

James 1:19-21

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[0 : 0 0] Desire can be problematic, but it can also hold a great promise. In this first chapter of the letter of James, just in the previous verses to the verses that we're going to be looking at this morning, James has traced the origins of sin and death to what he calls our own evil desire. And he presents the process for us. Desire conceives and gives birth to sin, and sin in turn gives birth to death. But desire in itself is not the problem. Desire is a good thing.

The key is to desire that which is good. In fact, we can do no better than desire for ourselves that which God desires for us. And what does God desire for us? Well, we get a hint or a sense of what that is in the verses we're going to be looking at this morning. So, notice there in verse 20, and James is talking about man's anger and what it produces, but notice what he says, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. The righteous life that God desires. And I want to think a little bit about that righteous life that God desires. What is that, and how do we get it, or how do we live it? And as I say, these are the questions that will occupy our attention this morning. So, first of all, let's just think a little bit about the righteous life that James makes reference to here in verse 20. What is that? In reality, what James says here in verse 20 is simply the righteousness of God. For man's anger does not bring about or produce the righteousness of God. And so, that leaves us a little bit, well, what does that mean? In what sense is that word righteousness being used? The translators of the version of the Bible that we have as the church

Bible have perhaps helpfully chosen to interpret what James has in view when they use this expression, the righteous life that God desires. But what James actually says is simply the righteousness of God.

And maybe we just need to think a little bit about that before we proceed to think about, well, how are we to live this righteous life that God desires? In the Bible, righteousness is attributed to the believer in two distinct senses. That is what we could call a legal righteousness, righteousness, the righteousness of Christ that is imputed or attributed to the believer. We are considered righteous by God. This is a righteousness that we receive as a gift, and we receive it by faith.

Remember what is said of Abraham. Abraham believed, and it was counted to him as righteousness. It was credited to him as righteousness. And of course, Abraham is presented by Paul as our model in that regard.

[3 : 4 2] As that was true of Abraham, so it is also true of us. We believe, we have faith in Jesus, and that is counted to us as righteousness. So, that's one sense in which this word righteousness is employed. But the word righteousness is also used to speak of what we might call the fitting conduct.

That ought to characterize the believer. And Jesus uses that word, or uses the word in that sense, in the Sermon on the Mount, on different occasions, but maybe we just notice one or two of those occasions. For example, in chapter 5 of Matthew's Gospel, in verse 20, we read, and Jesus here is speaking. He's directing these words to His disciples, and He says, For I tell you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. And clearly there, Jesus is using the word righteousness in the sense of a righteous life, a life marked by good deeds, righteous acts, righteous words, righteous words, a righteous life lived by the disciples of Jesus. And it seems clear that it is in the second sense that James is using the word in our passage this morning, namely, the righteous life that God expects from and desires for His people. We are to conduct ourselves according to God's standards and God's expectations. We are to live lives marked by fruit that is righteous, pleasing to God, and of blessing to others. Our thoughts and our words and our actions are to be good and pure and kind. Now, when we describe the righteous life in that way, immediately perhaps the question can arise. Well, who has modeled the righteous life to perfection? In whom do we see the breathtaking beauty of such a life? And of course, the answer is plain to see. We see such a life preeminent in the person of Jesus, the altogether righteous one. And the Father desires that we be like His Son. He desires that we be like His Son.

He desires that we be like Jesus. He desires that righteous life that James speaks of here in our passage.

And not only does He desire it for us, but the Father is dedicated to making this happen. This is a work of the Father by the Spirit, transforming us into the image of His Son. When we think about the life that we are to live, the life that we want to live, I wonder how many times have you heard it said? Maybe these words have been directed to you, or you've heard them said by others. It's the kind of thing you sometimes hear, folk who have been successful in some way, maybe overcoming great obstacles, an athlete, or somebody who's had some great success. And as I say, especially in the face of many obstacles, and you hear a motivational challenge directed to whoever is pleased to listen. You can be anything you want to be. If you put your mind to it, if you put in the effort, you can be anything you want to be.

