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James #7

September 6, 2015

Be Quick to Hear, Slow to Speak, Slow to Anger!

James 1:19-20

Let me come straight to the point. Our world, and sadly that often times includes the professing Christian church, is, contrary to James' counsel, slow to hear, quick to speak, and has a hair trigger when it comes to anger. You can almost hear people justifying each of these:

“Why should I be quick to hear? I don't know anyone who has anything of value to say. And if they do have something worthwhile to hear, I've probably already thought about it myself in advance.

“And it makes no sense to me to be ‘slow to speak’ given the fact that I probably know more than most people and they could use the insights that I bring to the table.”

“Slow to anger? Are you kidding? After what people have done to me. After all the abuse and injustice I've endured. I've got a right to be angry and even more of a right to vent my wrath on anyone who gets in my way.”

Such, sadly, is the mindset of much of our world. And as I said, it is also the mindset and the practice of many in the professing Christian church.

How vastly different is the perspective of God, as expressed by James in chapter one, verses nineteen and twenty of his epistle. As over against what society at large may say, as over against what even your native instincts might suggest, Christians are to “be quick to hear, slow to speak, [and] slow to anger” (James 1:19). But of course the question all of us are asking is: “Why?” Let's consider each of these in turn.

Be Quick to Hear

There is a lot wrapped up in this exhortation, but here are a few things to keep in mind.

First, it's critically important that we be quick to hear what others have to say for the simple fact that contrary to what we stupidly think, ***we don't know it all!*** Never forget: ***only God is omniscient!***

If we first give room to listen to what someone else is saying it may well prevent us from sticking our foot in our mouths. In other words, we may be on the verge of saying something stupid or misguided or lacking insight. Listening well to what others have to say and giving due consideration to their insights and knowledge and perspective may bring correction to something misguided that we were on the verge of spewing out. Simply put: James is talking about the critical importance of our having a ***teachable*** spirit.

To be teachable means that you have ***the mind-set of a life-long learner***. You are consistently open to learning from anyone at any time on any topic. There is no way to escape the fact that being teachable is foundational to spiritual growth and character development in all other areas of our walk with the Lord.

One of the greatest dangers we face is in thinking that because we've read a lot of books and even written a lot of books and perhaps have a lot of letters behind our name that we are beyond learning from others. Some of the wisest and most learned people I know barely graduated from high school and never attended college.

Let me briefly tell you about one such man. Mike Bickle has been and still is a somewhat controversial figure in the Christian world. I worked closely with Mike for seven years and to this day regard him as one of my closest friends. Mike attended one semester of college before dropping out to take care of his brother Pat who was paralyzed from the neck down as a result of an incident in a football game. Mike doesn't read Greek or Hebrew. He has no degree from an accredited school or university. But I can't think of anyone I know who has a more encyclopedic grasp of Scripture than Mike. Even though I don't always agree with his interpretations, I've never failed to learn from him. And his insights into human nature and behavior are beyond anything I've ever seen. Having sat in on countless meetings with Mike I can testify that I learned more from his wisdom and discernment concerning the motivations of the human heart than I ever learned by reading books. Every time I was with Mike, whether in strategy sessions

for the church or in heated dialogue with other people, I realized how important it was for me to be “quick to hear.” And, oh, the lessons I learned!

Solomon said it best in Proverbs 13:10 – “By insolence comes nothing but strife, but with those who take advice is wisdom.” Wisdom, from God’s perspective, lies in knowing how to listen to others without being either defensive or condescending. Wisdom is evident when we humble ourselves to learn even from those who admittedly know less than we do and are perhaps not as experienced in the issues of life.

“A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion” (Prov. 18:2).

“And you say, how I hated discipline and my heart despised reproof! I did not listen to the voice of my teachers or incline my ear to instructors” (Prov. 5:12-13).

We should also remember that ***there is a world of difference between wanting to learn and being willing to be taught.*** The most arrogant and prideful of people want to learn, but only from themselves and for their own sakes. Or if they learn from others they won’t admit it; they don’t want anyone to know that they had to depend on someone else’s insights for growth.

If a man or woman is truly teachable, he/she will freely grant other people permission and freedom to speak into their life, even on matters that we might otherwise regard as extremely personal and, in other contexts, off limits.

Are you truly teachable? ***Can you be confronted without bristling or making excuses for yourself? Do you ask questions when you are with others or are you quick to tell everyone your opinion on the topic at hand?***

How would you recognize a genuinely humble and teachable Christian? Look for the person who asks more questions than they attempt to provide answers. He/she will listen and observe more than he will talk.

