

Trash-Talk

James 1:17-27 (NIV84)

¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created. ¹⁹ My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰ for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. ²¹ 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. ²² Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. ²³ Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. ²⁵ But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does. ²⁶ If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Another NFL season is upon us. No more preseason games. No more talking about who is or who isn't going to make the cut. The final rosters are set. Your fantasy football league is set. The 2015 season has begun.

If you are a football fan, particularly of the NFL, you have most likely kept up to date with the camp of your favorite team. You've been eying up the new recruits. You've analyzed the preseason performance. You know that the players have been working hard, building endurance and muscle. They've developed plays and practiced them over and over again. They've watched tape of themselves and of their opponents. They're ready to start the season.

You know that they practice these things, but there are couple of things that football players do that I wonder if they practice those as well. For instance, do they practice their touchdown dances? Some of those celebrations are pretty elaborate. I don't think those moves were thought up on the spot. Then there's the trash-talk. Do players stand in front of a mirror growling out nerve-rattling phrases? Do they spout out their newest slurs against their teammates during scrimmage to test the effectiveness?

Trash-talking is pretty universal in any sport, maybe even in your fantasy football league. People trash-talk because it's a psychological tactic to get your opponent off their game, break their concentration so that they make bad choices and don't play well. Outside of sports, though, does trash-talk have any usefulness? Is it beneficial?

How about for a church? It's kickoff Sunday here as all of our programs are getting back into the full swing of things. Should we be working on our trash-talk? Should we spout lines of dialogue like this to each other: "You think you're a good Lutheran? I bet you don't even know what the 95 Theses are." or "Your attendance is so lame that I have to tell the cleaning teams to dust the cobwebs off your church mailbox!" or "You think you're pretty good for you to make it to church on time? Well, already today I've read my daily devotion, did my daily Bible reading, read Meditations, said the Lord's Prayer, read from the Lutheran Confessions, came to Bible class, and I'm coming back tonight for Bible Information Class. Beat that!" But we wouldn't say those things, would we? We wouldn't let any unwholesome, boastful, off-putting talk come out of our mouths meant to rile someone up or offend them, right?

Although we don't get in the faces of other Christians and spew insults at them, we do say things that rile up another brother or sister in Christ. We do this most frequently when we fail to listen and speak instead of listening. Someone may come up to me and say, "Pastor, I want to talk to you about your preaching." And I could respond, "What do you mean you want to talk about my preaching? Do you think I'm boring? Do you think I'm not interesting enough for you? Don't you think that I try hard every single week to produce a good sermon for you? Do you know how many hours of preparation I have to do just to do a 15 minutes sermon? If only you knew. Plus, you know how many hospital visits I had this week? Do you know what I have to go through to get Bible classes and Catechism classes ready? Do you know what I have going on at home? If you don't like my preaching, you can just go to another church! I don't need you to critique my preaching." And the person stares at me dumbfounded and simply says, "I wanted to ask you how you come up with your sermons every week." All the ranting and raving and stressing and inferring that I did came out because I was quick to speak, quick to become angry, slow to listen. My words on such a day are no better than trash-talk, useless syllables of an unbridled tongue. I'm sure that you can think of a time or two when you have been slow to listen, quick to speak, and quick to become angry.

It's for times such as these that James had to write his letter to Christians like me and like you. He had to remind us as people of God, people that "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created (verse 18), people who have been forgiven and healed by Jesus Christ, he has to remind us of an often overlooked virtue of Christian living. "My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." (verse 19)

When we fail to be quick to listen we also tend to be quick to speak and quick to become angry. I made up my example about going off at someone commenting on my preaching, but I know that I am guilty of jumping immediately to a conclusion once someone starts speaking and then giving my opinion and my words before actually listening to the person and what they are really trying to say. I do this because I think I have it all figured out. I'm overconfident that I know what this person is going to say. And if I think it's going to be against me, or if it starts out that way, then I will bring out every defense that I have prepared in my mind. I will defend myself, and I will not tolerate someone criticizing me. I'm thinking you can relate.

This being slow to listen and quick to speak and quick to become angry is how Christians end up trash-talking each other. We say inconsiderate words thinking that we already know what the person is going to say. And when we jump to those words, we often upset the other person and make them angry because we didn't actually listen to them.

There is a bigger problem in being slow to listen, quick to speak, and quick to become angry. James says, "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless." (verse 26) If I do not stop and listen to my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, if I am not quick to listen with those who disagree with my beliefs and instead talk over them, steamroll the conversation my way, then I am not being a Christian. I'm not practicing what I preach. My God-given ears and sense of hearing goes unused and my tongue goes to serve only myself. This is Christian trash-talk, which has no place in the life of a Christian.

Throughout his letter, James emphasizes that actions flow directly from faith, give evidence of the beliefs we have, the religion we follow. If we fail to live the religion we profess to believe, then it's questionable as to whether we actually believe what we say we believe. As James will say in the next chapter of his letter "faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." (James 2:17)

This is why James gives direction for our Christian living that bears repeating. Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. Instead of immediately letting my tongue jump to the words to serve myself, to answer how I think the conversation will go, I need to stop. I may even need to put my hand over my mouth to stop myself from speaking. Instead, when someone says something to me, the first thing I want to do is listen. If it's a short statement, ask questions for clarification. "Pastor, I want to talk to you about your preaching?" "Ok. What would you like to talk about?" As the conversation goes on, ask more questions so that you can do more listening. "What do you mean by that?" "Is this an example of what you are talking about?"

When we take the time to listen to people, really listen to them, not just feign listening as we prepare our next defense, we will understand better where the person is coming from. Then, after we have listened to them, we will be able to speak in direct response to their comment or concern. No one gets angry because the other person is not listening. To be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry is practicing our religion as we keep a tight rein on our tongues. This is the way that we avoid trash-talking, spouting useless words that go against what we believe.

The only way that we can be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry is to remember what God has done for us. Instead of saying to us when we arrived in this world, "I have no time for you. You are sinful. I judge you. You are going to hell," God patiently made a plan to save us which was fulfilled in Jesus' perfect life lived for us and his death which paid our debt of sins. Then God patiently gave you day after day, each and every single day of your life, that you would hear his Word to give you birth as a new creation, to humbly accept this message that God has saved you.

When we do let loose the reins on our tongues, let us be quick to listen again...this time to God's Word, that we would hear the rebuke of God's law, that we would see how we wronged the other person with our trash-talk, our useless words said while we weren't listening, that, after being quick to listen to God's Word, we would speak and ask God and the other person for forgiveness. Our Father of the heavenly lights will forgive us since Christ has won that good and perfect gift for us already, because his Word that he planted in us saves us. Because he has done that for us, we do not merely listen to his Word, but we do what it says.

Because God has made us a new creation by his word of truth, we put his Word into practice. Each day, remember to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. As I remember those words, I pray each day, "Help me, Lord, to control my tongue and put your word of truth into practice. Help me to avoid trash-talk." Amen.