

Listen Up!

James 1:19-20

Introduction

Discussion: in your opinion, what causes the most problems in interpersonal relationships?

I would like to submit that I believe the number 1 cause of problems in relationships is miscommunication. In my own marriage, covering nearly 17 years, I have found that most of our "disagreements" have been caused by miscommunication, and both of us have been at fault at some time or another. Fortunately, I am married to a woman who breaks the stereotype and will actually admit when she is wrong, but unfortunately, I must also admit that I am usually the one guilty of the miscommunication. Each of us seems to have an innate desire to be heard. We tend to think that our opinion or idea is better than anyone else could possibly come up with and we will stop at nothing to voice it. Often, while we are waiting for someone to finish a sentence, we are already thinking of what we want to say next and not really processing what the other person is saying. Or, we think something is important enough to interject before the person's sentence is even complete. Think of conversations over just the past few days in which you have been involved. How often were you thinking ahead? How often did someone reply with something that had little or nothing to do with what you just said? How many times were you interrupted in the middle of a sentence by someone wanting to interject their opinion? How many times did you interrupt someone else with your thought? Were you frustrated or angered by the interruption? Was the other person frustrated or angered by yours? How many discussions have erupted into arguments because one party wasn't clearly receiving the message the other was delivering? It is quite amazing in this world of instant and vast communication that we still have such an abundance of communication problems. The English language is full of words and sayings that have multiple meanings and many people do not carefully choose the words they say or write, which contributes further to this problem of miscommunication. For example, "give someone a hand" could mean to applaud or to help. Suppose I said, "So-and-so is dying." If you do not know the context, you could think that the person is about to pass away when I actually mean she is coloring her hair. What if I say that someone is "chilling"? Does that mean the person is getting sick and feeling cold, or is the person at home just relaxing? In addition, our language seems to be a living organism that is constantly changing, which also adds to the confusion of trying to communicate with each other. Words may change meaning over time or entirely new words are created that maybe don't follow the established "rules" of language interpretation. That's why our text this morning is so very important. I believe James saw communication issues arising in the church and addressed these in James 1:19-20. But, I also believe his message is really two-fold. While the application of this passage can be correctly applied to interpersonal communication, when taken within the context of James 1:18, it can speak to how we treat the Word of God as well. Let's take a look at what James has to say. (Read James 1:18-20)

(pray)

- I. First, we must be quick to listen (v. 19). The dictionary defines listen as "to give attention with the ear; to pay attention; heed; obey; to wait attentively for a sound; to convey a particular impression to the hearer." Here again, we have a word in the English language that can mean more than one thing. You can listen to music by simply hearing the instruments all playing and the vocalist singing the lyrics or by attentively paying attention to the words of a song to understand the message and getting engrossed in the music to gain a perspective of the mood the writer is trying to convey. You can listen to a dog barking and hear the sound, perhaps finding it rather annoying, especially in the middle of the night, or pay attention to the inflection of the bark and understand whether the dog feels threatened, is excited, or simply wants attention. There are several ways that one can listen, but I believe the Bible has one particular way in which God intends for us to listen.
 - a. First, I believe that biblical listening involves more than just hearing. Hearing can be defined as perception by the ear, but God intends listening here in James to be more than that. You can hear someone's voice without listening to their words. If you are involved in a conversation but are constantly thinking of the next thing you are going to say, you are not truly listening. It reminds me of the teacher in the old Peanuts cartoons that is always out of the picture and all you can hear is "mraw, mraw, mraw, mraw". Kind of how you

may think your kids listen to you at times. Regarding the Word of God, some may "hear" the Truth, but not "listen" to the message it is conveying. The Bible is full of passages that speak to the difference between "hearing" and "listening". Let's look at some examples. (Isaiah 66:4, 6:9, Daniel 12:8) Have you ever watched a deaf person communicate? Some read lips, some use sign language, and I have even seen some carry a note pad and write what they want to say. Sometimes, I think that the deaf are better "listeners" than those that can hear because they have to pay close attention to the signer or carefully watch a speaker's mouth to truly understand what is being conveyed. Perhaps there are lessons that we could learn from the deaf about listening involving more than hearing.

