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Be Slow to Speak and Slow to Get Angry

James 1:19

Prayer: *Father, again, we do thank you for your grace, your goodness, your gifts, all that you give to us including the very freedom that we are still enjoying to meet and gather together, it's a gift from you and we thank you for it. Lord, we want to thank you in advance for another gift of yours which is your Holy Spirit guiding us and directing us. And so we pray as we open up your book we would have the privilege of the presence of your Holy Spirit guiding us, giving us the ability to hear exactly what it is you have to say to us in a way that has permanent value. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well we've been looking, we've been revisiting the book of James, looking in particular at *James 1:19*, which says: *Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.* And if you remember last week we spoke about being quick to hear. Today we're going to address being slow to speak and slow to anger.

And I said last week that there are basically three different categories of hearing. First we have natural hearing, it's natural but ineffectual hearing. I mean, that's the way the vast majority of the world hears the gospel. 24-7, 365, you can turn on the radio, you can turn on the TV and listen to a gospel station and you can naturally hear the gospel. And what that means is the words go in and they do nothing.

And secondly we have supernatural hearing, also known as effectual hearing, which by God's grace allows the words not just to enter but also to take root and to grow, to produce firstfruits for God's glory. And you know, people come to Christ oftentimes reporting about hearing supernaturally for the very first time something that they've heard naturally literally thousands of times. And Jesus' words to his disciples in *Matthew 13* applies well to those who have been blessed with this supernatural hearing.

This is what Jesus said. He said: *But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.*

So if you're one of Christ's sheep you are here this morning because God at some point blessed your ears, your ears with

supernatural hearing.

And again, this led me to my third way of hearing which I call sanctified hearing. Now once God has opened your ears, once he has ushered you into his kingdom, once he has justified you by declaring you righteous not on the basis of your good works but solely on the basis of what Jesus Christ did on the cross for you, once that justification takes place, well then the process of sanctification begins and that's a process that will last your entire lifetime.

"Sanctification" simply means "to sanctify." "To sanctify" means "to make holy" and "to make holy" means "to set apart." And the question that that raises is set apart for what?

Well, you see, out of every individual on this planet, God has set apart individuals from every tribe, tongue and nation for one purpose and that purpose is to bring honor and glory to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 1:4 says: He chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious

grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

What God is saying there is that he's chosen us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ so that our lives can be to the praise of his glorious grace. And God's intent is to shape those chosen ones into unique images of his Son, and that is ultimately our purpose.

God goes on to say in Romans 8:28 that every single event that takes place in our lives is designed to shape and mold us uniquely into the image of his Son. And we've all heard the front end of that verse many, many times that God sovereignly intends the lives of his own servants. *Romans 8:28 says: We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.*

Well, it's the back end of those verses that tells us why he uniquely programs the events of our lives. He says: *For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.* You see, each of us uniquely represents some aspect of the Lord Jesus Christ, and God is shaping and molding our lives so that we can represent his image in a way that nobody else can.

If you take a few steps backwards and you look at the purpose of

life from God's perspective, it is breathtakingly obvious that we are here for a much bigger point than ourselves, and understanding that point and purpose is the key as to whether or not you live a life of meaning or one of sound and fury but ultimately signifying nothing. And a huge part of that purpose has to do what James is telling us this morning about how we go about hearing.

He says in *James 1:19: Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.* So I said last week that practically speaking sanctified hearing means that we drop our defensiveness, we pick up our spiritual ears and we prepare to give God our full attention.

And the reason why sanctified hearing differs greatly from supernatural hearing is that while we had no role whatever in acquiring the supernatural hearing that led to our salvation -- I mean, that was an act of God, that was a free exercise of his grace -- we now find however that we have a large role to play in our sanctification. And to put it bluntly, our free will choices will determine the extent of our sanctification. And again, I said last week, to the extent that you learn how to listen well to God will be the extent that you grow in your sanctification.

