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YOUR BLESSED LIFE NOW  
James 1:21-27

It is hard to believe that it has only been 10 years since Apple introduced the first iPhone on June 29, 2007 because smart phones seem like they've been here forever. Today people can't imagine living without them. They are ubiquitous, an ever present necessity for most people. Many people literally are addicted to them. They look to them continually for connection to other people, information and work.

However, it turns out that smart phones might well be misnamed. Our dependence on them may be seriously counterproductive. Recently researchers at the University of Texas came up with an interesting test. They had more than 800 volunteers that they divided into 3 groups. All 3 groups were asked to complete standard tests of cognitive performance. One group was asked to hand over all their personal possessions, including their phones, before entering the testing room. The second group was allowed to bring their phones into the room but required to put them on silent and place them face down on the table and not use them during testing. The third group was asked merely to put their phones on silent but could have them wherever they wanted. The result was startling. The group who left their phones out of the room performed far better than either of the other two groups on the tests. In other words, just having a smart phone within reach, even if you are not using it, makes you less able to perform cognitively. In other words, it makes you dumber. Other similar studies have shown that having a cell phone within reach even if you are not looking at it makes you feel less connected to people you are conversing with. One researcher said just "trying not to be distracted by a phone is, itself distracting."

So the amazing thing is the very thing we look to for aid in connecting with people and informing us, actually makes us less connected and a little dumber. Is it possible that there is a lesson for us in that? Are there other ways the very thing we pursue to gain something might actually keep us from having it? It turns out that this is true when it comes to having what I would call a blessed life, a truly happy life. We will learn about this today from James 1:21-27.

The overall message of this passage is clear, but it turns out it is easy to miss some subtle points and consequently misinterpret it, and it is easy to overlook a couple of critically important statements in the passage.

## THE WORD THAT SAVES IS IN YOU

James says literally, getting rid of the filth and evil that is so abundant in the world, humbly accept the word planted in you. Literally it says accept the implanted word, or the word that has already been planted in your souls. This word he speaks of is the word that is able to save our souls. What message is able to save your soul?

Romans 1:16 says, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile." Speaking of the gospel, which means good news or good message, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:2, "By this gospel you are saved." By the message of Jesus Christ, the word of who he is and what he has done for us, our souls are saved.

Everyone in the world is looking for something that will save their soul. Oddly, though they may not be aware of it or admit it, sometimes not even to themselves, everyone knows there is something wrong in them and they need something to save them.

A common message today is we save ourselves. We just need to see the good or the divine in ourselves and that will save us. In downtown Dubuque, Iowa, this past week we came across an establishment called "The Center Of I Am." I first thought that maybe this was some unusual Christian group worshipping the great I Am, Yahweh, the God of Israel. It wasn't. It was a group helping people find out that they are divine. They just need to realize this about themselves to become whole. This group claims to support you "on your journey toward finding happiness, self love and awareness of universal consciousness." Yes, everyone is looking for happiness. They are desperate to be saved.

But let's imagine that you have gone to the beach. Unfortunately you get caught in a strong rip. You know you're supposed to swim parallel to the beach and not try to swim against the rip, but you keep getting swept farther out. You're a decent swimmer, but soon you are tiring badly. Fear starts to creep in, for you realize you are so tired you couldn't make it back to the beach even if you didn't have to defeat the rip. You struggle with all your might to get back to shore, fighting until all your strength is spent. You look up and to your dismay realize you are still a long way out. You've got nothing left. What can you do? You know at this point that you can't save yourself and you need help. But then to your immense relief you see a person powerfully swimming toward you and you realize it's a lifeguard. When he reaches you with relief you grab for him and say, "Thank you for rescuing me. I was about to go under." But then he says, "I'm not going to save you. You have it in you to save yourself. You just need to realize the lifeguard within." What kind of rescue is this? It's a useless one, because the lifeguard is

dead wrong. If he doesn't help you then you are going to drown. That's the problem with all the people that tell you to realize yourself and know that the salvation of your soul is in you. They're just wrong. You've tried and nothing has worked. People who buy that message keep trying to believe in themselves, but sadly they will never find the solution to the problem within them that they sense they need.

There are many other claims about ways to save your soul. Education, success, pleasure, drugs, meditation, various religions are all touted as ways to save your soul, though usually not in those terms. There is indeed something wrong in all of us human beings, and that thing is at the core of all the unrest, unhappiness, discord, fear and lack of peace that is rampant in our species. The solution for it is the grace of God through Jesus Christ. It is the word of Christ that can heal us.