- b. Second, biblical listening involves heeding. Heeding means to give careful attention to; to have regard; notice. Heeding goes hand in hand with understanding - you must pay careful attention to the words that are being spoken so that you can understand what is being said. Isn't it frustrating when you are talking to someone and their eyes are looking everywhere but at you? It seems the person has no regard for what you are saying, that they would rather be doing anything but talking to you at that moment. Very often, misunderstanding begins when someone only hears part of what is said. I have often told my wife that because I am a man and can only concentrate on one thing, she needs to make sure that when she is talking to me that I am looking at her square in the face. If Ohio State is playing football and I am watching, I am not going to hear the important thing she needs to tell me - I'm not going to heed her words. Or, if she has a list of things for me to do, she needs to write them down because when I hear #1, I am already thinking about how I am going to accomplish it and won't hear 2 through 5 - I won't heed the other things on the list. Similarly, you want to make sure you are able to heed what others are saying to you. If you haven't heard something completely, ask them to repeat it so that you understand. Also, it helps to look at the speaker to focus your attention on what they are trying to convey. Believe it or not, I am basically shy at heart, so I struggle to look people in the eye when talking to them. I have learned over the years, however, that if I am looking at the person while they are speaking and also when I am speaking to them, the risk of miscommunication is much smaller than if I am constantly looking around the room. We need to make sure our minds are clear of distracting thoughts as well. If you are thinking about what you have to do when you get home or revisiting events of your day, you will not be an effective listener.
- c. Third, biblical listening involves understanding. Matthew 13:14, Mark 4:12, and Acts 28:26 speak of the fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah that we read a few moments ago. The people would hear the words of Christ, but they would not understand. People that are not in a relationship with Christ can read the Bible, hear sermons, hear Christians speak the Truth, but never understand what is being said because they do not have the "ears" of the Holy Spirit to reveal the scriptures to them; the Bible just seems to be a work of literature filled with nice stories and eloquent poetry, but they miss the message. These people are "deaf" to the truth of Scripture. Similarly, when we communicate with each other, it is vitally important that we not only hear what others are communicating, but that we also understand the meaning of what they are saying. A good method to use to ensure understanding is to repeat back to the person what they said in your own words to make sure you agree on the intent. In every day conversation, this is difficult to do and can be cumbersome, but when something is being discussed that is important or you hear something with double meaning, I don't think the person would be upset if you verify what you heard. Clear communication, particularly in the church family, is important to maintain so that the work of Christ is not interrupted by misunderstanding.
- d. These concepts also apply to the church attender. How often have we come to church to fellowship, to worship, and to hear the preaching of God's Word and sat in our seats thinking about what we will be having for lunch after the service? Or, watching the younger crowd passing notes? Or, doodling on the note sheet in the bulletin? James asserts that we must learn to be quick to listen - not only hear the Word, but heed and understand it, too. Heeding is also defined as obeying. What good is it if we hear the Word and understand it, but ignore the application? In a way, it makes us guiltier than if we had never been exposed to the Truth to begin with. Isn't it easier to forgive a child for doing something wrong that they didn't know was wrong than the child that knows better and does it anyway?

II. The second point that James shares with us is that we must be slow to speak (v. 19). This is a tough one for me. I like to try to fix things and like almost everyone else, I think I have the answer for a lot of life's problems. Often, I find myself offering unsolicited advice because I have the impression that if someone is talking to me about something, it equates to them giving me permission to offer solutions. Maybe I have experienced a similar situation and what I learned will help the speaker in their circumstance. I am especially

quick to advise my children instead of just letting them talk through the problem themselves because I feel that I am older and wiser, so I can really help them. That may be the case in some instances, but I would venture to guess that more often than not, most people just need to talk through things to express their feelings and put their thoughts into words. They mostly just want to vent, to get something "off their chest". I believe that James is telling us to be available to listen to others and only interject when asked, and when we do interject, to be careful in our approach. In the same way with God's Word, I believe James is telling us to be sure that what we say is truly in line with the Truth. It can be a very dangerous thing to speak on a Biblical subject without a clear understanding of it. There are many out in the world that pull verses out of context, twist what God has said, blatantly misinterpret a passage of scripture, and so on to tickle the ears of the hearers; to make the Word of God say what they want it to say, not what it really says. These people are called "false teachers" in the Word. It is clear that teachers of the Truth are held to a high standard and they will answer to God for every word they utter in relation to that Truth. The Bible has a lot to say about the subject of speaking, so let's turn now to God's Word and see what we can learn.

