

New Year, New You
March 31, 2019
“Stop Talking While I’m Interrupting”
Text: James 1:19-20, 3:9-12
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I am often amazed at God’s creation. This weekend has been a perfect example. Out yesterday with flowers beginning to come up, trees early budding and the birds chirping. Amazing. And at the top of the list is the way that he made us. He created us “in His image” and there are similarities in each of us. Our arms and hands, legs & feet, brains, hearts - the list goes on and on.

And yet, he also made each one of us a little different from the other. Even identical twins are different – physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Those similarities and differences are even evident in the subsets of humankind. Race, religion, nationality and gender. Men and women have similarities, but there are also differences individually and as a group. One of those differences is in the way that we communicate.

I came across an old list recently. We always hear "the rules" from the female side. Now here are the rules from the male side. I’m not going to list them all (although I would be happy to provide you with the complete list). The ones I am going to share here relate to communication.

These are the MEN’S rules:

‘Yes’ and ‘No’ are perfectly acceptable answers to almost every question

Whenever possible, please say whatever you have to say during commercials.

Ask for what you want. Let us be clear on this one:

- * Subtle hints do not work!
- * Strong hints do not work!
- * Obvious hints do not work!
- * JUST SAY IT!

If we ask what is wrong and you say "nothing," we will act like nothing’s wrong. We know you are lying, but it is just not worth the hassle.

Come to us with a problem only if you want help solving it. That’s what we do. Sympathy is what your girlfriends are for.

VIDEO - “It’s not about the nail”

I have been, and still am sometimes, guilty of this. This month marked my 32nd anniversary of marriage to Michelle. It wasn’t until very recently that I realized something important. When Michelle comes home at night and complains about a difficult day: she is not looking for me to fix the problem. I’m not there – I don’t know all of the details – and she and I look differently at things any way. She is really looking to me for support.

Now in truth, this is a bit of a stereotype. Yes, men have a reputation for doing this; but in practice we all tend to try to fix what's wrong – male & female. We do it with our friends, we do it with our partners and we do it with our children.

James writes:

¹⁹ My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, ²⁰ because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

James 1:19-20 (NIV)

James is writing to new believers in order to head off some bad habits already being formed. Bad habits that we are guilty of on a regular basis. Let's face it; most of us probably lean towards the exact opposite. We tend to be slow to listen and quick to speak. His instructions to be "quick to listen and slow to speak" is probably meaning that we should listen first, talk second.

Why does James think that is so important? Well how can we understand what somebody is saying if we don't take the time to listen? And I mean really listen, not just hear noise.

The definition of listen is to pay attention to sound; to hear something with thoughtful attention; to be alert to catch an expected sound

If we don't listen, then we can't understand the problem, or the situation. If we don't understand the situation, then we can't know what is needed. And if we don't know what is needed, then how can we help, or serve? But it is also not just about helping, fixing and serving. Being a better communicator/listener is how we build relationships with each other. When Michelle and I first started dating we'd stay up for hours just talking and learning about each other. Sometimes as you stay together for a while you forget that, and maybe begin taking your partner for granted. One of the most important things I got out of the Alpha Marriage course a number of years ago was the lesson of renewing your communication.

And the same goes in our relationship with God. If we don't communicate regularly with him, listening and talking, the relationship won't grow.

Why do we have such a hard time at that? What is so difficult about listening? Here are a few thoughts.

Lack of Interest – It is hard to really listen to somebody if you are not interested in what they are saying. Back when I used to watch football, there would often be a time during the game where I would say something like, "They just need a couple of more yards for a first down." Michelle would then ask me to explain what the downs meant. "Each team gets four attempts to move the ball ten yards. If they move the ball ten yards, then they get another four tries to move the ball ten more yards." I'd recognize that I lost her before the first sentence was complete. It's not that it was a very difficult concept to grasp. She certainly was more than smart enough to understand. She really just didn't care that much.

We have our own problems – It is difficult to truly listen to somebody else when you are struggling with your own issues. Your mind is focused on your own problem making it a challenge to truly listen and understand someone else's issues.

<big-bang-theory video>

Ever had that kind of conversation? It is difficult to give empathy when you have your own struggles to deal with. Of course at least Leonard is trying. Sheldon: not so much.

We like to talk - Maybe it's something as simple as wanting to help out, to "fix" the problem. We're so focused on fixing the problem we might not hear what they actually need. Other times we just want to share our own stories, tell our own tales. After all; who wouldn't want to hear what I have to say? But talking interferes with listening. Is there anybody else that instead of listening spends their time thinking of your response? Besides me? It's hard to listen to somebody when you are preparing your talking points. There is a fourth one that may be the most common.

