



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

A CHANGE OF PACE

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This morning starts week 2 in our study of the book of James. I say it starts week 2, because in addition to the sermons, we've got worksheets you can use to continue your own exploration of James during the week. They're simple pages that are just there to help you engage with the text a bit more than we can in our time on Sunday mornings. They're supposed to be pretty flexible so you can use them in one sitting or spread them out through the week. Go through them on your own or with your family – however it would be helpful for you. If you forget to grab one this morning, they're also up and available for download from the New Day web site (www.newdaynw.com).

Last week, we looked at what James had to say about hard times. We said that for the Christian, trials and tribulations have an added dimension, because they make us face questions about our faith. We can grow through these tough experiences and actually experience real joy -- even in the middle of the pain -- because they are shaping us into stronger, more complete people. And someday, God will put an end to the hard times and replace them with something so much better that it will all be worth it.

Even though that's hopeful, it's not an easy message to hear, particularly when you're in the middle of a crisis and you really don't want a lecture on the lessons you're supposed to learn. But it gives you a glimpse into the mind of James, and his no-nonsense approach in this letter.

I had a 1966 VW bug when I was in college, and I would drive that car back and forth from my parents' home in Olympia to school down in L.A. It was a little crazy. The thing had a 6 volt battery instead of the normal 12 volt, so the headlights were like having two flashlights taped on the front. The windshield wipers just flopped back and forth without doing much and the heater pretty much pumped gas fumes in right off the engine.

But what made those trips really special was that I had to pack that little car with my entire life for the next few months. All my clothes and books and anything else I wanted with me at school had to be crammed in there. I would work and work to make everything fit, tucking things into every available corner. The suitcases I would pack would be so full that I had to sit on them to get the latches to close. It was a good thing I drove by myself, because even the passenger seat would be loaded up.

James is like an expert packer, and he is intent on packing faith into every last corner of our lives – even those where it doesn't naturally want to fit. He presses and squeezes and shows us where we need to make more room for it. As we saw last week, that's not always comfortable to wrestle with.

This morning, he does it again. He takes us to another place where we are forced to make room for faith in our lives.

James 1:19-27

My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

Quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to become angry. These are instructions that I would like to expect from all of you without it applying to me. When I'm in a conversation, I want other people to be quick to listen to what I have to say. But I'm not so good at that myself. Half the time someone else is talking, I feel like I'm busy thinking up the next thing I want to say. That's not being quick to listen, although I tend to assume everyone else will be extremely attentive when I'm talking.

And I definitely want other people to be slow in getting angry at me. I want them to give me lots of second chances and make sure they fully understand my side of the story before they get mad. I, on the other hand, would like the right to instantly fly off the handle. I don't generally consider myself an angry person, but the things that do make me angry do it quickly. I have a short fuse for my hot buttons. So I want other people to pay attention to James, but I would rather not apply these things personally.

I sometimes think God has an ironic sense of humor, because when I sat down to start working on my sermon this week, it happened to be in a moment when I was all riled up about something unimportant and I was in a mood. I was just getting ready to be good and angry. Do you know what I mean by that? You start to stew about something and work out in your head all the reasons to be mad. Your mind starts to lock down on that one thing so that you can't think about much else. And you wallow around in that mud that's not very nice, but feels kind of good. I had my angry eyes ready to go. One of the only advantages of having eyebrows like these is that you can do really impressive angry eyes.

Anyway, I was just on the edge of anger when I read those words from James. And it caught me up short and forced me to wrestle through whether or not I was being slow to anger.

What is anger? Webster defines it this way: A feeling of displeasure resulting from injury, mistreatment, opposition, etc., and usually showing itself in a desire to fight back at the supposed cause of this feeling.

Have you seen King Kong? There's a scene in the movie where Miss Darrow refuses to do what Kong wants. It's the first time anyone has dared to resist him, and it makes him angry. He goes into a king size temper tantrum, yelling and knocking things around. To me, it was the ultimate picture of anger, this frustrated beast that we all feel inside sometimes, the rage that wants to lash out. Even the most mellow, happy go lucky people have triggers that will set them off at some point.

Do you find that you struggle at all with anger? I don't know what it looks like for you. Some people are yellers. Some people get violent. Some people get chronically grumpy. Some people don't look angry at all – they just simmer inside and it comes out in indirect attacks later. I've known people who use the silent treatment when they get mad, and other people who just play the martyr.

