

James: The Practical Christian

Growing in Spiritual Maturity

James 1:19-20

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Scripture

The story is told of two men who were traveling along in a hot-air balloon when they began to realize that they had no idea where they were. To make matters worse, as they looked at the sky, a storm began brewing overhead and heavy clouds started rolling in. For a brief minute they came through a break in the clouds and they were able to see a man on a hill just beneath them.

In a shout of desperation one of them yelled to the man, “Excuse me, sir, but do you know where we are?”

“Sure!” he said, “You’re in a hot-air balloon!”

Before the men could respond, a big gust of wind came along and blew them back into the clouds. Then one of the men looked at the other and said, “That man must have been a Christian.”

“Why do you say that?” asked his friend.

“Because what he said was absolutely true, but it was also absolutely useless.”

It’s unfortunate that the world often looks at Christians that way. Christians are often seen as believing in things that may be true but that don’t really make a difference in one’s daily living.

It’s one thing to say that you believe a certain creed, but it’s a totally different thing to have that creed actually transform your conduct. It’s one thing to talk about your faith, but it’s something altogether different to live it.

That is why today’s text is so helpful. James shows us what growing in spiritual maturity looks like. So, with that in mind, let’s read James 1:19-20:

¹⁹ My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰ for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. (James 1:19-20)

Introduction

Retirement homes are generally quiet places. *The St. Petersburg Times* reported in spring 2004 that the upscale Spring Haven Retirement Community in Winter Haven, Florida found their peace disrupted over a nasty incident at the salad bar. Mealtime turned ugly after 86-year-old William Hocker complained to 62-year-old Lee Thoss about picking through the lettuce. Name-calling soon gave way to punching, and eventually the police were summoned.

Those in the way paid a price. One resident was bitten in his attempt to stop the fight, another knocked down. Thoss' mother, herself a resident, tried to rescue her son. The octogenarian suffered a cut on the arm.

While no one was seriously injured, Thoss now must find a new place to live.¹

Those retirement home residents did not take time to listen, and they were quick to speak and become angry.

While we may smile at the incident, the fact is that you and I struggle in the same way. How often have you said something to someone and wished that you had listened before speaking? Or when was the last time you got angry? Oh! You may not have said anything or even hit someone, but inside you were annoyed.

Lesson

In our text for today, James shows you three characteristics of spiritual maturity. James outlines three distinct marks of growing in spiritual maturity. In this passage he sets down for you the first of many spiritual litmus tests you will be taking together over the next several weeks, tests that are meant by God to help you get a better grip on what true faith looks like, tests that are meant to show you what a practical Christian looks like.

¹ http://www.sptimes.com/2004/03/05/State/Retirement_home_melee.shtml.

I. Be Quick to Listen (1:19a)

The first characteristic of growing in spiritual maturity is that you should be quick to listen.

James says in verse 19a, **“My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen.”** But, “Listen to what?”

The primary meaning of **“quick to listen”** seems to be **quick to listen to God’s word**. The context of this exhortation from James is God’s word, for in both the preceding verse (verse 18) and the following verse (verse 21) James is speaking of “the *word* of truth” and “the *word* planted in you.” And so James is saying that you must have an open ear to hear what God has said in his word.

Jesus constantly rebuked the religious leaders of his day for their inability to “hear” him. They heard the truth with their ears, but Jesus’ point was that they had never learned to listen with their hearts! It’s possible to have good hearing *physically*, but to be very hard of hearing *spiritually*.

Your primary task as a Christian is to tune your heart to hear the word of God. We saw last time in verse 18 that it was through the hearing of the word that God brings about the new birth in our lives. And it is through this same word that he has chosen to transform you and change you into the likeness of his Son.

That is why you **should be quick to listen** to the word. That means that you must be eager to hear it, to sit under it, to submit to it, and to assimilate it into your lives. You must be teachable and attentive to the word of God.

