

The Epistle of James

Lesson # 6 Pure & Undeified Religion Part 1 James 1:19-21
Date: September 14, 2014

I. The Anger & Righteousness of Man James 1:19-20

This section seems disjointed and unconnected to vv. 2-18. At least one commentator argues that it is connected (vv. 19-27) if James's point is to teach "how to live under economic oppression".ⁱ That's possible & perhaps that's why this section ends at v. 27 – clearly a viewpoint that condemns those who, while calling themselves believers, do not look out for the needs of others within the church and whose general lives do not reflect a careful living out of a Christian worldview, while showing love.

Other commentators see this passage as more eclectic, more proverbs-like, veering off into helpful instruction about how to be sure one is really listening to and observing how to live out God's word as taught by God's servants.ⁱⁱ Another commentator believes the churches James wrote to were experiencing difficulties with one another & were divided over many issues (as we see throughout the book). One issue was the conflict between poor & wealthy members; another issue was the showing of favoritism; and apparently some were living in too much freedom and their faith was suspect because there seemed to be no fruit from it; and there were problems with people's anger, conversations, speech (coarse talk?); etc.ⁱⁱⁱ

How do we as believers understand our place in the world? Many churches have various programs they put on in order to "get people engaged" in the ministry and in evangelism, living moral lives, in fellowship, and so on – and some are helpful, and some are just awful. But "only if help comes from outside himself can help can man solve his problems of outward trouble and inward evil."^{iv} Homer Kent points out that v. 18 is about our salvation, that ultimate 'good gift' of God, and now in vv. 19-27 (& really throughout the , epistle), James is showing us what a saved life looks like. So this section is connected to what precedes it, but is also in a sense, separate instruction^v – practical Christianity 101.

It is not as if God did His part in saving us "of His own will" (v. 18) and then has left us on our own devices to complete the journey. Too many verses militate against that idea – Phil. 1:6; 2:12,13; Rom. 8:29-30; etc. – we are to be obedient to God's word and to follow the prescriptive as well as the descriptive instructions God provides in His word of course. But we are to realise that God is at work in us and the gospel that gives us justification also brings us to glorification as God's grace is given to us every day (cf. James 4:6), even if sometimes that grace comes in the form of trials we are to navigate through with proper attitudes and actions.

Verse 19 instructs us with 3 exhortations regarding hearing, speaking and controlling our anger. The first phrase, "know this" (ESV) has been translated a number of ways

– “so then” (NKJV); “understand this” (HCSB, NET); “take note of this” (NIV); “This you know” (NASB); and “wherefor” (KJV). I think the NASB fits the flow of thought the best here - he is stating that what he’s about to say is just a reminder & clarification of what they already knew. Perhaps it had been lost in the clutter of daily life with all its strife and pressures, especially in that era and culture.

The first point is very important for us, but especially for these early believers. We have God’s word to read and meditate on, to memorize, cherish, or sadly to ignore, but for the most part, other than the OT, since this is likely the first NT book written, the transmission of the gospel, all the attendant instruction and encouragements came to the people orally. So one had to be “quick to hear” or that person was not going to be fed spiritually with New Covenant truth.

Kent Hughes comments,

“The first duty is to be “quick to listen”. This was particularly important to the Jewish church because, apart from the OT, there were no canonical [NT] Scriptures at this early date. Virtually all communications were oral, when they met together in their house churches. Thus listening was imperative. Those who were not disciplined in listening ran the risk of spiritual impoverishment. It is not too dramatic to say that ready listeners gained for themselves a life-giving spiritual advantage.”^{vi}

How well do we listen to God’s word? By this I mean not only Sunday School classes & sermons, but also when we read our own Bibles, because we have that advantage over first century believers. Do we listen to it? Do we allow God’s living and active word to speak to us? Do we ask questions of the text? Too often, when we do open our Bibles on our own, I fear we tend to follow a reading plan and our main goal is to “advance the bookmark”^{vii} rather than to pause (*Selah*) and think through what we are reading. We encounter a tough verse or paragraph and thoughtlessly skip on to easier verses, not realising that wrestling with the implications of that tough verse would have supplied much greater spiritual treasure. John Piper once said, “If you rake the surface, you get leaves, but if you dig, you might get a diamond.”

