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Quick to Listen, Slow to Speak
James 1:19-27
October 11th, 2015, Pastor Jeff Germon
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James 1:19–27 (ESV) [Jeannie A to read]

19 Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; 20 for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. 21 Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

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22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. 25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

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26 If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. 27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

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This is the fourth sermon in our series on the book of James. The section that we are going to dig into this morning has to do with the reception of God's Word in our hearts, or the readiness of our hearts to, not only hear God's Word, but to obey what he says in his Word to us.

It's much like the parable of the soils that Jesus told in Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8. The seed in that parable represents God's Word, the gospel. The various conditions of ground symbolize the various conditions of a person's heart and consequently their ability to receive the Word. The soil was prepared by having it tilled. The rocks and weeds were picked so the soil was ready to, not only receive the seed, but with those healthy conditions, it would produce a very good crop.

Well, that's what James is talking about in the passage we are going to look at this morning. It's about getting your heart ready to receive the Word from the Lord.

When most people read this passage they relate it to interaction between people.

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..let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger"

This is very good advice for us in all our relationships. We should definitely apply these imperatives to how we relate to one another. Can you imagine what our relationships would be like if we all did this? There would be less arguing, fighting, and misunderstanding in our world. One of the greatest needs in relationships is to be understood. We all want to be understood don't we?

And the irony in this, is that if we are all so bent on being understood nobody will be. Where is the person on the other side of the conversation purposefully trying to understand?

One of the great things about a good relationship is that conversation goes two ways. It's bilateral. It's not one person talking, and the other putting up with the talker while they go on incessantly. Or, as one of our neighbours said last week to Ruthie, "Some people's model of conversation is, "I'm done talking about me. Now it's your turn — to talk about me."

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In a healthy conversation there is a purposeful, active listener who attempts to understand the heart of the one talking. The listener's mind is fully engaged and actively attempting to uncover what the speaker is trying to express. And this is reciprocal. They take turns. It's not that they are taking turns telling their stories while the the listener waits to jump in to one-up the other's story. The listener is actually listening, for the purpose of gaining understanding, and then asking clarifying questions to make sure they truly understand.

God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason. We should be doing more listening than talking. That is not natural for most people though, because we typically think we are the main character in everyone else's story. And if you doubt that, try being very purposeful this week about how you have conversations. Listen to yourself.

When someone is sharing with you, do you actually listen and then ask another clarifying question in attempt to gain deeper understanding, or do you go on to tell a story about how that relates to something about you? Pay attention to your conversations. And then practice listening more than talking. **Be purposeful about really trying to gain an understanding of the other person's heart.** Resist the temptation to jump in and tell your story. What matters right now is the heart of the other person who has just shared something meaningful with you.

I have had some people say to me, "I have the gift of gab. I used to feel bad about it, but now I just see it as a gift from God and I embrace it." I'm sorry, but that is not always a gift. When you dominate the conversation, and don't listen to the other person, trust me, nobody feels like you are giving them a gift.

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...let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. James says this is for every person. Those who see themselves as having "the gift of gab" need to be even more purposeful about this. You are going to have to resist your insatiable need to talk, and practice asking questions, and listen. This is so important. Self-control is one of the fruits of the Spirit that needs to be exercised in regards to our conversations. Believe me, you will find more joy and satisfaction in your relationships if you put this into practice.

As much as this is true of our relationships on the horizontal plane with people, it is likewise true between us and God. I think this whole passage makes a lot of sense to see this active, speaker/listener conversation as between a person and God.

Verse 18, in the previous passage, ties into verse 19 of this passage.

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James 1:18

18 Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

So, God planted the seed of His Word – the gospel – into the soil of our hearts and it produced life. What was dead was raised to new life. We were born again, as Jesus told Nicodemus. In verse 19 James exhorts these believers to receive God's Word, not just in theory, but in reality. And then he says, if the Word has really taken root, if it has landed on a soft, cultivated heart that is ready to step out in obedience, there will be fruit.

