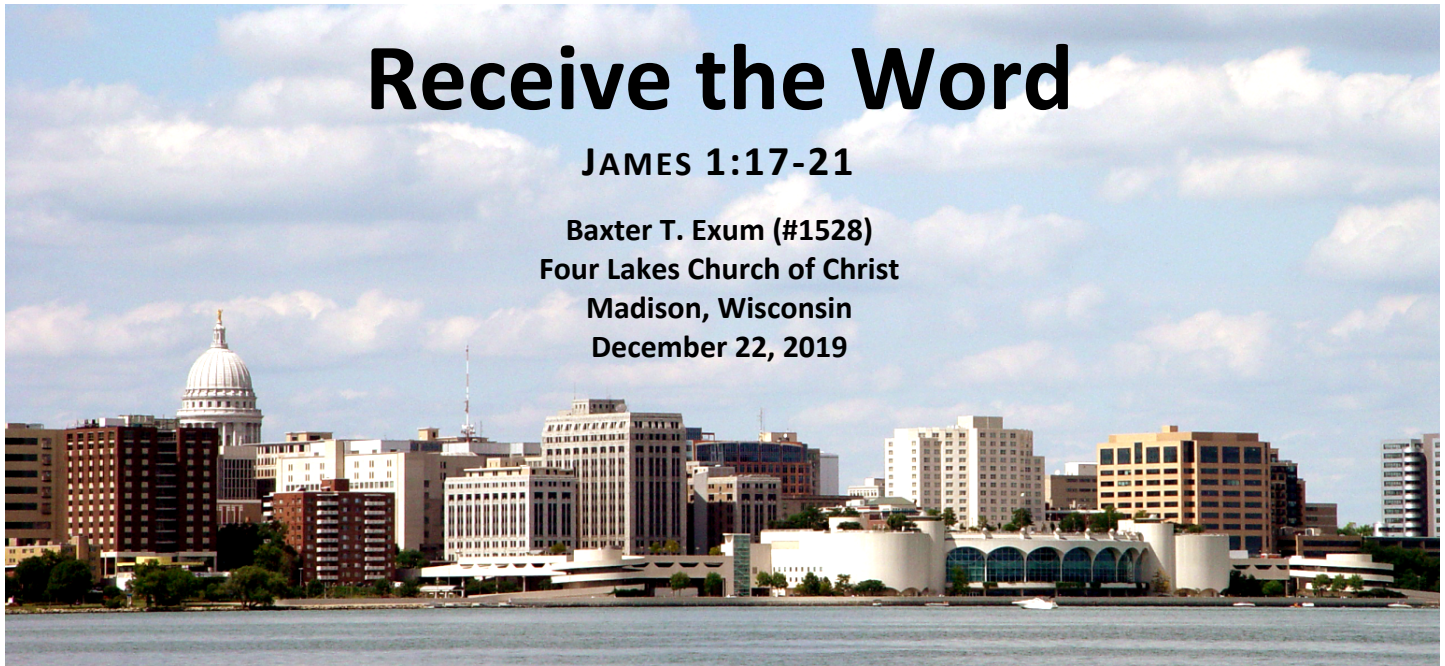


Receive the Word

JAMES 1:17-21

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Hopefully everybody either has or is getting a copy of the handout this morning. You will also need something to write with. If you are joining us online, I would invite you to take a piece of paper and make a list numbered 1-10. As we get ready to our study, we are actually starting this morning with a bit of a test, a quiz. I will ask ten very basic Bible questions, and hopefully this will give us just some idea of where we are. As I have mentioned a few times through the years: If you fail the test, you will need to take church again next year (and that is totally okay)! But, I will ask a series of ten questions, and I would ask that all of us very quickly write down an answer (just do the best you can), and then we'll go back through with the answers.

1. In chronological order, who came first: Abraham, Moses, or Noah?
2. In the Bible, who said, ***"The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord"***?
3. In what city were the disciples of Jesus first called Christians?
4. In the early church, who was the first person to be killed for being a Christian?
5. Who asked Pilate for Jesus' body after the crucifixion?
6. What tribe is Paul from?
7. To what city is Saul traveling when he is struck blind?
8. In which book of the Bible do we read about a valley of dry bones?
9. What is the main topic in Hebrews 11?
10. What is the name of the king and priest of Salem to whom Abraham gave 10%?

