

Quick Slow Slow

The Word or Hearing and Doing Part 1 James 1:19-20 1-4-2015

Summary: The root of anger is three-fold: 1) Wrong interpretation of suffering, 2) pride, and 3) selfishness. The whole book of James is designed to correct those three problems. After correcting #1 in the first 18 verses of chapter 1, verses 19-20 introduce the body of the book which focuses on replacing pride and selfishness with humility and love. Anger is a reaction against evil that is supposed to increase righteousness. But human anger does the opposite – it increases sin. So get rid of it by being quick to listen and slow to speak.

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James 1:19 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. 21 Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

Introduction

What if Anger Were Eliminated?

What would the church be like if all sinful anger were eliminated? Nobody got irritated or aggravated or frustrated - no trace of bitterness in anybody's heart toward anyone else. No harsh, angry words or attitudes. If all of that were eliminated, what would the church be like? What would your home be like? What would you be like? Take a look at that statement in verse 20 of James chapter 1.

James 1:20 Man's anger does not bring about the righteousness of God.

That means the more we get rid of anger, the more of the righteousness of God we would experience in our church, our homes, and in our own lives.

The Root of Anger

But that is easier said than done. Everyone who has a temper problem knows that just deciding not to get angry doesn't work. Something has to be done about the root cause – that thing down inside us that causes us to react in anger. What James does in this book is reveal to us what those root causes are, and then he gives us five chapters on how to change them. I will try to unfold this more as we go, but I believe the entire book of James is devoted to teaching us how to get rid of the three root causes of anger: pride, selfishness, and a wrong perspective on suffering.

Selfishness + Suffering = Anger

When there is pride or selfishness in your heart, suffering will cause a reaction toward anger. Instead of considering it pure joy, you get irritated. Pride and selfishness are kind of like cesium. If you take a chunk of cesium and set it down on the table, it will just look like a harmless piece of metal sitting there. But if you dump a bucket of water on it you will be injured. There will be an instant, violent explosion because coming in contact with water causes cesium to react in a violent way. Pride and selfishness can sit in your heart like a chunk of cesium. And suffering and the hardships of life are like a bucket of water. Is water a bad thing? No. If there is no cesium present, then water is good for you. If there is no pride and selfishness present, trials and hardships are good for you. But if pride and selfishness are sitting there in your heart, as soon as they come in contact with suffering, they are activated. And the byproduct of their reaction is anger. It might be explosive, violent tantrums. It might be invisible, under the surface resentment. It might just be irritability or a bad mood. But whatever form it takes – it is all anger.

Most people who have an anger problem think the culprit is the water. They think their anger is caused by suffering – people mistreating them, or things going wrong. But that is not the cause. The cause is that cesium – pride and selfishness in the heart, and the wrong attitude about suffering. And the structure of the book of James is very simple. It is like a sandwich. At the beginning and again at the end there is a section on the right way to interpret suffering. Those are the bookends. And in the middle – the body of the letter – is one section after another on how to deal with the problem of pride and selfishness.¹ We finished up that opening section on how to properly interpret suffering. Now, in this passage, verses 19-20 we see an introduction to the main body of the book. He goes right for the jugular in dealing with their anger.

Symptoms of Selfishness and Anger

And you can tell how important this little paragraph is by the way he begins.

James 1:19 My dear brothers, take note of this:

James wants you to take note of everything he wrote, but especially this. There is emotion in his words – **my dear brothers**. James knows the devastation that comes from pride and selfishness and an unbridled tongue, so he just really wants the readers to get this.

19 ...Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger

One of the most obvious marks of proud, selfish people is that they tend to be the exact opposite of this - slow to listen, quick to speak, and quick to anger. When you are puffed up with self-importance,

¹ The opposite of pride is humility, and the opposite of selfishness is love. And you can tell how much true love and humility you have by how you live and by what comes out of your mouth. The way to increase in humility and love is by receiving the Word and putting it into practice. Chapter 2 is all about love, The second half of chapter 3 and all of chapter 4 focus on both humility and love, the first half of ch.3 focuses on the tongue, and the second half of ch.1 focuses on receiving the Word.

what you have to say matters more than what anyone else has to say. You are not quick to listen because you probably already know more than this person who's talking. And unless they are talking about you, what they are saying is boring, because when you are selfish, you are not interested in the lives of others. And you are angry a lot because selfish, proud people think the world revolves around them, and so every time the world doesn't cooperate, it makes them mad.

Most of our anger, if you think about it, rises from either pride or selfishness. In our pride, we sit in the place of God. And the reason we have anger is people keep on breaking our commandments:

Thou shalt love me in the way I require.

Thou shalt honor me and respect me and listen to me.

When thou drivest thine automobile thou shalt not turn to the right or to the left in front of me unless thou first signalest thine intention to do so with thine blinker.

Children, thou shalt not inconvenience your parents.

We have all these unspoken commandments. We are not even consciously aware of them, but if you want to discover what your commandments are, just look at the things that make you angry.

Pride causes anger – and so does selfishness. Selfishness is when there is a list of things I must have in order to be happy. And if something gets in the way of me having those things – I get mad. You can tell what it is in your life by just filling in the blank: “I must have _____.” I must have peace and quiet in my home when I'm tired. I must have a spouse who respects me instead of treating me like a child. I must be listened to. I must be comfortable. I must be in control. It is fine to want all those things. But you know that wanting has crossed the line to “must have” when you get angry when those desires are blocked. The only “must” for the Christian should be nearness to God. Everything else is a preference, and love delights in giving up its preferences for the good of others. But selfish people live for their selfish desires, so if you get in the way of one of those desires – look out. You are going to face their wrath.

Slow to Anger

So let's take a look at these three commands in verse 19. I want to start with the third one (**slow to anger**), because that is the primary idea. You can tell that because that is the one he expands on in the next verse. So let's start there, and then go back and see how the other two are related.

Definition

So what is anger? Let's begin with a definition. Anger is a judgment and reaction against evil (or what you perceive as an evil). You see or experience something that seems bad, and your soul passes judgment on that thing and reacts against it – that is what anger is. And it is supposed to be a good thing.

Righteous Anger

It is one of the attributes of God. God sees evil, judges it to be evil, and reacts harshly against it in ways that defeat that evil and bring about righteousness. That is how anger is supposed to work. And when it does work that way in our lives, it's a good thing. It is called righteous anger. If you see a kid being picked on by a bully and it doesn't make you angry, something is wrong with you. Anger is designed to energize us to overcome evil and bring about greater righteousness.

