

## Be Swift to Hear

James 1:19-20

10/24/1999

Chapter 1. We will read together verses 19 and 20. James, chapter 1, verses 19-20.

“Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.”

Now the verses that I have just read to you must be understood in the light of their context. What our verses are telling us is that men are altogether too prone to talk too much, listen too little, and to get angry altogether too quickly.

Now if, as verse 18 says, it is *through* the word of truth that we are born again, as we saw last Lord’s Day evening, then we need to be *listening* to that word a lot more than we *do*. We need to be swift to hear what the word of *truth* says in order that we might be the recipients of its life-giving power.

Now too often, we are far too busy thinking our own thoughts and speaking our own words to be listening as we ought—to be listening. It is axiomatic that one cannot talk and listen at the same time. And therefore, one must always be sacrificed for the other. And James makes it very clear to us which of them should have priority. It is interesting to note that God gave us two ears, but only one mouth, indicating that we probably ought to be *listening* twice as much as we talk.

We need to be far more ready to listen than to speak; far more ready to be taught than attempt to teach; far more ready to hear the words of God than to speak the words of men. And this is especially true when we are tempted to blame God for our sin and become angry with God because we imagine that He has tempted us and is responsible for our sins. Or we become angry regarding the trials and tribulations that God brings into our lives, and we wind up giving *vent* to that anger in our words, and thus we add to the sin of our attitudes the sins of our lips. And so the solution, James tells us, is to listen more, speak less, and contain and control the anger that so easily arises within us in response to the circumstances that we find ourselves in.

Well, what we want to do is consider these instructions together in greater detail. In the first place then this evening, let us consider the *duty* to be swift to hear—the duty to be swift to hear. Now this is the first point of a three-point message, which we will cover on three subsequent Lord’s Day evenings, God willing. We will not get to the “slow to speak” part tonight.

Now there are some things that we ought all to be very aggressive about pursuing. We are to move very quickly to take advantage of them. They are to have first priority in our lives and the first claim upon our energies, attentions, and resources. And I’m not talking about the sale down at the local mall. The thing that ought to have first priority in our lives that we ought to move *quickly* to take advantage of, and that we ought to be very *aggressive* about pursuing, is the listening *to* the word of God.

Now our text tells us that we are to be *swift* to hear. And the question is, Swift to hear *what*? Should we be swift to hear the latest gossip? Should we be swift to hear the evening news? Should we be swift to hear someone else’s private conversation? No, we are to be swift to hear something in particular. And that something in particular is described for us in the context.

In verse 18 it says, “Of his own will begot he us with the word of truth... Wherefore,... be swift to hear.” And so the thing that we are to be swift to hear is the word of truth. We are to be *quick* to take advantage of every opportunity we have to hear biblical truth. This is what James is telling us. And so whether it is the written Scriptures, whether it is the preached word of God, whether it is written sermons in books, we are to be quick to seize the opportunity to *expose* ourselves to them, listen carefully *to* them, and meditate thoughtfully *upon* them.

And so the duty prescribed here is to be aggressive, eager, and ready to avail ourselves of every opportunity to acquaint ourselves with the word of truth. And so there should be on our part, according to James, a glad willingness—that’s what it means to be *swift* to hear—to be *eager*, to be *quick*, to be *aggressive*, to be *anxious*, to lean forward and *strain* with our attention. That is all wrapped up in this word “swift” to hear.

There should be not only a glad willingness, but there should be a *seizing* upon of every *opportunity*. Not saying, Oh, you know, I can hear that some other time, and waiting for a more convenient time to hear the truth. You remember that that was King Agrippa’s attitude in the Scriptures. “I will hear thee another time of this matter.” He wasn’t swift to hear the word of God. He was *slow* to hear it. And clearly, we, then, have a duty to be aggressive, eager, and ready, with a glad willingness, seizing upon *every* opportunity possible to hear the word of truth.

Now, clearly, there are many things about which it is *good* to be slow to hear. There’s a great deal in people’s conversations that we should be *slow* to hear. There is a great deal on the radio and on the television that we should be *slow* to hear. There is a great deal in magazines and newspapers and books which is idle and profane and contrary to truth and vain, and we should be *slow* to hear that.