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This is the basic equation: **God's Word planted in a soft heart that is ready to hear and obey WILL produce fruit.**

That is what Jesus said in his parable about the farmer sowing seed in healthy soil. And, in a nutshell that is what the whole Epistle of James is about.

So, James begins this section by getting their attention.

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"Know this..."

When I was in junior and senior high school I was on the wrestling team. And, I think every coach I had did the same thing. We would all be practicing our moves on the mats that were spread out in the gym, and coach would walk over with his clip board in hand and yell out in a booming voice, "Alright, listen up." And immediately, we would all stop what we were doing because his was the voice of authority. And we would gather around him and give him our undivided attention because we knew when he said "listen up" he had something important to say that would good for the team.

That's what James is doing here. ***"Know this..." "Listen up, what I have to say is vitally important."***

The NIV says, ***"Take note of this..."*** Write it down. Underline it. Put an asterisk beside it. This is important. Do not miss this.

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"Know this, my beloved brothers..."

[13]

He is speaking to everyone. ***"...let every person be quick to hear."***

This is something that is very important for everybody in the church to hear, because, as we already pointed out, everyone needs to be quick to hear is God's Word. That's the context here from verse 18.

In the contemporary world of multi-media and entertainment we have come to think that it's the responsibility of the speaker to get the attention of the listener. I was talking with someone about this last week. We were lamenting about the different world we live in where we have to compete with electronics and multi-media. I cannot count the number of times I thought I was having a conversation with someone that was important and was interrupted by a text or message, either from the other person's "smart" phone, or mine. And either I or the other person was made to feel less important because the text demanded attention.

With this new social phenomenon we have had to resort to all kinds of tactics to make sure that people are listening.

In the old days, before TV and this multi-media generation, a farmer would work in his field, and he would see nothing, but nature. He wouldn't have all of these visual stimuli that we have flashing in front of us today. And then when he was done working the field he would go home to his wife and family eager to have a conversation. No kidding! A conversation. How many of us remember what that is?

Things are different today. The onus has been put on the speaker to keep the attention of the listener. And you better be a pretty good story teller because you have a lot of competition.

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Well, James flips it around. He says, **“be quick to hear.”** In other words, be an active listener. Posture yourself to listen. Don't diagnose, or label, or give advice. Listen and resist the temptation to jump in. **“Be quick to hear”**, and not just with people, which we need to learn to do, but also with God. Do you know that **God is just waiting for us to listen** to him? He is a God who has always spoken to his creation. And he still does today. But, in order for us to hear him, we have to actively listen.

Ruthie and I often go for walks together, not just because it's good for our health, but because it's good for our relationship. When we walk together we talk. We get away from all the distractions and we focus on each other. And if we don't do that it's very difficult for me to focus. When we are not out on our walks, sometimes Ruth will be talking to me and I'll be nodding my head and saying, “aha, yes, oh really?” as if I am hearing her, when actually my mind is somewhere else off in a distant land. I don't do it purposefully. It's just that I have so much stuff bouncing around in my cranium that it is difficult to get it to turn off at times.

Sometimes I'll catch myself doing that and have to ask her to repeat what she has just said, because all I heard was, “blah, blah, blah, blah.” And of course, sometimes she sees the telltale signs of me wandering off somewhere in my mind and has to try to bring me back. She's always very kind and gracious when she does it because she knows I'm brain damaged. But, we have learned that **in order to have good conversations we need to be purposeful about it.** We need to get away from distractions.

And that's what we need to do with our relationship with God as well. We need quiet time away from things that distract us so we can listen to God. Somehow we need to shut off all the noise. We all have different ways we do this.

I know some people who will go for a run just to get away from distractions so they can listen to God. There is no one right way to do this, but we should find some way to turn down the noise and distractions and get silent so we can listen to God.

It's a time when we can get away from the busyness of life and focus on talking to God and, especially, listening to him. We're all different, so each of us is going to have a different way, but it is vital for the health of our relationship with Jesus that we have a time when we can do this.