But there is a problem. Look at verse 20.

20 ...man's anger does not bring about the righteousness of God.

In a sinful, human heart anger becomes perverted. Instead of being a tool to overcome evil and bring about righteousness, it becomes a tool to advance our selfishness. And the result is it increases evil instead of overcoming it. Most of the time our anger is loaded with sin. Think of the things that typically go along with your anger: Self-importance, self-assertion, intolerance, stubbornness, rudeness, violence,

resentment, focusing on the other person's weaknesses and failings, keeping a record of wrongs, revenge, harsh words, assuming bad motives, lack of compassion. The purpose of anger is supposed to be to increase righteousness. But our anger does the opposite.

Therefore, it is forbidden because anything that does not bring about the righteousness of God is off limits. That is the logic of the verse. There is no such thing as a part-time Christian life. Everything we ever do – from preaching the gospel to drinking a glass of water² or climbing in bed at night – all of it must be done to bring about the righteousness of God.

Justice

So, we are to avoid anger because it does not bring about righteousness. Not only that, but our anger does not even do the main thing we want it to do. When we get angry, what we really want is some kind of justice. We want there to be some consequence for this person who hurt us. That phrase - **the righteousness of God** very often refers in Scripture to justice. We get angry because we were wronged, and we want justice. But it never works. Human anger doesn't bring about the justice of God. When is the last time you improved a bad situation by getting angry?

You cannot give that person what they deserve for their sin. The only way justice can be done is if that person suffers the wrath of God in hell, or the Son of God suffers the wrath of God in their place. And you can't do either one of those. Whatever punishment you give is going to be way too small to fit the crime, or, if the person is a believer, it will make a mockery of the punishment that Jesus already endured for that sin.

Romans 12:19 Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath

Our anger is not capable of bringing about justice. Leave that up to God.

The Righteous Anger Test

If you are ever wondering, "Is this anger that I'm feeling righteous anger or sinful anger?" just ask yourself two simple questions. Am I reacting against sin because it is sin? Or am I just reacting because it interfered with my desires? Righteous anger reacts against sin because that sin dishonors God.

The second question is this: Is my anger resulting in godly attitudes and behavior that are overcoming the evil and bringing about righteousness? Or is my anger resulting in more evil? And in verse 20 James informs us that the natural course of human anger is more sin, not less sin. That is why Scripture so often speaks of anger as a bad thing that we need to throw off.

God Is Slow to Anger

Did Jesus get angry? Yes. There is one place in the Bible that says Jesus was angry. One. Not 100, not 25 – one. And when that happened, did Jesus sin? Did He become irritable? Did He get into a bad mood for a couple hours? Did He say things that He later regretted? Did He lose control? No. None of those things happened.

God the Father is the same way. Think about it – His anger is only good – and yet, even though His anger is always perfect and good, still, even God is slow to anger. Do you know what verse in the Bible is quoted more often by other writers of Scripture than any other verse? It is Exodus 34:6 where God reveals to Moses what He is like.

Exodus 34:6 And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness

² 1 Corinthians 10:31 So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

So if you are convinced that your anger is righteous and justified and good, just like God's anger – even if that were true, you should still be slow to anger.

Universal Problem

It is interesting to me that James lists all kinds of specific problems his readers had in this area, even though the letter wasn't sent to any specific church. He talks about how they were getting in fights and quarrels, boasting, slandering each other, gossiping, criticizing, showing favoritism to rich people, etc. He pinpoints all those specific problems even though he is not writing to any specific church, because those problems are so common and prevalent in every church in every age. Very few people don't have a problem with sinful anger in times when they are being mistreated. And it causes so many problems. It destroys marriages. It destroys intimacy with God. It makes your prayers and Bible reading dry and boring and ineffective. It ruins friendships. It disrupts the functioning of the church. It causes ministries to die that could have been incredibly fruitful. It is such a massive problem, and it is so incredibly hard to deal with because the people with the worst anger problem are so often the ones who have the least awareness of the problem. They get angry multiple times a week, every week - sometimes multiple times a day. And yet in prayer group, their prayer request is never about their anger. They aren't reading books on anger or doing Bible studies or asking for accountability or biblical counseling. After a bad outburst they feel kind of bad, but for the most part, they do not have the same kind of desperation that you see in someone who is enslaved to alcohol or pornography or even overeating. And that is especially true for those people who are the types who express their anger by quiet withdrawal rather than loud outbursts. Instead of confronting, they just let it cook.

It is especially hard to get those people to come to grips with the sinfulness of their anger. I think that's why Paul wears out his Thesaurus in Ephesians 4 when he is telling us to get rid of our anger.

Ephesians 4:29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths ...31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.

He knows that angry people sidestep exhortations about anger by renaming their anger. "I'm not angry – I'm just frustrated." Or, "I'm not angry – I'm just hurt." Paul knows that we are experts in renaming our anger so we don't have to admit that it is real anger. So he just says, "Whatever you want to call it, whatever name you want to put on it – get rid of it." Is it a sin to be hurt? No, but oh, how easy it is to hide sinful anger behind hurt. If you find yourself saying the words, "I'm not angry," fairly often, you are probably angry. People who aren't angry generally do not have to go around trying to convince everyone that they are not really angry. I have heard people say, "I'm not angry," and then walk out and slam the door – just to prove that they aren't angry.

I think maybe one reason why some people are so slow to take this sin seriously is because anger is a feeling. And they think, "Feelings are just things that sort of happen to you, and you aren't responsible for how you feel. The real sins are things you actually do with your body." That could not be farther from the truth. All sin takes place in the heart. Even the sins you commit with your body – the thing that makes those actions so sinful is the things you were feeling inside that resulted in those actions.³

We need to put away selfish anger, and that will never happen until we are honest with ourselves and call a spade a spade when we have some form of anger in our hearts. Acknowledge the sinfulness of it, stop blaming other people, stop blaming circumstances, stop blaming trials and suffering; and confess the sin fully to God so that you can repent of it and be forgiven and changed by His grace.

How to Change

³ The greatest command in all the Bible is a feeling – love God and love your neighbor. And if that is the greatest command, then the greatest sin is to love something else more than you love God. Not only can feelings be sinful, but the greatest sin there is is a feeling.

