

JAMES 1:19-21

RULES FOR A RIGHTEOUS LIFE

“Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.”¹

God gave us two ears and one mouth so that we would listen twice as much as we speak. Unfortunately, we tend to speak much more than we listen. Consequently, we often fail to hear what others are saying. Though we hear the words, we don’t hear what is said. Worse yet, when we do hear the words, we too often permit ourselves to grow quickly angry, enticing impulsive reaction to what we thought we heard. Such reactions dishonour the Lord who saved us. Thus, James found it necessary to confront this persistent condition among the people of God by establishing rules for a righteous life. Join me in exploring this portion of the Word in order to equip ourselves to be righteous before the Lord our God.

THE PURPOSE FOR THE RULES — “Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” To benefit fully from the instruction James provides, it will be necessary for us to review what we have previously studied.

James was writing to people who were being severely tested, even as he wrote. Reading the letter, it becomes evident that James longed for them to derive some benefit from their trials, which were seen as testing permitted by God. God was at work transforming into good what their enemies meant for evil. James did not want the testing they were passing through to be wasted. At the outset of the letter, he told them that the immediate goal of their testing was steadfastness. Then, when the steadfastness was polished to perfection, they would be mature—“complete and lacking in nothing.”

The purpose of the command is nothing less than righteousness—practical righteousness, the righteous life God expects. This is not theological righteousness that James holds before us, but practical righteousness. Those who were persecuting the believers persecuted them because of their lives—what they believed and the impact their belief had on their manner of life. We Christians are taught to “put off [the] old self, which belongs to [y]our former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” [EPHESIANS 4:22-24].

Peter writes, “The time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry. With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you” [1 PETER 4:3-5].

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Inhabitants of the world are schizophrenic concerning the children of God, at the same time hating us because our refusal to agree that their actions are okay and admiring us because we hold convictions. The professed Christian that is like the world suffers no persecution because there is nothing in her manner of life that condemns. However, the life of the child of God who lives conscientiously in order to please the Master condemns the world about him, and those in the world resent the condemnation.

It is for this reason that Paul urges Christians, “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God” [PHILIPPIANS 1:27, 28]. Steadfastness in persecution, living with convictions instead of seeking what is convenient, gives evidence to the world that the child of the God has been delivered from the judgement of God, though those who approve of such persecution face that awesome judgement [see 2 THESSALONIANS 1:4-7].

James called on the persecuted saints to whom he wrote to walk in the way of wisdom in VERSES 5–11. Beginning with VERSE 12 he called Christians to walk in the way of knowledge—knowledge about ourselves, knowledge about the work of God in us, knowledge of our old nature and knowledge of our new nature. The path of knowledge outlined is demanding. Those walking that path will find themselves under constant pressure. At one and the same time the old nature lures us to follow its desires and so to walk the path of sin and death, while at the same time God summons us to live out our true nature. This is the new nature given in the new birth, filled with new life, bound for new destinations of holiness. This is the battle of the wills—the will of the old nature, and the will of God expressed in the new nature. This clash of wills is the very heart of the life-giving conflict of which James has been teaching.²

James referred to the old nature that will afflict us throughout our days on this earth in VERSES 14 and 15. “Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.” The new nature is in view in VERSE 18. “Of his own will [God] brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.” This does not mean that we are stalemated in our progress toward righteousness, for “every good gift and every perfect gift” has been placed at our disposal, so that we can fulfil the will of the Father.

It is distressingly easy for us to focus on a couple of verses, forgetting what God is saying. We can read the words without ever grasping the essence of the message. This is the reason I am stressing that the purpose for these rules is to enable us to live the righteous life that God requires. We are not to be righteous in order to be saved; but because we are saved, we must be righteous. We are saved to serve God, to glorify Him through witnessing to His grace and through revealing His power in our lives as we turn others about us to the imputed righteousness of Christ the Lord. We lend power to our witness through the manner of life that we live. Thus, James unites with the whole of the Word of God to urge Christians to labour to be righteous. The goal of the instruction is maturity in the Faith and practical righteousness exhibited in each life.

