

THE INDISPENSABLE ACTIONS OF THE GROWING CHRISTIAN

James 1:19–27

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Today we're reading from verses 19–27. Rather than reading the passage all at once at the beginning, I'm going to read it in sections. Today's message I have called "The Indispensable Actions of the Growing Christian."

Several years ago, when my brother's children were small, they came out to visit us. My brother, Paul, and his wife had to return home to Dallas early, and they left the three girls with us to catch a flight. I guess the girls had never flown alone before—maybe not at all. They got on the flight in LA. When they got off in Dallas, the girls said, "We're so thirsty. Get us something to drink. We haven't had anything to eat and we're starving!" He said, "Didn't you drink on the plane? Didn't you have anything to eat?" They said, "No, we didn't have any money with us." They thought the stewardesses passing out all those Cokes and good things were doing it only for people who had money. He had to explain to them that that stuff came with the price of the ticket!

I think, in our Christian life, sometimes we may miss some things because we didn't know or apprehend or apply the fact that this came with the ticket.

Certainly, one of the things associated with the Christian life is to take God's Word, His external Word, the Bible, and go through this wonderful process of internalizing it. So that what is outside of us becomes inside of us. I know that when you first become a Christian, you hardly know where to begin. I'm reading the Bible through myself this year. As I read along, I'm trying to keep a certain clip everyday. There are times I read things I don't understand. I just keep right on going. It's a big task to take this external word and internalize it. I recommend, by the way, if

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you are a new Christian, don't begin with Genesis or Revelation. Start with the Gospels. Start with the life of Jesus.

One of the things that go with the trip is taking this Bible and letting it become a living Word in us. That's really what James is setting before us today in the Scriptures. He's talking to us about three indispensable actions of the growing Christian. They're all related to this process of taking the external word and internalizing it.

I. The first thing he says that we must do as an indispensable action, if we're to grow, is to receive God's Word into our life.

“My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

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” (James 1:19–21, NIV). The appeal here, of course, is to everyone. All of us are to take this key phrase, at the bottom of verse 21, “implanting the word.” That is, “receiving the Word of God.” Before getting to that point, James has reminded us of the things in life which will create a bottleneck for the external Word of God moving into our internal actions. He lists several things that will cut down on the reception of God's Word.

James is telling us there can be strong interference—things in our own lives personally that keep this Bible from becoming a living force in our life.

A. So he says to us, “Be quick to listen” (verse 19). An attitude which says, “Don't confuse me with the facts, my mind's made up, I know everything on that and I don't want to know any more.” Least of all, “I don't want to know what God thinks of this, because I don't propose to do it anyway.” That is an attitude which will keep God's Word from being implanted.

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B. Be quick to listen and, conversely, “slow to speak” (verse 19). I often do that in the reverse times, when I should have kept quiet, but I let it rip. And you probably have too.

C. Then, “Be slow to anger” (verse 19). Isn’t it interesting that anger is mixed up with this listening and speaking? The reason why it is in there is that anger is sort of like a sediment in a pool. When I go golfing—there is a water hole on the golf course. I seem to have a predisposition to go at times. If you’re trying to fish for the ball—and there’s loose sediment there—and you don’t see it, it will stir up the sediment, and you can’t see the ball. Anger is like that in our life. It is there, and I’ve found that I don’t listen to God very well and I don’t read the Bible very well and I don’t pray very well when I’m hopping mad.

The kind of anger here in James is the sort of anger that represents deep-seated, long-lasting, long-standing resentment. Of course, when that’s at the sediment level of our life and we have a flash point when something jars us, up comes that sentiment and sure enough, we become quick to speak and slow to listen. All that then takes away from this receptive mode for living out the Word in our everyday life and living out what it means to be a Spirit-filled person, full of love and joy and peace and patience and gentleness and goodness and kindness and faithfulness and self-control. All those kinds of things.

D. James tells us, in addition, we’re to “get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent” (verse 21). The King James had a marvelous take on this phrase, “the evil that is so prevalent.” The King James tells us to get rid of “the superfluity of naughtiness.” That literally means “excess” or “remainder” of evil. What James is telling the newborn Christian is, “You’ve been given a clean slate. God has given you a new nature.” But in that new nature, we still sometimes come with the baggage of the old life and the old man, the old nature, that excess, the remainder

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left over of the life before we came to Christ. It is what we are still working on. Christ has saved us. He's freed us from our sins. He's cleansed us.

