

Communication Matters
The Wisdom of Waiting
March 22, 2015

PRELUDE – “Who Is Like Our God?”
Worship Songs – Who Is Like Our God / Our God’s Alive
Announcements – Video
Feature – “Say” / Offering

Good morning everyone.

As Nathan said, today we’re continuing in our very brief series *Communication Matters* which is based on a very brief passage – two phrases, actually – from the New Testament book of James (who was the brother of Jesus and who, at one point, became head of the church in Jerusalem).

Here’s what he wrote. This is the passage:

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)

We saw last week from the context of what came before this passage that James was very concerned that those who considered themselves to be Christians – those who believed in Jesus alone as their savior – James was very concerned with how their faith impacted their lives *when things were not going well*. I mean, it’s fairly easy to be a Christian when things are going well, right?

But things were not going well for the people to whom James was writing. They were Jewish by birth but had been thrown out of the synagogues (and in some cases thrown out of their families) for worshipping Jesus as God. That made them, in the eyes of Rome, a “new religion” ... which then made them a target of state persecution. So they were stressed. Things were not going the way they should. Their expectations were not being met.

So when James was writing this brief statement he was telling them “if your faith is maturing – if it is really beginning to root itself in your life in the way that it should – then even in the middle of trials and tribulations this is what your communication with one another and (even with God) will look like.”

You will be ...

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

Now, as we did last week, I’m going to ask you to read that with me out loud. Here we go. <READ>

And, again, as I said last week, this little formula is the corrective that almost all of us need to begin applying to our interpersonal communications ... because ... it is the *exact opposite* of what comes naturally to most of us. Most of us, when we get stressed ... when things don’t go the way we expect or desire ...

Most of us are ...

- Quick to become angry ... we let things get to us instead of letting them go.
- We are quick to speak ... we transmit our anger verbally or non-verbally; we explode or we become passive-aggressive depending on our personality traits.
- We are slow to listen ... and sometimes we never do.

Now, clearly this is a very destructive pattern of communication. And if you do it long enough, eventually the secondary trauma that *it* causes will eventually become *the primary problem* in the relationship and it will become impossible to communicate about *anything* ... which means that healing the initial traumas (the offenses that produced the anger in the first place) will become almost impossible.

And, as I said last week, as a pastor, sometimes I just want to shake people who are mindlessly following this pattern and say “do you realize how much harder you are making it for yourselves? The issues between you and your spouse (or whoever) are *not* insurmountable. Your situation is no different from thousands of other couples in this town. But the damage you are creating in how you are responding to those issues is heading in that direction.”

And that’s why it’s important that we unlearn this sin-driven pattern and, instead, adopt the pattern James lays out for us ... which is ... what?

Fill in the blanks for me:

- Quick to what? _____ (Listen)
- Slow to what? _____ (Speak)
- Slow to become what? _____ (Angry)

Why So Quick to Speak

Now, last week we talked about what it means to be “quick to listen” (as well as everything else I just said but in much greater detail). And if you were not here, I just want to say that was probably one of the best messages I’ve ever done on the subject, so you might want to check it out online in the media section of our website.

But today we’re going to move to the second part of what James is teaching: “be slow to speak.”

Obviously, I think, that’s the other side of the coin of “quick to listen.” In other words, if you are quick to listen you will also, by definition, be slow to speak. If your ears (and your heart) are truly open, you’ll keep your mouth shut until it is time to speak. On the flip side, if you are quick to speak you’ll also, by definition, be slow to listen.

So ... a good place to begin, I think, is to ask: *why are we so quick to speak?* Why, when something happens that we don’t like – something that puts us under stress; something that doesn’t meet our expectations – why are we so quick to react by speaking our minds (or, if we’re more introverted, acting out in passive-aggressive ways) instead of listening and evaluating before we respond.

I'm sure there are many reasons but, in my experience, I see two main factors at work. And I see these things not only in others and in our culture. I see them in myself. So, I'm kind of an expert on this (which isn't necessarily a good thing).

I think we're quick to speak because ...

1. We believe it is our *right to speak*.

One of the fundamental rights of citizens of this country – and of every free democracy – we've been told, is “freedom of expression” and, more particularly, “freedom of speech.” *No one*, we believe, has the right to tell us what we can or cannot think and say. No one has the right to silence our voice and our opinions.

