

Can We Talk?
When You Say Nothing at All
June 7, 2020

Great job Ashlyn ... and a great introduction to what we're going to be focusing on today and in the three messages that follow ... which is our ability (or lack thereof) to communicate with one another.

And just so you'll know, when I decided several weeks ago to do this series, part of my rationale – and I'm just being honest here ...

Part of my rationale was that I was kind of worn out from handling "live ammunition" every Sunday.

What I mean by that – and you know this if you've been tuning in even on an occasional basis over the past three months ...

What I mean by that is that we've been talking about some angle of the COVID-19 pandemic every Sunday for the past 12 weeks.

- In the beginning we focused on the shock of what was happening and what that reveals about us and our world and, more importantly, our individual and collective need for God.
- Then we talked about how to make the most of the unpleasant situation of being locked down indefinitely – how to “bloom where we'd been quarantined.”
- Then, in our final series, which concluded last Sunday, we talked about the tension that exists over how to restart the world and how those of us who are Christians could rise above the fray and be part of the solution instead of adding fuel to the fire.

And because *every single person* watching and/or listening was dealing *every single day* with the coronavirus and its effects ... and because there was a lot of emotion surrounding every aspect of it ...

... it felt like I was dealing with "live ammunition."

Not *literally*, of course, but spiritually and emotionally and psychologically and relationally, the coronavirus is "live ammo" in everyone's life right now.

And if you don't handle live ammo properly what happens? It blows up in your face. It messes you up and everyone else around you.

So, you have to be very, very careful. And if you do that for a long time, it's exhausting.

And that's what it was beginning to feel like every Sunday to me ... and maybe even to you, too.

So, I thought, "you know, maybe we need a series that kind of backs away from the front lines of this battle but still deals with something that would be helpful as we continue to engage in it, because this thing is going to be an issue for a while longer."

"Maybe we need a series about how to communicate with one another because, as the coronavirus stress revealed, we're not very good at it. And we're getting worse. But communication applies to many other areas of life, too, so it won't feel so much like live ammo."

So, I thought, "Yeah, that's a good idea. Let's do that."

Then ...

- George Floyd (and Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery) happened.
- And nationwide protests happened.
- And looting and destruction happened (along with even more senseless and unjustifiable death).
- And heated debates about systemic racism and the role of law enforcement happened.

And, once again, the polarization and our inability to talk to one another *based on what we think about all of the above* became even more magnified ...

... which means that, like it or not, in this

series “*Can We Talk?*” we’re going to get really close to the “live ammo” again – the emotional, spiritual, psychological and relational dynamite associated with what’s going on right now.

That’s not the purpose of this series but, along the way it’s going to happen.

So, with that in mind, let’s pray.

Setting the Stage

One of the things I love about the part of the New Testament that Christians call “the epistles” or “the letters” is that those letters were written to real people who were facing real problems.

And even though you and I are removed from their situations by time and distance and

culture, the issues concerning them (and often besieging them) were, at the root, were no different than what we face.

- Often, they were scared.
- Often, they were confused.
- They were angry.
- They were arrogant.

And the list could go on and on ... which is *why* what was written to *them* can still be applied to *us*.

And in this series, we're going to be looking at a letter that was written by a pastor to members of his congregation who were scared, confused, angry and a little bit arrogant ...

... and who, coincidentally, were unable to gather together – kind of like us.

In fact, the letter begins by addressing them as “believers scattered abroad” because that’s what they were. They were Christians who had once lived in Jerusalem but had now been dispersed to the surrounding districts because of *persecution*.

And this persecution had come upon them because the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem had finally had enough with all the talk about Jesus being the Messiah, and Jesus rising from the dead. So, they arranged for anyone who believed in Jesus and followed Jesus to be officially kicked out of their synagogues ...

- Which then made Christianity a “new religion” ...
- Which then put followers of Jesus in violation of the “Pax Romana” – the Peace of Rome – which didn’t *allow* for

new religions as that typically caused political and social unrest ...

- Which is why many of these first-generation Christians decided to pick up everything and get away from trouble as fast as they could.ⁱ

As you can imagine, that was very hard on them. And they had a lot of questions about where God was in all of that ...

... which is why their pastor, James the half-brother of Jesus, who at that point was the leader of the church in Jerusalem, addresses it at the very beginning of the letter.ⁱⁱ

By the way, whenever we mention James, I always think it's fun to ask ourselves, "if you have a brother, what would it take for you to become convinced that he was God in the flesh?"

