

“Let Everyone Be Quick to Listen, Slow to Speak, Slow to Anger”

James 1:17-27

In our text from James he wants us to know that while God blesses us with good things in our lives; temptation and evil do not come from God, but from our own desires and sin. So to fully appreciate what James writes in our text about the good things in our life, we need to read the preceding four verses to remind us where our temptation comes from.

Verses 13-16 - “No one, when tempted, should say, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. Do not be deceived, my beloved.”

During my walkabout this summer, I visited with three of our foster daughters out west. Last week I shared with you some of Amy’s story and the failure of the social service system in Washington.

Bridget, the second foster daughter I visited with in North Dakota, has experienced more evil in her life than most. I always knew she was pregnant at age 14 and had an abortion, thus my encouraging her not to have a second abortion when she became pregnant the next year. What she had never told me until this summer was that her father was responsible for the first pregnancy. She said she didn’t tell me 20 years ago because she was afraid of my anger toward her

father.

Bridget moved into our house from the hospital with her newborn son when Rachel was 3 ½ and Nathan was 6 months old. The good news is that her son, John, has moved to Colorado where he's doing his apprenticeship to become an electrician. The bad news in her life is plentiful. She divorced her husband five years ago with which she has two junior high aged sons. She also has a 3-year-old daughter with a man she now has a restraining order against. A year ago she was rear ended, doing significant injury to her head, neck and back and thus had to quit her well paying construction job building Wal-Mart's and other large buildings.

Now she works a few hours a day out of her dilapidated house taking drive through orders for McDonald's which was a revelation for me, not knowing the drive through voice isn't always in that building. All it takes is a computer.

Despite all the evil, despite all the downness, Bridget somehow maintains a positive attitude and doesn't blame God for her problems. Instead, she continues to care for her children and makes the best out of much difficulty in her life. Her love, her faith, and the same old smile were an inspiration for me. All of you know a Bridget who can be an inspiration for you when you're feeling down and out. Or maybe you're a Bridget inspiring others with your positive spirit despite hard times.

On the other hand, I've known many people over the years who blame the bad things in life on an all-powerful God, forgetting the bad choices they made or

the bad choices those close to them made that caused their suffering. Instead of dwelling on blaming her father or her ex-husband, she thanked me for almost two years of stability in her life at a crucial time with her first born.

In verse 16, James says “do not be deceived” by the bad things in your life, but instead in verse 17, know that “every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.”

The idea that God is a Father of lights originates from the Genesis accounts where he is the Creator of light. James wants us to know that just as God brought light into the darkness of creation, so will he bring light into the darkness of our lives. Light is one powerful example of the gifts that God sends into our life. And what is an even greater blessing than receiving that gift of light is being that gift of light sent into a person’s life. We all have plenty of opportunities to bring God’s light into people’s lives we know. Whether we bring that light through a formal ministry like Stephen’s Ministry or informally in our everyday relationships.

James then gets very specific in verses 19 and 20 about how to bring God’s light into another person’s life.

“You must understand this, my beloved; let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.”

The 50 hours of training Stephen’s ministers receive in our Divinity classes focuses primarily on improving our listening skills. The skill to be quick to listen

and slow to speak is one every one of us could benefit from in not only our church relationships but especially in our family and workplace relationships. Too often we are slow to listen and quick to speak with words of judgment.

A well-known illustration of what James is advising is when baseball great Willie Mays got off to a disappointing start in the Major Leagues. In his first 26 times at the plate, he had only one hit.

Eventually, the disappointment got to Mays, and as he was sitting in the dugout one day, he started crying.

Mays thought no one was around, but his manager, Leo Durocher, heard him. Putting his arm around Mays, the manager asked, “What’s the matter, son?”

“I can’t hit up here,” Mays replied. “I belong in the minor leagues.”

Durocher replied simply, “As long as I’m manager of the Giants, you’ll be my center fielder.”

Mays later credited that simple act of listening and praise with turning his hitting around. The rest is baseball history.

Unfortunately, even when we’re successful at being good listeners and slow to speak, we can, at the end, say the wrong thing when we don’t follow Leo Durocher’s example of words of comfort and praise.

One of my favorite negative examples is the story of a husband and wife getting ready for bed. The wife is standing in front of a full length mirror taking a hard look at herself.

“You know, love,” she says. “I look in the mirror and I see an old woman. My face is all wrinkled, my behind is hanging out a mile. I’ve got fat legs, and my arms are all flabby. Tell me something positive to make me feel better about myself.”

Being a good listener, he thinks about it for a bit and then says, “Well . . . there’s nothing wrong with your eyesight.”

Instead of a response like that; a quote from Steve Goodier’s book entitled “Prescription for Peace.”

“Compliment your spouse at least once every day. It should be sincere. Then point out something new you appreciate about him or her every week. Make sure it is something you have never mentioned before. You’ll be surprised at what it does for your marriage. Sincere compliments cost nothing and can accomplish so much. In any relationship, they are the applause that refreshes.”

“You must understand this, my beloved; let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror, for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they are like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act - they will be blessed in their doing.”

I appreciate James' analogy of us Christians looking at ourselves in a mirror, which we do every time we worship and begin by confessing our sin, which we do every time we hear God's word proclaimed, which we do every time we receive our Lord's body and blood; we look at ourselves in the mirror of our faith and then go out the rest of the week either forgetting about what we saw and heard here in this place or we go out and are "doers of the word" who act and who are blessed in our doing. When we hear God's word, it gives us liberty, it gives us the freedom, it gives us the will to persevere so that we are "not hearers who forget, but doers who act and are blessed in our doing."

Our Sunday School teachers hear God's Word and act in sharing his Word with our Divinity children. Our communion carriers hear God's Word and act in taking the sacrament of Christ's presence out to our homebound and nursing home residents. Those who come to Sunday or Wednesday morning or Women's Bible studies, hear God's Word and act to learn more in sharing His Word with others.

Some of you this week will go into your workplace and compliment a co-worker or employee bringing light into their darkness and nurturing your relationship with them.

Some of you will compliment your spouse or child or grandchild this week, bringing you closer together in loving one another with a more Christ-like love.

But according to James in the last two verses of Chapter 1, all of that isn't even enough. Being religious isn't enough. Serving others in our church, in our

workplace, and in our families isn't enough.

Verses 26-27 - "If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this; to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

Our world is full of orphans and widows. We are doers of the word when we reach out to them, when we listen, when we serve. But it's never enough. We always fall short. So as doers of the word we give thanks to God that all of our doing is only a small response to the ultimate doing, to the ultimate serving, to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, giving us salvation by God's grace through our faith. May each of us this week be a means by which God shares his grace with even the orphan and the widow in their distress. Then may the peace of God . . .