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## A RECEPTIVE HEART

James 1:19-21

By

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James Lesson 6

## A Receptive Heart James 1:19-21

A current popular myth in evangelical circles is that salvation is based on a personal decision for Christ and that such a decision may or may not result in a changed life. In this paradigm, a child from a Christian home may make a decision at summer camp "to invite Jesus into his heart." He goes forward at the closing song after a meeting. He gets some follow-up, is given a Bible and told to read it every day. Perhaps when he gets back to his church, he is baptized. He attends church every Sunday, because that's what his family does.

But as he gets older, he finds church to be boring and irrelevant. He prefers having fun with his worldly friends to hanging out with the church crowd. His friends introduce him to drinking, drugs, pornography, and sex. He drops out of church. He never reads his Bible. He has no desire to know Christ in a deeper way. And yet his parents will say, "But he's saved, because he made a decision for Christ as a boy at church camp!"

But the important question in situations like this is, "Is there any evidence of a changed heart or new life in Christ?" As we saw in James 1:18, salvation is a matter of God imparting new life through His word of truth. Just as a newborn baby gives clear evidence that he is alive and well, so a new believer gives evidence of his new life in Christ. His desires change. He was a God-hater, alienated from God, hostile toward Him. Now he is a God-lover, reconciled to God, receptive to the truths of God's word.

Jesus' parable of the sower (Matt. 13:3-9, 18-23; Mark 4:3-20; Luke 8:4-15) shows that genuine faith in Christ is not just a flash in the pan. Faith in Christ endures and produces fruit. In that parable, which is probably behind James' thinking in our text, Jesus described the hard, unresponsive heart as the seed that fell by the roadside. The birds quickly ate it and it did not take root at all. Next He described the seed that fell on the thin, rocky soil. This represents the shallow, impulsive heart. This person receives the word with joy, but as soon as trials or persecution hit, the person

falls away. The third place where the seed fell was on the thorny ground, representing the divided, worldly heart. The thorns eventually choke out the word. The common thing among these three types of soil is that none of them bear fruit. Some look promising for a while, but none produce fruit. I understand Jesus to be saying that none of these types were truly saved.

The fourth type of soil is the receptive heart that hears the word, holds it fast, and bears fruit with perseverance (Luke 8:15). This heart is the only one of the four that represents the new heart that God promises to give under the new covenant (Ezek. 36:26-27; Jer. 31:31-34).

The changes that stem from new life in Christ are congenital in the sense that they grow out of the new heart that God implants by His power. But, these changes are *not automatic or effortless*. If they were, the New Testament would not contain the many exhortations to spiritual growth that are there. If you have come to faith in Christ, it is crucial for you to cultivate a heart that is receptive to God's word of truth.

Psalms 78 is a lengthy psalm about Israel's unfaithfulness in the face of God's repeated faithfulness. In verse 8, the psalmist exhorts his generation not to be like their fathers, whom he describes as, "a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation that did not prepare its heart and whose spirit was not faithful to God." Don't be like they were! Prepare your heart to be receptive to God's word.

In our text, James tells us how to have a receptive heart. He mentions God's word in 1:18, 21, 22, 23, and 25 ("law"). In 1:18, he says that God brings us forth by His word of truth. In 1:22-25, he emphasizes being doers of the word. In our text, 1:19-21, James is talking about receiving the word implanted in our hearts. While his words about being quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger obviously apply to our personal relationships (James will address this in 4:1-2), the primary application in the context has regard to our response to God's word. We should be quick to hear it, slow to speak out with our opinions on it (anticipating what James will say in 3:1), and slow to anger when it confronts our sins. Verse 21 adds that we must get rid of all the crud of sin if we want to grow in our salvation. So James is saying here,

If God has given us new life through His word, we must prepare our hearts to be receptive to His word.

