

## Hearing and Acting James 1:19-21

Teacher and philosopher Socrates was once approached by a young man who wanted to become one of his students. The young man talked on and on for 10 minutes without a break before Socrates could say a word. When he was able to speak, he told the young man that he would take him on as a student but would have to charge him double the normal fee. The young man asked why he should be charged double to which Socrates told the would-be student that he would have to learn two lessons instead of one. The first lesson he would have to learn was how to hold his tongue and the second lesson would be how to use it.

We have all heard the age-old adage “you have two ears and one mouth, and they should be used in that proportion”.

With your Bibles turned to **James 1:19-21**, James begins with a note to believers. Referring to them once again as “**dear brothers**”, he is not speaking about them as physical blood brothers having been born into the same family, nor he is speaking to them in regard to their national identity as born into the same Jewish heritage. Instead he is speaking to the endearing and enduring relationship they share through a common faith in Jesus Christ. They were born again into the family of God.

Bill Gaither wrote a little chorus we sometimes sing that speaks to the truth of our relationship in Christ.  
I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God –  
I've been washed in the fountain, cleansed by His blood!

Joint heirs with Jesus as we travel this sod;  
For I'm part of the family, the family of God.

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James is writing to believers who happen to be Jewish. But these words are just as much for us because together, then and now, we are bound in Christ. What he says to them, he says to us and we see it in the words that follow: “**take note of this**”. He wants his audience to take special note of what he is about to say. We could even say that he is

reminding them of something they already knew. They've heard it before, but it bears repeating because it's important to understand.

If you hadn't heard the big news yet, David got his driver's license this past week. He passed his road test on Monday and we went to the Secretary of State on Tuesday and got that piece of paper that gives him the privilege to drive without his parents. We had lots of hours with him behind the wheel. Most of the time it was me in the front seat next to him offering suggestions and advice. His mother took up too much oxygen when she thought something was about to happen. So I took on the role of guiding. Occasionally I would offer a reminder based on certain road or traffic conditions. They were things we had talked about before or that he had learned in his driving classes, but they were things I wanted him to remember because they were important. I was saying the same things as James: “take note of this”. They were meant to help him remember practical driving tips and not meant as criticism or nagging.

Keep in mind that the book of James offers tips about practical Christian living.

**So what does James want them to take note of and apply to their lives?** In our verses this morning. I see two main ideas that I think relate back to what he said in the previous verse. “**He chose to give us birth through the Word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruit of all He created.**”

The new birth brings about a transformation in the life of the believer that should be evident to others.  
The new birth affects our talk.  
The new birth affects our walk.

As a believer there should be a noticeable difference between what you say and what you do before your new birth and after your new birth. Let's consider first, how the new birth affects our talk.

### I. HOW THE NEW BIRTH AFFECTS OUR TALK – vs. 19-20

James gives us three clear ways our talk should be

affected. We would do well to take note and ask if the new birth has altered our talk in these areas. The first is that the new birth affects our attentiveness.

### A. The New Birth Affects Our Attentiveness

#### “Everyone should be quick to listen.”

The dictionary defines quick as rapid, swift, or done with promptness. The word swift, as it reads in the KJV, is defined as moving with great speed, fast; acting or responding quickly.

The action we are to do swiftly is to listen or hear. Now the word listen or hear can mean two different things. It can mean that we hear a sound. We’re driving to the store and we hear the sound of a siren. We take note of the sound it makes. We have heard it. We hear the sound of a train whistle. We hear the sound of someone speaking. Throughout the day we hear or listen to a lot of different sounds.

But the word listen or hear has another thought that James intends for the person who has experienced the new birth that affects our talk. The word conveys an action associated with what was heard. It moves us from an intellectual assent of hearing a sound to doing something with the sound we just heard. Simply put we act on what we hear. We hear the siren and we look to see where the sound is coming from. The action is to pull over. We hear the sound of a train whistle and we determine if we need to stop at the train crossing, especially if the sound of the whistle is also accompanied with flashing lights and a dinging sound. We hear someone yelling to get out of the building because there is a fire or maybe it’s our boss giving us an assignment.

James doesn’t want believers just to hear the message, he wants them to act on the message that was just heard. Next week we’ll talk about doing God’s Word not just hearing it.