We need to keep in mind that this is not a legalistic ritual we do just to get it done. We do it because the very purpose we were created for was to have relationship with God. It stands to reason then that **we will not be satisfied until we are satisfied in God**. So, that relationship is going to require some cultivating. We will not coast into a good relationship with Jesus any more than we will coast into a good marriage relationship. It takes work.

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I take time most mornings to be with Jesus. Here is what I do. The first thing I do after getting out of bed is take a couple minutes to get my thoughts centred on Jesus. This is very important for me because of all the stuff that is clanging around in my head. And those thoughts start as soon as my eyes open in the morning. So, it's very important that I take my thoughts captive immediately and focus my mind and heart upward.

I then head to the kitchen to get my breakfast cooking and hop in the shower. When my breakfast is ready I sit down and eat it, aware that I am in the presence of Jesus. I have my Bible in front of me. I have a rhythm of reading through the Bible in about a year most years. And I choose a different translation each year so it stays fresh. I read some from the Old Testament, some from the New and some from the wisdom literature (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, or Song of Solomon).

Once I am finished breakfast I move to a comfortable chair and continue reading the Bible, interspersed with times of meditation on what I have read. After I do that I journal my thoughts. What do I sense God saying to me from his Word? What do I need to learn? How do I need to grow? What was my day like yesterday? What are my fears, my hopes, my desires? And then, finally I spend a couple more minutes in quiet prayer just receiving from the Lord.

That is my rhythm. Yours doesn't need to look exactly like mine, but you should make sure that you **invest the time necessary to listen to the Lord**. If we are going to grow in the fruit of the Spirit to be like Jesus we need to get quiet and allow him to speak to us. Somehow we have to quiet all the noise in our brains, and that will not happen unless we purposefully get quiet and actively listen to God.

The next thing that James says is the flip side of being quick to hear.

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...let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak.

Now, we're all different, and this one might even be more difficult than the listening part for some of you. Have you ever had the experience of trying to tell someone something that was important to you only to be interrupted by them because they thought they knew what you were going to say, and it was way off the mark?

And so you try again, and the same thing happens. And then you finally give up because they aren't really listening. They seem to be more interested in talking than actually hearing your heart. Constant talking keeps a person from being able to hear what the other person is saying. It says, "I don't care about you. I am the main character in your story and you are a bit player in mine."

The Proverbs are full of sayings about loose tongues. Here's my favourite.

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Proverbs 17:28

28 Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.

I think we can all learn from that one. Wisdom does not mean that we always have something to say. Sometimes it's quite the opposite. Wisdom listens intently and actively until understanding is achieved. Also, when we talk too much it gives the impression that we think what we have to say is more important than what the other person has to say.

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And so James very wisely reverses this process. ***“Be quick to hear and slow to speak,”*** instead of the more natural way which is the reverse of that. We need to use a mental stop watch when we are having conversations and ask ourselves, “Am I talking more than listening? Have I listened actively enough that the other person feels heard and knows I understand them?”

And it's the same with our conversations with God. Sometimes we just need to be quiet and listen.

What is God trying to say to me through his Word? Remember, the context of this passage is posturing ourselves in such a way that the seed of God's Word can penetrate the soil of our hearts.

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The next thing James says is that we need be ***“slow to anger.”*** We are actually going to skip right on by this because I want to deal with that part next week.

Let's jump down to verse 22. James is calling us to active listening. He's calling us to action.

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22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. 24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. 25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

We illustrated this at the beginning of the message this morning. I came to the front with a dirty face, and someone tried to tell me that my face was dirty. And I looked in a mirror they gave me, and saw that I, in fact, did have a dirty face, and said, “Whatever, I'll live with it.”

I deceived myself into thinking that I was okay with a dirty face. God's Word is a mirror into our hearts. It shows us what we are really like. Maybe that's why some people are reluctant to read it. It might show them what's really in their heart and that is a scary thing because then they would have to do something about it. Ruth's nephew, who died in a motorcycle accident just over a year ago, had written on the front of his Bible, ***“Caution, will cause change.”***

The point James is making here is, when we see from God's Word that things are not right with us, that things are not as they should be, that we have dirt on our faces, so to speak, we need to do something about it, or we deceive ourselves into thinking it's ok. It's not ok! That kind of hypocrisy grieves the Spirit of God.