The final point we must consider is the underlying cause of the lack of teachability in a person: ***pride***. We read this in Proverbs 26:12 – “Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him” (Prov. 26:12).

Why is this true? Because pride puts a person beyond the perceived need for instruction. The proud man says to himself: “I don’t need the wisdom of God’s Word. I’ve already got it. I don’t need the instruction and encouragement of others; I’m beyond that sort of thing. I don’t need to be held accountable for my actions. Who are they to tell me what to do or not to do?” The proud heart is impervious to rebuke and insensitive to conviction. That’s why he’s more hopeless than the fool.

Be Slow to Speak

What does he mean when he encourages us to be “slow to speak”? ***He does not mean speak slowly***. In other words, the way I might obey this command is not . . . by . . . slowing . . . down . . . how . . . fast . . . I speak . . . to . . . you! Many of you know Larry Crabb, a personal friend of mine and a great influence on many of you. Larry is a fast talker. Sometimes too fast. When it was pointed out to him at a seminar that he talked too fast, he responded by saying: “No, I don’t. You just listen too slowly!” In any case, being “slow to speak” has nothing to do with how many words per minute we speak.

What James means is that we must slow down our response. We must pause and consider the impact of our words before we let them fly into the face of others. What ought we to be doing instead of talking?

The best thing to do before we speak is to silently *pray*:

- “God, do I understand what others have said or done that has stirred me to say something in response? Do I fully grasp their motives? Have I properly interpreted their position? Am I about to speak because I fear that if I don’t my reputation will suffer?”

We should also wait to speak and first ask ourselves a variety of *questions*, such as:

- “Why am I feeling this impulse to respond quickly? Am I doing this out of self-defense?”

- “Am I afraid that someone has misunderstood me?”
- “Am I angry because someone appears to have misrepresented my views?”
- “Am I inclined to snap back quickly and decisively because I believe that others will be impressed with how fast I think and how quickly I process information?”
- “Do I feel hurt by what someone else has done to me or said about me?”
- “Do I fear that my reputation has been slighted or undermined?”
- “Am I speaking quickly because I want people to like me, respect me, fear me?”

Before responding quickly, we need to ask additional questions about the *person* whose words or actions have prompted us to want to lash out verbally:

- “Do I fully understand the position this person has taken? Should I first ask them to tell me again in different words precisely what they mean? Have I assumed that they mean something by certain words that they might in fact have never intended?”
- “Have I taken into account their own past experience and especially the pain and abuse they may have endured that explains why they said or did what they said or did?”
- “Did they say what they did because they misunderstood what I earlier said? If so, before I respond to them do I need to back up and explain myself more clearly?”

Sometimes we need to carefully consider what the *impact* of our hasty words will be:

- “If I were that other person who is about to be on the receiving end of my verbal barrage, upon hearing what I’m about to say, would I feel dishonored? Would I feel misunderstood? Would I feel like my value as a person has been ignored? Would I feel threatened? Would I feel like I had been beaten up? Would I feel confident that the person speaking to me so quickly and hastily had taken the time to carefully consider what I was trying to say?”

We need to pause before speaking and ask ourselves *questions* like:

- “Will what I’m about to say honor Christ or bring reproach on his name because I claim to be his follower?”

- “Will what I’m about to say build up and instruct other people? Or will the speed and manner in which I’m about to say it make them feel stupid?”
- “Am I responding quickly in order to appear smart and clever in their eyes?”
- “Whose ultimate welfare do I have uppermost in mind: theirs or mine?”
- “Would I be so hasty to speak if I knew Jesus was standing next to the person who is the object of my comments?”
- “Does the manner of my verbal response reflect the fact that I am a sinner who deserves eternal damnation but who instead is the gracious recipient of eternal life?”

Another thing we need to take into consideration are the *lessons* we hopefully have learned from past instances in which we spoke too hastily:

- “Have I heard this before? If so, how did I respond then? Did it prove productive? Were people blessed or humiliated by my response? Did people feel judged or affirmed by how I reacted? Did my words end up putting them in an awkward and embarrassing situation? Did I bring unwarranted shame on them because of how I spoke?”
- “Have my words in the past ever been the cause for bringing someone to tears? Have my words in the past ever been the reason why dialogue was suddenly stifled and shut down?”
- “Did I make people afraid to say anything else, lest they be bombarded and attacked by my words?”
- “In the past, did people typically respond to my comments by saying: ‘Thanks. That was very helpful. I can tell by what you said that you really care about me and that you actually respect my opinion even though you believe me to be wrong.’”

