

## Getting it Right: Session Three

### **Say it Right, Live it Right: James 1:19-27**

My dearest brothers and sisters, take this to heart: Be quick to listen, but slow to speak. And be slow to become angry, for human anger is never a legitimate tool to promote God's righteous purpose. So this is why we abandon everything morally impure and all forms of wicked conduct. Instead, with a sensitive spirit we absorb God's Word, which has been implanted within our nature, for the Word of Life has power to continually deliver us. Don't just listen to the Word of truth and not respond to it, for that is the essence of self-deception. So always let his Word become like poetry written and fulfilled by your life. If you listen to the Word and don't live out the message you hear, you become like the person who looks in the mirror of the Word to discover the reflection of the face in the beginning. *You perceive how God sees you in the mirror of the Word*, but then you go out and forget your divine origin. But those who set their gaze deeply into the perfecting law of liberty are fascinated by and respond to the truth they hear and are strengthened by it - they experience God's blessing in all they do! If someone believes they have a relationship with God but fails to guard his words then his heart is drifting away and his religion is shallow and empty. True spirituality that is pure in the eyes of our Father God is to make a difference in the lives of the orphans, and widows in their troubles, and to refuse to be corrupted by the world's values (The Passion Translation).

Introduction: We are again dealing with the need to get it right (for a change) and live "right" lives by doing "right" things. If we pull this off God's Kingdom will progress, and no Divine course corrections will be necessary. This week we will spend time with James and his uber-practical letter. James made simple look, well, simple, but in reality, his work was profound. This hallmark section of James's imperative-filled teaching deals with yet another counterintuitive set of issues. He tells his readers to avoid the natural temptations to speak before listening and, as a result, avoid unjustified anger. For the modern reader it is comforting to know that sins of speech are not a recent problem. Sins of speech

are as old as humanity; they were problematic for the Hebrew believers and are equally so for today's church. The best and most equitable lens through which to view these practical admonitions are trials and humility. To make these practical works even simpler, M.G. Gutzke sees this as a simple matter of obedience.

There is a very good reason why we as Christians should live in obedience to God. These words of admonition tell us something important. They tell us that God does not ask us to be good because we are able to be good. The truth of the matter is that we cannot be good. God also does not expect us to be good to get something out of it. It does not follow that because we are good we are going to be rich. God wants us to be good, and to do good. He wants us to demonstrate to the whole world how differently we live, when we no longer walk alone in our strength and depend on our own understanding, but rather walk with our hand in His. In this we show forth righteousness which comes from God.

With a shift to the practical side of faith James begins an emphatic focus on character issues. James taught that the faith experience must naturally lead to active displays of obedience and righteous habits. This "to be is to do" mindset leads to many basic topics that might otherwise be easy to overlook. The numbers of words used by an individual is an example of a seemingly small topic that would be easy, even convenient, to downplay. James highlights rather than downplays speech issues by speaking repetitively about the inherent dangers of words. Plus, there's nothing overtly theological about talking too much. All of these realities combine to make this section of the epistle incredibly practical and necessary for the proper living out of faith. Obviously this would be especially true for the Hebrew Christians who would be serving as missionaries in their new locales. Whether they realized it or not, they were in a position of amazing influence, and the manner in which they used their words would provide impact. Using words is not the end-all of James writing, however, as he valued the ability to listen above speaking.

Blomberg and Kamell wrote, "We are being told to hurry up and listen." This would be the view of virtually all wisdom literature up to that point. Ecclesiasticus and Proverbs contribute to the statement, "Be quick to listen, but over your

answer take time” (Townsend). Proverbs 17:27 is a link to the relationship between too many words and the onset of anger. In short, if one talks a great deal and is not keen on listening, the results are often detrimental. Blomberg and Kamell tied up these pieces and parts of communication nicely:

The final part of James’s proverb gives us one last challenge, that of being “slow to anger.” Here anger refers not so much to general outbursts of frustration as to deeply-seated wrath or rage. We should be hesitant as believers to allow our anger to settle into something that we nurse and that can control us. These last two activities that we are to “be slow” to undertake obviously reflect the greater of the three problems in James’s community, but all three are inter-connected. Speaking and wrath link together whenever anger provokes hasty speech, and often both of these problems stem from inadequate listening.

The ideas that believers must be listeners first and talkers second is, as they say, “not rocket science.” This is great advice in any form and shape. It is the following line about resisting anger that veers into difficult space: “A Man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires” (1:20). James Ropes suggested that the use of “wrath” is misplaced as it reinforces an ancient Jewish doctrine that anger “is sometimes valuable as an engine of righteousness.” James Adamson agreed and believed that James’s teaching was directed more to the individual than to another person: “In Christianity, sin is forbidden primarily because of its effect on the sinner.” This means that God’s righteousness is lived out in the individual believer’s life by resisting anger. James was not referring to the cessation of intramural fights; he was pointing to personal purity and, once again humility.

C.W. Morgan and Dale Ellenburg listed three problems with anger in a Christian’s life:

1. An angry Christian does not reflect God’s righteousness.
2. Wrath does not promote the cause of righteousness.
3. Wrathful people do not practice the type of conduct required by God.

Possibly the best take on this section belongs to John Kloppenborg, who described the necessity for “purity language” among Christians. If Christians pursue righteous speech habits and intentionally seek to honor God with their words, they are practicing purity language.