So if you have a problem with anger I hope you feel convicted by God's Word right now. If this is a sin in your life then God wants you to feel deeply convicted. But if you are His child He does not want you to feel condemned. He does not want you to feel discouraged, and He does not want this command to feel burdensome to you. When God gives you commands, He wants them to feel like what they really are. Look at what they are called in verse 25 – **the perfect law that gives freedom**. The command to let go of your anger is not oppressive or burdensome, it is freeing. Anger causes misery, never joy. And letting go of it may be hard to do, but God wants you to do it not only for His glory but also for your joy. Holding on to selfish anger is like wrapping yourself up in razor wire. It will only do you harm and never good.

So God not only commands that we let go of it, He provides a way. Think of God's commands not like a job description, but like a doctor's prescription. If we do what He says, it will cure the disease. Not because our efforts are so powerful, but because His medicine is powerful.

So what is that medicine? We know that just deciding to be more even tempered won't cut it. Just making a new year's resolution to be less angry won't have any power behind it to change our hearts. The only thing we can do that will have power behind it is to follow the Doctor's prescription. That is why the word **therefore** appears at the beginning of verse 21.

James 1:21 Therefore, having gotten rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

The word **therefore** lets us know that he is not starting a new topic. He is drawing a conclusion. He is saying, "You need to get rid of anger, therefore humbly accept the word." That is the solution to the problem: humble acceptance of what God's Word says.

And in the next section James is going to go into detail on what it means to humbly accept His Word. So we will plan on studying that in the weeks to come. But for this morning, let's just see what God's Word is telling us about how to overcome anger right here in verses 19 and 20.

Quick to Listen⁴

So let's back up to the beginning of verse 19. The first two commands in the verse are preparing us for the third command. One of the best medicines to cure the disease of anger is to be quick to listen and slow to speak. You might think, "Listening doesn't help – the more I listen to her the madder I get!" That may be true with selfish listening. But selfish listening is not real listening.

Definition of Listening

When you see the word *listen* in the Bible it means more than just hearing and understanding the words. Listening means being open to be influenced by someone's words.

Proverbs 4:1 Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction; pay attention and gain understanding.

Don't just hear them; allow them to influence you.⁵

⁴ Many scholars argue that because the statement immediately preceding this verse is about the word of truth, and the section immediately following is about obeying the Word, that these imperatives should be interpreted in relationship to the Word of God (be quick to listen to the Word, slow to speak the Word is in chapter three, and slow to get angry when you hear the Word preached). There is some merit to that view, that I am not convinced. It requires quite a bit of inference – especially given the fact that chapter three was not written yet and would not be in the people's minds. So it does not seem likely that they would automatically think "slow to speak" refers to speaking God's Word. Also, the fact that this statement is in the form of a proverb seems to be an indication that it should be interpreted proverbially. And finally, the main concern James seems to have in verse 19 is relational, as indicated by the explanation in verse 20, which seems to be speaking of all sinful anger – not just anger over God's Word.

⁵ Obviously, this does not mean we throw discernment out the window and allow ourselves to be influenced by everything everyone says. If someone is trying to influence you toward evil, obviously you shouldn't listen to that. In Genesis 3:17, God rebuked Adam for listening to his wife. **Genesis 3:17 To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' 'Cursed is the ground because of you'"** Do not let yourself be influenced by evil. This is not an absolute rule. It is a general wisdom principle. Generally speaking, you should be the type of

Proverbs 4:10 Listen, my son, accept what I say, and the years of your life will be many.

Listening means giving someone a fair, sympathetic hearing and taking to heart what is being said. You approach people with the attitude that says, “If wisdom allows it, I will let myself be won over to your way of thinking. And before I make a judgment about whether wisdom will allow it, I will give careful, open-minded thought to your words.”

Do not think that you have listened just because you can repeat the person’s words back to him. True listening is when you have an attitude that says, “I really do want to know what you think and how you feel. I really do want to know what’s going on inside you.” When you are in an argument, imagine God telling you, “I want you to be able to stand in a courtroom like a lawyer and argue that other person’s side.” When you can argue that person’s side to their satisfaction, then you have listened. And that kind of listening will calm anger. You cannot feel compassion and anger towards someone at the same time.

Your ears more firmly plugged up than when you are angry. Nobody is a good listener while they are angry. But it is amazing how opening your ears and opening your heart to a person will calm both your anger and theirs.

But pride will keep you from listening this way. Proud, arrogant people can only learn from brilliant teachers. So unless you are brilliant or highly educated, they won’t listen to you. And most people aren’t brilliant, so proud people don’t do much listening.

Neither do selfish people. Loving people listen, because they are genuinely interested in your life. When you talk about yourself, they are not bored because you’re talking about one of their favorite subjects. Selfish people are interested in themselves, so listening to you is a waste of their time.

This is one reason why proud people have so little influence. If you ask a bad listener, “What is that guy’s view on evolution?” he will be able to tell you what the guy’s position is. But if you ask a good listener, “What is that guy’s view on evolution?” the wise person will be able to not only tell you what the guy’s position is, but why he holds that position. When he was talking to that guy about it, he really listened. That is why wise people tend to be so influential. It is hard to change or influence someone’s view on something if you don’t know the various reasons why they hold their view. One person might believe in evolution because that is the only thing he has ever been taught. Another person might believe in evolution because he lost a loved one and he is angry at God. The wise person knows to take a much different approach with the second guy than the first guy, because he was quick to listen and so he knows what the real issue is.

Quickness

Is it possible to listen to everyone this way all the time? No, but being quick to listen means you are eager to do it when you can. Slowness to listen is when you are asking questions like this:

Is listening to this person right now going to be inconvenient?

Is it going to infringe on my time?

Is it going to be an emotional drain for me?

If I get a sympathetic ear to what this person is saying right now, is that going to put me at a disadvantage in the argument?

Quick to listen means unless there is some major reason preventing it, your first impulse is to set aside your agenda for a moment, and listen with compassion and interest to what the person is trying to say.

A lot of times the reason we are slow to listen is because we want them to listen to us. We have something to say. We have a point to make. We want them to listen to us and to be influenced by what we are saying. The ironic thing is this – the less you listen to people, the less they will be interested in listening to you. But if you take the time to really listen to them and consider their point of view for a while, without poking holes in it or contradicting it or giving any commentary on it – just exploring what they are saying and how they feel about it; it is amazing, after you have done that, how open they tend to

person who really listens and who allows your heart to be influenced by what people are saying.

be to be influenced by your point of view. When we are slow to listen, we accomplish the exact opposite of what we are trying to accomplish. But when we are quick to listen, not only will other people tend to listen to us more, but very often we find that what they were saying really does have some wisdom in it after all.