² Cf. J. A. Motyer, **The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of James** (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL 1985) 61

THE RULES STATED — “Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires.” There are three rules for righteousness—be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. This is nothing less than an iteration of oft-repeated admonitions found throughout the Word.

The rules are universal—every person is included in the commands. When James addresses the rules to “every person,” the language is deliberate. He is making the instruction individually applicable to each individual. None of us are excused. Of course, there is a time to respond forcefully and vigorously. When error is being taught, we must not debate, but rather for the sake of Christ and for the sake of bairns within the congregation, we must quickly take a stand. When our family is threatened, or when the cause of the Faith is threatened, we must not delay but act with haste. What is especially difficult for us is that God does not provide us with a detailed list of “do’s” and “don’ts.” He gives us principles which enable us to apply sanctified common sense.

The first rule calls us to be *quick to hear*. Certainly, God expects us to listen, especially attending the preaching and teaching of the Word that we might learn what is taught from the pulpit and through the Word. This is not merely an admonition to attend the preaching and teaching of the Word, though it is assuredly that, but it is a warning to be eager to understand what God is saying through His Word. We do not slavishly listen to the preaching of the Word, driving ourselves to attend the ministry of the Word, but we do are to do so freely and with alacrity because we want to know the will of God.

However, we are to be quick to hear, and the emphasis is upon the quickness, diligence in listening to the instruction of the Word. Delay in obedience to the Word is a sign of unwillingness. Paul demonstrates the proper manner for a Christian to receive the command of God when he writes of his call to ministry. “When He who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by His grace was pleased to reveal His Son to me, in order that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone” [GALATIANS 1:15]. To put off doing what is right demonstrates that the sluggard is not willing to obey. When we debate the commands of God, we demonstrate that we are losing the battle to the flesh.

I marvel at the tendency for us Christians to make excuses why we cannot obey God in this matter. Family is coming, so we cannot attend the instruction of the Word. We are tired, and we must have our recreation, so we cannot attend the instruction of the Word. Our presence might be offensive to some of our friends or family, so we cannot attend the instruction of the Word. Our children have soccer practise, a hockey game, or a dance recital, and therefore, we cannot attend the instruction of the Word. However, though we have a thousand excuses, we have not one reason why we should not attend the instruction of the Word. Surely, James commands that we be quick to hear.

In the business meetings of the church, I have observed that it is not unusual for vocal people to demand that they be heard. “Listen to me!” they cry. However, we would each be well advised to hear the Spirit of God when we meet. It is a wise thing for us to allow time to discover what the Spirit is saying through the Word of God.

The account exists of Augustine in debate with a heretic who demanded of him, “Hear me, hear me.” Augustine modestly replied, “Neither hear me, nor I thee, but let us both hear the apostle.” It is a good rule for us to hear the Apostle, to hear the Word, to listen for the voice of the Master speaking through His Word.

Have you ever noticed how frequently the Word urges us to be quick to hear? Consider a selection from the Proverbs.

“When words are many, transgression is not lacking,
but whoever restrains his lips is prudent.”
[PROVERBS 10:19]

“Whoever guards his mouth preserves his life;
he who opens wide his lips comes to ruin.”
[PROVERBS 13:3]

“Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise;
when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.”
[PROVERBS 17:28]

“Do you see a man who is hasty in his words?
There is more hope for a fool than for him.”
[PROVERBS 29:20]

Jesus cautioned His followers to “Pay attention to what you hear” [MARK 4:24], but He also taught those who would follow Him to “Take care ... how you hear” [LUKE 8:18]. The great tragedy is that there are found among the churches religious people who fall under the condemnation of the Master. Of such people Jesus warned, “Hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” [MATTHEW 13:13]. Too many professed followers of the Lamb have become “dull of hearing” [HEBREWS 5:11].

