



MULTIPLYING THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Study Notes by Thomas Hale

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Wrath and Anger - James 1:19-21

Commentary Study

19 Understand [this], my beloved brethren. Let every man be quick to hear [a ready listener], slow to speak, slow to take offense and to get angry.

20 For man's anger does not promote the righteousness God [wishes and requires].

21 So get rid of all uncleanness and the rampant outgrowth of wickedness, and in a humble (gentle, modest) spirit receive and welcome the Word which implanted and rooted [in your hearts] contains the power to save your souls. (Amplified Bible)

Barker, Kenneth L. Expositor's Bible Commentary (Abridged Edition: New Testament). Zondervan Publishing House, 1994, pp. 1022-23.

In vv.19-21a, James is attempting to clear the way for the reception of God's truth (v.21b). He begins by calling for the readers' attention: "Take note of this." The reception of the Word demands a readiness "to listen" (GK 201). Reluctance at this point will block the acceptance of truth. It also demands restrained speech. A continual talker cannot hear what anyone else is saying and by the same token will not hear when God speaks. Finally, the restraint of anger is demanded, for anger closes the mind to God's truth. A fiercely argumentative attitude is not conducive to the humble reception of truth.

20 "For" indicates that this verse gives the reasoning that lies behind the last exhortation. One's anger does not produce "the righteous life that God desires." An angry attitude is not the atmosphere in which righteousness flourishes. James stresses this from the positive side when he later says, "Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness" (3:18).

21 In further preparation for the reception of the Word, one must “get rid of all moral filth.” The word translated “get rid of” (GK 700) was primarily used of taking off garments (cf. Heb 12:1, which speaks of throwing off any excessive weight to make ready for the race of faith). The “moral filth and the evil” that are so abundant must be stripped off like dirty clothes in preparation for “accept[ing] the word.” The reception of truth must of necessity be marked by humility or meekness (GK 4559). This is not to be construed as spineless weakness. Instead, it is the quality of a strong man that makes him docile and submissive rather than haughty and rebellious. Only in such a spirit can one fully receive God’s truth. That the Word is described as “planted in you” suggests that the readers were believers who already possessed the truth. The phrase “which can save you” simply describes the truth as saving truth. James is not calling for an initial acceptance of that message, but for a full appropriation of the truth as the Christian grows in spiritual understanding.

Moo, Douglas J. The Letter of James. Eerdmans;

A. Hasty Speech and Anger Do Not Please God (1:19-20)

19 My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, 20 for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

James has wrapped up his first general exhortation with an allusion to the word of God (v. 18). That “word” will be the focus of vv. 21-27, where James calls believers to recognize in God’s word the demand of obedience that comes to all who claim the blessing of the new birth. But before he turns to this topic, James interjects a brief exhortation about speech and anger. This concern with improper speech and the anger that can often cause such speech is a traditional theme of Jewish wisdom literature. But James appropriates the tradition because he recognizes that his readers are struggling in just this area—as his repeated attention to “the tongue” and unbridled passions makes clear (see 1:26; 3:1-12; 4:1-3, 11-12; 5:12). Verses 19-20 may then be viewed as James’s brief announcement of a motif that is woven like a thread through the fabric of the letter.

The basically independent character of the verses might suggest that they should be given a place in the outline of the letter equal to vv. 2-18 and 1:21-2:26. But it is better to view them as a transitional introduction to the major unit that follows. The address “my dear brothers” usually introduces a new topic in the letter of James (see the comments on v. 16). And the “therefore” of v. 21 shows that the negative warnings of vv. 19-20 act as the basis for the positive exhortation to “accept the word.”

19 In place of the NIV’s take note of this, the NASB has “this you know” (NASB), and the KJV “wherefore” (KJV). The KJV translation is based on a variant in the Greek text that should not be accepted.⁵⁶ The NASB, on the other hand, reads the same Greek word as the NIV—*iste*, “you see”—but takes it to be an

indicative rather than an imperative.⁵⁷ But the imperative is more likely here since this is the kind of verb that James usually pairs with his address “my beloved brothers.” This general call to pay attention signals a pause in James’s argument as he switches from one topic to another.

