

Be Slow to Anger

By: Meagan McLaughlin

August 29, 2021. In her sermon on our readings today from Deuteronomy, Mark, and James, Pastor Meagan invites us to be quick to listen and slow to anger.

Readings: [Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9](#), [James 1:17-27](#), [Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23](#)

*** Transcript ***

Reading today's passage from James with its direction on how to live out the word of God reminded me of a young Alateen member I knew some years ago. We were in the car with their dad heading to a speaker event where they were going to tell their story, and we talked as we drove about how to best share how Alateen had helped them. When it was their time to speak, they shared for a bit and then they said, "So, how has Alateen helped me? Well, it used to be that when I was talking to my mom and she made me mad I would immediately start screaming. Now, when she says something and I get mad, I wait a minute, and then start screaming."

I'm not sure that this is exactly what James had in mind when he said, "Be slow to anger." But hey, in twelve-step programs one of the slogans we often hear is "progress not perfection" — and progress is progress. I wonder how long it took them to end the conversation before screaming.

I don't know about you, but living out the Word of God, embodying the love of God in all that I do, often feels like a difficult, even impossible, task. All of today's readings can make following God seem daunting. Deuteronomy says we are to not only know the law, but to observe it. James echoes that, and also says we should rid ourselves of sordidness and wickedness, or our religion will be worth nothing. Just a few verses after today's passage comes that famous line, "Faith without works is dead."

And in today's gospel from Mark, Jesus calls the religious leaders, who pride themselves on knowing and teaching the law of God, hypocrites, saying they honor God with their lips but not their hearts. If even the rabbis aren't living up to God's standards, what chance do the rest of us really have?

One of reformer Martin Luther's clear messages lifted up in the Reformation was that our salvation, our life with God, is grounded in faith, not in works. So what is up with all of these scriptures we have today, calling us not only to live out God's law, but to do so seemingly perfectly? Because in case you hadn't already noticed, the pastor you called just a year-and-a-half ago is far from capable of living up to the standards that not even the leaders of Jesus' time could meet. And it's not enough to say "James isn't actually meant for us Lutherans who believe in grace" — not when virtually the same message appears in all the rest of our readings as well.

So how are we to understand these words in Deuteronomy, and Mark, and James? How do we accomplish the seemingly impossible task of embodying the love of God, when literally no one except Jesus has ever been able to do it?

The simple answer is: we can't. That's why we have the law to begin with. It gives us a guide for our life together, certainly. And as Luther teaches, it makes it clear to us that on our own, we can't follow it perfectly. We will always fall short.

Thankfully, we are not on our own. As my young Alateen friend so eloquently demonstrated, following

God, living out love and grace, happens not when we follow the law to the letter, but when we allow the Spirit to transform us, bit by bit, from the inside out. That happens often when we least expect it and is most often visible when we look back. Moses tells the Israelites — not just one of them, but all of them as a community — that embodying the law is not about gaining God's approval, but knowing that God is close. James wants the community of believers to know that when God enters in and changes us, slowly but surely God's love will be revealed in all that we do. Jesus tells his listeners that God's law is not about the lips, the head, but about the heart — and that is God's realm.

It's not about being perfect, thank goodness, because we never will be. It's not about having the exact right rituals or beliefs, because God is so much bigger than that. Embodying the law of God is about love, mercy, and perhaps most of all, grace. It is about recognizing when, not if, the heat of anger rises and shoots out of the top of our heads, or that knot of anxiety causes our gut to clench, and inviting God into that moment to slow us down and show us new ways to move forward.

Today, we are invited to be quick to listen — to God, and to one another. To allow the word of God, and the Spirit of mercy and grace, to transform our hearts, so that more and more we embody that Spirit in the world around us. To understand that God forms us in community for a reason, so that we can grow together and learn from one another. And above all, to know in our hearts that the greatest commandment will always be love.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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