

One quick and two slows

- James 1:19-20
- Thank you to David Ball and Shawn Curtis for your excellent messages the past two weeks. You fed the flock well, and I am grateful. It is good to be back at Antioch, and it was good to be in Moldova. Kevin and I were greatly blessed there and we owe that to God's grace working through your prayers. We will give a report in three weeks so that you can see and hear more about what God is up to in Moldova.
- You will remember that the last time we were with James, he was teaching us that God is great and God is good. And that every good gift comes from Him, including the best gift of all, our salvation! And that gift was brought forth by the word of truth. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. That's the context into which James drops verses 19 and 20. Because right after it, notice he says, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. Salvation removes the penalty of sin immediately. And when we get to heaven we will be free from the presence of sin. But as long as we live in these bodies, we are subject to the power of sin. How do we deal with the power of sin? The answer is found in the word of truth. When we receive with meekness the Word of truth, God saves us from the power of sin in our daily struggles. But wait. Just knowing the word of truth is not enough. We must receive that word with meekness so that we can be changed by it. It's not a matter of going through the Word, but allowing the Word to go through you. It's not a matter of storing information about the word but seeking transformation through the Word. Imagine going to the fitness center with your workout clothes on and watching intently while the fitness instructor works out. You don't work out with him, but you know everything about how HE does it. Can you walk out satisfied that you got a workout yourself, and that what you just 'did' helped you in any way? Of course not. We must receive the word of truth and that cannot happen until we do what it says. James has more to say on this later.
- But for now, James impresses on us the importance of a Christian dance move. You could call it a three-step move, one quick and two slow. We are to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. The sad truth is that most of us most of the time turn that completely on its head. We are slow to hear, quick to speak, and quick to get angry. Let's look at each of these in turn and see how they help us with receiving with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save us from the power of sin.
- **Quick to hear**
- This was vitally important in a culture that was oral-based. The Old Testament was available, but the New Testament was still being written. Virtually all communication of the truths of the Gospel and the way we are to live it out was oral, so learning to listen well was imperative. Though we have the Bible in our hands and on our phones now, I would say that this encouragement for us is just as urgent. Because how many of us know that it is one thing to hear and quite another to listen? Sometimes we are physically present but mentally miles away. I remember the story of the man who was attending a wedding but he had an earplug in one ear and a radio in his pocket and he was listening to the Iron Bowl, the football game between Auburn and Alabama. This was not Shawn. Anyway, in the middle of the wedding service, while the bride and groom were reciting their vows, the man listening to the radio heard his beloved team score a goal in a close game. Forgetting where he was, the man stood up and pumped his fist and shouted, "YES!"
- The average TV show or movie changes images every few seconds, and each generation seems to struggle more than the one before it with sitting still and listening to someone preach or teach. Maybe that's why Adlai Stevenson said when addressing the students at Princeton, "I understand I am here to speak and you are here to listen. Let's hope we both finish at the same time." If the primary way we learn is through media, including social media, we are in trouble. It means that we are training our minds to learn in sound bites, and perhaps not learn the discipline it takes to sit and really listen to a sermon, or to read our Bibles, not just to move a bookmark but to hear from God...or to pray in a way

that includes listening so that we give God time to speak to us. Samuel said, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” How hard it is for us to do that!

- Obviously though the context has to do with being quick to hear the Word, there are serious implications for our interpersonal relationships, right? Alistair Begg tells the story of taking one of those personality tests that a lot of Christians were doing back in the 80’s as I recall, where you are a D,I,S or C. D stands for dominant or driven or demonic or something like that, but apparently Alistair is a strong D just like I am. These people are task-oriented and can run over people easily. And they tend to speak a lot and listen very little. I remember when we took this test and I was working with the New Directions. I excitedly told JL, the head-D and leader of the New Directions, how much of a D I was. I won’t tell you what he said in response. Anyway, Alistair said someone sent him a checklist of things he should do each day to help him grow in interpersonal relationships. Each day you concentrate on this one thing and put a checkmark on it at the end of the day if you were successful. He said he could never put even one checkmark! Monday: Don’t interrupt anyone today. Don’t finish anyone’s sentence. Avoid speech hurrying. (I usually fail this one by breakfast) Tuesday: Be aware of how pleonastic you are today. (use of more words than is necessary in order to give the sense of something.) In other words, how much do you like to hear yourself talk? (oops) Wednesday: Avoid all lecturing and pontificating. Don’t tell anyone what to do or how to do it! (ouch) Thursday: Don’t contradict or correct anyone today. Don’t be argumentative. (oh, well) Friday: Avoid being definite in how you state your opinion. (riiiiiight) Saturday: Avoid all poly-phasing when someone is talking to you. (In other words, don’t multi-task while someone is talking to you). Look at them in the eye. Listen carefully! (wow; I am failing this) Sunday: Speak. In an unhurried, even-paced way, avoiding rapid, dis-rhythmic speech. (see why I wouldn’t have any checkmarks?) How about you?

