

**Avoiding Anger**

August 29, 2021

**James 1:17-27**

*<sup>17</sup> Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. <sup>18</sup> In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.*

*<sup>19</sup> You must understand this, my beloved; let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; <sup>20</sup> for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.*

*<sup>21</sup> Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.*

*<sup>22</sup> But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.*

*<sup>23</sup> For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; <sup>24</sup> for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. <sup>25</sup> But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act — they will be blessed in their doing.*

*<sup>26</sup> If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. <sup>27</sup> Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*



Today we begin a new worship series called “Doers of the Word”. Working primarily from the book of James, we will spend five Sundays seeking to better understand the call to live out our faith in tangible and life-giving ways. Today we begin with “Avoiding Anger”. Over the course of the next four weeks, we will also consider these messages: “Making Distinctions”, “Taming the Tongue”, “Root of Conflict”, and “Power of Prayer”. Each Sunday we will hear James’ charge to not only have a strong faith but to live it out in the world, drawing others towards Jesus Christ. James invites us to have an outward focus for our faith, providing real help to our neighborhoods and communities, lifting up individuals and families. A few weeks ago, we began thinking about how we are living well in our communities and within our relationships. This theme will continue throughout this series from the book of James. During the series I will also spend some time each week around the topic of foster care and adoption. This focus for this beginning of the school year will highlight a need in our community and in our area, providing us with some tangible ideas on how to practice and live out our faith to be doers of the word. As we begin this morning, let us begin with a word of prayer...



As we begin in James 1 today, please turn with me to verse seventeen. This morning’s message is called “Avoiding Anger”. In these words today we will also connect into the theme of this new series, called “Doers of the Word”.

James is believed to be the brother of Jesus. After Jesus' death he came to a saving faith and became one of the prominent leaders of the church in Jerusalem. He grew up around Jesus, listening to his words, watching his example from afar as Jesus began his ministry. While we do not know much about the relationship between Jesus and James, we do know that the teachings and witness of Jesus have a huge impact on James' life. Soon after Jesus' death and resurrection, James' faith caught fire. He became an active doer of the word. Something that had taken root long before came alive inside of James, leading him to become a good and faithful servant of the risen Lord. James had always heard Jesus' call to live out a life of love, but he had never stepped into that role, had never begun to live out his faith. It was as if he heard the message on Sunday and then went back to worldly living the rest of the week.

In verses 22 through 24, this is what James is talking about. At least in large part, James is writing from his own personal experience with his faith. Here we read these words: *"But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like"*. During our quiet time or during Sunday School or during youth group or during church, we can envision the person that God created each of us to be. We can see who or what God wants us to be. After Jesus' death, James looked in the mirror and did not like what he saw. He saw an empty spirit. Yes, he went to the temple each Saturday. Yes, he offered the prescribed sacrifices at the correct times.

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James 1: 22-24

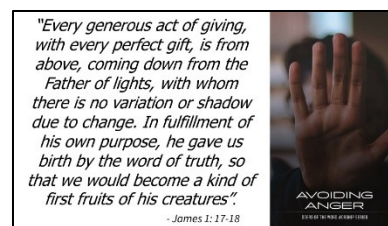


Yes, he was a dutiful son. Yet James knew, when he looked within his soul, that his motivation for all these things came from a sense of duty and obligation. In your journey of faith, have you ever been there? I know I have been there and would fathom a guess that some here today are here out of a sense of duty or obligation. In that place we come to church or serve or whatever out of that sense of obligation and duty. Those feelings raise up anger and resentment when we are forced or feel forced to comply and raise up guilt and shame when we shirk our duty, our responsibility. When our faith is motivated by the wrong things, eventually we end up with a dead faith or an angry heart.

In that moment, though, James looked beyond what he saw in the mirror and remembered the words of hope, the words of life, the words of healing, the words of acceptance and love that Jesus preached and preached. Maybe for the first time, James heard the Holy Spirit speaking those words to him, into his heart. James found relationship, he found faith, he found purpose in his life. Avoiding the anger that comes so easily when our faith is forced or coerced or fake, James chose to no longer deceive himself. In meekness and gentleness James chose to receive God's steadfast love, his unending mercy and grace. Doing so, James felt his soul restored. He felt hope alive within. Knowing the fullness of his salvation, James sought to live out the word implanted by Christ in his soul.



