying to God for wisdom, and using the tongue, indeed the entire body, for the obedience of faith.

James called the religion that goes with an uncontrolled tongue “worthless.” His attention was on the practices of religion, its services and sacrifices. Worthless religion is then merely external and a virtual idolatry involving self-deception.¹²⁵

“Worthless” is the word μάταιος (“empty,” “futile”). It appears again in [2:14](#); cf. [Isa 1:10–17](#); [1 Cor 15:17](#); [Titus 3:9](#); [1 Pet 1:18](#).

¹²³ Cf. [Matt 3:9](#); [6:7](#); [26:53](#); [Mark 6:49](#); [Luke 8:18](#); [19:11](#); [24:37](#); [Acts 12:9](#); [John 5:39](#); [1 Cor 3:18](#); [8:2](#); [11:16](#); [14:37](#); [Gal 6:3](#); [Phil 3:4](#).

¹²⁴ χαλιναγωγέω (“to bridle,” “restrain”), a rare word in Greek. Only James used it in the NT (also in [3:2](#); but also anticipated in [1:19](#)). Cf. [Pss 32:9](#); [39:1](#); [141:3](#); cf. [Herm. Man. 12.1](#); [Polycarp ad. Phil. 5.3](#).

¹²⁵ Cf. [Acts 14:15](#); [Rom 1:21](#); [8:20](#); [Eph 4:17](#).

[1:27](#) Genuine religion is that which is (lit.) “pure and undefiled before our God and Father.”¹²⁶ There is no room for human definitions here. The standards of true religion in behavior come by the Word of truth and the reception of wisdom to produce a right relationship with God. Genuine religion means that everything in the believer’s life is to bear the mark of service to God. Paul’s “whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” ([1 Cor 10:31](#)) and “everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving” ([1 Tim 4:4](#)) are applicable here. The totality of life is brought before God and becomes an acceptable religious form for his glory. The close association between creation and God as Father of believers reminds them that their lives now originate from God and are in his hands.

God tests and blesses so that believers’ religion might be “pure and faultless.” This combination of terms distinguishes genuine from empty religion. Double-minded believers flirt with idolatry so that their religion is inevitably defiled and impure. Sins of omission and commission are entailed in futile religion because of the idolatrous nature of it. That which is pure in religion is everything that can be consecrated to God (cf. [1 Tim 4:5](#)), particularly the self as well as a way of life.¹²⁷ The undefiled aspect of religion is nearly synonymous with purity, and thus there is an emphatic quality in the use of this second term. Undefiled religion reflects the divine standard itself, while its purity reflects the quality of the practice itself.

Just as God comes to the aid of those in need, those who practice true religion “look after”¹²⁸ orphans and widows, these most vulnerable members of church and society.¹²⁹ Orphans and widows are the objects of repeated appeals for righteous action to minister to the needy and helpless.¹³⁰ These exemplify the poor to whom God shows special favor (cf. [2:1–7](#)) against the natural human preference for the wealthy. The poor must be the object of true Christian duty ([2:14–16](#)) or all claims to true faith are meaningless. Not to give aid to these poor ones turns out to be only the beginning of the problem, for the rich later come under the charge of being active oppressors of the poor (cf. [5:1–6](#)). The poor are necessarily of chief concern to the church because they live under such travail.¹³¹ The unending tribulation

¹²⁶ παρά τῷ θεῷ: “before God,” “in the eyes of God,” i.e., according to God’s standards as in v. [20](#); cf. [Rom 2:13](#); [9:14](#); [1 Cor 3:19](#); [Gal 3:11](#); [2 Thess 1:6](#); [1 Pet 2:4](#), [20](#).

¹²⁷ Cf. [Gen 7:3](#); [8:20](#); [Lev 4:12](#); [7:19](#); [11:32](#); [15:13](#); [Num 8:7](#); [Deut 12:15](#); [Luke 11:41](#); [Rom 14:20](#); [Titus 1:15](#); [Heb 10:22](#).