James says it doesn't matter what it looks like: we need to change the pace of our anger. We need to slow it down. Some people wonder if it's a sin to be angry, and the Bible doesn't say that. Anger is a natural and sometimes justified emotion. There are things worth getting angry about.

But anger tends to sit on the porch with sin. They stick close together. When one shows up, the other isn't ever very far away. That's the reason James gives for trying to slow it down:

Man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

Even when we're angry about something that is truly wrong, our reaction to it may not be right. Sometimes I think that as Christians, we feel like we're on God's side when we get angry at bad things. It seems morally superior to get upset when we see sin and evil in the world. And yet anger tends to be unproductive. As justified as our anger might be, as much of a right as we may have to lash out and retaliate, James tells us that that kind of response isn't going to do much to bring us more into line with what God wants for us. It's not going to set the world right. Most of the time, we'll end up doing or saying something we regret.

I'm so glad that God himself exercises great restraint in his dealings with us.

Psalm 145:8

The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.

We tend to imagine God as being an angry hothead, hurling lightning bolts at every person who messes up. But he's just the opposite. He's patient and slow to anger, even when he has every right to be mad about what he sees.

God is the supreme example of anger management. Anger management experts will tell you to develop a strategy for dealing with your anger in healthy ways, whether that's through talking it out or calm breathing or hitting a pillow. God went out of his way and came up with the ultimate strategy for redirecting his own anger. Jesus voluntarily took

all that fierce wrath on himself, wrath that God would have been fully justified in unleashing on us.

So when James encourages us to be slow to anger, he's encouraging us to live in light of the incredible compassion God has shown to us.

Anger has built into it a desire to see things corrected. Something offends or hurts us and anger is the reflex that attempts to push back and remedy the situation. But it's a very human and flawed approach, because our anger is often helpless to actually change the situation.

James says, "You want to make the world more like God wants it to be? I'll give you a better alternative to anger. Here's a way to rechannel that sense of rage into something more productive."

We've been told to be slow to speak and slow to become angry, and James now puts us on the slow road to change. Since anger won't get us anywhere, James maps out a different strategy:

Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

Run to the dump.

The first stop on the road is to make a run to the dump. I don't know if your garage is like ours, but every few months it will start to pile up with various odds and ends that have migrated out of the house, and Karin will say, "We need to make a dump run!" We'll load up the car with junk and haul it off to the transfer station down in Auburn, where it magically disappears forever.

James says that before anything else happens, we've got to clean house and get rid of some junk in our lives. We have to stop doing what's wrong before we start doing what's right. It's the prep work. We've got to make some room.

What does that look like? It's very simple. We take what we know we've done wrong or what we're continuing to do wrong and we bring it to God and say, "This is what I've done. I'm sorry. I don't want to do this anymore." We come clean in confession. We change our attitude in repentance. And we get ready for something new.

The word that James uses for "moral filth" is the same one he will use in chapter two to refer to shabby clothes. It's what people see of us, the external stuff we do, our actions that aren't in line with who we say we are as Christians.

Then James talks about the evil that's so prevalent, so abundant. I think of that as our interior world. Did you ever play the game Whack-a-mole at Chuck E. Cheese or a carnival? Every time you hit one of the moles, another one pops up somewhere else.

That's how prevalent evil is inside our hearts and minds – every time we knock it down one place, it pops up somewhere else.

When I was in seventh grade and the chemicals in my brain started changing with adolescence, I remember just being plagued by how my mind could go to all kinds of dark places. Thoughts would fly into my head that were pure evil and I couldn't seem to make them stop. I talked to my dad about it, and he said, "Your brain is like a big satellite dish, and all these signals are whizzing past all the time. You're not responsible for the thoughts being out there – you're responsible for which ones you tune into, which ones you let stick."

James says that evil is everywhere. It will take regular trips to the dump, regular self evaluation to see what's in my heart or in my behavior that doesn't fit with following Christ. What am I needing to confess and get rid of?

James would also encourage me to

Rethink myself.

...humbly accept the word planted in you...

Humbly accept. Humility is the antidote to a lot of anger. Paul told his readers in Rome not to think of themselves more highly than they should. He's not encouraging low self esteem – that's the other extreme. Humility is proper and healthy perspective on our place in the universe, not acting like we deserve special treatment.

