

Introduction

Vehicles generally are built for speed or built for power. You have to sacrifice one for the other. You know what it is like to be socked in behind a semi at a red light. It takes forever for the semi to get going. Semis are so slow, but semis are powerful. They carry big heavy loads. They may take off like a slug, but if they were fast they could not perform the important task of getting our groceries to the store. When it comes to vehicles, we need one kind for speed and another for power. When it comes to human beings and conversation, however, God made us all with the capacity for power AND speed. For in some aspects we need speed and in other aspects we need to exert the power of deliberation. James tells us precisely what these aspects are.

[Read Text and Pray]

When evil desires within us encounter opportunity, they conceive and sin is brought forth. The ultimate outcome of sin is death. However, the indisputable goodness of God is evident. While sin kills, the father of Lights brings the dead to life. He does it by the word of truth, the gospel. He brings forth life within the dead sinner. The spoken word then bears witness with the renewed heart. This word by which sinners have been born has begun its work in those who believe, but it is only the beginning. Much more work remains to be done. Sin is to be eradicated, killed, mortified. And it happens by a proper response to God's word. God's children are born by it, and we are perfected by it as well. And for the word to do its perfecting work, producing the righteousness of God in our lives, we must respond to that word in three ways. James tells us we must hear it, receive it, and do it. There is much to be said about each of these three responses.

This morning we are going to focus upon the first of the three-hearing. One of the reasons there is so much to be said about hearing the word of God is because there is a correlation between how we are to hear the word of God and how we are to hear each other as fellow human beings. Godly hearing applies both to the manner in which we communicate with one another as well as the manner in which we respond to the word of God. And it is apparent that James means to emphasize and address this correlation. You see, he explicitly connects his comments to the word of God in verse 18 and in verses 21-25, but he omits that explicit mention in verses 19-20. He does so, I believe, so that we will look carefully at both how we hear from humans and how we hear from God. Godly hearing, hearing that produces the righteousness of God, applies both to our communication with each other and our communication with God. Diving into James, we see that there are three principles for godly hearing—one that involves acceleration and two that involve deceleration. With respect to one we are to pedal to the metal, and with respect to the others, we are to hit the brakes.

First, James says, we must be . . .

I. Quick to Hear.

A. Quickness involves acceleration. It involves sudden action. Last fall when I rented a Ford Mustang I enjoyed the rapid acceleration. Whenever I came to a traffic light, I was actually hoping that it would turn red. I would have the opportunity to experience another rapid take-off. Too bad James never got to experience that kind of thing. But surely he had seen a rabbit take off suddenly and scurry across the way. Perhaps that was his image of quickness. At any rate his point is vivid. When it comes to hearing, we need to be quick. It pertains to us whether we are talking about hearing the word of God or hearing one another. Opportunities to listen should be prized and we should quickly engage ourselves to take advantage.

This is true when it comes to the Scriptures. Think how blessed we are to have multiple copies of the Bible in our own language. Such ready access may lead us to take the privilege for granted. But compared to many in other parts of the world and for most of world history, possessing a copy of the Bible is a rare jewel. Those who realize its rarity put to shame those who have grown accustomed to its presence. They are quick to prize it, swift to run to it, and rapid in their reaction to what it says. How about you? Can you say you are quick to hear God's word? Are you diligent to seek to grasp what it says? Do you hunger and thirst for the words of God? We have every reason to be quick to hear, but we have to fight the old flesh in order to persist in such quickness.

James takes our minds to the setting of seeds and planting. In verse 21, he speaks of the "implanted word." Jesus used this imagery to explain that there are different kinds of listeners to the seed which is the word of God. The first type of soil in Jesus's parable was hard soil. Along the side of the path, it was packed down and rocklike. It resisted penetration by the seed. Thus the birds came and ate the seeds and the word had no impact. To be quick to hear God's word requires a readiness in place of resistance, a softened heart in place of a hard one. When the word meets with reception, it can become implanted. It can do its work and produce the righteousness of God.

But being quick to hear the Lord is not only about the desire for God's word to work effectively. Just as importantly, there is the matter of giving honor. The act of listening gives honor. It pays respect. It demonstrates the recognition of worth in the one to whom it listens. It reflects proper humility. The Lord is the Creator of all things. The sovereign ruler is seated in heaven upon his throne. There is no one like him. But he says, "This is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word." Being quick to hear the Lord is an act of humble worship which itself will be honored by the Lord.

The urgent need for an open ear and a softened heart is also apparent when we look to God-honoring conversation between human beings. Conversation, communication, is a two-way street. It does no good to talk if the person to whom you are speaking is unwilling to listen. And as it is with God, attentiveness displays proper honor to others and reveals a humble heart. Here is a way that we count others more important than ourselves and thus it is also a way that we love them. What is the golden rule? It is found in Matthew 7:12. Jesus said, "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also for them, for this is the law and the prophets." How do you feel when you speak and no one listens? It is an opportunity for you to swallow your pride, isn't it? We would like for others to be listening when we speak to them, and we should listen to them when they speak.

