

The Letter of James
Bible Study Session 04
James 1:19-27

Greek NT

19 Ἰστε, ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί· ἔστω δὲ πᾶς ἄνθρωπος ταχύς εἰς τὸ ἀκοῦσαι, βραδύς εἰς τὸ λαλῆσαι, βραδύς εἰς ὀργήν· 20 ὀργὴ γὰρ ἀνδρὸς δικαιοσύνην θεοῦ οὐκ ἐργάζεται. 21 διὸ ἀποθέμενοι πᾶσαν ῥυπαρίαν καὶ περισσεῖαν κακίας ἐν πραΰτητι, δέξασθε τὸν ἔμφυτον λόγον τὸν δυνάμενον σῶσαι τὰς ψυχὰς ὑμῶν.

22 Γίνεσθε δὲ ποιηταὶ λόγου καὶ μὴ μόνον ἀκροαταὶ παραλογιζόμενοι ἑαυτοῦς. 23 ὅτι εἴ τις ἀκροατὴς λόγου ἐστὶν καὶ οὐ ποιητὴς, οὗτος ἔοικεν ἀνδρὶ κατανοοῦντι τὸ πρόσωπον τῆς γενέσεως αὐτοῦ ἐν ἐσόπτρῳ· 24 κατενόησεν γὰρ ἑαυτὸν καὶ ἀπελήλυθεν καὶ ἐυθέως ἐπέλαθετο ὅποιος ἦν. 25 ὁ δὲ παρακύψας εἰς νόμον τέλειον τὸν τῆς ἐλευθερίας καὶ παραμείνας, οὐκ ἀκροατὴς ἐπιλησμονῆς γενόμενος ἀλλὰ ποιητὴς ἔργου, οὗτος μακάριος ἐν τῇ ποιήσει αὐτοῦ ἔσται.

26 Εἴ τις δοκεῖ θρησκὸς εἶναι μὴ χαλιναγωγῶν γλῶσσαν αὐτοῦ ἀλλὰ ἀπατῶν καρδίαν αὐτοῦ, τούτου μάταιος ἡ θρησκεία. 27 θρησκεία καθαρὰ καὶ ἀμίαντος παρὰ τῷ θεῷ καὶ πατρὶ αὕτη ἐστίν, ἐπισκέπτεσθαι ὀρφανοὺς καὶ χήρας ἐν τῇ θλίψει αὐτῶν, ἄσπιλον ἑαυτὸν τηρεῖν ἀπὸ τοῦ κόσμου.

Elberfelder

19 Ihr wißt [doch], meine geliebten Brüder: Jeder Mensch sei schnell zum Hören, langsam zum Reden, langsam zum Zorn. 20 Denn eines Mannes Zorn wirkt nicht Gottes Gerechtigkeit. 21 Deshalb legt ab alle Unsauberkeit und all die viele Schlechtigkeit, und nehmt das eingepflanzte Wort mit Sanftmut auf, das eure Seelen zu erretten vermag.

22 Seid aber Täter des Wortes und nicht allein Hörer, die sich selbst betrügen. 23 Denn wenn jemand ein Hörer des Wortes ist und nicht ein Täter, der gleicht einem Mann, der sein natürliches Angesicht in einem Spiegel betrachtet. 24 Denn er hat sich selbst betrachtet und ist weggegangen, und er hat sogleich vergessen, wie er beschaffen war. 25 Wer aber in das vollkommene Gesetz der Freiheit hineingeschaut und dabei geblieben ist, indem er nicht ein vergeßlicher Hörer, sondern ein Täter des Werkes ist, der wird in seinem Tun glücklich sein.

26 Wenn jemand meint, er diene Gott, und zügelt nicht seine Zunge, sondern betrügt sein Herz, dessen Gottesdienst ist vergeblich. 27 Ein reiner und unbefleckter Gottesdienst vor Gott und dem Vater ist dieser: Waisen und Witwen in ihrer Drangsal zu besuchen, sich selbst von der Welt unbefleckt zu erhalten.

NRSV

19 Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. 20 Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires. 21 So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls.

22 But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. 23 For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. 24 You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. 25 But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.

26 If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless. 27 Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.

NLT

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The Study of the Text:¹

Context of our passage:

STRUCTURAL OUTLINE OF TEXT

¹With each study we will ask two basic questions. First, what was the most likely meaning that the first readers of this text understood? This is called the 'historical meaning' of the text. That must be determined, because it becomes the foundation for the second question, "What does the text mean to us today?" For any applicational meaning of the text for modern life to be valid it must grow out of the historical meaning of the text. Otherwise, the perceived meaning becomes false and easily leads to wrong belief. See <http://cranfordville.com/JasLess04.html> for a detailed study.

		Of James ²	
PRAESCRIPTIO			1.1
BODY	1-194		1.2-5.20
Facing Trials	1-15		1.2-12
God and Temptation	16-24		1.13-18
The Word and Piety	25-37		1.19-27

Exegesis of the Text:

1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

Literary Setting:

As the above outline suggests, verses 19-27 come as the third unit of material in the scripture text. The very strange use of the archaic classical Attic imperative Greek form from ὁἰδα, **ἴστε, ἀδελφοί μου ἀγαπητοί** ("Listen, my beloved brothers."), signals a new thought direction for the writer. Although somewhat debated among NT scholars, the central thrust of the new topic clearly focuses on worship and the hearing of the orally preached message of the Gospel.³ As early Christian groups met in private homes for worship the tendency evidently was for this worship experience to turn into chaos at times. James seems to be dealing with a situation somewhat like what Paul had to address at Corinth where worship became chaotic because in part everyone was speaking at once (cf. 1 Cor. 14:23-40). At the end, Paul's admonition to the Corinthians was similar to James' here when Paul said, "all things should be done decently and in order" (v. 40). James focuses on correct hearing of God's Word in worship.

