

Quick to Listen, Slow to Speak, Slow to Wrath (James 1:9-21)

Expository Lessons from the Letter of James

I. Introduction and Review

- a. This is an extremely practical letter to help Christians who are striving to follow the way of life laid out by Jesus.
- b. In the prior messages we discussed:
 - i. Why this letter was so disparaged by Martin Luther, the founding father of modern Protestantism. Luther said things like:
 1. “St. James’ epistle is really *an epistle of straw*...it has nothing of the nature of the gospel in it.”
 2. “Someday I will use James *to fire my stove*.”
 3. “[The epistle of James] has *no value*.”
 - ii. We should rejoice when facing various trials, since God is using those things to perfect or complete our faith, so that we should no longer be spiritually lacking or immature. (**James 1:2-4**)
 - iii. The importance of asking God, in prayer, for spiritual wisdom. (**James 1:5-8**)

II. On Humility and Temptations

- a. Read **James 1:9-11**.
 - i. We have a sober reminder that the glory of material wealth and worldly pursuits is rapidly passing away.
 1. The point that James makes here, alluding to the passage in **Isaiah 40:6-8** about the worldly glory of men being like the flowers of the field that fade away, is reminiscent of a similar point made by Peter in **1 Peter**.
 2. “..because ‘All flesh is as grass, And all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, And its flower falls away, But the word of the LORD endures forever.’ (**Isaiah 40:6-8**) Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you.” (**1 Peter 1:24-25**, NKJV)

- ii. Don't get caught up in wealth and the things valued by the world, and don't judge yourself or others on that superficial basis!

- 1. Jesus told us, "...what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God." (**Luke 16:15**, NKJV)

b. Read **James 1:12-18**.

- i. Those who love God will persevere in the face of temptation.

- 1. When they are approved by the Lord, they can look forward to the crown of life promised by God.

- ii. God does not tempt us (to sin). That is Satan's work. God allows that to happen, to test and refine us.

- 1. Consider how this happened in the story of **Job**, where God allowed (but limited) Satan to put Job to the test.

- a. Job did not understand why (he thought) God was causing all this misfortune to happen to him. Instead, it was Satan's work, with God's permission.

- 2. Also, recall what Jesus said while speaking to the apostle Peter. "...Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may *sift you as wheat*." (**Luke 22:31**, NKJV)

- a. The "*you*" in the statement by Jesus above, in the original Greek, is the second person *plural*. Therefore, this statement applies to more than just Peter.

- b. Satan has asked to be able to *sift all of us* as wheat!

- iii. If we (Christians) give in to sin and allow it to grow in us, at some point, after it is "full-grown," it can lead to our spiritual death.

- 1. **Challenge for Us:** Confess and repent NOW, long before it reaches the "full-grown" stage!

- iv. We are reminded that all good gifts come from God, "the Father of lights." He is consistently and transparently good: always, and from every angle.

III. Swift to Hear, Slow to Speak, Slow to Wrath

- a. In *How to Read a Book* by Adler and Van Doren, a classic guide to becoming a great reader, the authors make an important distinction between *active* and *passive* readers.

- i. *Active readers* ask questions of the author (even though the author is not present, and in many cases is long dead).
 1. The problem is that after an active reader asks the questions, it is the reader who must dig into the text to find the author's answer (since it is not possible to query the author directly).
 - ii. Since the author is not available to answer the questions, it is the *active reader* who must find the answer himself (based on digging into the text).
 1. If this sounds like hard work, that is because it is!
 - iii. In contrast, *a passive reader asks no questions* of the text. However, as a result, he or she also *gets no answers!*
- b. **Question to James:** Why did you write this letter?
- i. **Answer:** Based on the text, he apparently wrote it to address people who were already Christians, in various churches "scattered abroad" (**James 1:1**).
 1. He wrote it to address a broad range of problems found in the churches of his time.
 2. Based on the text, those problems included:
 - a. People were unhappy and complaining about trials that they were facing in life.
 - b. Rich members were looking down on those who were poorer.
 - c. People were *blaming God* for the temptations they were facing and falling into.
 - d. Hypocrites believed in the Christian faith, but were not practicing some of its most basic teachings of Jesus.
 - e. There was strife and conflict between members of the church.
 - f. Christians were speaking evil things about one another, out of pride, envy, covetousness and selfishness. Even to the point of cursing others.
 - g. Some were Christians in name, but pleasure-seekers at heart.