The abrupt introduction of a new topic in vv. 19-20 has naturally led commentators to seek to integrate them more fully into the context. The most popular option is to assume that the object of the command “be quick to listen” is the word of God, mentioned in v. 18 and prominent in vv. 21-25.⁵⁸ We would then have to infer the same object of the next, coordinate command. If this were so, the command to be “slow to speak” the word of God would have to have a sense similar to Jas. 3:1: “Not many of you should presume to be teachers.” But this idea would be difficult to discover without 3:1—which comes later in the letter. Moreover, the third, grammatically parallel command, “be slow to anger,” is difficult to explain on this reading of the verse.

But an even better reason for rejecting the “word of God” interpretation is James’s obvious dependence on a widespread Jewish wisdom teaching about speech and anger. The admonition to display wisdom by listening much and talking little is found quite often. Indeed, one of the best known of all the proverbs is the one found in Prov. 17:28: “Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue” (see also 10:19; 11:12, 13; 13:3). The theme is echoed in Jewish intertestamental literature, a good example being Sir. 5:11-13: “Be quick to hear, and be deliberate in answering. If you have understanding, answer your neighbor; but if not, put your hand on your mouth. Glory and dishonor come from speaking, and a man’s tongue is his downfall.” Moreover, these same wisdom books sometimes link hasty speech and unrighteous anger; see, for example, Prov. 17:27: “A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is eventempered.” The “quick-tempered” person, this proverb suggests, is the person who is likely to speak without careful consideration. Uncontrolled anger leads to uncontrolled speech. How often do we find ourselves regretting words spoken “in the heat of the moment”! The wise person, James reminds us, will therefore learn to control the emotion of anger and so eliminate one of the most common sources of hasty and unwise speech. Psychologists will sometimes claim that emotions, since they are a natural product of the personality, cannot truly be controlled—only suppressed or ignored. But James’s exhortation here (and many similar biblical exhortations) presume differently. Emotions are the product of the entire person; and, by God’s grace and the work of the Spirit, the person can be transformed so as to bring emotions in line with God’s word and will.

20 James now explains (note the *for*) why Christians should be slow to become angry: man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. The NIV’s “righteous life that God desires” is a paraphrase of the Greek, which, literally translated, says “the righteousness of God” (cf. KJV; NASB; NRSV). God’s righteousness is one of the great theological themes of the OT. The starting point for the theme is the use of the language to describe an attribute of God: his moral purity and especially his

reliability and faithfulness in carrying out all that he has promised. An example of this meaning is David's prayer in Ps. 35:24: "Vindicate me in your righteousness, O LORD my God; do not let them [his enemies] gloat over me." Confident of his own right standing with God, David seeks deliverance on the basis of God's promised word to support his people and destroy his enemies. In other OT verses, "God's righteousness" expresses more of a relational and dynamic concept, focusing on the actual act of vindication. Note, for example, that Isaiah prophesies, in the name of the Lord, "I am bringing my righteousness near; it is not far away; and my salvation will not be delayed. I will grant salvation to Zion, my splendor to Israel" (46:13). Prophecies like this provide the basis for Paul's well known use of the phrase "righteousness of God" to summarize the gospel (see, e.g., Rom. 1:17; 3:21-22). Paul refers to an activity of God by which he puts people in right relationship with himself; and this use of the OT language is the most important and distinctive we find in the NT.

