

Pure Religion

James 1:19-26 | Jonathan K. Dodson

We're looking at James in order to become a wise people, a whole people, a community that flourishes. And throughout history, societies have embraced a set of words to promote their thriving. What Hammurabi's Code was to the Babylonians, or the U.S. Constitution is to Americans, the word of God is to Christians—guiding, authoritative words to shape us. But every society comes along and changes the words. Why? Because the words never got into them. James shows us two ways the word shapes us—internally and externally.

Slow to Speak, Quick to Listen

At the outset, we see that God's word is unlike any other word. It doesn't just guide or legislate; it **"brings us forth as a kind of firstfruits"** (1:18). Bring us forth is a pregnancy word, means to swell, like a rounded tummy, bringing new life into the world. God's word births a new humanity. How? You believe a word, you believe the promise that if you give up on a life centered on self, and replace it with life centered around Christ, you'll become new. The thing about this newness is that we don't always feel it or act on it. That's because his word is a seed. As "the word implanted", it has to be watered for new life to grow. If a plant doesn't receive enough sunlight and water, it curls up and dies. But before a plant dies, have you noticed how it will bend toward a window for light? Why? It's made to grow, to reach out for life, and so are you. We need to **"receive the word implanted which is able to save [also translated "heal"] our souls"** (21). The soul is the Hebrew way to refer to the whole person, internal and external—thoughts, emotions, actions. Here James shows us how the word shapes the interior of the soul. **This interior world contains our private thoughts, which make judgments about ourselves, God and others all the time. When our judgments are self-centered, they come out in anger.** Now, if your not Mr. Furious you're probably excusing yourself right now, but hold on. What do *you do* when someone does or says something you don't like? When you think: "That's not right, man!" When my youngest daughter doesn't get her right to the legos, she screams till she's hoarse (Mine!). My other daughter curls in, literally, like a ball when her "rights" aren't met. I'm more like my youngest. The quiet person withdraws, escapes (food, TV), or sinks into doldrums in self-vindicating thought. The loud person just rips someone's head off or runs them down to others to vindicate their perspective. Later on James says an unrestrained tongue sets fires with selfish thoughts, wreaking destruction in the church. Either way (Mr. Furious or Mrs. Quiet), beneath the surface, we are set on self-justification so we, *complain, bicker, nag, blame, rant, gossip, and so on*, all forms of anger, ways to relocate blame. What to do with anger? **"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"** (19). Everybody has anger issues; James gives a two-part solution. *First, be quick to hear and slow to speak.* The introverts win! Did you know that some introverted children get so mad that they hold their breath for an entire minute, turn red, and then pass out, *without saying a single word*? James isn't talking about mere silence. You can steam silently. Anger is inside you/soul, and if you don't know how the word heals you, how it reshapes your thoughts, you'll eventually pass out or pop, and cause a lot of damage along the way. Be quick to hear. Have you ever seen a mother grab her child by the chin, turn their head, and say, "Listen with your face"? True listening means

hearing the person not just the problem. It requires empathy. The empathetic person comes down out of the judgment seat (where they drag into court) to get in another's shoes. I listen to people a lot. When I sit down with people I listen, ask questions, and try to understand, to see and feel what they see and feel. I'm not always good at it, but if I'm doing a good job, it means I'll let a lot of sin and bad theology flow right past me in order to understand what they are going through. (Job, words to the wind.) "Truth" people have a hard time with this because they tend to value truth over understanding. The person who *listens* holds onto both. As you understand, you'll know what to come back to and what to let go. As your understanding grows, you'll know how to minister a word of truth that brings life. (I often pray Prov 25:11). Bottom-line, to avoid anger, we need to be quick to listen, *to recognize the person behind the problem*, and make it our goal to understand them. You need to climb out of the judgment seat and get into their shoes. But what do we do if they just keep rubbing us wrong? Give up your rights. Oh, easy, right? Stick with me.

The Righteousness of God

*The second part of James' solution is to know that anger doesn't "produce" the righteousness of God. What does that mean? Does it mean anger doesn't make you morally righteous?—a no brainer—or does he mean something else? This phrase, "righteousness of God", can mean several things. In the immediate context, James is talking about moral and wicked character, but we also need to remember James loves to motivate us with future reward, with eschatological truth: *the crown, the firstfruits, wisdom from above, the day of the Lord*. The ROG can also refer to God's end-time verdict regarding our status before him. James is reminding us that, in Christ, the verdict was delivered before the case is heard. The cross of Christ declares our innocence before we are resurrected to face our judgment. Paul says it like this: [he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God](#) (2 Cor 5:21). On the cross, Jesus bore the Father's righteous anger for our unrighteous anger to make us righteous without anger. So, being angry doesn't line up with our end-time verdict in Jesus—righteous. So we're meant to see that getting angry isn't righteous *but also* that it doesn't line up with our end-time verdict. What difference does this make? A lot. Let's say you are listening to someone and what they're saying is offensive, you feel the need to justify yourself, to prove that you are right. You don't want to be angry but you're having a hard time. But then you remember that you've already been declared righteous, you've already been justified, that Jesus suffered for your early innocent verdict. Now you can let barbs fly and false accusations land because your reputation is hidden in Christ. You find deeper reserves for patience and understanding, because you've already been mercifully vindicated. *And if you are wrong*, you can receive the blame and not despair because your standing doesn't change before the Father. You can actually be wrong or misunderstood and still be secure. Why, because your justification has been rolled back from the end into the middle of history on a bloody cross. Your wrongdoing was punished in Christ, and as a result, God declares you innocent. *See, James two-part solution works because the second part makes the first part possible. We can be quick to hear, slow to speak FOR the faith of a man works toward the righteousness of God. The opposite of anger is contentment, trust, in something greater. James is trying get us to set our gaze on the kingdom, to see ourselves as God sees us in Christ—righteous—some of you need to get that into your bones, get your face off your feet, you finger**

