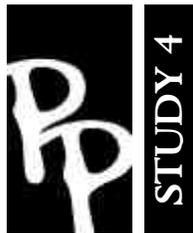


THE RIGHTEOUS LIFE



James 1:19-27

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- 📁 Introduction to the passage
- 📁 What these verses mean
- 📁 Summary
- 📁 A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses
- 📁 Focus Point: The world
- 📁 Over to you

Introduction to the passage

James now begins to explore a whole range of aspects of the life of the Christian, which will take up the rest of the letter. The conduct and behaviour of the believer follows naturally from his reference to the new birth (1:18). Birth must lead to growth toward spiritual maturity (1:4). James likens this maturing life to the ripened harvest out of which the Israelites offered the best to God. In the verses of our study passage, he calls this the righteous life made clear in the Scriptures. Therefore it is to the Scriptures we must turn for direction into this righteous life. We must apply our minds to the Scriptures with diligence and then apply what we learn to ourselves and to our relationship with others.

What these verse mean

Verse 19

My dear brothers, take note of this:

James is now going to explore some details of the Christian life which he knows will lead to heart-searching, even resistance, so he wants them to be alert to what he is about to say.

Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak

The Christian life is to be worked out in fellowship with other believers. This is one of the benefits of church membership. But this, in itself, is very testing and requires self-discipline. We may have a tendency to ignore other people's views and to try to impose our ideas on them. We must learn how to listen and how to choose the best time to speak.

and slow to become angry,

We may be tempted to anger if others do not listen to us, or reject what we say. But such anger arises from self-centredness and intolerance. The time may come when we must show "righteous anger", when God is being dishonoured or his truth is being denied, but we must not react quickly, and we must be sure that we are angry for God's glory and not for selfish pride.

Verse 20

for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

Anger in the heart, whether or not it is expressed in words or actions, is a blockage to spiritual progress. The way of blessing is through humility and meekness (Is. 66:2). Sinful anger is part of our old nature that must be discarded (Col. 3:8), if we desire to live in a way that pleases God.

Verse 21

Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent,

Unconfessed sin and persistence in wrong-doing not only hinders our progress to spiritual maturity, it also provides a blockage to the mind and heart as we approach the Scriptures. Here James may have in mind sinful practices from the old way of life of his members. Such practices are not easy for people, reared in a very different society, to overcome. The idea is one of taking off dirty clothes (Rom. 13:11-14).

and humbly accept the word planted in you,

Before we became Christians, the Bible was simply a book we might read occasionally. When we are born again, the teaching of the Bible increasingly becomes a part of us, dominating our inner being, our minds, our hearts, our consciences. Our whole inner being gradually harmonises with God's Word as we give assent to it.

which can save you.

We may think of our salvation in three ways. First, we have been saved (past); through faith in Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven and we have peace with God (Rom.1:16). Then when Jesus Christ returns (future), our salvation will be complete as every effect of sin in our souls and our bodies will be removed (Rom.13:11). In this verse we have the third way (present), which is a day by day experience of the work of the Holy Spirit giving us spiritual strength and enjoyment of the blessings Christ has prepared for us by his death.

Verse 22

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

This undoubtedly reflects the teaching of Jesus in such passages as Matthew 7:24-27 and Luke 11:28. Having introduced the “word” in verse 21, James now issues a warning. It is very easy to deceive ourselves that all is well with us simply because we listen to sermons, or read a part of the Bible each day. Hearing or reading God’s Word and obeying it are equally important. If we try to live out the Christian life (“Do”) without being directed by the Word, we will go astray. Likewise, if we listen to the Word without applying its teaching to our daily living, we will fail to live in a way that pleases God.

Verses 23 and 24

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 ²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.

We need to read the Bible (the “word”) for all kinds of reasons, such as to find the knowledge of salvation, to enjoy God’s promises to encourage us, to gain an understanding of God and his ways, and our hope for the future. But James reminds us of the importance of our faults being shown to us in the Bible, and our need to correct them. His illustration, taken from everyday life in the home, points out our tendency to agree with what the Bible says about us, to be sorry about it, and yet still not to do anything about it.

Verse 25

But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom,

Here is a helpful description of the “word”. It is perfect (Ps. 19:7) because it gives to us the truth of God without error or defect of any kind (2 Tim.3:15-16). It also gives freedom because God knows what is good for us because he made us. People who are not Christian mistakenly think that the Bible robs them of their liberty. It certainly leads them away from a self-destructive way of life; but it leads to true freedom which results in life rather than death. It is like the book of instructions with a complicated machine. So long as the instructions are followed, the machine works well and does not go wrong. We do well to search the Scriptures (John 5:39) regularly and diligently to discover God’s purpose for our lives (Ps. 1:1-3).

and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does.

The process of reforming our lives into conformity to God’s Word does not end until we reach the glory. There is always something to be done because, as we study the Scriptures, we discover new faults and sinful tendencies of which we had not been aware. But the process is not a miserable one (John 13:17); it is sin that robs us of joy, while holiness is the way to happiness.

Verse 26

If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless.

James has already mentioned the harm that can be done by the speedy use of the tongue (1:19-20), and he will expand on the subject later in his letter (3:1-12). Here, and in 1:27, his purpose is to show the emptiness of religion that is concerned mainly with external rituals and forms, which is the way many people today think of religion. But outward form should arise from inward spiritual grace and where this is absent the “religion” is worthless. At first sight this may seem to have nothing to do with the use of our tongues, until we realise that our words arise from our hearts as Jesus taught in Matthew 12:34. Very often, the first sign of grace in the heart is a refining of speech. The more we expose our hearts and minds to the Scriptures, the more we will be concerned with pure hearts that will then purify our words.

