

James 1:19-21, No. 5
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As I have already noted, James, not unlike Proverbs, moves from subject to subject without much in the way of a discernible rationale. His treatment of his subjects, again as in Proverbs, can be quite brief, even terse. Such is the case with the three verse section we are reading tonight. It is clearly a separate section, as you will see if you consider what comes before it and then what comes after.

Text Comment

v.19 Some commentators prefer to take the first phrase of v. 19 – “Know this, my beloved brothers” – as the concluding sentence of the previous section, all the more as the ESV does not translate a “but” that begins the second half of the verse. “But let every man be quick to hear...” Such a “but” might seem to be a natural beginning to a new section. [Motyer, 61, 64] As you can see the ESV editors do not agree and start v. 19 and the new section with “Know this...” They do this principally because James regularly *begins* a new section with “My brothers,” as, for example, he will in 2:1, in 2:14, in 3:1, and so on. [Moo, 81] An appeal to his brothers, in other words, at least in James, starts a section, it doesn’t end it. Now that matters for this reason: it is going to be important for us to remember that James is addressing *Christians* here. He’s speaking to his *brothers* about their moral filth and rampant wickedness. We’ll return to that point later.

Here “slow to speak” – a common piece of Jewish wisdom – reminds us of statements in the book of Proverbs. For example, compare James to Proverbs 17:28: “Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue.” What is more, the verse just before it, Proverbs 17:27, links hasty speech with anger, just as James does here. “A man of knowledge uses words with restraint, and a man of understanding is even-tempered.” In other words, an angry person rarely controls his speech as he should. How often do we regret words we spoke “in the heat of the moment?” [Moo, 82]

Like so much of biblical wisdom, this counsel is also something you will find in non-biblical sources. In one of the intertestamental books, part of what is called *The Apocrypha*, Sirach, also called Ecclesiasticus, we read:

“Be quick to hear, and be deliberate in answering. If you have understanding, answer your neighbor; but if not, put your hand on your mouth.” [5:11-13]

Even Plutarch, the Greek moralist, tells us of one Simonides who used to say that he had never been sorry for having kept silent, but many a time for having spoken. *Words to remember and to live by.*

In the same way, the reference to being “slow to anger” is also *proverbial*. In Prov. 15:18 we read: “A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger quiets contention.” And in 16:32: “Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he

who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.” In fact, as you may remember, there are a number of proverbs devoted to anger in one way or another.

And this too is an insight that unbelievers share. Here is Seneca, the Roman contemporary of James, the Stoic philosopher and moralist, in his essay “*On Anger*.”

“The most outrageous, brutal, dangerous, and intractable of all passions, the most loathsome and unmannerly, nay, the most ridiculous too... If I were to describe it, I would...dress it up as the poets represent the furies, with whips, snakes, and flames. It should be sour, livid, full of scars, and wallowing in gore, raging up and down, destroying, grinning, bellowing, and pursuing, sick of all other things, and most of all of itself.”

- v.20 There are perhaps any number of ways in which the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Angry people act sinfully themselves under the influence of a destabilizing and distracting temper. They are critical, often genuinely cruel; they speak unwisely and often dishonestly, and so on. Anger and pride or selfishness are usually two sides of the same coin. People who act in anger also provoke others to unrighteous responses, whether anger or hatred or fear. Angry Christians also fail to adorn the truth of God’s word, fail to make it attractive to others, and so fail to contribute as they should to the salvation of others.
- v.21 To say that the word of God has been “implanted” recalls the Lord’s parable of the sower and the soils, the seed of the word being in that parable *planted* in the human heart. I have already noted how often James seems to have the Lord’s teaching in the back of his mind. The point of the figure of speech is to indicate that the word, as also in the Lord’s parable, is intended to bear fruit, in this case a godly character. The ground has been prepared by the Spirit in the new birth – to which reference was made in v. 18 – precisely so that it might bear the fruit of a godly, Christ-like life. But for that to happen we must *receive* the Word of God. To receive the Word is to do more than simply to hear it. It is not enough to read or hear the Bible, *one must attend to what it says!* Angry people seldom carefully listen and attend to what anyone says, even God in his Word! [Motyer, 66]