- h. Some members of the church had wandered away from the faith.

ii. **What We Can Learn from This:**

1. Don't over-idealize what the church was like in the beginning. They had the same problems we tend to face.
2. Don't get discouraged and give up on the faith when we see problems. Satan is always at work, even in the church. It has always been that way (consider also 1 Corinthians, Revelation 2-3 examples).
3. The question/challenge for the church then and today: what do we do when we encounter all these types of challenges?

c. Read **James 1:19-21**.

- i. **James 1:19** contains some of the best advice for anyone who is married or facing strife in a challenging relationship.

1. **Recommendation:** This is a great verse to memorize (simple, yet very powerful).

ii. Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to wrath.

1. This verse, combined with what Jesus said about pulling the plank out of *YOUR OWN eye first*, and what Peter said in **1 Peter 3**, provides some of the best foundational marriage advice that I know of.
 - a. "And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye;' and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." (**Matthew 7:3-5**, NKJV)
 - b. "Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered." (**1 Peter 3:7**, NKJV)
 - c. "Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; not returning evil for evil or reviling for

reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing. For 'He who would love life And see good days, Let him refrain his tongue from evil, And his lips from speaking deceit. Let him turn away from evil and do good; Let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, And His ears are open to their prayers; But the face of the LORD is against those who do evil.'" (1 Peter 3:8-12, NKJV; where Peter is quoting from Psalm 33/34:12-17)

2. For many of us, our natural tendency is to talk too much (whether by attacking the other person or defending our own actions). Also, we are quick to be offended and react with anger.
3. In marriage (also parenting), when strife comes up, we should:
 - a. Deal with yourself first. Full stop.
 - b. Be quiet. Stop talking. Instead, listen to what the other person is feeling, and try to understand *how you have offended them*.
 - c. Keep your spirit under control. Don't react out of the flesh. Seek to understand how and why the other person has been offended. (I fully realize that this is hard to do.)
 - d. Even if they have reacted badly (outburst, cursing you out), listen to what you did that set the other person off. Don't start by pointing out their sinful reaction.
 - i. For most Christians, after they calm down, most likely they will see for themselves what they did wrong, anyway, without your having to explain it to them!
 - e. If you are unable to effectively communicate directly, seek help from someone else (or a couple) you trust, who possesses wisdom.
- iii. The importance of being a great listener.
 1. Read **Wisdom of Sirach 5:11-15**.
 - a. Be quick to listen.

- b. Show patience, controlling what comes out of your mouth.
- iv. Warnings about anger.
 1. “...(be) slow to anger. The wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” (**James 1:19-20**)
 2. **Questions:** Is anger *ever* justified for a Christian? What about what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, regarding being angry toward a brother?
 - a. “But I say to you that *everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment*; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.” (**Matthew 5:22**, ESV)
 - i. However, note that in the NKJV and KJV (both of which follow the Majority Text here) it reads: “...whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment....” (**Matthew 5:22**, NKJV)
 - ii. Therefore, it appears that there are instances where anger “with cause” is not necessarily sinful!
 - b. Also, consider what Paul wrote in **Ephesians 4**.
 - i. “Therefore, putting away lying, ‘Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,’ for we are members of one another. Be angry, and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil.” (**Ephesians 4:25-27**, NKJV)
 1. Note that some translations (ESV, RSV) render Paul’s quote from **Psalm 4:5** in the LXX as, “be angry *but* do not sin”. Similarly, the NIV translation renders that passage, “In your anger, do not sin.”
 2. While the common Greek conjunction “καί / kai” is usually translated as “and,” it can also mean (depending on context) “and yet,” “nevertheless,” or “but.”

