James: Truth that Hurts · Sermon Four

The Test of True Religion

What you actually do with what you already know

James 1:19–27

We are continuing our study in the book of James, and today we finish chapter 1 and wrap up the introduction of the book. Chapter 1 lays the groundwork for chapters 2 through 5, and for the most part every topic he touches here gets covered at a deeper level later on. Remember who he is writing to. These are Christians who have lost everything for the sake of following Jesus, forced to flee for their lives so they would not lose them. And it is in that hour of trial that James confronts them rather than comforts them.

Let me say something about that. Some of you have an aversion to confrontation, to saying hard things in hard moments, and you have a proclivity to comfort instead. I would challenge you that there is a time for confrontation. Not every hard moment requires comfort. Sometimes peace is only found on the other side of war. It is neither unbiblical nor unchristlike to confront people with hard truth in a hard moment. And like James, we ought to be Spirit-led in how we respond to the difficult situations around us. Does this one require a confrontational touch, or a comforting touch?

James has already said a great many hard things to these people, calling them to the highest level of truth. He tells them their trial will produce good fruit in their life if they will let it. He tells them they don't just need strength in the trial, they need wisdom. He tells them to stop being double-minded, believing one thing and living another. He reminds them that in the humiliation of being brought low, God will one day exalt them. He promises blessing to those who endure the hardship and reward to those who cling to Jesus. He rebukes them for blaming their temptation on God and shows them the problem lies within. And he declares the goodness of God as both demonstrated and immutable. Now he is going to continue in that same vein.

i.

Quick to Hear, Slow to Speak

> 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. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.
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> James 1:19–21, ESV

You know what I am never tempted to do when things get hard? Shut up, calm down, and listen. When things get hard, my temptation is to tell the world, get frantic, and get angry. Yet the response of the godly is the exact opposite: quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.

This is one of those commands that applies to every believer on the planet, and it is a lifestyle we are meant to live. Husbands, be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. Wives, the same. Parents, employees, employers, friends, pastors, leaders, sons, daughters — the same. It does not matter what hat you have on or what role you play. This is how you are to be governed. This verse should shape and affect every decision you make. It is our heart posture, always.

ii.

What He Is Not Saying

I don't want you to get this verse wrong. James is not communicating "only listen, don't speak, and don't get angry." He says we are to be quick to hear *others*, slow to speak, and slow to anger. Those are three different things, and each of them deserves a moment.

Quick to hear means that when you don't understand something, you ask questions before you render judgment. You don't just hear one side, you are quick to hear both sides. Your inclination is to lock in and hear first. Proverbs says it plainly: if one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.

Slow to speak does not mean don't speak. It means speak carefully. Weigh your words. Let what you say be informed by what you heard first. There is a time to speak, a time to render a verdict, an opinion, a conviction. This verse does not forbid it, it demands that you slow down before you do it. Some of you are like me — you love to talk, you are loud, you shoot from the hip, and you are known to put your foot in your mouth. This is especially important for you, because your personality, wiring, and temperament do not override God's command to be slow to speak. And some of you are nothing like me. You don't understand people like me and

you get overwhelmed by people like me. This verse is especially important for you too, because you are still required to speak.

Slow to anger does not say don't be angry. It says make sure that if you are angry about something, it is right to be angry about it. So let me ask you a question and I want you to be honest. How much of what you get angry about do you think the Lord is angry about? I think about my own kids here. I get so angry with them sometimes because they will not take no for an answer. They are incessantly persistent and, let's be honest, it is annoying. But do I think God is angry about it? Likely not. Is there wrath being stored up for them on the day of judgment because at eleven years old they kept asking if their friends could come over after school? No. But does it anger the Lord when He sees a pastor take advantage of his flock, or a husband dishonor his wife? Yes. We should get angry. We should just get angry about the right things.

Proverbs has been saying this the whole time. When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent. Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise. Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly. A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger quiets contention. Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.

iii.

Doers, Not Hearers Only

> But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.
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> James 1:22–25, ESV

My fear is that there are many believers who think they are Christians but are merely philosophers.

