

“Quick to Listen, slow to Become Angry”

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James 1:17-27

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

¹⁹ You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. ²¹ Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

²² But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³ For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴ for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵ But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

²⁶ If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

THE TWELVE TRIBES OF THE DIASPORA

The letter of James was written to the “twelve tribes of the dispersion” or the diaspora.

This means the letter was written to Jewish Christians who were scattered throughout the world due to persecution and perhaps, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD.

These Jewish Christians found themselves in a hostile world.

They were surrounded by people who lived in ways that were directly opposed to the gospel message.

And so they were confronted with the question that has confronted every Christian in every age:

How could they be in the world and yet not be of the world?

The answer according to James was to look in the mirror, the mirror of grace as revealed in God's Word.

UNFORGIVING MIRRORS

Let's think about the mirror we have in our bathroom or on our nightstand.

What do we see when we look closely at that mirror?
We see our flaws.

My wife has one of those makeup mirrors that magnifies and has light surrounding it.
I looked at myself in that mirror once...
...scared me to death!

Mirrors can be quite unforgiving.
All of our physical imperfections are on display when we look closely into a mirror.

For that reason, looking into a mirror too long is not a good idea.

Our flaws are exposed, and it can be quite discouraging.

Most of us try our best to cover those flaws up.
Makeup and skin care products are a big business because those mirrors are so unforgiving.

In an even greater way we try to hide our other flaws from others.

Guilt and a sense of failure can dominate a life.

We look in the mirror and do not like what we see.

THE GRACIOUS MIRROR

In today's lesson we learn that God's Word is like a mirror. But, this mirror is different.

When we look into the mirror of God's Word,
we don't see the person we are.
We see the person we are called to be.

For this reason, looking into the mirror of God's Word is very encouraging.

Regular mirrors are unforgiving.
They point out our flaws

God's mirror is very forgiving.
We see ourselves in a different light.

In that mirror we are reminded that we are God's children, and that makes all the difference.

LOVING OUR CHILDREN

We see potential in our children because we love them and want the best for them.

We are more inclined to forgive their faults and emphasize their good points.

Why?
They're our children.
No other reason is necessary.
We see them not as they are but as they might become.

Quite often when a child is loved and encouraged,
they do grow up to be successful.
They live up to the hopes and dreams of their loving parents.

And of course, sadly the opposite is also true.

When children are not encouraged,
when parents emphasize the negative and are unforgiving,
those children often grow up to be adults who have a negative self-image.

A poor self-image can cripple our ability love others.

CHILDREN OF GOD

According to this passage,
all of us have an opportunity to improve our
self-image.

How?

By recognizing that we are children of God.

By looking at ourselves in the mirror of God's grace, God's Word.

Our lesson for today begins with a description of God.

In verse 17 we read that every good and perfect gift comes from God.

God is the "Father of lights" in whom there is "no variation or shadow due to change".

God gives good and perfect gifts to his children.

And, unlike our love which is fickle,

God's love is steadfast.

God's love is unconditional.

God's love comes with no strings attached.

NEW BIRTH

And in the fulfillment of God's gracious purpose,
God enables us to be born "by the Word of truth".

We become "a kind of first fruits of his creatures" who are formed by this
gracious Word.

When we look into the mirror of God's Word,
the Word of truth

we get a look into the future...God's future.

We learn that we are the first fruits of a great harvest, a harvest in which there will be no more suffering, no more pain, no more tears, no more death.

That's how the Bible describes the resurrection of Jesus.

It's a reflection of things to come.

Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. (Hebrews 12:2)
He is the "first fruits" of those who will be raised from the dead. (1 Corinthians 15:20)

And this message about the future changes who we are today.

Instead of becoming
(to use William Saphire's wonderful line)
... "nattering nabobs of negativity"
... we become harbingers of hope.

And the more we meditate on the truth of the gospel,
the more we are transformed by the power of God's grace.

We are reborn.
We become different people.

REMEMBERING WHO WE ARE

But, the old way of life does not die easily.
Most of the letters in the New Testament
(including James) were written because God's children had forgotten who they were and whose they were.