Here “save your souls” could refer to the experience of salvation in this present life, but I think it is more likely that the phrase refers to the consummation of salvation. As you remember, there are *three horizons of salvation* in the Bible’s teaching: 1) the work of Christ 2,000 years ago; 2) the regeneration, justification, and sanctification of a believer in his or her own lifetime; and 3) the consummation of salvation at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. The terminology of salvation is used with respect to each of these horizons. For example, in respect to the incarnation and atonement, the angel Gabriel told Joseph that he should name the son to be born to Mary Jesus, because “he would *save* his people from their sins.” In regard to the experience of salvation in our own lifetimes, the apostle Paul told the Philippian jailer that if he believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, he would be *saved* and his household. And we read in Hebrews 9:28 that the Lord Jesus is coming again to *save* those who are waiting for him. Forms of the same word are found in all

three of those texts and often in texts having to do with all three of those distinct horizons of salvation. Here it is the distant horizon in view, as it is often the case in the NT. [Moo, 88] As always in the Bible, it is the Christian who actually lives the Christian life, who obeys and serves the Lord, really if not perfectly, who will be saved at the end.

By the way, the word the ESV translates as *rampant* wickedness ordinarily means “excess.” So Paul says that the Corinthians’ joy *exceeded* their afflictions. And in Rom. 5:17 he says that God’s grace not only redresses the damage done by sin but *goes far beyond* that. So “rampant wickedness”, an over abundant wickedness is probably the idea. As one commentator puts it, “It is a word that spells doom to any theory of sinless perfection in this life.” [Motyer, 68] And, of course, we all have an excess of experience of this sad reality. “Knock down one sin, and another quickly arises to take its place...” [Moo, 121]

Thus far the Word of God. Now I made a point of your noticing that James began this section by addressing himself to his “beloved brothers.” But then he goes on to tell them to put away their *moral filth and rampant wickedness*. We can scarcely imagine a more powerful acknowledgement that Christians not only remain sinners while they remain in this world, but remain serious sinners! Among those sins that still bedevil many Christians are the sins of a loose tongue and of anger, the latter of which James uses here as a heuristic example, an example that teaches or illustrates or makes the point he is in the process of making: there is filth and wickedness in our lives *as Christians* that we must put away, get rid of, put to death. James could, of course, have used any number of other sins to make the same point. The Christian life requires a constant supply of fresh living water – we have that in the new birth, in the Word of God, and the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit – but it also requires that something be done with the raw sewage. We are spiritually speaking, as it were, both environmentalists caring for the purity of the watershed *and* wastewater workers tending the sewer. We have both responsibilities every day and we live every day with one foot planted in the pure, clear fishing stream high in the mountains, and the other in the foul city sewer. We are spiritual plumbers, if you will, concerned both with inflow and outflow.

We came home this summer with my daughter Courtney’s dog Sofie. Courtney has four little boys five and under, one of whom has a hearing problem, and caring for a dog was just one responsibility too many. So Sofie now lives with her grandparents, who, like all grandparents, are more indulgent than her parents were. So she’s happy. She is a very sweet, nine-year-old yellow lab and we love her very much.

Sofie gets fed twice a day, breakfast in the morning and dinner at night, though the menu is precisely the same at both meals. As I said, she is nine years old, so she knows the routine. But you might not think so. When she realizes that it’s time for breakfast, she starts to sneeze, to jump up and down, and generally display her excitement. When we reach the basement and I’m filling her bowl, with her jumping around me in undisguised glee, I often think, “My goodness, she acts as if she hasn’t been fed for days and as if this meal is going to be the highlight of her life.” And, of course, she does exactly the same things at night before her evening meal and so it goes day after day. She is, in this, a rebuke to me. She is so happy with the provision that is made for her, whereas I, jaded human being that I am, am far more likely to take virtually all the far

more extraordinary blessings that have been granted to me for granted. If only I could have Sofie's twice daily happiness – even her thrill – even just a few times every week!

On the other hand, I hate to say it, but there are features of Sofie's character that are not so attractive. She barks somewhat angrily at everyone who passes by and does so no matter how many times I tell her that she is not being a good neighbor, which a Christian dog certainly ought to be. She also asks to go outside simply because she has learned to expect a treat when she comes back inside. In fact, I get up to let her go outside so that she can go potty, only to watch her run out, turn around, and come right back inside for her treat. Given that this happens virtually every day, James' "rampant wickedness" seems an apt description of her intemperate lust for snacks.