But we would be wrong to think that James must be using the phrase in the same way that Paul does. Indeed, perhaps no greater mistake can be made in interpreting James than to read his letter in the light of Paul. James, we must remember, is writing (we have argued) before Paul had written any of his letters and probably has no direct knowledge of Paul's teaching. James must be read against the background of the OT, Judaism, and the teaching of Jesus—not the apostle Paul. To be sure, James shares with Paul the use of Gen. 15:6, with its reference to "righteousness" (2:23). And we would certainly make an equally significant mistake to assume that James could not have applied OT language in ways very similar to those of Paul. But the word "righteousness" in Jas. 1:20 must be understood in light of the verb that governs it. And the combination "do" or "produce" righteousness makes it very difficult to think that James could be referring to God's act or gift of righteousness. For how could anyone think that human anger could lead to such righteousness? "Do righteousness" can mean "exact justice" (see perhaps Heb. 11:33). The REB translates in this way, and the idea would seem then to be that James wants to dismiss any idea that people could justify their anger because it is accomplishing God's own ends of retribution. But this meaning of "righteousness" is unusual. We are on firmer ground in thinking that James uses the phrase "produce righteousness" with the meaning it normally has in the Bible: do what God requires of his people. Jesus used the word "righteousness" in just this sense when he called on his followers to exhibit a "righteousness" exceeding that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law (Matt. 5:20; see also 5:6, 10; 6:33).⁵⁹ This meaning makes excellent sense in this verse. James's very simple point is that human anger does not produce behavior that is pleasing to God. Presumably, he is thinking especially of different sinful acts, such as violence, murder (see Matt. 5:21-26 and Jas. 4:2-3), and especially, in this context, unwise speech, that stem from anger.

Does James intend to prohibit all anger of any kind—even what we sometimes called "righteous anger"? Probably not. James falls into the wisdom genre at this point. And wisdom sayings are notorious for the use of apparently absolute assertions in order to make a general, "proverbial" point. Qualification of that

general truth is often found in other biblical contexts. So we can assume that James intends us to read his warning as a general truth that applies in most cases: human anger is not usually pleasing to God, leading as it does to all kinds of sins. That it can never be pleasing to God would be an interpretation that is insensitive to the style in which James writes at this point.

B. Obedience to the Word Is the Mark of Genuine Christianity (1:21-27)

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. 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. 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.

The theme of this paragraph is obvious: those who have experienced the new birth by means of God's word (v. 18) must "accept" that word (v. 21) by doing it (vv. 22-27). James's concern with practical obedience is signaled by his shift from the term "word" (of God) (vv. 21-23) to "law" (v. 25) and by the frequency of the term "doer" (vv. 22, 23, 25). The "religion" that counts before God (v. 27) and that is able to save the soul (v. 21) must come to expression in a lifestyle of obedience to the word of God, "implanted" within each believer (v. 21).

The point of transition in James's argument is not immediately clear. Most English translations and commentators put the transition between vv. 21 and 22. But the introduction of the topic of the "word" in v. 21 suggests that it belongs with the material following it. The therefore at the beginning of v. 21, on this reading of the sequence of thought, may connect the discussion in vv. 21-27 with v. 18 rather than with vv. 19-20. And a close connection between v. 18 and vv. 21-27 is suggested by a similar sequence of ideas in 1 Pet. 1:23-2:2. In both passages, new birth through the word of God is followed by the command (introduced with "therefore" [dio]) to "get rid of" evil behavior and to embrace the word of God.⁶⁰ Peter, of course, is writing after James; so there is no question of direct borrowing. But what the two passages suggest is that James and Peter may each, independently, be appropriating a familiar teaching from the early church in which a reminder of the spiritual birth God had graciously given his people through his word was followed by exhortation to shun the kind of behavior associated with the old life and to begin living by the standard of the word that had saved them.⁶¹ Corroborating this possibility is the similarity between James and 1 Peter at a number of other points (see the Introduction).

21 The NIV rid yourselves of translates a Gk. verb (apotithemai) that means to “take off.” The word connotes the idea of removing clothes (cf. Acts 7:58), and the imagery is applied metaphorically in the NT to the “stripping off” of the pre-Christian lifestyle from the believer (see Rom. 13:12; Eph. 4:22, 25; Col. 3:8; Heb. 12:1; 1 Pet. 2:1). James’s use of this term is another indication that he is probably citing common early Christian teaching here. The Greek verb is a participle, which could justify viewing the action as more of an assumption or subordinate idea than a command; see NASB: “putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive...” But Greek participles in these situations often become virtually equivalent to the imperative verbs they depend on. So the independent command that we find in most English translations is probably justified here.