The next time you find yourself complaining about the fact that someone isn't listening to you, ask yourself, "How well am I listening to them?" When people don't listen to you, very often it is because they feel like you haven't listened to them and so they are still laboring to get their point across. If you want to get someone to listen to you, one of the least effective ways to do it is to say, "You're not listening to me! You never listen to me!" If you do that, the other person might stop talking and let you talk for a while. But they probably won't do it with an open, sympathetic heart that allows itself to be influenced by what you say. If you want someone to listen to you, spend half-an-hour really listening to them with a heart that is open to be influenced.

Teaching couples to really listen is one of the hardest things to do in marriage counseling. It is hard, not because it's complicated or requires a lot of special skill – it is hard because it requires a humble, loving heart. And when you are mad at someone who has been hurting you, nothing in you wants to give them the grace of real listening.⁶

Give it a try this week. If you have someone in your life that you are having a conflict with, try this on them. Take that topic that is just totally off limits – you try to avoid it because every time it comes up it causes a fight. Bring it up, and just have one goal in mind – listening. If you don't agree with some of their arguments, don't say anything about those. If there is some aspect of some argument that you can agree with, make a big point of agreeing with that. Ask how they feel about it. Ask them how it made them feel in the past when you argued with them about it. Ask them their thoughts about your view. And throughout the whole conversation, just enjoy the pleasure of your heavenly Father who is smiling and thoroughly enjoying watching you love your neighbor for His sake.

Slow to Speak

So how do you control your anger? First, be quick to listen; second, be slow to speak.

Proverbs 11:12 a man of understanding holds his tongue.

Generally an intelligent, wise person is not a chatterbox. Why not? If he is wise, why hesitate to talk? Because even when you are wise, the first thought you have is not always the best. It might be a great thought, but if you take some time to give it a little more consideration, you might come up with a much better version. There are some people who have a thought, it comes out of the mouth, and that's how they discover that they have had the thought. There is no gap between having the thought and opening the mouth. And in some cases, even if there is no new thought at all, the mouth just keeps going to fill in the air while waiting for the next thought to come.

That can be a symptom of pride. You get a guy who always has to weigh in, always has to be heard. He wants you to make sure you get his input – he feels that his voice needs to be considered – why?

⁶ The next time you get into an argument with your spouse or someone else, before you give your point of view at all, spend 10 or 15 minutes affirming all the strengths of their view. Your spouse wants to make a purchase and you don't agree with it. Before you start trying to persuade them of your side, spend ten minutes affirming the validity of their arguments. "You're right; if we bought that thing it would make our lives easier in this way. And yes, I can see the wisdom in buying it right now while it's on sale, instead of waiting until later when we will have to pay more. And your point about how I bought that thing last month that I wanted and you didn't complain – that's a valid point..." And don't just give a quick acknowledgment of those things and then say, "BUT..." and then go on to pretend like those arguments have no force at all. Let your heart be moved by those arguments. If you spend 10 or 15 minutes doing that, it might change your perspective a little bit. You still don't agree with the purchase, but you are a little bit more in sync with the way your spouse is feeling. And then, once you have done that, it will be 100 times easier for your spouse to listen to you the same way. Then when you both acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of both sides, you might find yourself actually doing the unthinkable – agreeing on the final decision! But even if that doesn't happen, you have still shown love to your spouse by listening.

Because he has such an inflated view of his own importance. How could anyone be so foolish as to not seek out his opinion?

Not everything that crosses your mind needs to come out of your mouth right away. Even wise thoughts can usually be improved if you give them some further thought. And even then, it might not be the wisest thing to verbalize it. Just because a thought came into your head does not mean it has to be said. Nor does it necessarily need to be posted on Facebook or emailed. In my Bible I have to pencil in, “Be slow to speak (and slow to send emails).” That is a problem I have been working on in my life – being way too quick to send an e-mail. Modern technology has given us the platform for blurting things out in written form. So these principles apply to e-mail, Facebook, and twitter as well as to your verbal communications.

Think before you speak. There are a lot of ramifications to the things that you say. You are thinking of it from one angle, but some of the people in the room might take it from another angle. You need to think through how it is going to come across to the various people who were listening before you open your mouth.

Proverbs 29:20 Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him.

Generally speaking, the wiser the person, the slower he is to open his mouth. One reason for that is the fact that we have so much sin in our hearts.

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

We all have sin in our hearts, so the more you talk, the more of that sin will end up coming out in your speech. And not just sin, but all kinds of foolishness.

Proverbs 12:23 A prudent man keeps his knowledge to himself, but the heart of fools blurts out folly.

A high percentage of the things that are blurted out tend to be folly. Very rarely does anyone blurt out wisdom.

One of the most severe traffic tickets you can get is reckless driving. They have a stiff penalty for that, because it can cause so much damage. So can reckless speaking. Nobody has to take a test to get a license to speak, and yet far more lives have been ruined from reckless speaking than from reckless driving.

Proverbs 12:18 Thoughtless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

The sword back then was the equivalent of a gun in our day. Whenever you open your mouth, it is like you are waving a loaded gun around. Our words can do a lot of damage – far beyond what we intend. If I am just goofing off, waving a loaded gun around and pull the trigger and shoot you. I can’t just say, “Oh don’t worry. You shouldn’t be wounded – I didn’t mean to hurt you.” When you hurt someone with your words, they are hurt whether you wanted them to be hurt or not.

Don’t Speak Too Little

Now, one word of caution – do not use this as an excuse to clam up when you should be speaking. Be slow to speak, but when the most loving thing to do is to say something, then say something. If you are tired but your wife wants to have a conversation, and you are giving one word answers because you are too lazy to put forth the mental energy to have a real conversation with her, that is selfishness. Don’t be quick to air all of your opinions, but don’t pass up opportunities to encourage. Don’t ignore occasions to glorify God with something you could say.

Speech and Anger

Remember, the goal here is to overcome the pride and selfishness that cause anger. What comes out of your mouth can have a huge impact on your anger. Anger begins like a little flame in your heart, and your words can act like gasoline. When you express angry feelings with angry words, that makes those angry feelings intensify. If your way of dealing with anger is to vent, or get it off your chest, or blow off steam, or in one way or another put your anger into words – that is not a good plan. “Venting” is one of the most misleading, unhelpful terms our culture has come up with. That word makes it sound like anger is some sort of gas or exhaust that just needs to be released out of your system. But that is not how anger works. Anger is like a fire, and all “venting” does is give it more oxygen. When people feel better after venting their anger it is usually because in their harsh words they have taken some measure of revenge. And their hope is in their own efforts to bring justice rather than in God’s justice.