out of others faces, and then get on with being that person. He wants us set our gaze on the ROG, where our end-time verdict echoes off the golden walls of the New Jerusalem. If you invite the word of God in, to address the anger inside, it will actually heal you of self-righteousness and release into his righteousness.

Law of Liberty

The word shapes our interior life but also addresses our exterior actions. James says be a doer not just a hearer of the word. He points us to “perfect law, the law of liberty” (25) and says do the word. Now, progressive Austinites shrink back at words like law, commands, finding a phrase like “law of liberty” contradictory (responsible hipster). Liberty is freedom from constraints, people think. Laws get in the way of freedom. But if you think this out, you’ll know it’s not true. If we didn’t have laws against driving however fast you want to, we’d have a much higher collision fatality rate. Laws can promote life. But you say, I don’t agree with some of the laws in the Bible. Well, as Keller points out, you’re making an awfully big assumption that your perspective is better than God’s. You’re assuming that God, who sees all and knows all, would never contradict anything you have to say. You’re placing your finite vantage point above his and saying, with all your 20, 30, 40 years experience, I am universally right, and God has had it wrong all along. The arrogance of our historical-cultural moment is staggering. Years from now, people will look back on your views and say they were so backwards and archaic because they are always evolving. James reminds us this is a word from above, that doesn’t change; it has authority over us, and that’s good; it’s for our life. I’ve shared this analogy before. Authority is for our flourishing. Think about every single musician in an orchestra who restricts their “freedom” from playing however they want in order to play the notes the conductor sets. What happens? They flourish; they create a sound they could never create on their own. They practice a law of liberty, they accept constraints knowing that it results in the freedom to make more stunning music together than they could ever make on their own. The law shapes our outward actions to make music to the Father of lights. How? James says it like this: [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](#) (26-27). Now **progressive** people like to jump to this text to show that adoption and foster care are “pure religion”, as if its what really matters in the Christian life, and while it is important, as is our care for the marginalized and oppressed in general, it doesn’t receive place of importance for James. He says pure religion—the word is worship—true worship is visiting orphans and widows *and* keeping yourself unstained from the world. He doesn’t give special preference to social justice. But many people do. They’re all in on social justice but peace out on biblical sexual ethics. Christians who do this aren’t any more distinct than secular, non-profit volunteers. Worship that is pure includes pure living. Peterson: “We have so much more experience in sin than in goodness that a writer has far more imaginative material to work with in presenting a bad character than a good person.” Oh for more imaginatively good, pure, and true material from the church, from which great novels can be written and great cities be made! Now, **conservative** Christians will read right over the justice verses and jump straight to not being stained by the world. They’ll be all about sexual ethics (while failing to be slow to speak and quick to listen), *and* peace out

on social justice and care for the poor. James says that person's worship is worthless, empty. The word of God shaves off the left and the right to make a people right in the middle, a people *who care for the poor and live for the pure* (Ps 146:9; Amos 2:7), social justice *and* moral fortitude, both words to live by, wisdom from above, law of liberty, restraints for human flourishing! A gospel people bring both together because both are part of their new nature. The gospel creates new life to be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. The firstfruit was the best of the Hebrew harvest dedicated to God. It was the first taste of the harvest. The word of God comes along to shape us, inside and out, *to be first taste of God's kingdom*. How? Revelation 14 says those who keep themselves sexually pure, who *follow the Lamb wherever he goes*, they redeemed are the firstfruits for God—moral purity. 1 Corinthians 15 tells us that Jesus resurrection body is a firstfruits of the new humanity—physical/social transformation. Jesus doesn't divide the physical world and the moral world; he keeps them together for all of human flourishing. As first of the firstfruits, he pioneers the new humanity. He makes us a foretaste of social and moral purity. The Lamb for our redemption and the Lion for our resurrection brings us forth into true humanity, to live within his moral and social boundaries for true freedom. Receive Christ, let his word shape you, and you'll flourish; you'll make music you never could. Resist and you brown and die. Set your gaze on the kingdom, and his righteousness, look in the mirror of the word, and go be yourself, free to live a whole, flourishing life filled with moral rectitude and social justice. The gospel compels you to be imaginatively good. Let's point to the kingdom, bend toward the light and thrive.