I mean, that's not something you "just believe," is it?

So, what did it take for James to believe that Jesus – his oldest brother – was God?

Because in the stories we have of Jesus' ministry, it's very clear that not only did James *not* believe in and follow Jesus, he thought Jesus was crazy!

It took *a resurrection* for James to believe ... which, by the way, is one of the reasons why we can believe. Nobody who used to be a skeptic becomes head of a persecuted religion proclaiming his brother is God ... unless that brother does something to prove it, like coming back from the dead.

Anyway, James, who is pastor of all these folks who had been dispersed, sends them a

letter that contains thirteen mini-sermons – maybe things he had been preaching to those who were still in Jerusalem.

Obviously, they couldn't watch services via livestream like we can.

But, like a good pastor, he starts out by addressing their fears and confusion over what had happened to them at the very beginning of his letter.

He writes:

*Consider it pure joy my
brothers and sisters whenever
you face trials of many kinds*

...

James 1:2 (NIV)

And these folks truly were facing “trials of many kinds.” They were living under a great deal of stress.

On top of that, things were not going the way they expected. After all, they had decided to follow the Messiah so, shouldn't their lives be better and not worse as a result?

So right at the beginning of his letter, Pastor James explains to them how to think correctly about what God is doing as they go through these trials. He says, "whenever you face trials you can be filled with joy" ...

... because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.

It's the testing that makes you stronger. It builds your endurance.

So, let perseverance finish its work so that you may be

*mature and complete, not
lacking anything. James
1:2-3 (NIV)*

“God is going to do something through all of this,” James is saying. “God is going to grow you up through this if you hang in there.”

And I think that’s a good word for those of us who are believers in and followers of Jesus today to remember as well. The last three months and where we are right now as a culture – I’ve never seen anything like it.

And honestly, sometimes I just want to run away into the mountains and hide somewhere. But God will use this trying time to grow us up and make us complete if we persevere – if we hang in there.

Now, one thing to remember about this letter is that James isn’t writing to a bunch of disconnected individuals. He’s writing to men

and women who are part of the Christian *community*; people who are outcasts from the rest of society and are doing life together because all they have was one another.

Of course, when people who do life together ...

- Encounter anxiety and stress ...
- And things don't go the way they should
- And expectations aren't being met

...guess what happens?

They – we – become very sensitive. We come easily hurt and offended.

And we adopt patterns of responding – patterns of *communicating* – that are destructive to our relationships and to our

community.

And, James was very concerned about that.

In fact, maybe a quarter of what he writes in this letter has to do with maintaining the health of their relationships and the community (and we'll actually read much of it in the coming weeks).

So, after giving them some encouragement about God and about their trials and how they're related, as well as some other pastoral advice, James moves to how they are communicating with one another in the midst of their trials.ⁱⁱⁱ

A Hard Truth

And, again, I think this is so important for us right now, especially for those of us who are Christians.

And I know that not everyone who is here or tuning in is a Christian and I'm grateful for that. I'm grateful that you think enough of Jesus and of us to hang out with us.

But, for Christians, as I said last week, our calling is to rise above the fray and bring light instead of darkness to the world; to bring peace instead of strife. But it's so easy for us to get sucked into communicating just like everyone else ... which is why what James had to say to those first-century believers is so critical to us.

And we're going to look at it in detail over the next several weeks but, before we get into it, I have to tell you that in order for you to get anything out of what he writes, you've got to admit something about yourself that you probably don't even realize.

You don't communicate as well as you think you do.

One of the things I've noticed over the years is that most people overestimate their strengths in this area. Most people believe they are better at communicating than they really are.

Now, very few of us are aware of that that we believe that.

But the tell is that, whenever there is a problem in communication, our first reaction is to attribute the reason for that problem to *somebody else's* lack of skill or maturity.

For example, for many years in my experience as the lone male member of my household, if I got irritated about something and I expressed that irritation verbally, my wife would often come to me later and say, "honey, when you get angry like that, the girls

and I are kind of scared. We don't know how to deal with you."

And I would say, "Angry? I wasn't angry. I was just frustrated that <whatever>."

And she would say, "Well, that's not how it came across to them and to me."

And I would get frustrated with that, too. And I would say, "You girls just need to get a thicker skin. You all need to toughen up."

