

Faith with Hands and Feet
Slowing Our Reactions
James 1.19-20

February 19, 2023

Communion

One of the great mysteries of the Christian faith is how the justice of God and the love of God could both find perfect expression through the cross.

Somehow, when Jesus offers his life in our place, the righteous standard of God, which we have broken, and will always fall short of, is fully satisfied.

At the same time, the gracious love of God, which we do not deserve and could not ever deserve, is fully expressed.

We are children of the promise
The beloved of the Lord
Won with everlasting kindness
Bought with sacrificial blood

Bringing reconciliation
To a world that longs to know
The affections of a Father
Who will never let them go

This is the original canceling event.

“Cancel” literally means “cross bars.” It refers to drawing crossed lines through something to eliminate it, “crossing” it out.

Cancel culture is about a public recognition that I have said and done things for which I need to be held accountable.

When Jesus laid down his life on the cross, it was the ultimate canceling act.

But instead of canceling me, crossing me out, Jesus put himself in my place, allowing himself to be canceled, and in the process, he canceled my sin and guilt and shame, crossing *it* out.

Colossians 2.4

He **canceled** the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross.

In **I Thessalonians 5.9-10** Paul wrote

For God chose to save us through our Lord Jesus Christ, not to pour out his anger on us. Christ died for us so that . . . we can live with him forever.

This is the bread of reconciliation. This is the cup of forgiveness.

On the last night that Jesus spent with his disciple, he took bread, broke it, and presented it to the disciples, saying, "This is my body, broken for you. Eat this, remembering me." And at the end of that same meal, Jesus took the cup, and he said, "This is the blood of the new covenant, poured out for the forgiveness of the sins of many. Drink this, remembering me."

Ministering in his name, I invite you to share in this feast. If you have given Jesus your allegiance, and received his gift of new life, this table is for you.

As you take the bread, think of the justice of God, perfectly satisfied on the cross. And as you take the cup, think of the love of God, perfectly expressed on the cross.

The table is set. Come.

Message

Close your eyes and listen to these words as I read them to you.

Shared Reading: Second-Person Version

You are the beloved of the Lord.
In love He created you.
In love He came to you.
In love He died for you.

In love He makes you His own –
folding you into His love
transforming you by His love
sending you out in His love

By your love this world will know that you are His –
by your love this world will see Him in you –
as He lives His life of love in you and through you,
to the glory of God.

What happens when the cancel culture of the Kingdom of God, which cancels our guilt and shame and lifts up the person, comes face to face with the cancel culture of our society, which cancels the person and lifts up the guilt and shame and sin?

As you know all too well, our culture finds itself in an increasing crisis of polarization. In a trend opposite to global warming, when it comes to our various views and beliefs and ideologies, we find ourselves increasingly on a globe that is made up more and more of just two chilly poles and little warmth or common ground in between.

Glomming together with like-minded others, pulling apart into camps, mutually reinforcing our insider views, and mutually canceling the outsider's voices, we are living in a global centrifugal separator. Spinning faster and faster, heating up hotter and hotter, it throws us together with those whose views mirror ours, and throws us apart from those whose views or beliefs differ from ours.

Where do we turn for help?

Increasingly, the Bible is looked *past* rather than looked *to* for answers. The world around us has largely concluded that it isn't really relevant anymore, and maybe it never really was.

But if we ever wonder if the two thousand year old words of Scripture have anything worth saying to our culture today, we need look no further than the passage we're looking at this morning.

How do we relate across lines of difference? How do we interact with someone whose morals or beliefs or convictions are different from our own?

Listen to these words from James.

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.

My dear brothers and sisters – that is, you who are followers of Jesus, this counsel is for you.

Some of you who are Christians may find yourselves saying at this point, "Yes, but, if I follow this advice, if I spend more time listening than speaking up, aren't I condoning their immorality? Aren't I failing to stand up for truth?" That's a really important question, and James will address that in a bit. But first, let's walk through these three bits of advice that stand at the heart of James' invitation.

The Heart of the Invitation

Everyone should be
quick to listen

David Augsburger

“Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person they are almost indistinguishable.”

Ask questions

The best way to love someone in a conversation across lines of difference is to listen.

Actually, the best way to love *anyone* in a conversation about *anything* is to listen.

People love to share their opinions and perspectives and feelings. Letting the conversation be about them, and giving them an opportunity to share what they are thinking about is a great way to communicate value to someone.