But we, as Paul puts it in Romans 7, are still struggling with this fleshly nature. We're being asked to receive the Word of God. To be serious in our purpose to live the Christian life and lay aside these things which hinder our reception of God's Word.

What James is really doing is telling us that there are no automatics to the Christian life. It's something to be worked on. You don't go on cruise control in your spiritual development.

That reminds me of the couple that retired and looked forward to—as many couples do—getting a motor home so they could travel. The husband drove it for a few hours. He finally says to his wife, "I'm tired. I'm going to go lay down in the back. You can drive for a while." She gets behind the wheel. She has it in cruise control going down the highway. It's great. The thing is going so well that she, at one point, gets up and goes to the bathroom. She was talking to the Highway Patrol after the accident, and she indicated that she thought cruise control meant "automatic pilot."

There is no cruise control or automatic pilot in the Christian life. All of us, almost as a daily list, need to keep working on being quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. Put away the moral filth and the residue, the remainder of evil from the life before we became a Christian. It's an ongoing assignment.

In sports, I heard that men swimmers have been shaving their legs. The loss of hair on the leg will allow them a split second advantage for each lap. It can make a difference at the end of a race, whether your hand is pressing against the wall or somebody else's. Even the high school guys on the swim team are going to that length, because they want to be first. They want to be the winner.

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I think of the words in Hebrews, “Laying aside every sin that does so easily beset” (Hebrews 12:1). I think of this admonition in Scripture that the Christian is the person who is in training as a champion. Who doesn’t look up at the things of Scripture and say, “Why, God, are You making me do all this?” You’ve got to get in shape instead of getting all bent out of shape. It’s because we want to live in such a way that we have freedom and enjoyment and the liberty of God’s children. We can’t live that liberty if we are encrusted over with a lot of the dregs and the mud and the crusting of sin in our life.

So we take this matter of receiving God’s Word seriously, as we let this book get into us. We say, “I know that listening and speaking and being slow to anger and laying aside wrongful actions and attitudes, are all important. Help me to do that, to be pure.”

II. The second indispensable action for the growing Christian in regard to the Word is not only, “Do we *receive* the Word?” but then, “Do we *do* the Word?”

It’s not important that we become not only knowledgeable of the Word, but that we become people who live it out. “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22, NIV). That’s easier said than done. Do what it says. “Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like [There comes some point in life where you’re glad that happens]. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this [not one look, but a continuing look], not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does” (James 1:23–25, NIV).

What James is saying is that the Christian can’t settle down into passivity in his life, go into simply a listening mode. Christianity is a life of action. It’s a life to be lived.

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I have my own blindness. I, as a pastor, study the Word hours a week. That's one of the high privileges of my calling. I also have moments when I have forgotten what the Word has said I am to be. So I need to be corrected and go on looking intently at the Word. I'm glad that the text says "and continues to do this" (verse 25). That assumes that one look is not enough. It also assumes that simply because you make one mistake, it doesn't count you as out. Continues to look.

I identify with Charlie Brown. He's walking along the street, rewinding his kite string, and following his string to wherever his downed kite is. As he goes along, he is waxing philosophical to his friend and nemesis, Lucy. He's saying words like this, "In kite flying, the ratio of weight to sail area is very important. The ratio is known as 'sail loading' and it is measured in ounces per square foot. For example, a three foot kite with a sail area of 4.5 square feet would weigh about 2 or 3 ounces." Lucy observes, "You know a lot about kites, don't you, Charlie Brown?" And Charlie Brown throws back his shoulders and very proudly admits, "Yes, I think I can say that I do." By this time, the string has led them to the mouth of a large storm drain, into which the string disappears. In the last frame, Lucy digs Charlie with this question, "If you know so much about kites, then why is your kite down the sewer?"

