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# OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

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## Take a Breath

David Anguish

The young daughter of a woman I knew several years ago would often become so excited that she would talk too rapidly to be understood. Both to calm the girl and so she could understand what she was saying, her mother would say, “Breathe, Susie.” I submit that the main difference between her and many of us are the specific things that got her so worked up. Most of us have times when we need to take a breath, calm down, and get the anxiety triggered by our circumstances under control.

In 1.2–18, James says that trials are inevitable and we should ask God for the wisdom needed to cope with them. He also reminds us that God gives only good things and any sins we commit result from our failings, not God’s ill intentions. Building on that foundation, James turns to the obedience to God’s word that is necessary to demonstrate steadfastness. He first concentrates on the challenges to obedience caused by undisciplined speech and anger, shortcomings later passages will reveal were especially problematic for James’s readers (see 1.26; 3.1–12; 4.1–3, 11–12).

All well and good, but what if, despite knowing better, we focus on the immediate concerns presented by our trials to such an extent that they overwhelm us and leave us unable to hear and obey? James 1.19–21 in effect counsels us to stop. Breathe. Re-center. Remember where frustration and overreaction will lead.

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## 1.16–18, 19–21 – Textual Connections

At first glance, James’s transition from God’s character in verses 16–18 to speech, anger, and receiving the word in verses 19–21 appears abrupt. There is certainly a shift in topic, but when we place 16–18 alongside 19–21, we see similarities that indicate James intended one thought to lead to the next.

First, both paragraphs begin with commands. Verse 16 begins with the present imperative, “do not be deceived” (πλανᾶσθε, *planasthe*, preceded by μὴ, *mē*); verse 19 begins with the perfect imperative, “know” (ἴστε, *iste*; the word *this* is supplied by translators).<sup>1</sup> Second, both verses 16 and 19 use the address, “beloved brothers,” found elsewhere in James only in 2.5.<sup>2</sup> Third, both paragraphs conclude with a reference to God’s word. Verse 18 says that it is by means of the “word of truth” that God exercises his will to give us birth (ἀποκυέω, *apokueō*; see v. 15), “that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.” Verse 21 urges us to “put away” moral failures that stand opposite “the righteousness of God” (v. 20) and replace them with humble acceptance of God’s “implanted word,” which “is able to save your souls.” These repetitions alert us to the likelihood that James intends verses 19–21 to in some way advance the thought begun in verses 2–18, and especially 16–18.

### Living in Response to God’s Nature and Word

Broadly speaking, the connection is to be found in James’s repetition in 1.19 – 2.26 of the related ideas of the *word* (λόγος, *logos*; 1.21, 22, 23), *law* (νόμος, *nomos*; 1.25; 2.8, 9, 10, 11, 12), and *works* (ἔργον, *ergon*; 2.14, 17, 18, 20), all of which are vital for steadfast faith. James echoes Jewish wisdom teaching which often stressed the virtues of listening much and talking little as essential to demonstrating wisdom from God (an idea he introduces in 1.5 and develops in 3.13–18). Proverbs 17.27–28, for example, says, “Whoever restrains his words has knowledge, and he who has a cool spirit is a man of understanding. Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent” (cf. Prov 10.19; 11.12–23; 13.3; Eccl 5.1–2; 7.9). This theme was also featured in Jewish writings just prior to the New Testament period, as evidenced in Sirach:

- Unjust anger cannot be justified, for anger tips the scale to one’s ruin (Sir 1.22 NRSV).
- Do not be reckless in your speech, or sluggish and remiss in your deeds (Sir 4.29).

<sup>1</sup> The KJV (“wherefore”) and NKJV (“so then”) base their translations on the variant ὥστε (*hōste*) which appears in some later manuscripts. But the evidence and harmony with James’s style favor *iste*. See Metzger 1971, 680; Davids 1982, 91.

The NASB translates *iste* as an indicative, “you know *this*,” but add a note that gives the imperative alternative. The indicative is grammatically possible (Wallace 1996, 485 n 96), but “the imperative is more likely ... since this is the kind of verb that James usually pairs with his address, ‘my beloved brothers’” (Moo 2000, 82).