Spiritual hearing functions much like our physical muscles do. The

more you exercise them, the more they grow. This is what Jesus said in *Mark 4*. He said: *If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.*" And he said to them, *"Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you."*

But you know the opposite is also true. The more you ignore, the more you suppress the truth, the weaker your ears become until eventually you get to the worst possible spiritual state, the state that the Pharisees were in. I mean, not only were they spiritually deaf but they had no idea that they were in such a state. Jesus said in *Matthew 13*: *"FOR THE HEARTS OF THIS PEOPLE HAVE GROWN DULL. THEIR EARS ARE HARD OF HEARING."*

So make no mistake about it, there's great blessings in learning how to develop sanctified hearing but there's also great perils in refusing to hear.

Now you might think: What could be simpler? "God speaks, so I'll listen." It's not nearly that simple. Like I said, God is determined to grow, shape and mold us into the image of his Son. And the Holy Spirit is determined to grow in each of us the very characteristics that defined the life of Christ, and we call that the fruit of the spirit. And I'd be the first one to tell you it

would be wonderful if love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, meekness, gentleness, and self-control just magically arrived along with our sanctification, but they don't. In fact, they have to be grown. And the soil that they grow in is not that sterilized potting soil of a clean heart and a willing spirit, it's that far more messy stuff that makes up the heart of fallen sinners like us.

I mean it's one thing to say: "God, make me more loving, and joyful and peaceful," it's another thing entirely to go through the process that God will put you through to make you more loving, joyful and peaceful.

You see, we're not some kind of blank slate that God just writes new instructions on, you know, be loving, be joyful, be peaceful. My slate is actually filled in already with parts of me that are anything but love, joy and peace. Paul said as much in *Romans 7:18*. He said: *For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.*

God looks inside of me and he sees a mixture and there's a mixture of love and hate, there's a mixture of joy and bitterness and peace and war. And God is actively about the business of removing one

and inserting the other. And here's the point: That's always painful.

I mean, if you're one of his then God is determined to grow the loveliness of Christ within you so that you will glorify him by uniquely bearing his image; and he doesn't explain himself like we think he should and he doesn't ask your permission, he simply expects you to understand what he's made clear in his word.

Listen to what he says in *2 Corinthians 3*. He says: *And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*

That's the good news. The bad news is being transformed from one glory into another into the image of God's Son, that is painful.

You know, one of my all time favorite C.S. Lewis quotes is from *The Problem of Pain*. This is what he says about that very process. He says: "We are, not metaphorically but in very truth, a Divine work of art, something that God is making, and therefore something with which He will not be satisfied until it has a certain character. Here again we come up against what I have called the 'intolerable compliment.' Over a sketch made idly to amuse a child, an artist

may not take much trouble: he may be content to let it go even though it is not exactly as he meant it to be. But over the great picture of his life—the work which he loves, though in a different fashion, as intensely as a man loves a woman or a mother a child—he will take endless trouble—and would doubtless, thereby give endless trouble to the picture if it were sentient. One can imagine a sentient picture, after being rubbed and scraped and re-commenced for the tenth time, wishing that it were only a thumb-nail sketch whose making was over in a minute. In the same way, it is natural for us to wish that God had designed for us a less glorious and less arduous destiny; but then we are wishing not for more love but for less."

What he's telling us is that God will do whatever it takes to grow the fruit of the spirit in us because our transformed lives are what glorifies his Son.

I've often said the loveliest people on the face of the earth should be born again Christians. They're the only ones who bear the image of Christ. They alone are given the Holy Spirit's power to shape and mold the image that they bear uniquely into the image of God's Son. I mean, God calls us salt and light because our light is supposed to so shine among men that people look at our good works and what do they do? They glorify God. Well, that's

the theory. Sad that we all know that in practice we all fall short.

And growing that fruit of the Spirit often appears to be a process that's one step forward and two or three or four steps back. I mean, it seems the fruit of the spirit, it just seems to grow just like any other fruit grows, from flower to bud to immature fruit to fully developed fruit.

I pointed out last time that sanctified hearing is one of God's ways of growing his fruit. And this type of hearing is not easy to develop because what God wants to say, understand we oftentimes don't want to hear because, as I said, hearing actually means dropping your defensiveness, picking up your spiritual ears and preparing to give God your full attention. And again, that's as much of an art as it is a science because this type of spiritual hearing does not come naturally to us at all.

