

Sermon 7: James 1:19-21: Cool Heads and Open Hearts in Trials

OUTLINE

Curbing natural reactions
Learning better reactions

INTRODUCTION

How should we respond to our trials? With cool heads and open hearts to the word of God, that is the teaching of this next section in James. Sadly, when we are under pressure, when we are sick, when we are experiencing stress at work, when we lose a loved one, when we are under financial pressure, when we have been snubbed or rejected, any number of difficult situations brings with it the temptation to give vent to what we are in our hearts. James, who has an uncompromising hold on our priority to be holy reminds us that we are not to give vent to what is in our hearts, instead we are to fill our hearts with God's word.

An interesting exercise that has to be done in every new section in James, is to work out how this new thought links to the thoughts before it. How does v19-21 connect with its context? We can see that our verses have two key parts to them, v19-20 relate to the sin that we should not indulge; and v21 picks up on that idea of putting away sin and instead receiving the word. James is focusing on us maintaining our hearts by regulating what comes out of it, and what we put into it. And these themes of sin and the word are connected to what has come before. James discusses how we cannot blame God for our sins when we feel tempted in our difficult times because our sin comes from our fallen hearts. We are the source of sin not God. James is continuing to talk about regulating our sinful reactions to our difficult times. Also in v18 James responded to the criticisms of God bringing trials and not being good with a reminder that not only does give us all good gifts to enjoy, but that He loves us and desires to save us, and the mechanism by which He saves us is the word of God. James knows that the word not only saves us in justification, but it also sanctifies so he calls upon us to fill our hearts with God's word in difficult times. He is telling us to keep cool heads when it comes to our natural reactions; and open hearts that we might learn better reactions. James recognizes that there are two realities within us the remaining sin within us being tempted through the difficulties we face; and God's powerful work of salvation which is deepened by the Spirit using the word in our hearts. James gives us two ideas which will be our points, we need to curb our natural reactions; and learn better reactions.

Curbing our natural reactions

V19-20, 'Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.' James begins calling upon his hearers to know what should be an obvious truth to all, 'the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.' We are to be holy as He is holy, this is a defining purpose of our lives, and our sinful anger does not get us there. You will notice that again he calls them beloved. Is this beloved of God, to remind them that even though they are going through God appointed trials, God loves them? Or is this beloved by James, that even though he has to speak in sharp and emphatic ways that expose and rebuke sin, he is doing so in love? Yes, both are no doubt true.

James gives instruction for every person. There are those who are more prone to anger, having a more fiery temperament who are more ready in expressing their emotions. James recognizes that we all need to take heed to the things he is about to say.

Now before we look at these three instructions, we must remember that they are linked to our normal reactions to trials, normally we are slow to listen, and quick to speak and quick to anger. So although we could technically isolate these three instructions and make them a rule for life, James is particularly concerned about our reactions under trials.

Quick to listen. Many have said that our normal reaction is the opposite, that we are slow to listen and quick to anger, and this is true. This whole of idea of listening involves self-control in that we do not first react; but it also involves thinking in that we decide to hear in order to understand, not allowing emotion to govern our response, but a proper comprehension and response to the truth. Before we take this matter of listening to applying to listening to each other when we have conflicts, let's first apply it to listening to God, which is probably James' intent. James' hearers are not thinking clearly, they are not listening to the truth of God's word that He is good, that He is holy, that He controls all but is not the author of sin; they are instead angry at their discomfort, using their anger at God's apparent mismanagement of the universe as an excuse for their sins; and so instead of hearing James' encouragement to be joyful as you pursue holiness by praying for wisdom, he anticipates an emotional push back full of grumbling, accusation and excuses. So v21 where James calls upon us to meekly, that is humbly, and not angrily receive God's word is the likely application he has in mind.

