

James 1 (19-20) – Know this, My Beloved Brothers

Anger is evident every day of our lives; it is all around us in this world. Many people have personal struggles with anger issues, and at one time or another, we all have to deal with anger. Of course, the Bible has a lot to say about anger (Proverbs 14:29 / Ecclesiastes 7:9 / Galatians 5:19-21 / Ephesians 4:31 / Colossians 3:8).

When we come to James 1:19-20, we see what seems to be a set of isolated exhortations about anger. People often use them this way. However, these verses are still in a particular context, and they have to do with our attitude towards and our relationship with the Word of God. This is about submitting to God's Word, getting into alignment with God's will.

Think about the wheels on a car; when they are out of alignment they get wobbly, and worn, and you might get in a wreck. When you are in alignment, you may go through some hard roads, but your ride will be smoother and safer than it would be otherwise. As we travel down the highways of life, like the tires on a car, we need to stay in alignment.

Vs.18 teaches us that it all starts with the Word; that is how we are born again, that is how we become part of the kingdom of God. And the Word of God is also how we grow and mature, and the Word of God is what equips us to mature through the trials we face in life.

Now having said that, these verses do have something to say about why we have such trouble with anger. So as we unpack this passage, and as we move forward into vs.21, we will see how our deep seated anger spills over into more overt displays and feelings of anger in everyday life. But we need to learn what this passage is addressing first, before we apply it further, so hold on, and listen up. Otherwise you will be committing the very crime this passage is warning about.

The book of James deals with the nature of saving faith, what it looks like in practice. You see, there is more than one kind of faith. James is talking about a saving faith vs. a non-saving faith (like the demons have – cf. James 2:19). Believing in Jesus means trusting Him, and loyalty to Him, it is not merely mental assent. The demons believe that Jesus is the Son of God (Mark 3:11), and they know that Jesus was raised from the dead. They know He IS Lord, but they don't seek to love, serve, honor, or obey Jesus AS Lord.

So what about you? How do you know if someone is really saved, how do you examine your own life? James teaches us the truth that a saving faith leads to a living faith – your life tells the story about the kind of faith that you have. This book gives evidences of saving faith.

In vs.3-12, James talks about reacting to trials. Hard times will harden lost people, but hardships don't destroy genuine, saving faith, they develop it. They bring people closer to Jesus; they don't drive people away from Him. Christians learn endurance, and become mature through trials.

Then in vs.13-17, James talks about resisting temptation. The person who isn't actually saved wants to justify and stay in their sin. They want to play the blame game. But Christians learn to submit to God rather than succumbing to temptation.

Now, in vs.18-27, James talks about responding to truth, that is to say, our proper response to the Word of God. The admonitions of vs.19-20 are bracketed by vs.18 and 21, and both of those are about the Word. And then vs.22-27 are about acting on or “doing” the Word of God. Vs.19-20 teaches us what our attitude is supposed to be toward the Word of God in order to benefit from it.

The attitude of saved people towards the Word of God is that they are able to receive it. The Bible teaches in many places that a saved person responds to the Word of God differently than a lost person. There is a contrast in attitude and obedience. Saved people love the Word; they desire it (Psalm 119:10, 97, 111, 113, 163, 165). Lost people loathe the Word; they despise it (Psalm 119:155). Saved people seek to obey the Word (Psalm 119:33-34, 133). Lost people seek to oppose the Word (Psalm 119:136, 158).

Know this, my beloved brothers – God wants to make sure we realize some things about our relationship with His Word. There are three things, three aspects we will look at today that define the proper attitude and response of a Christian to the Word of God. Knowing this will unlock the reason why we often struggle with anger in our lives, because the answer to anger is a proper attitude and response to God’s Word. Next time we will develop this even further.

Anger is fueled by unmet expectations, but the root of anger is a selfish pride. And that selfish pride at its deepest level is actually against God. Most often, the anger you feel is more than anger with the people or circumstances that are the visible cause of it. Your anger is actually anger with the One who is in control of those people and those circumstances. You are actually giving way to thinking that you have been wronged by God. Therefore, if we really want to deal with anger in more than a surface way, we need more than techniques that deal with temporary outbursts; we need transformation that deals with the very heart of our anger.

let every person be quick to hear – this is not teaching us about being a good listener and that this is how you control your anger. That may be true in some sense, but what this phrase is talking about is a willingness to receive the Word with submission. Just as hunger and thirst are natural, that’s the way it is supposed to be for a Christian and the Word.

Quick to hear; a real Christian has an appetite for it, not apathy toward it. They are attentive, submissive, and teachable. James is not telling us to talk less and listen more. This is about wanting to hear, being ready to hear, and being hungry to hear what God has to say (cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:13 – *And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers*).

Realize what a privilege it is to have and to hear the Word of God. If you were given a map to a great treasure, you would be quick to go out and get it. There wouldn’t be any hesitation, you would want it. In the midst of your trials and temptations, you have a treasure full of wisdom that you can trust.

(let every person be) slow to speak – this is not about being quiet in some generic sense. This is about an awareness of the holiness of God’s Word. We are not to be so casual about it, but rather, to be careful about it, careful in our response to it. We are called to labor in order to use it

rightly (cf. 2 Timothy 2:15). James 3:1 teaches us that we should not be in a hurry to be a teacher. And you are not ready to be a teacher unless and until you have a teachable spirit. You need to listen and learn before you go speaking for God about something you don't really understand. You won't always have a full grasp, but be sure not to have a fools grasp.

