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Bridgeway Church
James #5
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Sermon Summary #5

The Life-Changing, Soul-Saving Power of God's Word James 1:19-21

Now here's a question for you, and yes it does have a purpose and it does have a direct relation to our passage this morning.

What issue or doctrine or perspective on Christianity is the most divisive in the church today? Could it be the charismatic question? Is it the debate between *continuationists*, who believe all spiritual gifts are valid today, and *cessationists*, who argue that the so-called miraculous gifts ceased and are no longer given by the Holy Spirit to individual Christians? Perhaps. Or is it the divide that exists between *Egalitarians* and *Complementarians*. Or for the sake of you who are not familiar with such terms, I'm referring to the division between those who believe women should occupy every office in the local church, such as that of Elder and Senior Pastor, as over against those who believe that God has restricted senior governmental leadership to men. Or could it be the debate between *Calvinism* and *Arminianism*, that is to say, the difference of perspective between those who emphasize God's sovereignty in salvation versus those who stress human free will?

I'm sure there are other candidates that we might consider, but let me get to my point. I want to suggest that the greatest division and the most obvious difference among Christians is that between *Orthodoxy* and *Orthopraxy*. Again, if you aren't familiar with those terms, orthodoxy simply means *right belief*, whereas orthopraxy refers to *right behavior*. What I'm referring to is the question of what matters most: *what you believe* or *how you behave*. Is it *accurate thinking* or *godly living*? Is it *what you theologically affirm* or *how you experientially act*?

If you're still struggling to understand the distinction I have in mind, let's allow James to make the point with utmost clarity. Here in the concluding verses of chapter one, it's as if James says under his breath or beneath the lines of what he writes, "Hey folks, buckle your seat belts, because I'm on the verge of offending virtually all of you! I'm going to make everyone mad!" Here is how James does it.

In James 1:21 he issues this urgent exhortation: "**Receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.**" You can almost hear countless Christians respond by saying: "Yeah! That a boy James! You go guy! It's about time someone rebuked all these activists in the church who only talk about doing good and pursuing justice and showing compassion to widows and orphans and making sure that we avoid sexual immorality. I'm persuaded they're all a little soft between the ears."

My guess is that many of you were drawn to Bridgeway because you heard that we strongly emphasize the teaching and truths of Scripture. And it's true. We are passionately committed to orthodoxy, to right belief, to sound theological thinking. We don't believe you can get very far in the Christian life if you are careless or indifferent towards the teaching of God's Word, the Bible.

But James isn't finished yet. No sooner has he issued this clarion call for orthodoxy than he declares with equal energy and conviction: "**But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves**" (James 1:22). At such words an equally large number of Christians respond by saying, "Yeah! That a boy James! You go guy! It's about time someone challenged these theological eggheads into putting their faith into practice. After all, what good is being a great theologian if it turns you into a selfish, arrogant jerk?"

My guess is also that some of you were drawn to Bridgeway because you heard that we strongly emphasize personal purity of life, moral integrity, missional outreach, life pursued in the context of community and personal accountability, compassion for the widow and the orphan, and dedication to the pursuit of biblical justice. And make no mistake, those are values of immense importance to us at Bridgeway.

So which is it? On which side of the divide do you fall? Do you more readily identify with orthodoxy or with orthopraxy. ***What registers more deeply in your heart: the call of James to receive and believe the implanted word of God, the word that is able to save your soul, or the call of James to be a doer or practitioner of the truth, a person who controls his speech and cares for the outcasts and the disenfranchised in our world?***

As you ponder your answer, I hope you realize that it is an entirely illegitimate, dare I say dumb, question! The Bible will not permit you and me to choose sides. Now, that isn't to say that it's wrong for you to be more gifted in one area than another. I'm not suggesting that we are all a bunch of monolithic robots who think and talk and act the same. Certainly there are differences in our personalities and preferences and in the way God has gifted us. Or to say the same thing, we need to acknowledge the different ways in which God has spiritually hardwired our souls. No two people are exactly alike. If they were, one of you would be unnecessary!

