

St. Timothy's Lutheran Church
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James 1:19-27

When We Don't Know What God Is Saying

In a certain town, there was a great flood. This flood was so big, the only safe place for a certain man was the roof of his house. This man was a Christian man, so he faithfully waited on the roof of his house for God to come and save him. A log drifted by, and the man decided not to get aboard the log, because he trusted that *God* would come and save him. Someone on a boat paddled by and asked the man if he would please come aboard for safety. The man said, "No, I'm waiting for God to come and save me." A helicopter came by, and called for the man to climb the ladder, because this was his only hope for survival. The man yelled, "No thank you. I'm waiting for God to come and save me." (Pause)

The man died. When he got to heaven, the man demanded, "Why didn't you save me?!" God told the man, "I sent you a log, a boat, *and* a helicopter; what *more* did you want?"

The man had been waiting for God, but he didn't see God's help, because he thought that God would come to him in some miraculous way. He didn't think that God would come to him in a "normal," human way. He didn't think that God would come to him in a log, a boat, or a helicopter.

Wouldn't life be so much easier if God would just call down to us with a booming voice from heaven? "You are supposed to be a doctor. Put your money in the stock market right now. Move to San Jose and you will become rich. Break up with that boy. I have someone much better for you in college."

In my experience, the voice of God is much more subtle, and the message *isn't* often instantaneous. It often takes *time* to discern God's voice, and even *then*, His voice is not always clear.

If God's voice is often subtle *and* takes time to hear, and even *then* we wonder if we have heard correctly, we can become discouraged. *Why even bother to listen? I couldn't hear Him the last time. I thought I heard Him last time, but what resulted was very painful. Did I hear the wrong message?* So some stop asking. Some are *afraid* to ask, fearful that God will demand something very difficult of them. Some become immobilized like the man in the flood, because they are waiting for God to give a clear message and don't want to move an *inch*, unless they are absolutely *certain* they know what God is saying. These thoughts and feelings are all completely understandable. Yet, we do not need to let our frustration, our fear, or our lack of confidence hinder us from being attentive to the voice of God.

Perhaps the root of our apprehension is fear. We fear that God is not really there or that He is not good. We fear that what He desires from us is more than what we can give. We fear that what we do will never be good enough, that *we* are not good enough, and that we will ultimately be rejected.

Know this: your heavenly Father loves you and comes after you. He knew that You could not come to Him, so He came to you. He came to you by sending His only Son to die for you, so that You would be with Him forever. He *is* good and He *can* be trusted. He wants You to be with Him and to know Him. This is why He speaks in the still, small voice. This is *why* He speaks through others. This is *why* He

has given us Scripture. He wants you to know who He is and what pleases Him – it's no secret.

There is no *one* Scripture passage that can consolidate what pleases God, but James' letter is a concise place to start. James writes shortly after Jesus' death and resurrection to a persecuted church, which has been scattered. He writes to encourage them that the trials they face will strengthen them and shape them into the likeness of Jesus.

James 1:19 says that they are to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. Quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. How can a person hear God when he/she is constantly speaking? How can a person love and care for others when he/she cannot stop talking? Be quick to hear and slow to speak. This is a difficult task, but it is easy to understand.

Let's spend some time on the "slow to anger" part. We need to consider this, because it is easy to rationalize our anger, and call what we feel "righteous anger." We are angry when people lie to us, when they treat others poorly, when justice is not served, when the vulnerable are taken advantage of, when evil is done. In James' letter and in the rest of the New Testament, however, human anger is *never* called righteous; there *is* no human righteous anger. Anger, however, often comes with a warning. James says in verse 20, that the anger of a person does not produce the righteousness that God requires. Romans 12:19 – 21 says, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' To the contrary, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on

his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Anger, often instead of resulting in goodness, results in giving place to the devil (Eph 4:26 – 27), and a desire to seek revenge.¹ Be slow to anger, because anger quickly becomes sin and does not produce what God requires.

James 1:21: Therefore, throw off like old clothes your old life of filth and wickedness, and receive with meekness the word that is already in you, which *is* able to save you. Get rid of your old life of revenge and sin. Humbly know that God *will* have justice. He *will* make things right. He is within you and will save you.

Verse 22: "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." For the person who hears and does not act on it, is like a person who looks at himself/herself and forgets what they look like. We are not saved by what we do. We do, or act in obedience, *because* we are saved.

Perhaps you have heard the saying that someone is "too heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good." Scripture tells us time and time again that this is *not* what God wants. He *wants* us to be of earthly good. He *cares* about what happens on this side of eternity. Ephesians 2:8 – 10 says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for* good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." You and I were created *for* good works. We were not created to twiddle our thumbs as we wait for heaven. You and I were created for good.

¹ Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 420.

Verse 26: “If anyone thinks [they are] religious and does not bridle [their] tongue but deceives [their] heart, this person’s religion is worthless.” A person can dress up and go to church every Sunday and go to Bible study and Grow Group, but if they cannot control their tongue, their religion is worthless. What a dangerous thing the tongue is, because it can bring up or tear down. It steers our bodies as a rudder steers a boat, and can be as dangerous as a wildfire.