Mothers provide a marvellous illustration of what is required in this instance. I always marvel at how a mother can hear her baby. The nursery of a church may appear to be chaotic, the din drowning out all conversation. However, it is wonderful how a mother can hear her child in the midst of all that noise. During the years that our children were infants, Lynda could hear their cry when I was oblivious to them. In a similar fashion, the child of God is to be ready to obey the command of the Master—listening and awaiting His direction, and he hears that command through the Word as it is preached and as it is taught and as he reads it for himself.

The second rule for a righteous life demands that we be *slow to speak*. This is a complementary command to the first that stressed quickness. There will be no meaningful discipleship without readiness to hear the Word of God. Likewise, when we hear what God is saying, we must resist the temptation to argue with that Word. This rule urges deliberation, slowness. Certainly, this means that we must consider what we say, understanding that words have consequences.

Sitting under the instruction of the Word, we must not permit ourselves to debate. Rather, we must learn to consider what we hear and weigh how to apply the teaching in our own lives. We must allow time for full comprehension and careful evaluation before attempting to apply the truths delivered. Too many of the saints of God are like the lawyer described in LUKE 10:29. Hoping to make himself look good in the eyes of others, he asked the Master a question; but when Jesus answered, we read that “he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, ‘and who is my neighbour?’”

The final rule is that we must be *slow to anger*. Just as “slow to speak” does not mean never to speak, so “slow to anger” does not mean that we are never to be angry. To say that man’s anger does not produce the righteousness God requires is surely unequivocal. To be certain, the Word of God does imply the possibility of a righteous anger. Paul instructs believers in the fine art of righteous anger in the Ephesian letter, “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger” [EPHESIANS 4:26]. Both James and Paul caution that anger and sin are never far apart; both counsel caution.

In our text, James is stating a general truth about human anger. It is not a pure emotion; it is usually heavily impregnated with sin—self-importance, self-assertion, intolerance, stubbornness. Most of us would have to confess that holy anger belongs in a state of sanctification to which we have not attained. Dear people, it is a general truth that your anger does not bring about the righteous plans of God. An angry spirit is never an attentive one. When anger comes in, listening flies out. Those who would listen to God must train themselves to be listeners and, to that end, they must covet and cultivate a reticent tongue and a calm temper. Everything must be made an adjunct to the fundamental practice of hearing God’s Word.

Nevertheless, there is a necessary righteous anger. It would be beneficial for us to recognise what holy anger looks like in order to eschew unholy anger. For anger to be righteous, the principle must be right. God’s interests and ours are often confused. We are more likely to be angry at affronts to ourselves than to God. Such rage is nothing less than an expression of pride and love of self.

For anger to qualify as holy, it must have a right object. The heat of indignation must be against the crime rather than against the person. Godly anger is always accompanied with grief; it prompts us to grieve over and pray for the offending party. Christ “looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart” [MARK 3:5]. False zeal seeks revenge rather than correction, and such is ungodly and unholy.

In order for anger to be righteous, the expression must be right. See that you are not tempted to any harsh or indecent speech. Moses had good reason to be angry, however, “he spoke rashly with his lips” [PSALM 106:33]. In religious contexts anger is often vented freely and lies unchecked under a pretence of zeal.

Unholy anger is excessive when it exceeds what is merited and when it is savoured. Thoughts of revenge may seem sweet, but when held they turn sour. Anger retained becomes revenge. Anger without sufficient reason is sinful. The majority text of the New Testament sets limits on anger. Those limits are unfortunately absent from many of our contemporary translations. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus warned, “Whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment” [MATTHEW 5:22 NKJV]. What, then, is a sufficient reason for anger? Are injuries? I answer, no. The Word forbids revenge as well as injury, for they differ only in degree.

