

WATCH OUT FOR THE HULK

James 1:19-20

INTRODUCTION

Phillip Wellman is currently the manager of the Padres AA team in San Antonio. However he is famous for something he did 10 years ago. He was managing the Mississippi Braves, the Braves AA team. In a game against Chattanooga he had repeated run-ins with the umpires until he finally blew. What followed is widely known as the most spectacular sports tantrum of all time. He ran onto the field, threw his hat down and screamed at the home plate umpire. Then he proceeded to draw in the dirt around home plate a huge figure of a home plate, to show how absurdly wide he felt the umpire's strike zone was. He was just getting started. At one point he had moved out near second base. He fell to the ground and did an army crawl to the pitcher's mound. There he pretended the rosin bag was a grenade. He pulled the pretend pin and lobbed it to land at the feet of the home plate ump. Then he pulled up second base and marched off the field with it.

It was impressive, but is that a way for an adult to act? I wonder if he has a wife and kids how they would feel about seeing him act that way. His out of control anger was absurd and an embarrassment. He says he feared that he would be fired the next day. He's not alone. That same year Lou Piniella was the manager of the Chicago Cubs. In one game when one of his players was called out on a close play on the bases he totally lost it. He went ballistic, screaming, kicking dirt, throwing his hat and at one point accidentally kicking an umpire. The irony is, after all that, following the game he said, "I thought from the dugout he was safe, but after seeing the replay the umpire got it right!" Yeah, anger is not a pretty thing.

Laurie and I recently watched the movie *Hidden Figures*. This movie tells the story of three African American women who worked for NASA during the space race of the 1960's, with the central character being Katherine Johnson, a brilliant mathematician who calculated the trajectories for several of the early space flights. It is based on a true story. As Hollywood typically does the movie overly dramatizes the prejudice they faced, both as African Americans and as women. Katherine Johnson herself said she never felt any prejudice from her peers at NASA. Nevertheless, the racism depicted in the movie was quite real in society. It actually hurts, it makes you cringe when you see it on the screen. I cannot truly understand the horror of that racism. Only its victims can do that. But I can see

how awful, how demeaning, it is, and how terrifying it can be. And it makes me angry even when I'm not the target, so I know its victims are outraged.

When we read the book of James we must remember that it addresses a group of people who were a persecuted minority. They faced a toxic mixture of both racial and religious prejudice that made life extremely difficult for them. How easy it would have been for them to be filled with fury inside at all of the outrages heaped upon them by others. To my mind they would be justified in their anger. James has something radical to say about how they should respond to that in James 1:19-20. "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires."

LOOSE LIPS SINK MORE THAN SHIPS

It was late at night. We had a red eye flight home that was scheduled to leave around 10 PM, but there was a delay. The delay stretched out for a long time until finally around midnight they canceled the flight. At that point uncertainty reigned. What were they going to do with us that night? How were we going to get a flight out the next day? There were no more flights out of that airport that night so it was deserted except for the passengers from our flight who were standing around in concerned confusion as we hovered about the three beleaguered airline agents who had the unenviable task of dealing with the mess. The agents informed us that the airline was arranging lodging for all who needed it and then set about the daunting chore of trying to get everyone booked on flights out the next day. As they did so an older man stood at the side of the gate podium and kept up a running commentary. He was obviously really unhappy with the situation, so he just stood there saying things like, "What a foul up this is. You people have no idea how to run an airline. This has to be the worst airline in the world. You don't know what you're doing. You people are useless." He was creative in coming up with a steady stream of negative comments. I was impressed with the agents who did not respond to any of his comments, but just kept trying to solve people's problems. It was beyond annoying. His negative chatter served no good purpose. I think everyone around him wanted him to just shut up. Finally a security guard, after hearing several minutes of this, said to him, "Sir, stop talking. If you say one more word I'm going to escort you out of the terminal."