- a. First, we must watch **WHAT** we say (Matthew 12:34-37). In this passage, Christ clearly warns us that what we say reveals our true nature. People will often make a statement, see that it has hurt someone's feelings, and then say, "Oh, I didn't mean it." Is that true? Do people really say things they don't mean? It seems that Jesus says that we only say what is really in our hearts. If someone is constantly lashing out with angry words, then Jesus would say that the person has anger in their heart. If someone continually stretches the truth, then Jesus would say that the person's heart is filled with deceit. If someone always speaks kind words, edifies those around them, promotes the Truth of scripture, then Jesus would say that person's heart is filled with the Holy Spirit. What we say, the conversations that we have, the words we choose to say all speak volumes to what is truly occupying our hearts. This is really something that has hit me hard preparing for this lesson and caused me to ask myself a series of questions. Do I choose God-honoring words? Do my conversations point people to Christ? When I complain, what is going on in my heart? Do I really trust God or is my complaint a result of my desire to be in control? Do I have wisdom enough to know when to speak and when to hold my tongue? How does that apply to sarcasm? I like to joke around with people I know very well, but if I read the scriptures correctly, am I perhaps saying what's really in my heart even if I say it in a joking manner? I'm not trying to be legalistic, but this has really provoked a serious train of thought for me. Would Christ say that those things I say jokingly are close to how I really feel in my heart? It is something to consider. This is an area in which all of us could use some Spirit-led introspection, because what we say is such a powerful indicator of where our hearts are in relationship to Christ. Proverbs 12 really reinforces this idea.
- b. Second, we must watch **HOW** we speak. Very often, I will say something to one of my children or my wife that in and of itself is pretty harmless. But, the tone of my statement may send a message of anger or frustration. Something as simple as asking them how their day was, if stated in a harsh tone, could tell them that I don't really care or that I am angry about something. Even telling them that I love them in the wrong tone could let them know that my heart wasn't really in it. We need not only to guard the tone with which we speak, we need to take care of how we talk with our body language - facial expressions, our hands and arms, how we stand. Speaking is more than just words. Whether we realize it or not, the human brain picks up on the subtle hints that are sent during the course of a conversation. Think about it. When you are talking with someone, you can usually tell if they are truly engaged without a word coming out of their mouth. Here are a few ways the Bible speaks to how we should communicate with others:
 - i. In love (Ephesians 4:15)
 - ii. In humbleness (John 7:16-18)
 - iii. With kindness (Proverbs 12:25)
 - iv. In an edifying manner (Ephesians 4:29)
 - v. With honesty (Proverbs 19:5,9)
 - vi. Graciously (Colossians 4:6)
- c. Third, we must prayerfully consider our words (Colossians 4:2-4). Here, Paul is asking the Colossians to pray for him as he ministers the gospel, but I think it is safe to assume that Paul is also himself asking for God to give him the words to speak. This act of prayer is especially important regarding the sharing of God's Word. I think we all know that we cannot understand the scriptures without the Holy Spirit revealing the truth of them to us, and the way that we tap into that power is through prayer. But, I wonder how often we ask God to bless our everyday conversations? I will daily pray that everything I do and say would honor Him, but how

many times have I paused throughout a given day to take inventory of my words up to that point and asked for additional wisdom for the remainder? I honestly don't remember the last time that I've started into a conversation with someone and stopped to pray with that person for God to give us wisdom and direction. I venture to say that if we prayed more diligently regarding our conversations we would find that they WILL become more God-honoring. I would go so far to say that they would more often be centered around what we are learning from God rather than on things that have little importance in the scope of eternity. Okay, so am I saying that talking about the day of college basketball is wrong? No. The point here is that, as Christians, our conversations need to be focused on God, how He is working in our lives, and His Word, not on things that have little or no eternal value. As I have been doing the past couple of weeks, we all need to evaluate what subjects dominate our conversations and prayerfully consider what God would want us to talk about.

- d. Fourth, after we have prayed, we must lean on the Holy Spirit for guidance (I Corinthians 2:1-5). Paul understood that he was weak and that human wisdom is flawed at best. We often think of Paul as one of the great saints of the New Testament who penned a good portion of it, but we need to realize that all that he said and all that he wrote came through the power of the Holy Spirit living within him. And, as intelligent or wise as we think we are, we cannot accurately portray the truth of God without His Spirit speaking through us. I could spend hours upon hours studying for these Sunday school lessons, but the words that I bring to you would be worthless if I did not rely on the Spirit of God to guide me. In the same way, we need His help for our daily conversations with others. We need to allow the Holy Spirit to speak through us at all times. How else can we carry on God-honoring conversations outside the Spirit filling our hearts with the Truth of God's Word?

III. Finally, James encourages us to be slow to become angry (v. 19-20). The Greek word used here is "orge" which indicates a slow burning rage leading to bitterness and a desire to take revenge. It is a deep-seated anger that goes far beyond a simple temper tantrum. This is the same word that is used in Ephesians 4:31 and Colossians 3:8 which talk about putting off all bitterness, anger, wrath, etc. Question: what does this have to do with listening and speaking? (discussion) At the time James was written, the Jews would debate the scriptures in the synagogues. Very often, these debates would lead to heated arguments and huge divisions were created among the people which would cause them to not even be able to talk to each other in a civil manner. I believe that James was addressing this issue in the passage we are studying today. He recognized the danger of not properly listening to one another and, more importantly, the Word of God, of speaking quickly in defense of one's own point of view, and allowing the disagreement to lead to anger and bitterness. He was warning the Jewish church of the harm that such things could do to the testimony of Christ. So, what is the message for us today? How can we apply this passage to our lives? (discussion)

- a. Church splits
- b. Family divisions
- c. Divorce

(pray)