

James: Faith To Let Go

James 1:19-21 So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; (20) for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

One of the most difficult things to do in life is to let go and let God.

Somehow, as human beings, we take life's issues and we just let them simmer inside of us till we reach boiling point.

We're continuing on in our studies in the book of James, and we find that James has some great advice for us in dealing with life's issues.

Let's take a look at what he has to say.

1. Be swift to hear

We hear a lot about how important it is to develop listening as one of life's skills.

But I must confess that I often find it difficult; I don't always find it easy to focus on a conversation.

Yet James says that we need to be swift to hear; we need to develop the ability to be good listeners.

Listening doesn't just mean waiting your turn to speak.

But, as essential a skill as listening may be, it's even more important in the spiritual realm.

There are two good reasons why listening is an essential spiritual skill.

First, because that's how faith comes.

Rom 10:17 So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

A lot of people think that faith comes from God's Word, but that's not the full story.

According to Paul, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

In other words, faith comes from our ability to hear what the Word of God is saying to us.

Let me just say here, that in this day when huge numbers of Christians are saying, "I don't need to go to church. I can read my Bible for myself," that Scripture is primarily talking about the preaching of the Word.

That's the context of Rom 10.

Of course, I believe that it includes the written Word of God as well.

But it's important to remember the high value that God Himself has placed on the preaching of the Word.

But let's get back to what James is talking about; we need to be swift to hear – both naturally and spiritually.

Hearing spiritually brings faith.

The second reason we need to develop the ability to hear spiritually is because of the way God speaks.

ILLUS – In 1 Kings 19, there's a powerful story about a prophet named Elijah. Elijah has escaped from the evil Jezebel, made it to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God, and he has decided to spend the night there in a cave. And Elijah was feeling a bit sorry for himself. So God told him to go outside of the cave. And there was a great wind, a wind that was so powerful that it even split the rocks on the mountain. Elijah must have looked at that amazing display of power and thought, "Wow! God must be in that wind." But it tells us that God wasn't in the wind. And then there was an earthquake, and probably a whole bunch more rocks broke

away from the mountain. And probably after that powerful demonstration, Elijah thought, “God must have been in that.” But it tells us that God wasn’t in the earthquake either. Then there was a fire. And if you’ve ever seen a big fire at night, you’ll know that they are spectacular. And as Elijah looked at this spectacular fire, he must have thought, “Surely God is in this fire!” But it tells us that God wasn’t in the fire either.

Then Elijah heard a still small voice; that was God speaking.

Don’t you find this amazing?

That the God of all power who created the heavens and the earth with His words, has all knowledge and wisdom and power, and rules all of eternity; this God speaks in a whisper.

He doesn’t shout; He doesn’t roar; He speaks in a whisper.

Guess who roars?

1 Pet 5:8 Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.

The devil roars to try and intimidate.

But God, who has infinitely more power, whispers.

And in the clamour of life, we have to learn to listen to that still small voice.

2. Be slow to speak

ILLUS – Many years ago, I heard a preacher preaching on this verse, and he said that when you’re angry, you need to speak slowly. Something like this: “I ... want ... to ... say ... that ... I ... disagree ... with ... you ...”

Honestly, if that works for you, then go ahead and do it.

But I don’t think that James actually meant that at all.

A Greek philosopher named Zeno, who lived about 2,500 years ago, probably summed up what James was talking about.

He wrote that we have one mouth and two ears and that that should give us a fair idea of how much talking we should do compared to listening.

He was right.

Apparently, the average human speaks at about 150-200 words a minute; but a person’s brain can listen to about 800 words a minute.

It seems that God has designed us in such a way that should encourage us to be slow to speak and swift to hear.

ILLUS – Einstein was once asked if he had a formula for success. He said that he did, and that success = X = Y + Z. He said that X stands for work and Y stands for play. He was then asked what Z stood for. He replied, “Keeping your mouth shut!”

That’s not a bad philosophy when you think of how quick off the mark we so often are in our speech.

ILLUS – If you’re like me, you often wish that life came with a CTRL Z function. You computer enthusiasts know what I’m talking about. For those who don’t use computers, CTRL Z is an undo shortcut. You type something into your computer, realise that it wasn’t right, and the solution is easy. CTRL Z! Wouldn’t it be wonderful if you could do that in life? You speak a few careless words, and immediately realise you shouldn’t have said what you said. Simple. CTRL Z; undo!

But you can’t do that in life.

Instead, God has a solution.

Prov 10:19 In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise.

Prov 13:3 He who guards his mouth preserves his life, but he who opens wide his lips shall have destruction.

Prov 17:28 Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace; when he shuts his lips, he is considered perceptive.

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

God wants us to restrain our lips, shut our mouths, not be hasty in our words.

ILLUS – Apparently, a former governor of New Jersey, Robert B. Meyner, had a bit of a reputation. So much so that a restaurant owner put a picture of him in his window. In the picture, the governor had his mouth open, and immediately above was sign saying, “Open 24 hours a day.”

ILLUS – One man in the Bible paid with his life for his hasty words. At the end of 1 Samuel, we read about the death of King Saul. Saul had been wounded, and rather than be captured by the Philistines, he told his armour bearer to finish him off. But the armour bearer thought, “No way I’m going to kill the king.” So Saul fell on his own sword and died. Now the story moves forward into 2 Samuel and a man who has escaped from the battle comes to David and tells him that Saul and his son Jonathan are dead. David says, “How do you know?” The man says, “Saul was in anguish and asked me to kill him. So I killed him. And here’s his crown and bracelet to prove it.”

That was a big mistake! What on earth possessed this man to lie?