But I am saying without hesitation or qualification that ***if you think right doctrine can be sacrificed for the sake of right living, or that right living can be subordinated to right thinking, you are horribly misguided***. I've heard all the arguments from both sides, the one insisting that Christianity is ***a life to be lived*** while the other arguing that it is ***a creed to be confessed***. Jesus is to one an ***example*** to be followed and to the other a ***teacher*** to be heard.

And it's not just James but the whole of the Bible that refuses to let any of us off easily. It's simply a choice that must not, indeed, cannot be made. We must receive and believe the implanted word of God because it has the power to save our souls. And we must do and serve and behave in godliness and compassion and love or our profession of belief will mean nothing to people who are hurting and in need.

So I expect that some of you may love James and me this week and despise us both next Sunday, in the same way that others will despise us today and adore us next Sunday. I say this because I hope you are here next week to hear the second half of James's exhortation regarding orthopraxy. But today his focus is orthodoxy.

“Receive the Implanted Word of God”

When I began my public pastoral ministry over 40 years ago it was entirely unnecessary to say anything about the importance of the Word of God in the lives of God's people. It was a given of the Christian life. Virtually everyone, except for the anti-supernaturalists who reject the heart of Christianity, believed in and was devoted to the power of God's word for governing our lives as believers. But times have changed. Meticulous study of God's Word is now out of style. What happened? I'll mention a couple of things.

(1) Many in the younger generations were offended by the traditionalism of those who stood firmly on the Word of God. In other words, to be a Bible-believing, Bible-memorizing, Bible-studying church was often equated with being legalistic and exclusively Republican and resistant to social justice and afraid of engaging with the wider world in which we live. Simply put, many (not all) who were Word oriented were also mean-spirited and judgmental and indifferent to the orphans and widows of our world.

So the younger generation lost confidence in the power of God's Word to make a difference. It's as if they said: “Well, if the Bible is all that powerful and so important, then why don't the very people who claim to believe it demonstrate those changes in the way they view people of different ethnicities? Why don't they take seriously the Bible's emphasis on social justice and racial reconciliation and world hunger?” Understandably, to some extent, they turned from Bible-centrality while seeking to retain their Christ-centeredness.

The bottom line is that many of the older generation became so intellectually and doctrinally driven that it degenerated into arrogance and pride. It led to unnecessary divisions among Christians as people said: “Well, if you don't believe just like I do then I won't have fellowship with you. You need to leave our church because you'll never have a meaningful place to serve here.”

(2) With the explosion of modern media and digital technology, the printed page was relegated to a distant and irrelevant past. Today's younger folk prefer to see than to hear. They wish to participate rather than to study. They want moving images rather than a book. They prefer feeling over thinking. Everyone today, and not just the younger generation, is bombarded daily with sight and image and color and virtual reality and sensible/tangible encounters. My guess is that some of you would prefer that I incorporate movie clips into my sermons or make use of skits or

dramatic enactments. Perhaps you might even prefer that we used strobe lights and fog machines during our time of singing. I'm sure that more than a few people have left Bridgeway over the years that I've been here precisely because they wanted a more interactive and sensory experience on Sunday morning.

Please understand that I am sympathetic with all these concerns. And the last thing I would do is suggest that those who approach ministry on a Sunday morning differently than I do are in sin. Who knows . . . I might surprise you some Sunday with a movie clip or even something as revolutionary as power point!

All that being said, there's no escaping or denying the force of what James is saying to you and to me in the second half of verse 21. Today our focus is very narrow. We will look solely at v. 21. That doesn't mean vv. 19-20 aren't important. I plan on returning to them in a week or so. But let's take note of this remarkable imperative: **"receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls"** (v. 21b). Let's pull it apart word by word and then put it back together again.