Of course, failure to hear the Word and haste in speaking is a sure-fire formula for anger. We would be well advised to consider carefully how we respond whenever we hear something that we do not like in the Word of God. Responding in anger to what is taught is powerful evidence of guilt. We need to receive the Word of God with humility, knowing that we do not sit in judgement of what God says, but rather it judges us. The worst thing we can bring to a church conflict or a theological disagreement is anger. We know that the cause of Christ is not advanced by hot anger and rage. We cannot assist Satan more than when we wrong truth through an angry defence of the Faith.

James says, “The anger of man does not produce the righteousness God requires.” You may feel that you are angry because you are a defender of the faith, but, my friend, the wrath of man simply does not work the righteousness of God. Don’t kid yourself that you are angry for His sake, because He’s not angry—He’s in the saving business.

Jewish congregations tend to be free and unstructured, not unlike Baptists. James was not speaking theoretically, for some of the congregations had degenerated into angry accusations and harsh words even against each other. This appears to be the basis for his rhetorical question in **JAMES 4:1, 2a**. “What causes quarrels and causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.”

Facing intense persecution and danger, David frequently prayed a rather impressive request. On his heart was his need not merely for protection from his attackers but, even more, for protection from sin. Listen to his prayer, offered on several occasions when he was pursued.

“Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all the day long.

“Oh, guard my soul, and deliver me!
Let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.
May integrity and uprightness preserve me,
for I wait for you.”

[**PSALM 25:4, 5, 20, 21**]

“Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth;
keep watch over the door of my lips!
Do not let my heart incline to any evil,
to busy myself with wicked deeds
in company with men who work iniquity,
and let me not eat of their delicacies!”

[**PSALM 141:3, 4**]

It is a kind of praying we Christians need to learn—not just “Lord, keep me safe,” but “Lord, keep me pure.” This is the need James saw for the Christians who had been scattered by persecution. He wrote to strengthen them for clear-headed moral courage even when others were doing evil and even when that evil was being done against them.

Perhaps it is wishful thinking to imagine that a generation trained to be self-centred will actually submit to the Word of God, but the issue is sufficiently serious that it must be placed before the professed people of God. However, we do not have the luxury of approaching the Word of God as we might a salad bar, selecting the items we enjoy and rejecting those we do not like. If we will be righteous in the eyes of God, and if we have any hope of moving toward maturity, we must obey the Word of God.

IMPLEMENTING THE RULES — “Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” Life with God is not momentary, segregated to those times we feel particularly religious; rather, life with God is constant—if it is real life. Some among the people of God attempt to restrict God to their occasional quiet times, but such people never progress in the Faith. We do not become different people when we are reading the Bible, but we are the people of God in the marketplace and at the workbench as surely as we are the people of God on Sunday morning and during the times we read the Word of God.

James demands that we strip off all filthiness and wickedness. When James tells us to “put away” all that contaminates, he uses a word that means to take off our clothing. He does not merely suggest self-improvement, but rather he says that we must rid ourselves of “all” that is filthy and wicked. We must consciously divest ourselves of all that contaminates our lives. However, we must not stop at ridding ourselves of all that contaminates, but we must replace what is removed with the implanted Word. Putting away precedes receiving.

To divest ourselves of what contaminates without receiving the Word of God is to expose ourselves to a grave danger. Jesus delivered a word of caution to people tempted to seek moral reformation without regeneration, people who seek to transform their lives without replacing what is removed. “When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. Then it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first” [MATTHEW 12:43-45].

One of the gravest threats to the continued spiritual health of churches today is the transformation from the holy Bride of Christ into self-improvement societies. Consequently, what is witnessed among the professed saints of God are groups of people gathered together for religious observance without commitment to the Son of God. So long as time is set aside for “worship” or for religious talks, transformation is unnecessary. Consequently, many of our fellow churchgoers are unchanged from what they once were and are indistinguishable from the world. We now have salvation without sanctification, redemption without regeneration, heaven without holiness. Few demands are placed upon people who seek forgiveness of sin, other than a presence in the pew. Modern Christians reject any thought of personal accountability to the collective people of God, much less to pastors who are appointed to shepherd us. We react vigorously and viciously to any suggestion that our actions can be called into account by anyone. Our churches are a gathering of religious people, but we are no longer holy bodies.

