

Swift to Hear, Slow to Speak, Slow to Wrath
James 1:19

James 1:19 reads, “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.”

As we have previously noted, the word “wherefore” with which **James 1:19** begins indicates that the instructions of this verse are connected to and flow out from some truth in the previous paragraph (verses 12-18). Even so, we have concluded that this connection is with the truth of **verse 14**. This connection is with the truth that the cause of sinful temptation in our lives is the selfish desires of our own corrupt hearts. The principle of selfishness is a natural characteristic of our hearts; and that principle of selfishness often corrupts our thoughts, attitudes, words, and actions. This is especially true in our relationships with others. For this very reason, the three-fold exhortation of **verse 19** is delivered in quick succession in order to reveal our need to deny our selves and our selfishness in our relationship with others. In our selfishness, it is natural for us to be slow to hear the opinions and concerns of others. In our selfishness, it is natural for us to be swift to speak our own opinions and concerns to others. In our selfishness, it is natural for us to be swift to wrath when things do not go our way. Thus we are exhorted to deny our selfishness by being “swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.”

Grammatically, **James 1:19** begins with a loving address from a pastor’s heart -- “Wherefore, my beloved brethren.” James employed this loving address both to obtain the attention of his readers for his exhortation and to open the hearts of his readers unto his exhortation. Thereby he expressed his pastoral love for them as brethren in Christ and his pastoral burden for them concerning their growth in righteousness. Then **verse 19** continues with a three-fold exhortation for right relations -- “Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.” Finally, **verse 20** concludes with a Biblical explanation concerning selfish wrath -- “For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.” In this message we shall focus our attention upon the three-fold exhortation for right relations.

I. Be Swift to Hear.

The first exhortation of **verse 19** concerns the manner in which we listen to others -- “Let every man be swift to hear.” Clearly this exhortation is delivered to every child of God. Whereas the phrase, “my beloved brethren,” narrows the focus of this exhortation to God’s own children, the phrase, “let every man be,” extends the focus of this exhortation to all God’s children. So then, every one of us who are God’s own children have the responsibility before God our heavenly Father to be “swift to hear” in our relations with those around us. Indeed, we have the God-given responsibility to be quick to listen and pay attention to the thoughts, suggestions, concerns, and input of others. In our selfishness, we find it far easier to express our own input than to listen unto another’s input. In addition, we find it far easier simply to ignore another’s input than to listen with concentration and patience. Yet God’s holy Word commands us to be *swift* to listen unto the other’s input and *slow* to express our own. In relating to others, the Lord our God desires that we give priority to the practice of *listening* over the practice of *speaking*.

Even so, the opening half of **Proverbs 15:28** declares, “The heart of the righteous studieth to answer.” A heart that is governed by our Lord’s righteousness is wise in communication and considerate toward others. Such a righteous heart studies a matter through careful listening and then responds with a well-considered answer. Such a righteous heart is diligent first to listen, to understand, and to consider. Then such a righteous heart is careful to respond considerately, lovingly, and helpfully. A heart that is governed by righteousness is clothed with humility, and in that humility it recognizes how little it truly knows and understands. Thus a heart that is governed by righteousness will be slow to make judgment calls against others and slow to express personal opinions before others. Rather, a heart that is governed by righteousness will be swift to seek after greater understanding through careful and attentive listening. Even so, **Proverbs 18:13** gives the warning, “He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him.” Responding before careful and attentive listening is the way of selfish foolishness. Such a practice will not enhance our testimony for the Lord, but will only bring shame upon our lives. Such a practice will not help, but will only hinder the cause of our Lord Jesus Christ. On the other hand, careful and attentive listening before responding is the way of righteous wisdom and will bring glory unto our Lord’s name.

Furthermore, being swift to hear means that we should be open and receptive to godly counsel and correction from others. Even so, **Proverbs 1:5** states, “A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels.” Again **Proverbs 15:31-32** proclaims, “The ear that heareth the reproof of life abideth among the wise. He that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul: but he that heareth reproof getteth understanding.” Yet again **Proverbs 10:17** declares, “He is in the way of life that keepeth instruction: but he that refuseth reproof erreth.” Finally, **Proverbs 13:18** warns, “Poverty and shame shall be to him that refuseth instruction: but he that regardeth reproof shall be honoured.” Indeed, we should we swift to hear godly counsel and correction; for such is the way to abide in righteous wisdom, to get spiritual understanding, to walk the way of abundant life, and to be honored with our Lord’s favor. Thus **Proverbs 19:20** gives the instruction, “Hear counsel, and receive instruction, that thou mayest be wise in thy latter end.”

II. Be Slow to Speak.

The second exhortation of **James 1:19** concerns the manner in which we speak to others -- “Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak.” Again this exhortation is delivered unto every child of God. Every one of us who are God’s own children have the responsibility before God our heavenly Father to be “slow to speak” in our relations with those around us. Indeed, we have the God-given responsibility to be slow to express and speak forth our own thoughts, insights, interests, and complaints. In our selfishness, we often think more highly than we ought to think of our own thoughts, insights, interests, and complaints. Thus in such selfish pride, we imagine that our thoughts must be revealed, that our insights must be shared, that our interests must be communicated, and that our complaints must be heard. Yet **Proverbs 29:11** reveals the Biblical truth, “A fool uttereth all his mind: but a wise man keepeth it in till afterwards.”