And it all sounds very stirring, but there are two problems with that. The first is that it's not true. You can't be anything you want to be. There are any number of obstacles that are insuperable for you. But secondly, and more importantly, God has a better plan for you as His child.

[7 : 57] You can be what God wants you to be. And this is really what we want to think about as we think of this righteous life that God desires. Not just in the sense of that God is looking on and says, well, that's nice, you know, my people living righteous lives, but because He wants the very best for us, He wants us to experience the very best. And the very best for us is this righteous life, living a life like Jesus. So, how do we get it? How do we live this righteous life? And I think we can sum up James' advice on how to cultivate a righteous, God-pleasing life in this way. And this is a, there's an element of taking liberties in terms of summarizing what James has to say, but it's about anger management and about active listening. Or certainly those are the ways in which we're going to explore these three verses. So, we're looking at advice that James gives in the matter of living a righteous life, that righteous life that God desires for you. And I'm saying that on the basis of what James says here, it's about anger management and active listening.

Now, maybe some of you in your work context have even been on a course to learn this kind of stuff. Not that you're likely to own up to it. Well, certainly the anger management one you probably won't own up to. But who knows? I don't know if some of you are required to go on courses of this kind. Well, let's think of these two elements of the righteous life. Now, obviously, this is not, and James doesn't intend it to be an exhaustive treatment of the subject. But these are two aspects mentioned by James in our passage, and so we're going to give some time to think about them.

First of all, anger management. And we can split this into two seemingly contradictory exhortations. First of all, don't get angry. But then secondly, get angry. The first is very clear, it's explicit.

The second is maybe somewhat hidden, and we'll have to draw it out. But let's just think of these two sides of this requirement of anger management. First of all, don't get angry. As I say, James is very explicit there in verse 19, my dear brothers, take note of this.

Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. Slow to become angry. What kind of anger is James warning against? We might call it bad anger, or to use his expression in what immediately follows, man's anger. Verse 20, notice, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. I think it's significant that he qualifies that. He says man's anger. He could say anger doesn't bring about the righteous life, but no. He says man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. James has in mind that anger that is the fruit of selfishness and jealousy and greed. It's ugly and sinful. It's impatient and short-tempered and petty.

[11 : 16] This is the kind of anger that James is warning against. And why are we urged to be slow to become angry in this way? Well, simply for this reason, that such anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. It's bad for others who are the objects or the victims of your outbursts, but it's also bad for you. I was just this week watching a tennis match at the Monte Carlo Open that is, I think, still on, I guess, today. It concludes.

And I don't know if you've seen any of those matches. Even if you don't like tennis, just the setting is spectacular. Well, anyway, I happened to catch, oh, it was just a few minutes of one of the matches, and it was a guy I kind of heard of, but he's not very well known. I don't know where he is in the ranking. A guy called Donaldson. He's an American tennis player. He could have been of any nationality, but as it happens, he is American. Anyway, for this poor guy, Donaldson, a line call went against him, and subsequently it was proved that he was right and the umpire was wrong, but that's by the by. So, anyway, the line call goes against him, and he wasn't very happy. Well, you could understand that. He wanted to win the match, and the line call goes against him, and so he was protesting the fact. But boy, did he get angry. I don't know if you saw it, but he was in the face of the umpire. You know, the clay court, so the umpire comes down to look for the mark, and he came down, and Donaldson came right up to his face, and he was in his face, and he was shouting, and he was screaming. Wow, it was not pretty. But what was the outcome of that? Well, the outcome was a very intimidated umpire, a hostile crowd, and a tennis player with a serious dent to his reputation. It was ugly. This angry outburst didn't produce anything good for the guy who was, you know, in meltdown as a result of this bad line call. But what about us as Christians, as believers? Are we immune to that kind of angry outburst? Well, you know the answer to that. In a word, no, we're not. And the question is, how can we manage or avoid getting angry in this way? At one level, the problem is really a heart problem, as we'll see in a moment. But nonetheless, even recognizing that it's a heart problem and needs to be dealt with at root, James does give two what we could call common sense pieces of advice.

