What does it mean to preach out of the back of the letter? If you study the letters in the New Testament, you will find a pattern. It is most easily seen in the letter to the Ephesians, but you can see it in the Colossian letter and the letter to the Romans. The front of the letter lays out doctrine. The author will speak of the love of God, the obedience of Christ, the atoning work of Calvary, and the freedom we have in the resurrection. It is a recitation of all that God has done. But then, the author turns and, in essence, says, “In light of all this, here are the expectations God has for you as you live your lives.” This is the content of the back of the letter.

So which is easier to preach to our modern congregations? The doctrines of the front or the ethics of the back? Which is more “relevant”? Which is more “applicable”? What has happened is we have trained up a generation of church attenders who know how to behave, but are totally devoid of any compelling reason to behave. They have been told what to do, but not why to do it.

If you look at Exodus 20, the recitation of the Ten Commandments, the text does not begin with, “Thou shall have no other gods before Me.” That is Exodus 20:3. The text of Exodus 20:1-2 gives us the doctrine of that moment, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the place of slavery.” Do you see the doctrine? Do you see the compelling act? Beware of teaching the ethic without teaching the doctrine.

So how does James develop this pattern in his letter? Though it is not nearly as clear-cut of a delineation as Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, James certainly sets out a doctrine of the character of God, the effect of the atoning work of Christ, and the hope we have in James 1:18 . . .

“By His own choice, He gave us a new birth by the message of truth so that we would be the firstfruits of His creatures.”

From this glorious point of doctrine, James gives his readers the first line of relevant, applicable, box-checking ethics . . .

“My dearly loved brothers, understand this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger . . .”

I love the way he exhorts his audience to these things by imploring them to “understand” their obvious ethical value. In essence, James is telling the twelve tribes of the Dispersion to simply observe the effects of the ethic of being quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. They are self-evident ethics. No one would dare to contradict these things, right? No one would tell their child to talk more, especially when they have not given a full hearing to others. No one would find value in a person who could not check his temper or her mouth. These are self-evident. They do not require explanation. They are so obvious . . . but they are so rarely employed.

Let us consider the first ethic, “Be quick to hear.”

What does a person’s attentiveness reveal? What does it say about a person who can sit and listen, to hear not only words, but to hear tone, intentions, and biases? What kind of person feels no compulsion to interject, interrupt, or to derail another person’s line of thought? There may be a fine line between attentive listening and silent apathy, but it will be made clear in time.

So let’s consider the second ethic, which is clearly a companion to the first, “Be slow to speak.”

I remember my grandmother telling us that God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason. Again, we need to ask the question, what kind of person does this? What kind of person is slow to speak? What manner of person feels no compulsion to add his two cents to the conversation, to say whatever crosses his mind, or to offer up his pearls of wisdom (even when no one asked)? There is some pride there. There is an eagerness to interject about which James is warning his readers.

So if we were to consider these things from a purely self-evident ethic, unbound to the doctrines of Christianity, could we say that these ethics are wise? Imagine the number of regrets you would avoid and the sheer number of apologies you would not have to give. Imagine how different your relationships would be. Imagine how wise your counsel would become.

I was once part of a group of pastors and we would meet once a month for accountability and fellowship. Many of us were young guys, just starting our first church, full of opinions and full of criticisms. We would all sit around and share the unsearchable depths of our wisdom (I hope you hear the sarcasm). But one of the members of the group, an older man easily 20 years our senior, would just sit and listen. He would rarely join in the banter of the subject, but would sit almost amused at his junior comrades. Invariably, the conversation would wane, and curious as to his thoughts, one of us would turn to Don and ask what he thought about the topic at hand. He would fold his arms, take a deep nasally breath, turn his eyes upward and say, “Here is what I have been hearing you say, and here is what I think I need to say.” He would then speak with such eloquence and wisdom that the foolishness of our ramblings was palpable. We called Don, “The Sage” . . . and he is sorely missed.

The ethics of being quick to hear and slow to speak are so obvious . . . but so rarely employed.

So what about the third ethic, “Be slow to anger.”

What factors accelerate our anger? If we are to be slow to it, then it may be helpful to understand the speed to which we come to it. What brings you to a point of anger that under normal circumstances would have little to no effect on you? I think of things like stress, self-centeredness, jealousy, pride, and impatience. What if we were quick to recognize the presence of these accelerants in our psyche and were more aware of their effect on our anger?

