

James 1:19-21
January 28, 2007

Good morning – I'm glad you are here. Let's get our Bibles out and open them back to James chapter 1. We've been studying James now together for a couple of months and when we started I challenged you to either memorize each passage as we study it with me like we did Philipians or to at least work on the few verses from each chapter I would tell you about if you were only going to do parts of it. So far in chapter 1 you've hopefully been working on verse 5 about asking for wisdom and verse 12 about standing the tests of our faith. This morning we're going to look at the next verses that I encourage you to hide in your heart – verses 19 and 20 though we'll go through verse 21 today. Let's take a look.

“My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. For man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”

I've shared with many of you before that pretty much every sermon that I share with you on Sunday mornings is basically more for me than for you. It's what God is teaching me more than anything. But even so, there are some verse you just hate to come to because they have your name written all over them. I think of all the verses in the entire Bible that I have had quoted to me or at me, verse 19 has got to top the list. So this morning, we are definitely walking through this together.

And what is more, it isn't like this verse needs a lot of explanation. There aren't any secret Greek meanings or Hebrew idioms or anything. It pretty much says to me exactly what it says to you- Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.

So this morning, we're going to look more at how to simply apply this than trying to imbue it with some profound surprise meaning. Because if you ARE anything like me, then straight forward or not, this is a command we need to hear again and again.

But before we dig into that, I want to make sure you catch the heart of this passage. It's actually at the end of verse 20. Look at it: “for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.” There it is. **The heart of this passage gets back to what we've already talked about many times this year – that God wants us to have a righteous life.** That's the goal. We've worded it like this – this righteous life is life in Christ – life surrendered by faith to truth, life changed by belief into obedience, life linked through relationships into family, and life shared by service to our world.

But before that will ever happen in your life or mine, we have to come to grips with what we talked about a week or so ago. Do you really believe that a life of discipleship – of following Jesus – is the best life possible? Because if you don't believe that, then you might as well go home now because you aren't going to care about verses 19-21. But if you believe that Jesus meant it when he said in John 10:10 that I have come that you might have life and have to the fullest, then grab your pen and message map because James lays out some simple steps to living that life.

Number 1 – be quick to listen. First of all to God. **Nothing more important to hear than the voice of God.** Nothing more crucial than sensing the presence and purpose of God. How many times does Jesus repeat, if anyone has ears, let him listen? The most tragic person in all of life is the one who turns a deaf ear to the One who has the words of life.

And here's the deal about listening to God. **Until we obey, until we have followed, until we are surrendering our lives to Him, we aren't listening to Him.** Anytime a person hears God and disregards what God has said, the result is a hardness of heart.

God can speak any time and any where through anything. But **the best way to listen for the Lord is through the study of his Word.**

2 Timothy 3:16-17 says “all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

If you begin to listen to God, there will be two things you will hear before you hear anything else. First you will hear about sin. God will tell you about your sin. God is first and always holy. Just like when Isaiah found himself in the presence of God, the first thing that hit him was his sinfulness – he cried woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips and I’ve seen the most high God. When we begin to listen to God, we’ll hear about our sin in order for God to lead us to repentance. Because he loves us.

And that’s the second thing you’ll hear – God’s love. After hearing about your sin – feeling despair and guilt before a holy God – then He will tell you that He sent Jesus Christ to die for that sin because he loves you. He will tell you about the glory of his love and how living in that glory is your very life.

As that happens in each of us – **as we listen to God, we will be quick to listen to others** - in a way that shows them we are living in Christ – for his glory and not our own.

Husbands and wives will begin to be quick to hear their spouse – leaving behind the self-centered priority of being heard first. Marriage doesn’t work if you do not listen. If you are not quick to hear, to really understand and respond to your spouse.

Parents will listen to their children. Parenting is very difficult if you do not listen to your children. Listening takes time but listening time is one of the most unmet needs of children today. When I say listening, I do not mean that you hear what they say and give them what they demand. What I mean is leisurely time that is necessary to hear the needs of your child’s heart, the time that is needed to hear and recognize teaching moments when love makes its deepest impressions. If we are going to parent well, we must listen well.

Plus this command will play out in all areas of our lives. The greatest servants are the greatest listeners – hearing what is meant as well as what is said- hearing what is said as well as what is not said. The better we listen, the quicker we are to really hear and respond, the more likely it will be that people see the gospel alive in and through us. In fact one of the greatest tools we have in evangelism is listening. I think we often forget this tool in sharing our faith – instead we are quick to win a debate rather than quick to listen to a heart and demonstrate genuine, Christ-like concern for a searching person.

