

Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People
The Practice of Listening - James 1:19-21
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We're continuing our sermon series on "Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People" with both the easiest and hardest behavior to practice: listening. It's the easiest because we all have two ears, so listening doesn't take any extra time or effort on our part. But it's the hardest because to truly listen, we have to be intentional about drowning out all the others noise around us and focusing our attention on the person who is speaking. I'm not necessarily saying this applies to you right now while you listen to this sermon, but it might.

James says, "Let everyone be quick to listen and slow to speak." It sounds so simple, doesn't it? How many embarrassing situations could we have saved ourselves from by following this simple rule? I can remember many times where, even as the words are coming out of my mouth, I want to grab them and stuff them back in. But we can't un-communicate. That's why we listen first and speak next. As they say, "A closed mouth gathers no foot," and yet how often do we jump in with our words before hearing the words of others?

The biblical translation The Message says it this way: "Lead with your ears, and follow up with your tongue." That's a marriage counseling session in one sentence. Of course, our ability to lead with our ears centers on the focus of our attention. Research says people only remember 50% of what they hear immediately after hearing it. Therefore, I am going to preach this sermon twice today and pray that you'll remember 50% of it each time. If we really want to hear something, we have to be listening for it, we have to be paying attention. When I taught public speaking, we would talk about the technique of faking attention, where we nod our heads and say our "um-hums" in all the right places, but aren't really paying attention. We're faking attention. I imagine many of you are nodding your head and saying "um-hum" in agreement right now. Or are you faking it? Too many of our conversations lack the rich connectedness of a relationship because we simply don't listen. Our minds are too preoccupied.

I see this a lot, especially on social media. As more and more of our conversations have been forced to be virtual during this pandemic, we are being conditioned to listen to the other person for the purpose of formulating our response. We listen with an agenda, just waiting for our chance to interject what we have to say, which is obviously more important than what they have to say. We listen for the purpose of trying to change their mind or pointing out what's wrong with their viewpoint or fixing their problem. And when all that is going through our minds while they're speaking, are we really listening? Lead with your ears.

This way of listening on social media spills over into our face-to-face conversations, which we hopefully will be able to have again soon in more regularity. How would the nature and quality of our interactions change if we approached each one with the goal of completely and fully listening to the other person? It's hard to silence the rebuttal machine in our brains, but it's important to remember that holding your tongue doesn't count as listening. Or, as someone else put it, never miss a good opportunity to be quiet. As we interact with others, how would the nature of our relationships change if we

made a conscious effort, as Henri Nouwen put it, “to withdraw into ourselves out of humility, so that we create the space for the other person to be themselves?” When we talk, we take up a lot of space. What if we listened to others with the same intensity and effort that we usually save for talking? What would we hear that we’re currently missing? If we take the time to truly listen to someone else, we send them the message that they are important to us, that they matter to us. The greatest gift we can give to someone else is our full attention.

Of course, listening well to others is good practice for our most important listening, which is listening to God. We should take time to listen to God for the simple reason that God takes time to listen to us. The Bible is full of examples of God listening to God’s people. Psalm 66 says, “God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer.” As Jesus is about to raise Lazarus from the dead, he looks up and says, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me.” God is always listening. He says through the prophet Isaiah, “Before my people call I will answer; while they are still speaking, I will hear.”

And God call us to listen, as well. One of my favorite Psalm passages says, “Be still and know that I am God.” Sometimes when I read that I hear it as a word of comfort, but most often I hear it as an admonishment to my current behavior. “Be still! I’m trying tell you something. I’m God. You’re not. I have something to say. Be still and listen.”

Relationships grow through the give and take of communication, as we each talk and listen. God listens to us, and God has a word of comfort, a word of hope, a word of good news with which to respond. John Ortberg says that in the Bible Samuel prayed, “Speak, God, for your servant is listening,” but too often we say in prayer, “Listen, God, for your servant is speaking.”

Do we give God the space to speak to us, or is God’s voice crowded out by all the other noise? We are so good at faking attention with God, bowing our heads and saying “Amen” in all the right places, but letting other responsibilities and distractions take priority over our time with God. Our growth as a person of faith depends upon our paying attention to God, our dialogue with our Creator, our ability to listen for what God is saying to us.

So, what does it mean to listen to God? Do we hear an actual voice? I never have. I’ve never heard God say anything directly to me, and to be honest, I used to be a bit suspicious of people who claim they have. As comedian Lily Tomlin said, “Why is that when we speak to God we are said to be praying, but when God speaks to us we are said to be schizophrenic?” Who I am to say how God speaks? I believe God talks to each of us in the way we are most likely to hear, if we are listening.

God speaks to us through our prayers, through other people, through scripture. I heard God speak to me through Laura Barkhauer, who said, “You should go to seminary.” I heard God speak to me through scripture shortly after I was diagnosed with MS, when Psalm 121 promised me God would not let my foot stumble and that God would watch over me. I heard God speak to me through an email that said, “This is Wayne Shaver and I’d like to talk to you about the senior minister position at Crestwood Christian Church.” I’ve heard God speak to me through many people, but I’ve probably missed God speaking to me in thousands of other ways because I wasn’t listening. We’ll never hear God if we don’t pay attention and take the time to listen. Otherwise, our relationship with God will only develop as a monologue, not a dialogue.

To be honest, sometimes prayer feels like a monologue because we don't feel God speaking to us. God can feel awfully far away sometimes. But I wonder, during those times, if we're missing God's still, small voice because we're expecting some grand gesture? We want God to write a message in the sky when God is sending us a butterfly. I read this in a devotional recently: "But what if the voice of God – the gospel word of extravagant love and wide-open doors, the bedrock promise of tender mercy and life abundant – is not rare at all? What if God is actually communicating to us all the time, in everything from a baby's first laugh and a bird's sweet song to the chants of Black Lives Matter protestors, the agony of Covid-19 deaths, the faith of immigrants in sanctuary, the storming of the U.S. Capitol, and everything in between?"

The devotional continues, "For how long has God been calling us in the night? For how long have we been hearing voices, only to settle back into our lives and go back to sleep? What does it take to get our attention? Praise be for a still-speaking, still-calling God, a loving, persistent presence who just keeps knocking at the door, waiting for us to answer." I'm thankful for God's persistent presence in my life, a God who keeps knocking.

Lead with your ears. Be quick to listen. There is so much need around us, but I believe the greatest need people have is a need to be heard, a need to be acknowledged and accepted and validated as a valuable human being. To be able to answer that need, we first have to create a space for God's word in our lives, we have to listen to what God is saying to us. May we all put into practice this simple, profound gift, so that we can respond faithfully by saying, "Speak, God, for your servant is listening."