

JAMES - SOUNDNESS OF SOUL FROM THE INSIDE OUT - Part five

Teaching #1807 - Sunday, May 24th, 2015, 10:00 a.m.

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TURNING NEW BIRTH INTO NEW LIFE

James 1:18-21 - "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits 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 that God requires. [21] Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls."

The theme of the book up to this point has been the testings and trials of the Christian life and the different possibilities of response. The point of today's text is there is no time when the power of God's Word is more needed than the hour of trial. **These trials, says James, show what's lacking in my faith.** They are great **revealers**. They point out specifically where the renewing, healing power of God's Word is most needed. But there's a catch-22 here. If I'm not careful, I can block out the life-giving power of the Word of God just when I need it most.

That's what James is going to be writing about in **1:18-21** - turning **new birth** into **new life** - getting the most help when the need is greatest. When trials bog us down, the Word of God can lift us up and pull us through. This is a passage about giving your spiritual life a forward thrust when trials come. It's about **not** just living on the past experience of conversion, but having the joy of ongoing and increasing maturity and development in your walk with Jesus. It's all about **how** to allow **"steadfastness have its full effect" (4)**.

1) THE WORD THAT GAVE YOU NEW BIRTH IS THE WORD THAT GIVES YOU ONGOING NEW LIFE

James 1:18 - "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures."

Even before we get into the various ideas packed into this verse notice God's plan in those words, **"that we should be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures."** We see God's incredible plan to show the world His greatness right now by the transformed character of His children.

He doesn't plan to just **tell** the world of His preserving power and steadfast love. He wants to **show** the world these things. And He wants to show these things through you and through me. And the place God's greatness can be most **noticeably** demonstrated is right in the middle of your trial. Because life at least **appears** to work pretty well for Christian and atheist alike when times are happy and prosperous. No one is hunting for meaning and the life of God in the soul. But people start to hunt for deeper realities when the bottom falls out of life. They will notice how Christians secure their lives.

Notice that eighteenth verse doesn't begin with a description of God's plan for the **future**. James starts by writing about our **past**. The verse begins with our past experience of **God's grace in our conversion**. James starts with a verse about the past before he starts talking about the present trial or God's future work of grace. **Why?**

There's an important truth he's about to unfold and it starts with your **conversion**. If you're not saved James has no other starting place to offer. You can't just pull your own life up by its own bootstraps. This is not some Dr. Phil self-help course. This is not Oprah telling us how to get in touch with our inner spirit (small "s") and actualize our full potential. James is talking about **new birth** - a divine **God-encounter** - that only comes through faith in Jesus Christ as He's revealed in the Word of Truth. James' focus is that very defined, historic, truth-specific revealed gospel records.

But new birth, while crucial, isn't really the center of James' thinking at this point. Rather, it is the launching point into something else very important. The Word that gave you new birth is the Word that gives you ongoing life. The Word that **births life** is the same Word that **sustains life**.

This is so important. I'm just as dependant on the daily reception of God's Word **now** as I was for the gospel of truth to penetrate my heart to bring new birth. Get this. I can no more **continue** to walk with Jesus without receiving His Word regularly than I could be **saved** apart from the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And I don't think most Christians deeply believe that.

Commitment to the truth of the Word **ongoingly** isn't legalism. It's life. That's what James is saying. Devotion - your devotion - and intake of the Word of God **today** is as necessary to your walk with Christ as it was for your conversion.

"How important is it that my life gets revived in God's Word every day, Pastor Don?" James has an answer to that question. How important was God's grace for your conversion? The reason James starts with this truth is he's going to be talking about how we receive the Word on a continuous, regular, daily basis in the next few verses. And he wants to clear up a big misconception Christians have about living in the Word of God perpetually.

We all understand we've been **saved** by grace. We know it was only God's mercy extended to us in the glorious gospel of Jesus that **gave us new birth**. But it is hard for us to **sustain** proper emphasis on the **ongoing** necessity of hearing the Word day by day, long after conversion. Somehow, in a twisted, pseudo-spirituality, we don't think it matters too much if there are areas of life where we have not, as of yet, really started living Biblically.

This is a huge problem. It is **misunderstood grace**. Any view of walking in grace that makes me **less** diligent about hearing and obeying the Word of God - the **Word of His grace** - is grace all mixed up. And people with a mixed up view of grace never like the book of James, because while James **does** believe in salvation by grace through faith, he always wants to make sure my **experience** of divine grace is **living, authentic, and dynamically current**.

James refuses the option of leaving a confused church thinking we have been **saved** through the Word and now that we are in the kingdom we will select the areas of our lives we will **yield** to the Spirit of the Word to correct and clean and renew. And if we don't get around to it for quite a while, well, after all, we're already saved by grace, so there's no big panic.