In my mind, there was no way that *I* was transmitting what *they* were receiving which meant I was off the hook. *They were the problem*, not me.

It took many years and many hard conversations for me to realize that *I* was as much of the problem as *they* were (and probably more) because, as I said, most

people tend to overestimate their strengths in this area.

Point being ... if you're going to make the most of where we're going in this series, you're probably going to have to eat a little bit of "humble pie." You're going to have to swallow your pride and admit you don't know some things and, therefore, you need to learn.

The verse first Bible verse I ever learned was Proverbs 16:18.

*Pride goes before destruction,
a haughty spirit before a fall.
Proverbs 16:18 (NIV)*

I'm not sure *why* someone thought I should learn or memorize that (although, as it turns out, it has had much application to my life), but the point is clear:

- If we always think we're right
- If we already know everything
- If we're too proud to learn anything new

We're going to screw things up pretty badly.

But, on the other hand ...

*Whoever heeds life-giving
correction will be at home
among the wise.*

Proverbs 15:31 (NIV)

And what we're going to talk about in the next four weeks is going to be life-giving to many of us and to many of our relationships ... but it's also going to be corrective. It's going to be "you're doing this wrong and you need to change if you want it to get better."

And that's going to be hard to hear, especially for some of us.

Furthermore, if you really take this seriously, you're going to have to ask the people around you to give you feedback about these things. You're going to have some very specific things to talk about to the people around you (which will become clear very shortly) and you're not always going to like what they have to say to you.

For me personally, when I first began to realize that I'm not a "born communicator" (I *am* gifted at putting complex ideas into words people can understand, but that's pretty much where the gifting ends) ...

When I first began to realize that I'm not naturally gifted at interpersonal communication and that I chronically overestimated my strengths, I *wanted* to change. Actually, I realized that I *had* to change, or I was going to continue torching my relationships with the people I loved.

So, I began asking people close to me for their feedback.

That was the easy part. The hard part was when they actually started giving it.

- Like when our pastors and staff would come to me and say, “Rick, you *said* you wanted to hear about this...” and they would tell me about some way in which my communication (either in transmitting or receiving) was not right.
- Or, when Jetta or my three daughters would come to me and say, “hey you know when you said this ... or when I was talking to you about ...”

And even though in my heart, I *wanted* to be open to what I was hearing, there was (and still is) a part of me that goes, “argghh ... not

again.”

But it’s the only way. You have to listen to correction – over and over.

And that’s hard, which is why one author has written ...

“Everyone wants to *be* a good communicator. Few people want to *become* a good communicator.”

But if you do heed the correction you hear from this series, you will be, as the scripture said, “at home among the wise.”

The Key Principle

So, let’s look at what James had to say to his dispersed congregation about communication – and how it applies to all of us.

And this is what he says:

*My dear brothers and sisters,
take note of this: Everyone
should be quick to listen, slow
to speak and slow to become
angry, because human anger
does not produce the
righteousness that God
desires. James 1:19-20
(NIV)*

By the way, the word translated "righteousness" in that sentence could also be rendered "justice," so it would read "human anger does not produce the justice God desires."

I think that has some obvious implications for what's going on these days but I'm not going to go there right now because it's the overall pattern of communication that's so important to James.

In fact, it's so important that a few sentences later he adds:

Those who consider themselves religious ...

Those who think of themselves as mature Christians, who know the Bible, who are walking with God ...

... and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues ...

... who can't control what they say to others or what they post on social media ...

... deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.
James 1:26 (NIV)

Strong words.

To state it more positively, James' point is ... if

your faith is affecting your life in the way it should, even in the middle of trials and tribulations ...

This is what your communication will look like:

- Quick to listen
- Slow to speak
- Slow to become angry

Would you read that with me, out loud?

This is the principle we are going to be looking at and trying to implement. This is the corrective that almost all of us need to begin applying to our communications.

It's pretty simple, actually; simple enough to memorize.

In fact, let's see if we can all say it from memory right now.

Here we go:

- Quick to what? Listen
- Slow to what? Speak
- Slow to become what? Angry

Good job!

Now, what's fascinating – and convicting – about this instruction James gives, is that it's the *exact opposite* of what comes naturally to most of us.

Most of us, when things don't go the way we expect or desire are ...

- Quick to become angry

- Quick to speak
- Slow to listen

We do the *opposite* of what we should do, and we do it *backwards* ... which is yet another illustration of how thoroughly sin has affected us in even the most mundane ways.