Of course, in our post-modern, post-Christian era, this sort of intellectual discipline is tough to come by and requires a diligence that most people are not willing to invest. People have busy lives today, and the technology that was promised to make our lives easier and give us more leisure time, has freed up our time only to spend on the new technology! We are bombarded by TV shows where the plot advances and complex problems are solved - in between mindless commercials - within 50-52 minutes. The news consists of 30-45 second snippets which compel those who hear these snippets to believe that they are now experts on that subject. Books, especially good theology books like commentaries, are only read by some pastors, theologians, seminary students and some Sunday School teachers. The general Christian in the pew might read a Christian novel or 2 in a year or a squishy devotional by Max Lucado or the like, or worse, books by Joel Osteen or Joyce Meyers but deep introspection of the Bible and good Christian literature has almost vanished, and along with it, scores of good Christian bookstores. We must learn to be “quick to hear”. Be inquisitive on your own. There is a place for good questions in teaching situations or after a good sermon,

but don't just settle for a quick answer – dig into a deep book on a subject that you are thinking about, or ask your pastor or teacher to explain it in more depth, and study your Bible prayerfully.

Secondly, James says we are to be “*slow to speak*”. Have you ever been in a conversation with someone, and are making what you think is a good point, but you realise the other person is not really listening, because they are thinking about what they are going to say back that will be (to them) so much smarter than what you are saying? We do love the sound of our own voice don't we? We must listen and not be so fast to reply. Think about what you are going to say, and then more than half of the time, don't say it. God gave us all two ears and one mouth for a reason.

We must think before we speak. Kent Hughes makes a great statement – “I've never had to take back something I didn't say.”^{viii} When it comes to the Bible, because we are not such good listeners, and not diligent to wrestle with the text, we too quickly jump to the wrong conclusions and so doctrinal error can be the result as well as wrong direction for living (eg. [Rom. 6:1](#)). Too often, like the apostle Peter, we only open our mouths to change feet. There may have been a problem with this issue among James' audience – note [James 3:1-2](#). Teaching may seem like a great attraction, a pathway to minimal local fame perhaps, but proper, accurate teaching takes hard prep work and time as well as a personal diligence to live out what one teaches others. It is not so easy – that's why so few people are willing to try it.

Being ‘slow to speak’ must also include understanding our motive for what we say. Is it instructive, encouraging, gracious ([Eph. 4:29](#)) or thankful? Or is what you say planned to undermine someone, incite anger or shame, challenge one's authority, to gossip or back-bite, or to demonstrate your intelligence? ‘Think before you talk’ is great advice, seldom heeded. ([Prov. 29:20](#))

James' third point is, “be slow to anger”. David Nystrom says this, “It is possible, however, that James is instructing us to be slow to assume the mantle of righteous indignation, because in so doing we implicitly claim to speak for God. Such anger certainly has a rightful place, but should only be summoned after careful and diligent exercise of prayer and thought.”^{ix} When the first two admonitions of James 1:19 are not observed in a church community, anger can be the result.

Everyone...everyone...everyone is certain that their position is correct, or they would not defend it, and so they will often go beyond friendly debate on a topic to desk-pounding vehemence that only serves to escalate a situation. In a church setting where so many people of various backgrounds, socio-economic status, races, nationalities, and genders are involved, these types of situations can and do result in church splits, over the silliest, most trivial things. Carpet colours, colour of new hymn books, Bible versions, the role of deacons, points of doctrine, business meetings, how or even when to renovate a room in the church, etc. all qualify as touch stones for disputes when people fail to love one another and are quick to be angry. When people's opinions are strong, love for others gets left behind and conversations can get ugly in a

hurry. That happens in our family and business / secular relationships, but should not be happening in the church.

However, not all anger is sinful – Christ Himself expressed anger at those who had turned the Temple (His Father’s house) into a marketplace, or “den of thieves”. (cf. Matt. 21:12-13; MK 11:15-17; LK 19:45-46) Paul advises in Eph. 4:26, “be angry and do not sin...”. So there is room for carefully thought out and prayerfully considered righteous (NOT self-righteous) anger in some situations. But if you tend to “shoot from the hip” and anger is just under the surface for you (if you have a ‘hair-trigger’), then this advice from James is for you. Simmer down. Don’t be so ready to be argumentative about everything. Not every wind of doctrine is a “hill to die on.”