All this listening to others is really listening to God, to recognize what God is doing in others lives and then to be involved in that. And don’t miss the beauty of the text in this command – **God would have no reason to tell us to be quick to listen if He didn’t have something to say.** God has something to say to you!

The next part of this command – number 2 - is – **let everyone be slow to speak** – and it is naturally connected to being quick to hear. If you are quick to listen you will be slower to speak, but God wants us to be more intentional than that so James includes the second phrase.

Using the same progression, first of all **we need to be slow to speak where God is concerned.** Speaking that follows listening is more likely to be God centered than self centered, but let me give you two other reasons it is important to be slow to speak when God is concerned.

First – **Being slow to speak to God helps you avoid hastily making some vow to God that you will not fulfill.**

In Houston there is a place to eat called Pappadeaux – it’s a Cajun seafood place and Nicole and I used to love to go there and I always got the same thing – a platter of Cajun fried chicken strips, Cajun fried shrimp and Cajun French fries. Never had a problem. Until one night after going there I wake up in the middle of the night and my chest is killing me and my arm is even a little tingly. And I lay there freaking out. I began to cry out to God and beg God to save my life – don’t let me die. And I began to make promise after promise – that I would do this and that and I would stop this and that and on and on and on – just don’t let me die God. Finally I nudged Nicole and said – sweetheart, my chest is killing me and I can’t move my arm. And she bolted up in bed and was like what – and asked me some questions and then very calmly said – Brett – you’ve got heartburn – you’re not going to die. And I just know God was laughing like no get out at the idiot dying from heartburn.

I can laugh at that now, but **Ecclesiastes** kind of steals the funny from that. God says in chapter 5 verses 5 and 6 that it is better not to vow than to make a vow and not keep it. Verse 6 says do not let your speech cause you to sin and then don’t come to the messenger of God and say that it was a mistake.

Jesus said in **Matthew 12:36** that we will have to render an account for every careless word we speak on the day of judgment. Every word we utter has spiritual consequences – so be slow to speak to God.

Second – **Being slow to speak for God helps you avoid claiming some knowledge from God that may not be true.** We must be slow to speak for God as well.

Phrases like “God told me” and “God said” must be carefully and slowly used. These words too often can be manipulative and dangerous when they are words that do not really represent the truth. When they do represent the truth, they can be wonderful and powerful. But too often I’ve seen them used carelessly and quickly to manipulate and convince and to wield an authority that is only God’s to wield. And God takes that seriously. Listen to **Jeremiah 23:30-32**

We’ve got to be slow to speak for God.

And again we must **be slow to speak to others.** Obviously he doesn’t mean when someone asks you how things are you sit there for three minutes before speak. James isn’t telling us to be weird here. But even Hollywood gets the danger of speaking too much too fast.

I’ve been watching the show *Scrubs* on DVD while I jog in the mornings and two of the main characters – JD and Eliot – both who are medical residents in a hospital – are constantly getting in trouble because they say whatever comes into their minds and that say it before they think about it. Both of these characters are exaggerations created by Hollywood but the reason we laugh at them is because they are based on truth. They are very much indicative of a tendency that we all face and God has amply warned us about. Listen to the wisdom of **Proverbs**:

18:13 – He who gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and his shame. The loose tongue destroys the speaker – the one spoken to – and the one spoken of.

29:20 – Do you see a man who is hasty in his word? There is more hope for a fool than for him.

17:28 – Even a fool – when he keeps silent – is considered wise.

This one isn’t in the book of Proverbs but it wraps it up pretty well:

A wise old owl lived in an oak
The more he knew, the less he spoke
The less he spoke, the more he knew

Does that same thing apply to you?

Let's go on. The next phrase is connected to a reason – Every one should **be slow to become angry** because man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

Now I know you're probably thinking that not all anger is wrong. And you're right – God's Word talks about a righteous anger and even attributes that kind of anger to God in the Psalms. But reality is that **rarely is man's anger righteous. And never is anger at God righteous.** We can't always see all of what God is doing. The Bible is clear about that – his ways are not our ways. And yet **Psalms 27:13** says "If we will wait on the Lord we will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." Most of the first half of what we have looked at in James so far is a reminder that often, times of failure or difficulty – the very things that make us angry at God - are God's way of bringing something wonderful to fruition – of maturing us in our faith and moving us further into the life in Christ that He promised us.