We don't know how - We don't practice it enough.

- Pay attention. I'm talking about really listening – not just hearing. Listen to what the other person is saying, how they are saying it and also looking for hidden meanings. Concentrate on what is being said, not on how you'd like to respond.
- Ask questions – Now I know this involves talking. But it is a kind of talking that focuses on what the other person is saying. Asking for clarification and details.
- Determine the proper response – If you've paid attention and asked the questions then hopefully you have a better understanding and can give the correct response for the situation. It might be that a sympathetic ear is just the response that is needed. There will be times when you are being asked to provide feedback, ideas and even recommendations. And sometimes, while they think they are asking for us to just listen, we have to tell them to take that nail out of their forehead, because actually that **is** what they need!

On the other hand, talking is an important part of communication. Do you know what you call a conversation between two great listeners? Silence.

James does not say that we should not speak. He writes that we should be "slow to speak." He also goes into more detail about our talking; about what comes out of our mouths. And he makes it clear that he is talking about more than just listening better.

³When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. ⁴Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. ⁵Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. ⁶The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

James 3:3-6 (NIV)

Sounds a tad overstated, doesn't it? But it isn't. The old schoolyard phrase of "sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me," is true in a physical sense. But they can hurt our feelings as well as hurt our reputations among others. Small comments, a little dig, an insult, a lie, slander – all of these can be very painful.

⁷ All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, ⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

James 3:7-8 (NIV)

We might be able to train our tongue, but we never really tame it. Oh we try, but usually fail. So we hold it in – until we explode in anger. We resort to sarcasm, a long time staple for me. We lash out and hurt people – often times the ones we love.

⁹ With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. ¹¹ Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? ¹² My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

James 3:9-12 (NIV)

We come to church every Sunday singing praises, crying for prayer and listening to your Word. We leave after our hour and can become unrecognizable as soon as we leave these walls. I remember a time a number of years ago at a growth group session. We had an active and deep discussion. When the study was over and we were sitting around after, I noticed that the conversation was turning and we were talking about another person from Woodside. It started out innocent enough, but I soon realized that the talk was shifting. It was beginning to sound suspiciously like gossip – a form of communication that God frowns upon. And to make it worse the Bible study we had just finished was on gossip. Unsure how it would be taken, I finally had to say something. Fortunately the group recognized how hypocritical we were being and we stopped. How simply we can stray.

James has solid support from the Old Testament on his writing. It is written in Proverbs

¹⁶ There are six things the Lord hates,
seven that are detestable to him:

- ¹⁷ haughty eyes,
 a lying tongue,
 hands that shed innocent blood,
¹⁸ a heart that devises wicked schemes,
 feet that are quick to rush into evil,
¹⁹ a false witness who pours out lies
 and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.

Proverbs 6:16-19 (NIV)

I find it very telling that of the seven things that are detestable to God, three of them - a lying tongue, a false witness who pours out lies and a person who stirs up conflict in the community – come from our tongues. Murder, hands that shed innocent blood, is only mentioned once. Why is that? Does He deem it worse, or is it just more common. Due to my time in prison ministry, I am probably one of the few in this room that can state with confidence that I have spoken with multiple people that have taken another person's life. Yet I'll bet that each of us in this room is personally guilty of performing one of these deeds in our lives.

So how do we address those issues? How can we at least contain our tongue, if we can't actually tame it? I think that earlier James passage is a perfect guide.

We should be

- Quick to listen – Train yourself to be a better listener. Pay attention and understand what is said
- Slow to speak – we don't need to instantly respond to everything that is said, or written. Think about what you want to say. Consider the implications of your words. And before you speak, think once more. In today's terms: Don't hit "send" until you re-read what you wrote – twice!
- Slow to become angry – notice that James doesn't say, "don't become angry." There are times when anger is a justified reaction. The important thing is that you control your anger. Don't let your anger control you.
- And in all things - listening and speaking – Do it with love. Understand that you do have the ability to cause harm to others and that is no way to go through life.

¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

Ephesians 4:14-15 (NIV)

Most of my life I have been a poor listener. I would be thinking of a response rather than concentrating on what people were saying. I don't think I was a "tale topper" but I often had to share my own story about the same subject. I hope that my time here, and in ministry, has changed me. I have spoken with people who were sharing their concern about the "friend" that they had – and realized that the "friend" was actually standing right in front of me. I have talked with a mother who was a wreck due to her son's addiction issues. Listening to what she was actually saying and understanding that she doesn't just want my prayers – as powerful as that might be. No; she was looking for help, some resources, some advice, some love. There is no reason we all can't learn to do the same.