And some of the worst of the things that are out there that we should be *slow* to hear is the so-called “Christian” fiction books and novels that are in such abundance these days, 95% of which are humanistic trash with a veneer of Christianity spread over the top of it so that young Christian people will have *romance* novels to read. ’Cause I have read most Christian fiction, the vast majority of it is corrupting, and it was one of the chief causes of much perverted thinking, especially among young people in our day. We need to be slow to hear that kind of nonsense. Such trifling, unprofitable, and destructive speech ought to find in us, not a swiftness to hear, not an eager curiosity, but rather a great deal of indifference, unwillingness, and outright hostility towards hearing it. David said that he would *cut off* from himself all workers and speakers of iniquity. He wouldn’t *listen* to them. They would have no opportunity to be before his face.

And it is unfortunately a sinful curiosity on our part that causes us to be swift to hear what is offered up in our day for people to read and for people to hear. We are far quicker, unfortunately, to read and to hear the words of men than the words of God. Listen, life is too short and there is too much to be learned of God’s word to *waste* our time with the vain words and the vain writings and the vain images of the world and of worldly Christians.

You know, it used to be, twenty years ago, when I was a new Christian, that you could go into a Christian bookstore and pick stuff off the shelf and have a pretty good chance of getting something that was halfway decent and edifying. But most Christian bookstores nowadays that I go into are just merely toxic waste dumps, and they need an EPA cleanup done on them.

And so it is imperative that we be careful *what* we hear, not only *how* we hear, but *what* we hear. And it is imperative that we be *swift* to hear the right things, and slow to hear the wrong ones. Much of the declension of the church at large, and individual Christians in particular, can be directly traced to being swift to hear those things that God disapproves of.

And so the best way to avoid these pitfalls is to be swift to hear God's word—the word of truth, as James describes it here. And so be *quick* to pick up your Bible and read it. Be *slow* to pick up fiction and worldly books and read them. Be *quick* to read sermons and biblical expositions of various subjects, like we have on the back rack in the church. Be *slow* to read newspapers and magazines. Be *quick* to hear all of the preaching on the Lord's Day. Be *slow* at finding an excuse to do something else. Be *quick* to listen to tapes of sermons and Scripture reading. Be *slow* to listen to the radio and T.V. Be *quick* to listen to biblical and scriptural music. Be *slow* to listen to worldly music.

In short, what James is telling us here is, Take every advantage to aggressively seek out and listen to God's word of truth at *every* opportunity, and if you're doing that, you won't have time for the trash.

But of course, hearing alone is not sufficient. We must labor to retain and remember what we have *heard*. This is why it is imperative to record what we hear, review what we hear, and reflect upon that which we have *heard*. That's why many of you take notes during sermons, and I greatly appreciate that and commend you for it, because then you *record* what you hear. Some of you as you read the Scriptures, I know you keep a journal, and as you read things in the Bible that God impresses upon you, you write those things down, and then you review those and reflect upon those, so that they might become part of the fabric of your lives. That's what it means to be swift to hear.

This is why we must read and listen carefully and thoughtfully, and then of course we must be swift to *practice* what we have been swift to hear. Notice if you will, verse 22. "But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only." But you can't be a doer of the word until you *are* a hearer. And so he says, "Be *swift* to hear." That's the first step. And then, of course, you have to take the second step, which is to *do* something about it.

But you can't *do* about what you haven't *heard*. And I think the reason why there is so much defective behavior in people's lives is because they've never heard the truth in the *first* place. Because their lives and their minds are so cluttered with so much of the world, they have no *time* to read the word of God, and the word of God has no *room* in their thoughts because it is filled with Christian fiction.

But it all starts with an aggressive exposing of ourselves to the truth on every occasion and opportunity. And so when the opportunity presents itself, we need to be swift to hear. We need to *make* opportunities *for* ourselves to be swift to hear. A good place to start is reading your Bibles every day, taking the tracts off the back rack and reading each one of them, perhaps one a week. In 52 weeks, you will have gotten quite an education from the material that is back there. If you've got time to read the newspaper, if you've got time to read magazines, you certainly have time to read our little pamphlets that contain so much edificational material. If you have time to listen to the radio, you have time to listen to sermons.

Am I advocating a complete and total isolationism? I am not. I listen to the news every day at noon. But I don't listen to the radio all day long. It's imperative that we fill our minds with good things.