I don't know if he actually had the authority to do that, but he became a hero in the eyes of a lot of people at that moment. To the relief of everyone the idiot clammed up and sat down. That was not the last we heard from that guy that night. He made himself equally unwelcome on the bus to the hotel later. But he was an extreme

reminder of the wisdom of the words of James in verse 19. In his letter James was addressing the fact that many of his readers were being treated badly and instructing them on how to respond to their difficult lot in life. These verses fit right in with that instruction.

When that guy in the airport felt he wasn't being treated well he responded by running his mouth to make sure that everyone knew he was not happy. He felt he had a lot to complain about, and he was insistent on making sure people knew about his complaints. Unfortunately, while usually not to the degree of that clown, it is not uncommon for us to be quite verbal when we don't feel we are being treated fairly, or when we feel like we have something to complain about. It's fairly amazing how quick we are to complain, and especially if we perceive we are being mistreated or we are in a conflict with someone. James has some instruction for us that is literally inspired. Be quick to listen and slow to speak. The use of our ability to speak will be a major theme later in this book, but James starts in this context of difficulty and trial by giving this profound, simple command. Be slow to talk and anxious to listen. Say little, and listen a lot. You have one mouth and two ears, so use them in that proportion.

Proverbs 21:23 says, "Those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity." Calamity is a big word. It speaks of something really bad. When you open your mouth you are inviting disaster. If you went down to Tijuana on a hot summer day and took a drink from a public water fountain there, would you be surprised if something bad happened later? You shouldn't be. Montezuma is alive and well in the water down there and he will get his revenge. James says you should think of opening your mouth to talk as being a little like that. It is that likely to have a regrettable result. That's a pretty drastic statement. When you talk, calamity is about to happen. If a calamity is looming the obvious wise course of action is to do everything you can to stave it off. So stop talking!

But wait a minute. How are we ever going to communicate if everyone does what that Proverbs and James both seem to say? If catastrophes happen when we speak then the obvious conclusion is that we should never say anything. That's going to make for some pretty boring conversation and it's going to make it impossible for us to know what anyone else is thinking, since no one is talking.

Obviously the point of that verse is not that we should never talk. James didn't say that we should never say anything to anyone. He just said we should be cautious in our speech. The Proverb said the same thing. It didn't say shut your mouth for good, it said guard your mouth. A guard doesn't refuse to let anyone ever go in or

out of a facility. He just makes sure that only the right people are allowed to enter or exit at the right time.

Proverbs 10:19 says, “Sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues.” In other words, the more you talk the better the chance that you are going to sin. Proverbs 17:28 says, “Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent.” There is a common saying that is often erroneously attributed to either Abraham Lincoln or Mark Twain, but probably was first used by a writer named Mark Switzer in 1906. “Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt.”

James aimed at two crucial ideas. First, be careful with your words. Don’t use them liberally and thoughtlessly, for if you do you are probably bringing about calamity. Second, instead of wanting to talk all the time, choose to listen. Desire to listen, to learn, so that you can understand and empathize with others. The simple fact is you can’t do that while you are talking.

Charlie Munger, investor, philanthropist, vice chairman of Berkshire Hathaway, says, “I never allow myself to have an opinion on anything that I don’t know the other side’s argument better than they do.” In other words, he feels he has nothing to say until he understands an opponent’s position and reasoning so well that he could make a better case than they do. Only then does he feel he has really listened and thus has reason to speak. That’s being slow to speak and quick to listen.

If people in our nation lived by that one principle it would put an end to all of the rancor and vituperation that is so characteristic of our political climate. I can’t watch the political shows on television because I get so irritated by how the people constantly interrupt and talk over each other. What would happen in those debates if people listened to Charlie Munger, or even better, they listened to what God says in James 1:19? Instead of the approach of talking louder, longer, and more insistently they would actually listen to each other. That might actually produce a little light on the subject rather than just the heat that usually occurs.

This is not just about politics. Imagine the revolution in our personal relationships if, when we find ourselves in a conflict or an argument, we were slow to speak and quick to hear. What would happen if we determined that the first thing we must do is understand the thinking of the other person so clearly, so well, that we could not only state it, but make an argument for it better than they could make. What do you think would happen if we did that?

