

8. The Danger of Anger

My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.
(James 1:19-21)

Hindrance to the Growth of the Word

In the previous chapter, we learned of God's faithfulness in granting us every good and perfect gift. We saw that the greatest gift in this respect is "birth through the word of truth." God gives us what we need for this life, and above all gives us a new birth which has fruit unto eternal life. The means of this birth is the word of truth.

This focus is carried into the next verses of the letter. Note how James writes in 1:21 about "the word planted in you," the same word of truth by which we receive a new birth. The expression "the word planted in you" indicates that there must be growth through that word. It has been planted, but it needs to grow and come to maturity for in this way the word saves us.

The word that is planted in us is not a substance that grows by itself. James also writes in 1:21 that we must "humbly accept" the word planted in us. To accept means more than simply knowing that the word is there, for it also means working with that word, being affected by it, and even being governed by it. Acceptance is the opposite of rejection, and we know from Scripture that the word planted in us can be rejected. Think of the parable of the Sower and the seeds that initially grew but were soon choked and killed by wild growth (Luke 8:4-8).

The expression "accept the word" is further qualified in this passage, and we will see what that means, but we note here that what hinders the growth of the word planted in us is the unwillingness to listen. James writes about a man's anger, and how that anger can cut off and choke spiritual growth. The Lord warns us here against the destructive force of anger. We must come to

understand the process of anger, how it takes root and grows. We must also learn how to conquer the power of anger, for this can be done in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Command to Know

In this passage, we touch on an underlying theme in James' letter for the first time, namely, the calling to control our tongue. James will deal with that more extensively in the third chapter of his letter. In the present passage, the focus is more on anger, for that is the word on which James elaborates in 1:20-21.

I believe that the expression of anger was not uncommon in the early Christian church. James is quite serious about his admonition, considering the way he begins: "My dear brothers, take note of this." The text actually reads, "Know this!" The NIV translation is fine, as long as we realize that there is a *command* to know. It means keeping the following statements constantly in mind. And what is it that we must always remember? "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." We tend to do things the other way around — we are slow to listen, quick to speak, and quick to become angry.

Be quick to listen. This means that we are always prepared to listen to what is being said. We do not listen with half an ear, but with both ears. We pay careful attention to each word the other person is saying. This implies that we are really trying to understand what the other person means, because we can only give an appropriate response when we have properly understood and thought about what we have heard.

This is therefore followed by the words, "[be] slow to speak." We should not immediately respond. The connotation here is that we usually do not even let the other person finish what he is saying, but we interrupt and have a quick and ready response. We just cut the other person off. Often, we deny what is being said, offer our own comment, or subtly change the topic, and in fact, we have not even listened.

Dialogues of the Deaf?

How does this tie in with anger? Anger is a barrier that hinders listening. We listen the least when we are being admonished or instructed. Somebody is criticizing us. How dare he? We have a retort ready, and we proceed angrily to

insult the other. We turn the tables around and the accused becomes the accuser. This manner of reacting can be found in all relationships of life.

James does not specify exactly what situation he means. But in the light of the whole letter, we know that he is speaking first of all about our lives as Christians, as members of the church of Christ within the communion of saints. I do not think that James excludes other relationships, like business or public life, or even marriage and family life, but the main focus here is how we treat one another as brothers and sisters in the Lord. Remember how he began this instruction with the words, “my dear brothers.”

We must be quick to listen. It is already difficult to just listen, let alone be *quick* to listen. Many conversations are essentially monologues. I read somewhere that most conversations are “dialogues of the deaf”. We do not hear what the other person is really saying. We are not interested in his words, but only in ourselves. We have already condemned his viewpoint, and everything said in response to us is wrong even before it is uttered, in our opinion.

How many conversations end in anger? We start a conversation about something, there are a few twists and turns, and suddenly everybody is mad. What happened? I am sure we have all witnessed such conversations, or even been involved in them. Sometimes we are no longer even aware that this kind of non-communication has become “normal” to us.

Quick to speak often means slow to listen as well. Generally speaking, we are poor listeners. Some ascribe this to the fact that we are all so busy. We have no time to listen. Parents cannot sit down with their children to listen and seriously interact. Children have no time, either, because they are always on the go, and they think they already know what Mom or Dad is going to say. There is no sense in wasting valuable time, and kids will usually go to the parent who gives in the quickest.

