

Listen More Speak Less

James 1:19-21

Intro

Did you know that good listeners make good company? That good listeners make good friends. And that good listeners make good learners. Also good listeners make good teachers and good counselors. On the other hand, poor listeners who only want to hear themselves talk and even while forced to listen are only thinking what they're going to say as soon as you take a breath. Learning how to listen is important. It determines a lot about our relationships with others. Far more important, however, than how we listen to others is how we listen to the Lord. How good are we at listening to God? What kind of listeners are we?

This is what James writes about in this passage. Let's look at it.

James 1:19

"My dear brothers and sisters..."

As James writes this verse he shows a deep concern and genuine love for those he is teaching and counselling. In this verse James gives 3 important commands for the brother and sister who is willing to receive God's Word with submissiveness and obedience.

The first command James gives is:

1/ *"Everyone should be quick to listen"*

Verse 19 is a marvelous transition from verse 18. What James is saying is that since you have experienced the power of the Word of God to make you a new creation, the idea is you've got to let it continue to do its powerful work in your life. That's the transition that he makes. James is placing emphasis on listening to God's truth, His Word. He wants the believers of his letter to pay close attention to God's truth and to receive and obey it.

Listening was very important in the first century, books were rare and paper wasn't used until after the eighth century. Also the printing press wasn't invented until 1455. Back in the first century it was an oral culture, and those not disciplined in listening ran the risk of missing out on spiritual truth. In urging us to be good listeners James is saying that we need to soak up truth and to be teachable. Very closely related to being a good listener is the second prerequisite: a controlled mouth. Jesus not only said, *"Take heed what you hear"* (Mark 4:24), but He also said, *"Take heed how you hear"* (Luke 8:18).

Too many people are in that sad condition in which Jesus spoke, *"though hearing, they do not hear or understand"* (Matt. 13:13). They may attend church services and Bible studies but never seem to grow. Is it the fault of the preacher or teacher? Perhaps, but it often may be the fault of the hearer. It is possible to be *"dull of hearing"* (Heb. 5:11) because of spiritual apathy and of living in sin that hardens the heart.

If the seed of the Word is to be planted in our hearts, then we must take the instruction of James to heart. Jesus often said, *"Whoever has ears, let him hear!"* (Matthew 13:9). Also in Romans 10:17, *"So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God."* Just as the servant is quick to hear his master's voice and the mother to hear her baby's smallest cry, so the believer should be quick to hear what God has to say.

To hear suggests that there was public reading of the Scriptures as well as oral instruction in the early church. We need to listen carefully to make sure we get the message correct.

To be quick to hear God's Word implies an attitude of eagerness to take in the Word from every angle. As a believer, you should desire to read the Word, to listen to biblical preaching of the Word, to memorize Scripture, and to understand its teaching with a view to obedience.

In the Psalms we read of David's delight and eagerness for God's word. In Psalm 19:10, David said regarding God's Words, *"They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb."*

The apostle Peter says *"Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation..."* (1 Peter 2:2). That verse became very vivid to me when my son was anew born baby. I made the mistake of getting him in the middle of the night and holding him close to me with my undershirt off. To him, any nipple looked like the source of milk, so he latched onto me! I never made that mistake again!

Evaluate your heart for God's word. Do you delight in it? Do you long for it and pour over it with an intense hunger? What is your attitude when you go to hear the Word of God preached and proclaimed? Are you focused? Are you eager to receive the Word of God?

The second command James gives is:

2/ "slow to speak..."

You cannot listen carefully while you are talking, or even while you are thinking about what you want to say. Many discussions are fruitless for the simple reason that people are paying more attention to what they want to say than to what others are saying.

In this context, therefore, it seems that slow to speak includes the idea of being careful not to be thinking about one's own thoughts and ideas while someone else is trying to teach God's Word. We cannot hear God's Word when our minds are on our own thoughts. We need to be slow to speak and silent to listen carefully.

The primary idea here, however, is that, when the appropriate time to speak does come, what is said should be carefully thought out too. When we speak for the Lord, we should have the gravest concern that what we say not only is true but is spoken in a way that both exhorts those who hear and honours the Lord in whose behalf we speak. We should pursue every opportunity to read the Word ourselves, to hear it preached and taught, and to discuss it with other believers who love, honour, and seek to obey it.

At the same time, we should be cautious and careful when we have opportunity to preach, teach, or explain it to others. It is most likely for that reason that James later warns, *"Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment"* (James 3:1).

3/ "slow to become angry."