In other words, I can know the big work of mercy was accomplished through the truth of the gospel in regeneration. But I'm not nearly as worried about hearing the **same** Word as it speaks to my life on Thursday afternoon. And James is saying I can no more **keep going** in my Christian life without properly receiving the Word of God, than I could be **saved initially** without the gospel. Keep this truth in the front of your mind. On your own, you couldn't **initiate new birth**, and on your own, you can't **sustain new life**. That's the deal.

2) **THE FIRST STEP OF PREPARING YOUR HEART TO RECEIVE GOD'S WORD BEGINS BEFORE YOU START READING YOUR BIBLE**

James 1:19 - "Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger"

I take these words to be **preparation** for the teaching James is going to give about receiving the Word of God in **verses 21-25**. James says there are three specific instructions requiring diligent, hands-on attention for the life of the Word to be quickening to my heart:

- a) **"Let every person be quick to hear"** - He doesn't mean we should be quick to hear **anything at all**. He's talking specifically about hearing **God's Word**. Or, even better, he's talking about the **anticipation** we bring to the Word of God - the **chewing at the bit** to have our thinking corrected and changed by the Spirit of Truth.

In other words, **before** I open my Bible I lay down all self-justification. Before I **open** my Bible I **close** my mind to the possibility of arguing with God's Word when it opposed my values and ambitions.

It's the attitude of the Psalmist when he said God's Word was **"more to be desired than fine gold."** How **hungry** are you when you come to dine at God's table? How prepared are you as God's Word comes - through preachers, teachers, friends at a Bible study, or just the Word of the Spirit in your times of personal devotion?

We can **come to church** and still be **slow to hear**. O, how we should pray much for a **freeness of heart** that is **anxious to be steered by God**. That's what James means. Have running feet to come and be exposed to God's truth. Find ways to show your children that this is the number one desire of your life. Run to church, don't walk. Dads, show your whole family that coming to God's House to hear His Word isn't a **"have to"** issue for you, but a **"long to"** issue.

So first we see that we need to hear God's Word quickly. Shun apathy. Stir up your heart toward the Word of God. Read it enough to develop an appetite for it. Get the **feel** of divine truth. Get worked up about knowing God's Word.

James has two more instructions - **directions** for assembling a Word dominated life, but they're different from the first. The first dealt with a quickness to get to the source of power. Run to the Word. The second two points deal with **preparing the heart for when the Word is read or listened to**.

There are two particular barriers to the flow of power and grace whenever we hear God's Word. Pastor James knows about them and offers two warnings:

- b) **"Let every person be slow to speak"** - This is not a plea for some vow of silence. James doesn't mean people shouldn't talk or communicate. But there is a **kind of expressiveness** James says is harmful in the presence of God's Word. And it can manifest itself, even when no words are spoken out loud.

Don't be quick to frame objections to what God is saying in His Word. Don't bring a heart that, even though you've rushed to read or hear the Word - in church, Bible study, or devotions - **however** you've come in contact with the Word - don't bring a heart that is **hearing it conditionally**. Never approach the Word considering it an **option** for your life. Never set yourself up as the **judge** over what God speaks.

Remember, James is writing to Christians. And he actually has to remind them to **hear the Word**. This isn't automatic for any of us. We're respectable enough not to outwardly **deny** the Word, or **hate** the Word. But we can come to the place where, in certain tender areas, we **sit in judgment** over the Word when we hear it. At least that can be our **initial** reaction. This is true **especially** in the areas where **we need the correction of the Word most**.

We become **attached** to our own ways of thinking. We get used to evaluating our lives from inside our own fallen heads - from our own perspective. Our **desires**, as we studied last week, can drag our minds and will in bad directions, even when we **know** better.

Our minds almost instantly arm themselves with arguments. James is saying, "**Hear what the Word says without argument. Hear silently. Hear reverently. Learn to suppress the carnal mind's expressions contradicting the voice of the Holy Spirit.**"

God used a very graphic image to show us just how important it was to have **purified hearing** when we come into His presence. In **Exodus 29:20** He commands the priest, upon slaying the animal for sacrifice, to take some of the blood of that sacrifice and **place it on the "tip of the priest's right ear."** It's a graphic picture of the need for **atoned** hearing. We are **contaminated hearers**.

Without God's help in this business of **hearing His Word** we will frequently shoot ourselves in the foot. We will frame words - **inner words** - to protect our lives just the way they are. And this will keep us **sowing to the flesh and reaping corruption**. In other words, we will be destined to come scrambling for forgiveness for the **very same sins over and over again** instead of having our lives **shaped and changed and re-engineered** by the Spirit of God.

The lesson is obvious. **Anointed hearing** is better than **repeated forgiveness**. One has to do with **getting clean**. The other has to do with **staying clean**. And I have it on pretty good authority, to obey is always **better** than sacrifice. James has more instructions:

- c) **"Let every person be slow to anger"** - Hear the Word with patience - especially when God repeats His instructions.

