

So, then, my beloved brothers, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger; for the anger of man doesn't produce the righteousness of God. Therefore, putting away all filthiness and overflowing of wickedness, receive with humility the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not only hearers, deluding your own selves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man looking at his natural face in a mirror; for he sees himself, and goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of freedom, and continues, not being a hearer who forgets, but a doer of the work, this man will be blessed in what he does. If anyone among you thinks himself to be religious while he doesn't bridle his tongue, but deceives his heart, this man's religion is worthless. Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this: to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

When designing an airplane, one thing is always figured, always measured, and always indicated on the sketches and blueprints from the very beginning. It may not be quite as critical, but the same thing is true when a boat is being designed. Can anyone guess what that is?

The center of gravity—the balance point. An airplane needs to be balanced if it is going to fly straight and level. Even if it is engineered perfectly, there are still individual variations—that is why they build in a way to “trim” a plane or make a small change in the functional center of gravity—even during flight. When I was a teenager, we had an Areronica L-16B, a small two-seated fabric-covered plane that once was in the service of the Civil Air Patrol.

On our plane, the trim-tab was a piece of metal on the elevator that actually wasn't adjustable in flight at all. It was adjusted by bending it while you were on the ground and once it was set, right after manufacture, then unless something changed the balance, it was left alone.

Modern planes, though have a crank or even an electronic way to alter the trim so that variations in how it was loaded—luggage and people—can be offset easily in flight. Still. It is better if the balance is right in the first place.

On a boat, having the center of gravity off can make the boat run with the bow up or the bow down—unless of course, you have a trim system—but just like an airplane, it is better if the balance is literally right.

James is one of the more interesting books in the Bible as far as I am concerned. James doesn't want us to just tell about our faith—he wants us to SHOW and tell about our faith, with a special emphasis on the outward demonstration of the inner workings of God in our heart and our lives.

When we read St. Paul's writings, we see a special emphasis on faith and faith alone. In Ephesians two: *even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us to sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus; for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*

Both of these passages are true and yet they almost seem to contradict each other—so how do we choose?

Do we concentrate on the inner part of our relationship to God or do we concentrate on those works that point to those inner workings—that relationship with God?

The answer for me turns out to be the basic principle I personally try to use when using Scripture to guide my life. Just like planes and boats, our faith needs to be as balanced as possible. Balance between inner and outer religion—but maybe even more important is that we balance our use of Scripture itself. I'll talk about balance a bit more in a while, but first let's look at these nine verses in order.

This passage begins with “wherefore” in some translations. In the translation I just read, it begins with, “so, then...”

What does that mean to us as readers? [It means that these verses are directly connected to something earlier.] So, what does verse 18 say?

Paraphrased, it says that God, by his own choice, used the word of truth to transform us into new creation—new creatures—the first-children of his new family.

“Because of the grace and the love of God shown in his work and his actions” then let everyone be swift to hear—this is what we call “active listening.” Paying real attention—wanting with all our being to hear AND understand.

This relates to the “Word of Truth” in the earlier verse and is often connected with hearing one who preaches the word but it applies to silently reading also. To hear in the Bible usually has action connected to it.

The reality is that this can apply to any conversation. If we want to be good at relationships of any kind, we need to be swift to hear.

If we want our relationship to God to be healthy, we must be swift to hear him.

If we want our relationship with fellow Christians to be healthy, what must we do? [That's right be swift to hear]

If we want our relationship to our spouse or kids or grand kids to be healthy, what must we do? [You got it—be swift to hear. Truly listen.]

Then comes the second punch of this one-two. Not only are we to be swift to hear—we are supposed to be slow to speak. This might be applied as “Think before you begin speaking.”

“Listen well and let it sink in before you open your mouth.” and we might connect it with the “slow to anger” and say that we are to really hear, THEN speak—and count to ten before we speak in anger. Allow time to hear and think and allow anger to dissipate.

This fits with theological conversations with our fellow Christians and with non-believers. It fits our relationship with God and his Word. It fits with hearing a preacher. It fits with living in the world. It fits with our relationships at home and with business meetings at the church.

