

Be Swift, Be Slow

From the Epistle: 1 St. James i. 17 ff.
The Book of Common Prayer, p. 174-175

17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. 18 Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. 19 Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: 20 For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. 21 Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.

Be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. The Apostle James, who never minces words himself, gives us strong counsel in these few and pithy phrases. They have always meant much to me, because they go so contrary to the impulses that are natural to all of us, and are therefore worth paying very close attention to.

The language itself is striking: *swift to hear*. There are a number of ways of listening to what another is saying, but allow me to suggest a method I will call “listening through...”, because I believe it is the only truly *Christian* way to listen. It requires great discipline and practice, but it is the key to rendering a service to others that, frankly, is very rare, but is very much needed.

I said that being properly listened to is a great need. I think it’s safe to say that our wives often wish that we listened better to them. They may feed us our meals, while they themselves are starving for attention! “Listening through...” means that I must train myself to overcome every impediment to thoroughly hearing what another is saying to me, whether the hindrance is something within me, or one I perceive to be in the one speaking to me. I must endeavor to part with all my excuses for not being interested enough to open myself without qualification to another. I must curb my criticisms and my impulse to self-defense. If I am framing my rebuttal while I am in the very process of supposedly “giving ear” to another, then they are receiving, to be sure, only a small portion of my attention.

To deeply listen to another is to make contact with their heart and soul not only through their words, but through their manner, and body-language. In highly charged emotional exchanges especially, it will enable us to see past that which would otherwise cause us to react thoughtlessly and impulsively. Make no mistake...this is hard labor, and a labor of love, at that. It is far more than a mere auditory experience, or, for that matter, an intellectual one. Although those levels will certainly be involved, I must employ a faculty that goes deeper than my ears, and even my mind. It is my heart, enlivened by the graces of the Holy Spirit, who grants the power to do that which my natural capabilities cannot perform.

Be slow to speak. There is a variety of responses we can offer in situations of listening, but in the most serious and deepest moments of communication, a careless and superficial reaction is a great injustice. Perhaps, after meaningful consideration, a quick and ready answer might be forthcoming and possible. But if another has entrusted to me some portion of their heart, I cannot afford to betray their trust by not attaching to their concerns the gravity due them. Even if I am in total disagreement with some fundamental principle being expressed, I must work to suspend all judgment, because it may well be the case that Christian charity mandates from me something more than merely being right, and proving it so. This is a subtle business, but once again, before I fire away with a retort, I must ask my own soul some searching questions: “What is my principal desire here, the betterment of the eternal soul of the one with whom I’m communicating, or winning the debate in the name of righteousness?” Love for a soul may oblige me to keep my mouth shut, and let God do the talking, if and when He chooses to do so, and by other means than me. “God loves this person,” I counsel myself, “and that is the supreme fact of the case, far more important than winning or losing the argument, be the cause ever so righteous.”

People everywhere are searching for wisdom, and it is in short supply. It is wisdom that answers slowly. Considers these jewels from the Book of Proverbs:

-Bow down thine ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply thine heart unto my knowledge. (22:17)

-The mouth of the righteous is a well of life... (10:11)

-In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise. (10:19)

-There is one who speaks like the piercings of a sword, but the tongue of the wise promotes health. (12:18)

-Wisdom rests quietly in the heart of him who has understanding... (14:33a)

In an age full of experts, of talking heads, of jabbered opinions, of how-to books and videos, the hearts of men cry out, “Just give me one wise person, someone somewhere who speaks out of the deep wells of experience, from a life informed by sound principle, from humility that is the product of long years fully lived, from sorrows and joys that have left their permanent mark, and from real, personal contact with God.”

Be slow to wrath. For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. Religious history is absolutely filled with examples of men who assumed that they were the rightful instruments of God’s wrath, when in fact they were entirely self-appointed, were acting presumptuously, and ended up creating far more harm in good. *Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath...* says St. Paul (Eph. 4:26). Turning once more to the Book of Proverbs:

-He who is slow to wrath has great understanding, but he who is impulsive exalts folly. (14:29)

-He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city. (16:32)

How much wreckage has been wrought by uncontrolled anger ravaging the lives of friends, families, communities, and countries! It seems to me that America has become a very angry nation. Look at the faces that pass you by. Is it not written clearly on so many of them? It is such a peculiar phenomenon, because in many respects one might conclude that Americans have never had it so good. Why are we angry? Is it not because of a growing and very deep-seated discontentment? We have traded our ideals and dreams and beliefs steeped in long-held traditions for spinning, blinking, soulless toys which promise us pleasure and fulfillment and never deliver it. And like frustrated, spoiled children, moving in dissatisfaction from one distraction to the next, our anger mounts, eventually to be aimed explosively either at ourselves, or at some other likely target for blame. Everyone seems to be angry at someone.

Yes, there is a time for righteous anger, but few and far between are those who are mature enough to manifest it. Too often our Christian convictions comes across with judgmentalness and self-righteousness, and are easily dismissed in these proud and arrogant times which assume that new commandments can be written to replace the old.

As Christians we must learn the discipline of being *slow to wrath*. How can we do this? Principally because of our faith in God. Do you recall these additional words from St. Paul?:

Romans 12:17 *Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. 18 If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. 19 Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. 20 Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. 21 Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.* If we assume the role of self-styled agents of God's wrath, we may very well prevent people from coming to terms with God. We will become stumbling-blocks to their perception of the character and nature of God, who is both wroth with sin, but also filled with charity and mercy, far, far more than we can imagine.

The world, in contrast to today's Epistle, instructs us to be "slow to hear, swift to speak, and swift to wrath". The world has exhausted its treasuries of virtues, because it refuses to turn to the One who could replenish them. It has run out of patience, of gentleness, of faith, of kindness, and is taking matters into its own hands, to its eventual destruction.

But we cannot afford to follow them. Our mission is one requiring great self-control. Where we are inclined to say "yes" to impulse, let us say "no". Where we are inclined to act in God's name with the sword of righteousness which we are dead-certain He has supplied us, let us take a long, holy pause. He may well require that we lay it down instead, without fear, knowing that *the Lord's hand is not shortened* (Is. 59:1). He can take care of Himself.

A few battles may be lost, but the war certainly will be won.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.