That's what James is saying here in the Word, essentially, "The critical thing is not that you have a theological understanding of the Bible, that you have a linguistic understanding of Scripture, that you have a hermeneutical, exegetical ability to look at God's Word. What is important and vital is that you have a working knowledge of the Bible." My real problems in the Scripture are not with the hidden esoteric, difficult theological issues. My real problems are with the things that are plain, which call upon me to do them. That's where I get my problems. It's the flesh in me and the devil in me that wants to say no.

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James suggests, therefore, that we take a long and continuing look at God’s Word. Not a casual look, but look intently at his perfect law of liberty that gives freedom. Lest anyone think that Paul here is in conflict with James—when James tells us to go out and do the Word, Paul says in Galatians 5, “You are called to freedom, brethren, only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh but through love serve one another.” Do the Word, don’t just listen to it. Do it.

III. Then the third indispensable action that James puts before us is the practical application of the Word.

Not only do we receive it and do it, but then he illustrates for us how we are to do it and gives us a practical illustration, where doing the Word fits in with the everyday responsibilities of being a Christian. “If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. 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 1:26–27, NIV). Notice the word “religion” here is used a number of times. In the language in which James writes, the word “religion” in this particular context was taken to mean “outward performance.” We say, “That person is religious,” because not only do they go to church on Sunday morning, but they go to church on Sunday night and Wednesday night as well, and they go on home visitation and so forth. I’m not against all those things, but that’s being religious according to an outward standard of measurement. James is saying that that’s one aspect of being religious. But real religion and pure religion before God involves these elements; he articulates three basic elements for the application of the Word.

A. The first practical application of doing the Word of God is the control of the tongue. He’s already referred to this in verse 19. He’ll have a whole section on taming the tongue in chapter 3.

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James' concern was speech. If we relate what he says in verse 26 back to verses 1–19, we might get a clue to how it fits here. In verses 1–19, James has been addressing the person who's going through trials; addressing an individual going through stress. Of course, one of the things that happen when you've got a lot of pressure on you is that you might, in a given situation, simply erupt. Something will set you off, and you will spew out a ton of speech you really wish you hadn't.

So when we're under stress especially, we're to watch that matter of pure religion, including the fact that there's to be a tight reign on the tongue; some control is being asked for. This is in contradiction with some emphases which simply say, "Go ahead and vent." It's not wise, from a personal point of view or from a biblical point of view, to simply ventilate everything. When you ventilate a fire, you put it more on fire. Sometimes, the effective way to deal with a fire is to close all the doors so it starves from oxygen. I'm not sure that it's a good idea, that we must always ventilate our rage. Always ventilate our anger. Always ventilate our words. We've sort of taken that like a nice sugar-coated pill that's gone along with the pop psychology of our day—"Vent."

Here the Scriptures are saying, "Keep a tight reign. Grab hold. Don't just hang loose. Bind up. Have a tight reign on the tongue."

Is that easy to do? Not if you're given to speech, it's not.

B. Then the second thing that James tells us to do on a practical level is to have social concern.

"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress" (James 1:27, NIV). I would suggest that, from James' perspective, these were the two most pressing social issues of his day, with which the Christian church dealt. There was no Social Security program. There were no private fundraising efforts. There were no

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shelters for abused women. There were no orphanages in society. Christians, therefore, developed a concern for the last and the least and the lost. Among the most glaring problems in the social order was what to do with widows and children who lived then, as they do in many non-Christian cultures of the world, out on the garbage heaps of the city. James is saying, “Look, ritual religion is not where the ultimate test is.” Jesus says, “Have you come to Me? Have you visited Me? Have you cared for Me?” (Matthew 25:39).

If James were writing this today, I think he would expand this “widows and orphans” list to include abused children, the homeless, the alien in our land, the mentally handicapped, the physically handicapped, those in nursing homes and prisons, the poor. That’s part of the gospel, of living out the gospel. Especially when we’re under stress. If we relate that back to verses 1–19, one of the things that happens when we’re under stress is we tend to turn inward and become exclusively worried about our concerns. One of the things that the Lord wants to draw us out of. Through His Word, He makes us aware of the needs of others, knowing that that is a healing act itself, to look beyond our own world of concerns to the needs of those whose lot in life is significantly worse off than ours.