First, it would turn the heat on arguments way down. Second, the other person would feel heard. You may or may not agree with the other person, but the one thing you can be sure of is that they would feel listened to, because you listened!

We have a ridiculously small kitchen in our house. We see the shows on TV where they renovate houses and they have these kitchens with counters as long as an airport runway plus an island the size of Australia, and we drool with envy. Our kitchen has served our needs for decades, but it is stupidly small. One problem with this is that if there are two people working in the kitchen it turns into an awkward dance because there is no room. You are constantly maneuvering around each other and bumping into each other. We recently got a brand new refrigerator because our old one, emphasis on old, decided to retire without warning. We also got some new countertops. The guy who put in the countertops made Laurie a stone cutting board out of the scraps of the quartzite we used. It is really hard. So recently both of us were working in the kitchen and Laurie was in my way. I had cleaned the cutting board and was carrying it to put it away, but when I moved around her I bumped the new refrigerator with the corner of the cutting board. That stone is really hard. I think they've misnamed our refrigerator. They claim it is made out of stainless steel. It may be stainless but it's also thin and wimpy. I guess they figure they wouldn't sell many wimpy steel refrigerators so they don't talk about that. However, when hard stone meets wimpy steel guess who wins. It wasn't me. I put a dent and a scratch in our shiny new fridge. Guess who was happy. It wasn't Laurie. In a less than sympathetic tone of voice she said something along the lines of, "Oh, Rick, look at that. You've dented the refrigerator. Why couldn't you be more careful?"

Instantly I felt defensive. It was as much her fault as mine, she was in the way and she wasn't moving out of the way. What was I supposed to do, just stand there and wait for her to decide she could shift her position at last? I was just trying to help in the kitchen, after all. I was a little miffed. But I said nothing, because I wanted to be slow to speak and quick to listen. I started applying the principle of Munger and made an effort to understand her position. It definitely was disappointing that I had damaged the new appliance. There was no denying that. And it wasn't urgent that I move past her and put the board away. I did get impatient. I really didn't watch what I was doing. I was disappointed, so it should hardly be surprising that she was. By the time I reasoned all that through I decided that she was right, I'd made a stupid and unnecessary mistake and it resulted in something neither of us were happy about. She had a right to feel the way she did. I really had no excuse. So no defense was needed. And no argument ensued, no impatient and unloving words were exchanged.

Rob Labeznik, a writer for the Simpsons television said, “Listening is like reading a corporate report. Talking is like eating a cinnamon bun.” Reading corporate reports is not fun. It’s dry and dull. So it is with listening. It is hard. That’s because according to psychologist Douglas LaBier, director of the Center for Adult Development in D.C., most of us suffer from what he calls Empathy Deficit Disorder. That’s a psychospeak way of saying we are all sinful and obsessed with self. Talking is like eating a cinnamon roll, and that’s not hard.

Back in 2013 *Scientific American* carried a story about a study done at Harvard University. The researchers asked 195 subjects to spend a few minutes talking about themselves and a few talking about other people. As they did so they scanned their brains. They found that when they talked about themselves the pleasure center of the brain lit up. That didn’t happen when they talked about other people. They concluded that humans find talking about themselves to be inherently pleasurable.

Listening is an act of love. To listen is to set aside one’s own personal agenda, one’s obsession with self, and care about another person. The more emotional we are, especially the more upset or angry we are, the more we need to guard our mouths and put our ears and our brains to work. We need to listen with all our might.

You get a sense for the fact that James especially had unfair, hard or tense situations in mind when he wrote about being slow to speak and quick to listen when you read the next phrase.

THE HULK WASN’T THE ONLY ONE

James tells us to be slow to anger. It’s not too hard to understand why he would bring that up. Suppose you were a believer in Jesus back then who is ostracized and even ridiculed by former friends and family, or that you are denied fair treatment in some way. The natural human response to hurt and injustice is anger. James tells us that God wants us to be very slow to go there.

James gives us a very good reason for not being angry. He says our anger “does not produce the righteousness that God desires.” In other words, when we get mad it never accomplishes the good that God wants to happen in and through us.