Do you remember the great story of David and his sin with Bathsheba? Do you remember how David got a fresh lesson on **hearing God** from the way the prophet Nathan pointed out his sin? Nathan tells the story of David's sin, but puts David's sin temporarily into some fictional character's life.

This detachment gives David just enough time to really **look at the sin objectively before he had a chance to start protecting himself by lashing out against Nathan**. In other words, Nathan **defused David's natural anger** long enough to allow God's Words the time to do their work.

Because David's anger was checked he learned from that wonderful experience. His simple confession is as succinct as it is rare - **"I have sinned against the Lord!"** When they've really, really sinned badly - when there's a

lot of personal pride at stake - and especially when feelings have been wounded and hurt - **not one Christian in a thousand has the guts to say that out loud when God convicts him.**

It's a lesson David never forgot. Later, in the Psalms, he says something I'm sure was birthed in his wise heart from his famous exchange with Nathan: "**Let the righteous reprove me, it shall be as an excellent oil.**" If you want to learn **that** lesson you have to be slow to anger when God's speaks.

3) THE MOST COMMON MEANS OF QUENCHING THE HOLY SPIRIT WHILE STILL GOING TO CHURCH

James 1:20 - "...for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires."

We must have a hard time remembering this because God repeats it over and over again, so many times in the Scriptures:

Ephesians 4:30-31 - "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. [31] Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice."

Isn't it interesting that when Paul talks about Christians grieving the Holy Spirit, the first thing he mentions is anger and its fruit? That's because we can almost always **justify** our anger. It's always righteous. And the Scriptures throw up the red caution flag - a hot, angry, rebellious, calculating heart will never experience the ongoing germinating grace of God's Word.

4) THE WORD OF GOD WON'T AUTOMATICALLY GROW IN EVERY HEART THAT HEARS IT

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

Every magazine I read offers another translation of the Scriptures that will finally make the Bible easy to read and easy to understand for the people. And every time I see another ad, I wonder to myself, "Are we all really that stupid? Can we not understand the present translations at all? Not **any** of them? Or could there be another problem? Is there something else blocking the power and fruitfulness of the Bible out of thousands of lives?"

"...put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word...."

James takes a big, high elevation satellite photo of the problem of "**wickedness,**" and then zooms in to a detailed look at a particular **kind** of wickedness. And remember, he's talking to Christians. The kind of wickedness he names is "**rampant**" wickedness. Rampant means "**exceeding all bounds - wide-spread and unchecked.**"

This is the kind of wickedness James says can smother the power of God's Word in Christians. It's the **wide-spread** wickedness you have to fear. It's the **unchecked** wickedness that's most deadly to Christians - the kind of behaviour no one really **thinks** of as wicked anymore - the kind you almost feel silly and old-fashioned bringing up. There's where spiritual life silently drains away.

Here's what I think is wrong. Worldly minds will never be able to grasp spiritual truth. The Bible says so. The soil must be broken up and turned. Weeding must be done. The heart must be prepared. This is so powerfully pictured in a little gesture almost totally unnoticed at the giving of the Ten Commandments. What are we to make of the fact that **before** God will give one word of His law all the people around the mountain must take off their clothes and **wash** them?

With all due respect to my mother, I don't know if it's a spiritual axiom that cleanliness is next to Godliness. But it is surely true that cleanliness is **before** perception when it comes to hearing God's Word. I don't mean we have to be perfect before we can read the Bible. Surely the very **purpose** of God's truth is to convict and purify my life.

But there is a **kind** of cleanliness I must bring **to** the Word, right when I pick it up. I must, as we've been studying all along in this teaching, **allow it to expose my own faults.** I must be ready to **hear God sincerely.** I can't be **bluffing spiritually.** I must be **hungry to hear and see God work.**

James says **before** I **pick up** my Bible I have to **put down something else.** "**Putting away all filthiness and rampant wickedness**" (21). Then James continues. "**And receive with meekness the implanted word....**" Hearing the Word with meekness is hearing it as James has just been describing. It's hearing it without **argument** - hearing it **quickly** - hearing it

without anger or resentment.

Will this work? Isn't this all a bit too simple? Can just hearing God's Word patiently, with a pure, teachable heart, really make that kind of difference in my time of struggle and trial? James tells us. He tucks in a simple, beautiful promise for those who learn to receive the Word of God the way he's been describing: "***...which is able to save your souls***"(21). If the Word is heard in this way, no situation is beyond redemption, no life is beyond the reach of hope through God's rebuilding grace.

That's why this whole first chapter of James deals with the proper response to everything life brings our way. Everyone faces trials. None of us is strong enough in himself, and wrong responses are death-dealing. But to all who make the effort, to all who meekly receive God's will and way, there is no hopeless situation. The Word can save you. Period.

So what you learned at the very ***beginning*** of your Christian life - how to repent and receive God's Word - relearn in the ***middle*** of your Christian life. Turn ***new birth*** into ***new life***.