

LISTENING AND DOING

James 1:19-25

Leo Douma

July 28th 2018



Are you a good listener? What would those in your home or at your work say? Do you realize how important it is to be a good listener? What affect it has? Richard Moss said, 'The greatest gift you can give another is the purity of your attention'. Pharaoh Ptahhotep instructed his officials to listen to the pleas of clients patiently and without rancor, because a petitioner wants respect and attention to what he says more than the accomplishing of that for which he came. Listening to another person says, 'I respect you. I value you.' Every human being needs to be affirmed. We do that by listening to them. 'I would love to hear your story and get to know you.' It is how we hear the heart of another. Listening well is essential for marriage, raising kids, connecting as a congregation, bringing joy to another. J. Michael Bennett, an expert in listening, writes, 'No one could count the tales of woe that have as their central point 'I thought you said...'. No one could tally the jobs ruined, the classes failed, the battles lost, the hearts broken, the money wasted, the lives damaged as a direct result of poor listening skills.' James in his letter calls on his readers to listen. That's because too often they were not really listening to God. Not listening to God means we don't hear his heart. We don't appreciate how much he loves us in Jesus. Not listening to God means we don't truly respect him or value what he says. Not listening to God means we misunderstand what he is doing in our lives.

You will remember that James wrote to Jewish Christians who had to leave Jerusalem because of persecution. They struggled as refugees in foreign places. They had lost all their possessions and status. James encouraged them to see their trials with an attitude of joy. That's because God was testing their faith. Doing that was helping them persevere and become mature in the faith. The problem was that those 'trials' could end up being 'temptations'. With the wrong attitude those Christians could end up losing trust in God. There was the tendency to blame God for tempting them. James made it very clear the fault for their failure lay with them. They were enticed by following their own desires. But, he said, God in his grace had given them a new beginning. They had been born again by the Word of God. With that new beginning, it was up to them to keep growing. James spells out how they can grow by following three steps: 1. Listening: (:19) *"Everyone should be quick to listen..."* 2. Accepting (:22):

"...humbly accept the word planted in you ..." and 3. Doing: (:22) *"Do not merely listen to the word...Do what it says"*. James' three points follow closely the three points his brother Jesus spoke of in Luke 8:15 *"But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop."*

So, first, we see James writes *"...be quick to listen"*. But listen to what? Back in verse 18 James wrote *"[God] chose to give us birth through the word of truth..."* To become a Christian, we are 'born again' by listening to the Word of God. The Holy Spirit creates a new nature in us. And when we hear God's Word, say from a parent, the minister, a friend or teacher, it triggers our response to God. We believe what the Bible says and trust Jesus. But we should not stay new in the faith, like a baby Christian. We are meant to mature and become more like Jesus. Growing up as Christians happens in the same way we were 'born again'. By listening to the Word of God. When James tells his readers to *"...be quick to listen"* he means more than listening to each other. It's about listening to God. What is interesting is that James does not give us a Bible reading list. Or tell us to be in church every week. He goes deeper. He knows we can be reading our Bible or be in church and still not really listen to what God is saying. In his book 'Directions' James Hamilton shares an insight about listening to God. He tells of a man who lost his watch in a cool room full of food. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't find it. Nor his coworkers. A small boy slipped into the room and a little while later came out with the watch. The amazed workers asked him how he found it. The boy said 'I closed the door and lay down on the floor and kept very still. Soon I heard the watch ticking.' The question for us, with our hectic lifestyles, is whether we are being still enough and quiet enough to really listen to what God is saying to us. That's the point James is making. He wants his readers to develop an attentive spirit; a listening attitude. That begins by listening to each other. James mixes together the two ideas of listening to each other and listening to God. Note how *"...quick to listen"* is followed by *"...slow to speak and slow to become angry."* These obviously have to do with relating with other people. There is a connection between how we relate with God and how we relate with people. In other words, we don't have split characters. If we are not good listeners in every day things, we do not suddenly change when we come to God in devotions or worship. When we are speaking we are occupied with our own thoughts. We are thinking and expressing what we are anxious about or want others to know. You can't really talk and listen to another person at the same time. When we are angry we are even less likely to be listening to the other person. We are then so absorbed by our own emotions we cannot hear anything of the other person. Constant talkers can treat each other like a 'comma'. Like the boy who said 'My dad treats me like a comma. Dad talks and talks. He stops for a minute while I talk. And then he goes on where he left off. I was just a breather, a comma. He did not listen to me at all.' Have you been

treated as a comma? Have you treated others as a comma? Have you treated God as a comma? You keep telling God what you want but do you listen to him?

Now, James does not say we should not speak or not be angry. But we should be 'slow to speak, slow to be angry.' In other words, take your time to speak so you have the opportunity to hear what the other person is really saying. If we don't listen, we will not understand each other. A quick mouth and quick temper will not bring peace in a home. It does not bring the *"...righteous life God requires"*, says James. That requires listening. And listening requires a servant attitude. Listening is serving because it takes great effort and lots of concentration. As we, said it gives the message 'What you have to say I will treat with value because I value you'.