In verse 25 James wrote about gazing intently at "the perfect law that gives freedom." Since he was Jewish the knee jerk reaction is to think that he was referring there to the Law of Moses, the Jewish Law. It sounds like he's saying freedom comes from obeying that law. But that's not what he was saying.

We tend to view that statement through the lens of law versus grace. But that was not what James meant. Ancient Jews often used the term "law" to mean more than a bunch of rules Moses handed down. The law, for them, meant God's revelation of himself and his will for humans. James specifically referred to this perfect "law" as one that gives freedom. The law of Moses did not give freedom. That's why Jesus Christ came into this world. He came to bring us freedom.

In these verses the word that is implanted in us is the same as the law he refers to in verse 25. As we will go through this passage you will see that James is making one big point. That one point requires that we see that the word implanted and the law of freedom are the same thing. They both refer to the message of the gospel of Christ. If we don't understand that we will end up with lots of theological confusion from this passage.

This soul saving message, James says, has already been implanted in us. His readers are believers in Jesus. Their souls have already been saved. The message has been planted in ours as well. If you're a believer in Jesus Christ that message has been planted in you, it has saved your soul, given you life, and is in the process of bringing you freedom.

## HUMBLY ACCEPT THE WORD

James says something that seems confusing. He tells us to humbly accept the word that is planted in us. Wait, what? That sounds like he's telling people to accept the message of Jesus. But we know this is written to people who had already accepted it. They were believers in Jesus and James even says his truth has been implanted in them. Haven't they already accepted the message?

James was not using "accept" here in the sense of acknowledge it to be true. He meant let it instruct you in how to live. The New American Standard translation of Zephaniah 3:2 is the most accurate. There, speaking of Jerusalem, it reads, "She heeded no voice, she accepted no instruction." In verse 7 God told Jerusalem to "accept instruction." The Greek translation of those verses used the same word as James used in verse 21. It meant they should heed the instruction of the word that is planted in them. They should pay attention to it.

James goes on to put it in other terms in the subsequent verses. He tells them they should become not just hearers of this message, but doers of it. That's saying the same thing as "accept" the word. Let its instruction rule in your heart and life. In other words, this message that saves our soul has a "doing" aspect to it. It's not that the doing saves our souls because they've already been saved by the message. It's that not heeding it is a self-destructive course of action.

The point he is making is that the message of Jesus Christ and his grace has some implications for what kind of people we are and how we live. James is saying we need to pay attention to those implications and live by them. Otherwise, he says, we're kind of like a guy who looks at himself in a mirror, then goes away and can't remember what he looked like. What's the point of looking in a mirror if you immediately forget what you look like?

Have you ever had the experience of being out to a restaurant, going to the restroom, and when you look in the mirror discovering that you have little pieces of broccoli stuck between your teeth? Yeah, been there, done that, or something like it. What would you think if someone who had that experience, said, "Huh, look at that. There's broccoli between my teeth," then shrugged and went back to his table without doing anything? Then when a friend says to him, "Hey, um, did you know that you have broccoli between your teeth?" he says, "Really? I had no idea. When did that get there?" That's genuine USDA grade A dumb. You look in the mirror specifically to see if you look all right and if you don't do something about it. Having the word implanted and then not paying attention to what it says about how you should live would be really stupid.

It is, after all, the word that saves your soul and brings you freedom. Oh, well who would want that? Everybody! So how dense would you have to be to have that truth in you, the truth that saves and brings freedom, and then pay no attention to it. USDA grade A stupid.

James gives some examples of some of the implications of the word that we have implanted in us. We should control our speech. Notice that verse 21 begins with the word "therefore," linking it to the verses that preceded this section. There James warned us to be careful of our speech, be quick to listen and be slow to anger. Then in verse 21 he told us that we should get rid of filth. We typically think this has to do with maybe raunchy movies or pornography or terrible immoral habits. We surely should not have that going on in our lives, but that's not what James meant. He was talking about our speech. He was referring to speech that is angry, attacking others, critical, promoting self. That's the stuff we need to get rid of. He refers again in verse 26 to keeping a tight rein on our tongues. That's an example of accepting the word that is planted in us.

