

## *Speeding Up the Ears; Slowing Down the Mouth • James 1:19*

It was in the Greek language that James wrote the teaching of James 1:19. And it is a truth that translates very well into English. It goes like this:

“My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak . . .”

When I was a college student I picked up a practice that I still continue to this day. It is to use a common Latin abbreviation in my note taking. If I come across something I think is really important I write down “N.B.” which stands for “Note Bene” or “Note Well”. Sometimes when I am reading a book and come across a point I want to mark as valuable I’ll write “N.B.” in the margin. I do the same when preparing notes for a sermon or speech. It’s not that the other information is unimportant, but the “N.B.” information is especially important.

That’s the way James felt about James 1:19. So he wrote his “Note Bene” right into the text. “Take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak . . .”

Of course, he doesn’t mean that we should speak slowly, one word at a time, drawing out every syllable. Nor does he mean that we should somehow be able to speed up our listening capability so that we can take in more words and somehow mentally digest them at a faster speed. He means that just as each

of us has two ears and one mouth, we should try to listen more and talk less. Or at least we should be anxious to listen and think before we speak.

There are many different applications of this practical piece of wisdom. The first and most important application is to listen in order to know God. In order to get this point, we need to check back in our Bibles to James 1:18 where it says that God “chose to give us birth through the word of truth.” So that’s the word that is being referred to when it says that we are to be quick to listen and slow to speak. It is primarily the word of God or what God has to say to us. We are to

be quick to listen to God’s communication.

Each morning I have a time for reading the Bible and for praying. Usually I write out on a weekly basis a list of matters about which I am going to pray. And at the top of that list I have written, “Listen.” I’ve done that because I know that I am prone to be in a hurry all the time. I eat my food too fast. I fill my schedule too full. And I tend to do all the talking when I pray.

I need time to listen to know God. It is not with the expectation that God will audibly speak to me, although I would like it if he did. Rather, it is to focus on the Lord, to meditate on what I have just read from the Bible and to allow the Spirit of God inside me to communicate with my spirit.

I am not a mystical person by nature, so I’ll tell you right now that this is hard for me. But it is also very important that I listen to the God of heaven, not only with my head through the Bible but also with my heart through the Spirit. So when the Bible is telling us to be quick to listen, it is primarily talking about listening to God and listening to the word of the truth of God.

But there’s a secondary meaning of this advice to be quick to listen and that is that we listen to others — out of respect. One of the key ways we show respect for other people is by listening to them. It is disrespectful

to dominate a conversation. It is treating another person as an object intended primarily to hear what I have to say. It’s selfish.

Several years ago I was home alone when the phone rang. After I said, “Hello,” the caller started talking. I listened carefully and intently for about twenty minutes without saying much more than “uh-huh.”

When the doorbell rang unexpectedly I tried to interrupt the caller to briefly excuse myself, but he ignored what I said and kept on talking. The doorbell rang a second time and I spoke again asking him to hold on and let me answer

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the door. He just kept on talking, so I laid the phone down on the bed and went downstairs to answer the door. That took me about five minutes. When I returned to the phone he was still talking. He never knew I had left.

Let's not be like that. Allow others a chance to speak. Hear them out. Show respect for others. Be quick to listen.

When we are too quick to speak it can reveal a "know-it-all" attitude. Being quick to speak often communicates that we have something to say that is more important than what anyone else has to say.

It is common sense that if we do the talking we aren't doing much learning. In order to learn and grow we need to give others plenty of time to talk — absorbing their knowledge, experiences and insight.

I love to listen and learn. Because I'm in the people business I meet hundreds of new people every week. Of course there's not time or opportunity to hear all of them out or get to know all of them as well as I would like, but there are plenty of great stories to hear. When I hear people telling about their experiences with God I am spiritually encouraged. When I hear people share their needs I am humbled and challenged to pray for them. And when I hear the insights others have into life I learn enormously from their wisdom.

And so the Bible has for us here such practical advice from God: "Everyone should be quick to listen."

Of course, if everyone just listened and nobody talked, there wouldn't be much to listen to. So, somebody needs to speak up. The Bible isn't telling us to shut up — it is telling us to "be slow to speak."

The primary meaning still connects back to James 1:18 and the "word of truth." When we do speak, it is good to speak God's truth. Of course, this assumes that we have first listened to and learned God's truth. Few things are more tragic than a person pretending to speak for God who has never really listened to God in the first place.

Think about it. Haven't we all heard people speak about God at length and sort of make fools

out of themselves? Sometimes it is in a formal teaching situation and sometimes it is an informal conversation.

On the other hand, it is wonderful to hear a person speak about God who has earlier listened to God. You can sense that this person has spent time studying the Bible. You can sense that she has been in the presence of God to listen and learn rather than to talk and tell. These people are wonderful to listen to even though they may be slow getting started. They are slow to speak, but when they do speak it is well worth hearing.

The secondary meaning of "slow to speak" refers to relationships with others. When we do talk, is it mostly for our own benefit or is it to benefit the other person?

Of course, we must often speak for our own benefit. If I ask you for a favor, it is to benefit me. If I call "911", it's because I need help. If I engage you in conversation, I'll be sure to gain.