The more common way in which we are used to applying this verse is as a rule for relationship breakdown. Something has happened, now a husband and wife are accusing each other for what went wrong; they are seeing the splinter in their brother's eye not the log in their own; they are fixated on the problem instead of their partnership to solve the problem; the emotions escalate, criticisms are responded to with excuses and more criticisms.... Listening before speaking; understanding before responding, delaying your emotional response by trying to see it from another's perspective. This is all good advice that can be gleaned from this principle. As the ancients used to say, you have two ears and one tongue so you should be doing twice as much listening as speaking. How many fights would end before they began if we would only listen? Prov. 18:13, 'If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.'

Slow to speak. James has several sections that deal with the tongue, James 1:26; 3:1-12, 5:9. It is clear, given James' concerns that he sees the hearers as too quick to speak in criticism of God, words of faithlessness and accusation. As well as quick to speak against each other. James has been called the book of proverbs of the NT because it shares so many concerns, this being one of them. Prov. 17:27-28, '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.' 10:19, 'When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.' 11:12-13, 'Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent. Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered.'

John Blanchard suggests that we should be slow to speak about ourselves, whether it be what we are; what we have; or what we do, because we owe all to God. But he also says that we should be slow to speak of others. He shares a poignant story to show that words once spoken cannot be taken back, words spoken are loosed upon the world and bring about destruction. 'The story is told of a woman who after years of malicious tongue-wagging, became convicted of her sin and went to her minister to ask his advice. He listened carefully to her story, then said, 'If you want a clear conscience, you must take a bag of goose feathers, go around the neighbourhood, and put a goose feather outside the door of every single person you have offended.' Off she went, and a long time later she returned to the minister with an empty bag. 'I have done what you told me,' she said, 'but I feel no better.' 'Of course not', the minister replied, 'because you have only done half the job. What you must now do is to go around and pick all the feathers up again.' Now it so happened that there was a high wind blowing that day, so that when the woman returned hours later, her bag was still empty. Slumping in a chair, she said, 'It's no good. I can't find a single feather. It was easy to put them down, but I can't get even one of them back again.' 'Precisely,' said the minister, 'and in just the same way it was easy to scatter your words of criticism and rumour, but now that they have gone, it is impossible to bring them back.'¹

Slow to become angry. You know what they slow, that anger is just one letter short of danger. James is speaking in general principles here, and like speech, he says be slow to anger, be slow to speak, not never speak and never get angry. Paul quoting Ps. 4 says, be angry and do not sin. There is obviously a place for righteous anger, the anger in view is not righteous anger but sinful anger. Once again James is reflecting the wisdom of a life that fears God in Proverbs. 14:29, 'Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly.' 19:11, 'Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense.' Those quick to anger cause contention but those slow put out fires, Prov. 15:18, 'A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger quiets contention.' And the main reason for this is not simply that anger is destructive, which it is, but because God is slow to anger, Ps. 103:8, 'The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.' What this means is that James' three step program to conflict resolution is not a self-help program but rather a gospel shaped life. We are sinners and people sin against us, just as we sin against God. But God is gracious, He does not deal with us as His sins deserve. He does not deny His holiness, but He does not instantly give us all that our sins deserve. He is slow to anger. So when we have dealings with other sinners, and they sin against us or we think they have sinned against us, we remember that God is slow to anger. Jesus taught us that in order to be able to love our enemies who sin against us, we should pray for them. This is one way to stop the anger which really wants to vent from venting, by stopping and praying for that person. It is in prayer that we will remember our own sin which takes the heat out of our anger; our own worthiness to be judged which soon cools our anger. The very next verse Ps. 103:9 adds a second stunning truth, 'He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever.' We often give ourselves permission, once we have gotten angry, to stay angry. If our case is just, our

1 John Blanchard, [*Truth for Life: A Devotional Commentary on the Epistle of James*](#) (Darlington, England; Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 1986), 78.

anger is justified, and we are entitled to hold onto our anger. God does not keep His anger forever, He lets it go. So should we.

Why? Why should we be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger? Because it will make us successful; because it will help without relationships at home and at work? That is all true, but James tells us why, v20, 'for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.' Our goal in life is holiness; and our self-righteous, heavy handed, hair trigger, anger will not make us more like God but less like Him. anger does not affect the righteousness of God in others, hitting your child in anger will not make them more like Jesus, it will only make them scared of you; becoming angry and going about with a chip on our shoulders using anger and protests to push governments around will not produce a godly society, it will only result in others using the same bullish tactics; becoming angry at others sins whether against us or not, justifying the handing of ourselves over to passion and not a gospel informed gentleness, will make us less like God not more.

