

Steadfast Joy: The Book of James

Quick to Hear, Slow to Speak

James 1:19-20

Mark Vroegop

Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God (James 1:19–20).

There are some sermons where I feel the need to justify the content. A good sermon helps you to realize quickly why a particular topic is important. Sometimes an illustration or a summary phrase can serve as an “attention grabber.” Most sermons need to start this way because the subject matter might not be intuitively important.

I don’t think I need to do that today.

Our text today is part one of two, and it addresses how we talk. This week we are going to look at the matter of listening and speaking. Next week we’ll talk about the problem of anger. I trust that you know listening, speaking, and anger are all connected.

And I also trust you know, especially during this season, that anger and how we talk are huge problems.

Remember that James is writing to a group of people who are facing the pressure of hard circumstances and even persecution. He wants us to embrace steadfast joy in the midst of very difficult situations, including (two weeks ago) how we think about temptation and (last week) how we think about the good gifts of God.

Today we’re going to look at (1) a caution and (2) two commands. Next week, we’ll unpack an issue underneath our sinful speech: anger.

Caution

James starts, yet again, with a caution. I trust that you are seeing the pattern. Previously, it sounded like “Let no one say when he is tempted...” (1:13) and “do not be deceived my beloved brothers” (1:16). One of the reasons I love this book is because of the directness of James’s approach.

However, this caution is designed to set up the two commands that follow. It’s designed to set the context for what follows. And when we are talking about communication, it is really important. I’ll show you why in a moment.

Here’s what James says: “Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person...” (v. 19).

Notice that he refers to them as “beloved brothers.” James is trying to strike the right tone here. He’s trying to balance truth and grace. I really hope that you have some people in your life love you deeply and “cut it straight” when it comes to how you communicate. People in your life who lovingly remind you about the danger of your words are really important. I hope this message is like that. I want to love you well by helping you see the caution in this text.

Secondly, he says “know this...” The New Living Translation says, “Understand this...” The NIV renders it as “take note of this...” The idea is something that’s both important, needs to be comprehended, or recalled from memory.

In other words, if you’ve never read the book of James, it shouldn’t surprise you that he says something about listening and talking. It should be self-evident that this issue is important.

Whether it’s a conflict with a friend, tension with your spouse, what podcast you listen to, your comments on social media, what you text, or what you talk about you know this is an issue. It’s rampant in our lives. And it’s rampant in our culture. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve turned off a news program because the discussion turned into a verbal cage fight. Or even the presidential debate last week.

Regardless of who you think won or who you wanted to win, everyone lost at some level because the debate was just a spotlight of what’s happening everywhere. In the middle of the debate, someone posted “this debate feels like I’m reading the comments section on Facebook.” For sure.

Unfortunately, the Church—including even our church—is not immune. It’s deeply grieving to see brother and sisters trade verbal barbs back and forth as we act virtually the same as the world. I’m sure you feel this, you see this, and (at some level) we’ve all been a part of it. No one is immune. You’re not. I’m not.

This is also why James says, “let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak...” This is something that applies to all of us, and our culture isn’t making it easier. For example, in Scott Sauls’ book, *A Gentle Answer*, he writes:

In our current cultural moment, outrage has become more expected than surprising, more normative than odd, more encouraged than discouraged, more rewarded than rejected...It is part of the air we breathe – a native language, a sick helping of emotional food and drink to satisfy our hunger for taking offense, shaming, and punishing. Outrage has become something we can’t get away from, partly because we don’t seem to want to get away from it. Instead of getting rid of all bitterness, rage, and anger as scripture urges us to do (Eph. 4:31), we form entire communities around our irritations and our hatreds. Tribes and echo chambers form, social media feeds grow, political pontifications multiply, book deals prosper, podcasts rant, and churches split. On some level, we are all engaged in the seemingly insatiable, ubiquitous theme of us-against-them. The whole idea of being for something has gone out of style. Instead we prefer to preach an angry “gospel” about whatever we have decided to stand against. We warm

*ourselves next to the fire of digital hashtags, ideologically slanted news feeds, political slogans, and religious doctrines, and then...ready, aim, fire!*¹

Whew, that quote should make all of us uncomfortable. And we probably all need to be. Don't we?

So, let me give you some applications points right now:

- 1) **Resist** the urge to listen to this message with someone else in mind
- 2) **Pray** that the Lord will open your heart to where you need to change
- 3) **Look** for 1-2 action steps in your life that you can take

Embrace the caution. Receive it. Listen to it. Because then you are ready for two commands.

Two Commands

Now that James has our attention (hopefully), he provides a series of commands. We are only going to talk about the first two: (1) Be quick to hear and (2) slow to speak.

It's an interesting way to issue a command because it goes against the typical way that most people—Christian or non-Christian—act and live. Generally, we are slow to hear and quick to speak. Our inclination is to be poor listeners and jump too quickly when it comes to the words we use. James invites us to lean the opposite direction.