What James calls on the believer to “take off” is moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent. “Moral filth” continues the clothing imagery suggested by the verb “take off.” The Greek word lying behind the NIV phrase occurs only here in the Bible (rhyparia), but James uses the adjective from the same root in 2:2 to characterize the clothes of a poor person. And we find the same term used to describe the garments that the high priest Joshua must discard before being given a new, splendid set of clothes in Zech. 3:3-4. The NIV “moral,” therefore, is an attempt to capture the ethical nuance of a word that basically means “filth” (NLT) or “sordidness” (NRSV). James chooses a word that reminds us just how offensive and detestable sin really is. Coupled with “moral filth” is the evil that is so prevalent. This somewhat stiff NIV rendering seeks to capture the idea of “abundant” or “surplus” of evil that the Greek suggests. Another option is to take the Greek to refer not to an abundance of evil but to a “remainder” of evil; see, for instance, NASB: “all that remains of wickedness” cf. also NJB: “remains of evil”). This meaning is possible, but unlikely. The Greek word involved (perisseia) is used three other times in the NT (Rom. 5:17; 2 Cor. 8:2; 10:15), each time with the meaning “abundance.” James warns believers that putting off sin involves a fight against a foe that takes many different forms. Like an army with many soldiers, sin attacks us persistently and in many guises. Knock down one sin, and another quickly arises to take its place in the spiritual conflict in which we are engaged.

NT authors who use the imagery of “putting off” to refer to sin often complete the metaphor by calling on believers to “put on” a new suit of clothes—the righteous living to which Christ calls us. James, significantly, abandons the imagery at this point, using as his positive command the verb accept or “receive.” He does so because he wants to focus attention on a more basic issue than the adopting of a new code of behavior: the influence of God’s word in producing that new kind of behavior. James’s description of the word here as planted in you has caused considerable controversy. Arguing that the Greek word (emphytos) must mean “inborn,” some scholars insist that James must be referring to a natural human capacity to respond to God’s revelation: “the original capacity involved in the Creation in God’s image which makes it possible for man to apprehend a revelation at all.”⁶² But this conception, besides having rather dubious biblical support, is too general for the context, where “the word” is described as

having the power to save (v. 21) and to regenerate (v. 18) and is eventually equated with the “law of liberty” (v. 25). James must be referring to the word of the gospel and not to an innate quality within human beings.⁶³

If this is James’s meaning, then *emphytos* will have the sense “implanted” rather than “innate.”⁶⁴ The word is not something that all people have within them from birth onward, but an entity that has taken up residence within believers. James likely draws this striking conception of the implanted word from the famous new covenant prophecy of Jeremiah 31.⁶⁵ The prophet, noting the failure of Israel to live up to the terms of the Mosaic covenant, announces on behalf of God a new covenant that God would enter into with his people. As a prominent component of that new covenant arrangement, God promises to put his law within his people, to write it on their hearts (Jer. 31:33). The repeated failures of Israel to obey the law that God gave to them had made it clear that the human heart was not capable of submitting to external rules. A new, interior work would have to be done, giving people a “new heart” (see the somewhat parallel passage in Ezek. 36:24-32) so that they could respond truly and obediently to God’s word. James’s language reminds his readers that they have experienced the fulfillment of that wonderful promise. But it also reminds them that the word that has saved them cannot be dispensed with after conversion. God plants it within his people, making it a permanent, inseparable part of the believer, a guiding and commanding presence within.

If this interpretation is on the right lines, then the command to accept the word implanted in you is not a command to unbelievers to be converted (“accept the word” means this elsewhere in the New Testament),⁶⁶ but to believers to allow the word to influence them in all parts of their lives. By adding the word humbly to the command, James reminds us that we need to be open and receptive to the work of the word in the heart. Christians who have truly been “born again” (v. 18) demonstrate that the word has transformed them by their humble acceptance of that word as their authority and guide for life. Jesus made a similar point with different imagery: the believer is to prepare “good soil” in his or her heart in order that the “seed” of the word that has been planted there might produce much fruit (Mark 4:3-20). In place of “fruit,” James refers to “the salvation of your souls” (a literal translation). As so often in the OT, “soul” (Gk. *psychē*; Heb. *nephesh*) probably does not here refer to a “part” of the human being, but to the human being as a whole; the NIV rendering, which can save you, is therefore probably on target. We should especially note that James here portrays salvation as future from the standpoint of the believer. Some Christians, accustomed to equating salvation with conversion or regeneration, might be troubled by this future orientation. But, in fact, such a focus is quite customary in the NT, where the verb “save” and the noun “salvation” often refer to the believer’s 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’s other uses of the terminology share this future

orientation (2:14; 4:12; 5:20; in 5:15, “save” applies to physical, not spiritual, deliverance). This perspective on salvation is important to keep in mind if we are to understand James’s theology correctly.