Even so, **Proverbs 29:20** gives the warning, “Seest thou a man that is hasty in his words? There is more hope of a fool than of him.” It is the way of selfish foolishness to be hasty in uttering our mind. Yea, to be hasty in uttering our mind will only bring forth sin and unrighteousness; for **Proverbs 10:19** declares, “In the multitude of words there wanteth not sin: but he that refraineth his lips is wise.” Out of the selfish corruption of our hearts, our tongues will be consuming fire and “a world of iniquity” (**James 3:6**). Out of the selfish corruption of our hearts, our tongues will be “an unruly evil, full of deadly poison” (**James 3:8**). Thus a multitude of unbridled, hasty words will only bring forth much sin and offense in our Lord’s sight and against those around us. This is the reason that **Proverbs 13:3** proclaims the Biblical truth, “He that keepeth [guards] his mouth keepeth [guards] his life: but he that openeth wide his lips shall have destruction.” In like manner, **Proverbs 21:23** proclaims, “Whoso keepeth [guards] his mouth and his tongue keepeth [guards] his soul from troubles.” Being hasty in uttering our mind will bring forth sinful iniquity in our lives and spiritual destruction in our relationships. Yet being “slow to speak” will protect our souls and our relationships from many troubles.

However, being “slow to speak” is not the same as being never to speak. Certainly in righteous wisdom we will be slow and careful about our words. Yet in righteous wisdom we *will* speak -- the right words at the right times to minister God’s grace unto others. Again we consider the Biblical truth of **Proverbs 29:11** -- “A fool uttereth all his mind: but a wise man keepeth it in till afterwards.” Yes, hastily uttering all our mind is the way of selfish, sinful foolishness. Yet there is a time *afterward* when a Biblically wise individual, walking in the way of righteous wisdom, may speak forth the *appropriate* word. Even so, **Proverbs 15:2** declares, “The tongue of the wise useth knowledge aright: but the mouth of fools poureth out foolishness.” Whereas the spiritual fool will speak forth with abundant, selfish foolishness, the individual of godly wisdom will speak forth with careful, righteous edification. Thus **Proverbs 15:23** exclaims, “A man hath joy by the answer of his mouth: and a word spoken in due season, how good is it!” To this **Proverbs 25:11** adds, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.” Finally, **Proverbs 24:26** states, “Every man shall kiss his lips that giveth a right answer.”

III. Be Slow to Wrath.

The third exhortation of **James 1:19** concerns the attitude in which we relate to others -- “Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.” Yet again this exhortation is delivered unto every child of God. Every one of us who are God’s own children have the responsibility before God our heavenly Father to be “slow to wrath” in our relations with those around us. Indeed, we have the God-given responsibility to be slow in being provoked unto wrath in attitude and expression toward others. Now, the word “wrath” that is employed in this exhortation does not necessarily refer to an explosive, passionate outburst of angry temper. Rather, this word refers to an inner, deeper spirit of resentment, which may reveal itself upon occasion through angry outbursts. Thus this Biblical exhortation not only concerns our external actions, but also our inner attitude. Even so, we have the God-given responsibility not only to be slow unto outbursts of anger, but also to be slow unto a spirit of anger.

The exhortation, to be “slow to wrath,” possesses a natural connection with the previous two exhortations, to be “swift to hear” and “slow to speak.” When in our selfishness we are not careful and attentive to hear the cause of another, we are prone to misunderstanding and to being provoked unto wrath in that misunderstanding. Also when in our selfishness we are hasty in uttering our mind, yet find that others lack interest therein, we are offended in our selfish pride and are easily provoked unto selfish wrath thereby. Also when others respond toward us with expressions of anger, for whatever reason, in our selfishness we are easily provoked to return wrath for wrath, especially with hasty and angry words. Yet **Ecclesiastes 7:8-9** declares and instructs, “Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof: and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools.” In like manner, **Proverbs 16:32** states, “He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city.” On the other hand, **Proverbs 25:28** states, “He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city that is broken down, and without walls.”

To be easily provoked unto selfish wrath and anger is the way of spiritual, sinful foolishness. To be slow to wrath and anger is the way of righteous wisdom. Even so, the opening half of **Proverbs 14:17** declares, “He that is soon angry dealeth foolishly;” and **verse 29** adds, “He that is slow to wrath is of great understanding: but he that is hasty of spirit exalteth folly.” Whereas an individual of selfish foolishness will quickly express irritation, frustration, and complaint, and that with an angry, despiteful manner; an individual of righteous wisdom will hold his peace and pass over irritation, frustration, and complaint. Even so, **Proverbs 11:12** declares, “He that is void of wisdom despiseth his neighbour: but a man of understanding holdeth his peace.” Again **Proverbs 12:16** states, “A fool’s wrath is presently known: but a prudent man covereth shame.” Yet again **Proverbs 19:11** states, “The discretion of a man deferreth his anger; and it is his glory to pass over a transgression.”

Certainly, there is a godly spirit of righteous anger and holy indignation against all defilement of sinful iniquity and against all dishonor of our Lord. In fact, our Lord Jesus Christ expressed such righteous anger and holy indignation on a number of occasions (See Mark 3:5; John 2:14-17; Matthew 21:12-13). In only stating that we must be slow to anger and wrath, the exhortation of **James 1:19** allows for this truth. Yet even in this, we must be very slow to anger and wrath; for the Lord our God Himself is slow to anger and wrath (See Psalm 103:8; 145:8; etc.) Furthermore, we must be very slow to anger and wrath; “for,” as **James 1:20** reveals, “the wrath of man [our selfish wrath] worketh not the righteousness of God.”