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Last week we started with vv22-25 going a little out of order. We needed to hear all that to understand what James says in vv19-21 & 26-27. James is writing to Christians who are scattered and under persecution. His concern is for their hearts not to be robbed of joy and filled with damaging anger. His concern is for their understanding of their stance with a holy, gracious, and unchanging god; how they need to emulate him in heart and life even in suffering. He reminds them that they are servants of a gracious king – his hope is for the name of Christ to be glorified in the lives of his subjects.

James reminds us that left to our own accord we segregate ourselves out by issues of class, wealth & poverty, and by simple differing views; we would naturally gather all those that think like us & shun others. We are predictable animals, we gather in holy huddles and say, 'This is how I feel about subject X! How do you feel?', and because we have gathered all like-minded people, we get the same answer. And we say, 'Oh, so you agree! Then we must be right, and they must be wrong!' All we've done is stayed safe; no challenge, status quo, pride bolstered, no growth. It fosters an us/them attitude (Rudyard Kipling poem 'Us & Them'). In gathering our like-minded forces are we really right? Or, are we trying to prove we are right? The Gospel is not about being 'right', it's about love and sacrifice, and James pushes us that way.

The Gospel forces me to think. James forces me to consider something beyond myself, my likes & dislikes, my ambitions & prejudices, etc. He forces me to think about what is God's heart? What moves God? What makes him weep, what makes him laugh? Most people don't think through their faith. They adopt whatever the local church has told them; 'There that's it, that's what I believe.' They don't question it, even when the message comes through a system of control and power guarding the status quo and through mouths they would never emulate. Why, because it is easier that way. If the Word of God can be relegated to Sunday mornings, and a Bible study during the week, then it never has to challenge the inner person. It never challenges how I feel, let alone how I act towards others. It never challenges my reactions in stress. It never challenges how I spend my money, whether I adopt children; give to the poor or tithe. It never makes me stop and think, am I giving my children too much at Christmas, shouldn't I be teaching them sacrifice for the needy? It never challenges how I feel towards someone when I disagree with them or that is different from me. Like we said last week, when the Gospel becomes relativistic, superstitious, emotional, merely theoretical, or a mixture of these, it has lost its power; it has become just a sub-culture that does nothing much for the Kingdom of God or us. And, that leaves us wanting to prove we are right instead of loving others in Christ.

Remember our question from last week, the same one Jesus asked his followers, 'Why do you call me Lord but do not do as I say?' Philippians 2 says that our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. So, the proposition for us today in this passage is be like Christ, which may not be like you. Therefore, the question becomes are you becoming like Christ, or are you making Christ like you? [Has Christ changed your world](#)

view affecting your beliefs, values, behavior and even artifacts? (put up the world view model in concentric circles and refer to it later).

In this passage James starts to give us real practical examples of how this internal assimilation of the principles of the perfect law, which is Christ, bleeds out into everyday living. He says, ¹⁹My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. ²¹Therefore, 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.

So, here we have some contrasting things; quick to listen, slow to speak, and quick to listen, slow to become angry. Someone once said (Zeno) said, 'We have two ears but only one mouth, so that we may hear more and speak less.' This is exactly the opposite of what we would normally do when confronted with a situation that naturally angers us. We have a knee jerk reaction built into us, but God has given us the Spirit to help us in bridling that. Bridling it for the reason that we value everyone as God's creation. The most mature and successful people I know are masters at listening. A successful leader (Demonax) was once asked how it is best for a man to rule, he said, 'Without anger, speaking little, and listening much.' Practical advice, when you're talking, you're not listening. We get into situations where we think we know what is going on, we don't ask questions, we don't clarify, and in the end we get nowhere with someone creating an emotional knot which cannot be undone.

The wise person, listens, clarifies what they hear, seeks understanding from the other, and does not react in anger, since it does not do any good to do so. But, let's stop and think for a second...is this just good ol' moral teaching? 'Be a good listener son, it's just the right thing to do and'll git ya far in life!' Because, honestly there are wise unbelievers that listen better than Christians I know.

And listeners usually fall into a few categories. The first category I would label the intellectual listener; there are those who seem to respect others doing their best to understand. They ask questions, they clarify; they don't seem to pass judgment even when there is disagreement. But in the end, they are not moved in their thinking; it's an intellectual exercise. These people say, 'Hmmm that is interesting you think that way, thank you for sharing.'

