

“A Potent Seed”
James 1:19-27
July 2, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

Imagine that it is early in the year 2004 and a young 19 year old college student comes to you with the offer of investing in a technology company he wants to start. His idea for a product is something that will allow friends to share photographs and other information through the internet. He promises you a 1% ownership share for a \$10,000 investment. Would you do it? Of course, knowing what we now know about Mark Zuckerberg and the product he launched in February of 2004, Facebook, there would be no shortage of people lining up to invest. A 1% share of Facebook stock right now would be worth more than \$3.5 billion. That little seed of \$10,000 would have grown to a fortune.

Or imagine that a new medicine has been invented that will cure cancer, and all you have to do is take a small pill. Further, imagine that the medicine will not only cure your cancer but begin to roll back all the negative effects of aging. All this from a small pill? As remarkable as that may sound, James speaks in today’s passage of something even better. He tells us in verse 21 to **“receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.”** The word of God is likened to a seed which, when planted, brings forth the fruit of the salvation of our souls. The word of God is just like a seed in many ways. It is small and appears on the outside to be lifeless. Many have concluded just that about God’s word. “What good can it bring to me?” they think, “It’s just old words from dead guys who lived thousands of years ago.” It may not look like much, but God says that there is life in these words. In this way, the word is like a seed. The life of the seed brings forth growth that is far out of proportion to the size of the seed. The little acorn yields the giant oak. The tiny tomato seed brings forth many tomatoes. The word of God works that way as well.

But God’s word doesn’t produce such fruit automatically. Just as seed needs a particular kind of environment to activate the life within the seed, God’s word requires the same. That’s what Jesus taught in the parable of soils, in which the word of God is sown in different types of soils. The seed of the word is the same in every case, but the soils are different. Jesus said that it is only in the good soil that the word grows. In today’s passage, James is defining for us what constitutes good soil. It is the heart that hears the word, receives the word and obeys the word.

I. Hear the Word of God

James wants us to be “quick to hear” and “slow to speak.” While that’s a good policy in our interactions with other people, James has in mind with this our interactions with God. Our dominant posture before God needs to be that of a closed mouth and a readiness to hear from God. It is an attitude that comes from believing that **“man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord”** (Deut. 8:3). If you don’t eat food, you will die. If you don’t hear the word of God, you will die in an even more profound way.

To hear the word of God means at least three things. First, it means that we must have some regular plan and practice of reading and hearing God’s word. That’s the way we eat food. Someone has to make a plan for it, do the grocery shopping and prepare the food. Similarly, we need a regular plan and practice for taking in God’s word. You don’t have to come up with a plan yourself, because there are many very good ones out there. Some are more demanding than others, requiring the reading of five or more chapters every day. Others are less ambitious, but all good ones provide a systematic way of making sure you have a balanced way of getting through the whole Bible.

The second thing involved in hearing God’s word is to engage the mind. While benefitting from God’s word requires more than engaging the intellect, it certainly doesn’t require less. When someone speaks, that person intends to convey some meaning with the words used. The listener is not free to put his own meaning into the words, but is obligated to try to understand what the speaker intends. That involves the mind. If you don’t know the meaning of a word, dictionaries are available. Such things as grammar, context and literary genre all come into play as we read and hear God’s word.

A third thing involved in hearing God’s word is to hear it as an expression of a loving relationship. Our goal in Bible reading is not just to move the bookmark forward. It is to meet with God and hear from him. After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to Mary, who spoke with him but mistakenly thought he was the gardener. Jesus spoke one word to her that changed everything: “Mary” (John 20:16). Because it was the expression of a relationship, that one word was transformational for Mary. Something I have found helpful in my Bible reading is to expect and look for this “word” from God that has special significance to me. There is often something that stands out in my Bible reading, and I find it beneficial to pause there and meditate on that portion of God’s word. It may be just one word, or one verse or even one story. But it is helpful to listen for God’s Spirit using that one part of his word to speak to you in a special way.

II. Receive the Word of God

This brings us to the next verb James uses to describe the kind of soil we need to cultivate in our hearts if the seed of God's word is to spring into life. We are to *receive* the word of God. I notice two things about this receiving of God's word.

First, we are to receive it **“with meekness”** (v. 21). Meekness or humility is a form of “Miracle Grow” for the seed of God's word. The humble, meek person has come to the conclusion that she is not up to the task of running her own life. She needs outside help from someone much wiser than she. She has a healthy self-doubt about her own conclusions of what she needs. She has learned to trust God more than her own conclusions about life. That's why James says to be **“slow to anger.”** There is a righteous anger, but most of our anger is unrighteous, provoked because others don't seem to have received the memo that they should cooperate with our agenda for life. We respond in anger when others don't do what we want them to do because we assume that we know best. To receive God's word, we must come to the place of doubting that we know best.

Second, we are to receive all of God's word. James says to **“put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness”** and receive God's word. He's not telling us that we need to clean up our own lives before we attempt to receive God's word. Rather, he is saying that we need to approach God's word with an attitude that is ready to receive everything. In other words, we don't say to God, “Tell me what you want me to do and then I'll decide whether or not to do it.” Instead, our attitude needs to be, “Even before I fully understand what you want me to do, I stand ready to do it no matter what, as you give me the strength to do so.” That is the attitude that reflects trust in God. It's not unlike the relationship a person might have with a well-respected mentor. If you are privileged to have a mentor who has proven himself wise and caring, you will listen to whatever he has recommended for you. You have learned to trust both his wisdom and his love for you. That's what we do with God. We come to his word with an attitude that says, “I have learned that you have great wisdom and that you love me, so I trust whatever you tell me to do even before knowing what it is.” This doesn't mean that we will always perfectly obey God, because the sinful nature is still powerful within us. But it does mean that there will be an openness to move into areas of obedience that we might find challenging.

