

Speak well.

Listen well.

Love well.

Listen well—

The art of hearing like Jesus.

James 1.19

In a world inundated with words and connectivity, key research since the pandemic reveals—

- ▶ 80% of young people under the age of 18 report feeling lonely,
- ▶ 54% of Americans say they feel unheard and unknown,
- ▶ 44% of young adults feel as if they do not matter to anyone,
- ▶ 66% of Americans believe people are worse listeners than in the past,
- ▶ 40% of those feeling excluded in their local community feel “no one really listens” to them.

Sociologists refer to “always on consumption” and “continuous partial attention”—a state where our attention is perpetually divided between multiple streams of input. This shows up in numerous everyday ways: our earbuds in our ears while someone is talking to us, looking at our phones in our hands while in conversation with another person. Consequently, we never *really* listen.

In a survey of over 650 employers by the School of Business at Duke University, 55 % of them highlighted listening skills as one of the most difficult qualities to find in job candidates.

The 80/20 listening rule is a communication strategy where one spends 80% of the time listening and only 20% speaking, particularly in sales, leadership, or negotiations. The more a sales rep talks, the lower the conversion or sales rate. Listening literally pays off.

“God gave us mouths that close
and ears that don’t . . .
that should tell us something.”

Eugene O’Neill

Job 2.10b-13
James 3

Tongue Theology—

The 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. . . . no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. (James 3.6, 8)

From Solomon to Jesus to James, the writers of Scripture warn us to use words judiciously. James reminds his readers that all kinds of animals have been tamed but no one has found a way to tame the tongue—it is a wildfire, a deadly poison, and a restless evil.

We love to talk, air our own opinion, make sure our perspective is heard. But take careful note of what James says about the tongue—

- ▶ it is a world of evil among the parts of the body,
- ▶ it sets the whole course of one's life on fire,
- ▶ it is a restless evil,
- ▶ it is full of deadly poison,
- ▶ and most damning of all, it is itself set on fire by hell.

So egregious is the tongue that James says nothing positive about it. And yet, we are literally in love with our own tongues.

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.

James 1.26

Words carry weight—the power of life and death is in the tongue. In addressing our words, James warns of both self-deception (1.26) and inner duplicity—

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? 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)

From God's perspective, nothing has greater impact than our words—thus the warning of Jesus that our words should be regulated because we will be accountable in eternity for what we have said (Matthew 5.37; 12.36-37).

But the issue is not simply the words I use, but the heart and spirit from which my words originate. The teaching of Scripture is that only by becoming more like Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit can I speak words that are life-giving and worthwhile.

Two sides of the same coin—

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. (James 1.19)

The issue is not just speaking less, it is speaking well. And speaking well does not happen without listening well—a skill that is immensely Christlike but mastered by few of us. While sociologists tell us that we have a “listening crisis” in contemporary culture, Scripture tells us that both speaking and listening are deeply spiritual issues.

Human instinct, corrupted from that first moment of sin in the Garden of Eden, is to be—

- ▶ quick to speak,
- ▶ quick to react,
- ▶ slow to listen.

At its heart, this is a spiritual issue—a deformity of the image of God. Both the OT and the NT emphasize that speaking well and listening well are matters of **spiritual formation**, and particularly, the evidence of Godlike wisdom and Christlike humility.

Sin is not ended by multiplying words,
but the prudent hold their tongues.

Proverbs 10.19

The reality is that when others are speaking, we are not listening. Because we carry an inherent disunity in our psyche (think back again to the Garden of Eden), communication is corrupted because we are —

- ▶ thinking about our response,
- ▶ putting up our defenses,
- ▶ forming judgments,
- ▶ trying to fix,
- ▶ reacting emotionally.

The truth is that most of our listening is not to understand but to respond—and according to Scripture, that intent is rooted in a lack of humility and godly wisdom.

To answer before listening—
that is folly and shame. (Proverbs 18.13)

Foolishness is not only saying the wrong thing; it is also deciding what you think before someone has finished talking.

What is our first instinct when someone shares with us a problem or issue they are experiencing? It is not to listen *more* but to give a “fix it” answer.

- ▶ “I know just what you mean; the same thing happened to me.”
- ▶ “The best thing you can do is . . .”