The second category are those who are good listeners because they have an agenda, the manipulative listener. This begs the question of them actually being good listeners, but at least they are clarifying to understand where a person is coming from, they are skilled at listening – they are salesmen. They shake their head and are sure to make eye contact; they understand the importance of body language in communication. In the end they are trying to size you up for who you are, getting to know you, so that they can sell you a product, but they did listen to some extent. They may say, 'Now I can see that you are a very deep guy, and that you value xyz, well let me show you something you may like.' They seem contrived in the end.

Yet there is also the non-listener; the angry person. They don't think and are reactionary twisting your words around. As your words go in they are filtered through a mesh of distrust and anger. We all know them, no need to elaborate.

Then there is the person who listens out of a biblical world view; the servant listener. The servant listener listens, not reacting in anger, because they're being Jesus; their heart is to sacrifice their pride and need to win the argument. The servant listener listens by throwing off all moral filth and evil that is prevalent in their own heart; the bitterness, the hatred, the lust, the coercive tendencies, the violent tendencies, the manipulative and prideful tendencies, all those things that keep us from really listening. The servant listener listens beyond his/her own ambitions and desires and is driven for love for the person in front of them. They value people because God values people. God serves people, God loves people, God sacrifices for people; they do likewise. They realize that this simple act of listening well, driven by God's word, is saving them and possibly the person in front of them. So their purpose in listening is not to be 'right' and drive their agenda. It is not to manipulate a person to their views and stance. It is not to subjugate or control. It's humility. This person realizes the ambiguity of life and their propensity to be wrong in a situation. They realize the depth of sin in their own heart and how that can hurt another. They view people as intelligent, loved, and valuable beings worthy of respect and honor although they may even disagree with the person. They realize that anger does not bring righteousness, they could be wrong, and it is hurtful to one of God's own anyway. It's not contrived, or manipulative, or coercive, or violent; that's maturity in Christ working itself out in relation with others.

So James does not allow us to stop at 'good moral teaching' – listening well to merely add to your understanding or intellect, or to manipulate someone to your position is not what James is talking about. James says that anger does not bring about righteousness. I don't think we can take his words to mean that we never are angered by something. There are things that should anger us, but I think he is speaking to how that anger is channeled and expressed. It is one thing to react in anger, it is another thing to stop and say, maybe there is something I am missing, and because this other person is a child of God as well, I will listen. It is one thing to stand with an attitude that I am right, only interested in arguing, than it is to say, I have my convictions, but I could be wrong. I am sure you have met people like this, so let me ask, who do you want to be around, and who do you want to be like? It is the last person, the servant listener that James wants us to become.

Proverbs 10:19 says, 'When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is prudent'. Or, 13:3, 'He who guards his mouth preserves his life; he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.' And, 17:28 'Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise.' And also, 29:20 'Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him.' Think of how you would fair differently if you assimilated those words into your heart the next time you are confronted with an angry situation or someone you disagree with.

James urges us to take off, or strip ourselves of those things in our hearts which do not produce a righteous life. One of the most prominent things is anger. But what does he mean by righteous life? That word 'righteous' we throw around so easily, but what does it mean? It means being rightly related to God or aligned with his heart. Are we rightly related to God when we react in anger, or listen with hidden agendas of manipulation or coercion in our pride? The easy reaction in a trial when someone is attacking you is to react in anger; the knee-jerk reaction is not to listen. However, many times the perceived injustice or attack is driven by our lack of listening well; our own arrogance. Not listening makes it worse and could possibly be the ONLY reason it is happening.

When James says, ²¹Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent. What do you think he means? Does he mean, don't sleep around? Does he mean, don't look at porn on the internet? Does he mean don't go get drunk? Possibly, since we do run to things like that as an escape, but I do not think that is the whole of it. I think he is focusing more on the heart, and how it works out in relationships. It is evil and filthy in just how we regard each other in times of testing relationships. You have to remember that he is writing to people under persecution, the scattered people of faith. People that are under oppression who would naturally want to bite back, hit back, or at the least hate in their hearts.

So, yes, there is moral filth in sleeping around or looking at porn or in drug and alcohol abuse. But, there are steps we take in our hearts long before which lead to that outward behavior. However, some of us seem to lead the perfect Christian lives, never committing those outwardly unacceptable sins, but inwardly we walk away from relationships easily; we regard people as commodities which serve us. We don't care enough to listen to others. We don't take the time to love someone enough to seek reconciliation with them. We write them off and roll our eyes. Which are not options in the Christian life; although we've all done it. Look at the one another verses; forgive, love, encourage, bear with each other, etc. These are the exact opposite of what we would normally do in strained relationships.