How does submitting to the Gospel of Christ call on us to get rid of unholy talk? In Ephesians 4:22-24 Paul said, "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds and to put on the new self, created to be like God." He claimed the Gospel of Christ means we have a whole new life with a new way of living. It is living in a way that reflects the very character of God. Then he begins in verse 25 to discuss what the implications of that gospel are for how we live. In verse 29 he wrote, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

God is always motivated by love. Everything he does is a result of his loving desire to do good for us. The Gospel says we have a new life, and in this new life we begin to live as God does, motivated always by love. That means every time we open our mouths to speak what we say should be motivated, framed and limited by love. We should only speak in ways that will benefit others. This is part of what it means to accept the word that is planted in us!

The world's way, the natural human way, is to say whatever makes you feel good or whatever you think is going to get what you think you need or want. Rip others apart, gossip about them, vent your spleen on them, whatever you feel, say it. But God says only use your speech to love others, to benefit and bless them, to build

them up. That's part of the message of the gospel because the gospel is all about grace, and giving grace to others.

James says we should help widows and orphans in their troubles. That's kind of a biblical shorthand for caring for the helpless, the poor, the downtrodden of the world. It's awfully easy to make faith in Jesus be all about self. Jesus is going to love me and give me eternal life and he's going to bless me with good stuff. There's a whole corrupted brand of the faith that does just that. God wants you to be healthy and rich, so just believe and he'll give it to you. The gospel calls on us to have the attitude of Christ Jesus, who looked on fallen, failed, helpless, weak people, and sacrificed himself to bring about good for them. James says that should be true of us who have the word implanted in us.

The gospel calls on us not to be polluted by the world. Ooh, the world is so dirty. If we're not careful we're going to become like it, so let's not touch it. Yes, the world is dirty. It has fouled up everything good that God has given to us. But God calls us not only to live in the world but to engage with the world, to actually touch it, not to remove ourselves from it. To be defiled by the world is to accept its ways of thinking, to buy into its philosophies and values and behaviors. The gospel that is implanted in us calls us to be different than the world. The difference isn't in how we dress or all the things they do that we don't. The difference is in the fact that we live with God as the center of everything, not self. That we live in grace and extend it to others. That we return good for evil, that instead of seeking to get even when someone hurts us we seek to bless that person. That we love instead of serve self. That we see our value as rooted in how God loves us not in our ability, intelligence, status, wealth or any other human form of merit. That we live for God's glory and for eternity, not for some bauble of this world right now.

This passage is summed up in the simple call to be doers of the word that has been planted in our souls. The message of Jesus Christ has saved us and set us free from condemnation, fear and the horror of sin and death. So James says listen to it and its implications and then apply them to how you live. Live by this truth. Or as Nike put it, just do it!

I must warn you, however, there is a subtle trap here we have to watch out for. We read this and think, "Okay, I have to be a doer of the word. What are the rules? What are all the things I have to do?" That can be dangerous for two reasons. First we almost automatically start thinking that following the rules is the necessary step for having our souls saved. We have to do these things in order to be connected to God and have eternal life.

We must remember that message that saves our souls has already been implanted in us. James is not saying that we'd better do everything or our souls won't really be saved. If that was the deal then there was no point in Jesus coming and dying. God could have just given us the rules. The point is not that failure to pay attention to the word means we will be rejected and condemned by God. The point is that said failing to live by the word is stupid, like the dumb guy with broccoli in his teeth that forgot all about it. As we will see that failure will hurt us and other people.

The second problem is when we start focusing just on the rules we somehow will always end up turning them inside out so that in our supposed effort to keep them we actually violate the real intent. Back in June newlyweds Rachel and Mike Brumfield boarded a United Airlines flight from Newark bound for Europe as they headed to their honeymoon in Venice. They buckled into their seats, everyone was settled, they plane was pushed back from the gate and began taxiing toward the runway. That's when the newlyweds saw jet fuel gushing out of the wing of the aircraft. That just didn't look right at all. Mike unbuckled his seatbelt, got out of his seat and hustled up to the flight attendants to tell them about it. The cabin crew yelled at him, "Sit down! Get back in your seat and buckle your seat belt!" He said, "But something's not right!" They said, "Is it an emergency?" He said, "I'm not sure. Maybe." They said, "Get back in your seat right now." The rule is that passengers cannot be out of their seats and moving in the aisles while the aircraft is taxiing. The flight attendants were adamant about obeying the rule. The problem is, the rule is intended to keep everybody safe, and in this case keeping the rule was putting everyone in serious jeopardy. Fortunately Mike refused to obey until the flight attendants finally listened to him. At last, after his uncompromising insistence, they looked out the window. Instantly they made a mad dash for the cockpit. In a few moments fire trucks appeared outside the airplane and the flight was canceled.

