

## James 1:13-25 Sermon: Slow to Anger

Let's hear what our Lord says to us through his servant James;

### James 1:13-27

<sup>13</sup>When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; <sup>14</sup>but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. <sup>15</sup>Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

<sup>16</sup>Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. <sup>17</sup>Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. <sup>18</sup>He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, <sup>20</sup>because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. <sup>21</sup>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.

<sup>22</sup>Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. <sup>23</sup>Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror <sup>24</sup>and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. <sup>25</sup>But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do."

This is the Word of the Lord

Let me tell you a story. It might sound familiar.

A father has been under serious stress at work. Day after day, expectations keep piling up—expectations from his employer, and expectations he places on himself. And day after day, he feels like he's falling short. He's exhausted, discouraged, and just needs a break.

All week he's been looking forward to Friday night. He's carved out a little time for himself: the hockey game, a favorite drink, and—just for a few hours—not thinking about work or anything else weighing him down.

Then Friday afternoon comes. He gets a text from his wife:

"Can you pick up Johnny from practice? I've got something I need to take care of."

He sighs, but tells himself, *Okay, it's fine. The night isn't ruined. I'll still have time later.*

After work, he picks up Johnny—but Johnny’s clearly had a rough day. He’s whining, complaining, ungrateful. The father bites his tongue, but inside he’s thinking, *Doesn’t he know what I’m sacrificing for him?*

They get home. It’s loud. Dinner isn’t ready. Johnny’s sister, Betsy, has invited a friend over for a sleepover. They have taken over the TV room, no watching the game tonight. And now the father is expected to head back out and pick up pizza. Night ruined.

That’s it. He explodes.

“Why doesn’t anyone appreciate what I do around here? Why can’t I have one evening to myself? Just one! Is that too much to ask?”

And he storms out, slamming the door to get the pizza, leaving his wife wide eyed and his kids in tears.

Maybe that *exact* scenario hasn’t happened to you—but something like it probably has. Maybe it’s not at home. Maybe it’s traffic. Maybe it’s the pickup lane at your kid’s school—just a totally random example that definitely doesn’t make me angry.

Our anger shows up in different places, but it all has something in common.

James 1 gets to the heart of our anger, not just the outburst, but the source. It helps us starve our anger, and feed what will give us the life God wants for us, with the people he has put around us.

Being free from our own anger is a blessing. It is like being set free from a slave driver that lives within us, freeing us to the life that God desires for us. The perfect law that gives freedom, as James calls it.

Let’s look more closely at this text together, and hear what God says to us, and how he will set us free to live a blessed and happy life with those he has placed around us.

### **Slide 9**

James begins by reminding us about who God is. James says, “God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.” God is totally and completely holy. In the way he orders the world, he could not have any evil motive. He does not entrap us in our sin.

You might object, thinking, if God is in control of all things, then isn’t he in control of my evil actions. This confusion is nothing new.

### **Slide 10**

God is what we call the *primary author of all good*. Genesis 1-3 is clear, he created the world, and called it good, very good even. At the fall, creation did not cease to be good, but simply was introduced things that are not good. Despite the fall, God has ordained, in his goodness, the salvation of all who believe in him.

God created the possibility for evil to occur, and even knew they would occur on his creating them, but did not commit them, nor is liable for them taking place.

Think of a parent who leaves cookies cooling on the counter, knowing their child will see them. If the child takes one without asking, the parent isn't guilty of theft. In fact, the parent may have intended something good—either to praise restraint or to teach patience. In fact, you are teaching your children to watch their desires, and make sure they do not reach to actions.

This is why James says, God isn't tempting, as in, giving opportunity for evil with malicious intent. God is giving opportunity for good to happen. It is our evil desire that drags us away from the good opportunity to resist. More than this, in our sin we often look for others to blame, rather than ourselves, this is nowhere clearer than in our anger. That is why James begins with who God is.

Let's go back to our original example of anger, at what point did the father begin to sin in his anger?

### **Slide 11**

James tells us, "each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire."

The father's problem didn't begin when he yelled. It didn't even begin when things went wrong. It began inside him.

All sin—including anger—starts with **sinful desire**.

That's uncomfortable for us, because we tend to think of our desires as neutral, natural, even a part of who we are. The world tells us, "Follow your heart."

Scripture says something very different.

Even our desires are corrupted by sin. And sin doesn't require intentional action to be sin—it's sinful because of where it comes from: our fallen nature.

### **Slide 12**

James continues:

“Desire, when it has conceived, gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”

The father’s anger was already growing long before his outburst; his sin began at his own conception. His desire was simple: *I want to be free from my responsibilities—even just for one evening.*

Don’t get me wrong, James isn’t saying that wanting rest is sinful. God even commands us to rest on the Sabbath. He knows we need it. But our sinful nature takes a good desire and twists it at the expense of our relationship with those around us. That is why we need to keep our desires in check.

