



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Take a Breath

James 1:19-21

David Anguish

Introduction

1. I knew a woman whose young daughter had a habit of getting so excited over the least little things that she would talk so rapidly that her words would run together. To calm her down and make sense of what she was saying, her mother would say, "Breathe Susie."
2. What made her different from the rest of us were the specific things that got her so agitated. We all face times where we need a reminder to breathe, take a step back, calm down, and approach a situation with less anxiety.
3. Our text does something similar. James's readers faced trials. He told them that was inevitable and to ask God for the wisdom they needed for coping, remembering that God gave only good things and that any sins they committed resulted from giving in to their desire.
4. He told them how to remain steadfast in faith, introducing themes to which he returned throughout the rest of the writing. Our text begins that part of his teaching. It also has the effect of telling them to take a step back and get in the right frame of mind.

Body

- I. The Question of Structure.
 - A. As we come to vv. 19-21, we find ourselves again pondering James's structure.
 1. Reference to the "word" in vv. 18, 21-22 connects those verses.
 2. But how do verses 19-20 fit into the flow of the chapter?
 - a) They introduce the ideas of anger and speech he develops later (3:1-4:12).
 - b) Are they misplaced, a random digression/preview that James inserted here?
 - B. His use of the word, "therefore" (*διό, dio*) in v. 21 suggests that he intended 19-20 to fit with 21, which leads into 22-25, thus connecting the whole section.
 - C. It is helpful to know that James recalled an often used Jewish wisdom theme.

1. Similarities exist in Sirach's focus on the fear of the Lord as true wisdom, rewards of wisdom, and precepts for everyday living (Sir. 1:22; 4:29; 5:11-13).¹
 2. But, the themes are ultimately rooted in OT wisdom writings, as in Prov. 10:19; 17:27-28; 29:20; Eccl. 5:1-2; 7:9.
- D. The verb "know" helps us see the point and how vv. 19-21 fit into the whole.
1. Translators have added the word "this"; literally, James wrote, "Know, my beloved brothers, all people must be quick unto hearing, slow unto speaking, and slow unto anger."
 2. Whether it is an imperative (as taken in most translations) or an indicative (as in the NASB),² the point is the same: in living lives of steadfast faith that trust in the goodness of God, even when facing trials, we need to learn to "take a breath" and focus on what's most important for faithfulness.
- E. The proverbial statement served James's purpose well, drawing on what he had just said even as it advances his point to what he would go on to say.
- II. What Not To Do: Hindrances to Steadfast Faith.
- A. First consider the problem of anger.
1. He is not condemning all anger, only human (i.e., unrighteous) anger (v. 20).
 2. Refrain from such anger because it "does not produce the righteousness of God."
 - a) Grammatically, "righteousness of God" (δικαιοσύνην θεοῦ, *dikaionēn theou*) can mean one of two things.
 - (1) The righteousness God possesses, his faithfulness in keeping promises that we can trust; this would fit with vv. 13, 17-18.
 - (2) Or, the righteousness revealed and expected by God, i.e., "the righteousness God desires" (NLT ; cf. NIV).
 - b) The word "produces" (ἐργάζεται, *ergazetai*) supports the second option; this fits the teaching of the whole writing (1:3; 2:9, 14, 17-18; 3:13; 5:4).
 - c) Human anger creates problems that hinder us from doing God's will.
 3. But do not forget the focus of James which shows another perspective.
 - a) The theme of trials sets the stage for the entire writing; failing to ask for wisdom (1:5-6) and recall God's goodness (vv. 13, 17-18) could easily have led to frustration that spilled over into unrighteous anger (cf. 5:7-11).
 - b) We know, too, from 4:1-3 that anger was an issue in interpersonal relationships within the church, resulting from desires that were frustrated.
 - c) Taken this way, vv. 19-20 would have the effect of saying, "when you face trials, take a breath; think about who God is, what he has promised, and what he aims to do through your trials" (cf. 1:3-4).

¹ "Unrighteous anger cannot be justified, for a man's anger tips the scale to his ruin." (Sir. 1:22, ESV).

"Do not be reckless in your speech, or sluggish and remiss in your deeds." (Sir. 4:29).

"Be quick to hear, and be deliberate in answering." ¹² If you have understanding, answer your neighbor; but if not, put your hand on your mouth. ¹³ Glory and dishonor come from speaking, and a man's tongue is his downfall." (Sir. 5:11-13).

² The Greek ἴστε (*iste*), from οἶδα (*oida*), can be either a perfect imperative or a perfect indicative.

- B. We would, therefore, expect him to include (and later emphasize - 1:26; 3:1-12) the need to be “slow unto speaking” – what troubles result when we let our anger get away from us and “speak our mind”?

III. What To Do: The Foundation for Steadfast Faith.

- A. James calls for a different way, the way of being “quick unto hearing.”
- B. Perhaps the key word in the three verses is verse 21's “meekness” (πραΰτης, *prautēs*).
1. The word does include the idea of “humility” (NASB); it is not about being a doormat, however, but about letting God completely control the strength we possess (and he enables).
 2. It is somewhat ambiguously placed in the sentence.
 - a) Is James saying, “take off . . . in humility,” or “in humility receive”?
 - b) The second option is to be preferred, but “a case can be made that James intentionally places this phrase in a hinge position to refer to the attitude one should have both while divesting oneself of sinfulness and while receiving our new selves from God.”³
- C. James called for complete surrender to what the person of faith professes to follow.
1. Sin *must* be laid aside; the figure is that of taking off clothing, the participle ἀποθέμενοι (*apothemenoi*) having the force of the main imperative verb.
 - a) All the “moral dirt” (ῥυπαρία, *hryparia*).
 - b) All the “rampant wickedness” (περισσεῖαν κακίας, *perisseian kakias* ; cf. ASV 's “overflowing of wickedness”).
 2. The teaching of the word must be completely embraced, a course that implies total trusting acceptance (i.e., we sit under the word's judgment, not the other way around) and – as vv. 22ff. will elaborate – doing what we learn.
 3. In a phrase that highlights another aspect of the goal of the process that he has stressed throughout the chapter (cf. 1:4, 12), James says that it is this word that will ensure the salvation of the one professing faith.

Conclusion

1. James's teaching here seems axiomatic, a given that everyone professing faith surely understands. But, there is danger in taking that for granted.
2. A teacher of mine who knew him personally once told me a story he said had been related to him by a friend who was a psychiatrist and professor at a leading southern university.

In his psychiatry practice, the doctor counseled numerous Christians. He customarily would ask them how their faith influenced the way they dealt with their troubles. He reported that more often than not they acted as if the idea had never occurred to them. They were religious, but there was a strong disconnect between their profession of faith and its application to their lives.

³ Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 87. They also cite William Baker who observes that “a humble attitude ... is not only mandatory when we make God the Lord of our lives; it is also required in the preliminary step of cleaning the evil out of our houses. That's what repentance is.”

3. I think it is safe to say that James would have responded with an urgent command to them to listen to the word of the Lord and do what they learned. They needed to refocus on that which is most important and will ultimately save their souls.
4. It occurs to me that they are not the only believers who need that exhortation. Maybe it fits you today. If so, I urge you to stop and listen to the word of the Lord and then do what you learn. Now is the time.

April 11, 2011; updated May 23, 2016
www.davidanguish.com