So here are a number of reasons we should be quick to hear both God and others. It is the antidote to a hard heart. Hearing honors the speaker. Hearing expresses love to the speaker. Refusing to hear is unloving. Hearing demonstrates humility, the willingness to value the interests of others above those of yourself. Here is one more reason I want you to see. You should be quick to hear because there are many things you do not know or understand. Do not assume the superiority of your mind. It is pride and arrogance to dismiss what others are saying because you already know better. Hear in order to know and understand. Hearing what another is saying will teach you something; perhaps it will teach you a lot. It will teach you about that person. It may even teach you about yourself. Even if you disagree or think you know better, you will not be able to help another if you do not listen to them. And listening earns you the opportunity to speak instructively at the proper time.

There is only one person who knows everything and never learns anything. It is because he is omniscient. The understanding of God is infinite and inscrutable (Psalm 147:5; Isaiah 40:28). Even

before a word is on my tongue, he knows it all (Psalm 139:4). All things are open and laid bare to his eyes (Hebrews 4:13). The Lord alone knows the secrets of the heart (Psalm 44:21). He does not need anybody to tell him anything. No one has become his counselor (Romans 11:34). God alone has no need to hear. And God alone owes no one the honor of hearing them. But he does! God, the Almighty, omniscient, and exalted God, condescends to give ear to the words of human hearts. He knows everything we ever say even before we say it, but nevertheless he hears. Psalm 65:2 addresses God as "you who hear prayer." The scripture counsels the people of God to let our requests be made known to God because he hears. Psalm 34 says, "This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him." It says, "the eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry." It says, "When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears." Two blind men sat beside the road from Jericho. They cried out, "Lord, have mercy on us." Jesus was passing by, engulfed within a great crowd which attempted to silence the men. But Jesus HEARD them. He stopped and spoke to them and healed them.

I tell you. God has saved a people to be like him. And he hears. He gives ear even though he does not need to. If he gives ear to us, how much more should we surely give ear to him, and how much more should we also give ear to each other. Be quick to hear. Determine to empathize. Hear the heart. Focus on the speaker. Ask questions to aid your understanding. Look at the speaker. Observe what they are saying apart from their words. Let your first response be warmth to them. And do no less with the words of the Lord.

Second, James says, we must be . . .

II. Slow to Speak.

A. Put on the brakes! The Bible has a lot to say about not being slothful. When laziness is in view, slothfulness is an undesirable character trait. However, I think we have found in this command from James an exception to the negativity of being like a sloth. Sloths are notoriously slow. Their digestion is slow. Energy production is slow. Movement is slow. So they do everything slowly. There are two areas in which we humans should be like them. James tells us to be slow to speak and slow to anger. We will take them one-at-a-time. First, let us be slow to speak. We must hop like a bunny to lend an ear, but we should move like a tortoise when it comes to using our tongue.

Why is this? One reason we need to be slow to speak is that we cannot listen and speak at the same time. If we are to be quick to hear, we must of necessity be slow to speak. When we speak up, it cuts off the input others might otherwise have. And that is particularly dangerous when the one from whom we might receive input is the Lord.

Consider Ecclesiastes 5:1-2. It warns, "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore, let your words be few." We should certainly be slow to speak in the presence of the Lord. Hasty speech turns out like the advice of Job's wife. "Curse God and die." Hasty speech is often fault-finding speech. It dares to think itself justified in calling God to account. But in opening its lips, it removes all doubt of the foolishness bound up in the heart. When you are full of what you want to say, you crowd out the instruction you should receive. You preserve within your soul the unfortunate presence of ignorance and delusion. Professing to be wise, you make yourself a fool when you think you know it all. You make God in your image and after the corruption in your heart and delude yourself and others with your own deception.

To hold the tongue is taught by the wisdom of the Proverbs. Proverbs 10:19 says "When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent." 13:3 tells us "Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life; he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin." We come to ruin because the lack of restraint in regards to the tongue sets it loose to all sorts of evil. Hence, Jesus instructs that by our words we will be justified, and by our words we will be condemned. The mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. Hasty speech displays an arrogant and prideful spirit. And that speech further reveals the darkness. It is a darkness which breaks God's holy law with words.

Hasty and unrestrained speech can spread misinformation. We are so full of ourselves we remain uninstructed and spread that ignorance around. Hasty speech that is consumed with oneself will not hesitate to deceive in order to save face, but God hates lying. Hasty speech gives vent to feelings. It gives others a piece of one's mind. It often speaks judgment. It murders with words. We are going to get there before long, but a preview of James' teaching on the tongue is in order here. Chapter 3:5ff. says that "the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and is set on fire by hell."

What a difference between our words and the words of the living God. His words are righteous altogether. They reveal his glory. They point to the path of holiness. They proclaim good news to captives. They preserve righteousness. The words of the Lord make the simpleton wise. They rejoice the heart, enlighten the eyes, and endure forever. They are more to be desired than fine gold, sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. In keeping them there is great reward.