And the best way to listen is to ask someone a question and then close your mouth and open your ears and give yourselves to hearing what they have to share. Listen well.

Listen well

Put away your phone
Lay down your agenda
Set aside your need to be heard
And give your full attention to the other person

Simone Weil was right when she said,

“Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.”

In her book *Distracted*, Maggie Jackson tells about a fellow workshop participant with her who said:

If a person leaps in and sacrifices his life – you leap in and save a baby and then you die – you’ve given your whole life in one piece. That’s a wonderful sacrifice. Great love hath no man than he who lays down his life for another. Jesus, right? So that’s pretty good. But when we give another person our attention, we’re giving away that portion of our life. We don’t get it back. We’re giving our attention to what seems worthy of our life from moment to moment. Attention, the cultivation of attention. Is absolutely core. (*Tranquility*, 129)

James’ advice applies to our reading too. When we are deciding whether or not to read a book, the wrong question to ask is “Will I agree with everything in these pages?” That’s not reading, that’s merely reinforcing what we already think, which is just confirmation bias.

James invites us to choose to stick our heads outside of the closed-loop bubble and listen to other perspectives and views.

One of the best ways to listen well is to ask a question. And then another question. That follow up question is key.

Ask follow up questions

You've asked a question. The other person has just taken a big risk to share an opinion. Right now the conversation is at a precarious place. Don't kill the conversation by jumping in with your opinion. Gently fan the conversation into flame by making it safe for the other person. We do that by asking more questions.

Remember that the best questions are open-ended and invite a person to answer in whatever direction they want to.

That means they are not yes-or-no questions.

Think the Boilers are going to win this afternoon?

And they are not leading questions, which are usually ways of giving our own opinion in the form of a question.

Don't you think the Boilers are going to stomp the Buckeyes today?

And they're not leading and shaming question:

You aren't going to root for Ohio State, are you? How could *anyone* root for Ohio State?

Instead, an open-ended question is one in which the person is given the freedom to take the conversation in whatever way they please.

How do you think the game is going to go this afternoon?

A few weeks ago I went to Charleston for a conference. During the two and a half days of that trip I had seven significant conversations with everybody from my fellow passengers to my check in clerk at the airline. I had so much fun!

Let me tell you about a conversation I had with one of my Uber drivers, a man named Michael, who drove me from the conference back to the airport.

When I got in he asked how I liked Charleston, I told him I loved it and asked if he had been home for him for awhile.

He said he had grown up there, moved away, and then moved back. I asked him what brought him back and he answered.

Then I told him some specifics of what I loved about the city: I loved the beauty and the history and the unique architecture, the piazza houses in the Old City

But I wanted to move the conversation to a deeper level so I told him I had made it a point to walk over and see Mother Emanuel church where the church had happened and also the slave market, which I had run to see right before he picked me up.

It worked. He paused and then he said, "I don't know what you think about this, but this is something I believe pretty strongly, and I just feel like I need to say it."

Then he launched into his views on a very controversial societal issue. I'm not going to name what it was, because I don't want the specific issue, or my view on it, to be the focus of this example. Let's just say his was a view that was very different from my own.

He shared his view, and why he thought it should be my view too, talking about the history of our country, and other countries, and pointing to a couple of sources that he thought supported his view.

He ended by saying, "You may not believe that, that's cool, but that's where I am, and I just feel a responsibility to share that it."

When Michael my Uber driver finished sharing his views, I said, "I respect you for sharing your view and I also really love how gracious you are in holding an opinion passionately but not insisting that I agree with it."

James goes on to the next step.

The Heart of the Invitation

Everyone should be
quick to listen
slow to speak

Being slow to speak has three important parts to it

1. Stay with the other person even as you begin to interact

Don't take over the conversation or shift it over to you.

How tempted we are to say, "But enough about you. Let's talk about me."

But think about it: if we aren't listening to them, why should they listen to us?

Even as you begin to speak, keep the focus on the other person.

In his excellent book, *How to Have Impossible Conversations*, Peter Boghossian says

Shift your goal from winning to understanding. (12)
 Make understanding the other person's reasoning your goal. Abandon adversarial thinking (arguing and winning) and adopt collaborative thinking (listening and learning). (13)

2. *Restate their position to their satisfaction*

This is the George Herbert Principle. Before he became a pastor my favorite poet George Herbert taught rhetoric at Cambridge University. Whenever they had a discussion in class where two people were on different sides of an issue, this was his first rule:

Repeat back the other person's view to their satisfaction before you respond.

