

Quick to Listen  
James 1:19-27

I love the Book of James. As I have talked with others, I don't think I've ever found anybody who doesn't enjoy his epistle. James was Jesus' brother. I've always imagined that if Jesus had written something for us, it would be similar to what James wrote. It is so down-to-earth. It's practical and easy to understand. It is filled with good advice.

So, during the month of September, we'll be looking at the Book of James. I'll start us out this morning. The next two Sundays Bonnie will carry on. I'll be working an Emmaus walk next weekend, and the following week I'll be visiting my son and his family in New York.

James starts out with these words, *"My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing."*

In these words James gives us the main point that he wants to make: God has designed life to help us become mature. The trials of life are to be received with joy, not resentment, because they help us become mature. In the rest of his letter, James is describing what it means to be mature.

He tells us that the mature are anchored by their faith, so that they are not driven by the winds and waves of circumstances. They understand that worldly wealth comes and goes, and it's not important, because God provides for our needs.

He tells us that the mature recognize that sin grows, so that seemingly harmless vices have a way of growing, until they eventually become deadly.

He tells us that the mature recognize that every act of generosity comes from God, because it is God who enables us to give.

James tells us that if we are to become mature, we must "be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for your anger does not produce God's righteousness." There is only one word in that sentence that is more than two syllables, and that is "righteousness." But how profound those simple words are. The truth of these injunctions is self evident. All you have to do is hear them, and you say, "That's right."

The sad thing is that we forget them so easily when we go about our daily living. We know that we ought to listen carefully before we say anything. But, too often, we don't. We are hearers of the word but not doers of the word. Instead of getting all the facts before we speak, we jump to conclusions. We assume we know what happened and why it happened. Without any evidence, we pronounce judgment—Somebody was being thoughtless, inconsiderate, or downright mean. They were wrong, and we have every right to be angry, and so we give them a piece of our mind. We lower the boom on them.

One Monday morning a church member came to my office to see me. He and I had been butting heads over some issues. So, I thought I knew what his visit would be about. I was wrong. When he came in, he said, "I am here to tell you I do not appreciate what you did in your sermon yesterday." I asked him what he meant. He said, "It was obvious to me that you wrote that sermon with me in mind and that you were scolding me from the pulpit." I was absolutely flabbergasted.

I explained to him that I usually follow the lectionary. I preach on the scriptures that are assigned for that Sunday. On that particular Sunday I actually preached a sermon I had written on the assigned scripture several years before.

Sometimes I do preach a sermon I have preached before. I like what John Wesley said about re preaching sermons. He said that a sermon that's not worth preaching a second time wasn't worth preaching the first time. Well, that was a sermon I felt good about preaching again. So, I did. When I looked at that sermon, it never even dawned on me that anyone would have considered it offensive.

Well, the man didn't believe me. So, I went to my files and pulled out the manuscript and said, "Here is the sermon I preached Sunday." The date and place where I first preached that sermon was on the heading. He looked at it and saw that I was telling the truth. He apologized. I told him I was sorry that I hadn't thought about how that sermon might have sounded to him. It was a turning point in our relationship.

But that meeting would have been much less painful for both of us if he had been quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger. If he had come in and said, "Wesley, I want to ask you a question, how did that sermon you preached yesterday come about." and then listened while I told him the history of that sermon, that would have been a much different conversation. In fact, if he had learned to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger, the issues he and I had butted heads over would probably had been resolved without all the conflict we had had. He was a man who was always so sure he already knew what was what, that he hadn't felt the need to ask questions and get his facts straight. He was a different man after that meeting. It was an embarrassing moment for him, but he gained a new maturity that day.

Why is it that so often we assume the worst about people? Most people try to do the right thing most of the time. Sometimes people find themselves in circumstances in which there are no good solutions. Somebody will get hurt, no matter what they do. So, they decide what will do the least harm and hold their noses and do what has to be done. The immature scream, "Look at what a horrible thing that evil person has done." They are quick to speak and quick to anger. They don't stop to ask themselves, "Why would a person with good intentions do that?" They just assume the worst about that person.

The mature simply ask, "Why did you do that," and then listens. And, in so doing, they save themselves and others a lot of pain and frustration. There are a lot of people who have caused a lot of pain to innocent people and carried around a load of anger is corroding their insides because they didn't listen and get their facts straight.

All that can be avoided if they had just remembered to be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger.

James understood the power of words. When I was a child, we used to say, "Stick and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." But that's not true. Words have the power to wound people far more deeply than sticks and stones.

When my son went to Beast Camp, which is West Point's equivalent of boot camp, I told him, "Now, son, you know they are going to yell at you. They are going to say some very unkind things to you. They will try to break you down with their words. Remember it's just part of the process. They don't mean what they're saying. They are doing what they are expected to do. So just don't take it personally." When my son was finally allowed to call home, after we talked awhile, I said, "Well, Jonathan, are they yelling at you?" He said, "Constantly." I said, "You remember what I said about not taking it personally?" He said, "Dad, that worked for about a week. Then it got personal."

Words hurt. Even when you know it's coming and you prepare for it. When people say unkind things to you, most people will either be so wounded that they look for a place to hide and lick their wounds, or they will be so angry that they will counterattack, seeking to destroy the person who attacked them.

There are few who have the wisdom and self-control to ask, "What is going on here? Why is this person saying or doing these things?" Then, after getting all the information, making a decision about the most helpful way to respond.

Wouldn't this be a much better world if we did that? If we would just put ourselves in the other person's shoes and tried to understand, many of the battles we fight to the death could be avoided and people who are enemies would be friends instead.

James is saying to us, "Friends, it's time to grow up." Getting angry hardly ever makes things better. It does not produce the righteousness of God. Don't lose your temper. Keep a firm grasp on it.

When something happens, listen carefully. First, try to understand. When you understand what is happening, then speak. Talk to people about ways to make things better. Help them understand what the conflict is about and ways to resolve it that are win-win.

It is calm, mature thinking that produces the righteousness of God. The mature are quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger.

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