Paul spoke at length of the struggle that exists in each of us of the two natures that war within us: the flesh and the spirit. And that's never more obvious than when it comes to spiritual hearing. And the reason why spiritual hearing is an acquired skill and an art and a science and a discipline is because almost all of spiritual hearing is centered on things you don't want to hear in

the first place.

Just consider the three statements that James makes about hearing. He says: *Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.* I mean those are very simple statements but we can deduce a great deal of sanctified hearing just by examining what James is saying.

Just think about the first part that he says. He says, "be quick to hear." Now if you think about it, it would only logically apply to things that are unpleasant or uninteresting to hear, I mean, if I said to you, "Hey, somebody just said something wonderful about you," do you think you'd have a hard time giving it your attention? Or would you be -- quote -- "quick to hear" it? I mean, you may be polite about it but you would certainly be all ears if somebody is telling you something wonderful. You don't have to be quick to hear something that's altogether pleasant or interesting to hear in the first place. You have to be quick to hear those words that you're naturally quick to shut down, but those are the very words that God often uses to transform us.

And, you know, last time I out I gave you some very practical examples from my own life of how the process works. I said, when I get into a fight with my wife, when we retire to our neutral

corners, the very last thing that I want to hear, very last thing that I want to do is be quick to hear what the Holy Spirit has to say when he questions my motives or my intentions or my methods. But you know what? That's exactly what he does. The witness of the Holy Spirit will then challenge my assumptions and my defenses. That should be my cue. I hear the Holy Spirit speak as he usually does and oftentimes through scripture and I can unmistakably hear him challenge my premises, my suppositions, and my defenses and my arguments. And like I said, it's the last thing on earth I want to hear.

I hear him speaking to me when I'm about to say something unkind or uncalled for, and I can literally hear God's Holy Spirit telling me *"Put away anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth."* And like I said, sometimes, sometimes I gloriously hear him and sometimes I just talk right over the Spirit's voice. That's when I hear God saying, "It's time to be quick to hear," and that's when hearing is far more a matter of the will than it is of the ears because I hear him only when I force myself to listen.

You see, his intent is to create the very image of Christ in me, and that image is forged and shaped not by the pleasant things in life but by life's struggles and difficulties. And the reason why God insists over and over that we -- quote -- *"pay attention to*

what we hear" or -- quote -- *"incline our hearts"* or -- quote -- *not that we "harden not our hearts,"* is because our first response to hearing God's Holy Spirit speak is to defensively tune him out, speak over him, or simply ignore him.

The same is true with the second statement. James says: *"Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger."* And again, consider the words. Consider be slow to speak. Now when does that admonition apply in your life? I don't think James is lauding people who refuse to open their mouths. He's describing is a particular circumstance when it's critical to be quick to hear but slow to speak.

So just think about when do you have to take pains to keep your mouth shut? When do you have to exercise the discipline of not interrupting someone? Let me give you a hint question. Are you quick to interrupt people when they're telling you how wonderful you are? I mean, when you're being complimented, do you cut people off? I mean, the only time I have to truly be slow to speak is when I've heard something that sorely tempts me to open my mouth in defense. And God speaks to that directly in *Proverbs 14:33*. He says: *Wisdom rests in the heart of him who has understanding, But what is in the heart of fools is made known. In Proverbs 17:28* says: *Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace; When he*

shuts his lips, he is considered perceptive.

So God says there's a time when it's wise to hold your peace and that time is often when you're hearing something you don't want to hear.

And one of the things I notice is that my desire to respond, my desire to be quick to speak instead of slow can easily overwhelm my ability to listen. I mean, there's a huge difference between trying to hear what my wife is actually trying to say and then hearing to gather enough information and ammunition to mount a response. You know, in one case, I'm hearing to actually listen; in the other case, I'm just gathering intelligence. "There's a logical fallacy," "there's a misstatement," "oh, there's an exaggeration." I've done both. I've actually tried to listen and there's been times when I've actually tried just to gather intelligence. I'll let you guess which one is more effective.

