

WHERE DO YOU STAND WITH YOUR FAITH? #3
“Quick to Listen, Slow to Speak, Slow to Anger”
Psalm 34:4-14, Luke 6:46-49, James 1:19-27
September 17 & 18, 2022

“In his book *Uh-Oh*, essayist Robert Fulghum wrote of the summer of 1959 when he was working at the Feather River Inn near Blairsden, California, in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Just out of college, he was hot-headed and free with his opinions. One week he grew angry because the employees were being served the same thing for lunch every single day - two wieners, a mound of sauerkraut, and stale rolls. Furthermore, the cost of the meals was deducted from the employees’ pay checks. On Friday night he learned that the same fare would be on the employee menu for two more days.

“Fulghum, who had already taken a strong dislike to the hotel’s owner, vented his anger to the night auditor, a man named Sigmund Wollman. *I declared that I have had it up to here; that I am going to get a plate of wieners and sauerkraut and go and wake up the owner and throw it on him. I am sick and tired of this crap and insulted and nobody is going to make me eat wieners and sauerkraut for a whole week and make me pay for it and who does he think he is anyway and how can life be sustained on wieners and sauerkraut and this is un-American...*

“The whole hotel stinks anyhow. Fulghum continued in his tirade, and the horses are all nags and the guests are all idiots and I’m packing my bags and heading off for Montana where they never even heard of wieners and sauerkraut and wouldn’t feed that stuff to pigs.

“Fulghum raved on for about twenty minutes, delivering his monologue at the top of his lungs and with much profanity.

“Sigmund Wollman, who had spent three years in a German death camp during World War II, just sat, watching and listening. Finally he said, ‘Fulchum, are you finished?’

“No. Why?”

“Lissen, Fulchum. Lissen me, lissen me. You know what’s wrong with you? It’s not wieners and kraut and it’s not the boss and it’s not the chef and it’s not this job.’

“So what’s wrong with me?”

“Fulchum, you think you know everything, but you don’t. If you break your neck, if you have nothing to eat, if your home is on fire - **then** you got a problem. Everything else is inconvenience. Life *is* inconvenient. Life *is* lumpy. Learn to separate the inconveniences from the real problems. You will live longer. And you will not annoy people like me so much. Good night.’

“And with those words, he waved the young man off to bed.

“Before we lose our cool, it often helps to ask: Problem? Or inconvenience?”¹

It’s a common problem in our society today, where individuals get so ramped up on some subject, or some event, that we are quick to speak, quick to anger, and very slow to listen. We all have our own opinions about everything, and often we don’t want to hear about anyone else’s opinions. We are so set in the way we think about something that we’re not ready to listen to another person’s perspective, but we’re ready to spout out our own side of the story, and with lots of passion behind it, often leading us into anger at anyone who might disagree with us.

Robert Fulghum is not the first person to blast another because of the inconvenience they were going through. And sadly, he won’t be the last one to go over the top on an inconvenience, either.

What we need to do is to carefully consider what our inconveniences are and what our problems are. Then seek to change the problems and let the inconveniences go.

In order to start doing this, I invite you to listen to our next segment of the book of James, chapter 1:19-27. Listen carefully. (READ James 1:19-27)

The book of James wants us to practice on letting the Word of God be active in us today, thereby calling us to “*be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry...*” (James 1:19). James wants us to be open to receive God’s Word in our life so that we know the truth, and then live that truth in such a way that positively impacts those around us.

But if we are so quick to spout off our own opinions, rather than listen to what the TRUTH IS according to God’s Word, then we end up being a lot like how the writer of Proverbs describes a fool.

¹ (Robert J Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations & Quotes*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000] pg. 31-32)

Here are a few segments of the wisdom of Proverbs:

“The wise store up knowledge, but the mouth of a fool invites ruin.” (10:14)

“The prudent keep their knowledge to themselves, but a fool’s heart blurts out folly.” (12:23)

“All who are prudent act with knowledge, but fools expose their folly.” (13:16)

“A fool’s mouth lashes out with pride, but the lips of the wise protect them.” (14:3)

“The tongue of the wise adorns knowledge, but the mouth of the fool gushes folly.” (15:2)

“He who restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. Even a fool, when he keeps silent, is considered wise. When he closes his lips, he is considered prudent.” (17:27-28)

“Fools find no pleasure in understanding but delight in airing their own opinions.” (18:2)

“It is to one’s honor to avoid strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel.” (20:3)

It would probably benefit us to at some point work our way through Proverbs. But since there are 31 chapters in Proverbs, it is a good practice for us to read one chapter each day, aligning with the day of the month. I’m certain that by doing so, we might quickly learn the contrast between the righteous and the wicked, the wise and the foolish.

