

August 30, 2026

The Letter of James
“The Implanted Word”
James 1:19-27

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There’s much wisdom to be gained in preschool. One of the most helpful things I learned as a child in preschool was that, “I’m rubber and you’re glue, what you say bounces off of me and sticks to you.” Or there’s the classic, though maybe more obscure zinger, “I know you are, but what am I?” When someone says to you, John, you’re the worst basketball player I’ve ever seen, you can say back, “I know you are, but what am I?” It works every time.

But maybe the most well-known of those preschool sayings is the one that goes like this: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” We’ve all heard that, haven’t we? We’ve probably all said that to ourselves at one point in our lives. When somebody says something unkind to us on the playground or on the bus, or maybe even in our own homes, we console ourselves with that timeless wisdom, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.”

But the saddest part of that saying is that it’s nowhere close to being true, is it? Because words do hurt us. It only takes six weeks for a broken arm to heal, but it can take a lifetime to heal the wounds caused by the things people say to us. Professor and author, David Nystrom

[hateful] speech is destructive of not only the target, but eventually also of the speaker. Our speech has the power to encourage and nourish life, or to snuff it out. Which shall we choose?”¹

Words are intensely powerful, aren’t they. They go out from us to work in the world. Words have consequences. They can bring good, but they can also bring tremendous evil. Proverbs 18:21 says, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” With our words, we have the power to give life: “I love you.” “I’m proud of you.” “I’m grateful for you.” Or we have the power to bring death: “I hate you.” “You’re not good enough.” “Nobody cares about you.”

In our passage this morning, James hints at the power of words when he counsels us to use them wisely. He says, “let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”

And this is good advice, particularly in an age so full of opinions and self-righteous anger. Anger is everywhere in our age, isn’t it? You can’t look at your smartphone without being bombarded with someone’s seething rage. And when you read some of that stuff, it’s awfully hard to keep from getting caught up in the rage and replying with angry words of your own. My neighborhood HOA has a Facebook page, and you wouldn’t believe the kind of nastiness that

¹ David Nystrom – NIV Application Commentary, James

people post on there. Or maybe you would believe it, because it's not an uncommon problem on the internet.

Anger begets anger. Hatred gives birth to hatred. The anger we find in our online discourse is the very same anger we heard on the playground.

So, what are we saying? Is anger always bad? You might reasonably point to that episode in the Gospels when Jesus flips over tables. He's furious with the moneychangers when he says, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you make it a den of robbers.'"² Surely, Jesus is not wrong in his anger. And of course he's not wrong. He's Jesus. But what about the other examples in the Bible of anger? I was reminded this week of the prophet Amos and his angry tirade in Amos chapter 4. He says,

*"Hear this word, you cows of Bashan,
who are on the mountain of Samaria,
who oppress the poor, who crush the needy,
who say to your husbands, 'Bring, that we may drink!'*

*² The Lord God has sworn by his holiness
that, behold, the days are coming upon you,
when they shall take you away with hooks,
even the last of you with fishhooks.³*

That makes me think of another of those classic childhood sayings: If you can't say something nice, then don't say anything at all. Amos probably wasn't familiar with that one. I'm joking, of course. But what's the difference between the anger on display in the neighborhood Facebook page and the anger of the prophet? Well, one is rooted in God's concern for the poor and the oppressed, and the other is rooted in self-righteousness and ego.

And that's precisely what James is telling us. Our anger, he says, points to an inner hypocrisy. He declares quite bluntly that, "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless." James takes aim at our anger when he says that "the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God." God's righteousness and human anger are opposed to one another. What, then, is the righteousness of God? James goes on to spell it out in black and white: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." God cares about the affliction of the poor and the meek. That's the message of Amos. That's the message of Jesus when he flips the tables. That's the message of James in these verses. And if you want to know more about true religion, then I invite you to visit the parlor after worship.

