

## **Cultivating a Teachable Heart**

**James 1:19-21**

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Let me tell you my plan. I want to finish Mark. I have probably two messages left in Mark, but we're not going to do that tonight. I want to step away from what we've been doing because there's something that sort of ties together a lot of messages you've heard recently, the ones I've been doing from Matthew 7 that talk about our obedience to Christ being the tell-tale sign of a genuine faith. Dusty challenged us last week on the biblical role and practice of sanctification. And ultimately all of that comes back to our response to the Scripture. Tonight I want to deal with the issue of cultivating a teachable heart when it comes to our response to the Scripture itself.

It was in the early 1970's that two men, Allan Cormack and Godfrey Hounsfield, invented a new method for examining the organs of our bodies. They scanned them with X rays and then, using a computer, they constructed a series of cross-sectional scans with a single axis point. It was called Computerized Axial Tomography or a CAT scan. Since then, we've added other tools to the toolbox. We've added the PET scan and the MRI. And today there is the Functional MRI. It relies on the magnetic properties of blood to enable doctors to see images of blood flow in the brain as it occurs and literally map its flow.

FMRI, as it's called, has taken the place of PET scanning as the king of brain imaging because it can produce images of the brain every second. And scientists can determine with great precision what regions become active and for how long, depending on what you're looking at, what stimuli you're experiencing, et cetera. Also, FMRI has such high resolution that it can distinguish structures less than a millimeter apart, incredible diagnostic tool for determining what's going on in the brain.

As you think about that, wouldn't it be wonderful if God had given us a tool that would run a spiritual diagnostic? Well, the truth is he has, James tells us that it's the Word of God. It's not a CAT scan or a PET scan. It's not an FMRI. Instead, it is a simple mirror. Not a mirror of our physical appearance, it's a mirror of our souls. It's a mirror that never lies. It always accurately reflects our true spiritual condition. Every time we honestly evaluate ourselves by the Word of

God, we get God's perspective of our spiritual health and our spiritual condition. When I open the Scripture and I compare myself against it, I get to see myself through God's eyes. So not only do I find grace and comfort, help, teaching, reproof, correction, instruction in righteousness. Not only do I learn about God, His person, His character, His actions. I also find in its pages a perfect spiritual diagnostic. That's why everywhere you turn in Scripture, it proclaims its own importance in the life of every true believer.

If you've never taken Psalm 119 and prayed through that psalm, prayed through not only the words but embraced the meaning of each verse and pray that to God, I encourage you to do that. It will revolutionize your view of Scripture. Every verse, except for two, specifically mention the Word of God. And you see the psalmist's heart for the Scripture. You see what he, under inspiration, says the Scripture will accomplish in our lives. It's amazing. It's an ode to the majesty of God's Word.

Perhaps the most radical passage on the place of God's Word in the life of the believer is the psalm that stands at the introduction to the psalter. Turn to Psalm 1. I've always been struck by this. This psalm was placed here to introduce the psalter which, of course, is a divinely revealed and intended pattern of man expressing himself to God. And it begins this way, "How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers!" Here's the believer and he is characterized by what he repudiates, what he refuses, but notice how he's described positively. This is the only verse in the psalm that describes him specifically in terms of what he thinks and what he does, "But his delight," his delight, the thing that brings him joy, "is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night."

Now, if you were going to describe a righteous person, if I asked you to stand up where you are and we had not just read this together and I said, I want you to tell me in one sentence what constitutes a righteous person, a blessed person. How would you describe it? This is how the psalmist describes it. It has to do with his delight in and his meditation on the Word of God. That's how a true believer is always described.

Tonight I want us to study together a passage that makes a very similar point. It's James 1. Turn there with me, James 1, and let me read the entire paragraph. We're not going to look at

the whole paragraph but let's put it in its context. James 1, I'll begin reading in verse 19. James is writing to give us tests of a true faith and here's one of those tests.

This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he's like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. The one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.

