

Slow to Anger

James 1:17-27

It seems to me that the writer of James may have been listening to people say that they are spiritual, but not religious. Listen to what he says: "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above." This claim is the most important starting point for thinking about our religion and how we interact with each other because it grounds human responsibility within the divine initiative. God cares for the whole world and creates it anew through the divine Word. God nurtures us, gives us gifts, and provides direction for our lives, often using human agency to do so. In God there is constancy of care and purpose, and no shadow of turning. God supplies the good things in people's lives (v. 17): from this basic affirmation, James instructs Christians about daily life. He names the things he is most concerned about. For example, James is keenly aware of the power of human speech both to build up and to destroy. In the vernacular, he says, "Be slow to use the tongue, or bad-mouth others, or go on the warpath, or raise Cain."

James was a keen observer of human nature, and he paid close attention to the details of everyday living. He noticed the generous acts, the small gifts, the gestures and the words we use. He knew that such small acts are the nuts and bolts of everyday life, holding together the scaffold on which we build community and the social order. Why was he especially concerned with the way we use words? Because they can make a big difference in the way we relate to one another. He knew that our words reveal something about our motivation, intention, belief, and emotional life. Our emotional life grows from our earliest relationships with others and with the God who is Other. It

also emerges from our relationship with our selves. Anger, for example, is an emotion that can be destructive. It can also be an emotion that alerts us to wrongdoing. Thus anger can be channeled in ways that lead to protest and improvement, so that we must make a decision about its meaning in our lives. James knows this and shows us his concern.

We use words to express ourselves; to convince and convict ourselves and others; to describe, name, blame, or label things; to win arguments; to sell an idea or object; to lecture; to expound a point, explain things into or out of existence, persuade, condole, console, counsel; to announce, denounce, deceive; to ask someone to marry; to declare war and make peace; to sentence someone, diagnose a condition, analyze a problem, deliberate or negotiate a deal. We cannot get along without words. Words can alarm, harm, uplift, inspire, degrade, or silence someone. They can reveal our inner thoughts. Where would we be without words?

According to James, we cannot bring about God's righteousness through revengeful or evil speech, which only spreads destruction. Get rid of that way of being in the world, James counsels. Destructive anger can poison our own lives and that of the community as well. It cannot give new meaning to life or inspire creativity. Words that serve such anger are worthless. Destructive acts can never be the means for illuminating God's presence or making room for divine goodness in our lives. They cannot produce God's righteousness.

James urged his readers to be quick to listen, slow to speak. James undoubtedly sat through meetings or conversations where contention fractured the community. He observed that human anger did not and will not produce results that make things right. James is intense: "rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness," he admonishes (v. 21). On the

other hand, he says, listening and being listened to open the door to the righteousness of God for the community.

James does not deny the importance or strength of anger. He does not tell us to "swallow" or "stuff" it. Rather, he encourages us to transform anger into a virtue. Be quick to listen, he says, and slow to speak and (therefore) slow to anger. This is hard work, especially for those of us who are quick to judge, impatient with ourselves and with others, especially when we are in disagreement or have already made up our minds. To resist such impatience requires discipline. "Rid yourself of all sordidness, and the growth of wickedness," James counsels (v. 21). Reverse your direction. Cultivate the virtues of a discerning and welcoming spirit. James counsels meekness, not weakness. James calls us to a standard that is higher than the one we already have.

James counsels us to a practical morality that is quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. What we do matters, and what comes out of our mouths can make a difference, for good and for ill. But our actions speak louder than our words. Words may touch our emotional life and help us anticipate what is going to happen. But our actions establish the structures of meaning that build our worlds. Through faithful activity we create and re-create ourselves in trustworthy ways and help build worlds worthy of trust. Actions add value to our words and give them life. In this way, morality has the practical aim of creating relevance, meaning, and integrity in the world.

James calls us to make a distinction between worthless and worthwhile religious morality. By asking God's guidance and by acknowledging and taking responsibility for our own anger, we may exercise self-control and become decision makers, architects of relationships, and builders of the beloved community. This is what James requires of us. James does not ask us

to undergo psychoanalysis or psychotherapy, or to engage in fundamental character reconstruction. Rather, he calls us to be responsible, taking seriously our emotional lives, our religious faith, and our behavior. We can envision ourselves as early signs of God's new creation. We can begin by embracing the whole of ourselves and taking responsibility for our constructive and destructive potentials. Living this way can increase our critical discernment. It can foster the development of persons and communities. Such living, when joined by the faithfulness of many others, can become a strong current that helps to transform the world for Christ. **Archie Smith Jr.**

Martin Luther understood the necessity of expressing the gospel of Jesus Christ to our neighbors in love. James speaks of the "law of liberty" (v. 25). In a similar way, Luther wrote, "A Christian is a free lord, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant, subject to all."

John Calvin read this scripture and gave his contribution to modern society through his creation of welfare institutions as the city of Geneva during the Reformation period had many poor, widows, and orphans. Calvin himself came to Geneva as a French religious refugee. In his *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* (1541), Calvin established the General Hospital and designated the offices of deacon and deaconess to supervise citizens' works of mercy as the "doers of the pure religion" in care of the poor. **Haruko Nawata Ward**

So you and I can't be "Gallery Christians" as this represent a contradiction in terms (cf. Matt. 7:24-27). The Golden Rule contains the crucial provision "do to others" (Matt. 7:12; cf. Luke 10:37d). The Methodist minister Sangster turned the deep cellars of a church into shelters during World War II. He slept there five years supervising the welfare of thousands, putting service ahead of services.

By way of illustration, we don't want to be like the man who began cutting his grass on a scorching Saturday. He had a lot of lawn. Perspiring, he thought how good a tall glass of lemonade would taste. He went inside into the air-conditioning, poured an oversized glass, and settled into a big easy chair. He decided to look up the word "weed" in the dictionary and found "any plant growing where it was not wanted." He went back outside, surveyed the lawn, and decided that every blade stood exactly where he wanted it! He rationalized away doing.

Some other Christians have discovered a social conscience but have dismissed personal morals, a great gain and a disastrous loss. Bunyan characterizes Mr. Looking Both Ways as having a sense of what is right but a love for what is wrong! The church would do well to find a renewed passion for troubled children, to stand behind Christian homes for children, and to salute parents who adopt children. Some churches can develop programs for "latchkey kids." The Baptist New Testament scholar Raymond Brown observed that those who scorn "do-gooders" in the name of biblical religion do so by scorning James 1:27. Given this wise dual insistence, we think of a Christian as a person for others and as pure in heart. **Peter Rhea Jones**

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