Of course, the actual “right” that's granted to us because of our citizenship has to do with *the government* not being able to tell us what we can think or say and *the government* not having the right to silence our voice and opinions. But, as humans often do, we exaggerate that and extend it to apply to everyone and everything ...

... a tendency which is culturally reinforced by the ever-increasing number of venues in which *we are able to speak* – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Forums, E-mail, and text messages – to the point where, today, the belief that we have the right to speak is so culturally imbedded, so encouraged and so facilitated that it's almost hard to imagine *not speaking* (or not responding in some way) whenever the impulse strikes. We have an opinion on everything from religion to politics to the way Bill Self should coach the Jayhawks and we aren't afraid to give it – solicited or not. We know how everyone else should think and act even to the smallest, insignificant details of life and we can put it out there whenever we please.

That's the first major factor that I see.

The second factor is a lot more internal to each of us as individuals. Not only do we believe we have the right to speak ...

2. We believe it is our right *to be right ... and to convince others of our rightness*.

Most of us believe that when things don't go our way or when we are misunderstood or when others “just don't get it,” we have the right to say and do whatever it takes to prove them wrong and to convince them that we are correct and/or justified. And because we believe that, we are quick in our attempts to prove our point and to show others the error of their ways, especially if they have mistreated us.

Can you relate to that? Have you ever experienced that on either the giving or receiving end? If you have, you know just how destructive it can be to a relationship if it becomes a pattern.

One marriage therapist puts it like this:

“One of the main reasons many couples seem to recycle the same arguments over and over again is traceable to the fact that their efforts to resolve conflicts *are defeated by their need to be right* in their retelling, replaying, or reprocessing the details of the conflict, *rather than being able to attend to the emotional significance of the issue and why they are experiencing matters so differently from each other in the first place.*”¹

“Each person keeps insisting they are right by furiously justifying their position, by making their partner wrong and invalidating their partner’s point of view in order to win an argument ... This downward spiral causes vertigo from which it is hard to recover. The rule of thumb is: the more insistent, significant and serious you are about being right, the more difficult it is to recover.”ⁱⁱ

So, bottom line, a big part of the reason we are so quick to speak and slow to listen (the exact opposite of the pattern that characterizes spiritually mature Christian faith) is that we are rights-driven.

Now, that’s not to say that there isn’t a time and place when we need to insist on our rights. But there is a point – and many of us quickly and naturally gravitate to it – where we become so *demanding* about those rights and we make them such a priority that it becomes counterproductive to our relationships.

Holding Your Tongue

We’ll come back to that thought in a bit, but first we probably should define exactly what we mean by the phrase “slow to speak.”

I think it means not responding (verbally or non-verbally) to a person or a situation until two things have occurred.

#1. We have gained an adequate understanding of the person or situation *through listening*.

This is why James starts with the phrase “quick to listen.” (And, again, we talked about what that means last week).

#2. We have determined the most effective way to express ourselves ... if it’s even necessary.

Sometimes, when we have gained enough understanding, we realize there is no point – no value – in responding at all. We should just offer grace and let it go ... or ... we should avoid “casting our pearls before swine” as Jesus once put it.

But, more often than not, a response *is* warranted and, in those cases, being slow to speak means carefully considering our approach and choosing the most effective way – the way that addresses (and hopefully resolves) the issue without causing unnecessary damage and destruction: that “secondary trauma” that comes from consistently repeating the natural human pattern ... which is actually one of the main concerns behind James writing this letter in the first place.

As I told you last week, James wasn’t simply doling out generic advice to a set of generic individuals who might one day come across his writings. James was a pastor and he was writing to little communities of faith – little churches made up of believers-in-Jesus who had spread all over the Roman Empire because of persecution. And he was concerned that the pressure from the trials and tribulations they were experiencing was negatively affecting how they communicated with one another.

In fact, in the fourth chapter of his letter, he directly addresses the arguments and fights that were consistently breaking out among them.

He writes:

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you?

You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. James 4:1-2 (NIV)

Notice what he's saying there? "The reason behind your fights is the demand for your rights – what you want and what you think you deserve that you are not currently getting."

Anyway ... part of James' purpose in writing this letter (which might have actually been a collection of sermons he had given) was to impress on these Christ-followers the level of gravity with which they needed to approach their manner of communicating with one another ...

... which is why he told them ...

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. James 1:26 (NIV)

"It's not doing them any good at all in everyday life and they're fooling themselves if they think it is."