So is this an absolute prohibition of being angry? I would say no more than an absolute prohibition of speaking. The Old Testament speaks of God being angry over 200 times and often refers to His anger as a “burning” anger. So what is the heart of this ethic? And what is the lesson in the exhortation to arrive at anger slowly?

There was a moment early in the ministry of Jesus when he was running into one conflict after another with the Pharisees. This unheralded, untrained carpenter’s son from Nazareth often offended them, so they were looking for a way to trap Him and discredit Him before He could gain a following. On one Sabbath, Jesus entered the synagogue and noticed a man there with a paralyzed hand. Knowing the devious plottings of the Pharisees, Jesus called the man to come and stand in a conspicuous place in the synagogue. Turning to the Pharisees, Jesus asked, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do what is good or to do what is evil, to save life or to kill?” He waited for a response, but none was given. They just stood there in confounded silence. Mark shared with us what happened next, “After looking around at them with anger and sorrow at the hardness of their hearts . . ..” Jesus healed the man’s hand, which so angered the Pharisees that began plotting to utterly destroy Jesus.

Do you see what accompanied the anger of Jesus? Jesus looked at them with anger and sorrow. This is a strong word for sorrow in the Greek language. It was crippling sorrow. It was the emotion of a parent who is grieved at the disobedience of a child. The anger did not terminate on the offended one. The anger of Jesus was accompanied by sorrow for the offending ones. Is that the heart behind your anger? When you are cut off in traffic, do you grieve for the offender? When someone says something unkind about you to others, do you grieve for that person’s insecurity? When your kids stay out beyond curfew, are you filled with sorrow for their rebellion? Does your anger terminate with you?

“For man’s anger does not accomplish the righteousness of God.”

Will you allow your emotional response to life’s challenges to move you toward God or away from Him? James told his audience that their reactive, hasty anger, the anger that is a reflexive response to an offense, was leading them away from the righteous realm of their God. An anger that is couched solely in a personal offense is an anger that has completely ignored the righteousness of God—the right way of living. It is an anger that utterly fails the defining test of righteous indignation: “Am I angry because I love you and I want what is best for you?”

Why was God so angry so often? Why was this anger so often accompanied by sorrow? So often associated with His jealousy? The anger of God, the anger that is so often described as slowly kindled, is not a deviation or a departure from His love, but an expression of His love.

So is that how we become angry?

With the conclusion that our self-centered, short-sighted, reflexive anger will ultimately lead us away from the heart of our God, James gets personal . . .

“Therefore, ridding yourselves of all moral filth and evil, humbly receive the implanted word which is able to save your soul.”

This is not so much a two-step process, but is rather an exchange. A beautiful transaction that is also rarely employed. James calls on his readers to take all the “moral filth and evil” and set it aside. The Greek word is “apotithemi” which is probably best illustrated in the picture of the men taking off their coats in order to stone Stephen. They recognized how their coats would impair them, so they rid themselves of that which would restrict them.

James is calling his readers to do the same. So what was this “moral filth and evil”? The Greek phrase may clarify the passage for us. The phrase literally would read, “Therefore, ridding all filth and overflowing malice . . ..” The word for “filth” is actually used for ear wax is some contexts, so it could be inclusive of anything whose character is so vile that it restricts our movement toward God’s righteousness. The word for “evil” is a word that refers to a malevolent disposition, and for emphasis, James speaks of this character as being abundant and overflowing in our lives.

Do you see anything in that short list that you need to take off? Is there any filth or disposition that is impairing your pursuit of God’s righteous way? Is there any baggage of anger or unforgiveness that you need to put down? This is step one, but it allows for step two. Again, it is a crucial exchange. It is vital. It is a step toward salvation.

So put it down . . . Please!

And in humility, meekness . . . in the perfect disposition of control, take hold of the message of truth that was implanted in you through the Gospel. This is no casual reception. This is not something you grab along with your other baggage. The message of truth cannot be received with an available finger or two. The Gospel demands the full extent of your grasp. It has no ability to share its place in your life with anything that would compete with its all-consuming presence.

So pick it up . . . Please!

How sadly ironic it is that so many will choose to hold on to the baggage of temporal unforgiveness of others, all the while, crippling their ability to receive the eternal forgiveness that they so desperately need in order to save their souls . . .