

Sermon for Sunday, September 17, 1978, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"THE TRICK THAT ALWAYS BACKFIRES"

Text: "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."

St. James 1:22

Are you guilty of convincing yourself that you are usually right? I am! It doesn't matter what happens or how wrong I am, I can usually think up some reasons why I am right and justify whatever I do. Most of us are that way.

Our scripture this morning says that we should be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger. Let's think for a moment about hearing. How good is your hearing? And I'm not talking about the ability to hear sound, but the ability to hear people. Do you really hear other people? Do you really hear what your spouse says to you--what your children are really saying? You see, people communicate with us on two levels. The first level is the intellectual level. If you and I are having a conversation, it will have a certain intellectual content. But underneath the intellectual level of what we are saying is the emotional content--the feeling content--of what each of us is trying to say to the other.

Now, suppose I have had a hard day and things have gone wrong at the office. When I go home I am feeling depressed and I have gone wrong at the office. When I go home I am feeling depressed and I have the desperate need for somebody to care about me, to treat me as a person of worth. Suppose when I get home my wife is busy fixing supper and maybe supervising piano practice. She is busy and preoccupied and I say something like this to her, "You spend too much time with the children." Now, what am I really saying? What is the emotional content of what I have said? Am I not really saying, "Pay some attention to me!"?

You know, there is a real art to hearing each other. Most of the marriage counseling I do has to do with breakdowns in communication. Couples simply are not hearing each other. They hear the intellectual content, but they miss the emotional feeling being expressed. But the Bible says that we ought to be quick to hear. Did you ever stop to wonder why it is that we don't listen to the feelings being expressed by another? Well, the scripture lesson this morning says there are a couple of reasons. First, we are quick to speak. That means we are so eager to express our own needs, so eager to have our own feelings ministered to that we don't have time or won't stop to listen to the needs of another.

Does that ever happen to you? Are your own needs and emotions such that you are so anxious for others to know how you feel, so eager for someone to meet your needs, that you don't even want to hear what their needs and feelings are? I think that is true of most of us. We are so focused in on ourselves we don't have time to be sensitive to the needs of others, especially those closest to us.

So the Bible says to be quick to hear and slow to speak. That means to try hard to really hear the feelings others are expressing to you and to be slow to express your own needs. You see, I can't hear what you are saying about you if I am only waiting for you to shut up so I can tell you about me! But then the Bible goes on to say something else. It says, be slow to anger. Did it occur to you that this is an odd coupling of words? The Bible says be quick to hear, slow to speak--and maybe those two things go together--but why add, and be slow to anger? Anger is an emotion that on the surface seems unrelated to hearing and speaking.

But if hearing has to do with being sensitive to the feelings another person is expressing, and if speaking has to do with the needs I am expressing, then anger has to do with how I am relating to you. Does that make sense? See how it works! I read recently of some school boys who didn't like what was served them in the

cafeteria and proceeded to break up the dishes. When their teacher asked them why they did it, they replied that they didn't like the food and this was their way of getting even with the cook. "But", asked the teacher, "if I invited you to my home and served you something you didn't like, would you break up my dishes?" "O, no," replied the children. "And why not?" asked the teacher. "Because," said the boys, "you are our teacher." And that is simply a way of saying that they loved and respected their teacher as a person. The cook, on the other hand, was not considered to be a person of worth and therefore they could treat him with anger--an emotion showing disrespect. Isn't that how it is with anger? Anger arises out of hatred, or contempt, or disrespect towards someone. Do you remember how it was when you were dating the person you married? You were trying to win the affection and love of that person. But after you got married, what happened? Has your temper differed before and after marriage? And if it has, why is it different? Is it because you no longer need--or want--to treat your mate as a person of worth?

So the Bible says to be quick to hear--to care about the other as a person of worth who has needs and emotions that you should be sensitive to--it says to be slow to speak--that is, slow to dump your emotional needs on another person--and slow to anger, that is, slow to treat that other person as someone who is not worthy, as someone who can be treated with contempt.