Extra Credit: Which Old Testament prophet predicted that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem?

So, back to the answers:

1. Noah came first (in Genesis 6), then Abraham (in Genesis 11), and then Moses (in the book of Exodus).
2. Job is the one who said, ***"The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."***
3. According to Acts 11:26, the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.
4. Stephen is the first person to be killed for being a Christian (in Acts 7).
5. Joseph of Arimathea is the one who asked Pilate for Jesus' body (Matthew 27:57-60).
6. Paul is from the tribe of Benjamin (Philippians 3:5).
7. Saul (later known as Paul) is on his way to Damascus when he is struck blind (Acts 9).

8. The valley of dry bones is found in Ezekiel 37.
9. The main topic in Hebrews 11 is faith.
10. Melchizedek is the king and priest of Salem to whom Abraham gave 10% (Genesis 14 and Hebrews 7).

Extra Credit: Micah is the prophet who predicted that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2).

I will let you judge how you did on this, but I'd like to use this to introduce another sermon request. One of our senior saints has asked for a lesson on "How to Study the Bible at Home." And this morning, as we think about the importance of reading and studying the Bible at home, I would invite you to turn with me to James 1 (p.____).

Not all of you will remember this, but we actually studied the book of James together in sermon form, almost two years before we moved to Madison, way back in June of 1998! We had a series of lessons in the library over at Elvehjem Elementary School, and in that series of lessons, we learned that James is a very practical book. James is one of the first New Testament books to be written, and it has been referred to as "the Gospel of Common Sense." One commentary on James has been titled, "What Christian Living is All About." That, also, is a very good summary of the book of James.

To try to emphasize reading the Word, I want us to look together at James 1:17-21,

¹⁷ Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. ¹⁸ In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures. ¹⁹ This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; ²⁰ for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. ²¹ Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.

As we look at this paragraph, I want to make sure we understand the context by making several observations, and then I'd like to close by thinking about the importance of daily Bible reading as we head into a new year – 1.) noting some benefits, and 2.) making some practical suggestions.

- I. **But first, we start with the text in James, and I would just briefly observe that THE WORD OF TRUTH (THE BIBLE) IS A GIFT FROM GOD.**

And I included this here mainly so we can see the context. In verses 17-18, James transitions from the previous thoughts about God not tempting us, and he moves toward this idea that ***"every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above."*** So instead of tempting us to do evil, God does the opposite. God gives us good things; most importantly, God has ***"brought us forth by the word of truth."*** In a sense, God caused us to be born. As Christians, we have been born again. We are ***"...a kind of first fruits among His creatures."*** And this happens because of his word, ***"the word of truth,"*** when we hear it, accept it, and obey it. And again, this isn't complicated, but I want to mention the word here (the Bible, the ***"word of truth"***), to emphasize that the next few verses are usually ripped out of context.

- II. In context, though, we come to verses 19-20, and basically have the meat in a word sandwich, because in verses 19-20 we have James reminding us of the ATTITUDE WE NEED TO HAVE WHEN WE READ THE WORD OF GOD. If you're following along on the handout, I might write "ATTITUDE" or "MUST HAVE A RECEPTIVE ATTITUDE," right there by "II," because in verses 19-20, we have some inspired advice concerning the attitude we have as we read the word of God.

But how do we usually understand verses 19-20? Usually, when somebody says that we need to be "*quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger*," how is that passage applied? Many people will usually apply it to relationships, communication between people. In marriage, we need to be "*quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to get angry*." As we interact with each other in the church, we need to be "*quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to get angry*." When I deal with people at work, we need to be "*quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to get angry*." And on and on. I've read and heard dozens of sermons using verses 19-20 to try to tell us how to get along with each other, how to communicate.