This means making it a priority to set aside consistent times of solitude to read God’s word prayerfully and reflectively. It means reading the Scriptures with an attentive heart, sensitive to the Holy Spirit’s prompting as you read.

Some of you are thinking, “What time alone?” You’ve grown slack. Or you’ve never really started. When you become **quick to listen** your life will change. The primary way God changes lives

today is by his Holy Spirit through his holy word. Through reading the Scriptures, God will transform your thinking. He will equip you for life's struggles. He will comfort you in life's trials.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 says that "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." You need to resolve today to set aside regular times in your schedule for the reading of God's Word.

Pollster George Barna reports that 52% of all American adults do not read the Bible at all. That is not surprising. What is surprising though is that 22% of evangelical Christians admit that they *never* read the Bible outside of the worship service of their churches. Only 26% of evangelical Christians read their Bible daily.² Is it any wonder that so many professing Christians are not being transformed by God and his word?

To **be quick to listen** to God's word means that you read his word. It means spending time each day reading God's word.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne was born in Edinburgh on May 21, 1813. He died in Dundee on March 25, 1843—not yet thirty years of age. He had been serving as the pastor of St. Peter's Church, Dundee, since 1836. Though so young, he was known throughout Scotland as "the saintly M'Cheyne."

One of M'Cheyne's continuing concerns was to encourage his congregation, and himself, to read the Bible. To one young man he wrote these words, "You read your Bible regularly, of course; but do try and understand it, and still more to *feel* it. Read more parts than one at a time. For example, if you are reading Genesis, read a Psalm also; or if you are reading Matthew, read a small bit of an Epistle also. Turn the Bible into prayer. Thus, if you were reading the First Psalm, spread the Bible on the chair before you, and kneel and pray, 'O Lord, give me the blessedness of the man'; 'let me not stand in the counsel of the ungodly.' This is the best way of knowing the meaning of the Bible, and of learning to pray."

² Barna Research Group, May 9, 1991.

In line with his desire to foster serious Bible reading, M'Cheyne prepared a scheme for daily reading that would take readers through the New Testament and Psalms twice each year, and through the rest of the Bible once.³ I have enclosed a copy of M'Cheyne's Calendar for Daily Bible Readings in your bulletin, and commend it to you.

If you find M'Cheyne's Calendar too cumbersome for you, modify it. When I first started taking Bible reading seriously about twenty-five years ago, I used M'Cheyne's Calendar. After a couple of years, however, I personally preferred simply to read straight through the Bible, beginning in Genesis and ending in Revelation. I generally read through the Bible at least once each year, and I vary my reading by using different translations. The reason I mention my practice to you is to illustrate the importance of finding a method that works for you.

What happens to most Christians when they decide to start reading the Bible? They quickly get bogged down in their reading—usually in Leviticus! And so they stop reading. My encouragement to you is to read your Bible each day, and to find a method that works for you. If you get bogged down in Leviticus (or any other book), skip it, and come back to that book when it is the last book left for you to read.

To **be quick to listen** to God's word also means that you prepare your heart to hear God's word whenever it is taught.

Chapter 21 of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* deals with "Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day." Paragraph 5 addresses, in part, how we are to approach the Scriptures in public worship: "The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith and reverence. . . are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God." When the word of God is read and preached, you are to pay attention, to listen with faith and reverence so that you might understand and apply it to your lives.

³ D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God, Volume Two* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 11, 12.

A visiting preacher came to a black church one Sunday. Just prior to the time when he was to deliver his sermon, he noticed a strange noise in the congregation. It began as a low mumble and then slowly began to increase in volume. The people were almost chanting. Then he could hear them. They were saying, “Yes, Lord, Yes! Yes, Lord, Yes!”