"The Word"

What does James mean when he uses the word "word"? I think there are two things in his mind.

First, look back for a moment at v. 18. There James describes the experience of being born again, the new birth, or what theologians call regeneration: "Of his own will he brought us forth by **the word of truth**" (v. 18a). The "word of truth" is unmistakably the gospel of Jesus Christ. When you were born again, when you experienced that incredible transition from spiritual death into spiritual life, God caused it to happen by means of "the word of truth."

The apostle Peter said much the same thing in 1 Peter 2:23 and 25. There we read:

"since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; . . . And this word is the good news that was preached to you" (1 Pt. 2:23,25).

So the "word" through which a person is "born again" is the "good news" that was "preached" to us or that we read in a book or a tract or that was shared with us by a friend or our parents. That "good news" or "gospel" is the message of what God has done for sinners in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to secure the forgiveness of their sins and to reconcile them to himself. In some mysterious way that we don't fully understand, the Holy Spirit uses that truth as the instrument or means by which he opens our eyes to see the beauty of Christ and enlightens our minds to understand the glory of God's grace. It is the instrument he uses to impart to us new spiritual taste buds so that we might enjoy the sweetness of who Jesus is and how he has made provision to deliver us from the judgment and wrath of God that we so richly deserved. The "word of truth" is the means by which the Spirit enables your soul to experience and enjoy the satisfaction that only God can provide. So, that is one meaning of the term "word" in James 1:21b.

But it is also clear that "word" has in view **the collective revealed truth** about who God is and what he has done for us in Christ. So, it may refer both to the spoken words of Jesus as well as the written Word of God that we know as the Bible. ***The "word of truth" in v. 18 and the "implanted word" in v. 21 both have in view God's revelation or disclosure of himself, the totality of what he has made known regarding who he is, what he is like, who Jesus is, and how we are to live our lives.***

Sometimes I can't believe what I hear when certain individuals declare that we have moved beyond a "word-based" Christianity to an image-driven spiritual experience. Aside from the fact that it takes "words" to make their point (!), the Bible simply refuses to let us so easily and casually dismiss the urgency and importance of truth: spoken truth, written truth, truth that is communicated in both speech and print. This truth (the Bible).

Before I leave this point let me say one more thing about the "gospel" as the "word" of God. I think James would have us understand that the "word of truth," that is, the "gospel" that is implanted within us is something from which we draw strength every single day. ***You never, ever outgrow your need for the gospel.*** The gospel is not just for non-Christians! Just because you are already a Christian and have already, in the past, believed the good news of the gospel doesn't mean it no longer plays a role in your approach to life. You never, ever graduate from the

“elementary school of the gospel” to the “Ph.D. program” of greater truth. *The gospel must forever remain the gravitational center of your life.* Let me give you but one example of what I mean.

“Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you – unless you believed in vain” (1 Cor. 15:1-2).

So this “word” of truth concerning the gospel by which we were saved is never to be thought of as something we move beyond or the need for which we outgrow.

“The Implanted Word”

But we are not told merely to receive the word but the “implanted” word. Now what does that mean? In speaking of the religious leaders of Israel who were trying to kill him, Jesus said: “you seek to kill me because *my word finds no place in you*” (John 8:37b). Clearly the “word” or truth of who Jesus is had not been “implanted” in their hearts.

What makes this so remarkable is that no one knew the OT Scriptures any better than did the Pharisees. They had memorized it. They had studied it for a lifetime. But the “word” of God and of Jesus had no place in their souls. Their knowledge of God’s word was solely a matter of spiritual pride. It was a tool by which they arrogantly thought themselves better and more holy than all other people. The “word” was in a certain sense inside them, in their heads, but it had not blossomed forth in their hearts. *They slavishly obeyed it, but they didn’t love it.*

Conversely, James is confident that the people to whom he is writing his letter had the “word” “implanted” in their hearts. When, like seed, it was sown into their souls it took root. It burrowed down deeply and spread its roots throughout their inner being. It sank in. It gripped them.