I have several applications. The first application is this: If you need regeneration, be swift to hear. If you need regeneration, be *swift* to hear. Now, our text says in verse 18, "Of his own will he begot us" by means of the word of truth. If you're sitting here today and you're not sure if you're saved or not, and you want to be saved, and you're hoping and trusting that God will regenerate you, then you need to be swift to hear. Because if God does beget people *through* the word of truth, then it's imperative that you expose yourself as much as possible *to* the word of truth in order that the grace of regeneration might be communicated to you through the God-ordained means of *accomplishing* it.

In Isaiah 55 and verse 3, it says, "[H]ear, and your soul shall live." You see, there's the command—"Hear"—and then there's the encouragement—"Your soul shall live." And you see, those never attain eternal life who are not swift hear, who don't listen to God's *word*, who do not *expose* themselves to God's word.

So if you think of yourself as an unsaved person, then you need to say to yourself every time you come to the Scriptures, every time you come to church, every time you listen to a sermon, "I am coming to the word of God that is to beget me to eternal life." And when you come with that kind of anticipation, the Lord is going to speak to your heart through His word and draw you to Himself. And so who needs to be swift to hear? People who need to be saved. People who need to be regenerated need to be swift to hear God's word.

Secondly, if you have experienced regeneration, you need to be swift to *hear*. If you have already experienced regeneration, you need to be swift to hear. Now if the word has begotten life in you, is it not entirely reasonable to expect the same word will sustain and strengthen the life that it *began*? If you have found the initial blessing of salvation through the word of God, then certainly the word of God will continue to produce the maturity, the growth, and the sanctification that is the *goal* of that salvation that it began.

First Peter, chapter 2, and verse 2 says, "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that you may *grow* thereby." And so the word is the means of our regeneration, and then he prescribes *exactly* the same formula for our *growth*. And so the thing that brought us life is the thing that sustains our life, develops our life, and matures our lives. And so if we have tasted that the Lord is gracious, then we need to keep coming to Him for more and more from precisely the same fountain. You see, there's not one fountain for salvation and another for sanctification, but rather, the same fountain is suitable for both, namely, the Scriptures. And so the degree to which you grow is going to be in direct relationship to the *degree* to which you are swift to *hear*.

Thirdly, be swift to hear regardless of how much you have already heard. Be swift to hear, regardless of how much you have already heard. Now notice, if you will, that this is a universal duty. It says in verse 19, "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let *every man* be swift to hear." None are exempt from hearing, none are exempt from the duty to patiently continue to learn, because no matter how much you know, there is more to know. And there is no one who is too old, too wise, or too advanced to be taught further in the word of God.

It is interesting to note that Paul, at the end of his life, in Second Timothy, chapter 4, after he's written half the New Testament and has accomplished *great* things for God, and manifests this *incredible* maturity, he says to Timothy, he says, "The cloak that I left at Troas with Carpus, when thou comest, bring with thee, *and* the books, but especially the parchments." In other words, Paul was still studying, still learning, still growing from the written word. As advanced as he was, as *inspired* as he was, as *knowledgeable* as he was, he was still being swift to hear. He says, I want to hear more of the word of God.

And so there is none so wise but that he may receive some benefit by the different handling by another of that which he already knows. You know, I imagine that many times you come to church and you hear me preach a sermon, and you say, I already know that. But the point is, is that every time you hear it, it's presented a little differently. And when you hear it from different people, they present it perhaps with a new perspective, a new slant, or a new blessing of the Spirit of God upon it.

And so, you can always receive some benefit, even from that which you already know. It's important for us to realize that all knowledge and gifts do not reside in any one person, and therefore, we should not despise the injunction in First Corinthians 14:30, which says, "If anything be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace." And the idea is, just because God's revealed something to you doesn't mean you don't have something to learn from somebody else. And that's one of the reasons why, oftentimes after I preach sermons, I don't have much to say, 'cause I've done my talking. I'm ready to listen to you and hear what you have to say about what God has spoken to you about, through the sermon and in His word in the last week. Because I need to hear what has been revealed to others, as well. And so no man is above the condition of being instructed. And so, *all* are to be swift to hear. All are to be *eager* and *greedy* of receiving the word of God ministered to them.

