

Listen and Learn
James 1:17-21
September 10, 2006

Two men were talking over coffee one day. One said, "I'm concerned about my wife. She talks to herself a lot these days." The other said, "Mine does too, but she doesn't know it. She thinks I'm listening."

He may have been the husband absorbed in his newspaper whose wife said, "You needn't bother saying 'uh-huh' anymore. I stopped talking ten minutes ago."

Listening is among the manners of civil society that is in short supply. A lack of listening is not a recent development; we've had trouble doing it from the beginning of time. How many of us have had our parents say, "God gave you two ears and only one mouth so that you would listen twice as much as you talk!"

James writes, "be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger." Wise words, but difficult to put into practice. Frequently we do the exact opposite of James' counsel: we are slow to listen, quick to speak, and quick to anger. We listen only long enough to discover the other party's issue so that we can prepare our rebuttal to prove them wrong. Our defenses rise quickly when we feel threatened or attacked. We have a limited tolerance for those who differ from us or who do not understand things the way we do. Our threshold for patient listening is low. We react impulsively to correct and explain. We stop listening at a certain point and begin preparing for battle, waiting for a chance to seize control of the conversation by reclaiming the role of speaker.

The precocious Calvin of the "Calvin and Hobbes" comic strip typifies this in a conversation with Hobbes, his mild-mannered tiger. "When a person pauses mid-sentence to choose a word, that's the best time to jump in and change the subject!" said Calvin excitedly. "It's like an interception in football! You grab the other guy's idea and run the opposite way with it. The more sentences you complete, the higher you score. The idea is to block the other guy's thoughts and express your own. That's how you win!"

Hobbes observes, "Conversations aren't contests."

"OK. A point for you," says Calvin with a frown. "But I'm still ahead."¹

Conversations aren't contests, but too frequently that's exactly what we make of them. We seek to win and make the others lose. It's helpful to think of the difference in styles of communication.

The word *discussion* has the same root as the words percussion and concussion. It literally means using force to make a point. People say things like, "We ought to knock some sense into that guy." People seem to think that if they just say something louder or more often, the opposition will be convinced. Forcefulness, however, is usually met with equal or more force – verbally or physically. It fosters unhealthy power plays.

Another form of communication is debate. It has ground rules that encourage an adversarial encounter. In a debate we focus on the positive side of our own position and the negative side of our opponent's position. We don't even seek to find the negative in our own stance or the positive in the other person's view. A debate is set up to be a win-lose situation.²

A third style of communication is dialogue. "For the Greeks, dialogue meant a free flow of meaning through a group, allowing the group to discover insights not attainable individually."³ Dialogue is entering into conversation with one another not only to state our perspective, needs, and views, but to genuinely hear other's perspectives, needs, and views, and to be open to the creative spirit – the "logos," the Word of God, that may enter into our understanding as we dialogue.

Dialogue encourages us to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. It encourages us to temporarily park our own preferences and set aside our prejudices in order to experience another person's world from the inside, to step into his/her shoes. When we really stop to listen and take an interest in what motivates someone else, we learn more about them, their experience, and their position.

Listening is time consuming and it takes effort. It also involves taking the risk of stepping out of ourselves, our comfort zone, to really hear another perspective. But if we truly listen to one another, we can grow in our understanding and appreciation of each another. We can reduce the amount of conflict in our relationships and in our society if we genuinely listen to one another. The act of listening itself communicates to someone that they are valued as human beings. In the end, we still may agree to disagree, but the process of dialogue is likely to help us understand and appreciate one another more.

Listening to and learning about one another fosters healthy and rich relationships.

In addition to listening to one another, James encourages us to listen to the word of God. He writes, “Welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.” Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* translates that verse like this: “In simple humility, let our gardener, God, landscape you with the Word, making a salvation-garden of your life.”

I like that image of being landscaped with the Word of God. Imagine ourselves, our lives, as gardens, plots of soil open to being planted with words from the Lord. The quality we need in order to cultivate and hear God’s word is meekness or humility, just like the humus of the soil. To be humble is to have a teachable spirit. It is to be flexible and pliable, open to learning. It requires openness to being changed. It means that we may have to admit that our perspective has been wrong. As Paul says in his letter on love, “Love does not insist on its own way” (I Corinthians 13:5b).

Opening our lives to the Word of God invites a third party into our dialogues. God can offer wisdom not thought of before. God can bring a fresh perspective that open new pathways for partners in dialogue. God can save broken relationships when we allow God’s Word, not our words, to be the guiding force in our conversations.

In the fourth century, some Christians sought spiritual direction from desert mothers and fathers who lived an ascetic life in the desert. “A disciple who desired to learn would ask a wise elder for a word. This word was a dynamic and unique gift from master to disciple. Meant for the seeker alone, the word served as a sort of desert koan on which to reflect or chew. It was not to be analyzed but taken into the heart, digested, and lived. The wise ones knew from experience the tricky labyrinth of the human heart and knew the word for a given disciple that could illumine the path to greater understanding and fuller faith.”⁴

Sometimes all we need is to listen to one word from the Lord. Sunday and Monday mornings in our congregation small groups of people gather to listen to the Word of God. We follow a process called PRAY, which is an acronym for Passage, Reflect, Apply, and Yes. We read a Passage of scripture, Reflect on its context, Apply it to our lives, and say Yes to God in prayer. We select a verse or phrase or word from each chapter of scripture that speaks to us individually. We pray that word, chew on it, and let it resonate in our being through the day or week. This past week we began reading the Gospel of John and the prophet Hosea. A verse that struck me from Hosea says that God will “make the Valley of Trouble a door of hope” (2:15b). The image of the valley of trouble seems so appropriate to many of the circumstances we find our world in from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast to Baghdad to Darfur to Palestine, Israel, and Lebanon, to Ground

Zero. We often feel overwhelmed by so many valleys of trouble in our world. And we also have our personal valleys of trouble: illnesses, disabilities, concern for children, concern for our parents, difficult relationships, economic pressures. You can name your own valley of trouble. But the word of the Lord is that God will “make the valley of trouble a door of hope.” In the midst of destruction, God will open a door of hope. In the face of disaster, God will provide a way through. When the waters threaten to drown us, God will not let us drown. In the valley of trouble, whatever kind of trouble it is, God is there with us. God is acting to bring us up out of trouble to higher ground. God is working to raise us up out of despair and lead us to hope.

When we listen to the word of God, we find the power to save our souls. We are not alone.

Our lives will be richer, our relationships healthier, and our faith deeper if we heed James’ advice: be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. When we are humble and teachable, we listen for the word of God, that our spirits might be landscaped with the words of faith.

There is a writer who has some fame as a biographer. Her name is Jan Ardmore. She also writes novels. One of her novels is titled, *To Love is to Listen*. It’s too bad that is not the title of a biography, of everyone’s biography. Our world would be safer and holier if we all understood that listening is part of loving.⁵

¹ Quoted by Joseph Phelps, *More Light, Less Heat: How Dialogue Can Transform Christian Conflicts into Growth* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), pp. 87-88.

² Terry E. Foland, Alban Institute Consultant, "Concept of Dialogue," unpublished notes.

³ Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), p. 10.

⁴ Wendy M. Wright, "Desert Listening," *Weavings*, May/June 1994, p. 12.

⁵ Thanks to Rev. Robert Moon.

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