People who hear the word but never do it are philosophers of Christ, not followers of Christ.

The pull is always toward one of two ditches: becoming a philosopher, who hears without doing, or becoming a Pharisee, who does more than he hears. We cannot do either one. We have to believe the right things and be doers of the right things. We must hear the word and live it.

Let's get Legacy specific for a second. Because of our commitment to produce Christians who are both biblically literate and theologically sound, we might gravitate toward being really good hearers of the word without ever making the transition to doing it. We have to fight against that temptation. We have to fight for consistency between truth and life, between what we believe and how we live. We must hear the word and then do something about it. If we don't, James warns us what we become.

iv.

The Man in the Mirror

What James is communicating is that we can deceive ourselves, because we judge our spiritual maturity based on what we know rather than on how well we respond to what we know. We can think we are in a much better place than we actually are simply because we know more than the people around us.

And the analogy is this. You woke up one day, looked in the mirror, and found something that needed attention. Hair jacked up, beard matted, crust in your eyes. And then you did nothing about it. You just went on with your day in that condition, having forgotten your true condition entirely. That is the hearer who is not a doer. The problem is not that they don't know. The problem is that they don't care. The problem is not that you didn't see clearly. It is that you didn't respond to what you saw.

Maturity is measured by how small the gap is between what we know and how we live.

So here is the big idea I want you to walk out with: maturity isn't measured by how much you know about the Word, but by how faithfully you live in light of what you know.

Before You Turn the Page

Name one thing you already know God has asked of you and have not done. Not something you need to learn, and not something you need clarity on. Something you saw clearly in the mirror and then walked away from.

Now ask the harder question underneath it: have I been measuring my maturity by what I have heard, and quietly counting that as obedience?

v.

The Litmus Test

> If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.
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> James 1:26–27, ESV

Let me change the language a bit for the sake of our context. If anyone thinks they are a Christian and they do not bridle their tongue, they are deceiving themselves, and their Christianity is worthless. Some of you have wanted a litmus test to see how you are doing with the Lord. This is it. You can fast, pray, read your Bible, come to church, and avoid the obvious pitfalls around money and sex — but if you do not bridle your tongue, you have deceived yourself.

The image James is using is a bridle in a horse's mouth, and he will come back to it later in this letter. A bridle is what governs the horse and leads him in the way he should go. We are to bridle our tongues, which means we have to control them. What we say needs to be right, with the right heart, at the right time, in the right way. And that requires a relationship, a real-time conversation with the Holy Spirit.

So let's talk about what Scripture says we are bridling against, so that we don't deceive ourselves. Complaining, which is constantly verbalizing our dissatisfaction with our circumstances, our people, or our leadership (Philippians 2:14). Slandering, telling lies about people to destroy their reputation (Ephesians 4:31). Gossiping, telling someone's story without their permission (Proverbs 16:28). Speaking harshly, using our words to cut, belittle, embarrass, or unnecessarily wound (Proverbs 15:1). Lying, which includes exaggerating what is true or deliberately leaving out truth in order to deceive (Ephesians 4:25).

And then the ones we rarely name. Speaking carelessly, talking without considering whether our words are true, necessary, wise, or helpful (Proverbs 10:19). Flattery, saying things we don't really mean in order to gain someone's approval or get something from them (Proverbs 29:5). And boasting, using our words to draw attention to ourselves, our accomplishments, or our importance (James 3:5).

vi.

Pure and Undefiled

Then James gives us the other half of the test, and it is remarkably simple. Pure religion in God's eyes looks like this.

Religion That Is Pure and Undefiled

Bridle your tongue › Take care of people › Stay unstained

Be quick to hear and slow to speak. Visit the orphan and the widow in their affliction — go take care of those in need. And keep yourself unstained by the world, which means you do not conform to it, you resist it. That is the simplest, purest understanding of how we are to live, and notice that not one part of it is something you can merely know. Every part of it is something you have to do.

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Soli Deo Gloria

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