Jesus ran into opponents who were incensed when he healed a man's crippled hand with just a word, because healing is work and the rule is you must not work on the Sabbath. They were all about keeping the rules, even when it meant violating the real point of the rules. At one point, in Mark 2:27 Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." That made the rule keepers so mad they began plotting ways to kill Jesus.

James gives us examples of what he means, but he's not saying, "Here are the rules, you'd better live by them." He's saying pay attention to the message of

Christ in you. That message is about how God loves us, about his mercy and grace, about how life is found in him and not in the things of this world, about how having eternal life is what we all need. About the power of hope. To pay attention to the message is to live in light of those things. It is to use our tongues to bless because that's a way to love as Christ loved us, it is about orienting life around God and his glory, not ourselves, about loving the helpless just as God loves us.

### ACCEPTING THE WORD ASSURES YOU WILL BE BLESSED

Now we come to the most amazing part of this passage. The end of verse 25 says those who are doers of the word, those who let its message actually rule in their lives, "will be blessed in what they do." The original text puts that in more strong terms. It literally says the person who is a doer of the word "will be blessed in everything he does." He will have the Midas touch, because everything he touches will turn to gold!

Well okay then. Finally we learn that the health and wealth people were right all along, which, of course, is good news to all of us. Hey, be a doer of the word and you will be successful in everything you do. You will be blessed. That sounds terrific to me. I'm going to sign up today for that program.

Joel Osteen is totally down with this plan. In his book, *Your Best Life Now*, he wrote, "God wants to increase you financially...Get rid of that small minded thinking and start thinking as God thinks. Think big. Think increase. Think abundance. Think more than enough." He asserts God wants to bless you and make you rich and successful beyond your dreams. Doesn't this verse in James sound like it's the path to that future?

Before we embrace that idea enthusiastically we should probably look at some other parts of the Bible, especially the words of Jesus. He issued a resounding denial of the Best Life Now approach in his famous opening to the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:3 he said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Understand that to be poor in spirit was to be humble, aware of one's poverty of soul. Jesus said that the way he did because in his culture there was a connection between being materially poor and being poor in spirit. It was assumed that if you were deserving before God you would be blessed financially, just as Joel Osteen claimed. To be financially poor was a sure sign of poverty of soul. Jesus says the exact opposite. He says the poor, in his day meaning financially and in spirit, are the ones who are blessed because the kingdom of God belongs to them.



That's hugely important. He says they are blessed not because they have everything the world wants, not because they are rich and famous and fabulously successful at everything they touch. No, they are blessed because the kingdom of God belongs to them. **The real blessing we need to is to have the kingdom of God!**

That one statement alone dismantles the entire premise that if we obey God and have faith we will be successful in our careers and have way more money than we would ever need. It says it is possible to not have those things and still have fullness of life because we have the kingdom of God. Here's the stark world changing truth. The person who is blessed is the one who has the kingdom of God, even if he is the poorest person on the planet!

Jesus' words dramatically confront us with an entirely different view of life. Our human nature and our culture combine in telling us to be blessed is to have it good in life, to succeed in everything we do and to score one victory after another, producing phenomenal acclaim and wealth. But Jesus says the people who are blessed are those who are poor, those who mourn, those who are meek, those who hunger and thirst not for the stuff of this world but for righteousness, those who are persecuted for his names' sake.

The problem with Joel Osteen and others who preach health and wealth is that they have adopted the world's values. The world is convinced that what will bring happiness, what will save your soul, is money, success and the good things of life. In James' words those who promote that have been polluted by the world. They think just like it!

The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, which is pretty much the final word on Ancient Greek words used in the Bible, says of the word translated "blessed" here, it "denotes the transcendent happiness of a life beyond care." It is "fullness of life." Transcendent happiness in everything we do, fullness of life in everything we put our hands to. It is being full of life even in the most difficult moments of life. Isn't that what we all want?