The original language actually refers very strongly about the wax in your ear that builds up to the point that it keeps you from hearing. We need to have our ears opened so that we can listen to God and to others. We need to pray, not that trials would be avoided, but that we would be purified through them; we need to pray like David in Psalm 141 'set a guard over my mouth O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips. Let not my heart be drawn to what is evil, to take part in wicked deeds with men who are evildoers; let me not eat of their delicacies.' That is done by humbly accepting the Word that has been planted in us; something that has been done for us, and to us. By learning to listen to God, we cultivate his heart and can listen to others moving forward in relationships. God, in his grace has not left us without help, his Spirit is within us, and his Word is stirred in us to bring renewal/salvation, not only to our hearts, but in our relationship with others – God is about reconciliation and renewal.

And, ²⁶If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion that God our Father

accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Throughout history we have bolstered our liturgy inside the church. We have made great monuments to God in buildings, music, sermon, and so forth. We glory in our worship services. Worship has become big business. These monuments are not bad in and of themselves. However it sometimes feels that we have done so much to make ourselves feel good inside the church. There is nothing wrong with that, worship should engage the emotion. However, if we do it all without thought of how we speak to one another, what we do with the poor, and without owning and turning from a personal sin life it is useless. The Living Word changes the world view including; beliefs, values, behaviors, and artifacts. We are whitewashed tombs if this whole thing is not taking action in our hearts, our relationships, and in the issues of poverty in the world. It is not within our rights as Christians to neglect any of these things because of who we serve. If we look intently into the face of Christ found in the Scriptures, what we find is a holy, pure god of grace who is concerned for the poor and oppressed and saddened when our sin separates relationships and keeps us from fellowship with him; a god who is very concerned about our community, how we treat each other. He is serious about how we should love and encourage one another. You guys have done this for me. I have been blessed by this community in so many ways, and I think we are growing very well in these areas. God is opening hearts and conversations across the board in the relationships of Six:Eight. Over the past weeks many of us have had so many deep conversations and the Holy Spirit is meeting us bringing reconciliation and change. I pray that we will keep on this path and not be derailed by anger and bitterness in our testing with one another.

But let me take us again to the big picture (McLaren video):

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=4NtgjNLNpao>

If we can throw off everything that hinders and run the race that God has marked out for us, then our joy would be evident, our integrity intact, our sacrifice for the poor great, and our relationships reconciled. Is your personal religion relativistic, superstitious, emotional, or merely theoretical? Has your personal religion made a difference in how you treat others? Do you listen because you love them in Christ? Are you harboring personal sin which pollutes your fellowship with God and community? Do you care, as God does, for the poor; the widow and the orphan, or do you look the other way hoping the problem will go away? Are you becoming like Jesus or making him to look like you?

Pray

I have a challenge for us in reference to the verse, ²⁷Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. **We have a unique opportunity today to make a difference in the lives of a local family; a single mother with a couple of kids who are struggling greatly (explain).**

As we continue to worship, if you feel you need prayer today there will be people on the side who are waiting to serve you in that way...

Rudyard Kipling, *We & They*

FATHER, Mother, and Me
Sister and Auntie say
All the people like us are We,
And every one else is They.
And They live over the sea,
While We live over the way,
But - would you believe it? - They look upon We
As only a sort of They!
We eat pork and beef
With cow-horn-handled knives.
They who gobble Their rice off a leaf,
Are horrified out of Their lives;
And They who live up a tree,
And feast on grubs and clay,
(Isn't it scandalous?) look upon We
As a simply disgusting They!
We shoot birds with a gun.
They stick lions with spears.
Their full-dress is un-
We dress up to Our ears.
They like Their friends for tea.
We like Our friends to stay;
And, after all that, They look upon We
As an utterly ignorant They!
We eat kitcheny food.
We have doors that latch.
They drink milk or blood,
Under an open thatch.
We have Doctors to fee.
They have Wizards to pay.
And (impudent heathen!) They look upon We
As a quite impossible They!
All good people agree,
And all good people say,
All nice people, like Us, are We
And every one else is They:
But if you cross over the sea,
Instead of over the way,
You may end by (think of it!) looking on We
As only a sort of They!