I think this is so important to our relationships and to our witness in the world that I am going to try again to make this as clear as possible based on my personal understanding:

“Listen carefully and make sure you take time to understand. Reply only when you are certain it is your brain speaking instead of just your heart, making sure that you are not replying out of anger.”

The word “anger” in the 20th verse comes from a Greek word for “boiling pot” and I love that word picture. Also, the word “man” in verse 20 isn't a “man or woman” as it often is. It is “MAN” so. the Greek specifically refers to the anger of a MAN. I don't know what that means, but there you have it :)

So in verse 20 it seems that James is saying that even when we are right and even if the other person is absolutely and shamelessly wrong, we are to be careful of our attitude and careful with our anger. This doesn't mean that we can't debate religious things—just not in the angry style that is seen all too often.

Let me widen these two verses out some. I can do that because the truth is the truth is the truth and we know that Scripture is truth. In this case, relational truth.

Be quick to listen, slow to speak—making sure not to speak out of anger, because nothing righteous or good can come from speaking in anger. Again—works with any relationship you can think of.

Verse 21's “putting aside of filthiness” is again a word-picture. The picture of one of taking off dirty clothes. The phrase “implanted word” is also a picture—one of a seed taking root. Born in the heart.

One of the verses I learned as a child was also a song. “Be ye doers of the word, not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”

The Greek word for doing is continuing action—KEEP ON doing the word. Also, the word translated “doer” can mean an agent.

I like that idea—one of being God's agent in this place. Sounds pretty important, doesn't it? James says that we are to become agents of God—and that the way to do that is by hearing AND acting on what we hear.

When I was in seminary, my preaching professor said that the very best—the most a preacher can expect from a well-crafted and well-presented sermon is “intentionality.” If you leave this place INTENDING to act, then I have done my job. The rest is between you and God.

James encourages us to take it one step beyond. He is encouraging us to ACT on what we hear and what we intend.

If we go and we read and we go and we hear God's truth and we say, "boy that is great" and if we don't intend to act or if we don't act then maybe we should have remained ignorant. (That ISN'T found in the Bible, by the way, that is from first Tommy) :)

The picture painted in verses 23 and 24 is that if we hear and don't do or if we don't listen carefully, we might not understand the truth might not hear what God wants us to hear—and what he wants us to do. If we only take a "quick look" or a "quick listen" then we might not see what was really there. The superficial nature of that glance allows us to put aside what we saw and forget our tendencies and our natures and the very things that God wanted us to change.

Verse 25 is the opposite of that failing: *But he who looks into the perfect law of freedom, and continues, not being a hearer who forgets, but a doer of the work, this man will be blessed in what he does.*

God would have us really see and really respond.

Verse 26 refers back to the anger in verse 19. I like the picture of having a muzzle or a bridle. Control. If we claim to be religious—but we don't control our mouths—our religion is worthless.

Pretty strong, huh? James said it. Since Scripture is inspired by God, then God said it first.

Then finally, we have a picture in the last verse of true religion. Of real religion in the eyes of God: *to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

Now, Haden and David and Donna and Billy are going out from us to do some of those very things. BUT it is not the doing of those things that brings salvation—that makes us Christian—that makes up true religion.

Real religion isn't DOING these things. Real religion is when these things come from our nature and from our relationship to God. When our actions are fruit that comes spontaneously. This fruit is what we are to bear. This is how we can be judged as being faithful. This is how you can tell who we are and whose we are.

Let me try to show the difference between doing these things for the sake of religion and doing these things as a product of our relationship with God.

What time of year does an apple tree decide to put on blooms? What time of the year does it decide to put on apples and make them ripe? They don't decide do they?

Are our works works or are they fruit? God wants us to bear fruit that naturally comes from our relationship to him.

Christians, we are to have a natural center of gravity. Our vital, real, honest, loving relationship to God should result in fruit—naturally. Our actions are to come from that relationship just as an apple comes from an apple tree. Faith. Works. In fact there was a study book about James some time ago. "Faith Works." I guess that is the proverbial, "nuff said."