This can be a helpful point. In general (not always), there is wisdom in going in the opposite direction of what most other people are doing. Or there can be wisdom in not doing the first thing you want to do. Time is usually your friend.

Far too much sin and regret happen because we are rash or upset. James, in general, commends going the other direction.

1) Quick to Hear

The first command is to make listening a priority. James elevates listening over speaking. And this isn't the only place where listening is commended.

When we studied the book of Proverbs, we learned about the connection between wisdom and listening.

- The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise (Prov. 15:31).
- The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice (Prov. 12:15).

Biblical wisdom involves seeing yourself clearly. Pride or arrogance causes us to not take a posture of listening. A wise person doesn't trust her or her assessment of the situation. There is a humble caution.

¹ Scott Sauls, *A Gentle Answer: Our Secret Weapon in an Age of us Against Them*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2020), xxii.

But this also relates to conflict. It is way too easy to draw the wrong conclusion or to jump into a conversation without understanding all the information.

- The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him (Prov. 18:17).
- If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame (Prov. 18:13).

Many of you have probably read *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen Covey. The fifth habit is “seek first to understand, then to be understood.” It’s a great piece of advice and good wisdom. Now, *Seven Habits* is not a Christian book. Covey is a Mormon. But it would seem that Christians, of all people, should be quick to listen.

The gospel should create this within us. We know that the problem of sin is pervasive (Rom. 3:10-11). Christians believe that self-centered pride lurks in the heart of every person. It expresses itself in lots of ways, but especially in how we talk (Rom. 3:13-14). And we know that Jesus died in order to change rescue us from the damnable orientation of our souls. God gives grace to helpless sinners, and he changes what we love and value.

The result of true conversion is a Spirit-produced humility in regard to yourself and a love for others. First John tells us that we are deceived if we don’t think we are sinners (1 John 1:8). And if we don’t love others, we can’t really say that we love God.

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:7–11).

A failure to listen is really a failure to love. A failure to listen is really a cherishing of my opinion, my views, or what I want to say over another person. It violates Philippians 2.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others (Phil 2:3–4).

When we aren’t listening, we’re usually full of pride and only concerned about ourselves. And this runs contrary to the gospel itself. Scott Sauls writes: “Because Jesus has covered all our offenses, we can be among the least offensive and least offended people in the world.”

I think you’d have to agree that listening to people and especially those with whom we disagree is at an all-time low. Choose your topic: politics, COVID restrictions, racial reconciliation, or any number of issues, there are opportunities to demonstrate—very practically—how to live out the gospel.

Next week we'll get the heart of the matter with anger, but it also stems from fear. But the gospel promises that God will settle all accounts and that we need not fear. That means we are free to be gracious. Free to listen. Free to disagree in the right way.

So, let me ask you: Do you want to be right or be kind? Do you want to be heard or learn? Do you want to score a point or have a dialogue? Do you want to win or to love? Do you want to rant or do you want to reconcile?

Imagine what a testimony it would be if the Church was so marked by God's grace that we could love one another more than we hated where they were at. And imagine if we could model being quick to hear.

2) Slow to Speak

The second command is equally important. In fact, the words we use can create a lot of damage. Not listening is one kind of sinful response, but how we talk can have a much broader negative effect.

Being careful, thoughtful, and Christlike in our words (especially when we disagree) is something the Bible talks about beyond James. Again, here's Proverbs:

- When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent (Prov. 10:19).
- Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent (Prov. 17:27–28).

The point of what James and Proverbs are saying is to be self-controlled with our words. It's so easy to reduce the spiritual-maturity filter between your heart and your mouth. And this is especially true when you are upset, angry, or fearful.

Two thousand twenty has been an awful year for godly communication. In the culture, in the evangelical Church, and even in our own church, I've been grieved more about what is being said and how it's being said than ever before. There's more outrage and there are more passive-aggressive words now than I remember ever before. Don't you agree? You know some people like that, don't you?

The problem with this topic, however, is that you can always find someone worse to compare yourself to. But let me highlight three texts for you to consider

- Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people (Titus 3:1–2).
- Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice (Eph. 4:31).

- For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder (2 Cor. 12:20).

Let me invite you to consider some of the sin issues that we saw in these texts:

- **Lying:** not being truthful
- **Rudeness:** unkind communication
- **Gossip:** sharing information needlessly and hurtfully
- **Slander:** untrue accusations
- **Quarreling:** looking for and creating arguments
- **Divisiveness:** create unnecessary division
- **Disrespect:** talking in a way that diminishes others
- **Clamor:** verbal combat
- **Boasting:** celebrating yourself

The challenge with this list is that we know these things are wrong. But the pressure of the moment, the angst in our heart, or the frustration that we feel cause us to act in a manner that we know is wrong.

Which issue is an issue for you? Where do you need God's grace in your life?

Resist the urge to listen for someone else. Where do you need to listen? What kind of communication do you need to repent of today?

Let's ask God to help us, by his grace, to be quick to hear and slow to speak.

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop.

© College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com