If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Now, I want you to notice, first of all, to whom this paragraph is addressed. Notice how he begins in verse 19, "my beloved brethren." Obviously this paragraph is addressed to us. He's talking to Christians. And he adds in verse 19, "But everyone," literally in the original text, every man. So, there is not a single Christian to whom this passage does not apply. No one here tonight is exempt from what this passage has to teach us. And what is it it's teaching? This entire paragraph drives home one great spiritual reality. Your response to the Word of God is a perfect spiritual diagnostic. You can accurately discern both the legitimacy of your faith and the maturity of your faith by how you respond to Scripture.

Now, James identifies three qualities that should characterize our relationship to Scripture in this paragraph. First of all, in verses 19 to 21, a teachable heart. We ought to be teachable before the Word of God. Secondly, a consistent obedience. We are to be doers of the Scripture and not merely hearers. So we ought to respond to the Scripture with a teachable heart. We

ought to be open to what it has to instruct us, but we also then ought to do something with it. A consistent obedience. And thirdly, an authentic change. Once the Scripture has done its work, it changes us, it changes our behavior, it changes who we are, and that's reflected in verses 26 and 27.

Now, this evening I want us just to examine the first of these qualities that should characterize our response to Scripture and that is, a teachable heart. Because these verses not only serve as a spiritual diagnostic, they also show us how to advance in this. This ought to be true of us if we're Christians, but we ought to grow in a heart that's teachable to the Scripture. And this passage is going to teach us how. This has been on my heart a lot recently as we've been reminded from the Sermon on the Mount about obedience. Obedience really begins with a heart that submits itself to the Scripture. And that's exactly what James describes here. So let's look at just the first three verses of this paragraph again, because this is where we learn about a teachable heart before the Scripture.

This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.

Now to begin with, it is absolutely crucial to note that verses 19 and 20 are often pulled completely out of their context. We well intentioned parents will quote these verses to our children and what we mean to say to them is, be quiet and listen to me. And while that may be true, that's not what these verses are saying. These are not general lessons in listening and in listening more than you speak and in not getting angry. People who approach it this way, it's as if James just pulled these concepts right out of the air, stuck them here, with no connection to the context. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Now, notice the flow here. In verse 18 James ends the section on temptation with a reference to Scripture. Look at verse 18, "In the exercise of God's will He brought us forth," He regenerated us. This is a verse very strongly teaching that God is the initiator in our salvation. He regenerates us by the exercise of His will, not ours. Of course, we are willing and we do

respond, by His grace, but by “the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth.” The tool that the Father used to bring that regeneration to our souls was the Word of God. It’s the instrument then, the Scripture is, that God uses to bring new life to a spiritually dead heart. And obviously then, skip the verses in question, verses 19 and 20, obviously verses 21 to 25 are about the Scripture and our response to the Scripture, we’re to be to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only.”

So logically then verses 19 to 20 must also have some reference to the Scripture. But not just logically, let me show you exegetically. Look at the flow of James’ thought. He begins by saying, in verse 19, that there are some very specific things his readers knew. They knew, he says, “This you know, my beloved brethren,” here’s what they knew. They knew they should be “quick to hear.” They knew they should be “slow to speak.” They knew they should be “slow to anger,” because our anger cannot accomplish God’s holy purposes. They knew that. Now, how could James be sure they knew that? Because remember, he’s writing this letter to people who were once a part of his church in Jerusalem and now have been scattered abroad. So, he knows they know these things because he’s taught them these things.

Notice then in verse 21, verse 21 begins, “Therefore.” He says, listen, here’s what you know, and I know you know this because I taught you, therefore, here’s the practical application, “in humility receive the Word of God.” Now think about that. It makes absolutely no sense for James to say, listen, you know that generally you really ought to listen more than you speak and you really shouldn’t struggle with anger, therefore, “in humility receive the word.” That makes no sense. Verses 19 and 20 have to do with our response to Scripture.

These principles are generally true. It is true that you should listen more than you talk and that you shouldn’t get angry, but that’s not what James is saying. So let’s examine what he does say. And it’s about how we are to respond to the Word of God. It’s about how you and I can cultivate a teachable heart when we come to the Word of God. First of all, “everyone must be quick to hear.” That is, quick to hear the Word of God. Now, why would he even need to say that? You understand this. If you have children, you understand this. If you have a spouse, you understand this. The fact that you have a structure on the side of your head that channels sound waves into your ear canal toward your brain does not mean that you really hear.