Anything less than this attitude that receives all of God's word will make of us self-deceived hypocrites. Dan Doriani describes a time when he was part of a large team on a mission trip in which most of them stayed in the same house for several days. One of his team members was always the first to wake up each day, when he could always be found on the front porch reading his Bible as the sun rose. One evening, he told Dan Doriani, “I am so excited to go to bed each night because I'm that much closer to my time alone with God in the morning. I can't tell you how close I feel to God.” Dan says he felt like a spiritual dung beetle next to this lion of the faith. But then, months later, this

spiritual lion was in legal trouble for getting drunk and doing things that were both sins and crimes. Even worse, he had been doing such things for years. So it is obvious that such a man is not receiving the full word of God, but only certain parts of it. That brings us to our next point.

III. Obey the Word of God

If the seed of God's word is to grow and bring forth life to our souls, the soil of our hearts needs to hear it, receive it, and finally, obey it. In this famous section of his letter, James tells his readers to be doers as well as hearers of the word. It's always been a temptation to be a hearer only and not also a doer of God's word. But if we succumb to this temptation, three bad things happen.

The first bad thing that happens to those who are hearers but not doers is that they don't know themselves well, specifically the depth of their sinfulness. James says that they deceive themselves. The reason is that there is a big difference between obedience that is in the mind only, and obedience that is lived out. The person whose Christian life is only in his mind and intentions can easily think of himself as very mature and spiritual. But when you apply God's word by actually doing it, you see much more clearly that you are not as mature as you thought. Every Saturday in the fall, many thousands of fans gather to watch our beloved college football teams play. Probably ten thousand of those fans in each stadium genuinely believe they could call better plays than the coaches actually calling the plays, even though almost none of them have ever had any experience doing so. When you actually attempt to do something difficult, it humbles you. When I was in seminary studying to be a preacher, I had the opportunity to hear many men preach. I had done some preaching prior to that, but not a great deal. But I was convinced that I would do a better job than most of those I heard preaching. But then when I had the responsibility to actually do it each week, I found it far more difficult. Though I think my preaching has improved over the years that I've been doing it, the responsibility of preaching has humbled me greatly. After almost every sermon, I am reminded afresh of the many ways I still need to improve. Similarly, when you actually move from hearing God's word to doing it, you quickly realize your need for God's grace. You come to know your sin far better.

The second bad thing that happens if you're a hearer and not a doer of God's word is that you don't even know God's word very well. That's the point of his illustration about the person who looks intently at himself in the mirror, only to forget what he looks like upon leaving the mirror. There is a type of spiritual dementia that occurs when you don't apply the word to your life. Have you ever had the experience of a meaningful quiet time in the morning that fades almost immediately when the normal activities of the day begin? James locates that problem in the failure of application. There is a deep connection between knowing and doing. To fail to do is to fail to know. Premarital couples I

counsel never disagree with me when I tell them that marriage is both very hard and very good. But they know that truth in a much deeper way after ten years of marriage. In the same way, we know and remember God's word much better when we become serious about obeying it.

The third bad thing that happens when we are not doers of the word is that we don't know God very well. Or to say it positively, putting forth a sincere effort at obedience results in more joy in knowing the Lord. Notice James' phrase for the law of God in verse 25. He calls it **"the law of liberty."** One of Satan's most common lies today is that freedom comes from doing what you want instead of what God wants. The subtext of that lie is that God wants to keep you in miserable bondage. But the doer of the word experiences something else as he discovers that real freedom is found through obeying God's law. He discovers that the law of God is like the train tracks for the train. Imagine a train who thinks to itself, "Sure would be nice to leave these tracks and go exploring in that forest over there. These tracks are so limiting." Of course, we all know what would happen if the train abandoned the tracks to go explore the forest. In no time at all, the train would experience the loss of freedom. Instead of limiting its freedom, the tracks enable its freedom. That's what doing God's law does for us. James says that the doer who acts will be blessed in his doing. I take him to mean that his doing will increase his blessing through knowing God more intimately and joyfully.

In the last two verses of the chapter, James gives three examples of doing God's word. All three are expanded upon later in his letter, so I will just mention one of them because it illustrates this point of obedience leading to the blessing of knowing God better. He says that true religion is to visit orphans and widows in their affliction. He is talking about the giving heart because orphans and widows are unable to give anything back. So the one helping them is a true giver, just like God. To give to orphans and widows is to be like God, and doing so brings us into a great love for God.

CONCLUSION:

Let me end with an application about application. Whenever you are reading God's word, ask this question: "What steps are you calling me to take in this passage, Lord?" Doing so will bring great blessing to you. It will show you your need of God, point you to Jesus as the one who has both kept the law for you and the one who forgives you when you fall short, and will bring you to an experience of great freedom. Believe what God says about his word, and think of it as an adventure into increasing freedom.