It is not ok to fill our heads with biblical knowledge and then not let God change our hearts and behaviour. God's Word is perfect. And contrary to what some people think, it is not a ball and chain. Allowing God's Word to penetrate our hearts and change us actually gives us freedom to be who God has created us to be.

And the person who does this, James says, will be blessed, or blissfully joyful, because he will have the freedom to live. Along with responding well to suffering, this is how we mature in our faith. And we will not mature if we do not learn to be quick to hear and slow to speak.

Finally, James goes on to flesh out what real Christian maturity looks like.

[21]

²⁶ If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

We looked at this briefly in our first message in this series. These are some of the key verses of James.

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He says that there are **three signs of Christian maturity.**

[23]

1. The ability to control one's tongue

[24]

2. To minister to the least of these

[25]

3. To keep one's self morally pure

James is very clear. He says, if your faith is real, that is, if God's Word has been successfully implanted in your soft, pliable heart, it will produce action. He says **we deceive ourselves if we think we are mature or spiritual, but we cannot control our tongues.**

We deceive ourselves if we think we are mature or spiritual just because we have great biblical or theological knowledge, but at the same time **neglect to look outside ourselves to the needs of those around us.** We deceive ourselves if we think we are mature or spiritual **if God's Word does not affect how we live.**

Friends, God wants to use his Word to transform us from the inside out. And if God's Word is truly implanted in our hearts it **will** produce fruit. We will begin to see that we are becoming more able to control our tongues. James says we are fooling ourselves if we think we are mature and we are not doing these things.

As you seriously walk with Jesus and allow him to work in you, you will begin to see a change, and others will see a change; from the need to draw attention to yourself, to serving others and especially those who are less fortunate than you are.

And you will notice that you have a greater desire to keep yourself morally clean before God. None of this will happen by accident. It will take, first of all, a desire on your part to purposefully cooperate with God in that metamorphosis.

We will have to make some changes in our lives so we have the time to spend alone with God and allow His Word to penetrate our soft, pliable hearts.

Let me just read you an illustration in closing.

[26]

“A little child sits enraptured, watching [her] mother play the piano. The music is thrilling. As her fingers fly over the keys, [she] recognizes simple melodies and then listens with amazement as she embellishes them with harmony and chords until there is only a hint of their original simplicity.

“The child finally crawls up on the bench next to [her] mother and waits for her to stop. [She] wants a turn. Expecting to produce what [she] heard Mother play, [she] moves [her] fingers over the keys in imitation. The chaos of the sound is pure freedom, unbound by such things as a coherent tune, order, or music theory. For a moment it is fun to make noise, but noise gets dreary. ‘When can I play like you mommy?’ [she] asks.

‘After a while,’ she answers, remembering all those boring lessons and the endless drills and scales. Then she smiles as she remembers those glorious days when, having somehow internalized all those lessons, she suddenly realized she was actually, wonderfully, freely playing the piano. The freedom to play only came through learning and practicing the law of the piano.”¹

That’s how it is with God’s word and our maturity. It takes discipline, practice, and hard work. It takes cooperating with and obeying the master. But, the result is the pure freedom to be who God created us to be.

¹ Life Application Bible Commentary, pg. 36

Proverbs About Listening

Proverbs 8:33–36 (NLT)

³³ Listen to my instruction and be wise. Don't ignore it. ³⁴ Joyful are those who listen to me, watching for me daily at my gates, waiting for me outside my home! ³⁵ For whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the Lord.

Proverbs 10:8 (NLT)

⁸ The wise are glad to be instructed, but babbling fools fall flat on their faces.

Proverbs 10:19 (NLT)

¹⁹ Too much talk leads to sin. Be sensible and keep your mouth shut.

Proverbs 11:12 (NLT)

¹² It is foolish to belittle one's neighbor; a sensible person keeps quiet.