Jack Nelson has written a book called *Hunger for Justice*, in which he talks about his experience of walking through the streets of Calcutta, India, which probably has the greatest level of human suffering and misery in the world per square inch. He said, as he walked through the streets, “The poverty so enraged me that I wanted to scream at God. Then I came to a painful realization: in the suffering of the poor, God was screaming at me.”

Isn’t this what Jesus says? “I was sick and you came to me. I was poor and you visited Me. I was hungry and you fed Me. I was naked and you clothed Me. You came to Me” (Matthew 25:36). That’s what James was saying. Our faith needs to include that social dimension of being very

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much aware of those who are less fortunate and who we have within our power to help. Mother Teresa was once asked if she ever became angry, working in Calcutta and seeing those tremendous conditions of man's inhumanity to man. She replied, in her very quiet and terse way, "I'm too busy loving to expand even one moment of my energy in anger." Too busy loving to be angry.

C. Then the third thing that James tells us as a practical application of the Word is that we keep ourselves unpolluted from the world. That is, we have personal purity in our life. Again, relating this back to the first nineteen verses to people in stress. People going through a lot of relational stress, things not going well in family, in people-to-people relationships, individuals may seek relief from these pressures in escapism and alcohol and drugs and wrongful sex, in letting all the barriers down in our culture. The Scripture is calling us, however, to a life, not of escapism, not of irresponsibility, but to a life of responsibility and personal purity. There is a war in our culture between the Christian and the non-Christian lifestyle. I know that you, on a one-on-one level, are much more personally aware of it than I am even, because I spend a great deal of my time calling and ministering to the body of Christ. I don't work next to someone who's swearing and telling all kinds of things that cannot be repeated. Many of you have that kind of experience. You know the clash between the Christian and the non-Christian in the values. James is saying that, in that kind of polluted world in which we live, where people's thinking is not straight, and where what is wrong is being called right and what is right is being called wrong—in that kind of a world, we're to live morally pure. Smog free. Unpolluted.

I have a pastor friend whose daughter married and to the marriage, two children were born. They're now under school age. The father and husband, sometime ago, moved out and it turned out that he was a homosexual. He moved in with his homosexual lover. He has now filed for

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joint custody of these children in the state of California. He is asking for them on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. He has hired one of the top homosexual rights lawyers in the United States to pursue the case, and there is money from the homosexual community to back this effort. They are going after the children on the grounds that their being raised in the home of the mother will subject them to attitudes which will warp their mental, world, and life-view. On Sundays, they are going to be going to a fundamentalist church. That will put a set of values that are in contradiction to public policy in their lives. Public policy holds that there cannot be any discrimination on the basis of sexuality. The Christian church holds that immorality, whether it's homosexual or heterosexual, is in conflict with God's Word, and those who do it will die apart from God.

Therefore, in a church which is very similar to ours, an Assembly of God church, two little kids are facing the battle of their life—which they're not even aware of—in regards to custody, as to whether or not a parent can successfully use the leverage he has of money from the homosexual community to secure these children away from a religious environment on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. From the environment they would get in their church, on the grounds that that religious environment is going to be mentally harmful to them.

What has happened in the legal rights system in this country, is that a few years ago, the homosexual community was saying, "Nobody has any business with what is going on in the bedroom." A lot of people bought that argument, that we shouldn't legislate morality. What has happened by legalizing it, is that it then becomes impossible in a child custody fight to raise the matter of one's homosexual preferences and multiple partners as an issue in a child custody fight. But strikingly, in this particular court case that my friend is facing, it is alright to raise the issue of religion, but impossible and wrong and illegal to raise the issue of homosexuality. So the

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mother is on trial for her religious faith and the homosexual lover has no responsibility before the court for his perversion. And that's what homosexuality is. Scriptures call it perversion.

My friend has mortgaged his home to the hilt, has gotten rid of everything they have, has had people assisting them, sending in money. They know that this thing is going to go through a series of appeals that are going to involve hundreds of thousands of dollars before this thing is adjudicated. Not only these two little kids are at stake, but probably a host of other child custody fights in the state of California, between Christian parents and non-Christian parents are. I'm unable, as an individual Christian, to vote for anyone who participates as Grand Marshal in a gay rights parade, even if he's running for governor. Or mayor. Or city council. Or whatever.