We experienced this phenomenon every day. Let me pick on the men for a moment. Ladies, how many times has this happened to you? Your husband is watching a football game. He's reading the paper. And you walk in and you say, honey, there's something that's really bothering me. And he says, huh? Something that's really bothering me. And he says, yeah, what is that? But the problem is, he keeps doing what he's doing. He continues to look at the paper, lean over his computer, or to watch the game. And for the next five minutes you just pour out your soul about all that's been a problem that day. And after your impassioned request for a response, you wait for one. And then he looks up to you and what does he say? I'm sorry honey, what did you say? Now undoubtedly he heard you in the most obvious sense, you're standing right next to him.

James is not saying that we should be quick to let the words of God collect in our external ear and be channeled down our inner ear canal. He's saying, be quick to really listen and understand. This is what Jesus meant when, again and again in His ministry, He said what? "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." That's what he was saying. He was saying, really listen.

Now, it's important to understand that we now have the capacity to really listen to the Word of God. Unbelievers don't have ears to hear. In fact, turn with me to John 8. It's a fascinating passage in John 8, verse 37. Go back to verse 31 because it kind of sets it up.

Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; [*You just come back to that theme everywhere, don't you? The real test of being a true disciple is do you do what He says? Do you obey Him?*] and you will [*if that's true*] you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

So why is it then that the Jews didn't know the truth? Well, look at verse 37, "I know that you are Abraham's descendants; yet you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you." That is, "My word makes no progress in you." It doesn't fit in your frame of reference. Now why is that? Well, look at verse 43, "Why do you not understand what I'm saying? It is because you cannot hear My word." You, and there's that word to be able, to have the power to do something, you don't have the power to hear My word. You don't have the ability to hear

My word. This is 1 Corinthians 2, “the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are spiritually discerned.” So He says, “My word has no place in you.” And moreover, you can’t understand My word. You don’t have the ability to understand My word. Now, look down at verse 47, “He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God.”

So understand this, before you came to Christ, like every other unbeliever you did not have a capacity to truly listen to the Word of God. Oh, you might have sat in services like this one, and it just ran right off your back, and in one ear out the other ear, and never made any dent, because you didn’t have ears to hear. Why is this true? Why do unbelievers have such a problem hearing the Word of God? Well, Ezekiel 12:2 says, “‘Son of Man, you live in the midst of the rebellious house, who have eyes to see but do not see, ears to hear but do not hear;’” here’s why, “‘because they are a rebellious house.’” The reason unbelievers don’t listen to the Word of God is that they are, by nature, rebels against God. They don’t want to hear what God has to say any more than if you have a rebellious child, that child wants to hear your voice and your word. That’s who we were, before Christ.

But there’s another reason. The reason unbelievers can’t hear is not only from their side, because they are rebellious against God, but there’s also an act of divine wrath involved. Romans 11:8, quoting Deuteronomy 29:4, “just as it is written, ‘GOD GAVE THEM A SPIRIT OF STUPOR,’” speaking here of the Jews who haven’t believed, “‘EYES TO SEE NOT AND EARS TO HEAR NOT, DOWN TO THIS VERY DAY.’” Don’t miss the first part of that, “‘GOD GAVE THEM.’” So, just as it was with Pharaoh who hardened his own heart and God hardened his heart, so it is with unbelievers’ response to the word. They don’t respond because they have a rebellious heart, they don’t want to do what God says, and it is an expression of God’s wrath on their rebellion. Unbelievers are both willfully deaf to the Word of God and as a result of an act of divine judgment.