There is a story about an American Indian who left the reservation to visit a friend in downtown New

York. Walking down a busy street with his friend, he suddenly stopped and said that he heard a cricket. His friend said he was crazy because no one could hear a cricket with all the noise of around them. But the Indian friend said he distinctly heard a cricket. His friend insisted that with all the noise from cars and people that he couldn’t possibly hear a cricket. But the Indian stopped to listen again. Walking across the street he found a cement planter and began to dig through the leaves and there he found his cricket.

The friend was astonished and said the Indian had amazing hearing, but the Indian said his hearing was no different than anyone else. It simply depended on what you are listening for. To prove his point he reached into his pocket and tossed a bunch of coins onto the pavement and instantly people all around stopped and turned heads to the sound of the change hitting the concrete. Then he told his friend it all depends on what you’re listening for.

From **I Samuel 3**, before there was a king in Israel, we read about a time where we are told the voice of God was rare. One night as Samuel was sleeping he heard a voice speak to him. He did not yet know the voice of God. Each time he thought Eli was calling him, so he went to see what he wanted. Each time Eli told him he hadn’t called him. Eli realized the third time it happened that it was God who was speaking to Samuel and instructed him that when it happened again, he should respond. We read in **verse 10** that the Lord came again and stood next to Samuel calling him. Samuel woke this fourth time and said **“Speak, for your servant is listening.”**

What voice are we listening to? Are we quick to hear God speaking through His Word of truth?

The Psalmist gives us a bit of advice in **Psalm 46:10**, **“Be still, and know that I am God.”**

With all our chatter and busyness are we listening to the Lord speak or is the noise so loud we can’t hear Him? **“You know”** is both a mild command and a gentle rebuke. James was reminding them of something they knew already, but possibly forgotten. They were to be quick to listen.

Be swift to hear the Word of God. It is living and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword

(**Hebrews 4:12**). It is active in accomplishing its purpose. It accurately judges our thoughts, motives and actions. It's no wonder then that some don't want to listen to it because it will convict and condemn. Let us respond like Samuel: **"Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."**

But maybe the reason we're not hearing Him speak, is because we're listening to the sounds of this world, and we're not tuned to the sounds of heaven! Seven times during His earthly ministry and eight times from heaven Jesus said: **"He who has ears to hear, let him hear."**

Be quick to listen to the Word of Truth. Listen to it with the intent of obeying it. **Psalm 119:105** tells us it will never lead us astray. **"Thy Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."**

Charles Wesley wrote:

When quiet in my room I sit,  
Thy book be my companion still,  
My joy Thy sayings to repeat,  
Talk o'er the records of Thy will,  
And search the oracles divine  
Till every heartfelt word is mine.

**Do you have a time and a place where you sit ready to listen to the Lord?** John MacArthur cautions: **"There is no sense to plan a place or day or time for God's Word if there is not first a listening heart."**

Be quick with a listening heart to hear the Word of truth. It will affect you, if you willingly obey it.

Second, the new birth affects our speaking.

## **B. The New Birth Affects Our Speaking**

**"Everyone should be...slow to speak."**

There is another adage you are familiar with. **"It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt."**

When we get to **chapter 3**, we'll discuss again the power of the tongue. In my brother's anatomy and physiology class he talks about the tongue being one of the strongest muscles in the body. He then talks figuratively about the power the tongue has in what we say, and James tells us we need to be slow

to speak. It simply means to control the tongue, not be quick to blurt out the first thing that comes to our heart and mind. That's why we are cautioned first to be quick to listen. If we are quick to listen carefully we are less apt to speak foolishly.

We have all had an occasion or two where what we have said has gotten us into trouble. If we had only listened to the whole story to begin with. Sometimes we say one thing, but our mouth betrays us because it reveals what's really in the heart. Jesus said in **Matthew 12:34** **"The mouth speaks what the heart is full of."**

To be slow means take your time, don't be hasty.

A number of years ago I was working on a new memory verse when the Lord convicted me and I had to ask forgiveness of someone. Here's the verse: **Proverbs 18:13** **"He who answers before listening – that is his folly and his shame."**

Essentially, it's saying the same thing as James: Be quick to listen and slow to speak. Let's do ourselves a favor and be slow to speak.

King David could have saved himself a lot of embarrassment when Nathan came and told him a story. Had he thought long and hard about what Nathan was saying before he said that the guilty party should lose his head for stealing a sheep, he would have realized the story was about him.

