

Slow to Speak
James 1:19-27

July 8, 2018

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.

This is some tough love found in the Scripture reading today. I have had people say "you are a tough preacher." I have asked "what do you mean?" And the answer is "you are tough on the people." I respond with "no I am not, I am not tough, it is the word that is found in the Bible that is tough." It is hard to follow because it guides us to the way of God when we want to follow the way of self desire and our own wants. The author of the text emphasizes the importance of the lesson in verse 19 by stating "you must understand this." It is like you are talking with someone and he says "man you have got to get this!" Then James softens the impact with love by stating "my beloved." It is like saying "man, you have got to get this! You know I love you; you know I care!"

The letter James is basically a heart to heart talk with the recipients. Sometimes in a relationship with someone you care about you might have what is known as a heart to heart talk. You only have these with people that you care about. They are tender caring moments that are designed to help the other person. It is like saying "I love you, please listen."

The Scripture today has multiple lessons. The first lesson is to let everyone be quick to listen. First of all I will point out that the lesson is for everyone. The author makes a specific point of calling attention to everyone. Be quick to listen means prioritizing the need to listen. I started to call it a habit. Be quick to listen means prioritizing the habit of listening. Then I thought about calling it a skill. Be quick to listen means prioritizing the skill of listening. But it is a need, we all need to listen, it is something we have to do. There are multiple lessons that we learn throughout life about being an active listener.

The second lesson is to be slow to speak. Now if you notice the Bible does not just prioritize listening but it is advising to also hold your tongue. Human emotions create the desire to talk, to get your opinion out there, and to get the attention of others. Too many times we either interrupt others, or the other person interrupts us and hijacks the conversation. It will bother you, get on your nerves, and test your patience. Now we see that to be an active listener and to hold your tongue is a Christian virtue. The lesson is twofold. To be quick to listen and slow to speak. It is not that we are to just honor each virtue separately but we are to do both. We are to value active listening over talking.

To put this in a contemporary perspective I will tell you a personal story. My mother was what we would classify today as country. She grew up in the coal mining mountains of West Virginia. Her house was up on the mountain where you could not get to it by car. They had an

outhouse, coal heating, and coal cooking. She, through no fault of her own, butchered the English language. It was so bad that I needed speech therapy in elementary school. I did not learn to speak articulately until I took a speech classes in college. Well, my mama was also captious. Which was also probably due to her rearing environment. She would frequently call attention to the faults that she saw in others. Well when I was a child we visited some relatives in Atlanta Georgia. I remember mama making fun of the way the people there talked. She would go on and on about how they talked too slow.

The interesting thing is how today's Scripture connects to this personal story. The Bible says to let everyone be slow to speak. It does not mean to talk slowly. It means do not criticize, do not find fault, do not gossip, and do not dominate conversations. It means hold your tongue. In regards to my situation with my mother, her behavior is incongruous. She made an effort to find fault in others but in so doing she was at fault herself for her failure to hold her tongue. It is a skill that takes spiritual discipline.

The third lesson is to be slow to anger. I wonder how many times I need to hear this lesson myself. There are numerous reasons we are to control our anger. The Bible does not leave it up to common knowledge. The Bible emphasizes why it is important to control your anger. "For your anger does not produce God's righteousness." So, anger is not a virtue. The Bible does not say that you cannot get angry. We all do because anger is a natural human emotion. But anger can be tamed. The Scripture does not say that you cannot have any anger. The Scripture says to be slow to anger. The better your spiritual maturity, the stronger your spirit, the better you can manage the virtues and vices, including anger.

Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger are contemporary lessons for us on daily living. Recently I read a story about a person who said that she was good at getting mad fast and she wanted to do better. So she developed a system to manage her anger and worked at being able to control it. What she did is she posted Bible verses in different places throughout her house. Now I think that is a good idea. Take your biggest challenges and post biblical affirmations where you will see them and be reminded. But a problem came to her one day in a conversation with another person who was also quick to anger. Instead of listening she ended up speaking over the other person and realized that she had allowed her ego to override the biblical instruction. How many times has it happened to us that someone talked over us or that we have talked over someone else? Well, taking over a conversation is not a Christian virtue. I think there is an important point in here that needs to be emphasized. There are times in life when we allow things to override biblical instruction. Most of the problems we have in life come from letting something override biblical instruction. I think this is a valuable lesson. Do not allow the problems of life override what is written in the Bible. This one principle takes care of all the other problems. Because then it is the Bible that rules over your life. Instead of anything else such as greed, anger, vengeance, selfish ambition you have a life of Christian virtues.

Lesson four is get rid of the vices. Rid yourselves of all sordidness and wickedness. This means to get rid of the dirt and the filth. This lesson is congruent with many other biblical lessons. Then lesson five is to welcome meekness which is also in harmony with many other biblical lessons. These lessons are easier to proclaim than they are to follow but they are all very important. Lesson six is another biblical example on taking action. Be doers of the word not merely hearers. The necessity to take action has been covered many times in my sermons. It is mandatory to act on your faith. Christian faith requires action. This is one of the themes of James and it is found in many other places in the Bible. This Scripture demonstrated how hard the Bible is on the inactive it states "they deceive themselves."

The next lesson is to care for orphans and widows in their distress. This is just a small segment of the need. We are to take care of marginalized, the disadvantaged, those on the fringes of society. Religion that is pure cares for the disadvantaged. Pure religion is undefiled and takes care of the needy. The final lesson is to keep yourself unstained by the world. This is a catch all lesson. It is a summary of the earlier lessons and ties them all together.

With all of these vices and virtues how do you reconcile the difference between the person that you are and the person the Bible tells you to be? How do you, as a Christian, use the Bible as your guide for daily living? The Christian should live a life that is guided by the Bible. The Scripture says to be unstained by the world. That is easier said than done. It takes sincere discernment, to analyze the self and understand your Christian being. It takes devotion and discipline to avoid worldly desire and be the Christian you are meant to be. Authoritarianism dictates we are to be obedient because we are told to. We are to obey these Christian virtues and avoid the vices because the Bible tells us to. But our response is not to authoritarianism. Our response is to God's grace. We are thankful to God for a surplus of blessings and salvation. We are thankful for God's gift of love. We respond to God's grace through thanksgiving out of love. I have cited a handful of do's and do not's. How many of us can remember them? Right now while fresh in memory we cannot cite them all. A week from today maybe we will be able to cite one or two. The thing is we can't remember a list of do's and do not's. Jesus came to fix that. Jesus came to bring the love of God to the world. When you are reminded of God's grace it is much easier to follow the teachings of the Bible. It is not a chore, not a duty, but a response to love.