- ii. In English, generally we use ‘*and*’ to connect two things that are in harmony with each other, while we use the word ‘*but*’ to connect two ideas that are in contrast or tension.
 1. For example, one would say, “He was engaged to his fiancée for six months *AND* then married her.”
 - a. However, one would say, “He was engaged to his fiancée for six years, *BUT* did not marry her.”
 2. Similarly, one would say, “The shark, with his mouth wide open, approached the distressed swimmer in the open sea, *BUT* did not bite the swimmer.”
- iii. In Greek, sometimes the conjunction “καί” is used to connect two ideas that are in tension with one another. Below is one example.
 1. “...John had said to Herod, ‘It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.’ Therefore Herodias held it against him and wanted to kill him, *but* she could not....” (**Mark 6:18–19**, NKJV)
 2. The English word “*but*” in the NKJV is used to translate the Greek word “καί” here, instead of “*and*,” since the idea that Herodias wanted to kill John *was in contrast to* the fact that she was unable to do so. (She was constrained.)
 3. Note that while the NKJV, ESV, NIV and some other translations render it with the sense of “*but*,” some other versions translate the word found there as “*and*.”
- c. Therefore, the **Ephesians 4:26** passage, which connects two ideas in opposition to each other (being angry and yet not sinning), could be rendered: “Be angry *BUT* don’t sin.”
 - i. That makes more sense to me. Paul is putting a *constraint* on our anger.

- ii. Perhaps this is similar to a sign I might see at a park or playground: “Dogs are permitted *but* must be on a leash.”
- iii. I think of this constraint on our anger as acting like a leash that would restrain a dog.
- iv. Our anger must also be curbed before it becomes sinful.
- v. Paul puts limits on our anger. He says we must resolve things the same day, before the sun goes down.

IV. Early Christian Writers Commenting on Anger

- a. From Tertullian, early Christian writer from Carthage, in North Africa, writing c. 207 AD:
 - i. “... ‘be angry, and sin not;’ that is, not persevere in anger, or be enraged....”
 - 1. (Source: Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, book 2, chapter 19; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 312)
- b. From a work entitled *The Apostolic Constitutions*, a collection likely compiled in the late 300s AD but including much material from the time prior to the Council of Nicaea (i.e., prior to 325 AD):
 - i. “Be therefore righteous judges, peacemakers, and without anger. For ‘he that is angry with his brother without a cause is subject to the judgment.’ (**Matthew 5:22**) But if it happens that by any one’s contrivance you are angry at anybody, ‘let not the sun go down upon your wrath;’ (**Ephesians 4:26**) for David says, ‘Be angry and sin not;’ (**Psalms 4:4**) that is, be soon reconciled, lest your wrath continue so long that it turn to a settled hatred, and work sin.
 - ii. “‘For the souls of those that bear a settled hatred are to death,’ (**Proverbs 12:28**, LXX) says Solomon. But our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ says in the gospels: ‘If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has anything against you, leave there your gift before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift to God.’ (**Matthew 5:23-24**)
 - iii. “Now the gift to God is every one’s prayer and thanksgiving. If, therefore, you have anything against your brother, or he has anything

against you, neither will your prayers be heard, nor will your thanksgivings be accepted, by reason of that hidden anger.

- iv. “But it is your duty, brethren, to pray continually. Yet, because God hears not those which are at enmity with their brethren by unjust quarrels, even though they should pray three times an hour, it is our duty to compose all our enmity and littleness of soul, that we may be able to pray with a pure and unpolluted heart. For the Lord commanded us to love even our enemies, and by no means to hate our friends. And the lawgiver says: ‘You shalt not hate any man; you shall not hate your brother in your mind. You shall certainly reprove your brother, and not incur sin on his account.’ (**Leviticus 19:17**)”
 - 1. (Source: *Apostolic Constitutions*, book 2, section 6; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 7, p. 419)
- c. Lactantius, a prominent Christian teacher from Rome, writing c. 304-313 AD, writes concerning the anger of God and the anger of men:
 - i. “CHAP. XXI - OF THE ANGER OF GOD AND MAN.
 - ii. “There remains one question, and that the last. For someone will perhaps say that God is so far from being angry, that in His precepts He even forbids man to be angry. I might say that the anger of man ought to be curbed, because he is often angry unjustly; and he has immediate emotion, because he is only for a time. Therefore, lest those things should be done which the low, and those of moderate station, and great kings do in their anger, his rage ought to have been moderated and suppressed, lest, being out of his mind, he should commit some inexpressible crime.
 - iii. “But God is not angry for a short time, because He is eternal and of perfect virtue, and He is never angry unless deservedly. But, however, the matter is not so; for if He should altogether prohibit anger, He Himself would have been in some measure the censurer of His own workmanship....
 - iv. “... Therefore, He does not altogether prohibit anger, because that affection is necessarily given, but He forbids us to persevere in anger. For the anger of mortals ought to be mortal; for if it is lasting, enmity is strengthened to lasting destruction. Then, again, when He enjoined us to ‘be angry, and yet not to sin’ (**Psalm 4:4, Ephesians 4:26**), it is plain that He did not tear up anger by the roots, but restrained it, that in every correction we might preserve moderation and justice. Therefore, He who commands us to be angry is manifestly Himself angry; He who enjoins us to be quickly appeased is manifestly Himself

easy to be appeased: for He has enjoined those things which are just and useful for the interests of society.