Be quick to hear and slow to speak is just another way of describing working hard at listening, again particularly when somebody's telling you something you don't want to hear. Remember what God's intent is: He's determined to grow the fruit of the spirit in our spirits and he will work all things together for good to grow that fruit and so he'll use every single opportunity to

point out areas where we can grow from glory to glory into the image of his Son.

But here's where so much of sanctification lies within the realm of freedom. You see, as believers, we have the ability to listen and to grow or to refuse to listen and remain as infants.

See, my salvation is not based on how good I am at the Christian life. Like I said last time, if I was the most sanctified Christian that ever lived, I would still be hopelessly lost because all of my righteousness is as filthy rags. My salvation is based on Christ's work and his work alone. But my joy in this life and my preparation for the next is intimately tied to the decisions I make with regard to what I hear and how I hear it right now here today.

I mean, I've seen the effects of ears that are tuned in and ready to listen and ears that progressively become more and more and more tone deaf. Again, I think of Jesus' words. He says: *"If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."* And he said to them, *"Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you."*

And again, this is not rocket science, this is simply the way you

grow. I'm not saying that God is calling on everyone to be a milquetoast either and that every time someone is critical of you, it's a divine message from God. What I'm suggesting though is that you develop the ability to search for any potential truth in any critical response you get, and we do that by first being quick to listen and then slow to speak.

But there's also a third quality that fully rounds out our ability to develop sanctified hearing. James says: *Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.*

Now this third area completes a trilogy that marks out where the ability to hear comes from, and once again it points to the obvious nature of what it is that's being heard. James is talking about hearing well the very things no one wants to hear. He's not telling us to pay attention, to stay quiet, resist getting angry because God has some fun things he wants to tell you. He's giving us the discipline that we need to ward off an anger that makes listening almost impossible.

James goes on to tell us in chapter 3 what godly wisdom consists of. He says this in *James 3:17*, he says: *But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be*

intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.

You see, right there at the center of that definition of wisdom is the phrase -- quote -- "*easy to be intreated.*" What he's saying there is that wisdom is easily approachable and that wisdom produces a peaceable, gentle spirit and someone who has that wisdom is not going to rip into you if he thinks that you're saying something critical. We grow that ability within ourselves and we do that only when we are genuinely able to see our work and our value in seeing us as God sees us.

Listen to how Paul put it. He said: *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us -- and this is what you're thinking when someone is telling you something that may be against you -- if God is for us who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died -- more than that, who was raised -- who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.*

You see, if you just, if you take just a simple step backwards and see yourself as God sees you, you can begin to realize the extent

of the privilege that all of us have received. Understand who you are, you are one of those who were chosen before time itself even began to be among every tribe, tongue and nation that has been put on this planet to honor and glorify God. How do you do that? You do that by living a transformed life.

And no matter who you are, whether you're a wealthy businessman in the United States or a poverty-stricken believer in India, you still have the ultimate privilege of being shaped and molded into the very image of the Son of God. And it's not only a privilege, it's a responsibility. See, you may not realize it yet but you are royalty. Jesus Christ is your brother as well as your Master. You serve the King of kings and God fully intends to set you apart for that service.

And from the day you were declared one of his, God began the process of sanctifying you, and understand that much of that process is going to be painful.

Hebrews 12 says: For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put

out of joint but rather be healed.

What God is insisting here is that we take a step back and look at our lives within the context of eternity, and to do that we have to consider this is the God who did what he did for us. This is a God who left heaven itself and came to earth as one of us and then lived out that life perfectly and then went to the cross to lay down his life as a sacrifice for all of our lives of sin so that when we place our faith in him, we then exchange his righteousness for our sin and become worthy of heaven.

I mean God has chosen you to bear his image and display his glory to a world that you're part of simply by living the life that he's given you. And he's using the circumstances of each of our lives to train us in that very process. If we had any inkling of the privilege we've been given, we would readily understand this discipline process that God is putting us through. I mean it's part of the privilege that only those in heaven fully understand, but those of us who are still here on earth, we still have to grapple with it.

I had a friend named Harry. Harry died at the age of 97. He died in a nursing home and he died alone. I visited him just before he died in the nursing home that he was at and he was extremely weak,

but he wanted to make a point by telling me how much the nurses there loved him. It was very important to Harry to be able to point out that somebody loved him. All of his kids were gone, his wife had died, he was living by himself, and he wanted to make sure that I knew that somebody loved him even if all he could muster at the time was just a smile from one of the nurses.