Turning to the opening verses, verses seventeen and eighteen, we can sense James writing from this place of new birth and fresh faith. In these verses we read again these words: *"Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose, he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures"*. Having found an active and generous faith himself, James acknowledges his new birth as a gift from the Father above. Faith, salvation, mercy – all gifts from God. Nothing to do to earn these. They are freely given to all who proclaim faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Looking into that mirror and now seeing himself as a new creation in Christ, the word of truth, James recognizes God's purpose being worked out in his own life as he becomes a first fruit of Jesus, given in service to the building of the kingdom of God. God's gift of salvation through the good news of Jesus Christ was a first fruit, a foretaste, of the redemptive plan that will eventually encompass all of creation. Knowing salvation as a foretaste of the promise to be realized one day, Christians live in the world as a witness to this hope.



Yet James is also aware of the struggle that it was within himself. He can still remember looking in the mirror and seeing dead eyes staring back. The transformation process that God works out in each new believer is not simple or without difficulty. New birth, whether physical or spiritual, is a painful process.

During spiritual rebirth, this is another time when anger can rise up in the new believer. Change is always hard. Dying to self is not usually pleasant in the moment. Leaving behind our old life and the things of this world is a challenging process.



Turning to the next verses we see James acknowledging this hard part of the process. In verses nineteen through 21 James writes, *"You must understand this, my beloved; let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore, rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls"*. My beloved... such words of compassion and empathy. Such words of encouragement. The heart of these verses is simple yet difficult, just like the process of transformation: *"be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger"*. These three little practices are so vital to our Christian witness. Here James is drawing upon his

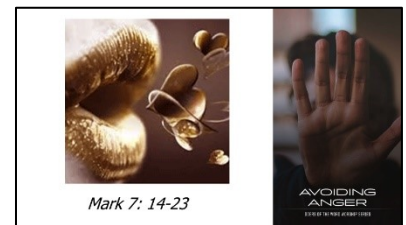


Jewish upbringing too. The admonition to display wisdom by listening much and talking little is found throughout Jewish wisdom teaching on speech and anger. For example, in Proverbs 17:28 we read, *"Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue"*. Many of the wisdom writings link hasty speech with unrighteous anger. Modern admonitions such as "count to ten" before responding in a heated situation would apply well to this arena too. When we are quick to listen, understanding well what the person before us is saying and meaning, when we are patient with our response, carefully considering our

words and how they might be received, then we are less likely to speak in anger. Speaking in anger certainly does not produce God's righteousness. It is just the opposite – speaking in anger leads to unrighteousness. James' point here is quite simple: human anger does not produce the behavior that is pleasing to God. For James and his Jewish audience, obedience to God's will and ways was what pleased God. Adding a layer was his understanding of Jesus' life and witness, manifest in his new birth. Living into who and what God created us to be, living into the image of God within each of us – these should be our response to God, our grateful response to our loving God.

Connecting back to last week's passage from Paul, speaking in anger tears down relationships; it does not build them up. When we are tempted to speak words of anger, then we must remember to draw upon the strength that we find when we wear the breastplate of righteousness. Then we guard our hearts and the hearts of those we are interacting with. James urges us, therefore, to rid ourselves of *"all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness"*. Perhaps James is also recalling one of Jesus' teachings.

In Mark 7 Jesus speaks of the condition of the heart. Beginning in verse fourteen Jesus shares these words: *"Listen to me, all of you, and understand. There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile..."*

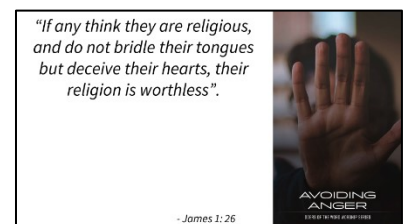


*Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?... It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person".* For James, if we rid our hearts of all evil, then what resides in our hearts and then comes out from our mouths will be righteous and undefiled.



Returning to our passage for today, picking up again in verse 26, James addresses the consequences and impact of an evil heart and an uncontrolled tongue.