- v. “But because I had said that the anger of God is not for a time only, as is the case with man, who becomes inflamed with an immediate excitement, and on account of his frailty is unable easily to govern himself, we ought to understand that because God is eternal, His anger also remains to eternity; but, on the other hand, that because He is endowed with the greatest excellence, He controls His anger, and is not ruled by it, but that He regulates it according to His will. And it is plain that this is not opposed to that which has just been said. For if His anger had been altogether immortal, there would be no place after a fault for satisfaction or kind feeling, though He Himself commands men to be reconciled before the setting of the sun. But the divine anger remains forever against those who ever sin.
- vi. “Therefore, God is appeased not by incense or a victim, not by costly offerings, which things are all corruptible, but by a reformation of the morals: and he who ceases to sin renders the anger of God mortal. For this reason, He does not immediately punish everyone who is guilty, that man may have the opportunity of coming to a right mind and correcting himself.”
 - 1. (Source: Lactantius, *A Treatise on the Anger of God*, chapter 21; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 7, p. 277)
 - 2. Points made by Lactantius here include:
 - a. God has anger. However, that is *not* a vice nor a shortcoming in God’s character.
 - i. This reinforces the importance of us fearing God.
 - ii. Recall that Jesus said, “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” (**Matthew 10:28**, NKJV)
 - iii. Jesus made a similar statement, in Luke’s gospel: “And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!” (**Luke 12:4-5**, NKJV)
 - b. God put anger in man.

- c. Consequently, human anger is *not always* sinful.
 - i. Man's tendency may be to unleash his anger uncontrolled, and for that anger to linger and turn to bitterness.
 - ii. However, we must restrain those impulses, restrain our human anger, and settle matters quickly.
 - 1. This may be analogous to how we are called to restrain our impulses in other areas of life (such as regarding sexual attraction and fulfillment, or in how we eat and drink).

V. Teaching on Anger: Practical Applications

- a. Many of us have come from families where a parent or other family member had serious problems with uncontrolled, destructive anger.
- b. Often, the person having an anger problem has caused a lot of damage to other members of the family, especially to the children (who may be particularly vulnerable).
 - i. Those of us who were subject to this kind of abusive anger can struggle with the idea of seeing Jesus getting angry (for example, in His clearing the temple, making a whip of cords, etc. in **John 2**).
 - ii. Those who have suffered under the hand of angry, out-of-control tyrants do not want to see anger in the character of God the Father, nor in the character of Jesus.
- c. However, we must see God *as He is*, and not over-react against the abusive type of anger we may have seen from people in the past.
 - i. **Question:** Does God (the Father) ever get angry?
 - 1. **Answer:** Yes. God is slow to anger and has perfect self-control. However, the Scriptures clearly explain that He *does (and will) get angry*. Consider the passages below, which describe God expressing anger toward the disobedient.
 - a. "The Lord is compassionate and merciful, *slow to anger*, and abounding in mercy." (**Psalm 102/103:8**).
 - b. "Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice in Him with trembling. Lay hold of His instruction, lest the Lord be angry, and you perish from the righteous way, when His

fury shall be quickly kindled....” (**Psalm 2:11-12**, LXX, OSB)

- c. “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, In the day of trial in the wilderness, Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, And saw My works forty years. *Therefore I was angry with that generation, And said, “They always go astray in their heart, And they have not known My ways.”*” (**Hebrews 3:7-10**, NKJV; quoting from **Psalm 94/95:7-11**)
 - d. “For behold, the Lord shall come like a fire, and His chariots like a sudden blast of wind, to render His vengeance with anger and His renunciation with a flame of fire.” (**Isaiah 66:15**, LXX, OSB)
 - e. “He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, *but the wrath of God abides on him.*” (**John 3:36**, NKJV)
 - f. “For the *wrath of God is revealed* from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness....” (**Romans 1:18**, NKJV)
- ii. **Question:** Did Jesus, who never committed sin (**Hebrews 4:15**), ever get angry?
- 1. **Answer:** Yes; I certainly would say so.
 - a. Consider when Jesus drove out the moneychangers from the temple area, in **John 2:13-17**.
 - b. Remember when Jesus rebuked Peter, saying, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.” (**Matthew 16:23**)
 - c. Consider His sharp rebukes to the religious hypocrites, such as in **Matthew 23**.
 - d. Also, recall how Jesus is described when He appears in **Revelation 19**.
 - i. “Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness

and wrath of Almighty God.” (**Revelation 19:15**, NKJV)