Barton, Bruce B., et al. James. Tyndale House Publishers, 1992, pp. 30-34.

James has spoken of the new birth; he now explains that this new birth should reveal itself in the way we act. He has also connected the new birth with its source, God’s Word. The ongoing importance of that Word will be the subject of the next paragraph. The Word that brings us life also guides us in living the life it has brought to us. From the grand scope of God’s eternal plan and the unique place of believers in creation, James turns to the painful and practical essentials of living as “firstfruits.”

1:19 My dear brothers, take note of this. NIV James begins with a single, attention-getting Greek word: *lste* (know!), translated “take note of this.” It has the same effect as when we say, “Listen!” before saying something we don’t want people to miss. Verse 19 records the theme for the rest of the chapter. Again James reminds his reader that these are family rules of conduct (“dear brothers”).

Let everyone be quick to listen. NRSV When James speaks to everyone here, he is especially referring to teachers (see 3:1). What they need to listen to is God’s Word (1:18). The expression quick to listen is a beautiful way of capturing the idea of active listening. We are not simply to refrain from speaking; we are to be ready and willing to listen. Quick also implies a readiness to obey what we hear. We often find the attitude among believers that the speaker is entirely responsible for getting the people to listen by being entertaining, relevant, and engaging. James shifts the responsibility back to the audience. This “quick” listening is obviously to be done with discernment. We are to check what we hear with God’s Word. If we don’t listen both carefully and quickly, we are liable to be led into all kinds of false teaching and error.

Slow to speak. Quick to listen and slow to speak should be taken together as sides of the same coin. Slowness in speaking means speaking with humility and patience, not with hasty words or nonstop gabbing. Constant talking keeps a person from being able to hear. Wisdom is not always having something to say; it involves listening carefully, considering prayerfully, and speaking quietly. When we talk too much and listen too little, we communicate to others that we think our ideas are much more important than theirs. James wisely advises us to reverse this process. We need to put a mental stopwatch on our conversations and keep track of how much we talk and how much we listen. When people talk to us, do they feel that their viewpoints and ideas have value?

Teachers are especially prone to an imbalance when it comes to speaking and listening. We should take careful note of the way Jesus mixed the two. His speaking tended to be marked by brevity. He asked questions. He listened. We should ask ourselves, “Have I listened enough to know that what I’ve said was heard?”

Slow to anger. NRSV Anger closes our minds to God's truth (see an example in 2 Kings 5:11; see also Proverbs 10:19; 13:3; 17:28; 29:20). It is anger that erupts when our egos are bruised—"I am hurt"; "My opinions are not being heard." It is just the kind of anger that rises from too much fast talking and not enough quick listening!

When injustice and sin occur, we should become angry because others are being hurt. But we should not become angry when we fail to win an argument, or when we feel offended or neglected. Selfish anger never helps anybody (see Ecclesiastes 7:9; Matthew 5:21-26; Ephesians 4:26).

We have two ears but only one mouth, that we may hear more and speak less. — Zeno

1:20 Man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. NIV The anger spoken of here is a thoughtless, uncontrolled temper that leads to rash, hurtful words. Our anger toward others does not create within us a life that can withstand God's scrutiny. Why not? Because expressed anger tends to be uncontrollable. Anger is inconsistent with Jesus' command to love our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48) and not hate our brothers (Matthew 5:21-26). Anger usurps God's role as judge. In fact, we can be sure our anger is wrong when it keeps us from living as God wants us to live.

So how can we obtain the righteous life that God desires? If we were to ask this question to James at this point in his letter, he would probably send us back to the beginning. The righteous life that God desires avoids anger, but actively pursues the following: tested faith, endurance, maturity, perfection, contentment, spiritual birth, quick listening, and obeying God's Word.