He gives us five marks of the receptive heart:

1. The receptive heart opens the ears: "Be quick to hear."

"This you know" in Greek may either be an indicative or an imperative. Most scholars agree that the imperative is better: "Know this," or, "understand this." The NIV paraphrases, "Take note of this." (The KJV and New KJV follow an inferior variant, "therefore.") Verses 19-21 are parallel in structure to verses 16-18: James begins with an imperative, followed by the warm address, "my beloved brethren." Both sections end with a reference to the word in the context of salvation. So James opens verse 19 by saying, "In light of your new life through the word (1:18), here is something that you need to know."

What follows is probably a familiar proverb from Jewish oral or written tradition (Peter Davids, *New International Greek Testament Commentary on James* [Eerdmans], p. 91). The word *but* (Greek, *de*) "probably fitted in easily enough in the context from which the saying came, but now appears awkward in its new setting" (*ibid.*). It is interesting that James' opening exhortation, to be quick to hear, follows the same sequence that Luke uses after presenting the parable of the sower. Jesus follows it with the exhortation, "Take care how you listen" (Luke 8:18a). In Matthew (13:9), Jesus immediately follows the parable with, "He who has ears, let him hear."

James says that the first mark of a heart that is receptive to God's word is that it is quick to hear the word. Jesus told the Jews who disputed with Him (John 8:47), "He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God." Obviously, these Jews heard the sound of the words that Jesus spoke. They were not deaf. But they did not (and *could not*, according to Jesus) understand them (see John 8:43), because they were not born of God. They lacked the ability to hear and understand spiritual truth. As Paul said (1 Cor. 2:14), "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised."

To be *quick to hear* God's word implies an attitude of *eagerness* to take in the word from every angle. As a believer, you should desire to read the word, to listen to biblical preaching of the word, to memorize the word, and to understand all of its teaching with a view to obedience. The centerpiece of the Bible is Psalm 119, which goes on for 176 verses extolling God's word and expressing the psalmist's delight in it. We see his eagerness when he says (119:131), "I opened my mouth wide and panted, for I longed for Your commandments." In Psalm 19:10, David said regarding God's commandments, "They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb."

The apostle Peter says (1 Pet. 2:2), "Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation, . . . ." That verse became very vivid to me when as a new father, I made the mistake of holding my newborn daughter with my shirt off. To her, any nipple looked like the source of milk, so she latched onto me with a vengeance! I never made that mistake again!

Evaluate your heart for God's word. Do you *delight* in it? Do you *long for* it and pour over it as a young woman longs for and pours over a love letter from her fiancé who is in another country? What is your attitude when you go to hear the word preached? The Welsh preacher Rowland Hill (1744-1833), as an old man, was visiting with a longtime friend who said, "It is now 65 years since I first heard you preach. I still remember your text and a part of your sermon." Hill asked, "What part of the sermon do you remember?"

The friend answered, "You said that some people, when they went to hear a sermon, were very squeamish about the delivery of the preacher. Then you said, 'Supposing you went to hear the will of one of your relatives read, and you were expecting a legacy from him. You would hardly think of criticizing the manner in which the lawyer read the will, but you would be all attention to hear whether anything was left to you, and if so, how much. And that is the way to hear the gospel.'" (Adapted from *Spurgeon's Lectures to his Students*, condensed and edited by David Otis Fuller [Zondervan], p. 374.) A receptive heart opens the ears to God's word of truth.

2. The receptive heart controls the tongue: "Be slow to speak."

Again, in the context, James' exhortation first applies to the need to be slow to speak as a teacher of God's word (he develops this theme in 3:1-12). Often, out of pride, a new believer wants to spout off in public to show how much he knows about the Bible or the Christian life. James, following the wisdom of the Book of Proverbs, says, "Slow down! Hold your tongue!" As Proverbs 17:28 says, "Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is considered prudent."

