

Last week we finished up our series on the early history of Israel found in the Old Testament. Today we are going to turn to the New Testament book of James. We are going to be reading through James in the month of September.

James has been considered a controversial book. It took several hundred years before it was accepted into the canon of scripture which we call the Bible. In fact, the German Reformer Martin Luther wanted to throw out the book of James from the Bible.

That would have been a shame. It would have been a shame because this book is clearly speaking directly to us at this time.

This morning we are going to be reading from the first chapter of James.

Read James 1:17-27

Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness.

Be quick to listen and slow to speak. Be quick to listen and slow to speak.

How well are you doing that when you are with your spouse? Are you quick to listen and slow to speak? How well are you doing that with your children? Are you quick to listen and slow to speak? How well are you doing that with your parents? Are you quick to listen and slow to speak?

How well are you doing that with your boss at work or with your employees at work? Are you quick to listen and slow to speak? How well are you doing that with your students that you teach? Are you quick to listen and slow to speak? How well are you doing that with your teachers? Are you quick to listen and slow to speak?

Imagine what kind of world our lives would be if we were quick to listen and slow to speak? Because in my world, I hear a lot of quick to speak and slow to listen.

We live during very anxious times. I read this week the words of a mom with young children complaining that no one listens to her anymore. She is extremely tired and worn out.

She says "I have nothing to talk about other than being exhausted and depressed and no one wants to listen to me anymore."

How many of us gathered today feel like no one is listening to us? Our spouse is not listening to us so we are stressed about our marriage. Our children are not listening to us so we find ourselves yelling at them louder and louder. Our aging parents or grandparents are not listening to us so we become more and more concerned about their health and well being.

Be quick to listen and slow to speak.

This pandemic has intensified our quickness to speak and slowness to listen. We are all frustrated by this pandemic. It's like we have been running a marathon and just when we thought we were getting to the end of the race we found out that someone moved the finish line and added a bunch of hurdles that we now have to jump over.

We don't want to run any more. And we don't have the energy to jump over more hurdles. We are frustrated and we are angry.

And what do we do when we become frustrated and angry? We become quick to speak and slow to listen.

And that is where we are as a culture right now. We are doing lots of speaking and very little listening. But that is not what James tells us to do is it?

James begins this letter by noting that the people he is writing to are facing trials. James recognizes that his hearers are being tested. And what advice does James give to his hearers? James tells them to be quick to listen and slow to speak.

When we speak without listening we make really bad decisions. We make bad decisions in our marriages and in our families. When we speak without listening we make bad decisions in our jobs. When we speak without listening we make bad decisions with our friends. When we speak without listening we make bad decisions in our churches.

I've shared this story from our church history before but it is worth repeating over and over and over again. Because it is a story that reminds me of how bad decisions are made when we are quick to speak and slow to listen.

When I walk into our sanctuary, what I see is a reminder of one of the worst examples of leadership by a pastor. And that pastor who exhibited poor leadership when faced with a challenge was me.

When I arrived here as pastor, we faced a dilemma as a church. The pews in the sanctuary were falling apart. The paint on the pews was chipped and stuffing was falling out of the pew cushions. We all agreed that there was a problem. We did not agree on the solution.

Some of us believed that we needed new pews. And we advocated for new pews. We researched and we thought that it only made sense to have new pews. New pews would be bigger and fit our curves better than the old pews that were built when people clearly were a lot smaller in girth. So one side of the church stood up for new pews.

Some of us believed that we needed to refurbish the old pews. The old pews were historical and needed to be preserved. The old pews told a story of our history and if we lost them we would lose an important piece of who we are.

The Session gathered the information of new pews vs. old pews. The Session came to the December meeting that year and no decision had been made. There were 11 elders that gathered in the Bigger Room. I told the Session that they had to make a decision that night before a new Session began to serve in January

It was stressful that night. And each side made their argument. There was lots and lots of speaking but I'm not sure there was a whole lot of listening. I pretty sure that no minds were changed by all of our speaking.

So the Session voted that night 6-5 to replace the old pews with new pews. No one went home happy.

When a group of people are anxious about something, we can't think creatively. When we are anxious we can only find black and white solutions. It has to be this or it has to be that.

That is what is happening in our culture right now. We are anxious and we are choosing sides against one another. You are either for vaccinations or you are against vaccinations. You are either for masks or you are against masks.

We are anxious and we are not listening to one another and we only think that there are two choices to any problem in front of us. And when we get anxious like that and only think that there are two solutions, we squeeze God right out of the solution. We advocate that our position as the only right solution and then we look for the data to affirm that God approves of our position.

If you walk into our sanctuary, which, one day we will worship in there again as a body, just not yet. If you walk into the sanctuary, you will find the new pews on the bottom level. They are great pews made right here in York County outside of Clover.

But if you look up into the balcony, you will find the old pews beautifully restored. How did that happen?

It happened because even when a pastor exercises poor leadership, God's grace can still overcome it. What happened is that when January rolled around, some new elders rotated onto Session while some other elders rotated off. Mark Sleeper was one of those new elders.

I'm thinking that Mark was in the new pew group. But when Mark came to his first meeting, Mark raised a question. Mark said, why can't we put the new pews downstairs and refurbish the old pews for upstairs? The Session members all went silent.

Why had we not ever thought about that? In all of our yelling at each other about why our position was the best position, we never considered that there was a third option. It took a non-anxious person to share a third option that had never been considered.

When we are quick to listen and slow to speak, we may hear the voice of God speaking to our challenges. When we are quick to speak and slow to listen, we are probably not able to hear what God is trying to say.

So may we listen to what James has to say to us in our marriages, in our families, in our jobs, and in this church.

Let us all follow the wisdom of James and seek to be
quick to listen and slow to speak. AMEN.

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-Given: August 29, 2021 at Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)