First of all, he tells us to be quick to listen. I like watching the odd episode of Fraser. I don't know if some of you watch that program. It's a sitcom, and the character's a celebrity psychologist who has a radio call-in show. It's 20, I don't know, 20 years old at least. But his tagline, the tagline of this psychologist is, I'm listening. But most of the time he isn't, which then generates some of the humor. Well, what about you? Are you quick to listen?

Now, we'll come back to this, because we're under the section anger management, and we've got another section about active listening. So, we'll come back to this. But be quick to listen. But James also says, be slow to speak. Be slow to speak. Now, I don't know if you were ever told by your mom or dad to count to ten. Did you know that it's in the Bible? Here it is. Be slow to speak. It's sound advice.

Don't get angry. But there's a second thing we want to say about this, or another side to this matter of anger management. It's not simply don't get angry, but do get angry. You might say, well, what madness is this? Well, anger is a bit like fat. I don't suppose you've ever heard that suggested before. I'd be surprised. But why do I say that? Well, I'm told that there is bad fat and good fat.

[15 : 36] I'm no expert on these things, but I'm sure I heard that somewhere. Good fat and bad fat. And that's also true of anger. There is bad anger, and there is also good anger. We've already highlighted Jesus as the altogether righteous one, the one who provides for us that real-life model of the righteous life. And yet we know, we have recorded clearly in the Gospels, and on more than one occasion, Jesus getting angry. And what did He get angry at or about? Well, if we just cast our mind to one of the occasions, perhaps the most memorable one, when Jesus was overturning the tables of the money changers in the temple, Jesus was angry, and He was angry with evil hearts that led to evil actions that in turn led to injustice and suffering. And that's what should anger us. But in our case, the evil that we are to be angry with is in our own hearts. And that's where we need to begin.

And that is what James is about when, in verse 21, he moves on to this matter, therefore get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent. It is vigorous language. It is urging us to, I would say, even with a measure of anger, deal with that which is so damaging in ourselves. We need to begin in our own hearts. It's true that there is a lot of evil out there that we can and should get angry about. We might think of Jesus in the temple. We might consider the injustice that He was challenging there. And we might say, well, we must be like that too. We must protest against oppression and injustice and evil in our midst. And by all means, let's do so. But we need to begin at home. We need to begin with our own hearts. Some of you may have come across the Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson, who's become a bit of an internet sensation. I don't know if that's maybe overstating the case. But he's written a self-help book, Twelve Rules for Life. I always thought ten were sufficient. But anyway, Jordan's got twelve rules for life that he is urging us to consider. And one of the rules is popularly or commonly rendered as tidy your bedroom. If you read the book, that's not actually the rule. It's something like get your own house in order. But when he popularly speaks about this rule, this is the phrase he uses, tidy your bedroom. You think, well, that's a bit bizarre. What's that all about? Well, really what he's doing is Peterson is mockingly pointing to student activists on campuses across Canada, where he's from, and I guess beyond, who are busy trying to change the world when they can't even tidy their own bedroom. That's the idea. And he says to them, look, get your own bedroom in order first, and then you can change the world. And he does that very eloquently and quite humorously, and it's worth a watch. And really that's what James is saying here about evil. He's saying get angry with your own heart. Deal with your own heart. Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent in yourself. Begin there. Let's just notice in what James says here, let's notice the scale of the problem and the actions that are to be taken. We think, first of all, of the scale of the problem on the basis of the language that James uses here. And it's clear that James is under no illusions as to the magnitude of the problem, all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent.