Since the *word of truth* is what caused you to be born again, it is also the very life of our sanctification as well. So we would do well to be ready to listen to it, and patient to learn about it. It saddens me when someone is quick to argue with you, and they can't substantiate their opinions, they don't agree with what you preach "just because". Some know a lot about the Word, but they are still unteachable and unreachable, they don't have the right attitude toward the Word of God. Of course this goes for preachers too, we haven't arrived yet either, but hopefully we've left the "I just don't feel right about it" to ourselves until we study it further.

(let every person be) slow to anger – this is not describing a boiling over, this is not about an explosive anger, but a settled anger. This is not a call to be calm. This is about resentment, an ongoing rebellion, a resistance to and rejection of God's Word. We are tempted to be angry when the Word of God exposes our wrong thinking. We are mad about being confronted with some cherished area of disobedience or rebellion or stubbornness in our life.

For the unbeliever, their resistance is at the basic point of sin and salvation. All people start out as rebels who are dead in sin, disobedient to God, and doomed to follow the direction of the world, the designs of the devil, and the desires of their own nature. They don't want God's Word, unless and until they are born again.

For Christians, those who are born again believers in Christ, they have a new life implanted in them, a new disposition in the soul which is driven to holiness, as we talked about last time. So what about believers, why do they have such anger at times? Let's say there is an area God wants to deal with, but you resist, you rebel. Since you, if you are a Christian, were created to love, learn, and live the Word of God, you have a basic conflict at the deepest level of your soul. This conflict becomes an issue, and we begin to develop this anger that James is warning us about. If we will not be "slow to anger" in this area, the prime, deepest area, it is no wonder that we have this free floating anger in our daily lives just waiting for something to pour itself into.

We are often tempted to respond in anger when we are in the midst of trying situations. Instead of counting it all joy we count it all anger. *Slow to anger* isn't talking about avoidance. That is what most people who don't want to live the Word of God but who want to claim the Word of God will do. But the problem with that is that the problem of resistance instead of repentance is still there, and so anger is still being developed.

What area will you not conform to? What do you keep putting off? In what ways are you resisting the Word of God? This inner conflict in your soul will play itself out in temporal situations, and you know this to be true in your own experience. This conflict comes crashing into our circumstances because we have unresolved issues at the core of our being. For some it is just a sign that they are not saved. For others, they do love God's Word, and they do want to learn it, but there is some area where they are resisting and rebelling instead of repenting, and this is what causes the conflict and it spills over into our everyday life.

Do you love the people that God uses to correct you? You must never develop hostility toward the truth of God just because it runs counter to your own sinful or selfish desires. The reason we answer with anger, respond with rage, and become vehicles for vitriol and violence is because we are not walking in a submitted state, and then we must medicate, either with anger, or to subdue anger. We are given to fits of anger because we are following the angry pathway.

We need a radically different way of thinking, feeling, choosing, and living. When a person doesn't have a teachable spirit, and they hear some truth from God's Word that exposes some area of their lives, instead of receiving it and allowing the Word of God to change their way of thinking, feeling, choosing, living, they have an attitude of resentment and rejection and rebellion and so real repentance (that is, a change of mind that leads to a change of life) fails to materialize and they are in the same sorry rut of having to avoid or suffer with anger.

We tend to put on masks when we feel like we are being scrutinized, and we hide our anger. So we may be able to play it off in certain public settings but this will come out in some way. We wonder why we overreact and have such anger in our lives. We give in to fits of anger and we feel this rage in our souls and we wonder why. Well it is because of the resistance we are giving to God's Word in some area He wants to deal with us in. We won't allow it and so the anger spills over into other things. We find ourselves easily frustrated, irritated and annoyed, angry and resentful and we might tend to overreact to certain things.

We don't want the truth and so the truth about our angry hearts comes out in some other way. We wind up venting, lashing out, or being passive aggressive, and most often against the person trying to deliver the message (think about how they treated the prophets, cf. Galatians 4:16). We might develop our own little demons (usually some other person or situation) which we can target as the means of expressing our anger and then feel justified in doing it.

What's the answer? Well this text is teaching us. Listen, learn, and live. We have to be ready to listen to the truth (quick to hear), ready to learn the truth (slow to speak), and ready to live the truth (slow to anger). Vs.19 isn't about keeping back your feelings, it isn't a struggle to keep yourself from venting, it is developing a whole new way of walking, so that obstacles don't become opportunities to vent, but opportunities to listen, learn, and live. Look at Matthew 7:1-5 – instead of going to the other guy and telling him what is wrong, see how it is wrong, listen to what the picture is telling you, learn what God is teaching you, and live how God intends instead of in angry rebellion.

Vs.20 – you can grow in righteousness, and trusting God, and treasuring God's Word is what will mature us through the trials that God uses. We can submit to God instead of succumbing to temptation, but an anger against God's Word and God's way is not going to lead you into God's will. Getting mad about it all won't really help you, and for a new creature, a born again believer, to be going against God's will is what creates such a conflict in your life, and it spills over into fear, frustration, resentment and rebellion, outbursts of anger and a soul full of rage. Don't just settle into an antagonistic position, deny yourself and discover your new self.

God loves us, and that is why He wants us to listen, learn, and live, He is back of it all, and His Word is there for us all. Know this, my beloved brothers and sisters.