More importantly, not keeping a tight rein on their tongues ... being quick to speak ... was incredibly dangerous as James went on to explain a bit later in his letter.

In Chapter 3 he gives a vivid analogy.

When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.

Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. James 3:3-5 (NIV)

In other words, it has great power far beyond its relative size – just like a small bit or a small rudder also has great power beyond its relative size.

He continues:

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. James 3:5-6 (NIV)

Not a very positive outlook, is it?

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. James 3:7-8 (NIV)

Wow! That's pretty intense isn't it?

Now when you combine that very dark but realistic understanding with our belief that *it's our right to speak* and *our right to be right*, you can see why James says "Slow down! Listen and understand before you just let it rip, because once you do – once you let your tongue loose in anger and self-justification – it's like a wildfire. It's hard to stop. So, you'd better

take control of it or it will take control of you and the people around you.”

“Slow down,” James says, “and *think* about what you’re going to say and *how you’re going to say it* because even though your words may seem small and inconsequential, they have great power to destroy.”

And some of you know exactly what he’s talking about because you have been on the receiving end of that kind of destruction.

And some of you, sadly, are in the process of learning that lesson right now because your words have pushed people you love away from you. Your words are destroying your relationships. And you need to wise up. You listen closely to the rest of this message but more than that you need to give up the right to be right.

And I say that from experience because this is a lesson I had to learn (and continue to learn). I mentioned last week that there was a time when our three daughters were younger that Jetta came to me on several occasions and told me that she and the girls didn’t know how to handle those times when I would express frustration verbally and non-verbally (and not particularly at them). But instead of listening to what they were saying, my approach was to justify myself and point out the deficiencies of their character.

“My words and actions in those moments don’t mean what you all think they mean. You all need to get a thicker skin” I said.

Translation: “I don’t need to change anything because I’m right. And I’m hanging on to the right to be right until you all admit you’re wrong. End of discussion.”

But that approach didn’t solve anything. It didn’t draw my kids closer to me. In fact, it pushed them further away. “They’re afraid of you, Rick. They don’t feel like they can talk to you.”

Eventually, through the grace of God, I finally realized that being right wasn’t worth it; that even if I was right (and I was at some level because all of us *do* need to develop thicker skin) I needed to let it go. Instead of focusing on my rightness and *winning the point*, I needed to “attend to the emotional significance of the issue” and because of that significance, attempt to change the way I communicated both verbally and non-verbally.

And that’s still a work in process (as those who know me would testify). I still need to work on my communication and on giving up the right to be right. And some of you are in the same spot and the sooner you admit it and embrace this principle, the sooner all of the secondary trauma caused by your bullheaded communication pattern will begin to heal ... and you will be able to deal with the foundational issues in your relationships.

To Speak or Not to Speak

Of course, with all of that said, some of you are thinking, “Wow, Rick, I just need to shut my mouth and not say anything about anything.”

Well, the Bible *does* say that ...

Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.

... so that's not a totally unreasonable strategy.

However, as the song before the message put it, there is a point where we need to say what we need to say. There's a time to be silent and time to speak (according to the writer of Ecclesiastes). And knowing when to do one or the other *and* how to speak when it's time makes all the difference in the world.

So let's talk about that for a bit. How do you know when it's time to speak up?

Well, let's look at something once written by another Christian leader who had a pastoral heart like James– the Apostle Paul, who also wrote letters to Christ-followers out of a similar concern for their relationships with one another.

In one of those letters (to the Ephesians) he wrote:

Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of malicious behavior.
Ephesians 4:31 (NLT)

I think this is a pretty good barometer for us to use if you're a person who has faith in Christ. When these kinds of emotions and behaviors become characteristic of you, that's a sign that you have to say something. Specifically ...

1. If you are developing a bitter attitude, it's probably time to speak.

If most of your thoughts about a certain person are negative; if you've begun to question their value and worth as a human being; if all you can think about is the grief that they bring to you ... that's *bitterness*.

And Paul says get rid of it. Deal with it, because it will destroy you.

#2. If you have imaginary conversations in which you get very angry, it's probably time to speak.

If, in your head, you have an ongoing dialogue with the other person where you are sarcastic and cutting, especially if you're not a person who typically uses harsh words in conversations with others ... that's a sign that you'd better deal with the issue.

#3. Finally, if your feelings lead to gossip, it's probably time to speak.

If you repeatedly tell others what you're *really* thinking about this person while you continue to smile in their face ... that's gossip at best, slander at worst.