The third command James says is to be slow to anger. The word used here, *"orge,"* speaks of a deep resentment. It's not explosive outward outbursts, that's *"thumos,"* that's like a fit of rage. What James means is a smoldering resentment, something underneath the surface, and a deep seated rejection of what is heard from the Word of God.

You are to be eager to listen, and be very cautious before you speak the Word and thirdly, when you hear something from the Word, don't build up inside of yourself a resentment to it because it doesn't agree with what you thought, or because it confronts your sin.

That's the issue here. James is talking about your **reaction** to the Word. It refers to an attitude of rejection. The context here is hearing the Word, teaching the Word, so it implies anger against those who teach the Word or confront you with the Word.

We are to be slow to become angry at God or His Word, for as Solomon wisely stated, *"He who is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who is quick-tempered exalts folly"* (Prov. 14:29). James warns us against getting angry at God's Word because it reveals our sins to us. Like the man who broke the mirror because he disliked the image in it, people rebel against God's Word because it tells the truth about them and their sinfulness.

In the assembly of people to which James is writing there was a lot of murmurings, hostility and people fighting and speaking evil of each other. Look at what James says in James 4:1, *"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?"* Wow! That was some church. *"You fight, you war."* What kind of church is this and why was it going on? Because they were pitted against each other. Everybody wanted to be heard. Everybody had his view. Everybody had his opinion. And there was anger and there was hostility and bitter attitudes were flying around in that church and James says you're not to be that way. Be very, very slow to ever have an angry resentment.

James' emphasis here seems to be on those who hear the truth and resent it exposing their personal false ideas or ungodly lifestyles. Throughout the history of the church—in fact, throughout the history of fallen humanity—even believers have resented God's truth and the messenger who brought it. Be careful not to resent the Word of God when it confronts you.

James 1:20 *"because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires."*

In this verse James gives the reason that we should be slow to anger, *"for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God."* If you want to grow in righteousness, stop your angry resentment against God's word and submit to it.

Human anger never practices the things that God approves. The verb can also mean that a person's anger never produces or brings about the righteousness that is God approved. Whenever a person gives way to anger, they never further the righteousness they are striving for. Anger blocks a believer's goal of fostering righteousness. Human anger is not an appropriate means for the production of righteousness, even if it professes a conscientious endeavor toward that end. It does not produce the desired righteousness in self or in others. The history of Christendom is replete with examples of this fact.

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 key word in this passage is *"accept."* James is talking about how you accept the Word. That's the issue. And if you are a true believer there is an acceptance and receptivity of God's Word. True saving faith is marked by a desire for a proper reception of the Word.

The word "*filthy*," is a fascinating word, "*rhuparia*." The root word of "*rhuparia*" is "*rupos*." What is interesting is that "*rupos*" refers to wax in the ear. What he is saying is get rid of any dirty wax in your ear that keeps you from hearing the Word of God. It's a very vivid concept. Basically James is saying don't let an accumulation of evil wax block your hearing so that you will be able to hear the Word of God with purity and get rid of every kind of evil and filthiness. If you do this then you can hear the Word of God with the right kind of ears and accept its correction.

In 1 Thessalonians 2: Paul says, "*And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.*" You heard it, you listened. It changed your life. You obeyed because your ears were clean and receptive.

This whole passage of James 1:19-21 then is a call to accept the Word of God in a right way. How are we to listen? We are to listen with a submissive heart, with a pure heart and humble heart. When we do that we demonstrate that we are true believers who not only hear the Word but practice it. Those who are truly the Lord's in the middle of trials, in the middle of temptations, are listening and listening carefully for His Word, they are receiving it willingly, submissively, humbly with a pure heart.

Conclusion

My maternal grandfather, John Sousa was raised in an oral culture because he couldn't read or write in Portuguese. He loved to recount stories and anecdotes. He was a great listener and he had a good memory especially when he listened to sermons or messages from the Bible. He also memorized Bible verses and passages as some of his family would read to him. He would sit in church on Sundays and pay close attention to every word the pastor would preach about.

As a farmer he would be working in the field and he would recount the messages and Bible verses. One time as he was working side by side with my paternal grandfather, he witnessed to him. As a result my paternal grandfather, Antonio Amorim, came to faith in Christ.

My grandfather John was one who listened carefully to the Word of God with a humble heart. It changed his life and in the end it bore much fruit in his life – to the glory of God.

James is exhorting us to listen ever so carefully to the Word of God and to put it into practice. The next message following this passage that James deals with is not only hearing the Word but doing it. That's the next passage, James 1:22-27. Practice what the Word teaches. Demonstrate it in your everyday life.