Before launching into what feels to us like a well-deserved and fully-justified verbal response, we need to ask ourselves:

- “Have I fully thought out my own position on this issue or am I talking off the top of my head? Have I taken into consideration all the counter-arguments brought to my attention or have I ignored them lest I be compelled to confess that I was wrong?”

The apostle Paul says in Ephesians 5:4 – “Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.” Before saying anything to anyone about an issue, stop and ask yourself:

- “Have I processed my comments through the filter of God’s Word?”
- “Am I tempted to use filthy or crude language in order to sound cool and culturally savvy?”
- “When I speak will I sound like a person of wisdom and maturity or like an immature jerk?”

Paul also said in Colossians 3:8 that we should “put away” from our mouths all “slander and obscene talk.” So we must ask:

- “Is what I’m about to say true about the person under consideration?”
- “Would I be ok with someone else saying the same thing about me?”
- “Is my speech something that I’d be ok with mother hearing? What about a young child?”

In Colossians 4:6 Paul gives this counsel: “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.” So, ask yourself:

- “Are the words that I’m about to utter ‘gracious’ words or condemning and critical? Are they ‘seasoned with salt’? That is to say, do my words carry a good and godly flavor? Or are they dull and insipid and a waste of time? Are my words charming or cynical? Painful or pleasant?”
- “Am I tempted to speak quickly because I don’t want anyone to think I don’t know the answer to a question or the solution to a problem? In other words, is my quickness and speed of speech due to my own pride and a concern for what others might think of me?”

As some of you know, I’ve had the privilege for the past year of participating in a monthly radio live call-in show with Janet Parshall on Moody Bible Radio. It’s been fun, but it’s also terrifying. This isn’t the sort of show where I get the questions in advance and have time to ponder and research and formulate my words. It’s live! That means that the person asks questions that I’m hearing for the first time and once I’ve responded there’s no taking back my comments. I don’t have so much as a split second to formulate my thoughts. I have to answer immediately, and I

don't like that. As I look back on the months I've been doing this I have to confess my fear that I've spoken too quickly and thus gave misguided information. The people calling in are often in tears and what I say can affect them for years to come. I'll continue to participate in the program, but James 4:19 weighs heavily on my heart as I do.

Sometimes we are "quick to speak" rather than "slow to speak" because we are afraid that if we don't speak up first someone else might jump in ahead of us and steal our thunder! What if they say what we wanted to say and end up getting credit for brilliant insights, credit that we think should have been ours? Needless to say, that fear is fueled by nothing but pride and arrogance and selfish, sinful ambition.

And let's never forget that *human language is far more nuanced* than we typically admit. Words often have double meanings. Words are always contextually determined. That is to say, the place, time, experience, and culture of a particular individual may have massive implications for what they are saying that, because of our different place and time and experience and culture, we don't immediately recognize.

So why do we speak quickly when we should hold our tongues? One reason is actually a good one: We have deep and abiding convictions about what is right and wrong. We want God to be honored and his name vindicated. We want to be sure that truth has its day and that error be exposed. But even then, *rarely is it the case that anything of value is lost by slowing down and waiting and meditating and giving deeper consideration to what we want to say.*

Be Slow to Anger

James is not prohibiting all anger. In other words, not all anger is sin. After all, he doesn't say, "Don't ever be angry" but "Be slow to anger." *Approach it with extreme caution.* Let's not forget that God gets angry (see Psalm 7:11). And Jesus got angry (see Mark 3:5). We also read this in Ephesians 4:26-27,

"Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil" (Ephesians 4:26-27).

There are occasions in the life of the church and in our relationships with others when righteous indignation is called for. *But be careful.* Don't let your anger simmer and seethe and lead you into other sins such as pride, spite, malice, or a longing for revenge. If anger lingers long in our

hearts it will eventually turn to malice. And malice that is not dealt with eventually turns into hate.

The exhortation not to let “the sun go down on your anger” (v. 26b) is not to be taken literally. If it were, “it would mean that those who lived in the Arctic or Antarctic would at certain times of the year have no temporal limitation on their anger!” (Best, 450). In the OT sunset was viewed as the time limit for a number of activities (see Deut. 24:13,15,23). Paul’s point is simply that ***we must be brief in our anger; we must not let it settle and harden before dealing with its cause.*** Thus this is “a warning against brooding in anger or nursing it. It is to be dealt with promptly, with reconciliation being effected as quickly as possible” (O’Brien, 340).