Genre:

The type of writing in these verses continues to be the same as with the previous passage in 1:2-12 and 1:13-18. In these words we see both ancient *paraenesis* (moral admonition) and more precisely ancient Jewish wisdom literary thought expression. Verses 19-20 reflect a common Jewish teaching on the importance of listening, as is illustrated by Rabbi Simeon ben Gamaliel I, Paul's old teacher, in Pirke Aboth 1.18, "Simeon his son said: All my days I have grown up among the Wise, and I have not found anything better than silence; and not study is the chief thing but action; and whoso makes many words occasions sin." In verse 25, we encounter the second beatitude form of the book; cf. v. 12 for the first one.

Literary Structure:

- (25) ^{1.19} **Know this,**
my dear brothers.
- (26) **Let every person be quick to listen,**
slow to speak,
slow to anger;
- ^{1.20} for
(27) **man's anger does not produce what is right before God.**
- ^{1.21} Therefore
having stripped off all moral filthiness
and
every evil growth,
in humility
(28) **receive the implanted Word**
which can save you.
- ^{1.22} And
(29) **become doers of the Word**
and
(30) **----- not just listeners**
who thus deceive themselves.
- ^{1.23} For
if any one listens to the Word
and
does not obey it,
(31) **he is like a man**
who glances at his own face
in a mirror;

²Taken from Lorin L. Cranford, A Study Manual of James: Greek Text (Fort Worth: Scripta Publications, Inc., 1988), 285. Statements indicate core thought expressions in the text as a basis for schematizing the rhetorical structure of the text. These are found in the Study Manual and also at the James Study internet site.

³For those with the ability to read German, see my sermon, "Predigthören," under *Sermons* in the *Spiritual Resources* section of Cranfordville.com. This sermon was originally preached at the Evangelisch-Freikirchliche Gemeinde in Bonn Germany and then later published in the German Baptist national magazine, *Die Gemeinde*. An English translation of this text is also available entitled "Sermon Listening." Both texts are in the Adobe PDF format.

1.24
 (32) for
 he glances at himself
 and
 (33) -- goes away
 and
 (34) -- quickly forgets
 what he looked like.

1.25
 Now
 he who looks closely
 into the faultless law of liberty
 and
 continues (in it),
 becoming not a forgetful listener
 but
 an obedient worker,
 (35) this one will be blessed
 in his activity.

1.26
 If someone thinks himself
 to be religious
 without bridling his tongue
 but
 deceiving his own heart,
 (36) this one's religion is worthless.

(37) 1.27 religion . . . is this: (1) to see after orphans
 pure and
 and widows
 undefiled in their affliction
 before God (2) to keep oneself unblemished
 the Father by the world.

Summary of literary structure:

The rhetorical structure of the passage is relatively easy to determine and is reflected in the threefold paragraphing of most recent English translations of vv. 19-27.

Verses 19-21 hang together as a literary unit made up of a couple of admonitions with the tone of a warning (core statements 25 and 26) and followed a causal defense (“for”) of the admonitions (core statement 27) and then by an application (“Therefore”) in the tone of a positive admonition (core statement 28) as a corrective.

The second pericope, verses 22 - 25, grows out of the positive admonition in core statement 28 along the lines of the axiom, “Correct listening leads to correct obedience.” Internally, the pericope begins with a twofold admonition (core statements 29 and 30), in which obeying the Word follows hearing the Word. The following statements (31-35) set up a defense (“for”) of these admonitions. The defense is first developed from a negative view (statements 31-34), then from a positive view through a beatitude (statement 35). The conditional if-clause in statement 31 sets up a scenario of just listening without obeying. Such a person is compare to a man in the everyday life situation of using a mirror to examine his face (statements 31-34). If the use of the mirror doesn’t result in making changes to his appearance, then the time spent with the mirror is useless. The positive side of the defense is seen in the elaborately structured beatitude in statement 35 where divine blessing is invoked on the one who both correctly listens and obeys.

The third pericope, verses 26-27, proposes some ‘tests’ of correct obedience. Again the negative (statement 36) is followed by the positive (statement 37). The first ‘test’ is in the area of controlling one’s tongue. Failure to keep one’s speech under control reflects serious spiritual problems deep down inside the individual. This can amount to a disastrous spiritual self-deception and/or deception of other people. The positive ‘tests’ are set forth in statement 37 in the sacrificial language of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. Two traditional Jewish reflections of genuine piety are set forth: (1) ministry to the helpless ones of society (orphans and widows) and (2) personal holiness.

2. What does the text mean to us today?

Questions for thought:

- 1) How hard is it for you to be attentive in church?
- 2) How consistently do you apply in daily living what you learn from Bible study?
- 3) How well would you “pass the test” of the three areas of piety described in 1:26-27?