- d. Those of us who are parents and spouses, especially, must be in control of our tendencies toward unrighteous anger.
 - i. We cannot ‘let it rip’ in unleashing the destructive force of uncontrolled anger, in explosive fits of rage.
 - ii. Also, we cannot let our anger go unresolved and cannot let it turn into bitterness. We must settle matters quickly. (**Matthew 5:25**)
 - iii. Sometimes, rather than dealing with our anger and resolving issues, people will stuff or suppress their anger. This can be one of the causes of depression (which I have heard referred to as “anger without enthusiasm”). That is not a righteous way to handle our anger, either!
 - iv. **Personal Examples, from My Own Family:**
 1. In my own family, I can count five generations in which there have been significant problems (with at least one member of the family in each generation) regarding unrighteous anger.
 - a. I include myself in this assessment. In my case. In my own case, rather than exhibiting the classic explosive or ‘volcanic’ outbursts of anger, my own anger tends to be expressed through impatience.
 - b. It has been damaging to others, especially to those who are more sensitive.
 - v. **Challenge:** Do you have a problem with unrighteous anger in your life? Ask your friends, spouse, or even your children.
 1. Are you quick to become angry? Easily angered?
 2. Do you stuff your anger rather than settling matters quickly?
 - a. Do you resolve conflict before the sun goes down? Before you take the Lord’s Supper?
 3. Do you justify yourself in your anger, as “just being authentic” rather than demonstrating self-control and love when it is hardest?
 4. When angry, do you “let it rip,” damaging your relationship with others?
 - vi. Self-control can make all the difference.

1. Throughout the Scriptures, men and women who want to follow Jesus are called to exhibit and grow in the character of *self-control*. (**Acts 24:25, Galatians 5:22-23, 1 Timothy 2:15, 1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:8, 2 Peter 1:6**, etc.)
2. I realize that some Christians think it best to abstain from drinking wine or other alcohol-containing drinks altogether. Drunkenness is a sin. However, other Christians drink but in strict moderation (for example, having just one glass of wine with dinner).
 - a. There is a world of difference between drinking in moderation with self-control, versus drinking without self-control!
 - b. The latter will destroy the life of the person involved and often cause a wake of destruction in the lives of others, as well.
3. Consider how this ties back to the central command to love one another. Paul explains the characteristics of real Christian love:
 - a. "...And yet I show you a more excellent way.
 - b. "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.
 - c. "Love *suffers long* and is *kind*; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; *does not behave rudely*, does not seek its own, is *not provoked*, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away." (**1 Corinthians 12:31-13:8, NKJV**)
 - d. The same passage, as rendered in the ESV:
 - i. "Love is *patient and kind*; love does not envy or boast; it is *not arrogant or rude*. It does not insist

on its own way; it is *not irritable or resentful*; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 **Corinthians 13:4–7**, ESV)

4. Similarly, water is a wonderful thing, necessary for life, when it is under control (when it remains within the designated plumbing pipes and water mains, or behind dams and flood-control levees). However, when water escapes those boundaries and is *uncontrolled, it quickly becomes a terrifying, destructive force!*
 - a. Control makes all the difference between something being useful versus being destructive.
 - b. You can't ever allow your anger to get out of control.
 5. As God the Father, Jesus exhibited righteous anger; there are occasions when it is possible for us to exhibit righteous anger as well. It can be useful and purposeful in the right places. However, it must be curbed; it can never be allowed to get out of control!
- e. **Closing Challenge:** Take inventory of your life. Be honest with yourself, and ask others who will tell you the truth. And repent where you need to.
- i. Are you a person who is characteristically quick to listen and slow to speak?
 - ii. Are you slow to anger? Or do you have a problem with destructive, unrighteous anger that is hurting others around you, especially among your family and closest friends?