The fourth application is to recognize that being swift to hear is a matter of commitment, not a matter of convenience. Being swift to hear is matter of commitment, not a matter of convenience. Now in Second Timothy, chapter 4, and verse 2, ministers are instructed to preach the word and be instant *in* season and *out* of season. Now what that means is that if pastors are to preach under *all* occasions, when it is convenient and when it is not; when it is easy, and when it is hard; when they are rested, and when they are tired; then the people of God need to be swift to hear under all of those conditions as well—not because it's easy or because it's convenient, but because it is *right*.

And so if the word's to be preached when it's convenient and when it's not, it's to be *listened* to when it's convenient and when it's not. Now oftentimes it is extremely *inconvenient* for me to come to church. But I'm always here. And I'm sure for many you, it was inconvenient to be here tonight, and I thank God that you're here. But you see, swiftness to hear means that there is a putting aside of all considerations in order to put ourselves in the *situation* where we hear God's word.

And so therefore, we are to *seize* every opportunity, and we are to do so with a good attitude, even though there be a tired body and even though there be other things that are *calling* us. Proverbs 28, and verse 9, gives us a very severe and stern warning about our failure to *hear* and be swift to hear God's word. In Proverbs 28, and verse 9, it says, "He that turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination."

Now isn't that an interesting statement? What he's saying is if you are not swift to hear the word of God when you have opportunities to hear the word of God and you *turn away* from it, God says your prayers are an abomination to Him. What God is saying is, Look, if you won't take time to listen to me, I'm not going to take time to listen to you. If you turn away your ears from hearing the law and say, I won't hear what God has to say—I've got other things to do with my time than to hear God's *word*. Then God is going to say, You know, I've got other things to do with my time than to hear *your* words.

Now I am not saying that because you don't spend 24 hours a day, seven days a week, listening to God word, therefore God's not going to answer your prayers. But what I am asking you is this, Are you swift to hear God's word? Would you characterize yourself by that terminology in the way in which I've described it? Is God's word something you're eager, aggressive, and zealous about exposing yourself to, to the putting aside of other things, including inconveniences, in order to achieve that exposure? Are you willing to give it the chief priority over all of those other things that demand your attention?

Certainly, we can't spend 24 hours a day with our nose in the Bible. But there are seasons and opportunities, and they come to all of us. And how many times, you've had the choice between picking up the newspaper and reading it and picking up the Bible and reading it, and you *know* you haven't read the Bible that day, but you still pick up the newspaper and read it anyway, and go to bed without cracking the Book? That's *not* being swift to hear.

And so the admonition that James gives to us here is, Make listening to God's word your first priority. And if we do, God will make listening to our prayers *His* first priority. And so do not fall into the sin of turning away your ear from hearing God's word and being *indifferent* to His voice, because it is not a matter of indifference in our relationship with God when we do this.

And so, whether we need regeneration or whether we already have *been* regenerated, whether we are immature or whether we are mature, we need to be swift to hear, avail ourselves of every opportunity, and put away those things that would take the time that could be given over to hearing the word of *God*.

It says in the book of Psalms, "O how I love thy law. It is my meditation all the day." You know, it is our double-mindedness and our overexposure to all kinds of input and information that keeps us from being single-minded with reference to God's word. And all this stuff is competing for our eyeballs and for our ears. And you know, you have to consciously work hard into *shutting* it all out and making time to hear God's voice.

And so I would say to you, don't do any reading until you've read the word of God. If you're tempted to pick something up and read it during the day, ask yourself, Have I read God's word yet? If you haven't, don't read anything else 'til you've read God's word, and you'll find yourself being more and more swift to hear and drawn to that, and less and less idle curiosity about what the world's saying about this or that. And you know, when you're all done reading it, after you've spent an hour, and you put it down, and you say, What good did *that* do me? None. Satisfied some idle curiosity and titillated your mind with reference to this or that, but the only lasting value of it is it corrupted your affections and has stolen time that could've been given to God in communion with Him.

And that's what the Scripture says when it says, "Redeem the time because the days are evil." We haven't got time for everything. We've only got time for the very best things. We don't even have time for the *good* things—just the best things.

And so let us be a people who are swift to hear God's word. As we're driving down the road, listen to tapes. As you're at home, have godly music being played in your home that is expressing the truth of the Scriptures. As you sit down to do some reading, make sure it's something biblical. That's what it means to be swift to hear. May the Lord help us to be such a people. Shall we pray together.