¹²⁸ ἐπισκέπτομαι: “visit,” “assist,” which often in Scripture refers to the coming of God to deliver his people from crisis or else visiting the sick; cf. [Gen 21:1](#); [50:24](#); [Exod 3:16](#); [4:31](#); [Josh 8:10](#); [Ruth 1:6](#); [1 Sam 2:21](#); [Zech 10:3](#); [Matt 25:36](#), [43](#); [Luke 1:68](#), [78](#); [Acts 7:23](#); [15:14](#); [Sir 7:35](#).

¹²⁹ ὀρφανός, “orphan,” and χήρα, “widow.” God is ascribed “father of the fatherless” and judge of the widow, who brings an extraordinarily harsh curse upon those who oppress them. In the early church elders were charged to act as the fathers of orphans; cf. [Exod 22:22](#); [Deut 26:19](#); [Job 31:16f.](#); [Ps 68:5](#); [Luke 20:47](#); [Sir 4:10](#); [Pol. ad. Phil. 4](#); [6](#); [Herm.Man. 8:10](#); Ign. [ad. Pol. 4](#).

¹³⁰ Cf. [Exod 22:20–21](#); [Lev 19:9–10](#); [Deut 10:17–19](#); [24:17–18](#); [Prov 19:17](#); [Isa 3:5](#); [Jer 22:3](#); [Amos 2:6–8](#); [Hos 12:8–9](#); [Mal 3:5](#).

¹³¹ θλίψις: “distress,” in the combined sense of grief and want; cf. [Exod 4:31](#); [Deut 4:29](#); [Matt 13:21](#); [24:9](#); [Acts 7:10](#); [Rom 8:35](#).

of grinding poverty must move believers and their churches to assist the poor in every way: economically, legally, politically. As is the case with all of Scripture, no political, economic, or legal system is advocated per se—indeed, all the options are merely worldly ones. But proper Christian aid and defense of the poor can shape their social conditions in a dramatic way, and often for the good of all.

Along with the positive content of religion, there is also the practice of its negative content: to avoid whatever pollutes¹³² the self. “Keeping” pertains to religious observance and spiritual devotion to God.¹³³ In view of living all life before God, the world must have no hold on the believer. Instead, believers hold themselves apart from the ways of the world. The divine/human relationship that is true religion entails a stance toward the world (cf. [2:5](#); [3:6](#); [4:4](#)) that supplies the intention for ethical action.

Religion, however pure, places the believer before God; but, having received the life-giving Word, life becomes truly and fully religious. Life is consecrated to serve God in everything. We are already before him. The question of how faith responds, which in many ways sums up our first chapter and the entire letter, has two dimensions: one is the inward life of the self; the other, life lived with others.

First, the outward-turning duty of faith focuses on persons in trouble, especially those against whom trouble falls the hardest, the orphans and widows. Jesus summarized all religion and commands in terms of total love for God and for neighbor. James’s definition of true religion serves similar comprehensive functions—love, loving care, will be focused most pointedly toward those in distress. The church is to be energized for this great cause in coming to the aid of such persons. James, rather than setting out a program for how each and every person is to be related to every other in the church, held that the standard of relationships is somehow rooted and shaped by outreach toward those in greatest trial. Without the church supporting them, the most needy will not be able to find the fortitude for faith by which James’s first injunction, “consider it pure joy,” can be followed. Orphans and widows may be outcasts to the world, but they must be enfolded into the relationships of believers. And this ministry begins by identifying those who are in distress. Out of this sign of love, the tenor of love in all the other relationships of the church will be set.

¹³² ἄσπιλος: “spotless,” “unstained,” from the κοσμός: “world,” the first appearance of this significant word in James; see [2:5](#); [3:6](#); [4:4](#), the world that pollutes the self.

¹³³ E.g., [1 Tim 6:14](#); [2 Pet 3:14](#).