Listen to how Paul goes back and forth between talking about speech and anger in Ephesians 4.

Ephesians 4:26 “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, 27 and do not give the devil a foothold. ... 29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate...

He goes back and forth from controlling the tongue to controlling anger, back to the tongue, back to anger. If you want to control your speech, you are going to have to get a handle on your anger. And if you want to control your anger, you are going to have to put a bridle on your tongue. Angry feelings and angry speech feed on each other. But kind, compassionate, loving speech will calm an angry heart. Look at the solution Paul gives to anger in verse 32.

32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Even after anger has taken hold of your heart, if you will just speak kind, humble, gentle words– it is amazing how that will take that anger away.

Dance

I heard someone talking about how he learned to dance, and he said his instructor told him, “For this step, just remember: quick, quick, slow; quick, quick, slow...” I don’t know what dance step that is, but James is teaching us a dance step that is slightly different: “Quick, slow, slow.” Quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. And like a dance step, if you get the first step in rhythm, it is easier to get the next ones right. If you are quick to listen, you will find it much easier to be slow to speak. Too much desire to speak usually goes hand-in-hand with too little desire to learn.

Proverbs 18:2 A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions.

The big talker is rarely a good listener. Why? Because he is full of pride and selfishness. Much talking and little listening are symptoms of pride. And when pride and selfishness get splashed with the water of suffering or mistreatment, they have a chemical reaction that produces anger.

When Rebuked

I think maybe the most important time for us to re-read this verse is times when we are being corrected or rebuked. Those times when someone is criticizing us – aren’t those the times when we tend to be deaf when we should be dumb? We plug up our ears and talk when we should be opening our ears and covering our mouth. Instead of giving all our defenses and reasons and excuses, we would do much

better to just humble ourselves and listen quietly. We need to restrain ourselves from running off at the mouth – and also from running off at the heart. Sometimes when people criticize you, you keep your mouth shut so you seem quiet on the outside, but on the inside you are going a mile a minute with defensive arguments. You are slow to speak but you are still not quick to listen, so the anger still comes.

Conclusion

I realize any sermon on anger and selfishness and pride runs the risk of being discouraging, because we all struggle with these things. Let me ask you a question as we close. Did Jesus die for hotheads? Yes or no? Did Jesus already suffer the wrath of God for angry people? Did He pay the penalty that they deserve for their sins of anger? Yes. Jesus died to pay for our past sins of anger, and He died to prevent future sins of anger. If you have a problem with anger, don't deny it or rationalize it on the one hand, and don't fall into self-condemnation or discouragement on the other hand. Just run to the One who can change an angry heart, and when He gives His doctor's prescription for the cure, like He does here in this passage, trust Him! The medicine will work. Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, and humbly accept the Word of God which can save your soul.

Benediction: Philippians 2:3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. 4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Application Questions (James 1:25)

1. What are a couple triggers for sinful anger in your life (“Thou shalt ____” or “I must have _____”)?
2. Who do you think God wants you to sit down with this week and really listen to them? What do you think is standing in the way of your willingness to listen more lovingly to that person?
3. What are some contexts in your life where you would do well to insert more of a gap between having a thought and opening your mouth?

Devotionals

Day 1

Preparation:

Read Psalm 119:1-8 and pray S.I.O.U.S.

Scripture Reading:

Ephesians 4 and Philippians 2:1-11

Sermon segment:

When there is pride or selfishness in your heart, and some cause of suffering comes along, there is an immediate reaction: anger. Instead of considering it pure joy, you get irritated. To illustrate this look at your pride and selfishness as a bit of cesium. If you take a chunk of cesium and set it down on the table, it is nothing more than a harmless piece of metal. But if you dump a bucket of water on it there will be an instant, violent explosion. Cesium reacts to water in a violent way.

Pride and selfishness can sit in your heart like a chunk of cesium. And suffering and the hardships of life are like a bucket of water. Is water a bad thing? No. If there is no cesium present, then water is good for you. If there is no pride and selfishness present, trials and hardships are good for you. But if pride and selfishness are sitting there in your heart, as soon as they come in contact with suffering, they are activated. And the byproduct of their reaction is anger. An explosion, a deep resentment, irritability, bad mood – it's all anger.

Most people who have an anger problem think the culprit is the water. They think their anger is caused by suffering – people mistreating them, or things going wrong. But that is not the cause. The cause is that cesium – pride and selfishness in the heart, and the wrong attitude about suffering.

19 ...Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger

One of the most obvious marks of proud, selfish people is that they tend to be the exact opposite of this - slow to listen, quick to speak, and quick to anger. When you are puffed up with self-importance, what you have to say matters more than what anyone else has to say. You are not quick to listen because you feel that you already know more than they do and what you have to say is more important. Selfish, proud people think the world revolves around them, and so every time the world doesn't cooperate, it makes them angry.

Our pride causes us to sit in the place of God. People are always breaking our commandments.

- Thou shalt love me in the way I require.
- Thou shalt honor me and respect me and listen to me.
- When thou drivest thine automobile thou shalt not turn to the right or to the left in front of me unless thou first signalest thine intention to do so with thine blinker.
- Children, thou shalt not inconvenience your parents.

Oh, we don't say them in so many words. We may not even be consciously aware of them. If you want to discover what your commandments are, just look at the things that make you angry.

Pride and selfishness go hand in hand. Both feed anger. Selfishness says I must have _____ in order to be happy. And if something gets in the way of me having that thing(s), my pride is aroused and anger erupts. What did you put in the blank? an understanding spouse? people to listen to me? due credit, comfort? control? There's no harm in wanting those things, but you can tell when "wanting" has crossed the line to "must have" when you get angry when those desires are blocked. The only "must" for the

Christian should be nearness to God. Everything else is a preference, and love delights in giving up its preferences for the good of others. But selfish people live for their own selfish desires, and if someone gets in the way of one of those desires – look out.

Memorize James 1:19-20. Say it 10 times from memory word for word.

Prayer:

Ask God to reveal to you areas of selfishness and pride so you can confess them and repent. Ask Him to replace them with humility and love.

Doing: Do not be a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the Word (James 1:22-25)

- Write down three specific acts of humility and love that are beyond what you would normally do.
- Check this box when you have done all three.

Fellowship:

Try to have a conversation with someone today about the most helpful thoughts that came out of your time with the Lord today.