- **Slow to speak**

- James is certainly not referring to avoiding a friendly and fast-paced conversation. He’s not saying we all have to talk like we’re from Louisiana and not from Jersey. But he encourages us to listen well and then think before we respond. Some of us have a tendency to only open our mouths in order to change feet. Again, I feel your pain and am there with you. But we need to listen more and speak less, or as the old Jewish rabbis said, “Men have two ears and one tongue, that they should hear more than they speak.” Solomon said this, in Proverbs 10:19, “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.” Or as either Mark Twain or Abe Lincoln said, “Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and to remove all doubt.”
- Back to the context, how do you respond to the Word of God when you hear it preached or read it for yourself? The tendency that is becoming increasingly popular today is to react against any preaching that gets too personal. Or to argue with the plain truth of Scripture. Or to be drawn to teachers who give you lots of ways to interpret a text. There are many ways we may apply a text of Scripture, but there is only one correct interpretation. A good application of a Scripture passage cannot violate the interpretation of it. Matthew 7:1 is the most oft-quoted verse of Scripture by unbelievers: “Judge not, that you be not judged.” If the application is that we can all live any way we want to and not be judged, then we have based a faulty application on a wrong interpretation, and that’s a house of cards. Those who quote Matthew 7:1 never go on to verse 5, “You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” In other words, judge yourself for the sin before you judge your brother for the same sin! But by all means, help your brother, which will require loving judgment. So, James, says, be slow to speak.
- James may also be encouraging us to make sure we have listened and are applying the Word of God in our lives before we speak it or especially teach it to others. He will say later in chapter 3, “Not many of you should become teachers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”
- Quick to hear. Slow to speak.
- **Slow to anger**

- Let's stay in the immediate context here, though the Bible has much to say about anger. But James knew that in our flesh we have a tendency to not listen carefully to the Word as taught, and to speak out against it without thinking, which provokes reaction in others and many times an angry reaction, so he's angry and this guy's angry, and she takes up an angry offense for her husband, and this family gets angry and leaves the church. Before you know it, Kent Hughes says, the church is no longer a lighthouse but a towering inferno. Let's get real here. A man with an anger problem will not be able to really hear what he needs to hear from the Word. Neither will an angry man preach the Word with humility. We should never listen to God's Word with anger in our hearts toward another, and we should never speak God's Word with anger in our hearts toward another. But some will say, "Wait a minute! I thought the Bible tells us to get angry!"
- Ephesians 4:26 is often quoted in defense of anger, and I have quoted it many times myself. "Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger." If we just took the first phrase, as we often do when trying to justify anger, we would be ok. But we have to eat the whole thing, not just nibble around the edges. Paul said that even though anger is a natural emotion and it happens, it must be dealt with. Quickly. Before the sun goes down. That's not a reference to death but to dark. Don't let it get dark, that day, before you have dealt with the anger that's in your heart. Why? Verse 27: Because if we don't, we give opportunity to the devil! We give him a place to stand. A place in our hearts where he is invited to take up residence. Still not convinced that anger must be dealt with? Look at verse 31: "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice." Put it away! Why? Because James says it clearly: "the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God." Anger does not produce righteousness. It cannot. Instead, anger can be deadly and destructive and even demonic, and we often use it as a carving tool to get people to do what we want them to do. You can see it in the countenance of children who live with an angry parent, or two. They have been beaten down by anger, and though they have learned how to avoid the blows of an angry parent, they have also learned that being bigger and stronger and ...angry, is how to make things happened around you. So they cower now, while they wait until it is their turn to use anger to get their way. They have missed out on the grace of God that could have come through a loving father and mother.
- The best book I have read on anger I just read a few months ago. It's called "Unoffendable," by Brant Hansen. His premise is that we can learn to be unoffendable. In the flyleaf he writes this: "To all those who want grace for themselves but struggle to extend it to others." Then he adds, "Wait: that's everybody." It is an excellent book that will challenge you if you tend to be swift, not slow, to anger, but will teach you much about the grace of God, which enables and empowers us to love others and even choose to not be offended. How would life change at work if you chose not to be offended by others' mistakes? How would life change in your marriage if you chose not to be offended when your spouse was rude or inconsiderate or did or said something that you didn't like? Or what would your family be like if parents and children decided to live that way with one another? Or in the church? An angry brother will not hear the Word of truth, will not keep his mouth shut, and will not seek reconciliation with the one who has offended him. "A brother offended is more unyielding than a strong city, and quarreling is like the bars of a castle." (Prov. 18:19) It doesn't have to be that way. We can learn to, as Paul said in 1 Cor. 6, suffer wrong rather than be offended and seeking retribution.
- We are called by God to be quick to hear...slow to speak...and slow to anger.