

Quick to Listen; Slow to Speak; Slow to Become Angry

James 1:17-27 (NIV)

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 and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰ because human anger does not produce the righteousness 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 someone 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 whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do. ²⁶ Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their 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.

We appreciate fast talk. And when I say fast talk, I don't mean manipulative talk like those speedy side effect warnings at the end of a drug commercial that go by so fast in hopes that you won't really pay attention to those negatives. What I mean is that in an age of people making videos for Youtube and movies and tv shows, you see more and more use of what are called "quick cuts." Quick cuts edit out the dead air so that the video, movie, tv show, or whatever moves along at a very brisk pace with rapid fire information and snappy dialogue.

This is efficient. We want to maximize our time. So, give me the most condensed amount of information in the least amount of time so that I can learn and move on to something else. Also, there is a part of us that likes it when people say clever things instantaneously, as if it required no effort because they were just that quick and good. We like it because we wish we could come up with those quick-witted phrases and spout them off with such rapidity, with no lag for the thought required to come up with such pithy statements. In fact, we may even have to stop from patting ourselves on the back after that great zinger, word play, pun, etc.

While we celebrate and enjoy quick speaking, James says this: "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry." (verse 19) Slow to speak? We get bored with someone who is slow to speak. We get impatient waiting for them to finish because we are thinking about all the other things we could be doing and need to be doing. We have a finite amount of time, and the slower you are to speak, the more of my time you use up. We grow impatient and get angry at the one who is slow to speak.

Then this anger boils over into what you say. It came out when you yelled at your parents that you are never coming out of your room again because of what they did and then slammed your bedroom door to make your point. It was that verbal barrage to that person who didn't do that thing that they said they were going to do...again... and you had to shove in their face everything else that they haven't done. In your anger, those words came out: "I hate you."

When was the last time you said something out of anger that was genuinely good? We teach our children the saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Yet we know that words affect us for years, even a lifetime – positively and negatively. God created the world and everything in it by speaking. What he said brought forth light and darkness, land and water, seasons and years, plants and animals. Even among people we know that the right words can broker a peace treaty between warring nations while other words can fuel a revolution. The right words can bring healing to a hurting soul while a well-timed criticism can crush a person. Words may make your day or keep you up at night.

Words are powerful, and the tongue is the means to distribute them. The tongue is like a rifle. Once the word is spoken, it finds its target. It is quick. This is why James encourages us to take note of being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry "because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires." (verse 20) We know that we are not supposed to lash out in anger, but we still do. We know that just a few words from the tongue can cause life-long hurt and anguish. We know words can tear down and we use them against people to this effect. We destroy with words, and this is sin. This hurts our neighbor. This is against what God commands of us. Our quick speaking in anger not only can destroy our relationship with another person, but it also destroys our relationship with God. When we hurt people with our quick spoken words, we also hurt God.

We are often quick to speak, and we need forgiveness for what we are quick to speak in anger. God is quick to listen as he is always at the ready to hear our prayers, including our prayers for forgiveness for what we said quickly in our anger. God also speaks. Some say he is slow to speak, as he gave us his Word over a time period of 1500 years. He spoke his word deliberately at just the right time in order to reveal himself to us, reminding us of what he promised and showing us that he was keeping all of his promises, giving us every good and perfect gift. He was not quick to speak to get that zinger in on us as we messed up. Instead, God spoke patiently to correct – both his followers as well as those who opposed him. He is slow to become angry. Wicked people live long lives because God is patient with them, not wanting any of them to perish but to come to know him and how his perfection covers over their life of sin. Yet God still called out sin for what it was. And he spoke of forgiveness. He spoke words of comfort to the brokenhearted, promising to save them, to rescue them from a life defined by words said in anger. He spoke promises as one who does not change like shifting shadows to people who needed hope in something solid, a certain salvation that comes by his life given to pay for our sins.

God still speaks today. He speaks to us through his Word, through the Bible, and through it he gives us this good and perfect gift: “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) God spoke to us, and he changed us. By his Word, he gave us a new life, a new birth, a spiritual birth, one where we are now clothed with Jesus’ perfection as he did for us in our baptisms. He spoke his Word to us, planted it in us, and it saves us.

God continues to speak to us to give us direction in our lives. He tells us we are to keep a tight rein on our tongues. God created our tongues so that we would sing his praises, that we would tell others about what good and perfect things he has done for us, to encourage others with the words he has used to encourage us, to build people up as God has built us up with his Word. Instead of being quick to speak in anger, to get that zinger in, he wants us to deliberately speak his saving Word, a word we may have to be slow to speak after we have spent time listening to the person we want to tell this to.

This is a challenge. I know what happens to me when people speak falsehoods about God. My anger rises. I want to shout them down about their false beliefs that will lead them to hell. I want to make them feel stupid for believing what they believe. I want to rant at them about how ridiculous their theology is compared to what God actually says. I want to win every argument and shove the victory in their face. I want to destroy what they believe as they concede to what I believe.

Yet, this is not what God wants me to use my tongue for. I have learned that this being slow to speak and slow to become angry takes time and practice; it doesn’t develop overnight. If you feel anger rising up in you and you know it’s about to spill out over your lips, I know many times we would say walk away so that you don’t spout the anger. And that may need to be done to keep a tight rein on your tongue. But James is not challenging you not to speak; he’s challenging you to be slow to speak and slow to become angry. God still wants you to speak. He doesn’t want you to stay silent because of your anger. But because he has given you the good and perfect gift of his Word which saves you, he wants you to speak that same Word so that this person who makes you angry can be saved.

When your anger rises at the person in front of you, stop your tongue and instead see this person as God sees them: a soul, which God valued worth the cost of his life – a life of perfection, a death to satisfy and pay our debt of sin. God wants them to be saved, and he may very well want me to be that one to speak the life-saving truth, God’s Word, to him or her. Then begin to realize that you don’t have to win every argument in every conversation – sometimes even when the person you’re talking to spouts false teaching. It’s more critical that they hear God’s saving message than it is for me to correct every theological statement since God’s Word of what he has done to be our perfect substitute is the only thing that will change this person’s heart. So we learn to hold our tongues searching for how to bring the focus back to God and what he has done for us and for this person. The more we practice this, the better we will become at being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, you have something great to say to all people, and God gave you a tongue specifically so that you could proclaim it. Knowing that you are washed clean in the blood of Christ, that he kept a perfect rein on his tongue for you so that you are perfect before God, let’s follow God’s direction for our tongues. Instead of priding ourselves in fast talk, zingers, and quick-witted responses, let’s be quick to listen to understand what this person is saying and where they are coming from, slow and deliberate to speak, and slow to become angry so that we can share with them the same true, unchanging Word of God which saves them as it has for us. Amen.