Further Study:

To go further on the topic of humility, read the book *Humility* by C.J. Mahaney

Day 2

Preparation:

Read Psalm 119:9-16 and pray S.I.O.U.S.

Scripture Reading:

Luke 15:11-24 and Isaiah 55. Take note of all you can learn about what true repentance looks like.

Sermon segment:

If you are ever wondering, “Is this anger that I’m feeling righteous anger or sinful anger?” just ask yourself two simple questions. Am I reacting against sin because it is sin? Or am I just reacting because it interfered with my desires? Righteous anger reacts against sin because that sin dishonors God.

The second question is this: Is my anger resulting in godly attitudes and behavior that are overcoming the evil and bringing about righteousness? Or is my anger resulting in more evil? And in verse 20 James informs us that the natural course of human anger is more sin, not less sin. That is why Scripture so often speaks of anger as a bad thing that we need to throw off.

Did Jesus get angry? Yes. There is one place in the Bible that says Jesus was angry. One. Not 100, not 25 – one. And when that happened, did Jesus sin? Did He become irritable? Did He get into a bad mood for a couple hours? Did He say things that He later regretted? Did He lose control? No. None of those things happened.

God the Father is the same way. Think about it – His anger is only good – and yet, even though His anger is always perfect and good, still, even God is slow to anger. Do you know what verse in the Bible is quoted more often by other writers of Scripture than any other verse? It is Exodus 34:6 where God reveals to Moses what He is like.

Exodus 34:6 And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness

So if you are convinced that your anger is righteous and justified and good, just like God’s anger – even if that were true, you should still be slow to anger.

It is interesting to me that James lists all kinds of specific problems his readers had in this area, even though the letter wasn’t sent to any specific church. He talks about how they were getting in fights and quarrels, boasting, slandering each other, gossiping, criticizing, showing favoritism to rich people, etc. He pinpoints all those specific problems even though he is not writing to any specific church, because those problems are so common and prevalent in every church in every age. Very few people don’t have a problem with sinful anger in times when they are being mistreated. And it causes so many problems. It destroys marriages. It destroys intimacy with God. It makes your prayers and Bible reading dry and boring and ineffective. It ruins friendships. It disrupts the functioning of the church. It causes ministries to die that could have been incredibly fruitful. It is such a massive problem, and it is so incredibly hard to deal with because the people with the worst anger problem are so often the ones who have the least awareness of the problem. They get angry multiple times a week, every week - sometimes multiple times a day. And yet in prayer group, their prayer request is never about their anger. They aren’t reading books on anger or doing Bible studies or asking for accountability or biblical counseling. After a bad outburst they feel kind of bad, but for the most part, they do not have the same kind of desperation that you see in someone who is enslaved to alcohol or pornography or even overeating. And that is especially true for those people who are the types who express their anger by quiet withdrawal rather than loud outbursts. Instead of confronting, they just let it cook.

It is especially hard to get those people to come to grips with the sinfulness of their anger. I think that’s why Paul wears out his Thesaurus in Ephesians 4 when he is telling us to get rid of our anger.

Ephesians 4:29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths ...31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.

He knows that angry people sidestep exhortations about anger by renaming their anger. “I’m not angry – I’m just frustrated.” Or, “I’m not angry – I’m just hurt.” Paul knows that we are experts in renaming our anger so we don’t have to admit that it is real anger. So he just says, “Whatever you want to call it, whatever name you want to put on it – get rid of it.” Is it a sin to be hurt? No, but oh, how easy it is to hide sinful anger behind hurt. If you find yourself saying the words, “I’m not angry,” fairly often, you are probably angry. People who aren’t angry generally do not have to go around trying to convince everyone that they are not really angry. I have heard people say, “I’m not angry,” and then walk out and slam the door – just to prove that they aren’t angry.

I think maybe one reason why some people are so slow to take this sin seriously is because anger is a feeling. And they think, “Feelings are just things that sort of happen to you, and you aren’t responsible for how you feel. The real sins are things you actually do with your body.” That could not be farther from the truth. All sin takes place in the heart. Even the sins you commit with your body – the thing that makes those actions so sinful is the things you were feeling inside that resulted in those actions.⁷

We need to put away selfish anger, and that will never happen until we are honest with ourselves and call a spade a spade when we have some form of anger in our hearts. Acknowledge the sinfulness of it,

⁷ The greatest command in all the Bible is a feeling – love God and love your neighbor. And if that is the greatest command, then the greatest sin is to love something else more than you love God. Not only can feelings be sinful, but the greatest sin there is is a feeling.

stop blaming other people, stop blaming circumstances, stop blaming trials and suffering; and confess the sin fully to God so that you can repent of it and be forgiven and changed by His grace.

Review James 1:19-20. Say it 10 times from memory word for word.

Prayer:

Confess sins of anger to God. Ask Him to change your heart in those areas.

Doing: Do not be a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the Word (James 1:22-25)

- Each time you have an incident of anger this week, write it down. What led up to it? How do you express it? And how long before you repented? Write down which of your “commandments” were being broken (if it was a pride issue) or which of your cherished “must have’s” went unmet (if it was a selfishness issue). Confess those sins to God and reaffirm that God’s presence is the only thing you must have.
- For each of those incidents, write down what the proper response to the suffering would have been.

Fellowship:

Try to have a conversation with someone today about the most helpful thoughts that came out of your time with the Lord today.

Further Study:

To go further on the topic of repentance, listen or read through the following sermons (available on FoodForYourSoul.net)

- “Are you a Man or a Mule?” Ps.32:3-5,8-10 (Favorite Psalms pt.17)
- “CNTL/ALT/DELETE” Ps.139:23-24 (Favorite Psalms pt.24)

Day 3

Preparation:

Read Psalm 119:17-24 and pray S.I.O.U.S.

Scripture Reading:

1 Corinthians 13. Watch for implications for listening.

Sermon segment:

James 1:19 Be quick to listen...

When you see the word *listen* in the Bible it means more than just hearing and understanding the words. Listening means being open to be influenced by someone’s words.

Don't just hear them; allow them to influence you.⁸ Listening means giving someone a fair, sympathetic hearing and taking to heart what is being said. You approach people with the attitude that says, "If wisdom allows it, I will let myself be won over to your way of thinking. And before I make a judgment about whether wisdom will allow it, I will give careful, open-minded thought to your words."