But, here’s the amazing thing, that used to be true of you, and you remember that. If you’re in Christ, you remember what the Word of God was like to you before you came to Christ. But if you’re a believer, you now have the capacity to hear, to grasp the truth of God. And so, to all of us James says, be quick to really listen to the Word of God. John MacArthur, writing on this

passage, says, “James appeal is for believers to seize every opportunity to increase their exposure to Scripture, to take advantage of every privileged occasion to read God’s Word or to hear it faithfully preached or taught. The sincere eager desire for such learning is one of the surest marks of a true child of God. Because, as Peter reminds us, along with the new life that comes to us in Christ, we become spiritual infants and like infants crave their mother’s milk, we crave the milk of the Word of God.”

We need to be careful listeners to make sure we get the message right. We should respond like those who heard Jesus in Luke 19:48. Luke says, “all the people were hanging on to every word He said.” Is that your response to the Scripture? Do you seize every opportunity to expose yourself to God’s Word? Let me ask you a basic question. If you’ve been a Christian for a while, have you ever completely read the only book God has ever given us? Not once in my whole life has God ever audibly spoken to me. And He hasn’t to you either. But He has spoken to all of us, ultimately and finally, in a book that we can read and study and understand with our minds. What could be more important to us than to listen to what God has given to us. Every one of us here needs to hear this, including me. Not one of us can honestly say before the Lord, I listen to Your Word enough. “Everyone must be quick to hear,” to really listen to God’s Word, to put ourselves in positions where we’re exposed to God’s Word over and over and over again, with hearts and minds that are engaged, that are hanging on every word.

But there’s a second part of cultivating a teachable heart. Everyone must be “quick to hear,” but James continues. In addition to that, everyone must be “slow to speak.” Now, what does this mean? Well, there are two possible interpretations of this phrase. Either it means don’t be overly eager to teach others. That’s one option. Be slow to speak in the sense that you shouldn’t be eager to put yourself in the role of a teacher. Now, the reason this is a possibility is because James comes back to this. Look at chapter 3 verse 1, “Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.” Apparently there were Jewish Christians, to whom James was writing, who had heard the word taught, and without carefully weighing the implications and applications for their own lives, they were in a hurry to teach others.



I've been there. I remember in the early days of my Christian life, because of having the gift of teaching, being thrust into places where I was teaching when I never should have been. I'm so grateful there weren't recordings of those early messages. One of God's great blessings to me.

I mean, this is an issue, Paul warns about this when it comes to leaders in the church. He warns in 1 Timothy 3:6, make sure that you don't put a new convert in the position of a teacher or an elder, "so they will not become conceited." In 1 Timothy 5:22 he says, "Don't lay hands on anyone hastily." If you're going to put someone in the position of a teacher, you better carefully vet them, you better make sure that they meet the qualifications, that they are worthy of that position.

It may mean, don't be eager to be a teacher, listen first. One writer recounts that a famous Roman orator was asked by a young man to teach him the art of public speaking, but the young man wouldn't shut up so that the teacher could even respond. So when he finally stopped talking, the teacher explained that he was going to have to charge him twice his normal fee. And when the young man said, well, why is that? He told him, he said, listen, because I need to teach you two skills. First, how to hold your tongue, and then how to use it. It may be that's what James is saying here.

But I don't think so in the context. I think in the context this second option is more likely. And it's this, when he says, everyone must be "slow to speak," he's saying be slow to speak in response to or in reaction to the word, the word read or the word taught. This is probably what James has in mind because the next phrase is be "slow to anger." So it has to do with our response to the Scripture. And essentially James is saying this in this line, stop talking and listen to the Word of God. Now this is really practical advice, because we're all tempted in this way. Whenever we read the Scripture or whenever we hear it taught, and it runs contrary to our own ideas, to our own beloved doctrines, to our cherished behavior, what's our first response? Not to listen, but to talk back. Well, wait a minute. We're too busy mentally defending our view to really listen to what God says.

As a pastor I see this in counseling, people who have convinced themselves of what is right or what they ought to do, so that when I simply share the Scripture with them, they don't even hear it. They're too busy talking, too busy justifying what they want to do, too busy sharing their

own mind, their own ideas. And frankly, there are times when, I'll admit to you, I want to say, would you just be quiet for a minute and really listen to what God says?