God's grace should promote gracious living.
Gratitude for God's love and forgiveness should cause us to be loving and forgiving toward others.

But, that's easier said than done.

Some of the Jewish Christians to whom James wrote his letter had forgotten this.

Instead of looking long and hard into the mirror of God's grace, claiming their status as a child of God, they had succumbed to the ways of the world.

They listened to God's Word, but they didn't take it to heart. It was as if they took a fleeting glance into that mirror of grace, but then hurried away.

They didn't look long enough and hard enough at that message.

And so they forgot what they saw in that mirror.

They forgot who they were, and they forgot whose they were.

And the reason they forgot is that they did not let that gracious vision shape their actions in the world.

TAKING THE WORD PERSONALLY

When we hear God's Word we must take it personally and apply it in concrete, down to earth situations. A good example of taking the Word of God personally and applying it concretely comes from the Old Testament.

In 2 Samuel we read the story of a leader who had a serious lapse in moral judgment.

David had an affair with Bathsheba. And Bathsheba was pregnant.

Instead of admitting his sin David's tried to cover it up. And in the end that meant having Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, murdered.

The cover up is always worse than the original sin. It was true then, and it's true now.

But, David thought his secret was safe. His fixer, the commander of his army made it look like Uriah was just a casualty of war.

No one knew.
Except God.

So God sent his prophet Nathan to confront the king.

Nathan comes to the king with a powerful story about a rich man who owns many sheep.

But, instead of slaughtering one of his own sheep he takes and slaughters the one lamb a poor man owned, even though the poor man loved the lamb "like a daughter".

David is enraged by this story, and he says,
"That man deserves to die."

And of course at that point Nathan says,
"You are the man."

David knew that it was morally wrong to have an affair with another man's wife.

David knew that it was wrong to cover it up and have him killed.

And yet David was not acting upon what he knew.

The Word of God forced David to take it personally.

When Nathan said, "You are the man" the story was transformed.

When we read Scripture, we need to do more than just read stories written long ago.

We need to put ourselves into the story.

We need to repeat the words of Nathan.

"You are the woman. You are the man.

You are the one that this story is talking about."

We need to do more than just take quick glance into the mirror.

We need to sit and stare a while because this is a message that will transform our life.

This is a message that will change us forever.

In this way we become not only hearers of the word but also doers of the word. (James 1:25)

And when we “do the Word” when we put the Word of God into action, we learn it’s true power. In some respects the Bible is like an instruction manual. Unless you put an instruction manual into practice, it does you no good.

For example, suppose you read a book on how to play golf. Maybe you read Jack Nicholas’ “Golf My Way.”

You understand what it has to say. And you think, “Now that I’ve read and understand this book, I must be a great golfer.”

But, of course if this theoretical golfer never goes to the course and tries to play, he will never know the joy and challenge of what it really means to play golf.

The same is true of the Christian faith.

A theoretical faith is no faith at all.
In order to really understand the grace of God,
we have to put it into practice.

THE WRONG WORDS CAN HURT

What kept those early Jewish Christians from looking at the mirror of God’s grace?

We’ve already touched on it.

They had been exiled to a foreign land.
They lived in a society with values
that contradicted the Word of grace.

In particular, these Christians were surrounded by people who used words in harmful and hurtful ways. And these angry words had actually made their way into the life of the church.

There’s a rhyme that we teach our children that I absolutely despise.
“Sticks and stones may break my bones but words may never hurt me.”

Not true.
Fake news.

Not only can words hurt us;
words can also cause us and others to break bones.
The wrong words can even cause us to deny the grace of God as revealed
in Jesus.
The wrong words caused religious and political leaders to crucify the Mes-
siah, the Son of God.

Just as the Word of God is a mirror of grace,
so the broken words of the world are the devil's mirror of destruction.

When we listen to those words too long they become ingrained in our
thought process.

And all too often we spout those words in anger and frustration.
Those words take on a life of their own.

And those words can cause us to deny
... by what we say and by what we do
...the very grace of God.

We're all guilty of this.

This was a problem in the early church, and it's a problem in the church to-
day.

The caustic language of the world has found it's way into the community of
faith.