Do not think that you have listened just because you can repeat the person's words back to him. True listening is when you have an attitude that says, "I really do want to know what you think and how you feel. I really do want to know what's going on inside you." When you are in an argument, imagine God telling you, "I want you to be able to stand in a courtroom like a lawyer and argue that other person's side." When you can argue that person's side to their satisfaction, then you have listened. And that kind of listening will calm anger. You cannot feel compassion and anger towards someone at the same time.

Your ears more firmly plugged up than when you are angry. Nobody is a good listener while they are angry. But it is amazing how opening your ears and opening your heart to a person will calm both your anger and theirs.

But pride will keep you from listening this way. Proud, arrogant people can only learn from brilliant teachers. So unless you are brilliant or highly educated, they won't listen to you. And most people aren't brilliant, so proud people don't do much listening.

Neither do selfish people. Loving people listen, because they are genuinely interested in your life. When you talk about yourself, they are not bored because you're talking about one of their favorite subjects. Selfish people are interested in themselves, so listening to you is a waste of their time.

This is one reason why proud people have so little influence. If you ask a bad listener, "What is that guy's view on evolution?" he will be able to tell you what the guy's position is. But if you ask a good listener, "What is that guy's view on evolution?" the wise person will be able to not only tell you what the guy's position is, but why he holds that position. When he was talking to that guy about it, he really listened. That is why wise people tend to be so influential. It is hard to change or influence someone's view on something if you don't know the various reasons why they hold their view. One person might believe in evolution because that is the only thing he has ever been taught. Another person might believe in evolution because he lost a loved one and he is angry at God. The wise person knows to take a much different approach with the second guy than the first guy, because he was quick to listen and so he knows what the real issue is.

Is it possible to listen to everyone this way all the time? No, but being quick to listen means you are eager to do it when you can. Slowness to listen is when you are asking questions like this:

Is listening to this person right now going to be inconvenient?

Is it going to infringe on my time?

Is it going to be an emotional drain for me?

If I get a sympathetic ear to what this person is saying right now, is that going to put me at a disadvantage in the argument?

Quick to listen means unless there is some major reason preventing it, your first impulse is to set aside your agenda for a moment, and listen with compassion and interest to what the person is trying to say.

A lot of times the reason we are slow to listen is because we want them to listen to us. We have something to say. We have a point to make. We want them to listen to us and to be influenced by what we are saying. The ironic thing is this – the less you listen to people, the less they will be interested in listening to you. But if you take the time to really listen to them and consider their point of view for a while, without poking holes in it or contradicting it or giving any commentary on it – just exploring what they are saying and how they feel about it; it is amazing, after you have done that, how open they tend to

⁸ Obviously, this does not mean we throw discernment out the window and allow ourselves to be influenced by everything everyone says. If someone is trying to influence you toward evil, obviously you shouldn't listen to that. In Genesis 3:17, God rebuked Adam for listening to his wife. **Genesis 3:17 To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' "Cursed is the ground because of you"** Do not let yourself be influenced by evil. This is not an absolute rule. It is a general wisdom principle. Generally speaking, you should be the type of person who really listens and who allows your heart to be influenced by what people are saying.

be to be influenced by your point of view. When we are slow to listen, we accomplish the exact opposite of what we are trying to accomplish. But when we are quick to listen, not only will other people tend to listen to us more, but very often we find that what they were saying really does have some wisdom in it after all.

The next time you find yourself complaining about the fact that someone isn't listening to you, ask yourself, "How well am I listening to them?" When people don't listen to you, very often it is because they feel like you haven't listen to them and so they are still laboring to get their point across. If you want to get someone to listen to you, one of the least effective ways to do it is to say, "You're not listening to me! You never listen to me!" If you do that, the other person might stop talking and let you talk for a while. But they probably won't do it with an open, sympathetic heart that allows itself to be influenced by what you say. If you want someone to listen to you, spend half-an-hour really listening to them with a heart that is open to be influenced.

Teaching couples to really listen is one of the hardest things to do in marriage counseling. It is hard, not because it's complicated or requires a lot of special skill – it is hard because it requires a humble, loving heart. And when you are mad at someone who has been hurting you, nothing in you wants to give them the grace of real listening.

Give it a try this week. If you have someone in your life we are having a conflict with, try this on them. Take that topic that is just totally off limits – you try to avoid it because every time it comes up it causes a fight. Bring it up, and just have one goal in mind – listening. If you don't agree with some of their arguments, don't say anything about those. If there is some aspect of some argument that you can agree with, make a big point of agreeing with that. Ask how they feel about it. Ask them how it made them feel in the past when you argued with them about it. Ask them their thoughts about your view. And throughout the whole conversation, just enjoy the pleasure of your heavenly Father who is smiling and thoroughly enjoying watching you love your neighbor for His sake.

Review James 1:19-20 one time from memory

Prayer:

Ask God to show you times when you need to reduce your speaking, and to reveal to you what it is in your heart that drives you to talk to much in those instances.

Doing: Do not be a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the Word (James 1:22-25)

- Set an appointment with a person you have a conflict with, or that you have not thoroughly listened to. Spend at least 30 minutes just listening to their point of view, asking questions about how they feel and why, how your words have felt to them, etc. Make sure there is no other goal than to simply listen and make them feel deeply and thoroughly understood.

Fellowship:

Try to have a conversation with someone today about the most helpful thoughts that came out of your time with the Lord today.

Further Study:

To go further on the topic of speech, read through Proverbs and put a "T" next to each verse that teaches something about the tongue.

Day 4

Preparation:

Read Psalm 119:25-32 and pray S.I.O.U.S.

Scripture Reading:

James 3 and Proverbs 12. Watch for instruction about speech.

Sermon segment:

James 1:19 ...be slow to speak...

Proverbs 11:12 a man of understanding holds his tongue.

Generally an intelligent, wise person is not a chatterbox. Why not? If he is wise, why hesitate to talk? Because even when you are wise, the first thought you have is not always the best. It might be a great thought, but if you take some time to give it a little more consideration, you might come up with a much better version. There are some people who have a thought, it comes out of the mouth, and that's how they discover that they have had the thought. There is no gap between having the thought and opening the mouth. And in some cases, even if there is no new thought at all, the mouth just keeps going to fill in the air while waiting for the next thought to come.

That can be a symptom of pride. You get a guy who always has to weigh in, always has to be heard. Make sure you get his input - his voice needs to be considered – why? Because he has such an inflated view of his own importance. How could anyone be so foolish as to not seek out his opinion?