I had a very clear experience of this when I was in graduate school. I was working on my master's degree and while I was doing that, I was teaching several undergraduate Bible courses. And one day, it was a day when a lot of the students had parents who came to the campus. It was one of the, sort of, campus-wide special events or whatever, and so there were a lot of parents on campus. And one of my students brought her mother with her to class. And after class she brought her mother up to meet me. And everything went great initially, I enjoyed visiting, until she said that after many hours of careful study, she had come to a unique conclusion about the condition in which man is born.

She said, it's like this, we're all born neutral, like a blank slate, with an equal capacity to choose either evil or good. And of course, that's not new, that's an old bad idea. And so I tried for 30 minutes to help her to see, both historically and exegetically, that her view was not original with her and that it was at best error, and the way she was stressing it, possibly even heresy. But she was too busy talking to listen to the Word of God. She and her daughter walked away mad, actually ended up reporting me to the administration for not being kind and gentle in my interaction, which I believe I was. But I just didn't listen and I didn't say, oh that's wonderful, that's a great idea. That lady's problem was not with me, it was with God.

In fact, look at Ecclesiastes 5. Ecclesiastes 5 makes this point whenever we approach God. Ecclesiastes 5:1,

Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil. Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. [*Because God is not one to be trifled with.*] He is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few.

He's teaching us to have a reverence, a fear, an awe of God, and that begins with shutting our mouths and listening to God.

Let me ask you, as you contemplate this point, do you cling to your own views, even though you've never really diligently studied them? Or do you often only do a cursory study of some issue without adequate scholarly tools and resources and yet you come to this entrenched position? Do you enjoy taking novel or maverick viewpoints of various biblical and theological issues? When your views have been taught against, have you sincerely sought out the true meaning of Scripture by careful study? Are you like the Bereans in Acts 17? Who "were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so." Is that how you respond? James says, everyone must be "slow to speak" in response to the Scripture.

James adds, that when it comes to the word, everyone must be "slow to anger." The Greek word for anger here is not the word for the explosion or the outburst of anger, but rather it's the word that's used for a settled anger of resentment. The anger that seethes under the surface. The anger here is resentment and it is resentment, in this context, not against people, but against anything you hear from the Word of God that displeases you. When the word conflicts with your cherished belief or conviction or standards, when it calls your views or your perspectives into question, when the Scripture confronts some sin that you cherish, James says, don't become resentful. Don't become resentful toward the teacher or the preacher. Don't shoot the messenger. I mean, Paul faced this. In Galatians 4:16 he said, "So have I become your enemy by telling you the truth?" Apparently, some in the Galatian churches thought so. And that happens all the time. People get angry with a messenger. I've had that happen. Don't get angry with me.

And don't get angry with God and the Scripture, either. We should never respond in anger toward the Word of God. There are examples throughout the Scripture, when people heard God's Word from the prophets especially, and they responded in anger. Read the story of the kings and again and again God says, this is what I want you to do, this is what's going to happen, and they respond to the Word of God in anger. And we can be tempted to respond that way as well. James says, be "slow to anger," human anger. Why should we never respond in anger to the Word of God? Notice verse 20, "for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God." Human anger against God's Word is not going to produce righteousness

in you. You must be teachable. And to be teachable, “we must be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.”

There’s a fourth part of this pattern toward teachability and it’s, everyone must “in humility receive the word.” Notice verse 21 of James 1, “Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.” Now remember, verses 19 and 20, James was simply reminding his readers and us of what we already know. What did we already know? Notice verse 19, “This you know,” you know that “everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.” Now here’s the punchline, here’s the practical application, here’s what you should do in light of those things you know. “Therefore,” verse 21. Now notice that the sentence begins with a participle that’s translated, “putting aside.” That participle modifies the main verb of the sentence. Notice in verse 21, the main verb of the sentence is receive. So, in the original language, the way the construction is put together, it implies that before we can receive we first have to put aside. Putting aside has to happen before we can receive the word.