This is precisely what happened in the experience of the Christians in Thessalonica. Paul describes their response to his ministry in their city:

“And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess. 2:13).

The word of God communicated by Paul and received and believed by these Christians didn’t come and go. It didn’t fly into one ear and just as quickly make its exit out of the other. It remained. It was *implanted* in their minds and hearts. We know this because Paul says it is even now “at work in you.” Here is another example taken from the first epistle of the apostle John:

“I write to you fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and *the word of God abides in you*, and you have overcome the evil one” (1 John 2:14).

When the word is not only heard but enters into us and is joyfully received and cherished it is “implanted” in our souls and does its work: changing us, convicting us of our sin, encouraging us, providing us with reasons and the incentive to obey, reminding us daily of God’s sure and certain promises, showing us the heart of Christ and the hope we have in him, etc., etc.

“Receive the Implanted Word”

All well and good, you say. But if the word of God is already “implanted” or embedded in your heart, how can you “receive” it? *How can you receive something that is already in you?* Let me answer this excellent question by directing your attention to something Paul said in Ephesians 3.

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted

and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:14-19).

Do you see the same problem here? If Christ *already* dwells in our hearts by faith from the first moment we believe in him as Lord and Savior, what does Paul mean when he prays to the Father that the Spirit might strengthen us “so that Christ may dwell” in our hearts through faith? It seems rather unnecessary and redundant.

The answer surely must be that what Paul is asking the Spirit to do is not cause Christ to indwell in our hearts for the first time but to enable us to *experience more deeply and more intimately* the presence of Christ who is already there. He is praying for the *emotional increase or experiential expansion* of what is already a theological fact. His desire is that the Lord Jesus, through the Spirit, might exert an ever-increasing and progressively more powerful influence on our lives and in our hearts. It is what I like to call, *the incessant spiritual reinforcement in the human heart of the strength of Jesus and his love.*

I think this is the same thing that James is describing in our passage today. He is telling us to do whatever is necessary *so that the word of God that is already implanted in our hearts might exert an ever-increasing, life-changing, sin-killing, Christ-exalting work in our souls.*

Now, think about this word “*receive*”. How are you and I to “receive” the implanted word? Leave it to John Piper to bring clarity to our ignorance. He put it this way:

“If you treat the word of God like your kidneys, you are making a big mistake. Your kidneys are implanted in you by your first birth. But you do not go on ‘receiving’ your kidneys. They just sit there doing their work, and you rarely think about them. You certainly don’t ‘receive’ them. They are already there – firmly implanted.

But James says, ‘*Receive* the implanted word.’ It is already in you. And you should receive it. It is rooted and planted in you. It brought you life. It is there sustaining that life by feeding faith in Christ. But it is not there like kidneys. It is there like oxygen. It gives life and in giving life, it makes you breathe, and in breathing you receive oxygen. No one says: ‘I have oxygen; look how well it is working in me; it makes me alive; I don’t need to *receive* oxygen.’”

In other words, as you continue to hear and believe and receive the word of God day in and day out it awakens and strengthens and reinforces the word that is already implanted within you.

But there’s even more to this word “receive”. I can “receive” a notice in the mail that I owe back taxes. I don’t like that kind of receiving. I can “receive” a ticket from the policeman for having broken the speed limit. I can “receive” a slug in the face from someone trying to mug me. But James wants us to “receive” the implanted word the way you “receive” a freshly baked pie from a loving friend or the way you “receive” news that you’re going to be a father or mother or grand-father or grand-mother for the first time. This sort of receiving is always good and joyful and a blessing to us.

So don’t receive the word the way many do when they reluctantly sit down and read the Bible from a sense of obligation or because they fear God’s judgment if they don’t. Don’t “receive” God’s word the way a child swallows castor-oil or the way I might be compelled to “receive” a serving of squash! Receive it with passion and expectation and hunger and openness to what God is saying to you.