Not everything that crosses your mind needs to come out of your mouth right away. Even wise thoughts can usually be improved if you give them some further thought. And even then, it might not be the wisest thing to verbalize it. Just because a thought came into your head does not mean it has to be said. Nor does it necessarily need to be posted on Facebook or emailed. In my Bible I have to pencil in, “Be slow to speak (and slow to send emails).” That is a problem I have been working on in my life – being way too quick to send an e-mail. Modern technology has given us the platform for blurring things out in written form. So these principles apply to e-mail, Facebook, and twitter as well as to your verbal communications.

Think before you speak. There are a lot of ramifications to the things that you say. You are thinking of it from one angle, but some of the people in the room might take it from another angle. You need to think through how it is going to come across to the various people were listening before you open your mouth.

Proverbs 29:20 Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him.

Generally speaking, the wiser the person, the slower he is to open his mouth. One reason for that is the fact that we have so much sin in our hearts.

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

We all have sin in our hearts, so the more you talk, the more of that sin will end up coming out in your speech. And not just sin, but all kinds of foolishness.

Proverbs 12:23 A prudent man keeps his knowledge to himself, but the heart of fools blurts out folly.

A high percentage of the things that are blurted out tend to be folly. Very rarely does anyone blurt out wisdom.

One of the most severe traffic tickets you can get is reckless driving. They have a stiff penalty for that, because it can cause so much damage. So can reckless speaking. Nobody has to take a test to get a license to speak, and yet far more lives have been ruined from a reckless speaking than from reckless driving.

Proverbs 12:18 Thoughtless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.

The sword back then was the equivalent of a gun in our day. Whenever you open your mouth, it is like you are waving a loaded gun around. Our words can do a lot of damage – far beyond what we intend. If I am just goofing off, waving a loaded gun around and pull the trigger and shoot you. I can't just say, "Oh don't worry. You shouldn't be wounded – I didn't mean to hurt you." When you hurt someone with your words, they are hurt whether you wanted them to be hurt or not.

Review James 1:19-20 one time from memory

Prayer:

Ask God to show you times when you need to reduce your speaking, and to reveal to you what it is in your heart that drives you to talk too much in those instances.

Doing: Do not be a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the Word (James 1:22-25)

- Ask someone who is around you a lot to keep an ear out for your speaking, and to let you know about times when you might have been better to speak less. Make sure to follow up with that person after a week (don't expect them to come to you). Check this box when you have followed up.

Fellowship:

Try to have a conversation with someone today about the most helpful thoughts that came out of your time with the Lord today.

Further Study:

To go further on the topic of speech, print out all those verses from your study in Proverbs in one document and summarize what the book of Proverbs teaches about the tongue.

Day 5

Preparation:

Read Psalm 119:33-40 and pray S.I.O.U.S.

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 5-7. Pay attention to anything Jesus says about humility, love, anger, or speech.

Sermon segment:

Remember, the goal here is to overcome the pride and selfishness that cause anger. What comes out of your mouth can have a huge impact on your anger. Anger begins like a little flame in your heart, and your words can act like gasoline. When you express angry feelings with angry words, that makes those angry feelings intensify. If your way of dealing with anger is to vent, or get it off your chest, or blow off steam, or in one way or another put your anger into words – that’s not a good plan. “Venting” is one of the most misleading, unhelpful terms our culture has come up with. That word makes it sound like anger is some sort of gas or exhaust that just needs to be released out of your system. But that is not how anger works. Anger is like a fire, and all “venting” does is give it more oxygen. When people feel better after venting their anger it is usually because in their harsh words they have taken some measure of revenge. And their hope is in their own efforts to bring justice rather than in God’s justice.

Listen to how Paul goes back and forth between talking about speech and anger in Ephesians 4.

Ephesians 4:26 “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, 27 and do not give the devil a foothold. ... 29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate...

He goes back and forth from controlling the tongue to controlling anger, back to the tongue, back to anger. If you want to control your speech, you are going to have to get a handle on your anger. And if you want to control your anger, you are going to have to put a bridle on your tongue. Angry feelings and angry speech feed on each other. But kind, compassionate, loving speech will calm an angry heart. Look at the solution Paul gives to anger in verse 32.

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Even after anger has taken hold of your heart, if you will just speak kind, humble, gentle words– it is amazing how that will take away that anger away.

I heard someone talking about how he learned to dance, and he said his instructor told him, “For this step, just remember: quick, quick, slow; quick, quick, slow...” I don’t know what dance step that is, but James is teaching us a dance step that is slightly different: “Quick, slow, slow.” Quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. And like a dance step, if you get the first step in rhythm, it is easier to get the next ones right. If you are quick to listen, you will find it much easier to be slow to speak. Too much desire to speak usually goes hand-in-hand with too little desire to learn.

Proverbs 18:2 A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions.

The big talker is rarely a good listener. Why? Because he is full of pride and selfishness. Much talking and little listening are symptoms of pride. And when pride and selfishness get splashed with the water of suffering or mistreatment, they have a chemical reaction that produces anger.

I think maybe the most important time for us to re-read this verse is times when we are being corrected or rebuked. Those times when someone is criticizing us – aren’t those the times when we tend to be deaf when we should be dumb? We plug up our ears and talk when we should be opening our ears and covering our mouth. Instead of giving all our defenses and reasons and excuses, we would do so much better to just humble ourselves and listen quietly. We need to restrain ourselves from running off at the mouth – and also from running off at the heart. Sometimes when people criticize you, you keep your mouth shut so you seem quiet on the outside, but on the inside you are going a mile a minute with defensive arguments. You are slow to speak but you are still not quick to listen, so the anger still comes.

I hope you are not discouraged. Did Jesus die for hotheads? Yes or no? Did Jesus already suffer the wrath of God for angry people? Did He pay the penalty that they deserve for their sins of anger? Yes. Jesus died to pay for our past sins of anger, and He died to prevent future sins of anger. If you have a problem with anger, don't deny it or rationalize it on the one hand, and don't fall into self-condemnation or discouragement on the other hand. Just run to the One who can change an angry heart, and when He gives His doctor's prescription for the cure, like He does here in this passage, trust Him! The medicine will work. Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, and humbly accept the Word of God which can save your soul.

Review James 1:19-20 one time from memory

Prayer:

Talk to the Lord about all the purposes you can call to mind about the cross – why Jesus came and died. Think carefully about those in relationship to the sins you are struggling with, and thank God for sending His Son.

Doing: Do not be a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the Word (James 1:22-25)

- Write down at least one specific way you believe the Lord would have you put into practice something you saw in His Word today.
- Check this box when you have done it.