A lot of times we think of "sin" as dastardly deeds or something immoral and unethical but, even in the simplest things – like how we communicate when there is stress – we can see that we really do fall short of God's original intentions for us ...

... which is even more evidence that we really do need a savior.

Listening Well

Now, in the time that we have left, I want us to

focus on the first part of that little triad of instruction: *quick to listen*. What does that mean?

- Obviously, it means you get to *it* (listening) before you allow your hurt and offense to turn into anger inside of you.
- It means you get to *it* (listening) before you open your mouth; before you say anything at all.
- To put it in terms of the late Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* it means you "seek to understand before seeking to be understood."

That's what the "quick" part of "quick to listen" means. And it's really hard.

But I think an even bigger issue is “what does it mean to listen – and listen well – *in general*? What do people who are good listeners *in general* do and not do? How do we cultivate the art of listening *in general*?”

And this is important because learning to become a good listener *in general* will help us in those specific times when we’re hurt or offended.

Now, I’m sure you’re already aware of many of the simple techniques that help us to be better listeners.

I’m talking about things like:

- *Minimizing distractions.* Turn off the TV, computer, radio, don’t answer a text message or check your voicemail.
- *Communicating interest through your*

body language. Maintain eye contact when someone is talking to you. Don't cross your arms or tap your fingers.

- *Not finishing the other person's sentences.* Don't interrupt the conversation by assuming you know what the other person was going to say.
- *And not correcting trivial details.* Who cares if it was snowing or raining that day? Or if it was two years ago or three years ago.

This isn't rocket science, right? It's more a matter of disciplining ourselves to put these ideas into practice instead of falling back to whatever comes natural.

Of course, that discipline doesn't necessarily mean we're actually *listening* better because it's possible to focus solely on these

techniques and not on the person with whom we are communicating ...

... kind of like *this*.

I thought we could use a bit of comic relief.

Point is ... being a good listener is not simply about mastering techniques.

So, what is it about?

Well, many things could be said at this point, but I want to share just two that have become part of the staff culture and ministry culture here at NHCC.

And when I say that they *have become* part of our culture, I mean that we – our pastors and leaders – learned them from others. They're not original with us.

But we discovered them at a critical time when we realized that the condition of our relationships was directly related to how well we communicated, especially when we were hurt and offended.

And as I told our staff back then many years ago – and told them again this week as we discussed how we feel about what happened to George Floyd and the reaction to it in our culture ...

As I have often reminded our staff, if we can't communicate with each other in those times when we're hurt and offended, then we have no business leading a church. If following Jesus doesn't work *for* us (and *among* us), we should close this thing down and move on.

Anyway, these two things are really, really helpful in becoming a good listener. The first

is a mindset and the second is a phrase.

1. The mindset is to see people as “people” and not as objects.

To listen well to someone else, you have to see that person ...

- As someone who matters as much as you do
- As someone who has legitimate hopes and dreams and fears just like you do
- As someone who God loves as much as He loves you

I mean, Jesus died on the cross for them, just like He did for you.

That’s the foundation – seeing people as people and not as “objects” that appear and disappear at various points in our lives whose

sole purpose is to help us or to hinder us.

In other words, *they* are not really about *them*; they're about us and what they can do or not do for us.

How can you tell which of those perspectives is true in your life?

Simple. When you listen to someone who is talking to you, what is your goal?

Are you listening with the intent to *reply* to what they're saying or to *understand* what they're saying?

Stephen Covey, in his *Seven Habits* book, wrote that most people listen with the intent to reply, not to understand. Specifically, what happens is ...

- You listen to *yourself* as you prepare in your mind what you are going to say, the

questions you are going to ask, etc.

- You filter everything you hear through *your* life experiences, *your* frame of reference.
- You check what you hear against *your* autobiography and see how it measures up.
- And consequently, you decide prematurely what the other person means before he/she finishes communicating:

“Oh, I know just how you feel. I felt the same way.”

“I had that same thing happen to me.”

“Let me tell you what I did in a similar situation.”^{iv}

Now, I'm sure you've had that kind of thing happen to you. You've had someone "listen" to you in that way.

How did you feel? You probably didn't feel heard. You probably didn't feel valued.

That's because, in that situation, you were just an object to that person. You and your story – your thoughts and feelings – were just another prop in their story. *Your story wasn't even about you.* It was about them and their story.

