

How To Receive God's Word – Righteous Hearing

19 So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; 20 for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God. 21 Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. (Jam 1:19-21)

One of Jesus parables was what we'd call a science experiment. A good science experiment is something you can repeat, observe and test. A good science experiment controls elements so that if you repeat them, or vary them, you will get predictable results. Jesus' "experiment" looked like this: you take one man, the same man, a sower; you take one pouch of seed, all of the same kind, and that one sower, uses the same motion with his hand to disperse the seed, but you then get very different results. One doesn't grow at all. One grows quickly and then dies. One grows and is choked and dies. One grows and produces fruit and reproduces itself. And if you were a scientist, you know what cannot explain the different results. You can't blame it on the sower or his sowing action – there is only one sower, not many, and he is repeating the same motion. You can't blame it in the seed – it is the same kind. So what explains the different result? How the seed is received – what kind of ground it lands on.

When Jesus told that parable He was explaining why the Word of God, and in particular the Word of God taught by the very Son of God – Himself – was having such different effects on His audience. Some rejected it altogether. Some were superficial disciples, following until they heard they had to sacrifice. Some seemed like disciples until money or worldly cares got the better of them, like Judas. And some were genuine disciples. Why these different responses? The fault was not with the sower, Jesus – it was the same preacher for all these people. The problem was not with the seed, the Word of God taught – they all heard the same message. The problem was in the soil – the quality of the hearts that heard the Word. Their receptivity, their response to the Word was the difference between rejection and reception, condemnation and salvation, emotionalism and true discipleship.

That is as true today as it was when Jesus spoke those words. For 52 Sundays a year, the Word of God goes out. Besides that, there are Sunday School lessons every Sunday. Besides that, there is the teaching on Wednesday nights. There are also men's studies and ladies' studies. Added to this, you will probably be reading the Bible for yourself, listen to some audio sermons, perhaps read some Christian books that detail the Word. So what result does all that seed landing on your heart have? What is growing as a result of all that sowing?

James is echoing the parable of Jesus when he begins to teach us that how we receive the Word is another test of our hearts. Receiving God's Word, and responding to God's Word are some of the biggest indicators of whether or not we are truly saved. How we respond to God's Word is another way of finding out if we are truly related to Jesus, if we truly do the will of the Father, if our faith has real works. If nothing is growing, we cannot blame the seed, or the sower. We cannot fault God's Word. In verse 18, James told us the Word is so powerful that it was used by God to beget us, to regenerate us and bring us into new life. The Word of God is powerful, life-giving, effectual. To explain differences in fruitfulness, we have to look within and examine the quality of our hearts.

So what James begins to do in this passage which goes from verse 19 to 27 is talk about the two tests that come our way every time the sower sows His seed. The two tests are how we receive the Word and how we respond to the Word. To put it in familiar biblical terms, it is how we hear, and how we obey.

But what we will see is that these two actions have sub-disciplines of their own. And since they are

so important, we want to take each one at a time. Today we want to look at the test of how we hear the Word; next week we'll consider how we are to obey the Word. And what we are going to see is that biblical hearing is not simply a matter of having functioning ear-drums. Jesus said, "He that has ears to hear, let him hear." He didn't say, "He that has ears to hear, will hear." he says, if you have functioning ears, use them to listen with understanding. Biblical hearing is made up of two godly responses: the attitude of attentiveness, and the action of receptiveness.

I. Believers Must Have the Attitude of Attentiveness

So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; 20 for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

"My beloved brethren" - this is for Christians. James is not calling on unbelievers to respond to God's Word this way, because they do not yet have the new heart to even begin to respond this way. But believers have the soil of the fourth heart in Jesus parable. Jesus described that heart in Luke 8:15 as an honest and good heart.

For believers, James says, there is an attitude you need to have even before the Word comes to you. We can call this attitude attentiveness. There is a kind of before, during and after sense in this passage. How you should be before the Word comes, what you should do when it comes, and then what you should do with it afterwards.