That's why our scripture ends with this verse, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." Why would visiting widows and orphans be so important? Isn't it because they are so vulnerable? So in need of love and care? Who can be more lonely than an orphan or a widow who have no one any more to love them and care for them? And pure religion is to have a heart for them, to care about them as human beings, as persons of worth. And what does it mean to keep myself unstained from the world? Doesn't it mean not to let my needs, my emotions, my feelings, so control my life that I do evil and wicked things to meet those needs? Well, there it is! Caring about others, controlling myself. It is being quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger.

The other day I read a story that illustrated this for us. It is a story about a boy named Mike who created such trouble at school that the teachers were ready to kick him out. The principle called him in. He knew the faculty was at the end of its rope and he didn't know what to do. Before Mike was ushered into his office he began to pray. "Oh, Lord," he prayed, "this boy is a person of worth. He has so much power, so much potential, in him. Help me to help him." So Mike came into his office, surly, snarling, eyes averted, and slouched in a seat. The principal looked at him and let the silence grow. Finally he said, "Mike, show me your hands, will you?" In utter astonishment, Mike put out his hands. The principal took them in his, turned them over, then thoughtfully said, "You've got long sensitive fingers, son. Those are strong hands. You know what you've got? You've got the hands of a surgeon. What a surgeon you could be with those hands! You could take a scalpel in those fingers, go into a human body and find the trouble and make a body well again. Yes, you've got wonderful hands." That was all he said. Mike stumbled out of the office and down the steps. But a dream had been born. He had been treated as a person of worth who had something worthwhile to give. Mike went on to college and medical school and today is an outstanding surgeon. And why? Because somebody was quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger.

How are you relating to your spouse? To your children? To the people you work with? To your friends and neighbors? Are you quick to hear them? Are you really listening to what they are saying to you about their needs? And are you treating them as persons of worth, people who are important--yes, are you slow to speak and slow to anger?

This brings me to our text for today. It says, "But be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." Do you ever play that trick on yourself? I know I do. I read my Bible, I study religious books, I pray, and I think I am so good and holy. But then I don't do what God tells me to do. I turn right around and do the very things God tells me not to do. I've tricked myself into thinking I'm a Christian and then it backfires on me. Are you guilty of that? I suspect most of us are. But the Bible says that we are to be doers of the word and not hearers only. Otherwise, we deceive ourselves.

Well, if the Bible tells me to be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger, how can I be a doer of the word and not just a hearer? That's the real question, isn't it?

Would you like to be a doer of the word and quit tricking yourself? Every week people come into my study to talk. Their problems burden them down and all too frequently we are dealing with broken relationships and broken lives and broken marriage and broken homes. And do you know in almost every case it is because they are not doers of the word. They are too frequently people who are not listening to one another, not hearing the needs and feelings of one another; they are focused in on themselves and their own needs and they are treating one another as objects rather than persons.

How can they change? How can I change? How can you change? How can we be real doers of the word? There is only one way. It is to give our own needs to Jesus and to let him be the Lord of our lives. Jesus says, "come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Only he can deal with your needs if you will give them to him. The Bible says, "cast your cares upon him, for he cares for you."(I Peter 5:7)

How will you ever deal with your own needs your own failures, your own emotions? As the Bible says, "Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you." (Psalm 55:22) Yes, when you have given your heart to Jesus and when you have let him meet your every need, only then will you be free to reach out to others, to be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.

There is so much tragedy in the world--so much brokenness between people, so much hostility, so much anger, so many quick words that can never be unsaid, so much unkindness, so much of treating each other with disdain and lack of love. Can the cycle be broken? Only if somewhere, somehow, someone of us lets Jesus take his heart, his life, his needs. And then--and only then--can that one be a doer of the word--quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. Will you let that someone be you?