Peter could have saved himself some embarrassment as well had he listened before speaking. On the mountain when Jesus was transfigured Peter spoke up and wanted to build some shelters for Jesus, Moses and Elijah to stay in. **Mark 9:5** says Peter didn't know what to say, so he said the first thing that came out. The old saying was certainly true of Peter from time to time and true of us as well: Open mouth and insert foot. And in Matthew's account God the Father spoke from heaven and told them to listen to Jesus because He was pleased with Him (**17:5**).

So on one hand we are to be quick to listen and on the other we are to be slow to speak. This is an area

we all could use some help with as we would do well to listen before speaking.

I think it was Abraham Lincoln who had the practice of writing a letter and then setting it aside to reread and rewrite after a day or two of thinking about the issue at hand.

You have maybe heard the expression “the poison pen” referring to a letter that was written in haste by someone who was angry. That’s why it’s important to follow Lincoln’s example and wait till we have thought more carefully and deliberately before responding. Hasty words spoken in anger sever relationships.

Solomon provides us with some wisdom.

**Proverbs 10:19**

**Proverbs 14:29**

**Proverbs 29:11**

Those of you old enough to remember WWII will remember the slogan used by the Navy: “**Loose lips sink ships**” meaning if you talk too much, destruction is sure to happen and that’s the end result of James threefold admonition. If we’re not careful, our words can result in anger and James reminds us that the new birth affects our anger.

### **C. The New Birth Affects Our Anger**

**“Everyone should be...slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.”**

Something that is present in the English translation that is not there in the Greek is the little three letter word “and.” It reads “**Let every man be slow to speak, slow to anger.**” It’s not there in the original because James wanted to show the close connection between our words and our anger. It doesn’t matter how hard we try, we can’t take back words that were said in haste and in anger.

Early on in the fight against the COVID virus, you probably saw, as I did, demonstrations showing the need for social distancing. They would illustrate the rapid spread of the virus by simulating a cough using a puff of smoke from a dispenser and then

they would see how far that puff of smoke travelled during a certain length of time. They wanted to show us that once it was out, the virus couldn’t be taken back.

You can’t take back words spoken in anger.

You may remember singing in Sunday school way back in the day the little song:

**Oh, be careful little mouth what you say.**

**Oh, be careful little mouth what you say.**

**For the Father up above is looking down in love.**

**Oh, be careful little mouth what you say.**

(Now you’ll be humming that all afternoon.)

Anger has been described as the strongest of all passions. This word doesn’t refer to an explosive anger, but rather an inner deep resentment that seethes and smolders. Sometimes it expresses itself in some action, but often it just smolders inside us and no one knows until one day we let it out.

I think that’s the kind of anger Moses had. There were times when he expressed his utter frustration at the hard hearted, rebellious nature of the disobedient, whining Israelites. One day he had all he could take. Instead of trusting God who had faithfully provided for their needs for almost 40 years, they complained once more about not having any water. God said He would provide. All Moses had to do was speak to the rock and water would come out, but instead out of anger he struck the rock. Because of that, Moses was not able to cross into the Promised Land.

If anger is left unchecked, it does not produce God’s righteousness in the believer. Many testimonies have been damaged because of anger. Like Paul, James isn’t saying that anger is necessarily wrong, just don’t let it eat you up. There is a righteous anger over sin that we should have because, like God, we should hate sin. But often we get angry about other things that don’t help us develop Christ-likeness.

Paul said not to let the sun go down on our anger and continued by saying that if we do, it gives the devil an opportunity to gain a foothold in our life

(**Ephesians 4:26-27**). But then elsewhere Paul tells us that anger is one of the characteristics of the old nature that we are to put off.

**Ephesians 4:31** “Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice.”

**Colossians 3:8** “But now ye also put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, slander, filthy communication from out of your mouth.”

Let me come back to Moses for a moment.

**Psalm 106:32-33** “By the waters of Meribah they angered the Lord, and trouble came to Moses because of them; for they rebelled against the Spirit of God, and rash words came from Moses’ mouth.”

As someone who has experienced the new birth by the Word of truth, anger goes not produce the righteous life that God desires. It does not demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit which is love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and self-control. Being angry does not achieve godliness. The new birth affects our anger.

Think of what James is saying here as a three-legged stool. Each leg is important for the stool to stay upright.

One leg is being quick to listen to the Word of truth and sometimes that Word is a rebuke or correction.