Or, to be spiritual, we say something like—

- ▶ “Just remember, God has a reason. It will work out.”

The reality is that we have been slow to listen and quick to speak. In our arrogance, we often make immediate conclusions about someone's life issue without listening well.

And yet, invariably, we think that we have spoken appropriately—that *our* opinion was exactly what *they* needed to hear and act on.

The truth is, that unless our listening was greater than our speaking, our words were worthless, foolish, and damaging.

The words of the reckless pierce like swords,
but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (Proverbs 12.18)

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. (James 3.17)

If we have spoken well, the other person will experience grace, peace and healing; they will feel loved and strengthened (Ephesians 4.29); if they do not, then we have not listened well.

Gracious words are a honeycomb,
sweet to the soul and healing to the bones. (Proverbs 16.24)

The measure is not, did we feel wise and sound good in our own ears about what we said, but how did our words affect the other person? Rarely, if ever, do we take that greater aspect into consideration—asking the other person if our words felt like grace and brought healing to their soul. A deeper spiritual issue is: would we even be humble enough to accept their honest answer?

Slow to speak—

The heart of the righteous weighs its answers,
but the mouth of the wicked gushes evil. (Proverbs 18.13)

“Quick to listen” requires space and time; if we are quick to reply, it shows that we have not taken time to really listen. We should never reply with the first thought that occurs to us. Not everything requires a response, not everything incorrect requires correction, and not everything shared with us requires our opinion. The discipline of slow to speak gives us space to weigh our answers.

Slow to become angry—

A gentle answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger. (Proverbs 15.1)

Why does James include this instruction? It would seem enough to say quick to listen, slow to speak. Behind the Holy Spirit- inspired admonition to be “slow to become angry” is the understanding of the Creator who has complete insight into how we as human beings function biologically and neurologically.

When we feel under attack, the brain's alarm and emotional response system (the amygdala) quickly reacts. It's our "always on" instant self-preservation mode—exactly what we need if an out-of-control car—or a bear—is coming toward us! When we feel threatened, stressed, rejected, embarrassed, or overwhelmed, the amygdala triggers a rapid emotional reaction — fight, flight, freeze.

However, in our communication with others, quick reactions invariably lead to misunderstanding—the tongue is corrupted by sin and, by default, prone to pride, criticism, and judgment. The part of our brain responsible for empathy, self-control, and reasoning (the prefrontal cortex) is slower to engage, but it is the part responsible for healthy, gracious, and healing communication. When our emotions aren't regulated, we will sound sharp, condescending, overbearing—emotions that provoke. We will curse instead of bless, wound instead of heal. A tongue slow to speak reveals a spirit that is under control.

Listening like Jesus—

Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.”

So they called to the blind man, “Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.”

Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked him. (Mark 10.49-51)

The encounter of Jesus and Bartimaeus is much more than the account of healing a blind man; in the details, Jesus presents to us a masterclass in listening well.

Jesus, with his disciples and a large crowd, are leaving Jericho. Outside the city, by the roadside, is a blind beggar named Bartimaeus. When He hears that Jesus is approaching, he begins to cry out for his attention. Many rebuked him, telling him to be quiet; Bartimaeus, however, shouted all the more for Jesus' attention. Jesus stopped and ordered that Bartimaeus be brought to him. When he came to Jesus, he asked the blind man, "What do you want me to do for you?"

- ▶ In a large noisy crowd, Jesus is moving slow enough to be aware of the shouts of a single man.
- ▶ Jesus is interruptible—despite being on a schedule.
- ▶ Jesus is available—for an insignificant individual.
- ▶ Jesus is attentive, considering Bartimaeus worthy of his full attention and concern.

In his masterclass on listening well, Jesus is showing us that listening is very different from hearing. Many heard Bartimaeus shouting; only Jesus gave him availability and empathy.

The art of listening well—

- ▶ Cultivate a people-first mindset and pace of life.
- ▶ Give the other person your full attention.
- ▶ Maintain a posture of humility and empathy.
- ▶ Listen to understand—“living in the viewpoint” of the other.
- ▶ Before you say something ask yourself whether *this* person really needs to hear *this* at *this* time; ask yourself: is what I am about to say fitting for this person—or is it simply my opinion and perspective and did they ask for my opinion?