In context, though, verses 19-20 have nothing whatsoever to do with interpersonal relationships! Instead, what James is telling us here, in context, is that we must be quick to hear what God has said in his word, we must be slow to speak or to voice our opinion about His word, and we must be slow to get angry or to argue about what God has said in his word. Again, this is not at all about interpersonal relationships, but this is the meat in a word sandwich. We have the word of God in verse 18, we have the word of God in verse 21, and we have verses 19-20 right here in the middle. Knowing that the word is a gift from God (in verse 18), we now come to our attitude toward it. As we read the word of God, here is some inspired advice from James.

A. And we start with his encouragement that we are to be "QUICK TO HEAR."

If you are following along on the handout, this goes by the little "a" under point "II." In terms of our attitude toward the word of God, we are to be "*quick to hear*." We know that listening is an absolutely crucial part of communication. A failure to listen is often where communication breaks down. I meet a new person, and as they are telling me their name, I'm thinking about how I will introduce myself, I tell them my name, and right as they are walking away, I suddenly realize that I wasn't listening as they were telling me their name! I have failed to listen. This happens all the time. So often, instead of truly listening to somebody, we are thinking about what we will say next. It's terrible at work or at church as we're meeting new people, it's awful at home with those we love, but the point here is: It's also a terrible way to read the word of God. James, then, with reference to the word of God, tells us that we need to be "*quick to hear*." We need to read, going into it with the expectation that we will hear a message from God. We read with an eagerness to hear. By the way, I love the song we sang right before today's lesson, but if I could change one word in that song, I would. We sang together, "Beyond the sacred page, I seek Thee Lord." I wish we could change that to, "WITHIN the sacred page, I seek Thee Lord." We go to the Word to seek the Lord. We hear what is important to us. When the surgeon comes into the waiting room to tell us how our loved one is doing, we are listening. We need to have that same intensity when we listen to God in his word. And so, in terms of an attitude, we are to be "*quick to hear*."

B. The second part of this is that we must be "SLOW TO SPEAK."

And again, if I start reading the Bible with an attitude of speaking instead of listening, then it might mean that I value my own opinion more than scripture itself. Most of us know that it's hard to teach somebody something if they think they already know it all. And yet sometimes it is so easy to go into a passage with a preconceived notion of what it means, "I'm reading this passage to support what I already believe." And if that's the way I

study the Bible, then I need to slow down and listen before I speak. I need to read Scripture with a teachable spirit, with the idea that I need to learn from the Word instead of me needing to teach the Word something. King Solomon said something interesting in Ecclesiastes 5:2, that seems to apply here. He said, ***“Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few.”*** What a wise saying! And it seems to be exactly what James is saying here. When approaching the word of God, we are to be ***“slow to speak.”***

C. And the final part of this receptive attitude (letter “c” on the handout) is James’ reminder that we must be “SLOW TO ANGER.”

And again, this is with reference to hearing the word of God, ***“for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God,”*** James says. As I understand it, we are not to get in an argument with God about something he has said in his word. We shouldn’t dispute with God. We shouldn’t argue with God about the importance of baptism. We shouldn’t argue with God about how he wants us to worship. We shouldn’t argue with God about the qualifications of elders and deacons. And on and on. Our anger might get us what we want from time to time here in this life, but getting angry with God accomplishes nothing. When it comes to the Word, we are to be ***“slow to anger.”***

III. Here at the end, I struggled with how to summarize verse 21, but the idea is that as we read, we need to ALLOW THE WORD OF GOD TO TAKE ROOT.

And in a sense, this is also the idea of reading with a receptive spirit, having an eagerness to learn. Basically, we need to remove sin from our lives to the point where we can accept what the word says, pushing aside anything that might keep us from hearing the Word effectively. It’s the idea of perhaps weeding the garden or tilling the soil before planting. We get rid of one thing so that something else has a chance to grow. Some authors compare this to the idea of cleaning out ear wax so we can hear better! The idea is: If I have some outstanding sin in my life that I haven’t dealt with, I need to take care of that before I go trying to learn more. Otherwise, the sin I refuse to give up might become a barrier to accepting even more of God’s word. Why learn more if I haven’t applied what I already know? So, we are to remove any obvious sin in our lives. And this allows us to receive the Word of God with humility and allows the word to take root in our lives.