But, let's also be careful to speak to help others. Mothers often teach their children that "if you don't have something good to say, then don't say anything at all." That's good advice that fits with James 1:19.

Speaking to benefit others is often connected to pauses in speech and in conversation. We all have moments of silence, even in the most animated conversations. We use those moments to plan what we are going to say next. By adding a few extra seconds before we speak we can ask and answer the important question, "How will this benefit the person I'm talking to?" After all, words have huge impact on the lives of other people. With a sentence we can build a life or destroy a life.

This isn't limited to words spoken directly to another person. It includes words we say to a third party. It includes words we write. Before writing a letter, ask if the words are to honor God and help others. Ask if the words are prepared in love. If ever the answer is "no" consider leaving those words unwritten.

Years ago I sat down at my typewriter one day and scorched out a few letters that were pretty candid and cutting in the things they said. I don't recall ever mailing one of those letters because I believe God stopped me. After that I

got into the practice of praying and thinking before mailing such correspondence. I developed a series of practical questions to ask myself: Would I want this letter publicly read at some future date? If it were publicly read, would this letter please God? Do my words build up? Do my words reflect the love of Jesus Christ?

I once held a letter for several weeks before mailing it. When I later reread what I had put on paper I decided that these words should never be sent and I destroyed my own mail. It is all part of being “slow to speak” so that we’ll be sure that when we do speak it is to benefit others.

When we do speak, some of our speech should be to learn. In other words, use the tongue to ask questions. When I meet new people I love to say, “Tell me about yourself.” It opens up a whole world of fascinating information that blesses and benefits me.

There is a direct connection between good listening and asking questions. Most people want to know if we’re really interested in them as persons before they will open up and reveal themselves. That’s why healthy curiosity combined with respect for the other person’s privacy and rights of self-disclosure makes a powerful communication combination.

Let’s be really practical about the wisdom of James 1:19. If we’re serious about being quick to listen and slow to speak, here are some ways to develop listening and speaking skills.

One way is to care about other people. Actually that’s the bedrock of it all because truly caring for someone else

transforms the way we listen. When another person senses our love, respect and kindness they know that we will truly hear what they have to say.

Another way is to listen so that we will understand. There is a difference between listening to hear and listening to understand. When we listen to understand it is because we want to comprehend the other person’s perspective.

A practical way to do this is to rephrase what the other person has just said, putting it into our

own words. Say something like, “Let me tell you what I think you are saying to me.” It takes a little time but it is well worth the investment to be sure we are getting more than just words — that we are getting what the other person means.

By the way, that’s a great thing to do when we pray, as well. When we pray we can regularly say, “God, here is what I think you are saying in the Bible. Let me tell you what I think you want me to do. If I’m not correct, please tell me again so that I will better understand.”

Another listening skill is to ask questions. Just as it’s good to repeat what we’ve heard, it’s also good to ask for clarification and explanation. You can always sense if someone is really listening by the good and appropriate questions they ask.

A last suggestion is simply to give feedback. Feedback goes beyond repetition and questions. Through feedback we engage ourselves in what the other person is saying. We give our insights and opinions, not because we think our ideas are more important, but to assure the other person that we are really involved in what they are telling us.

Be slow to speak, but do speak! This advice from the Bible can be misused as an excuse to never talk at all. That is not what is intended. Actually, silence can be an expression of arrogance, control and manipulation.

Do you remember a time when someone you

know just wouldn’t talk? She came to a meeting or party and didn’t say anything. Maybe not even answering questions or

just giving the shortest possible reply. That can be a power play that is disrespectful and un-Christian.

Words are like knives and fire — capable of wonderful good when correctly used and capable of terrible evil when incorrectly used. Therefore a key reason why we should be slow to speak is so that we can think before we talk. We need to consider how our words will please or displease God and help or hurt other people. We should wait until there is something worth saying be-

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fore opening our mouths. But do speak!

In high school I wrote a term paper that came back from the teacher with an “A” crossed out and a “C” written next to it. The teacher’s written comment was painfully insightful. She wrote, “Upon first reading this paper I thought it was excellent. However, on rereading it I concluded that you say absolutely nothing.”

Let us be sure we think before we speak so that we are not guilty of saying absolutely nothing!

If in doubt, keep quiet. Misspoken words can never be retrieved. Even when we apologize and are forgiven those words can leave deep and unnecessary scars. If there is a joke we are dying to tell that is sexually explicit, racially unkind, personally demeaning — if in doubt, don’t tell it. If there is a complaint or criticism that we are thinking about declaring but we have malice in our hearts, it’s best to just forget it and to leave it unsaid. Or, if we are feeling angry and that anger inside is starting to shape our words that are spoken on the outside, usually it’s best to just leave it unsaid. If in doubt, keep quiet.

Now we’ve heard the very practical advice of the Bible — for it is a very practical book! It tells us to “Note Bene”, “note well”. “Be quick to listen and slow to speak.” But before we leave this topic, let’s focus our hearts on God and reflect our thoughts on ourselves and let’s just listen. Listen to the Lord. Right now ask God to speak. And listen to what God says to your heart.

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Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church  
6630 Shady Oak Road  
Eden Prairie MN 55344  
952-944-6300  
[www.wooddale.org](http://www.wooddale.org)  
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