In our text, the word that is translated “filthiness” can be used for the filth which soils clothes or the body. But it has one very interesting connection. It is a derivative of a medical term meaning *wax in the ear*. It is just possible that it still retains that meaning here; and that James is telling his readers to get rid of everything which would stop their ears to the true word of God. When wax gathers in the ear, it can make one deaf; and sins can make an individual deaf to God. Further, James talks of “rampant wickedness” or “evil excess” [NET BIBLE]. He pictures this wickedness as tangled undergrowth or a cancerous growth which must be cut away.

The final test of salvation is fruit. This means a changed life, Christian character and conduct, and ministry to others in the glory of God. This fruit might be winning souls to Christ [ROMANS 1:16], growing in holy living [ROMANS 6:22], sharing our material possessions [ROMANS 15:28], spiritual character [GALATIANS 5:22, 23], good works [COLOSSIANS 1:10], and even praising the Lord [HEBREWS 13:15]. Religious works may be manufactured, but they do not have life in them, nor do they bring glory to God. Real fruit has in it the seed for more fruit, so that the harvest continues to grow more fruit [JOHN 15:1-5].

“Meekness” is an attempt to translate a Greek word that may well be untranslatable. *Prautes* is a great Greek word which has no precise English equivalent. “No one can ever find one English word to translate what is a one word summary of the truly teachable spirit. The teachable spirit is docile and tractable, and therefore humble enough to learn. The teachable spirit is without resentment and without anger and is, therefore, able to face the truth, even when it hurts and condemns. The teachable spirit is not blinded by its own overmastering prejudices but is clear-eyed to the truth. The teachable spirit is not seduced by laziness but is so self-controlled that it can willingly and faithfully accept the discipline of learning. [The word] describes the perfect conquest and control of everything in a man’s nature which would be a hindrance to his seeing, learning and obeying the truth.”³

Let’s put the information together, then. God has given us rules for a righteous life: be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger. Implementing these rules provides for a holy walk. However, these rules cannot be put into action until we have taken the necessary step of ridding ourselves of all that contaminates our lives, replacing the filth that once clung to us. We do this through receiving the implanted Word of God.

The picture James paints is of a garden in which the Word is to be planted. How do we prepare the garden? First, we must confess our sins and ask the Father to forgive us. John writes, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” [1 JOHN 1:9]. Then, we must foster anew the discipline of meditating on God’s love and grace, asking Him to “plough up” any hardness in our hearts. God, through Jeremiah, urged His people to, “Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns” [JEREMIAH 4:3]. Then, according to the teaching James has provided, we must have an attitude of “meekness” [JAMES 1:21]. When you receive the Word with meekness, you accept it without arguing with it, and honouring it as the Word of God; you do not try to twist it to conform it to your thinking.

Remember, James is not writing to sinners, urging them to be saved, but he is writing to believers urging them to make their salvation real. James is calling believers to live as those who are saved. In light of these words, we must realise that we should see the evidence of salvation in our lives in greater quantity with each passing day. Every day should provide us with fresh evidence that we are saved, that new powers are at work in us, and that the Master is indeed working out His purpose, making us complete. Maturity is the purpose of our efforts, and glorifying the Master is our ultimate goal.

However, if religious devotion is mere rote for you, it may be that we have failed to receive the Lord Jesus. If you are content with going to church, instead of being the church, you need to hear the Word of God concerning God’s salvation.

³ William Barclay, **The Daily Study Bible: The Letters of James and Peter** (Westminster, Philadelphia, PA 1976) 55

The Word of God calls us to believe the message of life—that Jesus, the Son of God, died because of our sin and was raised on the third day for our righteousness. Paul writes, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ believing in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved. For with the heart one believes and is declared righteous, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” The Apostle concludes that glorious promise with this citation from the Prophet Joel, “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13** author’s translation].