God desires us to be wise people, willing to listen before we speak, and controlling our anger, “because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires” (James 1:20).

Even if we know the truth of God’s Word, it is always in the best interest of any discussion that we hear what the other is saying before we blast them away with God’s Word. Once we hear about the other person’s opinion, then we can carefully lead them to the truth of the Word without blasting them away and thereby distancing them from the opportunity to learn the truth.

We heard the same thing in our Old Testament lesson of Psalm 34:4-14. David tells his readers: *“Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord. Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days, keep your tongue from evil and your lips from telling lies. Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it” (34:11-14).*

To learn the “*fear of the Lord*” we must first listen and come to understand what the Word of God is. That doesn’t happen if we are so full of ourselves that we run off at the mouth, stating only the ignorance that we know. It happens as we close our mouth, quiet our minds and really listen to God’s Word, thereby letting it resound within us, and bring the necessary changes within us first, before we proudly speak folly. We’re invited to listen to the wisdom of Truth.

How many relationships could be saved if both parties had the opportunity to speak their hearts before the other one jumps all over their beliefs? How many marriages could be saved if there was adequate time for congenial conversation covering the tough issues that we face today? How many sleepless nights could be eliminated if we would only close our mouths and open our ears for a little bit to clearly understand what the other person is saying before we have to jump in and correct the other according to what we think is right? There is wisdom in being “*quick to listen and slow to speak.*”

Sadly, the norm for today is that if someone begins to say something that we disagree with, or that is absolutely inaccurate, we quickly jump in, cut them off and state what we think is right. It only angers both parties and nothing can come to consensus because everyone has to be right. We end up trying to correct an inconvenience, thereby creating a real problem.

Therefore, James tells us, “*get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the Word planted in you, which can save you*” (James 1:21). He’s not saying that we need to cleanse everyone else first so that we can begin to make changes. He’s saying that we need to first clean up our own act, riding ourselves of pride and arrogance and envy and strife and wickedness, so that we can let the Word of God guide our hearts to address the problems at hand. Who cares if a person doesn’t have all the details of a particular account completely accurate? **Consider building up the relationship that you have with the other person instead of belittling them with corrections** of the details they may have missed, lest you create anger in the other and the relationship is destroyed.

If we are to receive the Word of God into our lives we must strip off the old clothes of “*all moral filth and the evils*” that so tightly bind us, and humble ourselves to be listeners instead of speakers. That

doesn't mean that we become spineless and weak, but rather that we become docile and submissive instead of haughty and rebellious. We let the Word of God rule in our hearts so that we can appropriately address the issues before us. In that way, the Word of God saves you from acting the fool and bringing disgrace to yourself.

And James goes on by saying, "*Do not merely listen to the Word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says*" (Ja. 1:22). **If we only listen to the Word or just read the Word, and yet not allow it to penetrate our minds or move our spirits, then we treat those words as empty and meaningless**, and it means that we really aren't listening. It would be like listening to a radio show or reading a newspaper article and then promptly forgetting it because we really weren't interested in it anyway. Nothing moves in us to make any changes so the words fall empty to us.

James is adamant that we need to have the Word of God active and living within us, guarding our hearts and minds, keeping us solid in our faith in Jesus Christ, and helping us to be "*slow to speak and slow to anger*" (Ja. 1:19). He is stating is once again from the words of Jesus Himself that we heard in Luke 6:46-49.

Jesus asked the pointed question to those who followed Him, "*Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?*" (Lu. 6:46). By not following His words, it means that we really aren't listening to Him, OR that we really don't respect Him as our Lord and Master. **We demonstrate our faith in Jesus by how we receive and implement His Word into our lives.**

The two examples, one of a faithful follower and the other of a non-follower, should really help us to see the end results of each situation. The one who listens and puts into practice the Words of Jesus can stand up strong against the storms of life when they hit us with all their fury. The faith we've developed by putting Jesus' Words into action within our lives helps us to stand strong during the storms.

The one who listens, but fails to act upon Jesus' Word never has any depth of foundation with Jesus, so when the storms of life hit, their lives literally collapse in upon them and they are destroyed.

The only encouragement and support we can hope to have is by putting Jesus' Word into our hearts and begin living them out in our everyday lives. Without His words in us, we are lost.

James puts it a little differently, but says the very same thing. *“Anyone who listens to the Word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it - not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it - they will be blessed in what they do”* (Ja. 1:23-25).

For the first person who listens, but does not do what it says, it is an “out of sight, out of mind” person. If they don't need it or want it, there is no need to keep reading or studying it, so it quickly disappears from their memory. The old saying, “Use it or lose it,” comes to mind. **Unless we practice the Word and let it become a part of our daily lifestyle, it has no use to us, so we put it out of our minds.** And then, when the struggles and trials and hardships of life hit us, they are no use to us because we do not have them living in us.

