

SMALL GROUP STUDY GUIDE



COFFEEHOUSE FIVE CHURCH

JAMES

HOW TO NOT BE A HYPOCRITE

JAMES 1:19-27

05/07/2017

MAIN POINT

We should seek to be people who slow down, hear from God, and respond to His Word.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

Think about your social media feeds or the media you consume. How many of your friends would you say agree with your view of the world? How many differ?

Why do we tend to surround ourselves only with people who agree with us? Do you have any friends who challenge you in a good and healthy way?

How do you react when you are in church or reading the Bible on your own and something rubs you the wrong way?

Have you ever heard the phrase “echo chamber”? This is the idea that we surround ourselves with people who have the same views we have so when we hear from them, we’re only having our own views echoed back to us. To a point, this makes sense—we want to surround ourselves with people who have similar beliefs, and the Bible calls us to be friends with believers. However, an echo chamber becomes harmful when it keeps us from ever being challenged. It is good to have that friend or that mentor who lovingly questions us when needed. It keeps us honest. Unfortunately, many people receive the Bible as an echo chamber. We read it and only see the sins that other people deal with, which makes us hypocrites. Rather, we should seek to be people who slow down, hear from God, and respond to His Word, as James encourages us to do.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 1:19-20.

When we read the guidance to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, our temptation is to make this a process in our lives. Yet in context, James is talking about making room in our lives to receive the word of truth. These directions deal with how we receive the Bible into our lives.

How might following the three steps that James laid out put us in a better position to receive truth from God?

Read Psalm 46:10. Looking through your week, how often do you make space to still yourself and receive the Word of truth?

Read 2 Timothy 3:16-17. What is the Word of truth able to do that nothing else can? If what Paul wrote is true, why should we desperately want to hear from the Word?

We love processes. The danger in loving processes, though, is that we reduce good guidance from God's Word into a process—or a formula—in our lives. What James is leading us to see is a disposition of our hearts where our default becomes to slow down, listen, hear the Word, and receive it into our lives. Yet, many of us want to put the Bible down when we come across something that challenges us. But the Word has the power to change us, teach us, rebuke us, and bring about the fruit of righteousness. We need to know the Word to know how to change.

Why is listening to the Word necessary for your spiritual growth? When has slowing down and listening to the Scriptures led to spiritual vibrancy in your life?

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 1:21-25.

James 1:22 is the central point of the Book of James. Even though this verse is direct and self-explanatory, how would you rephrase it yourself?

Read Hebrews 4:12-13. What does it mean that the Word is “living and active”? What makes the Bible fundamentally different from every other message we hear? Why do we need it to teach us who we are?

God's Word is not meant for us to read it and then do nothing about it. That is the essence of what it means to be a hypocrite. Another way to say James 1:22 might be that when we receive God's Word, we respond to God's Word. The Bible is a living and active book that is able to speak to our lives at any moment. It is not a dated or irrelevant message, but one that is sharp today and for all eternity. However, for it to cut into our lives, we must spend time in it. It alone has the ability to recognize our sin, which means that when it does, we must respond.

The word for “filth” is a rare word that has the idea of wax in your ears. Neglecting the Bible puts a “wax” around our hearts. How does this wax build up in our lives?

God's Word always requires a response. How did James illustrate this point for us? Why should we never walk away from time in God's Word without finding at least one way to apply it to our lives?

The devil has two main tricks to keep us from responding to God's Word. The first and best way is to ignore it altogether. Over time, we get busy or devote ourselves to other good things or simply fail to keep the time to meet with God in our schedules. Rarely is this a sudden process, but one that happens as we slowly give up real estate in our heart and lives. We resist this tactic by guarding our time in the Word every day, every week.

The second is by failing to apply the Word to our lives. The devil is completely satisfied when we listen to the Word and fill our heads with knowledge that never bears fruit in our lives. James illustrated this by describing a man who looks into a mirror and walks away, then forgets what he looks like. The truth didn't stick. We can resist this by always looking for at least one practical way to respond to the Word every time we read it.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 1:26-27.

You could summarize James's point here by saying that we are called to pure speech, loving care, and holy living. Where do we see each of these in the life of Jesus Christ? When we embrace these traits, how do we become a reflection of Him?

Why is it so easy for us to receive truth without reflecting on it and putting it into practice with our lives? Is there a simple way you could pursue pure speech, loving care, and holy living this week?

The goal of the Christian life is to be like Jesus. We model Jesus' heart and His actions when we live in accordance with His truth. To do what James says in these verses is to live a life that reflects Jesus. We fill the world with people who, with each passing day, look more and more like Jesus—this is what it means to be a doer of the Word of God.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR ME

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Is there an area of your life that you feel is segregated or “off limits” to go? Why are you reluctant to give this over to Jesus? What is one positive step you can take in that direction?

Audit your weekly and daily schedule—when can you make time to read the Bible?

Are you a doer of the Word? Imagine if a non-believer looked at your life over the past week. What would they think is of primary importance to you? Is your belief in Jesus evident in the way you live?

PRAY

Praise God for giving you His Word. Pray that you would receive His truth with eager gladness, and that it would lead to a sincere response in your life. Pray that your life would look more like Jesus Christ.

COMMENTARY

JAMES 1:19-27

1:19. Christians can pretend to obey God without truly listening to his commands. The readers of James's letter knew the transforming power of God's Word, the gospel. James urged them to demonstrate this change, particularly in their speech. The commands probably refer both to our relationships to one another and to God. We are to be quick to hear and slow to talk both toward other people and toward God.