Now, if we understand the value of listening to each other, and the need for a serving attitude, we will better understand what it is to listen to God. It's not just about reading a Bible passage and thinking I've done my devotion. It takes effort. We need to quieten ourselves and concentrate and reflect. What are you saying God? Help me appreciate how much you really love me. What do I need to learn? What do I need to change? We are not first full of prayer requests. Or questioning God when we suffer: 'Why are you doing this to me?' We show deep respect to God who is talking to us through his Word. We listen for his heart. We quieten our heart and thoughts. We come with a servant attitude. We humble ourselves and say (as Samuel did) *"Speak Lord, for your servant is listening"*. 'I will listen and learn from you. I will be guided by you.' That attitude is so important. As someone once said 'When you speak you are repeating what you already know. But when you listen, you may learn something new'.

So first we must listen. That leads naturally into what James says next. That we *"...humbly accept the word planted in you"* (:21). That means we not only listen and learn. But we accept for ourselves. You see the difference. We can hear and understand but not accept it as something for ourselves. James says (:21) *"...get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you which can save you."* The words 'planted in you' conjures up the idea of gardening. Jesus' parable of the sower comes to mind again. If I want to put some plants in my garden I have to prepare the soil. I must remove all the weeds. And I should put in fertilizer to give the plant a good start. So, it is with us as we accept the 'word planted in us'. We need to do weeding. That weeding, or dealing with our sin, happens as we listen to God's Word. On our own we really won't change our sinful ways. That's why James emphasizes it's the *"...word that can save you"*. The Holy Spirit changes us as we listen to the Word of God. But we have to work with the Spirit with a gardening hoe in hand, so to speak. If we really accept God's word that says, 'Love your enemy', we will let go of our spite

against others. If we accept God's Word that says 'Be holy as I am holy' we will weed out our addictions. If we have not done our moral weeding, then we may hear the Word of God and even understand it. But we will not accept it. We will excuse it away. We will rationalize our actions. To grow in the faith, we must pull out the weeds, as we humbly accept what God says. Humility is the key point here. It is the fertilizer that gives the start to growth. 'God, I admit I do not always like what your word says. But you are Lord. So, I accept what you say'. As one commentator put it: 'It is that temper of spirit in which we accept God's dealing with us without disputing.' Humility was the key character of Jesus. He said (Matthew 11) *"Take my yoke and learn from me. For I am gentle and humble in heart."* It was with that attitude that Jesus said in the Garden of Gethsemane *"Father not my will, but your will be done."* It led him to the cross. But with that he brought the hope of new life and the restoration of all things. Humility means simply saying 'yes' to what the Word teaches us. That may well be costly for us. But not as costly as it was for Jesus. For us it means accepting the truth about ourselves, even when it hurts.

So, we must listen to the word of God and accept what it says to us. And that will then have a result. It will lead to the third thing James mentions, that we *"...do what it says."* 'The proof of the pudding' is in the doing. When we do what God says it is proof of our listening and accepting. That's why James writes *"Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."* James knows our human nature well. We can so easily deceive ourselves. We can think we are being good Christians because we listened to the Word. We can say 'I read my Bible this morning. For an hour. I can even remember what I read. It's good stuff.' James would say 'Well done! But how is that changing the way you act and think? Are you actually doing what you read?' We can go to church and hear what we think is a beautiful sermon. We say 'Amen' to it. And we might even be deeply moved. We may think we have had a marvelous experience. But it's real value is when we put it into practice. Let me pause and ask you directly. The preaching, like this morning, the devotions you read. Do they redirect your behaviour? Do you use the sermon outlines and reflect on the questions? Does it impact how you live your week? Someone once said, 'We suffer from spectator complex- always watching but never doing'. We see something that disturbs us. We get worked up and all emotional about it. Then we go home and forget it. James describes it as a man who looks in the mirror, sees what he is like, what needs changing, and then goes away and forgets. It is not just that the man looks briefly and therefore hardly notices and forgets. There is a serious looking. But it's what happens next that is the problem. The man with the mirror forgets. Instead of doing that, James says *"The person looking intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it, they will be blessed in what they do."* The Greek literally means

'to continue in the company of the word'. The Word of God we listened do and accepted, remains in our thinking and directs what we do. It influences our attitude at work, on the road, at home. James points out doing this should not be seen as hard work. Rather it's a blessing. That's because we follow "*...the perfect law that gives freedom.*" You see the laws of God, like the ten commandments, are an expression of God's character. We are made in God's image. So, when we follow what God says we are actually going in line with our real character. In other words, we are liberated. When we live God's way, we live the way we were meant to be. God knows best because he is our maker. Do you want to live the best life? Do you want to grow as a Christian? Then follow James three steps. 1. Listen to what God says. 2. Humbly accept what God says. 3. Do what God says.