“Receive the Implanted Word with Meekness”

Ah, there it is: “with meekness”! Let me explain what this means by telling you what it doesn’t mean!

When I was a student at Dallas Theological Seminary in the 1970’s I was utterly devoted to the Word of God. I received it. I ate it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and for every snack in between. I digested it. I memorized it. I learned Greek and Hebrew so that I could “receive” it in its original languages. And then I turned and beat others over the head with it if they dared disagree with me!

The atmosphere on the campus of DTS during my days there was not a pleasant one, and I'm largely to blame for that. I argued and disputed and angrily insisted on my interpretation of what the "implanted word" meant and God forbid that you might disagree with me. If you did, duck. I greatly regret and have often repented for my arrogance during those days. Today we laughingly refer to such times as the "*cage stage*". It's that time in life when you need to be locked away in a cage lest you do irreparable damage to other Christians because of your arrogance and pride and argumentative spirit. Hopefully, by God's grace, after a measure of maturity and humility have set in, you can be released from the cage into the general population!

That's the very opposite of what James is calling for. He tells us to receive the word "*with meekness*"! That means a lot of things:

Always remain teachable because you never know nearly as much as you think you do.
Always remain humble and open to the very real possibility that you are wrong in your views.
Always remain open to new insights and the perspective of even those with whom you disagree. You can probably learn more from them than you ever imagined.

Or, to put it in somewhat negative terms:

Don't approach the Word of God with a spirit of suspicion. Rather, receive it as the Thessalonians did, not as the word of men but as the very word of God himself.
Don't receive it with a cynical spirit or a critical spirit.
Don't receive it piecemeal, as if you are free to pick and choose what you will believe and obey.

To receive the word "with meekness" means that when you open it and read it and hear it taught or preached you trust it, you submit to it, you bow to it and yield to its authority. Come to God's word with this prayer: "Open my eyes that I might behold wonderful things in your law" (Ps. 119:18). Receive it with the heartfelt cry: "Oh, God, satisfy my soul with the lovingkindness of Christ that I see and hear in your word. Draw near to me through your word. Crucify my sinful inclinations through your word. Make yourself known to me through your word."

"Receive with Meekness the Implanted Word, which is Able to Save your Souls"

And let's not overlook the power of God's word. When we receive it and believe it and yield to it and rejoice in it God works through it to "save our souls."

"There you go again, Sam, confusing us. James has already told us to 'receive' what we already received. That was hard enough to understand. But now you are saying that we who are already saved might still in some sense be 'saved' if we humbly receive God's word. What's up with this?"

The answer is actually quite simple. *The Bible speaks of our salvation in three tenses*: we have been saved in the past (justification); we are being saved in the present (sanctification); and we will shall be saved in the future (glorification). When James speaks of the implanted word "saving our souls" he is probably referring both to what is happening now, in the present, and what will happen in the future. God sustains us and preserves and protects us now in the present through that faith that is awakened and strengthened by the word of God. And God will fully and finally deliver us and glorify us in the future when Christ returns through that same faith that is nurtured by the power of God's word.

Do you see the wonder and glory and absolute necessity of God's word as it powerfully works in you each and every moment, upholding your soul and preserving you in faith and directing your hope to trust in all that God is and will be for you in Jesus? So receive it. Receive it with meekness. Give it room and place and authority to do its mighty and merciful work!

Conclusion

Well, that's it, then. Right? Nothing more need be said. Right? Obeying James 1:21 is the sum and substance of all there is to being a Christian. Right? Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. We must also "be *doers* of the word, and not hearers

only” (James 1:22). We must be practitioners. We must labor in God’s grace to put our orthodoxy in the service of orthopraxy. Otherwise we are “deceiving” ourselves. But for that, you need to come back next week!