Well, it is not difficult to apply that illustration. We too are given many gifts. The Lord has richly provided for our lives, not only in this world but in the world to come. He has given us a new heart, a new world of possibilities, and the spiritual resources with which to live a holy and righteous life and to live in the enjoyment of his blessings. We have so much to be thankful for and excited about and delighted with. How simple the Christian life would be if our hearts were always filled to the brim with the joy of our salvation, if we were every day thrilling to God's love for us and for what he has given us, and if we woke up each morning relishing the moral possibilities that lay before us. We would find it so much easier to face our disappointments, to surmount our temptations, and to work to eradicate the unworthy aspects of our character. *And there are unworthy aspects of our characters.* Very unworthy. We aren't the good neighbors we ought to be, we have lusts for various things we ought not to want or to want in that way or to want in that measure. We need to tear the idols of our lives from the Lord's throne where they sit.

But alas so much of the time we do not. There isn't nearly enough of the joy of the Lord in our hearts and we are too little constrained, our behavior too little controlled by the love of God shed abroad in our hearts. The supply of joy, peace, and love to our hearts begins to shrink because the pipes are being corroded inside with all that filth and wickedness. We take God's magnificent provision for us for granted and don't keep a watchful eye on those pipes to keep them clean and running free. And the result, as we know all too well, is that there isn't enough water pressure in the system to flush out the sewage. I apologize for the crude metaphor, but it was James who used the image of "filth".

Among the many such defects of Christian character James mentions two in the way of providing examples of what he is talking about when he speaks of our filthiness and our rampant wickedness. The first is the pride that makes us talkers rather than listeners, the lack of concern and respect for others that makes us more interested in talking to them than listening to them.

The other is anger. Now, to be sure, just as there is a time to speak and not be silent, there is a time to be angry. In the same way that "slow to speak" doesn't mean "never speak," "slow to anger" doesn't mean "never be angry." Paul recognizes this when he tells the Ephesians, "be angry but do not sin." But in this way too James is typical of biblical wisdom literature. He puts things bluntly and in absolutes. He does not supply qualifications. If he did the main point would be lost, which is that most of the time when we are angry we are sinning against God and man.

Righteous anger may be a very good thing, a necessary thing, but James isn't talking about righteous anger. He's talking about the anger we all know is sinful and unworthy of a Christian. The fact is that virtually all of us, *and especially all of us men*, know very well how often we have been angry with no reason and how completely unchristian our anger usually is. It is selfish, cruel, foolish, and hurtful. I know it is so in my case!

I've been reading of late a new biography of J.I. Packer. You know you have led a consequential life if you have had two biographies written about you and you're still alive! That was the case with Martyn Lloyd Jones and John Stott before they died and now with Packer. Those three formed a triumvirate of British evangelical leadership in the middle and later 20th century and all three of them have left a permanent mark on American evangelicalism, and American Reformed Christianity. But being great men, having strong convictions about many things, and wielding great influence it was inevitable that they should have been from time to time involved in controversy. This was certainly the case with J.I. Packer.

J.I. Packer, with the help of Martyn Lloyd Jones, founded the famous Puritan Conference that met annually for some twenty years, the 1950s and 1960s, at Westminster Chapel in London. The revival of interest in the English Puritans that transformed Reformed Christianity in the post-war years owed a great deal to that conference. Both Packer and Lloyd-Jones gave addresses every year and those addresses, among others, introduced a whole generation of young ministers – myself included – to the treasures of Puritan theology and spirituality. Packer in those days gratefully acknowledged that in many things the older Lloyd-Jones was his mentor and inspiration. But in the late 1960s there was a falling out between them because of Lloyd-Jones growing unhappiness with Anglican friends like Packer remaining in the largely liberal and often nakedly unbelieving Anglican Church. The Puritan Conference came to an end, largely because of the breach between Dr. Packer and Lloyd-Jones, the personal friendship ended – Lloyd-Jones largely shunned Packer after this dispute – and the substantial community of evangelicals that looked to Lloyd-Jones for leadership, no longer considered Packer a trusted ally. It is hard for a popular man to lose his popularity! All the more to lose it almost overnight!