We have to recognize that problem, and we have to do something about it.

WRONG WORDS AMPLIFIED

This language problem has been with us all along,
but I have to wonder if it's even worse in our day.

Not only are we careless about our use of language;
social media has amplified the problem.

On the spur of the moment

we say things that we will come to regret.

One ill conceived tweet can end a friendship
and do terrible harm to others.

I wonder what James might have said about Twitter?

Maybe he would have said something like,

“My little children, stay off Twitter.
It just creates arguments!”

I guess we’ll never know what James would say about Twitter.

QUICK TO LISTEN

But, James did say this,
“You must understand this, my beloved:
let everyone be quick to listen,
slow to speak, slow to anger...”

Two out of every five verses in the book of James are about the importance
of speaking carefully.

His message can be summarized this way:
The Word of God brings grace and hope.
Careless words bring destruction.

It’s just that simple.

I’ve had verse 19 memorized for a long time.
I preach on it almost every time it comes up in the Lectionary.
I believe it’s absolutely true.

“Quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to become angry...”
Words to live by for sure.

But, I still struggle to put it into practice.
Often I do just the opposite.
I’m quick to speak,

slow to listen and quick to become angry.

And when that happens God's Word of grace is drowned out by my angry words.

James put it this way,

"Your anger does not produce God's righteousness."

I have to agree. My anger certainly does not produce righteousness. It produces hurt feelings, misunderstanding, and division.

THE IMPLANTED WORD

How do we combat this tendency to speak angry words that cause real destruction?

James suggests that we replace angry speech with the "implanted word". When we hide the Word of God in our hearts it has the power to "save our souls".

In other words, when we take the Word of God personally, when we apply it to how we treat others, we are changed.

We are saved from our own impulsiveness and the fallout that comes from careless language.

To put it another way, we need to spend more time looking at the mirror of God's grace and less time mirroring what society tempts us to say and do.

Admittedly we are swimming upstream on this one. The war of words has intensified in recent years.

But, we believe that the Word of grace as revealed in Jesus is greater than the angry words of this world, even a world where those words are amplified by Twitter.

GOD IS THE JUDGE

And, more than that, we believe that it's up to God to judge ... not us.

That's the reason we can be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.

That's the reason we can "bridle" our tongue. (James 1:26)

This knowledge help us become "doers of the Word" as well as "hearers of the Word". (James 1:22)

We are creatures born of God's Word of grace, and as such grace becomes a way of life.

GRACIOUS AND JUST LIVING

Our lesson for today ends with an example of how we should live in response to this message of grace.

James wrote,

"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress,

and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

This last verse in our lesson is another good summary of James' message.

Gracious people care for those in distress.

And gracious people take care not to be stained by the ways of the world.

I think this passage prompts us to ask ourselves some hard questions each day.

How can I restrain my speech and my anger?

How can I listen, really listen to those with who I disagree?

And yet, at the same time,

how can I stand up for those who are in distress and have been abandoned by an ungracious world?

That's a fine line to walk.

The injustices of the world will often cause us to be quite angry.
We will want to fire off some angry words on Twitter.

But, grace calls us to stop and listen.

Listen to our opponents.

Listen to our better angels.

Listen to those that are without hope.

And most of all listen to the Word of God,
the Word of grace.

And then, very slowly and cautiously,
speak words of challenge said with care.

We try to bring grace and hope to those who have been exploited and
abandoned by a selfish society.

OUR EXILE

Those Jewish Christians to whom James spoke long ago weren't the only
ones in exile.

We're in exile too.
We live in a world that does not share our values.
We're a minority. Always have been.

And sometimes in our frustration with the injustices of this world, we will
want to fill the air with angry words.

We may even think that we are being "prophetic".

Sometimes angry words can be prophetic.
Sometimes angry words are the proper response to injustice.

But, James suggests that we have to be careful.
More often than not angry words are just angry words.

More often than not angry words are a sign that we haven't put our faith into practice,
that we have been hearers of the word but not doers of the word.

So this week, let's look long and hard into the mirror of God's grace.

And let that Word of grace help us be
"quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry".

AMEN.