It's also, to use Paul's phrase, "malicious behavior" because the other person never gets the opportunity to defend themselves in front of the person you're dumping on *and* they never get to hear the feedback they desperately need. Everybody else hears what *they* need to hear instead of them. That's malice. That's doing things to hurt someone.

Now, notice that in giving those three conditions, I said "*probably* you should speak up." And the reason I said probably is because sometimes the reason we're bitter or angry or gossiping is because we're messed up somehow. In other words, the issue is more about what's going on inside of us and not what they're doing. In those cases, we need to deal

with ourselves and our sin first before saying anything. And it could be that once we deal with our sin, the bitterness or anger and the desire to slander goes away. And in that case, it's probably best to keep silent.

Say What You Need to Say

But let's say that we realize it's time for us to speak up. It's time to say what we need to say. We've been quick to listen and we have gained understanding of the situation and the person. And we've been slow to speak. We have kept our tongue under control instead of just letting it loose.

How do we go about saying what needs to be said in the most effective way: the way that addresses (and hopefully resolves) the issue without causing unnecessary damage and destruction?

Here's some advice that Paul gave in the 4th chapter of his letter to the Ephesians:

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. Ephesians 4:29 (NIV)

So what does that look like in practice? Let me give you several examples. And I'll tell you right up front that you already know these things and I know I'm not telling you anything new. But it helps to be reminded of them.

1. Avoid communication that devalues the other person.

In 1980, psychologists at the University of Denver set out to discover what causes marital breakup. They studied more than a hundred couples - both successful and unsuccessful - to see if they could identify what made the difference. What they discovered was surprising: *none of the things couples typically use as reasons for divorce are significant.*

- There is little correlation between personality differences and marital breakup.
- There is also no significant correlation between whether couples had different family or economic backgrounds
- And no there is relationship to what they fight about, be it making the beds or making love.

The key issue is how couples handle conflict. Typically, those whose relationships are at risk tend to devalue one another during disagreements. Specifically, they ...

- Escalate negativity. This is when one partner says something negative, then the other says something negative back (but a little bit nastier), and so on, with increasing intensity.
- Invalidate each other through insults or by putting down or ignoring what the other says or does.
- Withdraw by leaving, becoming silent, or changing the subject.
- Negatively interpret what the partner is saying or doing, most typically by inferring that his or her motives are more negative than is really the case. ⁱⁱⁱ

Number two ... somewhat related to number one ...

2. Never ever direct profanity at the other person.

And I mean *never*.

The Bible says that ...

The heart of the righteous weighs its answers, but the mouth of the wicked gushes forth evil. Proverbs
15:28 (NIV)

Instead of cooling off, scripture is saying, the mouth of the wicked just verbally dumps out whatever evil comes to mind. And, friends, we live in a culture where it is more and more acceptable to dump out evil in the form of profanity.

But it's just foolish to do that in relationships. I mean, really, does directing profanity at another person build or damage the relationship? Think about it. What kind of effect is created when we say to someone 'damn you?'" Just think literally about the meaning of that phrase. "Damn you" (or worse).

Now, sometimes I hear people say, "I know that directing profanity at others is not good for relationships, but sometimes when you get mad you just cannot stop."

But that's not true. Once you start you may not be able to stop (that's why James gives us such a dire warning about the power of the tongue), but you *can* avoid starting.

Just last week, I went golfing and I joined up with three guys who were very prolific in their use profanity. And, we played a few holes until the inevitable happened. You know what I'm talking about. One of the guys says to me ... "so, Rick, what do you do for a living?" and I tell him. And when I'm hunting for my ball in the weeds, I'm quite certain that he then tells the other two guys that I'm a pastor.

And I'm certain of that because, while the profanity doesn't completely stop, it reduces to about a third of what it was. Why? Because you might not be able to stop the stream once it starts but you can avoid starting it.

3. Avoid public correction/criticism whenever possible.

Sometimes, it's not possible. Sometimes, you have no choice but to, for instance, correct your kids publicly because of some immediate danger they are in. But, in general, if you want to build relationships, you don't do this publicly. More specifically *do not ever* correct or criticize your spouse in public. It's just foolish.

The Bible says ...

A man who lacks judgment derides his neighbor,

i.e. he foolishly embarrasses him in front of the rest of the neighbors ...

... but a man of understanding holds his tongue.
Proverbs 11:12 (NIV)

He waits until he can discuss the matter privately because that protects the honor of his neighbor and the relationship they have.