So at the very least, this warning to be slow in getting there is to protect us in our relationship with God, but even more so in our relationships with others. You see the sin of anger lies in this – it gets angry for the wrong reasons. **The anger of man happens when things don't go the way we want them to go or people don't act the way we expect them to act.** This kind of anger is always self-centered.

And though no one can honestly say anger only hurts the one who is angry, anger never hurts the person that you are mad at like it hurts you. And this is mainly true because anger against another is rebellion against God and breaks our fellowship with Him. Anger and bitterness will always rob our intimacy with God. And God again gives us ample warning about that. Listen again to a few **proverbs**:

25:28 – Like a city that is broken into and without walls is a man who has no control over his spirit.

29:11 – a fool always loses his temper, but a wise man holds it back.

And if you think about it, you know how to control your anger – in a few seconds. For example – say you've lost your temper with your spouse or kids and you are ranting at them and your eyes are all crazy eyed like they're going to pop out of your head and suddenly the doorbell rings and your pastor is on the porch or the phone rings and your boss is on the phone and you know what you do – you go from "I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU AARRGGGHHH!" to "well hello – come on in" or "yes sir, no problem yada yada yada" Right?

So who counts the most in your life? Your preacher? Your boss? Or you spouse and your kids?

Proverbs 29:22 explains the truth when it says – a hot tempered man abounds in transgression – anger leads to even more sin. Which is why – obviously it doesn't lead to the righteous life that God wants.

So James builds on that fact and says in **verse 21** "Therefore get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you."

We could talk forever about how to apply that phrase specifically to your life and mine – moral filth and prevalent evil pretty much cover anything you already are thinking of that you know God doesn't want in your life – that is less than best – that encourages anything less than the righteous life that God wants for you.

But what I want you to see in this verse is something true all through Scripture. **Whenever you see in the Bible a command to put away sin or not to sin, it will always be connected to yielding to the Spirit, fearing God, or walking in humility before God.** The focus of Scripture is never just on stopping the sin. God doesn't just want reformed behavior. He wants an eternal

relationship. In fact the only way to not sin is to receive and believe in God and his Word and yield to the Holy Spirit in relationship through Jesus Christ.

Which is what James says here in verse 21 – humbly accept the **word planted in you**. The word we looked at last week is the word of truth – the truth about Jesus Christ which boils down to what we've said so many times – **that God is who He says He is and will do what He promised to do**.

And James says the key is to believe that – to **accept that humbly**. The humility commanded here is defined as **“the quality of spirit that accepts God’s dealings with us as good, without disputing or resisting them.”**

And the last phrase in this section is, **“which can save you.”** Now you might be thinking, if the word is already planted in me, then aren't I already saved?

I mean we talked last Sunday about the fact that this birth that God gives us in verse 18 happens in a moment – the blink of an eye – that is the act of God in making a sinner into a new creation.

True – but don't forget that that new birth is only known by its effects. Our salvation is a three part salvation. When we surrender our lives to the truth of Jesus Christ and God saves us – that is justification and it happens in a moment of time.

Then from there what is now real inside us must work its way through us into our life as we are transformed. That's called sanctification – you and me becoming like Jesus in how we think – how we talk – how we do life – and that process continues until we die or Jesus comes back. And at that point is the last phase of our salvation – when we are finally at home with God and given our new bodies for all eternity and that is called glorification. To put that all together – a believer in Jesus Christ has been saved, is being saved, and will be saved. And folks if you have one part of the process, you will have all three. If you have been justified by God – saved – then you will be sanctified – it will show up in your life on this earth. No one skips from justification to glorification without going through sanctification. In other words – if there is no evidence in your life of becoming more and more like Jesus, you've got reason to doubt whether or not you will eventually go to heaven. And that's what James is saying here.

The word planted in you – yes it saves you like we saw in verse 18 – but as you humbly accept it – day by day by day – it can save you day by day by day – your humble belief that God is who He says He is and will do what He promised – **Your humble acceptance of the word planted in you is the key to living the righteous life that God desires day by day.**

And if God is who He says He is and is going to do what He promised to do, then you and I should be quick to listen – slow to speak – and slow to become angry.

This passage is full of practical application for everyone of us. There is no way you can go home today without knowing something that God wants you to work on – to change – or be differently. So let me just wrap up with a glance at next week – verse 22:

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

Let's pray.