Notice also that ***Satan loves to exploit our anger.*** He doesn’t produce it. We alone are responsible for it (see James 1:13-15). But he can deceive us into thinking that it is justified when it isn’t. Or he can use your anger to wreak havoc in your own heart as well as in the church.

What precisely is anger? It is more than minor irritation. It is not the same as impatience or frustration, although these can easily degenerate into anger. ***Anger contains ill-will.*** That is to say, the angry person desires some degree of revenge and thus hopes that another will suffer some measure of harm.

Sometimes we are angry at others for something that is not their fault. Perhaps they are lacking knowledge or power and as a result they say or do something we find offensive. But if there was no deliberate or malicious intent on their part, they should not be the objects of our anger. Perhaps they performed below the level that we had expected or needed. We shouldn’t get angry because someone is forgetful or lacks particular skills or is of low intelligence or shows excessive zeal.

We must also differentiate degrees of anger. Sometimes we get angry or mad for minor offences that ultimately amount to very little. At most they create for us an inconvenience. I’m thinking of the slow driver who causes us to be late for an appointment or the next door neighbor whose dog continues to drop his load in our yard or recurring glitches on your computer! Confession: I actually caught myself yelling at my laptop this week!

It’s also important to ask, “Is your anger over what has been done to ***you*** or what you observe has been done to ***others***?” If it is the former, anger may be less justified than if it is the latter. And then there is the entirely justifiable anger and indignation we feel toward Planned Parenthood and the atrocities of ISIS and Boko Haram.

There is a world of difference between sinful anger and anger at sin. Anger at sin is not itself a sin. Whether the sin is against you or someone else, righteous indignation may well be justified. Even then we must guard our hearts lest such anger degenerate into malice and hatred.

Sinful anger, on the other hand, is an emotion that is indicative of something deeper in the human heart. Anger is reactionary. Typically what happens is that life takes a turn that makes you uncomfortable. Or circumstances don't turn out the way you had planned. The bottom line is that we get angry when we don't get our way. In other words, ***the underlying cause of most sinful anger is pride and selfishness.***

Before you let your anger get the upper hand, stop and ask the question: ***“What possible good is accomplished by anger? What is the fruit of it? What does it yield?”*** It certainly doesn't produce “the righteousness of God,” says James. By this he means an angry person does not do what God's righteousness calls upon us to do. By the “righteousness of God” he means what God requires of his people; the righteousness here is God's revealed will for how humans are to live.

I strongly suspect that many of you are wondering right now: ***“Is it ever ok to be angry at God?”*** This question typically arises in times of great loss or suffering. Death, divorce, the loss of a job, financial collapse, the rebellion of a child are all occasions that may cause us to be angry with God.

My answer to the question is ***No, it is never right to be angry at God.*** The reason is simple: ***anger at a person, whether that be another human being or God himself, always implies strong disapproval.*** In other words, if you are angry at God it is because you believe he has committed an injustice or has done something morally unacceptable or that he is guilty of a mistake.

But it is wrong, indeed sinful, for mere creatures such as we are to disapprove of what God either permits or does. We can weep over the pain and be angry at sin and Satan. But God only and always does what is right. If he doesn't, if God is guilty of wrong-doing, he's not God and is certainly not deserving of our love or worship.

We can surely be ***confused*** by what God does or permits. We can be ***frustrated*** by it. We can be ***bewildered*** and ***saddened*** by it. We can even feel ***deep and pervasive emotional pain and hurt*** from it. We can ***weep*** over it. ***But for us to be justifiably angry at God implies that God is in the***

wrong, that God has erred, that God has somehow in some way committed a sin or violated what is good and right and true.

In saying this I'm not suggesting that you should suppress your feelings or deny that you are angry at him. Don't add hypocrisy to your sin! If you feel anger with God, tell him so. Confess it. You might even need to shout it aloud! He already knows what is in your heart. You can't hide it from him. Ask him to intensify in your heart renewed confidence in his perfect goodness and wisdom. Here is how John Piper put it:

“Anger at sin is good (Mark 3:5), but anger at goodness is sin. That is why it is never right to be angry with God. He is always and only good, no matter how strange and painful his ways with us. Anger toward God signifies that he is bad or weak or cruel or foolish. None of those is true, and all of them dishonor him. Therefore it is never right to be angry at God. When Jonah and Job were angry with God, Jonah was rebuked by God (Jonah 4:9) and Job repented in dust and ashes (Job 42:6).”

There is no easy way to summarize or conclude what James is telling us. So I'll simply say once more what he says with utmost clarity: “Be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger!”