He probably couldn't have found a combination of words that were so emphatic as the ones that he has chosen. All moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent or so abundant. And just to be clear, if anybody is under any illusions or under any doubts, he's speaking about you and me. He's addressing this letter to disciples, to believers. But what are we to do with this moral filth, with this evil that is so abundant? Well, we're to get rid of it. And James seems to be using two overlapping pictures to address this or to urge us to act. There's the picture of taking off clothing and there's the picture also of gardening that he moves on to immediately. First of all, there's this picture of removing soiled or filthy clothes. When he says, get rid of all moral filth. Get rid of that which is polluting you. Take it off. Throw it away.

You need clean clothing to replace the soiled and filthy clothes that you are currently wearing. We know that Paul uses similar language when he writes to the believers in Colossae. And he speaks about taking off the old life and putting on the new life. And it's that picture taken from the bedroom where you're getting changed. Get rid of the old, dirty, soiled clothing and put on that which is clean and pure, love and patience and kindness and gentleness and so on, as Paul expresses it on that occasion. But then James immediately takes us from the bedroom to the garden. Notice the expression that immediately follows in that verse when he contrasts the need to get rid of all moral filth and evil is so prevalent with and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you, the word planted in you.

So, it's a horticultural picture that's being employed there. And if we take that gardening picture and apply it to the manner in which we deal with evil, we could maybe speak about the need to pull it out from its roots. Now, what does that look like? What does it look like to follow the advice of James to get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent? Well, it involves identifying that evil in our own heart. It involves taking ownership of it. That's something we were thinking about a couple of weeks ago when we thought about that expression, our evil desire. We need to take ownership of it.

[22 : 42] We need to take it seriously. We need to share James' conviction as to the gravity of it. We need to confess our sin and receive God's forgiveness, but we need to move on, and this is James' particular concern, to actively remove that sin, to avoid it reappearing, to pull it up from its roots.

We're all conscious, and we're all happy, I think, that spring has sprung, and that's a good thing. But it does mean that we need to get the lawnmower out. It's the one blessing of winter. You know, you get three months where you don't need to mow the grass. Now, our own lawn is generously populated with all manner of weeds, and I do get some satisfaction from mowing them away. So, if the grass is growing, and you see all these weeds, you get the lawnmower out, and you just go right across. It's not a big lawn. You know, the front lawn probably only takes 15 minutes. Something satisfying about just removing all the weeds and cutting the grass as well as we do that. But, of course, I haven't actually removed any weeds. Give it a couple of days, and they're back, mocking me as they tower over the grass and the front lawn. You know, I think we often try to deal with sin in that way, a superficial mowing over that leaves the roots untouched. And what James is saying to us, if you are to live the righteous life that

God desires, you need to get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent. You need to take it seriously. You need to take serious action. So, a righteous life, that which God desires for you, requires some serious anger management. But let's move on and more briefly think about the second aspect of it that James touches on that we're describing or using as an umbrella expression to describe active listening. We've already noticed how in verse 19 there is this general advice, be quick to listen. But then in verse 21, though the verb listen isn't used, we have the same idea being expressed by James. Now, this advice, to be quick to listen, is sound advice. It's good common sense.

We find it in the wisdom literature in the Bible, but indeed out with the Bible in other cultures across time. It's not unusual for this kind of advice to be found in wisdom literature. You know, be a good listener. Don't be quick to speak. And that is a truth applicable in any number of circumstances.

But I do wonder if James has something in particular that he would have us be quick to listen to. As I say, I think it's good advice generally. But I do wonder whether he has something in particular in mind.

[25 : 54] And I wonder if there is a connection with what he has just said in verse 18. Notice in verse 18, we read, he chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created. And of course, he's going to return to this reality of the word in verse 21, the word implanted in you. Now, what do you do with words? Well, you listen to words. So, having spoken of the word of truth, for James to then immediately go on and say, be quick to listen, it doesn't seem unreasonable to imagine there could be a connection there. By all means, be quick to listen in any number of circumstances, but very especially be quick to listen to the word of truth, to the word of God, to what God has to say to you. And of course, that's what James explicitly requires of us as he develops that idea in verse 21. When having told us to get rid of all moral filth, he then goes on to say, and humbly accept the word planted in you which can save you. Let's just think a little bit about that word of advice. What do we make of this claim that this word planted in you can save you and present it as a future prospect or outcome? Do we not protest and say, well, we're already saved.