The visiting preacher asked the pastor what in the world they were doing. The pastor responded by saying, “These folk believe that when God’s Servant comes to bring them God’s word, that God really does have a word for each of them. And they come every Sunday with prepared hearts, expecting to hear from God as his word is preached. And when they say, ‘Yes, Lord, Yes!’ they are telling God in advance that they will do whatever he tells them to do today even before he says it.”

How well is your heart prepared to hear God’s word each week? Do you come expecting to hear from God? That’s why I encourage you to take notes. It’s a great discipline for you to take notes to record them for future meditation.

So, the first characteristic of growing in spiritual maturity is that you should be quick to listen.

II. Be Slow to Speak (1:19b)

The second characteristic of growing in spiritual maturity is that you should be slow to speak.

James says in verse 19b, “Everyone should be quick to listen, **slow to speak.**” James is not referring to slowness in your speaking but to the manner in which you speak. He is referring to the need for you to restrain hastiness when you speak. It’s a call for caution, a call to think before you speak.

He is most likely drawing on the Old Testament Proverbs where we are continually called to recognize the need for a controlled tongue. For example, we read:

- Proverbs 10:19: “When words are many, sin is not absent, but he who holds his tongue is wise.”

- Proverbs 17:27-28: “A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even-tempered. Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue.”
- Proverbs 29:11: “A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control.”

A great proverb, although not found in the Scriptures but nevertheless very true, is: “Blessed is the man, who having nothing to say, abstains from giving clear evidence of the fact.”

Peter was a man not known for being **slow to speak**. In Matthew 17 we are told of the time when Peter had that glorious opportunity to witness the transfiguration of Jesus. Just after seeing Moses and Elijah and Jesus all appearing together in a glorified state on the mountain, Peter immediately burst out, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah” (17:4). Of course the immediate response came from heaven, which in essence should be translated as, “Peter, shut up!”

In John 13 we are told that as the Lord was washing the disciples’ feet, it was Peter who blurted out impetuously, “No, you shall never wash my feet” (13:8).

Peter had obvious struggles in this area. He was rash and impetuous.

James may also have in mind here the verbal abuse to which certain meetings of the church had been subjected in the first century. In 1 Corinthians 14 we are told that the design of those early meetings of the church was to provide an opportunity for the Spirit of God to move within gifted men to exhort, to teach, and to instruct. And yet it seems that there were those among them who were anything but **slow to speak**. They were rash and given to overstatement and to quick response. They abused the freedom the Spirit of God had provided in those meetings.

James’ concern here is that you not fall into that trap. He wants you to learn to consider carefully your words before you share them. He wants you to evaluate your words, to ponder them.

To **be slow to speak** is to be humble, patient, reserved, and careful of your speech in all circumstances. It is knowing that your words have power to build people up or to tear them down.

It was Zeno the founder of the Stoic philosophy who pointed out that human beings have two ears but one mouth so that they might hear twice as much as speak. Doesn't it seem only logical that we spend more time on the first than the second? We never learn while we are speaking. We learn while we are listening.

A young man once approached Socrates, the eminent philosopher of his day, and told him he wanted to pay him to teach him the gift of oratory which Socrates possessed. Yet from the time he was introduced to Socrates until quite some time later there was an incessant stream of talk from this young man. Socrates silenced him by placing his hand over his mouth and saying, "My young friend, I will teach you the gift but it will cost you double."

The man asked, "Why?"

Socrates replied, "Because I must teach you two sciences. First I must teach you the science of holding your tongue, and then I can teach you the science of the wise use of it."

So, the first characteristic of growing in spiritual maturity is that you should be quick to listen. Second, you should be slow to speak.

III. **Be Slow to Anger (1:19c, 20)**

The third characteristic of growing in spiritual maturity is that you should be slow to anger.

James writes in verse 19c, "Everyone should be. . . **slow to become angry.**"

Winston Churchill was known at times to be very quick to become angry. One of his more famous blowups was with Lady Astor who was seeking to become the first woman of parliament. Churchill violently opposed her on this. And in one of their more heated exchanges, Lady Astor blurted out, "Winston, if I were married to you, I'd put poison in your coffee."