Verse 27 puts it simply: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their [oppression], and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” You are loved, and have been created and saved *for good* – to care for and to be present to the most vulnerable in our society, and not to look like the rest of the world – to listen well, to be free from filth and sin, and to humbly trust that God will one day make all things right.

This will not be easy. You and I will continue to forget how much we are loved. We will forget why we have been created. We will worry that if we serve or give to someone else, there won’t be enough for us. We will be angry and distrust that God will one day make all things right. We will let our tongues run wild.

I would like to guide us in a time of prayer. I invite you to close your eyes and pray silently through each prompt that resonates with you. Heavenly Father, convict our hearts where we have strayed from You. (Pause) We have forgotten that You are our first love. (Pause) We have avoided You out of fear. (Pause) We have avoided You because we doubt Your goodness. (Pause) We have become angry with You and distrusted that You will one day make all things right. (Pause) We have let our tongues run wild. (Pause) We have not cared for those on the margins because we

fear that there won't be enough for us. (Pause) Forgive us and lead us, so that we may become more like You. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Church, have hope, because God through His Spirit is doing a new thing. The Spirit is doing a new thing in you, and He is doing a new thing in Christ's Church. God has created you. God has created all of *us* in "Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph 2:10b).

If you struggle to hear the voice of God, know that You are loved, and have been created and saved *for good* – to care for and to be present to the most vulnerable in our society, and not to look like the rest of the world – to listen well, to be free from filth and sin, and to humbly trust that God will one day make all things right.

CEO of Transforming the Bay with Christ and former pastor, Nancy Ortberg, shares a story about a next door neighbor in Chicago. When Nancy and her husband, John, pastored in Chicago, they lived on a small cul-de-sac, where everyone was a church-goer, except for the neighbors on their right, who were very committed school teachers.

Nancy and John thought that it was their pastorly duty to invite their neighbors to come to church with them. They said that John would be preaching and that they would love it if their neighbors would come. Their neighbors were so gracious, smiled, and said, "That's the weekend before finals. We would love to come, but we are inundated with work."

A couple of months later, Nancy invited them to church. "I'm preaching this time, and we'll even take you out to lunch afterwards." Their neighbors paused and

their voices got higher, and they said, "We're going to be clipping our fingernails that day. We're so sorry we won't be able to make it."

Over the years, Nancy and John formed a relationship with them. They exchanged gardening tips and had meals together. John visited the husband when he had a heart attack. Nancy brought meals over when the wife struggled with breast cancer.

About 7 years of knowing each other, the husband came running over, and said, "Pat and I would love to come to church with you this weekend. What time are your services?" Nancy wondered what could have *possibly* happened.

About a week before, the husband and wife had had a conversation with the teacher's aid who worked in their classroom. They just loved this teacher's aid and treated her like family. She was a single mom with three kids. Her husband had left her when their third child was born, and she had a very difficult time making it on a teacher's aid salary. She would drop her kids off at a neighbor's house so that they could take them to school and she could make it to work on time, taking two city buses.

She came to work excitedly one day, and told the neighbors, "You're never going to guess what happened to me. A church I don't even go to gave me a free car. It's a van. And inside the van are gift certificates for gas and car washes, and I can't believe someone would do this for me. This is going to change my life!"

The neighbors couldn't believe it, and as they asked her more questions, they said, "We think this is the church our neighbors work at! We need to find out more about this."

About 10 years before Nancy and John came to the church, a mechanic stumbled into the church. His life was falling apart. He was heavy into addictive behavior. He had lost his job. His wife had taken their two children and left.

He was at a point in his life when he was open to new messages. He came to know the compelling love of God for him, who gave His only Son to die for him, so that he could be reconciled to God.

He got involved in a small group, and the small group helped him get into an addiction recovery program. They helped him with his resume and helped him get a job. They helped him with marital counseling, and over time, his wife started making steps back toward him.

Over the course of about a year and a half, this man became reconciled to God, to his family, and his workplace. And then, he was left with this feeling of being so compelled by the love of Christ, that he wanted to reconcile a bigger portion of his world. And so, he went to the pastor of the church and said, "There are rich people at this church. Would you mind asking them that when they buy a new car, could they donate their old car to the church? I and a group of other mechanics at the church will fix them up the cars and sell them at an auction. And we'll sell the one car and get four or five more. We will work on them and then we will give them away to single moms."

The last year Nancy and John were there, the church had given away 200 cars to single moms, many of whom didn't go to the church, many whose lives were changed by a mechanic, whose life was changed by the love of God. These cars had

been given by a man who had been so moved by the love of God, that he wanted to extend that love to those he would never meet.²

God *is* speaking to you, and He wants to do good *through* you and through what you love to do. Perhaps you're a mechanic and would like to offer your services like the gentleman in Nancy's story. Perhaps you work in tech. Work and lead with integrity. Is God calling you to teach young people who have less resources how to code? Perhaps you are a financial wiz. Deal truthfully. Is God calling you to train those with financial hardships how to work their finances? Maybe you like to bake. Stop by our FISH Food Pantry sometime and share your gift with our neighbors. Whatever it is, offer your gift, offer yourself.

God is speaking to you and is doing a new thing in *you*. He is doing a new thing in Christ's Church to bless the world! Amen.

² <https://menlo.church/series/reconciled#/modal/message/4841/mlo>