Probably, he guessed accurately that David was going to be the next king of Israel, and he thought he’d ingratiate himself with the new king.

He was seriously mistaken.

ILLUS – David tore his clothes as a sign of mourning, and so did his men. And he said, “Who did you say you were?” The man said, “I’m an Amalekite, but I’m a resident in Israel.” He obviously didn’t realise that David had had more than one opportunity himself to kill Saul and hadn’t. Even when his own men said, “Go on! This is your big chance. Kill him!”, David still refused to kill Saul because he was God’s anointed. There was something this man hadn’t realised. While David and his men were away, the Amalekites had attacked his camp and kidnapped the wives and children of David and his men. His men were so upset that they almost stoned David. They managed to catch the Amalekites, defeat them, and rescue their families. But they had just returned when this Amalekite comes along and says that he’s killed the king.

David had him executed on the spot.

It’s a pity that man hadn’t put a bit more thought into what he was going to say.

James is very clear: We need to be slow to speak.

He especially singles out a particular sin of the tongue.

James 4:11 Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge.

Speaking evil of one another: The rabbis of old called this “the third tongue”.¹

It’s a strange expression, but they called it that because they believed that it killed the speaker, killed the person spoken to, and killed the person spoken of.

That makes sense, doesn’t it, when you think that Proverbs 18:21 tells us that “death and life are in the power of the tongue?”

3. Be slow to wrath

Anger is a major problem in our world.

People talk about an “Anger Driven Society”.

We hear about road rage, roid rage, substance abuse, violence, suicide attempts, and alcohol abuse – all related to anger.

And the problem is that when you experience anger, it seems so rational.

Have you ever been angry with someone, and you get such a flow of irrefutable arguments; such cutting insights; such clarity of thought?

Until you calm down, and you think back over the things you said, and you wonder, “What was I thinking?”

Anger interferes with your ability to think rationally.

There’s a great example of this in Esther.

ILLUS – King Ahasuerus, king of the Medes and Persians, throws a humungous party. And I mean humungous; it lasted about 6 months! And at the end of this time, the king decides to show off his trophy wife, Queen Vashti. So he calls for her so he can parade her in front of his people – naked! So, having a little bit of dignity, she refuses to obey the king’s command.

It tells us in Esther 1:12, that “the king was furious, and his anger burned within him.”

Now this is not a good time to be making major decisions.

ILLUS – Ahasuerus gets the advice of his counsellors, and they basically tell him what he wants to hear. And the result is that Queen Vashti is removed as queen.

Now we move forward in time a little: Est 2:1: After these things, when the wrath of King Ahasuerus subsided, he remembered Vashti, what she had done, and what had been decreed against her.

His anger subsided, he remembered what he had done at the height of his anger, but it was too late.

The custom was that the king’s decree could not be changed.

I wonder how many people have, in a moment of anger, done something, said something, made a decision, that would affect the entire course of their lives?

The anger of man never achieves what God wants to achieve anyway; that’s why God wants us to be “slow to anger”.

Another reason is that it reflects His nature; that’s what He’s like.

Ps 103:8 The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy.

Let’s look at two ways of dealing with our anger.

1. Understanding

Prov 14:29 He who is slow to wrath has great understanding, but he who is impulsive exalts folly.

Prov 19:11 The discretion of a man makes him slow to anger, and his glory is to overlook a transgression.

I have an ongoing prayer that God will make me a man of great understanding.

And I especially pray this in regard to the people that I’m closest to, because they are the ones most likely to get under my guard.

I am far more vulnerable to them than to anyone else.

ILLUS – The Mills Brothers, a band from the early Twentieth Century, used to sing a song that went like this: You always hurt the one you love, the one you shouldn’t hurt at all. You always take the sweetest rose and crush it till the petals fall.

And it’s true; we hurt the people close to us more than anyone else.

And a lot of the time, it’s our anger that does it.

If we grow in understanding, then we will be better equipped to control our anger.

2. Faith

Do you get angry when you see the news and it talks about corrupt politicians, criminals getting away with their crimes on a technicality, foolish judges, irresponsible parents?

It's easy to let those things build up inside you to the point where there's a simmering anger deep inside.

And it's there because deep inside we have strong desire to see justice.

The answer to this kind of anger is faith.

Ps 37:1-4 Do not fret because of evildoers, nor be envious of the workers of iniquity. (2) For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb. (3) Trust in the LORD, and do good; dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness. (4) Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart.

That word "fret" means to burn with anger; and God says, "Don't do it!"

Don't concern yourself with what people are getting away with; don't let yourself get all worked up about it.

Ultimately, they won't get away with it; they will "be cut down like the grass".

In other words, there will be a day of reckoning.

But you can only understand this if you have eyes of faith.

Faith is essential.

ILLUS – During World War 2, there were many atrocities that took place. One man responsible for many atrocities was Dr Ishii Shiro. The death toll has been estimated at more than 50,000 people who died as a result of his barbaric experiments. But when the war was over, the Americans struck a deal with him and his scientists. If they handed over their records, they would be immune from prosecution. And that's what happened. He lived his life in peace till he died a natural death in 1959. After the war, many of his researchers got top jobs in the business world and the Japanese government.

It would be easy to get angry about that sort of thing.

It would be easy to think that they got away with it.

But they didn't; one day there will be a day of reckoning.

And we have to have faith enough to trust God that He is in control and He will do what is right.

As Abraham once said, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen 18:25)

Understanding and faith; these are the great two qualities we need to develop if we are to deal successfully with anger.

Let me remind you of the three things James tells us to do: Be swift to hear; be slow to speak; be slow to wrath.

¹ Adamson, James B. *New International Commentary on the New Testament* p78