

## IRL: James 1:19-27 “How to Read Your Bible” 10/8/23

Did you know, according to what James is going to teach us, it’s possible for a Bible scholar, who has studied the original languages of the Bible, even written volumes of books commenting on the intricate details of the Bible, it’s possible for that Bible scholar to not know how to truly read the Bible? And did you also know according to James, it’s also possible that a 1<sup>st</sup> grader who is just now learning to read a children’s Bible knows how to read his or her Bible far better than the scholar? You say, “Really? How is that possible? That’s what we are going to learn from James today. Remember, the thesis of James is: Real faith in Jesus will change how you live in real life- in trials and suffering, in temptations, and now we will see it will change how we read our Bibles. Now some of us read our Bibles diligently, we have strong doctrine, we have memorized large portions and understand what it says. Other of us in the room are brand new to the Bible...or some of us really struggle to read our Bibles, to make the habit, to get something out of it for ourselves, to understand what it’s saying. But as we will see from James, whether we are seasoned Bible vets, rookie recruits, or discouraged strugglers there will be an opportunity for all of us to be challenged and encouraged to take a next step of faith. Let’s read this section, and be listening to see if you can hear what James is saying about the Word, the Bible, in our lives.

*<sup>18</sup> He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created. <sup>19</sup> My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, <sup>20</sup> because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. <sup>23</sup> Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror <sup>24</sup> and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. <sup>25</sup> But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do. <sup>26</sup> Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup> 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.*

Did you hear it? Well let’s look together and see if we can put it together. Our faith in real life changes the way we read our Bibles in three ways. James show us we should read our Bibles

### **With Listening Heads**

*<sup>19</sup> My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.* Now this is great advice for all areas of our lives. If you get good at this, your teammates on the soccer field will love you, your friends will love you, your boss or employees will love you, and it will make for a very happy marriage...amen? And what he says here could be a great Ted Talk or a whole sermon, but this maxim is also true when we approach God’s Word. I don’t think it’s too far of a stretch to say that many of us struggle with listening more than talking, anyone sitting next to you bumping you right now? One of the

problems is that we think we can multi-task like some of you are right now listening to this sermon. We can half-listen to our wife while watching the game, or half-listen in a meeting while also writing emails. Half-listen to our parents when we have our air pods in. Sometimes we can get away with half-listening if it's not particularly important...But other times, not listening will cause us a lot of frustration- like if we half-listen or half-read the instructions of how to build an Ikea bunk bed. But half-listening can also be downright dangerous. What if you half-listened to the surgeon's instructions for aftercare? Every time we open the Bible, every time we hear a sermon, if we are only half-listening not only might we be missing out on something important God wants to say to us, but also its an open invitation to the enemy to deceive us. Fundamental to what we know about God is that He speaks. We worship a God who created the universe by His words, brings new spiritual life by His words, and transforms us by the power of His written word. Listen!

So practically, how avoid half-listening and wholly listen, wholly read the Bible? <sup>25</sup> *But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom...* This phrase is the same used to describe when Peter went into the empty tomb that first Easter, he looked intently into the tomb. How do you think Peter looked? With *full attention and with careful examination.* This is how we should read our Bibles. **Full attention**- not distracted. When you read your Bible, put your phone in another room, get somewhere quiet, pray and ask the Holy Spirit to help you focus. **Careful examination.** Don't speed read, slow down, look at the words and how they relate to the other words in the passage. Ask questions, "Why did the author use that word?" "What does this phrase mean?" "When did all this take place?" "What is the main point?" Take notes, get a good study Bible or use a commentary to reference [www.soniclight.com](http://www.soniclight.com). Join a small group, Christian Ed class, Bible study so you aren't listening alone but with others.