So the attitude to God's holy and powerful Word when it comes must be one of attentiveness. James describes this attentiveness for us in three parallel statements. Each of us must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger. All three operate at the same time; they combine to make up attentiveness.

Attentiveness is quick to hear. This means it is swift to give thoughtful attention to God's Word. Attentiveness takes a visual cue from creation, God gave me two ears and one mouth, so I will do twice the listening and half the speaking. I want to prick up my ears at the sound of God's Word being brought to me.

We read of this hunger in Nehemiah, where God's chastened people were now back in Jerusalem and eager to be a covenant-keeping people.

Neh 8:2 So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who could hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month. Then he read from it in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate from morning until midday, before the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.

How many times in global church history do we find those people for whom one page of Scripture is like gold-foil, who hear a sermon, and request a second one, who would spend all day drinking at the river of truth. They had the heart of John Wesley to the Word, who wrote:

"I am a spirit come from God, and returning to God: just hovering over the great gulf; till, a few moments hence, I am no more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing,—the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach me the way. For this very end He came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be a man of one book."

Now even if I don't have that appetite, I can choose to direct my full attention to God's Word, and give it that much importance. I can choose that it will be the priority for me, over all other sounds and noises.

You see, the easily-distracted Christian is the uninterested Christian. We are only easily distracted if we are bored with the subject matter. When a man is engrossed in a subject, when he deeply desires to know something, he treat distractions like mosquitoes, he swats them away from his mind. They are like droplets on the windscreen of his mind, and his attention windscreen-wipers do a swish so he can hear again. But when we are bored with something, distractions are wonderful relief, giving us something else to look at, watch, think about.

Complimenting the eager, quick to listen attitude, is the slow to speak attitude. I am so eager to hear God's Word, I will not interrupt Him with the sound of my own voice. Now what does this look like? Solomon describes a kind of religious talkativeness that pretends to be interested in the Word, but is really interested in the sound of its own voice.

Ecc 5:1 *Walk prudently when you go to the house of God; and draw near to hear rather than to give the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they do evil.* **Ecc 5:2** *Do not be rash with your mouth, And let not your heart utter anything hastily before God. For God is in heaven, and you on earth; Therefore let your words be few.*

Some people are more naturally slow to speak. But some people can't wait for others to stop so that they can start. For many, that includes God's Word. Hardly two words of God's Word are read, and they want to start commenting, responding, explaining, teaching, talking. Have you ever had the frustrating experience of speaking to someone and while you are speaking, they say, "Yes, I know, I know," and you think to yourself, "There is no way you already know this!" We can adopt that kind of attitude with God's Word, "yes, yes, I know, I can already tell you this, if you asked me." God says, wait. You may not know. There may be an application, a level of understanding, a thought you don't know. Bridle your tongue. Don't start teaching before you've heard. **Pro 18:13** *He who answers a matter before he hears it, It is folly and shame to him.*

When it comes to God's Word, it is a monologue, before it becomes a dialogue. We let God speak, and we listen quietly, and only then do we respond in prayer.

Quick to listen, slow to speak. Here comes the third component of *slow to anger*. Why did James put this in? Why is slow to anger part of attentiveness?

Well, just think of the last time someone told you that you hadn't done something properly, at work or at home. Think about the last time someone blamed you for something. What was your almost immediate reaction? Anger. Self-protective anger. Vindictive anger. Guilty anger. The desire to lash out, blame someone else, make your accuser into the problem. Now here's the thing about the Word of God. Paul tells us in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 that every word of Scripture is God-breathed and useful for four things: doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness. Those four things mean the following. *Doctrine*: God says, this is what I expect. *Reproof*: God says, you're doing it wrong, and it's your fault. *Correction*: God says, here's how to put it right. *Instruction in righteousness*: God says, here's how to keep it right.