The final piece of this section on practical faith living ends with an emphatic imperative: “Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent” (1:21). In the Greek language this command is a once-and-for-all action. Today, people make New Year’s resolutions and attempt “do-overs” to make positive changes in their lives. At best, these modern attempts for personal improvement would be piecemeal and heavily sequential. James did not command “baby steps” for ridding one’s life of moral filth and evil. “Progress in our spiritual life cannot occur unless we see sin for what it is, quit justifying it, and decide to reject it. James’s word picture here has us getting rid of our evil habits and actions like stripping of dirty clothes” (*Life Application Commentary*). Dirty clothing would have been an inference easily understood by the Hebrew Christians as it was historically used for personal and corporate sin in Judaism (Isa 64:6; Zech 3:4). “Filthiness” was also a word in Greco-Roman medicine for earwax. While this tidbit of knowledge might sound more disgusting than insightful, the analogy is sound; if one’s ears are clogged with waxy buildup, it is all but impossible to hear, and if one’s spiritual ears are blocked by sin, it is difficult to hear God.

#### Verb-Faith, 1:22-27

James continues his direction of practical faith living with the admonition, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (1:22). Notice he didn’t use the plural, “words,” but he emphatically used the singular form to denote God’s word, specifically the words of Jesus. While this imperative sounds simple enough, it is heavy with the theological insight. Salvation is not a static, one-time event, despite the modern practice of remembering the day, date, and hour of “being saved.” There were no aisles to walk down in the early church, and it would be unlikely for the initial Christians to be preoccupied with the specific moment they accepted Jesus as Messiah. Salvation has always been a process of progressively *being* “saved” or, put a different way, progressing toward God’s plans and purposes for our lives. The Hebrew believers of the Diaspora

needed to understand that salvation through Jesus the Messiah was not a “one and done” event.

The need to hear and then apply the teachings of God (in the case of James, the teachings of Jesus) would not have been new to the Hebrew mind. C. Freeman Sleeper noted, “The Rabbinic tradition in the Mishnah classifies people as those who hear the law and do not do it, those who do the law without hearing it, the pious person who does both, and the ungodly person who does neither.

Hellenistic Hebrews would have also been influenced by the Greek philosophers who taught living by a moral code based on avoiding, the extremes. In both cases, attention was to be paid to specific teachings, which would be followed by pertinent action. James, as did Jesus, raised the proverbial bar on the concepts of hearing and doing.

By use of analogy, James portrays a believer who hears God’s word and promptly forgets to do anything with it: “Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like” (1:23-24). The use of a mirror image was prevalent in the era of wisdom literature. The Greco-Roman mirrors were made of polished metal that would have provided a somewhat distorted image of the user. As William Barclay wrote:

James says such a man is like one who looks in a mirror—ancient mirrors were made, not of glass, but highly polished metal—sees the smuts that disfigure his face and the dishevelment of his hair, and goes away and forgets what he looks like, and so omits to do anything about it. In his listening to the true word a man has revealed to him that which he is and that which he ought to be. He sees what is wrong and what must be done to put it right; but if he is only a hearer, he remains just as he is, and all his hearing has gone for nothing. James does well to remind us that what is heard in the holy place must be lived in the market place – or there is no point in hearing at all.

A modern analogy would be a person who finishes a meal, checks his or her teeth for any remnants of food, then finds several green slimy broccoli-bits stuck between prominent teeth, shrugs, and walks away with leftover pieces firmly in place. Such a person falls into one of four types: lazy and apathetic; not very

bright; forgetful; or greatly uncommitted to oral hygiene. It may appear that James is citing forgetfulness in his story, but it is actually a lack of commitment to the word of God. In essence, why listen if you aren't going to act on what you hear and learn?

### Genuine Religion

In verse 26 he shifts back to verbal issues and defines genuine or pure religion. James was a stickler for "faith in action," faith that defines the totality of an individual. He also made self-inventory an easy process: *Go to worship?* Check. *Listen intently to God's word?* Check. *Have control of your speech?* Uh, no. Oops! James is also increasing the degree and levels of necessary faith activity. He once again mentions speech but follows with ministry specific to widows and orphans. Widows and orphans would be the most likely to be exploited or, worse, relegated to the streets. Historically these two classes were protected by Judaism, so failing to care for widows and orphans would have been a major setback, especially in their new locales. The Hebrew Christians would have been practicing "pure" religion for different reasons than the traditional Jews: "Like Jesus, James sees worship not in terms of external law but as an expression of inner active goodness." The traditional Jews were protective of the disenfranchised in order to obey the legal code; the Hebrew Christians protected them out of a love for God. The differences are as simple as *I have to do this* versus *I passionately want to do this*. As James cites later in the epistle, "Mercy triumphs over judgment!" (2:13).

Takeaway: Getting it right is a combination of right belief and right action. James believed right action was paramount and must flow from belief. This would be putting action in/to our belief. You can insert profession for belief: profession without action is an insult to God. What if we said this: "Hey God, I believe in salvation; thanks for giving it to me; see you in heaven!"

No, no, no. That is so wrong in so many ways and it's a looming collision course with course correction. We are to be the Kingdom in action. Right living our way through life; lifting people up; meeting needs; extending hope; never forgetting our Divine Origin. Our Divine Origin may be the key.

My father told me I needed to always remember where I came from and honor my family name. It took me a while to grasp the full meaning of that... but I

did...and I do. I have a Divine Origin and I have a Divine name. I can't forget my spiritual lineage. I must honor it. I must live up to it.

Amen and Amen

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