James chooses the image of a bridle in a horse's mouth as the illustration for this part of the passage. The bridle, along with the bit, controlled the horse. It is a great image of both control and direction. For James, a person's ability to control the tongue indicates not only the condition of their heart but also the whole direction of their lives. This section also ties back into what we talked about earlier – coming to church or youth group or whatever out of a sense of obligation or duty. In verse 26 James writes, *"If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless".* In James' day, worthless religion would have been the outward practice of religious ceremonies, simply going through the motions. Failure to control the tongue falls in the same category for James.

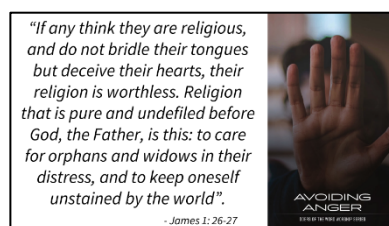




True religion, real faith, would reveal itself in the way one chose to control their tongue, speaking truth, avoiding angry and harsh speech. If we think we are faithful yet speak in anger, then we are deceiving ourselves. Our faith, our religion, according to James, is worthless.

James closes with a summary of what one aspect of “true worship” of God could involve. In verse 27 James states: *"Religion that is*

*pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world"*. Here James



chooses to elevate the care of the helpless as an example of faith that is true and pure and undefiled. The plight of and care for widows and orphans was both a common theme throughout the Jewish scriptures and amongst the current audience to whom James writes. In the ancient world, the absence of money-making possibilities for most women and the lack of any kind of social welfare meant that widows and orphans were helpless to provide for themselves. A mark of Israel’s obedience to God would have been their special concern for the orphans and widows.

In Isaiah 1:16-17, God directs the people: *"Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow"*.

These words are echoed in our passage today from James – to rid ourselves of sordidness and wickedness, to be pure and undefiled, to care for orphans and widows in their distress. In Psalm 68, verse five, God is described as a "*father to the fatherless and defender of widows*". God's concern is, of course, not limited to just orphans and widows. The "helpless" in our world today could include immigrants trying to make their way, those in third-world countries struggling for a basic existence, those wrestling with issues of poverty and homelessness, those with handicaps and other disabilities, and those dealing with addictions and other forms of imprisonment, just to name a few of those who find a special place in the heart of God. I am cognizant that some of these groups are potential hot button topics. Immigration, homelessness, addiction – none are easy topics to address and each one is very complex. While we may each differ on how we see and feel about some of these topics, the charge to care for the least of these remains. Avoiding anger and similar negative emotions keeps us focused on living out our faith well in the greater community, caring for the least of these.

Living with a pure and undefiled heart, seeking to live out our faith in ways that are pleasing to God, we seek as a community of faith to bring healing to our broken world and to offer prayers of intercession for those who are suffering in our communities. In our passage today James focused in on the orphans and widows. Over the course of the next four weeks, we will focus in on the orphans in our communities. We will learn about this vulnerable population and we will learn how we can care well for those in foster care and for those in the adoption process. Some may be led to be a part of the system that cares for such as these.

While foster care or adoption may not be God's plan for you, maybe your role will be to pray for and offer other forms of support. Maybe you can do something as simple as watching the kids for a few hours so the foster parents can enjoy a much-needed "date night". I am excited about sharing more information each week and seeing how God will be at work in and through the people of Grace United Methodist Church.

To care for and to love such as these would be to live into the image of God inside each of us – just as Israel sought to do in caring for the orphans and widows. To care for and to love such as these would be to share the blessings and gifts that God has given to each of us, that God has rained down upon each of us. As James understood, we too must understand. These gifts of love were not just for James' benefit, nor are they just for our benefit. He understood, as we must, that the gifts that we have been blessed with are not just for ourselves. They are also for the building up of others, for the care of the orphan and widow and all others who are helpless, for the establishment of the kingdom of God here on earth. As we seek to avoid anger, living as faithful witnesses in this world, may all we think and say and do bring God the glory this week. Amen and amen.

**GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. When have you become a “doer” instead of simply being a “hearer” of the word? How have you been blessed in the doing?
- 2) *Pray*. How have you struggled with anger or similar emotions concerning the care for “such as these”? Pray for God to transform your heart.
- 3) *Study*. Read James 1:9-16. When have you been deceived by riches or other temptations? How have you been able to overcome?