Most encounters with the Word have some experience of God saying, this is what I want, you haven't done that, here's how to do it instead, and here's how to keep doing it. Unless we adopt a totally indifferent and dismissive attitude towards the Word, each time we hear it we are going to be tempted somewhat to get angry, defensive, reactive. We can get irritated with the Word, impatient with it. This is not what I need to hear! I don't need to be made to feel like I am some horrible sinner! The real problem is my spouse! The real problem is my boss, my child, my health, my

finances, my parents, my past, my church. That's where the change really needs to take place.

James tells us in verse 21 that selfish anger does not bring about the righteousness of God. Selfish anger interrupts the power of God's Word in your life. It distorts the communication process.

Just like when you are having a disagreement with someone, you have to learn the biblical truths of not interrupting, not sighing and snorting and huffing and puffing and screaming responses. To be a good listener, you have to be slow to speak, quick to hear, and slow to get angry. So it is with God's Word. Let me hear it, let it take its course, let me not react and respond, let me allow God's Word to penetrate and take its effect.

That's the first part of hearing like a believer – the attitude of attentiveness. But now comes the second part of hearing.

II. Believers Must Have the Action of Receptiveness

21 Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

With that attitude of attentiveness in place, James says believers must receive the Word. You got the soil nice and ploughed up and moist, but now the Word is going to come and you must receive it.

He uses an interesting word to describe the Word – the implanted Word. It's the idea of a seed, and it suggests the Word has already been sown in your heart by God, so now receive more of it. In Christ, you are the fourth soil, so become what you are, and receive it like sons and daughters of God do.

And how is that? Believers hear with receptiveness. The word for *receive* here means to welcome, to receive, to host the Word. Since you are the fourth soil, since you are in position, and by the new birth by nature the only people in the world who have a home in their hearts for the Word, welcome it in. Put out the welcome mat. Say to God's Word, come in, make yourself at home. Every room in this house is open to you. The room of my desires, the room of my priorities, the room of my thought life, the room of my family life, the room of my finances, the room of my entertainment, the room of my work life, the room of my moral life, the room of my communion with God. Come in, and feel free to re-arrange, re-decorate, re-model as you see fit.

You can see two examples of this welcome given to the Word.

Act 17:11 These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

1 Thessalonians 2:13 For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.

So how do I receive the Word of God? What is entailed in this receptiveness? James gives two qualifiers to this main verb of receive. Keeping with the biblical imagery of hosting and welcoming, we could say we need to do some spring-cleaning, and some gracious hosting. There's some throwing out, dusting, and then there's receiving in, putting on.

Look at spring-cleaning first.

21 Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness

Laying aside is the image of taking off a garment. It's exactly the same word Paul uses when he speaks of putting off the old man. So James says, the way you receive the Word is to make space for it, and clean up the house for it. The filthiness here is moral uncleanness, impurity. Lay aside any abundance, surplus of wickedness.

Peter has exactly the same idea in 1 Peter

Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, 2 as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, 3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious. (1Pe 2:1-3)

Now James doesn't mean that we need to by our own efforts get rid of every sin in our lives before we receive the Word. Indeed, receiving the Word is one of the ways we are cleansed. James here says it is able to save our souls, it has saved us from sin, and is saving us from sin, and will save us from sin.

Instead, James means, get rid of the known, exposed sin in your life. If God's Word has already come in and pointed out what needs to be cleaned in some rooms of your life, then clean it. Otherwise we will become the man we read about later, who keeps being exposed to the Word, but makes no changes, and is actually in a cycle of self-deception, thinking that the mere exposure to the Word is a substitute for submitting to the Word.

Receptiveness to the Word is the opposite of hardness. Hardness to the Word comes from stubbornness. Stubbornness is a refusal to obey and make the changes. Hanging onto known sin, nursing the sin, protecting the sin, covering the sin, excusing the sin, hiding the sin is a sure-fire way to make the door of your heart harder to open, until you are locking it to the Word, and eventually barricading it to the Word.

People with a fourth soil kind of heart are always repenting. Christians are a repenting people. We are continually becoming aware of areas in our life needing cleaning, of evil to be thrown out, wickedness to be vacuumed, tossed out. Just as you clean your body each day, and clean your houses each day, doesn't this object lesson teach us that our souls need to be continually cleansed. Receptiveness to the Word comes from those with tender consciences, tender because they are grieved by their sins and repenting of them continually.