The command to be quick to listen calls for an eagerness to hear and obey God's message. The appeal to be slow to speak demands silence until we have understood and applied the message. It is a call for restraint lest we produce hasty, ill-timed reactions. The challenge to be slow to become angry warns against hostile, bitter feelings.

1:20. This verse supports the command to be slow to become angry. Man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. The anger prohibited by this passage is not so much a flashing, destructive temper as a simmering pot of hostile, mean-spirited feelings.

Human anger wastes the energies of God's people, produces divisions, and often comes from selfish ambition. The righteousness that God desires includes deeds which are pure; . . . peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere (Jas. 3:17). Angry words and deeds cannot produce purity and peace. The mischievous works of angry Christians prevent the unsaved world from seeing that the God of all the earth does right (Gen. 18:25). It is impossible to look at the disorderly conduct of fighting believers and worship the God they profess to serve. This should make Christians cautious in our display of an angry spirit.

1:21. Believers can make a positive response instead of indulging in the hurtful anger which so easily hinders God's righteous designs. This verse issues a command and then provides a prerequisite for obeying the command, an incentive for obedience, and a description of our attitude in obedience.

The command is to accept the word planted in you. This calls for a warm, open welcome to the influence of God's

message in our lives (1 Thess. 2:13). The prerequisite is to get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent. To obey the command we must strip off like a dirty garment any moral indecency and malicious attitudes.

Obedience to God's Word promotes holiness and develops godly character. We demonstrate a genuine likeness toward Christ as we get rid of the flaming desires for filth and evil. This shows the presence of a real experience of salvation. In our obedience we must display humility.

1:22. James's command is literally to "keep on becoming doers of God's Word." He insisted on an obedience which lasts. This does not minimize the importance of hearing God's Word. It does emphasize strongly the need for acting.

The command to listen to God's Word describes someone who attends a lecture. The hearer could nod agreeably to the message but do nothing as a result. God wants a listener to become a disciple, an obedient follower of Jesus. One who hears the message without doing anything is self-deceived.

1:23-25. James presented a negative and a positive illustration of a response to God's message. Via a vivid picture of listless listening, verses 23-24 compare those who only hear God's Word to people who gaze into a mirror and dash away with little memory of what they saw. Mirrors in New Testament times were made of polished metal. People used them to wash their faces, shave their beards, apply cosmetics, and comb their hair. Then they quickly left, giving little thought to the image they had seen. People can repeat this experience in the spiritual realm. We give a quick glance into God's Word, find a morsel of truth, and jump into another task without remembering or applying what we read.

God's Word is the perfect law that gives freedom. Obedience to Jesus' commands in Scripture brings freedom from sin and death. Whenever we submit to God's message, this law of liberty produces a disposition to obey God's will joyfully. We have freedom because we truly want to serve God. Jesus promised this freedom in John 8:31-32.

Obedient people are promised a blessing. We do not need to wait for a future blessing. We already have the blessing in our grasp. Doing what God requires brings a blessing with it. Psalm 1:1-3 summarizes the blessings of obedience. Those who meditate on the Law of the Lord will be "like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers."

1:26. This verse describes a person who considered himself to be religious but did not listen well to God's Word. The person focused on the externals of religious action such as public prayer, fasting, giving, and worship attendance. James did not belittle this action, but he added that inner control of the tongue must accompany outward performance.

Keep a tight rein on his tongue sometimes described the bridle used with a horse. The tongue is compared to an unmanageable horse which needed bit and bridle to tame its excesses. Controlling the tongue is so important that James devoted most of chapter 3 to its use.

James leveled two accusations at the person who practiced outward religion without inner control. First, he deceives himself. What a pity to find after a lifetime of pseudo-religion that you have only been practicing self-deception! Second, his religion is worthless. Peter used the same word—translated as empty—to describe useless pagan practices his readers had followed before they became Christians (1 Pet. 1:18). Religious practices without inner control have no more saving power than paganism.

1:27. Two evidences demonstrate pure religion: deeds of compassion and inner purity. This does not reduce Christianity to mere benevolence. True religion has more features than James has mentioned. The emphasis here is that for God to accept our worship it must be accompanied by loving ministry and a holy life. Both Christians and non-Christians could see and understand this type of evidence.

To look after orphans and widows demanded demonstrations of concern and active involvement. The psalmist pictured God as a defender of orphans and widows (Ps. 68:5). Christ used the word for look after in Matthew 25:43 to describe the ministry of caring for those in prison. Obeying this appeal calls for more than an occasional visit. It demands genuine compassion and true engagement.

(Not) polluted demands a freedom from contamination by the world. Peter used this word to refer to Christ as "without . . . defect" (1 Pet. 1:19). Christians are to model their purity after that of Jesus.

Some months ago I assembled a small playset with a sliding board and some climbing sections. I placed it in my backyard for my grandchildren to use. Although the process was not difficult, I constantly referred to the instruction book so I would know where to fit each piece. The writers of the book know how their product should fit together. I needed to follow their directions.

We must follow God's instructions devotedly if we want to produce a lifestyle honoring to God. Obeying God's Word demands control of the tongue, a compassion for others, and a separated life. These are the identifying marks of pure and faultless religion.