To which Churchill responded, “And if you were my wife, I’d drink it!”

Don’t misunderstand James here. He is not saying that all anger is always wrong. Jesus expressed righteous anger.

Even pagans recognize that anger is sometimes justified. Aristotle, in his book on *Ethics*, said, “We praise a man who is angry over the right grounds, against the right person, in the right manner, at the right moment and for the right length of time.”

The problem is that too often our pride and self esteem gets wounded, and we respond with unrighteous anger. And this anger then injures rather than edifies those against whom it is directed.

Why should you be slow to anger? James answers that question in verse 20 by saying “**For man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.**” James is saying that you must carefully guard against your anger lest it result in deeply hurting others.

The **righteous life** that James is referring to in verse 20 is not the righteousness that is a part of God’s character but rather it is the way of life that God requires of us. His point is that whenever you give way to improper anger, you do not advance the righteousness that you are professing. Inappropriate anger always blocks your goal of fostering true righteousness.

Ecclesiastes 7:9 says, “Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools.”

Stop for a moment and think how often you have had to repent from the passion of uncontrolled anger. After having realized that you misread the facts or the motivation of the other person, you have had to retrace your steps and realize that if you had simply stopped and considered what was said, and the reason why, you probably would not have responded with anger.

How do you talk to your spouse? What tone of voice do you use with your kids? Or on the job? It’s in an issue like anger where true faith will make itself known, or will be shown to be missing.

Conclusion

These are very personal truths found in verses 19-20. Notice in verse 19 that James carefully uses the word, **“Everyone.”** **“Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”** James says that these are three characteristics of growing in spiritual maturity. These three marks of authentic Christianity are not for the person sitting next to you today. These are not characteristics you will need to share with a friend or loved one by tape. God does not mean for you to concentrate on the person to your left or right, but he wants you to concentrate only on that person occupying your own seat.

Have you tuned your heart to hear God’s voice in today’s message? Of these three characteristics of spiritual maturity we have studied in this text, which one has God most impressed upon you today? Is it being quick to listen? Slow to speak? Or, slow to become angry?

You need to realize that you have no power within yourself to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. You need a power and strength outside of yourself. And that power comes only from the gospel.

Tell God that you have no power within yourself to apply this message to yourself. Tell him of your faults and failures and sin. Remember, you are not telling him something that he does not already know. Simply confess to him that you are far weaker and far more sinful than you ever dreamed possible.

But, thank God for the good news of the gospel! Thank him for his love and grace. Thank him that you are far more loved than you ever imagined. Ask God to give you his Holy Spirit to enable you to look to Christ, so that you can be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Take a moment now and ask God to impress upon you the truth he wants you to hear today. Thank God for bringing this truth to your mind and ask him to forgive you for how you have failed in this area. Ask him now for his strength and power, by his Holy Spirit to grow in this area.

If you are not a Christian today, you need to understand that this passage does not address itself to you or even to your specific needs. James is not giving rules and regulations here for you who are not Christians so that you might try to live by them in order to be acceptable to God.

For the Bible teaches that doing good works can never make you right before God. It is only through trusting in Christ's death and resurrection that you can be declared forgiven by God and find that necessary power to live out your life as he designed it to be.

If God has impressed upon you today your need to submit to Jesus Christ, I would encourage you to respond now by praying, "Thank you God for showing me my need of Jesus Christ, my need for forgiveness, my need for power to be the kind of person who is quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. As best I know, I now turn from my sin and trust Christ for salvation. I trust in his death as the payment for my sin and in his resurrection power to transform my life in conformity with his. I ask this in his name and for his sake. Amen.

CHARGE:

God's word to you today is very simple and straight forward. You are to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. For in so doing you will bring about the righteous life that God desires for you to live to the glory and honor of his name. As you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.