

Quick to Hear

Text

James 1:16 – 25

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

Introduction:

We have already looked at this text twice. Thus far we have observed that its central idea is to be both a hearer and a doer of the word of God. We also saw that this idea is central not only to the Epistle of James, but that it comes directly from the teaching of Jesus. In the first study of the text we focused on the outcome of being a doer of the word; on the words of verse 25 and the fact that a life of obedience to the word of God is a blessed life. In the second study we focused on the process of being a doer of the word. We looked at four images in the text that helped us understand how we become doers of the word. We saw first of all that it begins with a birth, a spiritual birth that is an act of God that gives us ears open to God's word, and hearts willing to obey. The second image is that of a cultivated garden. We must clear from our lives the weeds that would keep the implanted word from growing. Thirdly, we noticed the image of the mirror; that God's word is a mirror that both show us what we are and what we should be. The fourth image was that of an investigator or an intent listener. A cursory glance into it is insufficient for it to penetrate us to the point of transforming us, if we truly desire to be doers of the word we must be intently focused on it.

What remains then of this text that merits a third study? It is the two verses that we have only alluded to so far, verses 19-20: “Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” If we were to isolate these verses from the context of the rest of the passage, we might simply take them as a sort of general maxim or proverb; something like our sayings: “think before you act”, and “count to ten before you get angry.” Biblical proverbs like Proverbs 10:19 and 13:3 express this idea: “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.” “Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life; he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.” Now they are certainly true in this sense, and James will have a great deal to say about the control of the tongue in this letter especially in chapter 3. However, in the context of the present passage he is speaking of more than a general rule. He is not so concerned here with our relationship to other people, as he is our relationship to God and his word. The thing that we are to be quick to hear is, indeed, God’s word. What he is exhorting us to have is a proper heart attitude if we want to be doers of God’s word.

The following scenario, which will be immediately understood by anyone who has been the parent of an adolescent child, will help us understand what James is telling us. The adolescent walks in the room. You smile and say in a cheerful voice. “I was wondering if you could please . . .” The child glares at you with a look that says: “Did I give you permission to speak?”, and replies: “Sure, I’ll do it as soon as I don’t have anything else to do.” You smile again, and kindly remind her: “But I really haven’t had a chance yet to say what I wanted you to do.” At this point she launches into a tirade reminding you how she is no better than a slave, and that you never do anything, and that maybe she will just run away from home and find someone who really appreciates her and how much she does. This is the reverse of what James is telling us to do; yet we have a tendency to treat God’s word like a surly adolescent treats the request of a parent.

We don’t listen because we are sure that if God did ask us to do something, it would only be to make our life miserable. We are so sure of this that we start making excuses why we can’t even before we know what he is going to ask, and then we get angry because God would dare to interfere with our pursuit of happiness, not once imagining that he is just trying to save us from self-destruction and put us on the road to blessedness. As long as this kind of attitude continues, we will persist in making ourselves miserable and missing the joy that God wants to give us. What we need to do is to reverse the process. Instead of half listening and replying in anger before we have really heard, we need, as James exhorts us: to be “quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.”

I. Quick to Hear

What James means by quick to hear takes us back to the fourth image we looked at last time, the intent investigator, the one who pays close attention to what God is saying, who does not want to miss a single word. In the Old Testament Samuel is an example of one who is “quick to hear”. It is said of him in 1Sa 3:19 that he “grew, and the LORD was with him, and did let none of his words fall to the ground.”

This is what James means by receiving the implanted word with meekness. Jesus said that the meek would inherit the earth. That beatitude comes from Psalm 37. The first part of that Psalm reads:

Fret not yourself because of evildoers; be not envious of wrongdoers!

For they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb.

Trust in the LORD, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.

Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act.

He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday.

Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices!

Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil.

For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.

In just a little while, the wicked will be no more; though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there.

But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace.

The reason we are not intent in our listening is that we are not convinced that hearing and doing God’s word really leads to blessedness. Like a sulking teenager, we are sure that God only wants to interfere with our freedom. So we close our ears and our hearts to the one thing that we need to hear above all other things; instead of being like Samuel who would not let even one word of God fall to the Ground.

II. Slow to Speak

By instructing us to be “slow to speak”, James is reminding us that our words should be a response to the word of God, and that we are not ready to speak until we have truly heard. This is more than just hasty speech. It is making sure we have heard what God is saying to us before we respond. This can function at more than one level. One thing that he has in mind, he takes up again at the beginning of chapter 3 where he says:

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. (James 3:1-5).

Notice what he says at the beginning of the passage that not many of us should seek to become teachers. The reason he gives for this is that we are subject to error in what we say. In our teaching, he says, we are capable of leading others astray, of misinforming them. Therefore, we should be careful in what we say. We must truly hear before we speak.

In this paragraph he goes on to speak about how difficult it is to control what we say, to put a bridle on our tongues. He says the tongue is “a world of unrighteousness”. Again he is close to what Jesus taught us, that it is out of the “abundance of the heart” that the mouth speaks. Transformed speech, speech that builds up and does good, begins with a transformed heart. So we must weight not only our words, but the motives behind our words. The Apostle Paul, for example, makes it clear when and how we should speak when he says in Ephesians 4:29: “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers.”

III. Slow to wrath

Finally James says we should be “slow to wrath” because the wrath or anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. We could talk about legitimate and illegitimate anger and debate when anger is justified, but this is not the place. James is warning us about acting out of anger. He says human anger does not promote God’s work. In this text anger is the opposite of

meekness. What James wants us to do is to submit to God's way instead of taking matters into our own hands. Remember what we read earlier in Psalm 37:

Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices!

Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil.

For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.

In just a little while, the wicked will be no more; though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there.

But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace.

The problem with anger is that it is most often a reaction to a personal slight, or hurt. When we act out of anger, or speak out of anger, we are not really trying to do God's work or accomplish God's will, but we are rather trying to defend or to avenge ourselves. In these times God does not say that we really haven't been wronged or offended, but what he does say is: "Be still before the Lord, wait patiently, refrain from anger, forsake wrath." To do so requires great confidence in him and in his ways. We must be convinced that he is wiser than we are; that his ways are right and lead to peace and blessedness. If we have that kind of confidence then we will listen first, and when we do speak our words will be constructive words not destructive words.