Do you remember the television show then later the movie *The Incredible Hulk*? The main character is scientist Bruce Banner who is accidentally exposed to

gamma rays that cause a change in him. He appears normal until he becomes angered. When that happens his skin turns green, he swells up to enormous size and gains superhuman strength. He goes on a rampage of destruction that later he can't even remember. He is completely out of control of himself. The story speaks to the human condition. It may not be as obvious and we don't visibly morph into a monster, but our anger in fact turns us into ogres. The show was telling us there is a hulk in all of us, and anger releases it to do its damage. That's what James meant in this verse.

Some might object and say, "Well, Jesus got mad when he cleared the profiteers out of the Temple in Jerusalem. He made a whip and drove the people out of there. Sounds like he was pretty upset to me." Actually if you read the accounts in the Gospels you will find that they don't depict Jesus as flying off the handle, red in the face, screaming and yelling and beating people. John gives the most detail in John 2:15-17, which says "He made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, 'Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market.' His disciples remembered that it is written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.'"

Yes, he made a whip, but who did he drive out of the temple? It wasn't people, it was sheep and cattle. That's how you get them to move. He wasn't whipping anybody, he was just using the cord the way a shepherd or cattle rancher might. What the disciples saw was not out of control anger. John 2:17 says what they saw was zeal. He was serious about the holiness of the temple and he refused to let it be compromised.

Some people want to debate whether anger is a sin. But that is not really the point here. James' point is our anger won't bring about the good and righteous result that God desires in any situation. Yes it should upset us when we see injustice and do what we can about it. But that's not what mostly provokes our anger. The overwhelming majority of the time when we get angry it is not about some wrong done to someone else. It is about some perceived wrong done to us. It's not about justice or helping others, it is about ourselves.

We are all about ourselves, and what makes us really mad is when we are injured, denied justice, not given our fair share, treated badly or harmed in some other way. We get mad when we're driving on the freeway and some speeding jerk cuts us off. Our anger is mostly about self, and it will never produce the good God wants in our lives.

What does our anger produce? It produces some very negative effects in us. We know that when we suppress anger it eats us up inside. Psychologists tell us that suppressed anger can often produce depression. So obviously if we are angry we need to let it out, right? Even that doesn't turn out to be good for us.

Dr. Chris Aiken at the Wake Forest School of Medicine says that studies show that in the 2 hours after an angry outburst our chance of having a heart attack doubles. Our risk of stroke is 3 times higher! In another study at Harvard researchers asked healthy subjects to recall an angry experience from their past. Just thinking about a time when they were angry caused the subjects to experience a dip in levels of immunoglobulin A for 6 hours. That's the immune system's first line of defense. In other words, being angry suppresses our immune systems. Other studies show it negatively affects lung function.

Obviously anger has a potentially very negative impact on both our physical and mental health. But it has some other terrible effects also. A few weeks back Laurie and I planned to go to a local restaurant that we like. It was early enough in the evening that the restaurant was not especially crowded yet. As we drove into the parking lot we were behind another vehicle that apparently was looking for a parking space. The driver was going exceptionally slowly, but we weren't in a hurry so we patiently followed. The driver slowly passed an open parking space just before coming to a place where you could either turn right to leave the parking lot or left to go to another part of the lot where there were lots of open spots. The driver got to that point and then just stopped. We wondered what in the world the person was doing. The vehicle just sat there. Then it began signaling a right turn and inched forward a bit. I assumed the driver was confused and not sure where to go, but it seemed the driver wanted to turn right out of the parking lot. We sat there for a bit with the other car not moving, but signaling a right turn. I finally decided there was plenty of room to the left of the vehicle and no cars coming our way, so I would just ease past on the left since the driver seemed to not want to move, but would eventually go right. Just as I started to move past, that car started backing up. Only then did I figure out the person apparently wanted to back into a parking space. Immediately I realized if she was doing that I could not ease by her on the left, so I stopped and began backing up away from her, but had to stop quickly because there was another car behind me. While that was happening a man got out of the front passenger seat of the car ahead of us. He obviously spent a lot of time at the gym because this guy was seriously bulked up. But that wasn't the most obvious thing about him. Little did I know, he was the Incredible Hulk. He was mad, seriously mad, scary mad. His facial features were contorted and he was