Now putting aside is a familiar New Testament image, it refers to taking off dirty clothing. Metaphorically, it refers to taking off the evil attitudes and behaviors that were a part of our lives before Christ. Specifically, notice what James says we’re to put off or lay aside, we’re to take off “all filthiness,” everything that’s morally dirty, “and all that remains of wickedness,” literally, “the abundance of wickedness.” In this context, the word translated wickedness refers generally to all that’s wicked. It isn’t that you have to be perfect to receive the word, it’s that you have to have a willing heart and mind to let go of everything in your life that’s dirty and all the abundance of wickedness in your life.

You must be willing to let go of anything the word tells you to let go of, no matter how much you might currently cherish it. Whether it’s sinful acts or sinful ideas, sinful thoughts, sinful attitudes, or doctrinal error, whatever it is, all that’s wicked, everything that’s contrary to God’s Word, you have to come to the Word of God with a willingness to say, God, as the psalmist says, search me and see if there’s any way in me that causes You pain. And if You show me from Your word, if I look in the mirror of Your word and I see that terrible flaw, then by Your

grace, I'm going to strive to put that off and put on the virtue that should be in its place. When that's your attitude, you're ready to be taught.

Look at verse 21 again, once you have put aside, once you have a mindset that is willing to put aside everything contrary to God's will and purpose, then, "in humility receive the word." In humility as opposed to in the pride that argues with the text or gets angry because you disagree. "In humility receive." This word receive, this is not merely listening, we do have to listen, but this isn't merely listening. This word receive includes the idea of eagerly welcoming the truth. D. Edmund Hebert, a commentator, a great commentator actually, on the book of James writes this, "The readers had to go beyond a passive acquiescence to the statements of the word, and by a definite volitional response," in other words, by an act of their will, "welcome it as an active working force in their lives." That's how you have to come to the word. You have to come to the word being willing to put aside everything that displeases God that He identifies in your life, and you come welcoming, in a humble spirit, whatever God says in His Word. The same word that brought life to our dead hearts back in verse 18, is the tool the Spirit uses to shape us into the image of Jesus Christ.

If you want to see this in humility receiving the word illustrated, turn back with me to Nehemiah. There's a there's a wonderful example in Nehemiah 8 of what this looks like. You remember the story of Ezra, Nehemiah 8:1, "And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD had given to Israel." These people were in captivity. They have now been returned to the land. Ezra has now returned and with him comes a teacher who can teach them the law. So they ask him to bring the book,

bring the book of the law of Moses which the LORD has given to Israel. Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, and women and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law. He stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose.

By the way, that's why in churches like ours that are centered on the Word of God there is a platform with an elevated pulpit. It goes all the way back to Ezra. This is why we do what we do. He read it. Verse 7, "they explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place." In other words, they did expositional teaching, they read the Scripture, they explained the Scripture. That's also why we do what we do.

But notice the response of the people. Verse 9, "Then Nehemiah, who was the governor and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the LORD your God.'" They realized that they were in the middle of what should have been a festival season,

For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law. [*Because they realized they hadn't kept it.*] And he said, "Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." So they calmed the people, the Levites did, saying, "Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved." All the people went away to eat, and to drink, and to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which had been made known to them. [*They got it, they understood it.*]

Then on the second day the heads of the fathers' households of all the people, the priests and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law.

They wanted to understand it more. Notice verse 18,

He read from the book of the law daily, from the first day to the last day [*of the feast of booths*]. And they celebrated the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly according to the ordinance.

Now in the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them. The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. While they stood in their place, they read from the

book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshipped the LORD their God.

Here is a powerful example of what happens when a heart is truly humbled before God. Not the length of time, that's not the point, this was a festival they were celebrating, but an attitude of heart. A desire to know what God has said and to do it, to receive the word. That's how we should respond to the word, with an eager submission. They heard about the feast and they immediately went and started celebrating the feast, because that's what the Scripture said. They were teachable.

Now go back to James 1. Notice how James describes the word that we should receive. He said, I want you to receive the word, and here's how he describes the word. In two ways. It's "the word implanted." That word implanted comes from a word which means to plant a seed in the ground. The picture that James is painting here is that at the time of your salvation, the Spirit of God planted the seed of the word in your heart. He used that word to bring regeneration. And He planted the seed in your heart and because God had prepared our hearts, we embrace the seed and we have borne fruit. It's "the word implanted," both used to regenerate us, to draw us, as well as used to sanctify us. And we've been given a desire for it, like babes longing for the milk from their mothers.