Sadly, though he had been their principal champion, the man whose scholarship had restored their confidence in their convictions, the Anglican evangelicals also began growing apart from Dr. Packer in the later 1960s and 70s. The charismatic movement reshaped English Anglicanism, interest in historic Reformed theology waned, and the man who had been at the very center of the evangelical resurgence in the Church of England in the 50s and 60s found himself on the outside looking in. John Stott had become the leader and the trend-setter, very obviously and publicly replacing Packer in that role. It is hard to play second fiddle after being the concertmaster!

And, then, as many of you will remember, Dr. Packer used to be a fixture at R.C. Sproul's Ligonier Conferences. But when he contributed, with Charles Colson and others, to the project called *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*, Packer was, as the English would say, "sent to Coventry" by Dr. Sproul. He has not been seen at Ligonier conferences since the publication of that first document urging some measure of ecumenical cooperation in the face of our society's moral collapse. What is more, he later published a book, *Concise Theology*, - if you want a single book on your shelf to teach you the doctrines of our Christian faith, Dr. Packer's *Concise Theology* is a good place to begin - which contained a good bit of material that had been

originally intended for a Study Bible that R.C. Sproul was editing. After Packer's appearance as a contributor to *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*, Dr. Sproul claimed that what Dr. Packer had written was not good enough for his study bible, a snide and unworthy personal attack. Dr. Packer hasn't written anything in his entire life that was unworthy of inclusion in whatever book it was intended for. For your information, Dr. Packer was the theological editor of the *ESV*, the Bible you hold in your lap, and one of the principal editors of the *ESV Study Bible*, the best study Bible available today. It is not fun to be rejected by your friends and to be publicly criticized if not smeared.

Now what is remarkable about these personal and painful alienations and all these personal criticisms, too often made public, is that they did not produce in Packer himself any noticeable anger or ill-will. He has had opportunity – as many books and articles as he has published over the years, and with the complete access he has had through those years to the pages of *Christianity Today*, of which he has been a consulting editor – to tell his side of the story, to avenge himself on those who hurt him and criticized him, often quite personally, and he never has. Indeed, quite the contrary. He has invariably continued to praise in print the men whose words and actions reduced his public standing, marginalized him among groups of Christians who once lionized him, made his life difficult in other ways, and cost him many personal friendships. So far as Packer's public pronouncements are concerned, you would suppose none of these alienations had occurred, that all three of those men remained treasured friends. He wrote, in a biographical essay after Lloyd-Jones' death in 1984 that Lloyd-Jones “embodied and expressed” the glory of God “more richly than any man I have ever known.” He lavished praise on John Stott in his eulogy at the latter's memorial service, and he continued to write of Dr. Sproul as a treasured friend. *Now that is a man who is slow to anger.* And how beautiful such a character is and must be to God and to all thoughtful, intentional Christians. I want to be such a man. I've made some small progress, I think, but I would love to be such a man before I die.

But, alas, it is not always so, is it? I grew up in circles where anger toward brothers ruptured once friendly relations right and left. But those were smaller men. Take a larger example. The church father, Jerome, was a great man. His translation of the Bible into Latin, one of the great performances in the history of literature, what came to be called the Vulgate, became the Bible of western Christianity for a thousand years; no small achievement. His commentaries on the Bible and other writings continue to be of value today even though they were written in the 4th and 5th centuries. But the man lived angry. As one scholar put it, Jerome was as unlikely to keep a friend as Augustine was to lose one!

Aristotle defined anger as “the desire to inflict retaliatory distress.” [Cited in P. Johnson, *Socrates*, 120] And such was anger in Jerome's case. It wasn't enough for him simply to be angry himself with another churchman, he had to do what he could to destroy the man's reputation, to cut him down, to separate him from his friends. Phyllis McGinley has this marvelous verse about Jerome.

God's angry man,
His crotchety scholar,
Was St. Jerome,
The great name-caller,

Who cared not a dime
 For the laws of libel,
 And in his spare time
 Translated the Bible.

Now you can't read Jerome's biography without coming to appreciate the man's spiritual strengths. He was a great Christian. But we wish he had put away the filth and rampant wickedness more than he did, as, of course, we hurry on to say, we wish we had done the same. Listen to this concluding paragraph from Jerome's great biographer, J.N.D. Kelly, and tell me if James has not hit the mark in speaking to his brothers about their filth and rampant wickedness, perhaps especially with regard to anger.