If they say you've misunderstood, then ask them to try again. And keep repeating it back to them until you get it right. And once you get it right, thank them for sharing.

I'm convinced that just that single step has the potential to begin to transform our conversations across lines of difference.

Proverbs 18.13 says

To answer before listening-- that is folly and shame.

3. *Practice curiosity*

Here are some examples of follow up questions that are not exactly conducive to continuing a conversation:

Are you kidding?

How in the world could you see it that way?

And you call yourself a Christian?

Here's what a good open-ended follow-up question might sound like:

You mean you see it this way? I find that really interesting.

Tell me more about that. How did you arrive at that position?

It isn't fair to require nonChristians to share our moral framework if they don't share our Lord, is it?

And it isn't fair to require Christians to arrive at the exact same conclusion to complex theological or political issues that we have, is it?

If someone has a moral or political point of view that is different from yours, even if it is baffling to you, or seems blatantly wrong, seek to understand it.

You might ask something like:

I'm curious. What would you say are some of the influences that have shaped your perspective on this issue?

Is there some moral tradition or framework that you turn to when you think about issues like this? I'd like to hear about it.

How has your own life experience shaped your view?

If the person is a Christian, you might ask: Which parts of scripture have most shaped your view on this?

Practice what Jim Henderson and Jim Hancock in their book great little book *3Practices for Crossing the Difference Divide*, call *disciplined curiosity*. Start a sentence with the phrase "I'd be curious to know."

You don't need to memorize a list of follow-up questions. Just practice curiosity. Be fascinated. Be intrigued. And keep asking questions. And after they've shared, keep repeating their answers back to their satisfaction, and keep thanking them for sharing.

3. Only then – only when the time is right, in the healthy rhythm of a conversation, when they say, "What about you?" – share your views

Not all your views, but those that relate to what you've been talking about.

The quicker we launch into our views the less likely we are to bring the other person with us.

In *How to Have Impossible Conversations*, Peter Boghossian says:

Nobody likes to be lectured. The research literature on effective communication shows that delivering messages does not work. . . . Messages are information conveyed in one-way transactions. (22)

If you find yourself thinking "If they only understood this point, they'd change their mind," you're delivering a message. Ask yourself, "Was I invited to share this or am I just telling them?" If it's the latter, you're probably coming across as a messenger. (23)

If you've listened well, there will almost always be a time when the person shifts the conversation back to you.

"What about you? What do you think? What's your view on this?"

When Michael finished sharing, first I said, "So it sounds like you're saying this. Because of these concern you have, and because of this way that you understand our society is going, and because this is the way you think about our individual rights, this is what you think we should do."

“Yep. That’s exactly right. And then he sort of restated his position and his sources.”

Then I said, “I’m really curious about what you shared. Could I ask you a few questions? Not questions as statements, but questions that come out of genuine curiosity.”

“Sure, yeah, you bet.”

By this point we were just about five or six minutes from the airport.

So I said. “So I’m curious, you talked a lot about individuals and what’s best for them, but what happens if you shift your perspective and ask the question from the perspective of what’s best for the country as a whole? How does the view you hold work from that perspective?”

“Wow, that’s a really good question. I’m going to have to think about that. I’m not sure. But I just know what history tells us and I think I’m right on this one.”

Then I said, “I’m a follower of Jesus, and that shapes my perspective on pretty much everything.”

He said, “So am I!”

“That’s awesome! Well, you know how becoming a Christian sort of turns everything on its head. Starting with us. Well, there’s this specific thing that Jesus says that seems to relate to the thing we’re talking about. I’m curious how you fit together what you shared earlier with that saying of Jesus?”

“Yeah, I see what you’re getting at.” At that point we pulled to a stop in front of the airport.

The Heart of the Invitation

Everyone should be
 quick to listen
 slow to speak
slow to become angry

The four people who are still getting the local paper may have seen the *Pearls Before Swine* comic strip this morning (2/19/23)

It begins with a box that says:
How to talk to a person who doesn’t think like you politically
 Then in the next frame it show a person standing talking with Rat. Rat says:
 I see. Well, that’s a very interesting opinion.
 Next frame: Rat says: May I suggest a different way to look at this?

The person answers: Sure.

Great. Well, I think we all bring different perspectives to the issues.

Right.

Perspectives based on our past, our experience, our education.

Agreed.

So think the point is this. You may just be a moron.

Another box, this one that says: *Not like that*.