Some say that our attention span has been ruined by media, especially television. The most watched shows on TV are those with many subplots, with quick scenes shifting from one to the other, and where the camera keeps dashing in and out. Every thirty seconds or so, something new is introduced, and nobody *really* listens. Each character is in his own little world, and these worlds come together, briefly collide, and drift apart again. Dialogues of the deaf, indeed.

Anger Does Not Bring About a Righteous Life

That is the way of the world. But James is speaking about the situation in the churches. There is unwillingness to understand one another, help

one another, and work out the faith together. There are those, James writes later, who say that they have faith but are never seen showing forth the deeds of faith. They are quick talkers and poor listeners. They even drag one another into court. They say they love their brothers and sisters, but love is not noticeable.

What James writes in 1:20, then, is this: “for a man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.” The original reads “the righteousness of God.” The righteous life is one of obedience to God’s will, of trust in him, and of service to the neighbor. We cannot serve God if we are angry with him. Neither can we be friendly with our brothers and sisters in Christ if we are angry at them.

May we never become angry? Is there not such a thing as “holy” zeal? Remember that when the Lord Jesus entered Jerusalem, he cleared the temple. He carefully made a whip of cords and drove men and beasts from the temple of God. “How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market!” he said (John 2:13-17). Similarly, must we not also have zeal for the church of Christ today? Of course we must, but zeal must be without anger. Zeal must always be blended with wisdom and mercy. Otherwise it is fanaticism. Christ had zeal, but he was no zealot. He said that mercy is better than sacrifice.

Do we think that getting angry at others will lead them to a righteous life? Or that by becoming personalistic, we can bring a person closer to the Lord? James states it not as a possibility, but as a rule: a man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. By our anger, we may be able to get someone to step back, but he is not lifted up in the faith. Anger only intimidates; it does not edify.

Moral Filth and Prevalent Evil

I am always amazed at the strong language that James uses in 1:21: “Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent.” We may think that James should tone it down a little, that this is no way to talk for it is upsetting and makes us angry. Perhaps James himself should be slower to speak. It would be better to avoid such strong language.

Moral filth? Today we speak differently. We suggest to someone who has a bad temper that perhaps he should take a course in anger management or seek some counseling or medical help. I do not want to belittle any of the means that may help a person fight against a physical or mental weakness, for sometimes we do need help, but the primary step in our relationship with God and our neighbor is always repentance. All the courses and pills in the world

are no substitute for repentance. Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent.

What moral filth and evil does James mean? It is described everywhere in this letter. Is it not remarkable that being angry is included as “moral filth,” a breaking of the law of God? If we start screaming and shouting at each other, and do not even bother to hear what others are saying, is that not a moral offense, sin against the law of God?

The original word that is translated as “filth” in this verse sometimes denotes clothes that have become soiled. The verb translated as “get rid of” literally means to strip down. We must strip down and take off those soiled clothes. We need new garments, ones that have been purified. Repentance is not a superficial thing, but a radical solution. The original word for “filth” also has a medical connotation and can mean the wax that builds up in the ears. When there is too much wax, we do not hear well and we can even become deaf. James says that the wax must be taken out and a difference in hearing will result. Sometimes we have become deaf to the riches of God’s Word, and we must learn to hear all over again.

James writes that we must be quick to listen and slow to speak. We must watch out for a tongue that is too sharp and for ears that are clogged. Actually, I read somewhere that there is an interesting relationship between our tongue and our ears. We only have one tongue but we have two ears. One tongue, so that we do not talk too much. Two ears, so that we do not miss a word someone is saying. We should listen at least twice as much as we speak.

James also writes about “the evil that is so prevalent.” What evil does he mean? In the context here, it must mean the evil of the tongue. Lashing out against one another with destructive words is the worst thing to do in a suffering relationship. Notice that there is also a specific context here. James writes, “Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent *and* humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.” James does not say that our words must prevail, but *the* Word; not the words that come bubbling up out of our sinful hearts, but the Word that God has planted in us. What bubbles up from the inside is selfish by definition; what has been planted in us is godly in character.