The second way he describes it there in verse 21 is, "it's the word which is able to save your souls." The word is the tool the Spirit uses, listen carefully, to affect every single aspect of your salvation. There is nothing that will happen for your spiritual progress that is not attached to the word. It was through the word that you were regenerated. It is through the word that you are sanctified. The word is everything. It's the word that showed us the way of salvation and deliver us from the penalty of sin. It's the word that teaches us how to overcome the power and dominion of sin. It's God's eternal Word that prepares us to be free someday from the presence of sin. The word is the tool that the Spirit uses in our justification, our sanctification, and ultimately, our glorification, to prepare us for that reality.

That's why in Acts 20, as Paul was finishing his farewell to the Ephesians elders that he knew he would never see again after having spent three years with them, he said to them, "now I commend you to Go and I commend you to the word of His Grace." That is, His word which

effects grace, which is the purveyor of grace into your life. Because that word, he says, is able to edify you, “to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

Listen, understand this, in that book that you have in front of you, you have every spiritual resource that God intended you to have. You have, in that word, and out of that word, the church of course, but what do we do? We deal with the word? What do you do in fellowship? You deal with the word. You share what you’re learning with each other, in each other’s lives. It all comes back to the word.

If you want to know your true spiritual condition, if you want to run a spiritual diagnostic of whether or not you have a living faith, then look at how you respond to the Word of God. If you are bored to tears by the Word of God, then you have not been regenerated. Those who know God, remember what Jesus said, they hear His words. If you’re in Christ, let me ask you, are you quick to hear? Are you slow to speak in response and to argue with the Scripture? Have you stopped speaking your own mind and started listening to God? Are you slow to anger? Do you, in humility, receive the word?

This, folks, is how we cultivate a teachable spirit before God’s Word. Here’s how, first of all, be quick to hear, come to God’s Word to really listen. Secondly, be slow to speak. Don’t argue with what the text says. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve talked with Christians who have had their minds made up about what they wanted to do. I’ve shown them what the Bible says and they say something politely like this, I don’t care what the Bible says.

Before I ever met Sheila I had her father, who ultimately, obviously, became my father-in-law, for a number of classes. One of them was Matthew in Greek. I had him for New Testament survey, Daniel and Revelation, several others. In all of those classes, there was a line that he was known for that was constantly repeated. If I heard it once I heard it hundreds of times. And this was the line: But what does the Bible say? What does the Scripture say? Determine in your heart that whatever the word says, however contrary to your ideas, your preconceptions, however contrary to the mindset of the age in which you live, you’re going to let God speak through His Word. You’re not going to talk back. You’re not going to argue with what He’s clearly said. “Let God be true and every man a liar.”



Thirdly, be slow to anger. Don't get angry when the Word of God confronts you or contradicts your long held ideas. I see this response on two fronts with people. I see it when it comes to theological issues, difficult theological issues like election. Rather than saying, let's look at the Scripture together, there's immediate, I just don't believe in election. Well, what does the Bible say? It also happens when it comes to very intensely personal issues. Like what are the biblical grounds for divorce? Other issues. Be slow to anger, be angry with the text, or get angry with God, because it doesn't tell you what you want to hear.

And number four, in humility, receive the word. Welcome the word. Be eager to know what God has said. This is where obedience begins. It begins with a teachable heart before the Word of God. May God help all of us to respond in this way. Let's pray together.

Our Father, thank You for Your great grace to us. Thank You that You have given us Your word. Lord, it is such a tremendous gift. Help us to treasure it. Help us to welcome it eagerly, to be willing to put aside all filthiness and whatever remains of wickedness, to be willing to put aside everything that Your Word addresses, and may we welcome Your Word in humility, being quick to hear, to really hear, slow to speak in response, slow to argue with You, and slow to anger, to respond to You and Your Word in anger because we don't like what You've said. God, give us teachable hearts, teach us even through this passage. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.