Conclusion:

As we come to the end of our study, and since we are just about ready for a new year, and in keeping with this request for a lesson on reading the Bible at home, I just want to give a few benefits to reading the Bible on a daily basis, along with some practical advice. But let’s start with two very practical benefits of Daily Bible Reading. By the way, I asked my wife to proofread today’s handout, and she said, “What in the world is DBR?” I told her she would find out today! But then I got nervous! What if DBR stands for something obscene? She’s a middle school teacher, so the more I thought about it, the more nervous I got, so I looked it up. DBR does not stand for “Duke Basketball Report,” or “Dowel Bar Retrofit,” or “Distributed Bragg Reflector.” Very nervously, I then looked it up on Urban Dictionary. We go there often to figure out what in the world the middle school kids are talking about, and the worst they could come up with was “Damaged Beyond Repair.” Today, though, DBR stands for “Daily Bible Reading.” What are the benefits of Daily Bible Reading?

First of all, by reading at least a little bit every day, and especially if we move through the entire Bible, daily Bible reading allows us to see the **BIG PICTURE**. And I know I mention this from time to time, but when I was growing up, I learned all the important stories. We had some good Bible class material and some good teachers, so I knew all about Moses, and Noah, and Abraham, and Daniel, and Joseph, and Jonah, and King David, and Solomon. But, I had no idea which one of those came first! I had no concept of the chronology. I knew the stories, but I couldn't fit them together. Then, when I was in high school, maybe a sophomore, I decided to read the entire Bible through from cover to cover, and suddenly it all came together! As I was reading, I was already familiar with all of the disjointed stories, but things started clicking in an amazing way. It made sense. I was reading and came to Moses, and suddenly realized, "I know this guy!" And I came to Joshua, and, "I know this guy!" and so on. The characters were all fitting together. And this is huge. On the other hand, try to imagine studying such a large book WITHOUT ever reading it from cover to cover.

Yesterday, I asked my dad if I could borrow a large, classic novel to try to illustrate this. He sent what I think is his favorite, Doctor Zhivago by Boris Pasternak. I want us to try to imagine studying this book like we sometimes study the Bible. Let's imagine that we start a Doctor Zhivago club. We meet once a week, and we come together to study a random paragraph. So, we study this paragraph on page 406, we analyze the words in that paragraph, and then we put it away until next week. A week later we come together, and we open it up to page 196 and study another paragraph. We do the same thing, week after week, for decades. Is that any way to study a book like this? Is there a value to studying small sections? Absolutely! But how could we claim to love this book without ever reading it from cover to cover? In fact, it would be almost impossible for this book to make any sense whatsoever without reading it straight through. And the same thing is even more true for the greatest of all books. Yes, we can randomly study disjointed passages here and there (as we are doing right now), but the only way the word of God will ever truly make sense is if we read it – starting at the beginning and reading it all the way through to the end. So, first of all, when we read the entire Bible from cover to cover, we start to understand the big picture. If you have never done it, I would encourage you to give it a shot.

Secondly, when we read on a daily basis, we allow the Bible to **SHAPE OUR THINKING**. Even with only 5-10 minutes every day, we start thinking about spiritual things, and we get more and more familiar with the Word. And the longer we live, the more familiar it gets. The alternative is that we allow the world to shape our thinking, and that is asking for a spiritual disaster. So, we read daily so that we start thinking Biblically.

Here at the end, I want to give just two words of very practical advice. If reading on a daily basis isn't quite familiar to you yet, here are two things that might help.