The world continually presents us with proposed methods for having fullness of life. We all want our "blessed life now." How do you think you are going to get it? James claims under the inspiration of the Spirit of God Himself, that the way to have the blessed life we long for is not to amass all the approval, fame, power, possessions, pleasures or positions we think will produce it, but simply, humbly accept the instruction of the news of Jesus Christ. Become a doer of the word, and you will be blessed in everything you do because you will have the life of Christ,

the life of peace, joy and love, flowing through you regardless of your circumstances.

We embarked on the recent Great Myatt Midwestern Trek through Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois so that we could attend the wedding of a niece, Anna, the daughter of Laurie's brother, Scott. Scott arranged lodging for us in a restored house in his town, the thriving metropolis of Spring Grove, Minnesota, population 1300. The house, owned by some of Scott's friends, was built more than 100 years ago. It is beautiful, but it is old. The first night in the middle of the night I heard a thump. I was pretty groggy so don't know if the thump woke me up or if I was already awake. I figured it was just one of those noises houses sometimes make in the night as they cool off. I almost asked Laurie if she heard it, but thought she was asleep so didn't want to disturb her. I tried to go back to sleep, but then I heard a sort of scurryingsound. Uh oh. Something alive was in our room. I figured maybe a rat or a squirrel. Should I get out of bed and try to hunt this creature down, or just ignore it and hope it would go away? I looked around as I considered my options, and then was startled when something flew over me. Oh, a bird is in the room. It wasn't a bird. It was dark, but as I looked up I could see this creature circling our bed. It was obvious that it was a bat. I blurted out, "There's a bat in our room!" Laurie greeted this news with great joy. Not. She dove under the covers and said, "Get rid of it, Rick. Get it out of here!" Right. No problem. Call the expert at bat eradication, good old Rick. I didn't know what to do, but lacking any better ideas I got out of bed and opened the bedroom door. The bat flew out of the room and I quickly closed the door. It was my gift to the other residents of the house. At least the bat wasn't in our room. Then we lay there wide awake the rest of the night. That morning Laurie told the owner of the house that we had a visitor during the night. He immediately asked, "Was it a bat?" Apparently they'd had a bat in the house a week earlier. I thought, "You know, you could have told us that."

The story gets better. That morning Laurie texted Anna and related the incident to her. Anna quickly came back saying it wouldn't be a Myatt trip without something like that happening, but then she also said Toby told her we need to get rabies shots. We said, "Ha, ha, very funny." Then Toby called and said, "I'm serious. The protocol is if you wake up and find a bat in your room you must get rabies shots. You may not know you've had contact with the bat while you were asleep. You can't wait. If you develop symptoms of rabies, you're going to die. It is 100% fatal." We thought maybe this was overreaction by a zealous medical student. But we checked with the CDC and they said the same thing. We could not get shots anywhere in that area, but the next day we were going to the larger town of Dubuque, so we called the hospital there to find out what they thought and they

said the same thing. We needed the shots. We were faced with an unwelcome choice. Take the risk of not having the shots and hope that either the bat didn't have rabies or that he didn't get close to us, or get the shots and be sure that we would live and not die. It has been a huge headache, and is going to end up very expensive, but we have now each had 6 rabies shots and have 2 to go. We have chosen to do it even though it is not necessarily easy or fun, because we want to live.

This passage presents us with a choice. On one hand we can let the message of God's grace in Christ *and all that it implies* rule in our lives, or we can choose the way of the world. The way of Christ is not the way of the world. It is not the way of the natural bent of humans. That means following Christ, accepting the instruction of his message, is going to involve some hard choices. It means doing things in a way that is not necessarily natural to us. It might require that we do things that we might not even want to do. It will be difficult at times. But it is the way to the blessed life.

The world incessantly screams to us that we must have money, achievement, power, pleasure, pleasant circumstances, success in order to have the blessed life. In fact, it says having those things is the very definition of the blessed life now. But James says the blessed life, the life of transcendent happiness, fullness of life, comes from living continually with the gospel of Christ and its implications ruling our words, actions, values and thoughts. It is a choice between life and not life. If we accept the message of Christ, if we heed its instruction, we will have a blessed life. That doesn't mean we will succeed at everything or that we will be rich, powerful or famous, but it means no matter what our station and circumstances there will be peace, joy and fullness of life within us. If we do not accept the instruction of God's message, we will not experience the blessed life. The choice is ours, and we must make it continually every single day.