There's not a singling out here of homosexuality. God's Word tells us to be unpolluted from all sin. If it is wrong to be involved in homosexual activity, it is wrong also to be involved in heterosexual immorality, whether it is adultery or fornication. It is wrong to cheat on your income tax. It is wrong to tell jokes to denigrate people of another race. It is wrong to have racial attitudes that are not like Christ. It is wrong to steal from your employer, whether it's the theft of office material or the time on a time card. God is no respecter in terms of sin. He tells us, as Christians living in this world, that we are to strive to live an unpolluted life.

This doesn't mean that we put on the moral robes of the Pharisees and walk around as if we're better than everyone else. We're to humbly accept the Word of God. And we're to recognize that "but for the grace of God there go I" (see 1 Corinthians 15:10). But it is to have an attitude from the heart that is humble before God and other people, that says, "This is God's Word. This is the lifestyle that Jesus calls me to. I choose to live it." And the Holy Spirit chooses to give me the power to live it.

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I got to thinking about my friend, who's the grandfather, who has taken all their retirement funds, everything they've set aside for the years ahead, and has put it on the line for these kids. That's because he cares enough about these kids to want to spare them from some of the incredible moral pollution that is in our culture and our society. He would invest that for the sake of his grandchildren.

God has done the same thing. God feels as intensely towards every one of us in this room as my friend feels toward his grandchildren. He will do anything to spare us from any moral pollution that is in the world. The fact that He will do anything is exhibited by this display of the bread and the cup, that God spared not His own Son to save us from this world (John 3:16). The world passes away. Sin is a very real thing. It's not a psychosis that belongs to Christians. It is very real. It is estrangement from God. It is separation from God. God holds it to be so serious—whether you feel this way or not is immaterial—that the only way it could be dealt with was to send His own Son into the world to die in our place. Because sin will eternally separate us from God.

God has provided, through the death of Jesus Christ, that we will be covered by the mantle of righteousness. Within that righteousness, He calls us to live as people of freedom and He calls us to get to work in a practical way in our Christian life, to be serious about our living in following after Jesus. He calls us not just to be saved. He calls us to be converted. He calls us not just to be challenged. He calls us to be changed. He calls us not just to be persons who are Christians when we're in worship. He calls us to be Christians when we're in the world. He calls us to follow Him in this world. To receive His Word, to do His Word and to apply His Word. Let us do it, as the Spirit gives us power. We will follow Christ.

Closing Prayer

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Lord, Your Word speaks to us with such clarity. You also speak to us, Lord Jesus, with such great love. In wanting to change us, You could have used power. You could have said, “If you don’t do this, I’ll break your neck!” But You chose to appeal to us from love. You chose to reach, not just our heads, but our hearts. You chose to get at the nerve center of where we make the real decisions of life. You chose to appeal to us on the basis of the cross. You even let Your action at the cross stand as a moral constraint upon us. Having been crucified with Christ, we are in turn to crucify the flesh with its wrongful desires and its actions, unlike You. We pray to be pure people. Not better-than-thou people. Not super-righteous hypocrites. We just want to live in this world as Your people. Harmless, but powerful. Tender, but not weak. Let Your Word lodge in our life. We’re all fighting a battle everyday of our life. We are fighting the world, the flesh, and the devil. There are times when friends have seemingly gone down for the count. We’re reminded of the Scripture that tells us that we have not wrestled unto death as Christ (Hebrews 12:4). We’re to keep on and we’re to keep coming back to this Word, gazing intently in it. Looking at what You call us to be like and then going away and being called to live in the freedom of the morality and the righteousness that You provide. We pray for the victims in our society who are being pressed beyond pressure in their walk with You. That You will give every one of Your little ones strength and that, through the power of the gospel, we may act as a Christian community, as salt and as light in our world. Spare our country and society from the growth of the perversions that abandon You and choose man’s way instead of Your way. Bring a great revival, Lord, to our country and to our community and to us as the church. We ask this, Lord Jesus, in Your name. Amen.