Someone long ago pointed out that we have two ears that we cannot close and one mouth that we can, which ought to teach us something! TV interviewer, Larry King, observed, "I never learned anything while I was talking" (in *Reader's Digest* [12/02], p. 67). James is not forbidding us from interacting with God's word and asking pertinent questions to gain understanding. Rather, he is confronting the person who is never silent before the Lord. When God's word confronts his ways, he is quick to argue with the Lord or to find excuses of why this doesn't apply to him. But in the words that Eli taught the young Samuel, we all must learn to say, "Speak, Lord for Your servant is listening" (1 Sam. 3:9). You won't hear from God if you're doing all the talking! A receptive heart controls the tongue.

3. The receptive heart controls the emotions: "Be slow to anger."

How do you respond when the Bible steps on your toes? Maybe you're reading it, or hearing it preached. It says something that you don't like, because it confronts the way you think or live. Do you get angry and defensive, thinking, "What right does that preacher have to say that? How dare he tell me how to live!" Kent Hughes says, "An angry spirit is never a listening, teachable spirit" (*James* [Crossway Books], p. 66). It's interesting that the only time that John Calvin mentions his own conversion, he says, "God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame ..." (in the preface to his commentary on the Psalms [Baker reprint], p. xl). A teachable heart has stopped fighting angrily against God. Rather, it submits to God.

James (1:20) gives the reason that we should be slow to anger, “for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.” If you want to grow in righteousness, stop fighting God’s word and submit to it.

As I’ve mentioned before, for me this was the key in coming to understand and accept the doctrine of election. As a college student, I used to fight Paul (so I thought—actually, I was fighting God!). I would wrestle with Romans 9, up to verse 19, where he says, “You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?’” I thought, “Yeah, Paul, answer that question for me!”

But then, I thought, he cops out. His answer (9:20-21) is, “On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?” That answer made me angry.

Then one day as I was boxing with Paul, the Lord tapped me on the shoulder and said, “I gave you the answer very plainly. You just don’t like it!” I went, “Gulp!” With Job (42:2, 6), I said, “I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted.... Therefore I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes.” *That* is the *only* attitude if you want to have a receptive, teachable heart before God.

Before I leave James 1:19-20, I want to apply it also to our personal relationships. I have seen the sin of anger rip apart Christian families and churches. Unbridled anger is a devastating sin that *always* creates distance in relationships. It destroys your children. It *never* accomplishes anything good. You might as well throw a bomb into your living room while your family is sitting there!

Jesus labeled anger as the root sin behind murder (Matt. 5:21-22). Before Cain committed the first murder in history, God confronted him with the question (Gen. 4:6a), “Why are you angry?” It’s not a bad question to ask yourself when you’re angry. Paul warned that unchecked anger gives the devil a foothold in your life (Eph. 4:26-27). And yet it is tolerated in many homes and churches. I have known Christian husbands and fathers who abuse their

families with angry words and behavior. I have known of pastors who bully others with anger in an attempt to control the church.

Sure, we excuse it as hereditary or justify it as “righteous anger.” But you can pretty much assume that it is *not* righteous! It almost always stems from selfishness or pride: I didn’t get my way, and I want my way, and I’m going to threaten everyone around me until I get my way! But we need to listen to what James says: “the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.” Paul clearly labels “enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, [and] factions” as deeds of the flesh (Gal. 5:20). He warns (5:21), “that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” That’s a radical warning! Take it to heart!

If you can’t make it through a week without taking a drink, you need to face reality: You’re an alcoholic! You’re addicted to the stuff. If you can’t make it through a week without yelling, name-calling, throwing things, threats, or giving your mate the silent treatment, you’re an angry person. You need to face the problem and take drastic steps to root it out of your life if you want to inherit the kingdom of God! Begin by confronting it on the thought level. If you’re thinking angry thoughts against your mate or children or parents or... (fill in the blank), you’re already sinning against God and against them. Cut it off at the thought level by judging your sin and putting on a heart of compassion, forgiveness, and love (see Col. 3:12-14).

So James says that as those who have been given new life from God, we must prepare our hearts to be receptive to God’s word. The receptive heart opens the ears, controls the tongue, and controls the emotion of anger.