God had, in fact, given the father a gift, an opportunity for good. He had an opportunity to show his love to his family, to persevere through frustration, to even grow patience through the ordeal. Instead, he indulged in selfish self-pity and possibly caused a rift in his family.

That desire may feel understandable. It may even feel justified. But it was still selfish. And over time, it gave birth to irritation, resentment, and finally rage.

That sin of anger could give birth to something far worse if it is left un-healed. Sin grows and mutates like a cancer. That is what James calls “death.” The “death” for the father could eventually be the death of his marriage, the death of trust and intimacy. Or, it may result in the death of the relationship with his children.

That death fully grown is ultimate separation from God, eternal fires of hell. Just as the father burned with passionate rage, now he burns for all eternity in his rage, separated from the life that God gives to him through faith.

Again, James isn’t saying, if you ever feel angry, you’re going to hell. He’s showing the pattern of life apart from God; where our desires lead when unchecked.

This is the warning. You must see the final end of your sin if you wish to kill it. Learning to hate our sin as God does.

James doesn’t leave us there though; he brings us back, yet again, to who God is.

### **Slide 13**

To kill our sinful desire, our anger included, we must recognize, as James says, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” Recognizing this fact has huge effect on our life.

### **Slide 14**

Let's consider again who James is writing to. It will help us to see why recognizing that every good and perfect gift comes from God.

James' church, like he himself, are under huge pressure due to the persecution they are experiencing. As I said last time, they are like D-Day paratroopers, they are scattered refugees all over the empire. James himself will die in this persecution.

And yet, he says this is "a good and perfect gift." Just as the paratroopers were able to confuse their enemy and secure their objectives because of their scattering, so too did God's people, bring in all the Gentiles to God's Kingdom because of their persecution.

At the time, James did not know this outcome. He had every reason, humanly speaking, to be angry and frustrated with God. And yet, because he knows who God is, he is able to rest in his plan. This is despite the horrors that he is witnessing, even his friends being stoned to death. While the persecution is horribly evil in itself, the result that God brings out of it is better than they could ever imagine.

In this persecution, James says this church becomes "a kind of firstfruits," that is, just as the people in the Old Covenant would take the first and best of their crop in an offering, so too is God taking the first and best of his people and offering it. James' persecuted church is this people, following their Lord in suffering, and from them he brings blessing to all Christians from then on. We are all edified by seeing their perseverance and are encouraged to do the same in our much better situation.

### **Slide 15**

This new church became the "firstfruits" because God gave them birth "by the word of truth." That is, they have been born again, through the "word of truth," the preaching of the gospel. They now have the Spirit within them, empowering them to persevere.

Notice the contrast, sin gives birth to death, the word of truth gives birth to life.

So, he says to them, if you were born again through the word of truth, they should remain "quick to listen" to that same word of truth. If they want to fully put to death that old sinful nature, listening to the gospel is the best way forward.

That practice of listening then inhibits the sinful words we tell ourselves, the kind that stoke up our anger. I deserve better. I deserve a break. I'm owed what I want. Nobody appreciates everything I do for them. Nobody works as hard as I do. Sound familiar?

Being quick to listen means listening to God before listening to ourselves, listening to others before defending ourselves, and questioning the story our anger from our sinful

nature is telling us. Question the story of your anger by listening to God and others. Question your desires in the same way.

The gospel silences that self-indulgent story that ends in anger and frustration, killing the life that God has for us. The sinful nature is one that looks inward, self-pitying, woe-is-me, rather than to God, receiving every good and perfect gift from the eternally good and perfect father. The gospel says, you are sinful to your very desires, and yet God will bring you undeservingly to new life in him.

As we receive those around us as gifts from the father rather than as impediments to our selfish desires, our whole attitude changes. Especially our anger. When we are quick to listen to God, and his gospel, and let that shape our imaginations rather than our own sinful desires, anger has no place in our hearts. Because we receive all things, even the persecution that James went through, as a gift of God.

Now, if you find yourself in this picture of the angry father. Know there is hope, and that hope does not rest in you simply trying harder to not be angry, which will probably just make you angrier, stacking up more expectations. That hope rests in you being transformed by the “word of truth.”

Hear God’s Word and believe it. It is the only hope. When our Lord suffered death on the cross, he bore every kind of insult and injury with complete and utter patience. Even saying, “forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” That life now runs in us through the Spirit. That patience and self-control are ours, ask God to fill you with that.

First, we must see who God is, in his perfect holiness, giving every good and perfect gift. If God is who he says he is, we do not have an excuse for anger but should look to even the wrong in our lives as opportunities for goodness.

Second, we must recognize ourselves in light of who God is. Having sinful desires, that lead to sinful actions, that lead to death if we are not freed from that chain by God saving us. Our anger is almost always rooted in our sin, even when we feel we are justified in it. Question it, even when you feel justified in it.

Last, we must see that this anger is ultimately overcome by Christ living through us, making us the firstfruits of his new creation. We are born again through listening to the gospel, and we grow in Christ through the same.