Acceptance of the Word Planted in Us

The contrast to moral filth and prevalent evil is words governed by the Word of God. Notice that the verse reads, “and accept the word.” The word “accept” can also be translated as “receive”, which has been done in the King

James Version as well as the Revised Standard Version. The difference in translation is not very important, for when God gives his Word, we must take, accept, or receive that Word. It involves a conscious activity from our side. We hear the Word, we ponder it, and we accept it or receive it. This means a conscious decision must be made every time again.

Note also that the Word does not come to the readers for the first time. We are not dealing here with those who must yet come to faith, but with those who are known as believers. The Word has already been planted in them. The seed was sown earlier, it took root, and became firmly planted in them.

It is a remarkable combination: accept (our calling) what is planted (God's work). This is not a puzzle, rather, it is a matter of placing our calling and God's work together in a Biblical manner. These always go together. The Lord comes to us, not just once, but time and again. He sows the seed and then waters what is planted. It is our calling to respond, to bring forth fruits of faith, not just once but time and again, in obedience and faith.

This is how we conquer the power of anger. I know that anger can be very consuming and can come to completely control us. Malice and hatred accompany anger. A bitter root can take hold in our hearts. The Word that is planted is forced out and the root of bitterness begins to control our thoughts and actions. Everything is no longer focused on that Word, but on our evil will. This can happen to people who have been members of the church for many years. Our anger can become so great that it runs out of our control and alienates us from the communion of saints.

James 1:21 says, "the word planted in you, which can save you." Notice again the precise formulation. It does not say that by receiving the Word, we save ourselves. It says that the Word can save us. This does not mean that the Word has the *potential* to save us -which it does- but that it has the *power* to save us. If we work with the Word, we will be saved. We must submit to the Word of God and do what it says, because we believe that it has saving power.

The power of anger can only be conquered by the power of the Word. The voice of hate can only be stilled by the voice of love. No matter what we feel the right to be angry about, love covers a multitude of sins. It does not just cover a few minor sins, but a multitude, and even major ones. Only love makes a difference. Otherwise we stay angry, and hold others hostage to our anger.

Accept Humbly

There is a word here that we have yet to focus on specifically, and this is the word "humbly". We are not just to accept the word, but we are to do so

humbly. It is so hard to be humble. Elders and deacons can attest to this. Often in their work as office-bearers, they must come with severe or strong admonitions and people become angry and indignant. They say, “How dare you speak to me this way? Instead of being wrong, I am being wronged.”

But we must be humble. The original word is extremely hard to translate properly into English. It is often translated as meekness, gentleness, or kindness. It is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Humility means being meek enough to accept teaching and instruction. It also means being without anger, so that we can face the truth even when it hurts. Someone suggested the translation “teachable”, that is, a willingness to being taught by the Word of God.

Are we teachable? Do we open ourselves to what is being taught? Do we consider it a privilege to be taught, and are we prepared to try and understand? In order to be teachable, we must be humble. Are we humble? Are we slow to speak and quick to listen? To really listen to the Word? To listen also to fellow believers who may have been around much longer than us? To listen to our forefathers who also struggled to defend the faith, and even did so at the cost of their lives? Do we seek what binds together and not what separates? Or does the evil of selfish haughtiness permeate the church and our lives? Do we always know better? Must we always have our viewpoint recognized? Must we always speak and clamor?

Let us close this chapter with I Peter 2. Verse 15 reads, “For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.” People often do not know what they are talking about. Rather than talk, we should keep on doing good so that the foolish are silenced by the facts of our life. It is not easy, but then we must look to Christ: “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (I Pet 2:21-23).

Our Lord Jesus Christ was quick to listen. He really listened. He heard every word that was said and even knew the thoughts behind the words. He also was slow to speak. He never flew off the handle. When he spoke, it was with understanding and compassion. He was slow to become angry. Even at the cross, when others cursed and spat, he was silent. Is it not wonderful that we today have access to this Mediator, with his open ears, his soothing speech, and his heart of love?

It may seem that nobody ever listens, nobody talks sense, and everyone is always angry. What a world we live in! Nobody...except Jesus Christ. And he

opens up a whole new world. That is our world, where we have learned to listen again and to speak according to the Word, where there is no anger but enduring peace.