Maybe some of you can speak of the day when you were saved. Maybe you use that kind of language. And of course, it's entirely legitimate to do so. But of course, salvation from God's perspective is big.

It's big in so many senses, but it's big in its scope over time. In considering that the scope of our salvation, we sometimes speak of the already and the not yet. We are already saved in many regards. We are forgiven. We are justified. We are reconciled to God. We are adopted into His family. But in the matter of our salvation, we are not yet. We are not yet transformed into the image of Jesus. That's a work in progress. That is yet a future prospect. We are not yet living righteous lives. Think about what James is addressing here. The word of truth planted in us can help us to grow into the men and women that God would have us be. And this is a central aspect of our salvation, not some optional add-on that once we're saved, well, it's good to live a good life because, hey, you know, that's a good thing to do. No, this is central to what salvation involves from God's perspective. And so, we are urged to humbly accept the word planted in you which can save you.

The word of truth is, you might say, multifunctional. It gives life. That's what we were noticing in verse 18 last Sunday morning. He chose to give us birth through the word of life. So, spiritual life begins through the instrumentality of the word of truth. That's where it begins. But the word of truth also is that which helps us to grow that new life into something beautiful and fruitful and pleasing to God. How does the word planted in you do this work? Well, it has you listen. But it needs to be active listening, listening and obeying and doing. I don't know if you've seen there's an advert on the TV at the moment. There's actually a series of adverts of Barclays Bank, but it's to do with life skills. I guess it's part of their, I don't know, social program to the community. They organize life skill courses for young people. And these adverts focus on some of these life skill courses.

And one of them that I just saw, I think it was just a couple of days ago, there's a young lad in a classroom, and he's learning to listen and to repeat some random words. And when you see the advert for the first time, you're thinking, well, what's going on here? You know, the tutor, the teacher, he says the word, and this young lad, he repeats the word, and then he has to repeat three or four in a row. You know, and he's learning to listen. But then the scene changes dramatically, and that same young lad is transported from the classroom to a helicopter where he's working as a paramedic, and he's relaying critical information that can save a person's life. And if he hasn't listened properly, then he won't relay that information properly, and a life is on the line.

[30 : 57] And then the tagline of the advert is, listening is a key skill that will set you up for your future career. Well, what James is saying is that listening is a key skill or duty that will help you live the righteous life that God desires. Well, let's try and wrap things up quickly. What final words do I have for you this morning? If I were a motivational speaker, I'd perhaps urge you to be everything you want to be.

But thank God I'm not. I don't think I'd be very good at it. I'm a simple preacher, and so I urge you to aim much higher. Be everything that God wants you to be. And God desires that you live a righteous life, just like Jesus. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the enormity and the scope of our salvation. We thank you for the work of salvation wrought by your Son, Jesus. We thank you for the manner in which all that He has secured is applied to us by your Spirit.

And we thank you for the multifaceted array of blessings that we enjoy as part of your saving work. We thank you for all that we currently enjoy, but we thank you also for all that awaits us. We thank you that you are a God who is working in us. You are transforming us into the image of your Son.

And we pray that our lives would become ever more like Jesus, that our lives would be ever more the life, the righteous life that you desire for us. And while we acknowledge that you are the one who is responsible for that work in us, we're also conscious that we are called to cooperate with you. And we think of the advice that we've received from your word this morning. Help us to take that advice on board, to take these imperatives on board, that we would look in our day-to-day life and in the duties that we perform, that we would be characterized in the way described, that we would be quick to listen, that we would be slow to speak and slow to become angry. Help us to take seriously the evil within us, and not only to lament that reality, but to follow the call to get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent. We do thank you for the word that has been planted in us. Help us to accept it. Help us to listen. Help us to obey. And we pray all of these things in Jesus' name. Amen.