yelling and gesturing at us. Since we were inside our car with the windows up we couldn't make out much of what he was saying, except some of the words would have gotten him a mouth full of Lifebuoy soap when he was a kid and he yelled, "You just calm down." I thought, I don't think I'm the one who needs to calm down here. I don't know that I had ever personally witnessed roid rage before, but I'm pretty sure I saw it that night. Dude looked like he seriously needed to cut back on the anabolics. Or maybe stay away from gamma rays.

Admittedly that was an unusual and rather extreme example of anger. But it is helpful to consider what his anger accomplished. First it offended me. I had done nothing to earn such an outburst. So I found that I was angry at him for being angry at me. That is actually pretty typical. The very existence of anger assigns blame. So we naturally are offended that someone is blaming us. The problem is when someone blames us one of two things will be true. We could truly be to blame and know it, in which case the other person's anger only pokes at a wound we already feel. We feel bad enough about it and that person's anger just adds to our pain and feels like they're deliberately hurting us. The other possibility is we aren't at fault, in which case we are upset because we're being falsely accused. Either way, anger just breeds more anger. With offense comes anger right back at the first party.

So anger creates a sense of offense, defensiveness and a corresponding anger in the object of anger. But our experience with Mr. Incredible Hulk had another effect on us. After the guy's wife was able to finally park the car, which took an awfully long time, by the way, Laurie and I both had the same thought. We didn't want to go into that restaurant where we might have another encounter with that guy. I thought about trying to tell him I was sorry if we caused him a problem, but he was so irrational I was pretty sure it would not go well. We decided to go somewhere else. In other words, his anger created in us a desire to not be around the guy. Ironically later that evening we went to Costco. As we were doing our shopping guess who we saw. None other than the Hulk. We made certain to give him a wide berth. We had no desire to go anywhere near him.

While that was an unusual and extreme example of anger, realize that every time you are angry at someone your anger creates those same effects on the other person. It offends them and gives rise to anger and defensiveness in them, and it drives them away from you. Your anger is damaging your relationship with that person. That is the farthest thing from what God desires. He desires that people love each other and live in unity, and anger absolutely does the opposite.

APPLICATION

Perhaps you are thinking this doesn't apply to you because you are not an angry person. Unfortunately, if you are around other people you are going to one hurt and frustrated by them. Laurie and I have been amazed the past few weeks at how in dealing with various companies they consistently fail in their customer service. Their employees mostly just don't do their jobs. It is really frustrating and it tries our patience to the point where it makes me mad. Living in a family means being close to other people who at times are going to say or do things that hurt or frustrate you. The inevitable human emotional response to hurt and frustration is anger. We are all going to feel anger at times. It won't do any good to pretend that we aren't angry. The life of Christ is not about looking good or about pretending. Your anger does not accomplish the good that God desires. Even if you have a right to be angry, your anger will not bring about the good God wants. So how do we deal with our anger, knowing that just suppressing it or venting it are both damaging? Here are some things we need to do that can help.

Acknowledge that you are angry

The first step is to not simply react but to see what is going on. You need to acknowledge that you are angry and confess it to God. We will never be able to deal with a problem until we admit it is there and see it as dangerous.

When Toby was in high school he played baseball in the spring for his first three years. He was awful his first year, not very good as he began his second year, but during that sophomore year he began getting the hang of it. One weekend he asked me to take him to a nearby batting cage so he could work on his hitting. As he was in the cage taking cuts off a pitching machine I began noticing that every time a pitch was on the outside part of the plate he either missed it or made very weak contact. After a bit I said, "Toby, it seems like you're having trouble with outside pitches." He said, "No, Dad, I'm fine. I can handle them." That clearly was not the case, but I said nothing. I knew there was no point in trying to solve a problem he didn't think he had. The session went on a bit longer and probably because I had drawn his attention to it he began to see that he struggled on almost every outside pitch. Finally he said, "You're right, Dad. I can't seem to adjust to those. What can I do?" I didn't really know, but I had an idea I thought worth trying. I suggested he open up his batting stance so that when he stepped as he prepared to swing he'd be moving more toward the plate, thus keeping him from pulling off outside pitches. I was shocked at the result. He just started crushing pitches on the outside. He never had a problem again. But it started with him admitting there was something that needed to be fixed. So it is with our anger. We must start by admitting it is a problem.