Gail MacDonald is the wife of Gordon MacDonald, who has written a number of books and pastored some very large churches. Week after week, Gordon would regularly receive criticism and advice, and at first it bothered both of them a lot, especially Gail, who wanted to defend her husband. It seemed so uncalled for and was often off the mark. But finally, Gail and Gordon realized that getting mad about people's opinions wasn't doing them any good. And they also came to the conclusion that in almost all the comments, no matter how harsh, there was at least a nugget of truth. So rather than get caught up in deflecting the insult, they decided to always ask, "What's the nugget here?"

That's humility – being a big enough person to look past the wrong for the bit of truth to be gained. It's hard to be arrogant and angry when you believe you still have something to learn.

There's another side to humility, too, and that's the humility that comes from receiving something good you don't feel you deserve. At my going away party, my coworkers presented Karin and I with a trip for our family to Hawaii. It was so unexpected and over the top. It was very humbling to receive such an extravagant gift. I would never be able to give something back on the same level. I won't have the chance to ever return the kindness, and I felt like any thank you I could say was going to be totally inadequate.

Most of us have been there at some point in life, whether someone has helped us out when we've been in a tough spot financially or someone has just shown us an incredible kindness. We have to let go of our pride sometimes to accept amazing gifts. Humility means coming to terms with our own neediness. None of us is above help.

That's where James is going with humility. He says there's this incredible gift God wants to give us – the message of the gospel. And to receive it humbly involves that hard step of just saying “thank you” without being able to deserve it or pay it back.

humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

Open the door.

Here's where James takes a surprise turn. He's told us what won't achieve God's righteousness – anger. He's told us what to get rid of – all the evil and wrong in our life. You would think he would then give you a list of things to do to replace that. Instead of telling us a list of new behaviors, he says “open the door. Accept the word planted in you. That's what will save you.”

John tells us that Jesus himself is God's Word. Paul tells us that it's Christ in us that gives us the hope of glory. And James says the same thing: It is God's message of hope in Jesus that has the power to save us.

We went to a little gardening shop the other day, and we saw some incredible fountains. There were massive ones with huge rocks that cost over \$1,000. I love the sound of water as it runs over the rocks.

But there were also fountains there that weren't operating. I saw a pump lying in one that wasn't hooked up. You don't normally see the pump. You don't think about the pump when it's running. But without it, the fountain is just a puddle.

Some people look at the book of James and see a bunch of recommendations on how to act. That's like the visible, bubbly water of a fountain. But what matters for James is the pump that drives the whole fountain. All our best behavior is just a puddle of water if it isn't flowing from what Jesus did for us. That's the pump. That's the key to everything else in the book. There's no fountain without it. There's only a list of rules.

Make no mistake: We're not asked to exchange our sinful ways for clean living. We're exchanging our sinful ways for Jesus Christ. And once we have him, we will have power to live a new life that we wouldn't have otherwise.

All that's necessary on our part is acceptance. James says it's planted in us – it's something done by God -- not us. We don't make it happen – we just say yes to Jesus having his way in our lives.

James goes on to explain in more detail his idea of what it looks like to really accept that word of hope into our lives.

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it -- he will be blessed in what he does.

If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

James gives a contrast between someone who gets a quick glance of himself in a mirror, and someone who looks intently at God's word and internalizes what he or she sees. Again, he would have us shift gears from quick to slow, taking the time to absorb what God is showing to us.

He also says we're to continue to stay in that spot, reflecting on God's gift of freedom to us through Jesus. The death and resurrection of Jesus is not just a starting point for our Christianity. It's the touchstone that we come back to over and over again. The more we look at it, the better equipped and motivated we will be to live the Christian life.

George Barna conducts polls like the Gallup Polls, except he does it for statistics specifically on Christians. And what he has discovered is that by and large, there's really not much difference in the way American Christians act versus the way non-Christians do. Our beliefs don't seem to radically alter much of our behavior or attitudes. But according to James, they should. He wants us to

Become a performance artist

Once we really internalize the truth of God's hope for us, it is intended to result in new actions. Otherwise, James says we're just kidding ourselves about how sincere our faith is. If we're not moved to become different people, if there is no change from before we said yes to Jesus, then James says we haven't really understood the meaning of what God has done for us.

