

Body Building: Big Ears
James 1:19-21
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I don't want to alarm anyone, but I think someone is out to get me. I knew ministry came with its challenges, but I didn't expect it could be life-threatening! My would-be adversary's name is John, and he's a coach at the gym where I work out. At least once a week, he kidnaps me for an hour and tortures me with machines like treadmills and rowers until my heart almost explodes. If I don't show up one Sunday, have John arrested.

Why do we subject ourselves to something so torturous as exercise? Because, despite how it feels when we're in the midst of it, we know exercise is good for us. I listened to a podcast this week titled, "Exercise May Be the Single Most Potent Medical Intervention Ever Known." I would put it second after chocolate donuts. We exercise because it makes us feel good, but it also has benefits for us, both internally and externally. By exercising, we are taking care of our bodies, the gift God has given us.

But what about our faith? I believe we're supposed to work on strengthening our soul just as much as our body, but we can't exactly do spirit crunches or faith burpees. And yet, strengthening our faith makes us feel good and has benefits for us and others. It's a part of becoming, by virtue of our baptism, the "new creation" Paul talks about. So, starting today, we're joining the James gym, working on our bodies to make us better followers of Christ.

James tells us that the first part of our body we need to work on is our ears. "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 are supposed to listen first and speak second. As they say, "A closed mouth gathers no foot," but how many of us are slow to listen and quick to speak?

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 goes beyond the size of our ears; it centers on the focus of our attention. Research says that, even when we're paying attention, people only remember 50% of what they hear immediately after hearing it. Therefore, I am going to preach this sermon twice during this service and pray that you'll remember 50% of it each time.

There's a difference between hearing and listening. Because we have two ears, we can hear anything, but to listen to something, 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 present. We're faking attention. I see many of you nodding your head and saying "um-hum" in agreement. Or are you faking it? Too many of our conversations lack the rich connectedness of a relationship because we simply don't lead with our ears. We're not giving the other person the gift of our attention.

I see this a lot, especially on social media. As more and more of our conversations are virtual rather than face-to-face, 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. 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, "Speaking many languages is valuable, but knowing how to be quiet in all of them is priceless." 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?"

I was speaking once to a non-profit director about how Crestwood could be good neighbors to people different than us. She lamented that a lot of churches swoop in like saviors, thinking they know what people need, but never actually take the time to learn for themselves. I asked her what her community needed most, and she said, "We need people to sit on our porches and listen to our stories." We are so quick to make judgments about people different from us. But have you listened to their stories? Are we truly listening to each other?

This has become more challenging in our world that is so divided and polarized. It seems like everybody wants to get the last word, which turns a potential conversation partner into a means to an end. Here's Nouwen again: "As soon as our intentions take over in a conversation, the question is no longer, 'Who is the other person?' but 'What can I get from them?' We no longer listen to what they are saying but to what we can do with what they are saying. Instead of paying attention to the other person we impose ourselves upon them." Here's a challenge for us to ponder this coming week: are we creating space for other people to be heard?

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." And God 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, something you'd say to a restless toddler who insists on disobeying. "Be still! I'm trying tell you something. I'm God. You're not. I have something to say. Be still and listen."

So many of us want to be closer to God, but we're not willing to slow down and prioritize our faith. 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 conversation with our Creator, our ability to listen for what God is saying to us. But too many of us participate in a monologue to God where they should be a dialogue with God.

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 our senior minister opening at Crestwood Christian Church.” About 66 years ago, God spoke to a group of courageous people of faith and said, “Go start a new church on the outskirts of Lexington.” I’m sure glad they were listening! How much have we missed what God saying to us because we weren’t listening?

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 and for others to speak, and then we have to just be still and listen. What does God want to say to you today through a hymn...or a prayer...or communion...or another person? “Speak, God, for your servant is listening.”