Admit your anger will not bring about God's good will

But I have a right to be angry! What that person did to me was wrong and so very hurtful. Everyone knows I have every right to be angry at that person. That may very well be true. But your anger still will not bring about the righteousness that God desires. You're still going to turn into the Hulk. So you must decide what your life is going to be about. Will it be about standing on your rights, protecting yourself and getting what's rightfully yours, or will it be about accomplishing the good that God wants you to do? That is a crucial choice we all must make, and we must make it continually.

Colossians 3:8 is one of those verses we often read, sort of give intellectual assent to, then blithely go about disobeying on a regular basis. Paul wrote, "But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language." The first thing we must rid ourselves of is anger.

An angry person is not a person who is full of the Spirit of Christ, it's as simple as that. Reminding ourselves that we are not obeying God and not bringing about his will as long as we are angry is an important step. We need to remind ourselves that God doesn't want this. And we must choose to want what God wants, not just what we want.

Ask for God's help and perspective

In doing this we need to give our anger to him. We need to tell him we know he doesn't want it and we don't want it either. Then ask him to enable us to deal with it and not be controlled by it. If we get to this point the battle is pretty much over, for the biggest problem with our anger is it flares up, takes over and we react under its control. Before we know it we've turned into the Hulk without even wanting to. If we can stop that reaction, we are well on our way to get rid of something we don't want. God will enable us to do the right thing.

Act in accord with love

God has told us to not protect or promote ourselves. He says he'll take care of us. Our job is to love others. So instead of lashing out with harsh words or a desire to get even, we should seek to love the other person. Forgive whatever offense that person has perpetrated against us. That's what Christ has done for us. We have sinned against him in so many ways, but what he did was forgive us and go to the cross to love us and bring good to us. That's the model for us. Take anger to the cross of Jesus Christ and leave it there.

CONCLUSION

Colossians 3:15 says, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” What is the peace of Christ? It is the peace that he loves me, he is taking care of me, my value is never in question because God so loves me, I am forgiven and he will provide me with all I need in life. It is the peace of knowing he is sovereign and just and others are in his hands. It is the peace of grace and forgiveness, the grace and forgiveness that should fill my heart and flow through me to others.

Imagine I am holding two cups, one that has nothing in it, the other filled with water. Then suppose someone bumps me and jostles both cups. What comes out of them? It's what's inside. Out of the empty one comes nothing but air, but out of the water filled one comes water. Suppose now that someone jostles you. Someone does something insensitive, unkind, unfair or hurtful to you. What comes out? It's what's inside. If what is inside of us is the peace of Christ, then what will come out is the peace of Christ. That will allow us to do the good that God wants us to do, which is to ask what would love do? That is what we are to do.

Consider what would have happened had the Hulk not been controlled by anger but had taken a different approach. Suppose that he got out of his car, came to us and humbly said, “I’m sorry. I know my wife has been slow and indecisive and has been unclear in her intentions. But she would like to back into that parking space. Would you mind just backing up and waiting while she pulls into that spot?” I would have said, “Sure, no problem. I’m sorry for failing to see what she wanted to do.” The result would have been totally different. It would have been much more like the way God wants people to treat each other.

At first glance verse 19 seems to be talking about several different things. It seems to be about guarding what you say, focusing on listening and not being angry. But there is a thread that ties all three together. The thread is the call to be people who more than anything else, love others. Our talking and failing to listen is mostly about our preoccupation with ourselves. Our anger is almost always about ourselves and our hurt feelings. These verses call on us to live a radically different way. Rather than being about ourselves they call on us to be about loving others, no matter how deserving or undeserving they may be, for that is how Jesus Christ relates to us.