Well, but if that's true religion, then what exactly are we doing here? Shouldn't we be out in the highways and the hedges a-working for our Lord? According to James, we certainly should be. But what we're doing here matters to our religious life just as much as anything we might be doing out there. In fact, what we're doing here empowers and enables anything we would ever hope to do out in the world. Because what we're doing in this place, among these people, is the

² Matthew 21:13

³ Amos 4:1-2

equally important act of hearing. Paul says that “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”⁴

Hearing is important. Far more important than speaking. “Be quick to hear, and slow to speak.” I came across a story this week of a hospice volunteer named Dr. Chang who sits with the dying and listens to their stories. She seldom speaks, and one of the tools she uses is a clever acronym using the word, WAIT. WAIT stands for, “Why am I speaking?” And every time she wants to open her mouth, she asks herself that question. It has made her a better listener, and has opened the possibility for the dying to feel, perhaps for the first time, that their stories matter – that their lives matter.⁵

But by urging us to be good listeners, James is doing more than just giving good advice for interpersonal relationships. Sure, active listening is a good skill to have when we relate to one another, but it’s absolutely vital if we want to relate at all to the God who created us. James wants us to be good listeners, but mostly so that we can hear and receive the only word that truly matters: God’s word.

Remember how we talked about the power of words? Well, the word which God has gathered us to hear this day and every Lord’s day is a word whose power is greater than the power of any word we could ever hope to conjure out of our sin-sick hearts. The word of God, written in the Scriptures, enlivened by the Spirit, is the very word which spoke the world into existence. God’s word to us is powerful. John says this word was in the beginning with God. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.⁶ Through His powerful word, Jesus Christ, God has overcome every death-dealing word we could ever speak. Friends, God’s eternal word, Jesus, speaks to us only life! And the Good News that James speaks to us this morning is that this eternal and powerful Word, the yes to our no, the life to our death, is ours through the power of God for us. There’s a connection between hearing and doing that James wants us not to miss. What we’re doing now – hearing and receiving, is effecting in us something greater than we could imagine – the Word of God is securing our salvation.

James says, “let every person be quick to hear... and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” Beloved, receive the implanted word. The implanted word is Jesus. He himself grows within us by the power of the Spirit, taking root and changing us from the inside out.

Jesus tells the story of a seed. We know the story well. He says,

“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? ³¹ It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, ³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”⁷

When we truly hear and receive God’s word, we begin to be changed. When the implanted word of God takes root in us, we find that we are more able to do what James instructs: be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; to be able to love and serve our neighbors in need. In the

⁴ Romans 10:17

⁵ [The Doulas Who Help Us Die | The New Yorker](#)

⁶ John 1:4

⁷ Mark 4:30-32

reading from last week, James says, “God brought us forth by the word of truth.” We are creatures born of a new word. A word that speaks not of hatred and anger but of God’s perfect love.

Liz Huntley is an accomplished person. She is an author, a respected litigation attorney, and a dedicated child advocate. But the current trajectory of her life is not what it might have been were it not for the power of a word. In her book, *More than a Bird*, Liz tells the story of that word. Liz was “born in the violent Butler Terrace housing project in Huntsville, Alabama, but raised in [her] grandmother’s home in Clanton, Alabama, following her mother’s death by suicide... and the incarceration of [her] father.” She grew up in a situation of poverty, abuse, neglect, and addiction. But, she says, her “life changing moment came on her first day of first grade when her teacher spoke the emboldening words, “Elizabeth, you’re going to be the brightest student I [will] ever have.” Those words, she said, “produced a powerful wake of hope whose current has proven unstoppable.”⁸

Those words, like God’s own creating word, went forth into Liz’s life and did not return empty. Those powerful words from a teacher who loved and cared about Liz gave birth to something beautiful in her life. Those words spoke into being a potential for herself that Liz had not previously imagined. And around that same time, God’s own word of love and grace and acceptance came to her in a sermon her pastor preached. She says, “When I was eight-years-old, my pastor inspired me with a simple message: If God takes care of the birds, He will take care of me because I am more than a bird. His sermon gave me hope and guided me through some of the darkest days of my life.”

Words are indeed powerful, but no word is more powerful than the word of God for you and for me which we receive in Jesus Christ. May you hear today the word God has spoken over you. That God loves you. That God is for you. That you belong to him and there is nothing that you or anyone else can ever do to separate you from his love. Thanks be to God.

⁸ [Liz Huntley](#)