Proverbs 11:13 (NLT)

¹³ A gossip goes around telling secrets, but those who are trustworthy can keep a confidence.

Proverbs 12:15 (NLT)

¹⁵ Fools think their own way is right, but the wise listen to others.

Proverbs 12:16 (NLT)

¹⁶ A fool is quick-tempered, but a wise person stays calm when insulted.

Proverbs 13:3 (NLT)

³ Those who control their tongue will have a long life; opening your mouth can ruin everything.

Proverbs 15:1 (NLT)

¹ A gentle answer deflects anger, but harsh words make tempers flare.

Proverbs 15:2 (NLT)

² The tongue of the wise makes knowledge appealing, but the mouth of a fool belches out foolishness.

Proverbs 15:28 (NLT)

28 The heart of the godly thinks carefully before speaking; the mouth of the wicked overflows with evil words.

Proverbs 15:31 (NLT)

31 If you listen to constructive criticism, you will be at home among the wise.

Proverbs 17:27 (NLT)

27 A truly wise person uses few words; a person with understanding is even-tempered.

Proverbs 17:28 (NLT)

28 Even fools are thought wise when they keep silent; with their mouths shut, they seem intelligent.

Proverbs 18:7 (NLT)

7 The mouths of fools are their ruin; they trap themselves with their lips.

Proverbs 18:21 (NLT)

21 The tongue can bring death or life; those who love to talk will reap the consequences.

Proverbs 20:5 (NLT)

5 Though good advice lies deep within the heart, a person with understanding will draw it out.

Proverbs 20:19 (NLT)

19 A gossip goes around telling secrets, so don't hang around with chatterers.

Proverbs 21:23 (NLT)

23 Watch your tongue and keep your mouth shut, and you will stay out of trouble.

Proverbs 29:20 (NLT)

20 There is more hope for a fool than for someone who speaks without thinking.

Philippians 2:4 (NLT)

4 Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.



Quick to Listen, Slow to Speak
James 1:19-27
Week of October 11th, 2015

Objective of this study: To learn to listen to others and God.

[Remember, the main goal of each Growth Group is to allow God's Word to change your heart so that others would see Jesus in you and be likewise changed to be like him. He wants to change the world through us]

Worship (5 – 10 minutes)

1. Spend five minutes in silence asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
2. After the five minutes have someone interrupt the silence and read Psalm 37:1-9 [in a contemporary translation] meditatively to the group. Pause after each phrase letting God speak to you.
3. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Welcome (5 – 10 minutes)

How do you feel about digging into this topic?

Word/Work (60-90 minutes)

1. What stood out from the sermon?
2. Read James 1:19-27
 1. What in this passage goes against what comes naturally?
 2. How does James say we deceive ourselves? (look at the passage)

Sermon Quote: “In a healthy conversation there is a purposeful, active listener who attempts to understand the heart of the one talking.”

3. Read the above Proverbs. Which ones twig with you and why?
4. Describe active listening.
5. What do you need to be purposeful about doing, and not doing, in regards to active listening? See page 2 of the sermon for ideas.

Sermon Quote: “If we are going to grow in the fruit of the Spirit we need to get quiet and allow Jesus to speak to us. Somehow we have to quiet all the noise in our brains, and that will not happen unless we purposefully get quiet and actively listen to God.”

6. What are some distractions you will need to be purposeful about avoiding if you are going to be successful at actively listening to God and people?
7. What can you do this week to cultivate active listening with both God and people?

8. Let's Practice

Break up into pairs and have one person ask the other one of these questions: "What's one thing you feel God has been trying to teach you lately?" Or "What's something that is important to you right now?" Or "What's one thing that's hard for you right now?"

The person asking the question will listen and then ask one or two more clarifying questions to gain understanding. Remember not to give advice, diagnose, label, or interrupt. Resist the temptation to tell how it relates to you. It is not your story. It's the other person's.

"Be purposeful about really trying to gain an understanding of the other person's heart."

After about five minutes switch sides.

Regroup and share your experience. Did you find it easy to ask clarifying questions to gain understanding of the other person's heart?