Now, that sounds pretty harsh, and the reality is that all of us do that kind of thing at least some of the time. But some of us do it almost all the time. We're not really listening to people because it's all about us and how they are helping us or hindering us.

Only when we begin to see people as “people” – when we believe that they really matter (even with all their junk and all their crap and all their sin) – only then will we be open to listening to what they say.

That’s the first thing we learned many years ago – a mindset.

2. The second thing we learned is the phrase “Can you help me understand?”

For example ...

- Can you help me understand why you did this or didn’t do that?
- Can you help me understand why you believe that?
- Can you help me understand why you’re angry right now?

The great value of this phrase (beside the fact that it almost always ratchets down the emotion) is that it keeps us from jumping to negative conclusions about someone else and gives them a chance to be to us a real person.

What typically happens when someone makes us mad is that we horribilize them. We make them out to be a monster which, of course, we *need* them to be in order to justify our anger towards them.

After all, if he's not horrible, then why am I screaming at him?

Or, we profile an individual based on what we think of the "group" with which we associate them.

- "Well, you're just an old conservative white guy who's been blinded by your

years of privilege.”

- “Well, you’re just a mindless liberal who’s been brainwashed by the liberal establishment.”

In both cases, we’re turning a person into an object that is either helping us or hindering us.

But when we say to someone “can you help me understand,” we’re inviting them to become human to us. And we that means we can really listen ... and learn ... and maybe even begin to love them like God loves us.

As I was preparing for this message, I got an email from Rick Warren, who is pastor of Saddleback Church in California. Not a personal email – I’ve never met him, I’m just on his mailing list.

Anyway, I thought what he wrote really captured the spirit of this phrase, so I'm going to read it to you.

When someone comes to us and expresses a negative emotion – they're mad, sad, depressed, bitter – sometimes our first reaction is to get defensive.

- We say "Yes, but what about ... ?"
- Or we try to solve it.
- Or we compare the problem to someone else's.

That's invalidating someone's pain, because when we try to change the subject from the pain of our black communities, we're saying that their pain isn't as important as someone else's. We're talking over them. We're refusing to listen.

Could we sit for just a minute to absorb that

person's pain – even if we don't understand it? Could we be empathetic for just a few seconds before we get defensive?

That's called maturity. That's called love. That's called being Christlike.

When someone brings their pain to you, don't compare it, equate it, rush to a solution, or get defensive – just LISTEN. It's called "the ministry of presence."

And maybe, just maybe, they'll do the same thing for you when you're in pain.^v

Application

So, this week, your assignment – should you choose to accept it – is two-fold.

- First, as you're communicating with

others, ask yourself is this person a person to me or just an object which I perceive to be helping me or hindering me?

- And second, when you find yourself feeling angry or stressed with someone (or they with you), instead of being quick to be angry and quick to speak, be quick to ask, "can you help me understand ___?"

For bonus points, tell someone else that this is what you're trying to do this week.

Of course, as with all things of this nature, this is an issue of what's in your heart because, as we've said on more occasions than I can remember, you can only give to others what you have already received.

That principle applies here, too.

So, what have we been given – those of us who are believers in and followers of Jesus – that can help us improve how we communicate with others?

How about this?

- God is quick to listen to us – He hears our prayers.
- He is slow to speak – He is slow to pronounce judgment and condemnation.
- And He is slow to become angry – to carry that out.

And when we experience that grace from

Him in Christ, when our life is rooted in that, then we are able to turn around and hand that out to others.

- We can value them because He has valued us.
- We can seek to understand them because He has sought to understand us.
- We can listen to them because He has listened to us.

So, with that in mind, as we close, I want us to have a moment where we can experience God listening to us.

I've asked Richard to do a specific song for us that reminds us that God is present, and He is waiting for us to talk to Him.

So for the next few minutes, be still, know that He is with you and share whatever is on your heart with Him. He's listening because you matter to Him. You're a person not an object to Him.

And, therefore, you can treat others the same way.

Endnotes

ⁱ Acts 8:1

ⁱⁱ <http://preachingsource.com/journal/preaching-from-the-book-of-james/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/commentaries/IVP-NT/Jas/Be-Quick-Listen>

^{iv} <https://www.stephencovey.com/7habits/7habits-habit5.php>

^v Rick Warren email from June 4, 2020