You see, listening to the Word, or just reading the Word is not an end in itself, ready to supply us with all that we need. Just listening to or reading the Truth does us no good UNLESS we put the truth that we've heard into action. We might read how to ride a bicycle, we can study how the bicycle works, we might even watch someone ride a bicycle, but all that information does us no good unless we actually get on the bicycle and put our feet upon the pedals and actually make the bicycle move.

We might listen to sermons about Jesus, we might read sermons about Jesus, we might even attend sermons about Jesus, but that does not mean that we know Jesus. Oh, we might know a lot of things ABOUT Jesus, but unless we actually do what Jesus says and follow His instructions, all that we know about Jesus does nothing for us. We have to first listen to His words, and then we have to trust His words and then practice His words if they are going to do anything for us in our lives. Only by doing what Jesus says and following His word throughout our lives are we able to find His blessings in our lives. Unless His word lives in us on a daily basis, everything we know about Him does us no good.

There are blessings for the person who listens to God's Word and then puts them into action, James tells us. And there's four reasons for all of this. 1) The person who intently looks at God's Word is the one who diligently desires to really know the full extent of that truth. This person wants to get to the bottom of the promises of God so that they might put their full trust in them as the sure foundation of their lives. **They truly want to understand all the benefits of God's Word for them**, and they dig in to comprehend every truth.

2) This is not just a one-time endeavor to put an argument to rest or to explore some single promise. **This person begins to delve deeply into God's Word in order to let God's Word surround them**. They are so intent upon following God at His Word, that they "meditate upon God's law day and night (Psalm 1:2) searching for the answers to questions that surround them. They so want to be pleasing to God that they expend the time and energy to really know God's Word and the meaning for it in their life.

3) **This person then diligently puts God's Word into their heart, not forgetting what it says**, but rather letting it percolate into everyday life so that they don't forget what they have learned, but rely upon it with every decision they make, every conversation they have, and every relationship they develop. This truth of God's Word begins to walk with them wherever they go and it begins to reflect on everything they do.

4) In that way, **the person who diligently seeks the truth of God's Word makes it a living part of their life**. Their words reflect God's truth living in them. Their choices indicate God's Word in them. Their business dealings model God's Word living in them. Their interactions with other people, even the ones who are difficult or the "enemy," demonstrate the living Word of God in them. They literally have God's Word alive in their life from the moment they wake up until the moment they fall asleep, and maybe even in their dreams.

That's the way that James is inviting us to interact and put into practice God's Word in our lives. And that's how he says that the individual becomes blessed in all they do and say. They're not just

spouting off worldly things that they've heard. They're not just treating others the way that the world says that they should treat others. They're not conforming to the things of this world in any such way. **They have become the living witness to the complete difference that the Word of God makes in their life.** And I will bet you that this person has learned how to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger, no matter what happens in their life. They are a person after God's own heart, and God blesses them abundantly in all their ways.

And this is precisely the way that James contrasts those "*who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues*" (Ja. 1:26). It is in stark contrast because the ones who are quick to speak often do so in order to make themselves look better than anyone else, and they are usually very critical of others. They may claim to "know Jesus" but they only deceive themselves because their actions betray their lack of real understanding of God's Word. These folks may make a big show of how religious they are, but their faith is only grass deep, and their foundation is easily turned over. So their professed religion is worthless because it gives no lasting support or encouragement, but is easily destroyed by the struggles of life. **We are encouraged to be slow to speak and slow to anger because our foundations are deep in the truth of God's Word imbedded in us.**

Finally, James encourages us to practice that faith in God's Word by making a positive difference in the world in which we live in. We are to be so strong in God's Word that our lives quickly influence those who are hurting or struggling tremendously in their life to bring joy and hope and life to them, too. And we are to practice God's Word so that we might protect ourselves and others from the evils that surround us in our life that are contrary to God and to His righteousness. Let's pray...

Father, thank You for Your Word that gives life to all who will faithfully follow it. Give us the desire to grow so close to You that Your Word impacts every aspect of our life, so that we are not superficial Christians, but deeply faithful followers of all Your commands. Enable us a life that is marked by love for others and holiness before You. And as we let Your Word live in us and through us, may we find ourselves quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.

Father, You know how much our world needs living witnesses of Your love and holiness. Give us the strength and courage to delight in Your will and Your way, and be able to demonstrate to many others the benefits of living for You. Thank You for calling each of us closer to You so that we might become men and women after Your own heart. This we pray in Jesus' Name. AMEN.