Then, in v. 20, James tells us why we must be slow to anger. “For” is a purpose word, so the verse says, “For the anger of man does not produce the righteousness God requires. (ESV) If this a reason why to be slow to anger, we must understand it.

Homer Kent says this well;

“One reason every Christian must be careful to avoid wrathful argument when he should be submitting himself to God’s word is that man’s wrath does not achieve the righteousness of God. Defenders of God’s truth do not further His cause by resorting to wrath , for man’s wrath is usually mixed with other motives – ambition, revenge, jealousy, or egotism, to name a few. Furthermore, men engaged in wrathful debate are rarely in possession of all the facts. Consequently, man’s speaking should always be done with an attitude of submission to God’s word – the final truth.”^x

One key element of the quotation above is the sentence is the underlined portion, regarding our motives. When our anger is from the wrong motive, it will never reflect God’s righteousness per se, or the imputed righteousness He has given to us as Christians. Notice Jesus’ words about certain types of anger in the sermon on the mount in MT 5:22, *“I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, “You fool!” will be liable to the hell of fire.”*

Think of some of the more extreme forms of anger exhibited by ‘Christians’ today, which serve to turn people away from Jesus rather than towards Him: Such as the recently deceased (March 2014) Fred Phelps of Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas. He hated gays, and expressed that hatred and anger towards them with his small congregation in loud, ugly, very public demonstrations complete with offensive signs at funerals of soldiers, gays, and whoever else wandered into his hate-filled sights. What about the many murders by ‘Christians’ of abortion doctors, nurses or the blowing up of abortion clinics? Don’t we as believers have to heed Romans 12:19-21? There are other so-called ‘Christians’ out there with racial hatred who do Jesus’ cause no good by their use of vitriol. These are extreme cases of course, and James has something perhaps less severe in mind, more general, but unbalance on political or social issues can lead to craziness and a complete implosion of our testimony before the mission field. Peter also offers sage advice on this in I Peter 1:15-17; 3:13-17.

II. The Implanted Word

James 1:21

Therefore” always refers us back to preceding verses, and here, it a reference to vv. 19-20. This is a clarification of what he has just written and why. IOW, “they know better; they are to communicate in love and justice cannot be established through anger, so **therefore** they are to get rid of the sins that prevent justice from taking place.^{xi}

But there is a question here. Is James referring to 2 specific sins – filthiness and wickedness – or is he using synonyms to describe sin generally? Regardless, more importantly, the fact is that this verse is a two part command – both negative and positive, and both are tied to v. 20. It is sinful when it comes to God’s word if we won’t listen, have angry, off-the-cuff response and display unrighteous anger. We are to put away those sins and others we know are in our lives using as our sole guide, God’s implanted word, which we are to receive in meekness or humility [be teachable]. The negative and positive here: “put away” and “receive”. We will never receive God’s word if we are arrogant or self-righteous. Note Jesus’ words in Luke 5:31-32; and Paul’s in Romans 9:3-33, and 10:1-4.

God’s word is here called “the implanted word”. It is not outside of us if we are believers but inside. In fact, this has to do with the promise of the New Covenant as expressed in Jer. 31:33-34 & Ezek. 36:22-27. Notice especially how Jeremiah 31:34 mentions the salvation which James says is a result of God’s word being implanted in us – it is able to save us because of what it reveals to us about Jesus Christ.

“Those who are born again into the family of God by accepting the gospel need to continue using the Word to shape their lives and keep them from sin.”^{xii}

Note also I Peter 1:22-23. James, often accused of teaching ‘works’ salvation, here, very clearly shows that God’s word is the source of salvation – cf. Rom. 10:11-17.

ⁱ Scot McKnight, p. 133

ⁱⁱ R. Kent Hughes, p. 63-64

ⁱⁱⁱ Nystrom, p. 89ff

^{iv} Homer Kent, p. 47

^v IBID, p. 47ff

^{vi} Hughes, p. 63

^{vii} Hughes, quoting Simon Kistemaker, p. 65

^{viii} Hughes, p. 66

^{ix} David Nystrom, p. 91

^x Homer Kent, p. 50

^{xi} McKnight, p. 140

^{xii} Kent, p. 51