Verse 27

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress

Again, at first sight this seems to be simply a matter of outward conduct. But by selecting orphans and widows, James has in mind those who are most deprived and defenceless, and who are the least able to call for help or to repay it. Such help arises from a heart of selfless love and sheer humility. Again, the more we search the Scriptures, the more we will discover that this is the way of godliness and Christlikeness (Ps.68:5; Matt. 25:36).

and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

It is all too easy to allow our thoughts and desires to be shaped by the prevailing habits of the ungodly people around us. By the “world” James means the godless life and culture that clings around us and attacks us through our eyes and ears. The apostle Paul warns us against such things in Romans 12:2. We need to fill our minds and hearts with God’s Word, and to do what it says!



Summary

“The righteous life that God requires” (1:20) could very well be a statement of James’ theme in the whole of this letter, and here he touches on some aspects of this kind of life. A righteous life is one in which the temper and the tongue are under control, that outwardly is full of compassion and inwardly is resistant to evil influences. But what is the secret of such a life? A part of the answer is in the consistent reading of the Scriptures, and the diligent application of their teaching to every aspect of our lives.



A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses

Theme: The importance of the Bible in the Christian life

The Bible is one of God's most precious gifts to us. Without it we would not know the truth about him and about ourselves. Here we discover where we come from, why we are in the world, and our destiny.

It is important in the Christian life

1. For our spiritual growth – it is as necessary for our spiritual growth as our food is for our bodies (1 Pet. 2:2).
 - a. We learn about the Lord, all he has done for us, all he is doing for us now, and all he has promised to do.
 - b. We learn about ourselves and the areas of our lives that need correcting and cleansing (Ps. 119:9-11, 105).
2. For our consistent reading and diligent application.
 - a. Consistent reading means doing so regularly and being sure to cover the whole Bible over a period of time.
 - b. Diligent application means that we ask the Lord to give us understanding and to make us willing for correction of our conduct and cleansing of our minds and hearts.
3. For the benefits we receive.
 - a. Freedom (1:25) – unbelievers are unwilling to be restricted to obedience to God's laws. They want liberty to sin, but sin enslaves. The believer now has freedom to obey God, something we could not do before we were saved because we were slaves to sin.
 - b. Blessing – joy in ourselves and a blessing to other people. (Ps. 1:1-3).



Focus Point: The world

James concludes the study of this passage by urging believers to avoid being polluted by the world. James uses the word again in 3:6 to describe the tongue as a fire, “a world of evil among the parts of the body”. In the NIV translation the word “world” is used in different ways. In the original Hebrew and Greek more specific words are used to describe the different meaning of the English word “world”. In the King James (Authorised) translation of the Bible the word “earth” and “lands” is used in places where

NIV uses “world”. In this Focus Point we consider the different meanings in the Bible of the word “world”.

Planet earth

The most obvious meaning is the planet on which we live. God owns it (Gen. 1:1) and everything it contains (Ps. 24:1), loves it (John 3:16) and keeps it going (Col. 1:17). It is the physical realm and contrasts with that of heaven. The word “world” is used to describe the varied make-up of this physical earth.

- The planet with its topographical features as habitable and fruitful (Ps. 90:2)
- The place of human habitation (1 Co. 5:10)
- The material world (Rom. 1:20)
- “Ends of the world” is used to mean everywhere in the whole physical earth (Ps. 19:4; Rom. 10:18).

The Hebrews thought in terms of the heavens (the place where God lived) and the earth (the realm of human existence). The Greeks used the word *kosmos*, which became used for the universe. The New Testament writers followed the Hebrew thought and used the word *kosmos* to generally describe the earth and not the universe. However, these writers did not limit themselves in using *kosmos* to mean the physical world, but also to describe the human race who occupied the physical world and also the system that is opposed and hostile to God.

Human life on the planet

- All people of the world including every single individual (Gen 11:1; Matt. 13:38).
- People representing all races, nationalities and classes (Ex. 34:10; John 4:42).
- The human race as a whole, not including every individual. In John's Gospel the emphasis is on lostness, antagonism towards God. It is a description of quality rather than quantity (Matt. 26:13; Mark 16:15; John 1:9; James 2:5).
- A figure of speech to describe a large majority of people or the most significant part of the world's population known to the writer at the time (Gen. 41:57; John 7:4).
- This present life contrasted with heaven or hell or the world to come (John 6:14; 10:36; 11:27; Heb. 1:6).

Mankind under the power of sin and Satan

The world of human beings in rebellion against God. This world is controlled by the evil one (1 John 5:19), but the followers of Christ do not belong to this world (John 15:19). Satan rules this kingdom, which appears to be large

and very efficient (Eph. 6:12). It dominates the life of unsaved humanity. However, though this kingdom has spoilt that which was created, God is sovereign and permits Satan's kingdom to exist for a time. God has provided a way of reconciliation for the world (i.e. people representing all races etc.) whereby men can transfer from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God (2 Co. 5:19).

Further uses of the word "world" of human beings in rebellion are:-

- Material possessions, the cares and pleasures of this life. Excessive attachments to these things are sinful and a snare to be avoided (Mark 8:36; 2 Tim. 4:10).
- The substitution of the word "world" for a whole and vast complex subject. In James 3:6 world is used for sinful human speech.

The future beyond this earth

The earth as it will be renewed by God after the end of the present earth (Rom. 4:13; Heb. 2:5).

Source: *A Dictionary of Bible Symbols* (Grace Publications) and *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Baker Books).



Over to you

What can you do to encourage your people to read the Bible regularly and systematically?

Is there a needy group of people near to your church that you and your people could help in some way?