First of all, **GET A GOOD BIBLE!** Get a solid translation, based on the oldest manuscript evidence, make sure that the translation is as word-for-word as possible, and make sure you can actually understand it. We've studied this before, and those lessons are on our website. But we have some awesome translations available today. I use the New American Standard Bible, but I often keep the English Standard Version open on my desk. These are two of the best. Make sure the print is large enough to read. In terms of readability, I like our pew Bibles. You can get one just like these but in leather. If I'm looking up a word, I like to use some technology. I use the NASB on Olive Tree. Some of you use YouVersion or others. But for daily reading, it's usually better to use a hard copy. I read an article yesterday indicating that most teens who read their Bibles daily use paper, not a screen, and I thought that was interesting. In terms of layout, the ESV has put out what they describe as a "Readers' Edition." And this is formatted specifically for reading – not for looking things up, but for sitting down and reading. They have eliminated all verse and chapter references, they've eliminated footnotes, it's formatted by paragraphs instead of verses, and they've chosen a font specifically designed to be readable. If you want to look

up John 12:48, forget it! You will never find it! There is no “12,” and there is no “48.” But, it is actually fun to read without the distraction of verse numbers and footnotes. So, get a good Bible.

Secondly, **FIND A GOOD SCHEDULE**! Yes, you could just sit down and read, and without stopping to sleep or eat you will be done in about 70 hours. Most of us, though, need a schedule. We need some structure. Most of us can't read 70 hours straight through. We need to break it up. We need to eat, sleep, and work. I have a college buddy who read the entire Bible over Christmas break. Most of us, though, can't devote two solid weeks to reading the Word. So, I have put several schedules in the handout. The first is my favorite plan for reading through the New Testament in a year. I've talked to the author about it, and I have his permission to share. But what I love is the arrangement. If you read the New Testament straight through, you'd be in the gospel accounts half the year, and then you wouldn't have any Jesus from July-December! This plan fixes that. And it's doable. When our kids were younger, we did this together for several years. It's roughly one chapter a day. That's maybe 5 minutes a day. I'm also including a schedule for reading the entire Bible straight through from Genesis to Revelation with about three chapters a day. Then, I've also included a schedule that arranges the entire Bible in chronological order. It's fascinating. I'll leave it at that. They have Bibles arranged for reading, so you read a bit of the Old, a bit of the Psalms, a few verses from Proverbs, and then a chapter from the New Testament every day. I tried it once and nearly lost my mind. I couldn't handle jumping back and forth like that.

Beyond the printed schedules, I've also put two very helpful websites in the resources section – abibleaday.com has both of these that I've included in the handout, and more. Then, bibleplan.org is a great site where you pick a schedule, you pick a language, then your favorite translation, when you want to start, what time you want to be contacted every day, and then it will email you a section to read every day. It will harass you! I did one of their plans maybe ten years ago, and it was good.

My advice is to start small. Go home today and get started. Get a partner or do it together as a family. Get some encouragement. Get together with your family or a friend, choose a plan, and check in with each other once a week or so, “Hey, how's Deuteronomy going?” or whatever. When we lived in Janesville, we had a signup sheet with maybe 20 people who committed to reading through the Bible in a year, and we encouraged each other through the year. Pick a schedule and get ahead. I like reading a book at a time if I can. And so, if Matthew is next on the schedule, I might get up on my day off and read Matthew. You can read Matthew in 1-2 hours, depending on how fast you read. And if you are using a schedule, you might have just finished your reading for the whole week. Or just keep going. Some New Testament books take less than five minutes to read. On the handout I've included a list of the books and a rough estimate of how long it takes to read each one. So, if you have an extra 13 minutes in your schedule, go look for a book that fits, cross it off, and do it again tomorrow. We are out of time this morning, but I am thankful for the good question about reading the Bible at home. We've looked at the Word this morning (a small passage from James), and we've also looked at some very practical advice on how to read the Bible at home on a daily basis. I sincerely hope that you will consider reading through the Bible this coming year in some way or another. And please, let me know if I can encourage you in some way.

As we wrap it up, we want to give everybody here an invitation to obey the gospel. Because of what Jesus did for us, he has every right to tell us what to do. Remember: In James 1:21, James tells us that the word, when it is implanted in our hearts, is “able” to save our souls.” It isn't automatic. We need to do our part by obeying it (as he will go on to explain in the next few verses. We respond to the gospel with faith, and we obey his command to turn away from sin and to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any

questions, talk to me or John or Aaron after worship, but if you are ready to obey the gospel immediately, you can let us know right now as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: furlakeschurch@gmail.com