“As a man Jerome presents a fascinating puzzle. None of the famous figures of Christian antiquity known to us had such a complex, curiously ambivalent personality. Far cleverer and more versatile than Rufinus, more learned and acute than Augustine, he lacked the balance and solidity of the one, the nobility and generosity of the other. His affection for his friends, while they were his friends, was unstinted though possessive; once they ceased to be his friends, he could pursue them with a rancor and spitefulness that still dismay. Warm-hearted, kind to the poor and the distressed, easily reduced to tears by their sufferings, he was also inordinately vain and petty, jealous of rivals, morbidly sensitive and irascible, hag-ridden by imaginary fears. There can be no doubt of the reality of his conversion, or of his passionate devotion to Christ and...the gospel; but if this burning commitment was the driving-force of his life, the forms in which it found an outlet were often strange, sometimes repellent. Some of these contradictions may have had their roots in the ill-health which dogged him, or in his troubled awareness of his sensual nature; others we should probably trace to the more fundamental flaws of character which we can only surmise. The deeper springs of his psychology elude us...”
 [*Jerome*, 335-336]

So Jerome and so, in our own way, smaller Christians like you and me. Now, as we conclude, let's go back to Sofie, dancing and prancing and sneezing because she's about to get her dinner or her snack. James reminds us here that we are soon to receive the salvation of our souls! Stop and imagine for a moment what an indescribably transcendent moment that will be, when you open the eyes of your soul and find yourself in heaven, - or when you realize that the Savior is making his return to earth - feel yourself being warmed by the glory of God, and find within yourself a heart so full of love and joy that you cannot contain it. And what is more, all the filth and all the rampant wickedness will be gone and gone forever. You will hardly recognize yourself! You will be clean inside and out, finally able to experience what it's like to be living an absolutely sinless life, a life of true goodness, of nothing but love for God and man. If there remains any anger in your heart, it will be anger be at yourself for having dallied with that sin as long as you did. You have every reason, in other words, to put away the filth and the rampant wickedness that remains in your character and your behavior. You have more than enough reason. A man or woman who is leaping for the joy of salvation is entirely unlikely to lash out in angry words at some small slight or disappointment or misunderstanding. As Nehemiah reminds us, the joy of the Lord is the moral and spiritual strength of God's people!

I began this series by observing that wisdom literature is different than other genre of literature in the Bible. There is less of the theological in it, much less. But James has tweaked the formula here. He's already reminded us that God has created new life with us – that in v. 18 – and here he reminds us that we are on our way to heaven and that we should, therefore, act accordingly.

Take this problem we have of being slow to hear and quick to speak rather than quick to hear and slow to speak. Stop and think of God's way with you. Have you thought about this? God is so gracious and so humble that, while he has every right to speak to us and to demand that we remain silent before him, he not only has given us his Word, he has lent us his ear. [Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 97] He is ready to listen to us, to listen to everything we have to say. He invites us to speak to him, at whatever length we wish, and about any subject. Extraordinary!

And then consider anger. If anyone has a perfect right to be angry with us all of the time, to be exasperated and frustrated and irascible, it is God himself. He knows exactly what's going on in our hearts and lives at every moment. He has given us so much, we take his gifts so much for granted, we hardly ever really thank him for them, we continue to love the very sins that sent God's Son to the cross, so often we fail to manage even what might be thought the ABCs of the Christian life, and we care so often for so many other things more than his infinitely wonderful salvation. But he is not angry. He is patient, he is understanding and sympathetic, he is merciful and kind, and continues to be so day after day, month after month, and year after year. We consume such vast quantities of God's grace every single day and still he is not angry with us. If *that* doesn't motivate us to put away our anger, along with the rest of the filth and rampant wickedness, what pray tell will ever motivate us to do so? To ponder and to take these facts to heart is what it means to "receive with meekness the implanted word."

There is a hard-edged realism in James, a bracing honesty about ourselves, about what's wrong with us, and about our moral obligation to do better than we do. The acceptance – no the heartfelt *embrace* of that honest reckoning with our lives – is a large part of growing in Christ, which requires, in the first place, a heartfelt *desire* to grow in Christ, a commitment, a passion to honor the Lord with our lives. Read these verses over again.

“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!*”

The Bible constantly teaches us and in many different ways that true human freedom – and that is what we all want, if you stop and think about it, what we want is *freedom* – absolutely requires our honest recognition of the moral truth about ourselves. Here is that truth. Attend to it! Amen.