4. The receptive heart clears the crud of sin: “Putting aside all filthiness.”

“Therefore” links verse 21 as the conclusion to verses 19 & 20. “Putting aside” is a term used for taking off filthy clothes. “All filthiness and all that remains of wickedness” expands from the sins of verse 19 to include all sorts of disobedience to God’s word. The word translated “all that remains” is literally, “abundance,” but it’s clear that James does *not* mean that you can keep some wickedness, as long as you get rid of any *extra* wickedness! Either it’s a

figure of speech that means, “the whole dirty mass of wickedness,” or it means to get rid of every trace of it (Davids, p. 94).

James’ thought here is the same as Paul’s, when he tells us to put off the old self (or man) and to put on the new self (Eph. 4:22-24). We all bring baggage from our old way of life over into the Christian life. Usually, we’re blind to much of it. We don’t realize that we’re displeasing God by our thoughts, words, or actions. As we begin to read God’s word, it convicts us of areas that we didn’t even know were sin. When this happens, the receptive heart cleans out the crud of sin and puts on the clean clothes of new life in Christ. If you don’t do this, the crud will prevent you from growing as a Christian.

5. The receptive heart welcomes the word: “In humility receive the word implanted.”

The picture here is that of the parable of the sower, scattering the seed of the word. Will your heart be good soil that receives the seed and bears fruit, or will it be one of the other kinds of soil that is unproductive? Once the seed falls into the good soil, it still needs to be nurtured in order to bear fruit. The seed must be watered and weeds must be pulled. It must be protected from the birds or from being trampled under foot.

The word translated *humility* is a difficult word to translate. Often the NASB translates it as *gentleness* (a fruit of the Spirit, Gal. 5:23). The King James uses *meekness*. The Greek word has the idea of strength in submission or strength under control. It was used of Alexander the Great’s horse, which was powerfully strong, but totally submissive and responsive to the master’s touch. The believer with this quality can be very strong, as Jesus and Paul were, and yet completely submissive and sensitive to the Lord’s command.

When James says that the word implanted “is able to save your souls,” he is viewing salvation as the entire process of the Christian life, culminating in our “ultimate deliverance from sin and death that takes place at the time of Christ’s return in glory (see, e.g., Rom. 5:9, 10; 13:11; 1 Thess. 5:9; Phil. 2:12; 1 Tim. 4:16; 2 Tim. 4:18; Heb. 9:28; 1 Pet. 1:5, 9; 2:2; 4:18). James’ other uses of the [word] share this future orientation (2:14; 4:12; 5:20; in 5:15,

'save' applies to physical, not spiritual, deliverance)" (Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 88).

"Save" is a radical word that means to be rescued or delivered. The opposite is to be lost. Picture a man in danger of his life, who fights against those who come to rescue him. That's the wrong way to get rescued! The right way is to follow their orders, assuming that they know what they're doing and that they are out for your best interests. God's aim, through His implanted word, is to save your soul. But you need to submit to it with humility, putting aside all arrogance and pride. Welcome God's word into your life as your deliverer. It will save you from destruction if you receive it and obey it.

### Conclusion

Proverbs 4:23 says, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life." Have you done a heart check lately? If your heart is apathetic to God's word, James says, "Be quick to hear." If you're prone to spout off arrogantly with how much you know, James says, "Be slow to speak." If you're fighting some aspect of the word that you don't like, James says, "Be slow to anger." If you're tolerating the crud of sin, James says, "Put aside all filthiness." If you're resisting God's commands that are designed to rescue you from sin, James says, "In humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls."

### Discussion Questions

1. How can a believer who has lost his delight in God's word recover it? What steps should he take?
2. Anger is often such a quick, emotional response. How can an angry person gain control so as not to react quickly?
3. How can Christians identify areas of sin that are blind spots?
4. Some would argue with the statement, "If there is no changed life, there is no salvation." How would you defend it biblically?

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