WHERE ANGER ERUPTS

Knowing the places and the ways that we are tempted can help us prepare by praying and by planning alternative responses instead of giving in to anger:

- Family—When we are misunderstood, ignored, unloved, criticized
- Church—When we are unnoticed, overlooked, unappreciated, criticized
- Workplace—When we are slighted, overworked, harassed, criticized
- Friends—When we are left out, disappointed, criticized
- Society—When we feel singled out for unfairness, taxed, criticized

1:21 Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent. NIV According to the Greek, this is a once-for-all action. Why should we do this? Progress in our spiritual life cannot occur unless we see sin for what it is, quit justifying it, and decide to reject it. James's word picture here has us getting rid of our evil habits and actions like stripping off dirty clothes.

Receive with meekness the implanted word. NKJV Humble acceptance is contrasted with the quick speech and anger from 1:19. James is not asking believers to be converted—that has already happened. To accept the planted word he speaks of here is to accept its laws as binding and to seek to live by them. We are not to look for something to argue about, but with humility to live by that word. Yet we are not to be so “humble” that we feel unworthy to live by God's Word and thus decide not to try—that is false humility and does not honor God. To humbly accept the word, we must be “quick to listen” (good listeners), “slow to speak” (thoughtful), “slow to anger” (not hasty and jumping to conclusions), and willing to do what it says (1:19).

The word is planted in us when it becomes part of our being. God teaches us from the depths of our soul, from the teaching of the Spirit, and by the teaching of Spirit-led people. The soil in which the word is planted must be hospitable in order for it to grow. To make our soil hospitable, we must give up any impurities in our life. The exchange James describes, where we remove the sin covering our life and accept what has been planted within, helps us understand several ways that God works. God's Word directs us in identifying and removing those things that are unacceptable in our life. His Word and Spirit also work inside us. Our spiritual growth happens from the inside out. A wound must have its surface cleaned and kept clean until a scab forms, but healing occurs from the inside out. This verse describes both aspects of this process applied to our spiritual life.

Which is able to save your souls. NKJV Christians are not finished with God's Word once we are saved. Instead, God's Word becomes a permanent part of us, guiding us through each day. The implanted Word becomes part of us; then we absorb the characteristics taught in the Word; then these are expressed in living. Trials and temptations cannot defeat us if we are applying God's truth to our life.

1:22 Do not merely listen to the word. NIV The word is the gospel taught by Jesus and proclaimed by his followers. Simply reading, even studying, God's Word does not profit us if we don't do what it says. We learn God's Word not just to know it, but also to do it.

Obedience is the mother of true knowledge of God. — John Calvin

And so deceive yourselves. NIV It is self-deception to congratulate ourselves about knowledge of Scripture if that's all there is to it. This is the second kind of deception that James warns against. In 1:16 he tells us not to be deceived about God's character. Here James is concerned that we not be deceived about the

character of God's Word. We are not to engage in passive listening, but rather in an active attentiveness that leads to action.

Be doers of the word. NKJV Worthwhile knowledge is a prelude to action; God's Word can only grow in the soil of obedience. In order for a lesson to make a difference in a student's life, it must enter the heart and mind, affecting his or her life. It is important to hear God's Word, but it is much more important to obey it. We can measure the effectiveness of our Bible study time by the effect it has on our behavior and attitudes. Do we put into action what we have studied?

The emphasis on listening combined with doing is found elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul wrote: "For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified" (Romans 2:13 NRSV). Jesus himself said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it" (Luke 11:28 NRSV). James may well have heard his half brother, Jesus, talk about obedience many times. Here James, too, is emphasizing the importance of actions as part of faith. Later, he will discuss this topic at length (2:14-26).

Meanwhile, we can begin to examine how we might fall under James's concern. How often do we merely "hear" the Word with no intention whatsoever of obeying it? If our actions of service are only self-serving and our concern only for those closest to us, we are not being obedient to Jesus. In his scathing story of the final judgment (Matthew 25:31-46), Jesus points out that "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40 NIV)