Learning better reactions

V21, 'Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.' James gives us here a common way for Christians to become holy. He echoes the typical putting off the old man and his ways and the putting on the new man and his ways. There is just one little change, he starts with what should be put off, 'all filthiness and rampant wickedness,' but in the place of putting on the new man he goes behind into the mechanics of how we do that 'receive with meekness the implanted word.' The train of thought in this text where James begins with being saved by the word of God; putting off the works of the flesh; and then leaning into the word for spiritual growth is echoed in 1 Pet. 1:21-2:2, 'Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, ²³ since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you. So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— ³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.'

When we are in trials we may pursue sin for comfort; or because the unsanctified part of us is raised to the surface. James calls upon us to give no quarter to sin. Put away that is strip off like clothing 'all filthiness'. This description of filthiness is the same to describe a poor man's filthy rags, and the sinful rags of Joshua the Highpriest in Zechariah 3. James calls upon us to strip off the 'rampant/superabundant wickedness' that flows from our hearts and that it is inviting us to sin all around. He is aware of how much sin there is to resist; and he is aware of its true nature as wicked, a radical contrast to the righteousness of God we are to pursue.

But the Christian life is not just a relentless resistance against sin, there are some positive and constructive things that we do in our battle against sin, we are to 'receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your soul.' We said earlier that this is likely a large of part of the listening that James intends. How are we to listen to God's word? With meekness, that is humility.

Why must we have an attitude of humility when listening to God's word. We are by default proud and resistant to God's word. We are like our children that dig in their heels as soon as you tell them what to do. James is reminding us that this is God's word, that we are creatures, that we must reign in our natural resistance and pride and submit ourselves to God's word. Submitting to God's word, not argue with it, not think that our own wisdom is better than it, when it commands us we accept orders, when it rebukes us we keep silent and take instruction. We pay it attention and do not disregard it. We can have lots of bible memorized, read through the bible in a year, know all the answers to bible quiz questions, attend morning and evening services; but this is not the same as receiving the word with meekness, with teachableness, with a quiet heart that submits to it. Jesus warns us about how we listen, those who have ears let them hear, lest they be those who hear without understanding, after giving the parable of the sower, or rather the parable of the four hearts, He said, Mark 4:20, 'But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.'

The word of God is a tool in the hands of God for our holiness, we see this for example in Ps. 119:9-11, 'How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word. With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.' There are two paths here; two voices; two outcomes. There is the voice of sinful desire, tempting us to sin, ending in death; and there is the word of God, pointing us to God's ways, ending in life.

James motivates us to receive the word with meekness for it 'is able to save your souls.' What does James mean by this? He does not mean that those who are listening have been saved by Jesus, by now they have to make sure they save themselves by their future works. No, there are one of two good options to a correct understanding of what James is saying. Firstly, the word 'salvation' has a broad meaning. It can mean 'justification' but is also an inclusive concept including sanctification and glorification. So then James is saying that you have been saved (justified) but there still remains the path of sanctification that every believer must walk, because as someone has said 'Holiness is the visible part of salvation.' And you need the word to help you work out your salvation. This is not saying that we save ourselves, but is talking of holiness in an inclusive way. This is a good interpretation held by many Protestant commentators. I tend to prefer another theory that agrees with something Calvin said. James is motivating us to receive the word with meekness, and so he commends that word by reminding us that the word had the power to save us. By implication if the word can save us from the guilt of sin, then it can help us in our fight against the power of sin.

Lets conclude. When we are in trials we naturally react emotionally. We are quick to speak, quick to anger and slow to listen. James calls us to suppress our natural responses and rather put off these sinful responses and lean into the holiness we are called to by filling our hearts with God's word. How should we respond to our trials? With cool heads and open hearts to the word of God.