<sup>2</sup> “Brothers” is used without “beloved” in 1.2, 9; 2.1, 14–15; 3.1, 10, 12; 4.11; 5.7, 9–10, 12, 19.

- Be quick to hear, but deliberate in answering. If you know what to say, answer your neighbor; but if not, put your hand over your mouth. Honor and dishonor come from speaking, and the tongue of mortals may be their downfall (Sir 5.11–13).

The use of the perfect imperative verb, *know* in verse 19 conveys the tone of a reminder. James is utilizing traditional teaching to introduce important ideas, underscored by his return to them later (1.26; 3.1–12; 4.1–3, 11–12). Thus, having emphasized God’s generous character, James says, in effect, “And don’t forget what you’ve always heard: people who are committed to steadfast friendship with God should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger.”

### What Not To Do

Consider first the prohibition of anger (ὀργή, *orgē*) which should not be understood to condemn righteous indignation, but only anger that is not righteous. This is evident from his immediate reference to the standard of God’s righteousness in verse 20; we also infer it from other references to God’s anger (cf. Rom 1.18; 2.5; et. al. where *orgē* also appears) as well as from the example of Jesus who, though displaying anger at unrighteous behavior, did not sin in doing so (cf. Mark 3.5 where *orgē* appears; see also John 2.15; Matt 23.13–36).

Unrighteous anger impedes steadfastness because it “does not produce the righteousness of God” (δικαιοσύνην θεοῦ, *dikaioṣunēn theou*). Grammatically, it is possible to understand “righteousness of God” as the righteousness God possesses, especially his faithfulness in keeping his promises. But we can also understand the phrase to refer to the righteousness that is revealed and expected by God. Since “righteousness” is the object of the verb “produce” (κατεργάζομαι, *katergazomai*), it is best to take it in the second sense, as translated in the NIV: “the righteousness that God desires.” This fits with James’s emphasis in 1.3; 2.9, 14, 17–18; 3.13; and 5.4.

Unrighteous anger is a particular threat to righteous behavior. Because it is rooted in frustration, it can lead to exasperation that boils over into unrighteous displays such as the quarrels and fights referenced in 4.1–3 or the impatience experienced when facing mistreatment by oppressors in 5.1–11.

The solution is to stop and think (“count to ten”) in order to keep anger under control. Pausing in this way also helps us be “slow to speak,” forestalling the kinds of impulsive statements that only make matters worse.

### What To Do

The solution for undisciplined anger is to be “quick to hear” (v. 19). This is accomplished by practicing “meekness” (πραῦτης; *prautēs*) in the reception of “the implanted word.” “Meekness”

includes the idea of humility (NIV, NASB), but does not entail being a doormat (cf. Num 12.3; Matt 11.29). Rather, it is the spirit which surrenders our attitudes and actions to God's control.

That said, the phrase in verse 21 is ambiguous. It is possible James is saying, "Put away with meekness all filthiness and wickedness." Or, as our translations understand it, he is saying we should "receive with humility" the word of God which informs us about what is righteous and wicked. While the second view is to be preferred, "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" (Blomberg & Kamell 2008, 87).

What is not ambiguous is James's call for complete surrender to God's will by people who profess faith. "Filthiness and wickedness" must be "put away" (ἀποτίθημι, *apotithēmi*), an idea that is comparable to taking off soiled clothing, and replaced with a complete embrace of the teaching of "the word," acquiescing in trust to God's wisdom and plan. It is only that wisdom "which is able to save your souls."

## Conclusion

Although it seems James's teaching here would be a given for anyone professing faith, we know that it is possible to follow a different course. The best defense against that is to heed James's instruction introduced in verses 19–21 and developed more in the verses that follow: talk less and listen more, especially to the saving word of God.

Wise counsel for all of us.

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"Reprinted from David Anguish, 'Opening the Scriptures,' December 12, 2023"*

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