I thought about all the conversations that I had had with Harry over 30 years that I had known him, and you know, he was -- at one time he was the mayor of our town, he was the town supervisor, he had written a number of books, he had a very active website which he held forth on what was going on in the world. He was an extremely bright, articulate and knowledgeable man who could speak at length about science and politics and religion and culture; but in the end, it signified nothing.

The last time that we met with him, we read scripture and I talked about Jesus Christ being God, something that we've been doing for over 30 years, and Harry still didn't appear ready to commit. I'm thankful -- I have no idea what took place between him and God in his final moments, but I know that a lifetime that was spent ignoring the reason why he was placed on this planet made it very difficult for him to assess what the point of his life was when his time had dwindled to almost nothing. And so he needed to point out

to me that at least the nurses in this place really, really loved him, and then he died.

Soon after, his son wrote to me, he sent me the keys to his place, asked if I would make sure it wasn't getting vandalized because the grass was growing high and we know that thieves pick out places that look like nobody lives in them. I thought of *Psalm 103*, which says: *As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.*

Well, Harry died twelve years ago. And you know, Janice and I, we walk by the place that used to be his home literally every day. His house has been since completely resold, remodeled and redone, it looks fabulous today, it looks absolutely nothing like the house looked when Harry lived in it.

And actually as we were walking past, we got to know the people who were building it and when they had come very close to finishing it, they invited us in to take a look at it. And as we were kind of looking around the house, I asked him, "Have you ever heard of Harry, the guy who used to live here?" They had no idea who he was. In fact every single trace of Harry's existence from this gorgeous organic garden that he used to love to show us with

flowers and vegetables, it was beautiful, this gorgeous organic garden to the house that he once lived in, it's all completely and totally gone now. Harry, for all his accomplishments, has been cosmically forgotten. The wind has blown over Harry like it does the spent flowers in the field, and he is now known no more.

And all the evidence that Harry accumulated insisting that he had some cosmic significance has been swept away, leaving not even a trace. Folks, you have to understand, that's exactly what is in store for all of us, from the greatest to the least, without Christ.

You know, the *Westminster Catechism* gets it right when it raises as its very first question the one question that everyone struggles to answer. The question is: What is the chief end of man? What's the point of all of this? Why am I here? I mean, it's a question that Harry spent 97 years trying to answer. The Westminster divines, they got it right. Their answer to that question was simple. They said: "The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever."

Now do you know what that means? This is how I often attempt to explain it. I said, if you look around you, you can readily see all kinds of creatures and you look at those creatures, you can

readily deduce what they were designed for. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that fish were designed by God to swim, that birds were designed by God to fly. The hard part comes when we ask ourselves, okay, what were we designed for? I mean, that is something that we are -- that we are constantly struggling, you know, what were we designed to do? You know, even on his deathbed that was a question that still haunted Harry, something that gave him no peace whatsoever. It's my hope, it's my desire it drove him at some point to the cross.

I mean, "Why am I here" is a question the whole world tries feverishly to ignore, and it's the question that all of us here in this room that we have the answer to, if you want it. The greatest privilege a human being can have is to be chosen to have your transformed life shaped and molded into the very image of the Author of life, to have the living fruit of God's Holy Spirit grow in, through and out of you so men can see your good works and what? Glorify God. That's what God's intent for you is. And you can choose it or not.

You can spend your entire life learning how to be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger, and almost none of what you're going to hear is going to be pleasant, because all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant. But if you do it, you will learn to

hear the voice of God as he speaks through his word, through his Spirit and through his church. And the very thing that escaped Harry escaped him all his life, it will be yours forever. "Let him who has ears to hear, hear." Let's pray.

Father, I pray for each and every one of us that you would give us sanctified ears, and I recognize a huge part of that is our free will. We have the ability to decide, do we want to hear or do we not want to hear? Do we want to grow or do we not want to grow? And part of that process is the difficult part of being quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. I pray you would give that privilege to every single one of us and the courage to exercise it. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.