Here's another practical way James tells us we can grow in our whole listening and reading of God's Word. <sup>25</sup> *But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard...will be blessed.* Continues in it- perseveres in the Word, remains, lingers in the Word. Two ways we can do this. **Making the Time.** If you've ever watched the Oscars, you know that the winners are allotted 45 seconds to give their acceptance speech until the orchestra starts playing them off the stage...Hayes, don't get any ideas. You know, sometimes this is our approach to reading our Bible. "OK God, you've got 5 minutes to show me something and then I'm playing you off, and it's on to the next thing."<sup>1</sup> He's the God of the universe and he wants to spend time with you. We must learn to linger with him. Wake up earlier, use your lunch break, listen to God's Word on a long commute. And then don't forget what he taught you! The way we don't forget what we read is building in silence...(ever heard of that word?) But we must have silence to have reflection... or the better Biblical word for that is meditating- filling our head with God's word, maybe journaling, maybe going on a walk after you read and thinking on what you just read, committing a key passage to memory.

Second way we continue in God Word is **Making the Habit.** Friends, we will plateau in our discipleship to Jesus unless we make reading the Bible a habit. There is no way around that. For

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<sup>1</sup> Illustration for Sam Allberry *James For You*, p.45

me, that's in the morning. It needs to become as embedded in your routine as brushing your teeth or drinking your cup of coffee. Take this Challenge- if you are serious about reading the Bible- I want you to text me- (302) 217-6594, I will personally teach you have to read the Bible and make it a habit- through a Zoom workshop with me. **With listening Heads**. But listening heads isn't enough, **with humble hearts**.

***<sup>21</sup> 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.*** Do you hear how powerful the Word is? Here at Brandywine we believe that the Bible is inspired by God, that it is timelessly true in everything it speaks to and therefore holds supreme authority in our lives. When we take a humble heart posture to the Word of God, we rightly place the Word of God above the word of a politician, above the word of a podcaster, the word of a philosopher, the word of your friends or the word of Nate, ah AND the word of your self-authority. This is where we come into collision with our culture. Our culture tells us that we are self-determined beings. No one can or ought to tell you how to live. I determine that for myself. And so our culture often approaches the Bible, if they approach it at all, not from humble hearts, but from proud self-authority. We are prone to reading the Bible and saying, "I like this, I don't like that..." In reality, it's the other way around, God's Word should look at our lives and say, "I like this, I don't like that."<sup>2</sup> Please keep in mind that our modern sensibilities and moral inclinations are not inerrant and infallible, they are highly relative to our times and they must be humbly submitted under the authority of God. And if you believe God agrees with all your sensibilities of what ought to be, you may have to question if you have the real God.

When you have this heart posture, here's what happens- the **Word of God begins to become a mirror to your soul**. This is the analogy James is going to give us in v.23-24. ***<sup>23</sup> Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror <sup>24</sup> and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.*** According to at least one study<sup>3</sup> women spend about an hour a day looking at a mirror, men spend about half that, but teenagers top all categories- 1.2 hours. Whether that is true for you or not, we all spend time in front of mirrors. Because a mirror, generally, gives you a true assessment of what is there, not just what you'd like to think is there- Do I have something on my face? Do I need pluck my unibrow? The mirror will tell me, for better or worse. When we humbly accept the Bible, it does the same thing spiritually. It tells us what is really going on, not just our own perception which may lie to us. Listen to what Scripture says about itself. **Hebrews 4 <sup>12</sup> For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.** This happens almost every time I read the Bible. Do you know that every single sermon I preach, I'm first preaching to myself? Because I typically am preaching about what God has showed me in the mirror, what he has convicted me about, what needs to change in my life. Let me just give you a practical way to live this out. One of the prayers I pray every morning sounds

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Tim Keller for some of this phrasing from James 1:18-27 sermon, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2566918/How-long-did-spend-mirror-morning-Women-dedicate-55-minutes-day-appearance-equivalent-two-weeks-year.html>

like this, “God, today my inclination is to want to live by my own authority and my own agenda. I humble myself before you and your Word for me today. Help me to be your servant, about your agenda not my own.” **With Listening Heads, with Humble Hearts**, but just listening and being convicted isn’t enough, **with obedient hands**.