Here is the idea from one of the old Puritan Prayers in the Valley of Vision:

I need to repent of my repentance; I need my tears to be washed; I have no robe to bring to cover my sins, no loom to weave my own righteousness; I am always standing clothed in filthy garments, and by grace am always receiving change of raiment, for you always justify the ungodly; I am always going into the far country, and always returning home as a prodigal, always saying, "Father, forgive me," and you are always bringing forth the best robe. Every morning let me wear it, every evening return in it, go out to the day's work in it, be married in it, be wound in death in it, stand before the great white throne in it, enter heaven in it shining as the sun. Grant me never to lose sight of the exceeding sinfulness of sin, the exceeding righteousness of salvation, the exceeding glory of Christ, the exceeding beauty of holiness, the exceeding wonder of grace.

But if we have dusted, vacuumed, washed, we now need to do something positive. We welcome the Word with meekness. This word meekness is often translated gentleness, or humility. It is a similar idea to being slow to anger. Now that the Word has rung the doorbell and has come in, I will be a patient, gracious host, allow the Word to be at home, even when it rubs me the wrong way.

When the Word starts re-arranging the furniture of my priorities, I will still gently welcome it. When the Word lifts up the carpet of my motives, I will still patiently host it. When the Word starts pulling out books from the library of my thought life, I will meekly continue to extend the welcome. When the Word opens the fridge of my possessions and starts looking through it, I will kindly extend it welcome. When the Word goes into the bedroom, looking at my relationships, examining my moral life, I will make the Word feel at home. I will be what James describes in 3:17-18

Jam 3:17 *But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.*

I believe one of the obvious ways that God teaches us this attitude – so obvious but we miss it – is that God uses human preachers to preach His Word. God's Word is so pure, so perfect, so powerful, you would expect God to put it only on the lips of an archangel, to set it to music so beautiful as to make Bach blush with shame, tell it forth with flawless oratory from a flawless being. But instead, God has His Word preached every week all over the globe by fallible men with limited gifts, and difficult personalities, and substandard language, and mediocre communicative gifts. Why does God do it this way?

7 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. (2Co 4:7)

God is making it so obvious to everyone. You have to put up with this preacher. You bear with him. You struggle to concentrate on him. You are patient with his mistakes in delivery and his less than clear explanation, and his irritating mannerisms. God says, it's obvious I could give you my perfect Word in a perfect way, right? So why do I make you put up with this? Well, to get to the message through the fallible messenger, you have to show meekness. You have to be patient, gentle.

That meekness you are showing with the messenger, I want you to have with the message. Only difference, you only have to put up with the preacher for an hour a week. God's Word knocks at your heart all week.

This is the action of receptiveness. I keep spring-cleaning the heart of my sin to keep it soft, and I welcome the Word in with patience, gentleness meekness. These two disciplines: the attitude of attentiveness, and the action of receptiveness combine to be the kind of heart that the seed of the Word penetrates and brings forth fruit. You see, the image is very deliberately chosen. God did not compare His Word to a car being spray-painted, where simply being in the presence of the Word will somehow spray paint you with holiness. But I think some Christians have that idea. They imagine that being in church 52 Sundays a year, being in Bible studies will by itself bring change and growth, as if exposure brings automatic results.

No, the image is very carefully chosen. The seed has all the life and power in it. The Word is living and powerful. But the seed germinates in the right soil. The Word is effectual in the right kind of heart – a believing heart. A believing heart that hear and obeys.

So here is a plan of action for you going forward. Before church, before a Bible study, before your quiet time, pray something like this: God, when you speak, I wish to be attentive. Help me to hear You, and not my own thoughts. I don't want to teach You, and I don't want to get angry when You teach me, help me to be eager to hear. Cleanse me of known sin in my life. And then, as the Word comes, with a clean conscience, you let it roam free in the house of your life, making it at home wherever it works.