4. Use “I feel” statements instead of blaming.

Proverbs says ...

A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult. Proverbs 12:16 (NIV)

As soon as he’s irritated, a foolish person starts blaming, but a prudent person will not respond to the insult and deal with the issue in a wise way ... which is to focus on “how I feel as a result of your behavior.”

Now, why is this wise? Well, it’s almost impossible to debate how someone feels. If my wife says, “I feel sick today,” I can’t say, “well no you don’t.” You just can’t even debate it. If I feel something, I feel it.

And by letting you know how I feel, I offer you the opportunity to do something about it without condemning you – without making you feel like a loser. That builds relationships instead of damaging them.

On the other side of the “feelings coin” ...

5. Do not invalidate the other person’s feelings.

If we’re going to build relationships instead of damaging them, we’ve got to be able to listen to people’s “I feel” statements without invalidating them.

Specifically, saying something like “How can you possibly feel that way? How can my language possibly hurt you?” ... is an invalidation. That makes someone feel stupid.

But, Rick, what if I really don’t understand why my husband or wife or my mom or dad feels that way? What if it doesn’t make sense to me and I’m frustrated by it?

Try this phrase instead: “Could you help me understand why what I did causes you to feel that way. I really want to get this because I don’t want you to be feeling that way because I’m not intending to be as insensitive as a brick. Really I’m not. So help me understand how this plays out.”

When you do that, you build relationships instead of damaging them.

6. Choose suggestion over manipulation.

This is one that been very helpful to me because I’m a “D”, dominant personality, on the D.I.S.C. profile. People who are D’s on the D.I.S.C profile tend to be manipulative of people without even knowing it.

Here are the kinds of things we naturally say:

- “You should”

- “You ought to ...”
- “Wouldn’t you agree that ...?”

Now, what that communicates is “If you don’t think like me or do what I would do, then you must be stupid,” It manipulates people to the point where they think either, “I’ve got to do what you say or you’re not going to like me or you’re going to think I’m dumb.”

And if you’re thinking right now, “Aw, that’s not what people should think when I say this stuff” then you have this problem.

A better way than the “should and ought” approach is the suggestive approach.

- “Have you ever thought about ...”
- “Have you ever tried ... ”
- “What if you ...”
- “Would you be open to hearing a suggestion?”

What that communicates to the person is, “I’ve got some ideas that might be helpful to you and you probably should hear them because I’m a pretty smart guy. But, I respect that you, too, are an intelligent person so you don’t need me to tell you what to think or what to do.”

People like when you treat them that way. It builds relationships instead of tearing them down.

Waiting for God

I suppose we could keep adding to the list but I think you get the point. I think if we could implement even half of those kinds of things on a consistent basis in an attempt to *think about what we’re going to say and how we’re going to say it*, we’d see some big changes in our relationships.

But as we close this out, I want to shift gears very briefly and invite you to think about being quick to listen and slow to speak in another way.

As I’ve studied this particular passage we’re looking at in James, more than one biblical commentator has pointed out that he seems to be just as concerned with how Christ-followers are relating to God in times of trials and tribulations as they are to one another ... and that “be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” also applies to *how we are to communicate with Him*.^{iv}

Specifically, these are the qualities that are essential in trials. We cannot learn and grow if we do not silence our own thoughts and wisdom long enough to listen for God’s voice. We cannot be comforted and corrected if we are angry about our situation.

So, this morning as we close, our band is going to do a song about being quick to listen and slow to speak with God. It’s called waiting. And I want to invite you in the next few moments to visualize whatever trial or trouble surrounds you and to express your willingness to learn and grow as you wait for him to speak or act in your life.

Feature – “While I’m Waiting” John Waller

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. Women's event this Friday – not too late to sign up!
2. Men – we get our night at the K in May (details in program)
3. Turn & Greet on your way out

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://www.richardbjoelsonsw.com/main/index.php/newsletter-articles/180-having-to-be-right.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://help-my-relationship.com.s31408.gridserver.com/saving-marriages/tag/action-reaction/>

ⁱⁱⁱ

http://www.ethicalhealthcare.org/CMDA/ResourcesServices2/Publications1/Today_s_Christian_Doctor/1995TCD/TCD_Fall_1995_Vol_26.aspx

^{iv} <http://70030.netministry.com/apps/articles/?articleid=33629&columnid=3803>