But we must be warned to restrain our lips lest many be corrupted by what we say. Paul teaches that Christians must watch our mouths. "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths," he says, "but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you." We need to be slow with our speech because we sin a lot with our words. Those words grieve the Holy Spirit. But our words have the potential to build others up when they are like God's words. For that to happen we cannot be quick; we must be slow to speak.

Finally, James says we must be . . .

III. Slow to Anger.

Anger in human beings is a terribly destructive emotion. It destroys the one who is enraged and it destroys the objects of our fury. And there really is little place for it. Paul says we should be angry and not sin. There is a certain kind of anger which is not sinful. Of course that is true because God is angry. Psalm 7:11 says that "God . . . feels indignation every day." Psalm 2:12 warns that men should "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled." God's anger relates to holiness. It is anger, wrath, or fury which is aroused by the breaking of his law and is thus against him in his righteousness.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah says of the wicked, "they have rejected the law of the Lord of hosts, and have despised the Holy One of Israel. Therefore, the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people, and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them" (5:24-25).

Romans 1:18 says that "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth."

God's anger and wrath are holiness in response to sin. It is not hotheaded-ness or a loss of control. It is fierce for sure and fearful to think of falling under it. But it is never out of hand, never impure, never wrong. God gets angry, but he never loses his temper. How different is the anger of humanity. The last time you became angry or had to fight off the temptation to be so, I am guessing it probably had more to do with your pride and your personal offense than it did that humans suppress the truth by their unrighteousness. It was probably more akin to the anger of Jonah. Recall the prophet Jonah. God sent him to pronounce judgment upon the wicked city of Nineveh. He was reluctant to go but a fish helped change his course and change his mind. He went and proclaimed God's impending judgment. Shockingly, the city of pagans repented! God then relented from the disaster he had said he would do to them. And then we find that Jonah became angry. He was angry because God had mercy upon the people. He was angry because these wicked people got off. He was angry because God is good. Then Jonah went and sat under a plant which gave him shade from the sun. The next day, the plant withered and the shade was lost and Jonah became angry again. Generally, we are like Jonah in our anger. We may be angry because we are jealous of the kindness others receive or we are angry because our comforts and conveniences are removed. We get angry because of our pride. Rarely is it like the anger of God.

In his holiness and as creator and sovereign, God alone has the right to be angry. Wouldn't you agree with that? God alone has a right to be angry. Even if our anger is ever right, we do not have the right. Our judgment is not blameless and our words are not justified. We are never more than forgiven sinners. But now consider this. This glorious God has every right to be angry and is never wrong in his anger. He is justified in his words and blameless in his judgment. But get this. Though his anger is never wrong, he himself is slow to anger. When the Lord proclaims his name, he says of himself that He "is a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." It is of his kindness that we are not consumed. Constantly we violate his holiness. Instantaneous vengeance is what we deserve. Such vengeance occurred when Nadab and Abihu used unauthorized fire upon the altar and the fire came out and consumed them. Such vengeance was evident when Uzzah reached out and touched the holy ark of God and he died instantaneously. Such was the case when Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit and dropped dead. And this vengeance is what every one of us deserve. But God is slow to anger.

Not only is he slow to anger, but he has provided a substitute to endure the exercise of his anger in the place of those who committed the sins that necessitate it. And I will get to that in a second. Right now let us ponder that if God is slow to anger with his perfect holy anger, how much more should we be slow to anger. Let us be riven within for our being quick to speak, quick to anger, but slow to hear. Let us see ourselves in contrast to our great and merciful God. And let us repent of our pride and selfishness and self-confidence and self-importance. And let us resolve before God to be like him: slow to anger, abounding in kindness, and steadfast love.

Nevertheless, we need to be mindful that though God is slow to anger, his perfect and holy wrath is inevitable. Temporal judgments of God against sin have graphically put the anger of God on display. Think Sodom and Gomorrah. Think the flood. But above them all think of the cross. There Jesus became the perfect propitiation, the wrath-satisfying sacrifice for our compromise of the holiness of God. The full and righteous anger of God, long held back, was made to fall on Christ Jesus. On Christ, the Lord placed the iniquity of sinners and on him fell the wrath due that sin. On the basis of Christ's sacrifice and resurrection, we who trust in him are redeemed. We are forgiven. We are

saved from that wrath. Rejoice you who believe. Rejoice and resolve to be slow to anger, be slow to speak, and be quick to hear.

But for those in this room who have not believed, you remain under the wrath of God. He is slow to anger, but all who will not seek refuge in Christ Jesus will surely bear the judgment of his fury. When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven, the Bible says (2 Thessalonians 1:7-11) that in flaming fire he will inflict "vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed."

Conclusion

The Lord is slow to anger, but that anger is inevitable. Sinners who will not repent are storing up wrath for themselves for that day. Do not mistake God's patience to mean his wrath is not coming. Flee for refuge to Jesus. And honor him by being quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.