There was a pastor in New York who worked with gang members, and some of them put their faith in Christ and got out of street life. They would then go back to their gangs and share about their new belief in Jesus. And when one of the gang members would respond to their story and express their own desire to follow Christ, the person who shared with them would say, "Don't tell us you're a Christian. We'll tell you." Meaning: we'll know by your actions if your faith is genuine.

I had to take Greek in seminary, and my grasp of it was never that strong – even when I was taking the classes. I made the mistake of taking the first part of it via correspondence course, where I never heard anybody pronounce a word for me. So then, when I took a class that required reading out loud in Greek, I just tried to listen really closely to my professor and pronounce things just like he did. The only problem was that he was born in Scotland, so my Greek ended up having this slightly Scottish brogue to it.

All that to say, I'm no Greek scholar, and I don't want to be like the dad in My Big Fat Greek Wedding who was always referring to what a word meant in the original Greek. But every once in a while, even my very basic understanding of Greek comes in handy, especially with some of the word choices James makes.

In this case, what he said was, "Be doers of the word, and not just hearers." And it's pretty clear what a doer is. We get the idea of acting on what we say. But the Greek word James used for doer is "poetai" which, as it sounds, is the Greek word for poets. So you could translate it, "Be poets of the word." I like how that sounds. Make these words into a life poem. Act them out.

I've never been much of a poetry reader. But in 2003, I happened to catch part of the Tony Awards. There was a show on Broadway that year called Def Jam Poetry Slam, and it was this group of young, cutting edge poets doing these out loud readings of their works. And at the Tonys that year, they performed part of the show called, "I wanna hear a poem," and it was absolutely electric. I had never heard anything like it. It made poetry come alive in a whole new way.

The concept for the show came from a national competition called Poetry Slam. These new poets have their roots in rap and hip hop and their poems are written specifically to be heard instead of read. One critic described poetry slam as "words that beg to be sung or shouted and do not rest easy on the page."

The word of God begs to be sung and shouted and lived. It does not rest easy on the page. It was never intended to be read and forgotten. It was never intended to be just a list of things to believe mentally. James wants us to be the poets and performers who put flesh and bones on God's word, just the way Jesus did when he came to earth. We act it out, we live out God's love poem to the world. There is power and beauty in that.

What does it look like? James spells out two components:

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

By religion, James is referring to the outward aspects of our faith, the visible side of spirituality. What will other people see in us? He says that there are really just two sides to it.

First, we're to live generously. We're to regularly check in on the helpless, provide food and shelter for those who need it. We're to look for opportunities to take care of those who have no one to take care of them. As living examples of God's love on earth, we are compelled to act with the kind of heart that he does. John the Baptist put it in really practical terms. He said, "If you've got two coats, give one to somebody who doesn't have any. Do the same with your food." We are to live with unselfish compassion.

Secondly, James says that we're to live spotlessly. He says keep yourself from being polluted or stained by the world. He's talking about purity, which is an old fashioned concept. We're told in 1 Corinthians that bad company corrupts good character, and we don't always pay attention to the effects of what we surround ourselves with. If we worked at a nuclear plant, and were around dangerous, radioactive material all the time, we would take great care to make sure we didn't get contaminated. The stakes are too high.

Sometimes we forget that the world can be a dangerous place in which to try to live a pure life. We compromise and rationalize, and become desensitized to all the toxic mess around us, and pretty soon we're polluted. We become contaminated. Our faith loses its effectiveness as any representation of Jesus, because we don't resemble him at all in our choices.

Living generously and living spotlessly are the two pillars of how we are to live for God, because that's how Christ lived for us. He found a way to walk tall and straight while at the same time reaching out in love to those around him. If we can learn to focus on being compassionate while at the same time keeping our own attitudes and actions spotless, there won't be much time or energy left for anger. And we'll become poets, living out a love poem that the world desperately needs to hear.

James wants us to get practical and personal. So as you think about these ideas in light of your own life, ask yourself some tough questions:

1. Am I struggling with anger? What causes the rage in me? Is my response doing anything to help the situation?
2. Do I need a trip to the dump? Is there a clutter of sin or distraction in my heart that I've been hanging on to that is interfering with my ability to hear God? What do I need to clear out?
3. What's my power source? Am I just trying to do a bunch of good things on my own, or am I staying connected to the story of what God has done for me?
4. What's easier for me – living generously or spotlessly? Most of us gravitate one way or the other. We focus on compassion or on keeping our own lives in line. Which way do you need to grow?