**<sup>22</sup> Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.** And again v.25 **not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.** We are to read our Bibles in a different way than we read anything else. The Bible is the perfect combination of historical textbook, a love letter and an instruction manual. It tells us what’s true about God, humanity and us, it speaks to our hearts, but it also tells us how to live with the grain of how God designed us, giving us a moral vision and purpose for our lives. Again, we see James’ analogy of the mirror. I’ve noticed as I’ve aged that each morning it increasingly looks like I got into a fight with my pillow throughout the night. Sometimes I wonder- “Did Shannan punch me in the face?” Creases everywhere, bags under my eyes, my hair looks like it’s trying to run away from my face. So what do I do? After some lamenting, I get to work on that. Wash my face, shave, comb my hair, put cucumbers on my eyes... What I generally don’t do, is what the character in James’ analogy does. Looks at the disaster and shrugs his shoulders and goes out into the day presenting himself this way as if he never saw it. What’s the point of looking into the mirror unless you are going to do something about it? That’s the point of reading your Bible. As you begin to understand what it is saying, as it looks back at you and you see the areas of your life that it is speaking to, we are to do something about it. In verses 26-27, James focuses on two ways to read your bible with obedient hands **<sup>26</sup> Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.**

**<sup>27</sup> 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.** James says, we can’t say we are Christians just because we go to church, read the Bible and say our prayers. True religion, true Christianity reveals itself by its action. Now we aren’t going to go too far into this because the relationship between faith and works will carry over the next couple weeks. But just note here that a quick way to earn the label hypocrite from the world is to talk big and walk small.

But here, James shows us first that **Reading our Bible with obedient hands changes our outer world- “looking after widows and orphans.”** In James’ day, they were emblematic of the most vulnerable in the society, as they often are today. Reading the Bible with Obedient Hands means looking after the most vulnerable in our community- single moms, unborn children, foster children, people with disabilities and special needs, the poor, the immigrant, the grieving, those incarcerated, addicted, those home bound and sick. This is why we have ministries focused on many of these vulnerable. **Where are obedient hands leading you to care for the most vulnerable God has put in your sphere of influence?**

But it’s not just our outer life, **reading our Bibles with obedient hands changes our inner life. “to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”** One of those ways James says, it in our speech-

keeping a tight rein on our tongue... Let me put it this way. There is so much in this world that is toxic to our emotional and spiritual health. Much of our entertainment, our politics, social media wars, and cancel culture, our world's ideologies of what we are told to live for (careers, money, fame, sex). So much of it is toxic. When we allow the WORD to shape our inner lives not the WORLD, we discern what is unhealthy for us, we learn how to live according to the grain of God's design for us. This is why James says earlier <sup>25</sup> *But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.* We don't normally think of these two words next to each other- Law and Freedom. We think of law as restrictive. It prevents us from doing what we may want to do. Our modern culture tells us that if we remove all constraints, we end up with freedom. The in the Bible real freedom is not the absence of constraints, but rather the presence of the right kind of constraints that brings freedom. Remove fish from the water and put it on the pavement...are you freeing the fish from the constraints of water? Well maybe in one sense, but it not give it more freedom but less, why? It is designed for the constraints of water. So it is with God obedience to God's moral constraints. Why is gluttony a sin? Not because God's mean and doesn't want us to be free to binge on cheesecake and beer. But because the constraint of our food and drink intake will provide the right kind of freedoms for our physical and spiritual health that God designed us for...for our blessing as James says. Why should we forgive? Because when we don't forgive, we go against the grain of how God made us. We will be like a fish on land. It will prevent you from finding another relationship, from joy, from peace. Freedom comes when we forgive and we not only release the offender, but we release ourselves. This is true of every moral constraint that God gives us in his word whether it about our relationship to money, what we watch, who we date, and what we do with our bodies. *Where are you resisting God's moral constraints? Where does God want to give you true freedom?*

*How do we read the Bible? With listening heads, with humble hearts, with obedient hands.* We will all struggle to do this consistently, my track record of doing this isn't up and to the right...it it's up and down...but headed in the right direction. There's only one whose track record throughout his life is up and to the right- Jesus of Nazareth. As a boy Jesus was often found at the temple and synagogue with a listening head as looked intently at the Scriptures, studying and memorizing God's Word. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by Satan, instead of speaking on his own accord, he humbled himself and spoke only the Word of God to fight temptation. And at the cross he stretched out his obedient hands as they were nailed to the cross, paying for our sins, fulfilling every prophecy written about him. See ultimately, the only way to read the Bible is through Jesus.