And in the final box, Rat goes on: Have you considered hitting your head with a shoe until your brain restarts?!

Leaving now.

We are likely to react and become angry when

We are so immersed in a single way of thinking about something, when our beliefs and conclusions are so self-evident to us and to all who surround us, that we feel utterly baffled by another view and it strikes us as absurd.

Or we personally feel hurt or threatened by something someone says

Or, especially for us as Christians, when we feel the person's beliefs or morals are an affront to God, that they are hurtful or offensive to him.

Want to read a book that will challenge you? Read *Unoffendable*, by Brant Hansen. This is what the back cover says about it:

Brant Hansen asks a radical, freeing question. What if Christians were the most unoffendable people on the planet? And he offers a life-changing idea: "righteous anger" is a myth, and giving up our "right" to be offended can be one of the most encouraging things we can do. Drop your anger, and self-centeredness yields to humility. Choose to be unoffendable, and you'll flourish the way God intends you to.

James says be slow to anger . . . why?

James 1.20

. . . because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

Isn't it the case that we are usually angry because things we want things to go the way we think they should? And for us as Christians, the way we think God thinks things should go?

Anger is directly related to a desire to control an outcome

This takes us into a crucial question that many Christians ask whenever we begin to talk about loving and accepting people whose beliefs and morals are different than ours.

Isn't it our job to stand up for the truth? If we keep silent about sin, aren't we condoning the sin of our neighbors? If we don't condemn immorality, aren't we contributing to the moral erosion of our society?

There are certainly times when it is appropriate for Christians to express their moral opinions in the public square.

When Jesus says, "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's," I think a right application of that principle today is for us to be involved in the political processes of our nation.

But that's very different from when I am confronted with a neighbor or an Uber driver or a student who sits next to me in class or a dad sitting next to me in the stands whose beliefs and morals and politics are different from my own.

Why not get angry?

Look at James 1.20.

James 1.20

. . . because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

Anger doesn't bring about what God wants. Hitting people with truth isn't what leads them to live lives that honor and please God.

What does?

James 3.18, two chapters later in the section on the wisdom that comes from above, and clearly written with this verse in mind

Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

What *does* bring about what God wants?

Look at the verse just before this one.

James 1.18

He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

The word of truth – that is, the gospel – brings about new birth, which will lead to a person living a righteous or God-honoring life. That leads to what God wants.

And look at the verse just after this one.

James 1.21

Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

The word that God plants in us, when we humbly accept it, will save us, which, again, will lead to a person living a righteous or God-honoring life. That leads to what God wants.

We're not saying that truth doesn't matter, or has no place in our conversation.

But truth imposed from the outside, wielded in our hands in argument, truth used against a person, does not bring about what pleases God.

Truth on the inside, planted by the Spirit, and wielded in God's hands, does.

If you are concerned that someone's behavior is dishonoring to God, the best way to get them to live the sort of life God wants is not to try to push them into conformity to a standard they don't agree with, but to reflect the heart of God to them by loving them - listening to them and understanding them and accepting and valuing them even if you don't agree with them, and then, when the time is right, sharing the gospel with them, and allowing God to change them from the inside.

In his amazing book *A Gentle Answer*, which I highly recommend, Scott Sauls asks,

"Why is the world's experience of Christians so different from Christian's experience of Christ?" 36

He also writes this:

In Jesus' interaction with the woman caught in the act of adultery, before he says to her that she must leave her life of sin, he first assures her that as far as he is concerned, she is not condemned. "Neither do I condemn you," Jesus says, "go and sin no more." (John 8.11). If you reverse the order of these two sentences, if you say, "Leave your sin," before you will consider saying, "Neither do I condemn you," then you have ceased to speak the language of Christ, and you have ceased to reflect the heart of Christ." 18

John 13.34-35

So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

As Michael and I pulled into the airport I thumped his shoulder and said, "Hey, thank you for being able to have a conversation about really weighty things in a really gracious way. I think these are things that matter a lot to God and I'm glad we got to talk about them."

He got out of the car to shake my hand and thank me. "This has been a great conversation. Thanks. I'm really glad I met you."

What brings about what God wants? A change of mind.

What brings about a change of mind? A change of heart.

What helps bring about a change of heart? Only Love does. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

That's how the original cancel culture works.

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.

Would you join me in our shared reading?

Shared Reading

We are the beloved of the Lord.
In love He created us.
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In love He died for us.

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folding us into His love
transforming us by His love
sending us out in His love

By our love this world will know that we are His –
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