**Proverbs 9:8-9** “Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you. Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning.”

The wise listen, the wise don’t listen.

The second leg is to be slow to speak.

The third leg is to be slow to anger.

The new birth should affect our talk.

The new birth should affect our walk.

## II. HOW THE NEW BIRTH AFFECTS OUR WALK – v. 21

If we are going to exhibit the righteous life God desires for us, James gives us two opposite commands.

### A. The New Birth Rejects Immoral Ways

“Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent.”

It’s a picture of stripping off dirty clothes.

**Romans 13:12**

**Romans 6:1-6**

**II Corinthians 5:17**

**Ephesians 4:22**

**Colossians 3:8**

I think this is where the armor of God Paul speaks about in **Ephesians 6** ties in nicely, especially in regard to putting on the breastplate of righteousness. Our character is either the fragrance of Christ as we display righteousness, or it is the stench of the world if we revel in its moral filth.

Moral filth is any moral defilement or impurity. If you want a list of the moral filth we are to get rid of, read through **Ephesians 4:22-24**, **Colossians 3:8-10** and **I Peter 2:1**. Read through the lists carefully and make an honest assessment of your character to see if any of those are evident in your life and then with the help of the Holy Spirit strip them off.

**Hebrews 12:1** tells us to throw off everything that hinders our walk of faith and the sin that easily entangles so that we can run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

**Ephesians 5:3-4** “But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or course joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.”

**I Peter 1:14-16**

The word filthiness is related to a term for having wax in the ear which impairs our hearing. From time to time I have to go to the doctor to flush out wax build up (I know it’s just about lunch time).

The doctor would get this big syringe out and fill it with water and blast it into the ear canal to force out all the packed in gunk. If you have never had it done, let me be the first to tell you that what comes out is disgusting, but it's necessary if I want to be able to hear.

Moral filth keeps the believer from hearing God speak through His Word.

The word evil or wickedness refers to general evil and corruption, especially its intent and speaks of sin that is deliberate and determined. It's something that can live in our heart for a long time before it's acted on. I wonder how long Cain thought about taking the life of his brother Abel?

James is saying that we should not only get rid of the acts of sin but also the attitudes of sin, the sins we let remain secret. The word prevalent simply means something in abundance or excess. The new birth rejects immoral ways because they keep us from hearing and obeying God's Word.

Lastly, the new birth receives the implanted word.

## **B. The New Birth Receives The Implanted Word**

**“Humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”**

The implanted Word must take root in the believer. It is that Word which is the power of God to bring salvation (**Romans 1:16**) and Paul adds that faith comes from hearing the message of Christ (**Romans 10:17**). The word receive or accept means to fully embrace the Word of truth that can save you making that Word part of your life. Or letting it live in you. People can hear the Word and reject it, spurn it, disdain it, loathe it. Or people can hear the Word and accept it and embrace and allow it to change their character as they allow that Word to make it home in them.

**Acts 17:11** says that the Bereans were more noble than the Thessalonians because they received the Word with great eagerness and studied it to make sure what Paul taught was true.

**I Thessalonians 2:13** “**And we also thank God continually because, when you received the Word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the Word of God, which is at work in you who believe.**”

People can argue with God's Word all they want. They can disagree with it, disbelieve it and even reject it, but it is still truth and it is still right. Paul tells us to let the Word of Christ richly dwell in us (**Col. 3:16**). Like a living plant, when we allow the Word of God to take root in us, change occurs through the work of the Holy Spirit using that Word to transform us.

But James gives us a criterion for accepting the Word of God. We must do so with meekness. It implies submission to it with a ready and willing heart to obey. When we obey His commands, Jesus says it demonstrates our love for Him (**John 14:21**).

The Word of God that brings salvation also teaches us and transforms us (**II Timothy 3:16-17**). In terms of practical Christian living that James is writing about, we use a term called progressive sanctification. That simply means that as I grow in Christ-like character, I become more in practice to what I already am in position. When Christ returns, I will be made completely holy – that's glorification.

**I John 3:2-3** “**Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.**”

That's what James is saying. If we want to pursue the righteous life God desires, we must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger. We must rid ourselves of moral impurity and embrace the Word of truth. It will show up in our talk and our walk. We will hear the truth, have an affection for the truth, and we will then obey the truth.

**How's your talk?**

**How's your walk?**