

Can We Talk?
Hold It Right There!
June 14, 2020

Good morning!

It's great to see all of you who are in the room today and great to see that our number is increasing every week.

And, if you're watching online, thank you for staying connected with us by tuning in today. I hope you'll be able to come back and join us *in person* very soon.

But regardless of whether you're in here or "out there" right now, I'm glad you're watching or listening because what we're talking about in this series is extremely relevant and important, given the tension so many of us feel these days.

I'm talking about ...

- Tension arising from fear of the coronavirus
- Tension over the shutdown and what it's done to us economically and relationally
- Tension over what's happening as our country confronts and debates, once again, the scourge of racism.

And all of that's on top of whatever it is we're already dealing with in our personal lives.

- Anxiety and stress over health issues, family problems, job concerns.
- Things in general not going the way they should
- Expectations not being met

And when people feel that kind of tension externally and internally – especially over a protracted period of time, they – we – become very sensitive and amped up. We become easily hurt and offended by the people around us.

And we adopt patterns of responding and interacting which are destructive to our relationships and to our community at large.

It doesn't take a rocket-scientist to see that's what's happening these days all over the country ... whether it's in face-to-face interactions or through unsocial media.

And the sad irony of the whole thing is that ...

The *secondary* trauma from repeated destructive communications has become the *primary* problem ... making it impossible to communicate about *anything*.

In other words, instead of just the initial problem such as ...

- Racism
- Or coronavirus policy
- Or our marriage
- Or, even, what we're having for dinner

... because of our amped-up communication, there's now *an additional problem* – a pain point – that overshadows everything else.

It's kind of like when you break a bone that requires surgery to repair. Sometimes the swelling around that bone is so bad that the doctor has to wait for it to go down before he/she can operate.

In that case, the *secondary* issue – inflammation of tissue around the bone – has become the *primary* issue. And until that is

dealt with, there is simply no way to address the initial injury.

And it works the same way in relationships and communication. The secondary trauma from repeated destructive communication eventually becomes the primary problem.

And when that happens, we can't talk about "the issue" – the *initial* problem – in a way that might actually begin to make some progress because the swelling from *the way we've been talking about the issue* is so great.

And ...

- Maybe because I am a pastor ...
- Maybe because I'm old and I've seen it happen so frequently ...
- Maybe because of the damage I did to

many of my own relationships before, by the grace of God, I figured this out ...

I am so sick and tired of seeing people I know – and even people I don't know (like politicians and pundits) – who are unable to address *the real issues* because the emotional swelling caused by their destructive communication is so great.

Sometimes, I just want to get in their face and say, "do you realize how much harder you are making it?"

"Yes, the issues you are facing are *challenging*, but the damage you are creating in how you speak to one another – how you treat one another – is making them *insurmountable*. You'll never be able to address them (let alone solve them) because of the secondary trauma you've created by your communication."

“If something doesn’t change in that between
...

- You and your spouse
- You and your kids
- You and your boss, or that co-worker or employee ...

...the relationship is going to break. *But it doesn't have to be that way.*”

And that’s why we’re doing this series. You and I can follow a much better pattern; one that minimizes the swelling so that we can face and deal with the real issues.

And that’s what I want for myself, and for you.

And that’s what God wants for all of us...

... but especially for those of us who are

Christians because we are called to rise above the fray both in culture and in our personal lives. We're called to be part of the solution and not the problem in this world.

The Key Principle

And it was this concern that was on the heart of Pastor James, the brother of Jesus, who didn't even become a follower of Jesus until after he saw Jesus alive following Jesus' crucifixion.

If you were here last week, you know that we started looking at part of a letter he wrote back in the first century to a group of Christians who were dealing with a lot of tension in their lives.

I won't go back into all the reasons *why* that tension existed. If you missed last week's message you can go watch, listen to it, or

read it in the media section of our app and website. Or you can listen to it on the North Heartland podcast.

But, to a group of believers in and followers of Jesus who were stressed and constantly sniping at each other because things were not going the way they wanted, and their expectations (even of God) were not being met ...

James wrote...

*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)*

As I said last week, the word translated "righteousness" in that sentence could also be rendered "justice," so we could read it as "human anger does not produce the justice God desires."

And we'll talk more about that in next week's message.

But, just to be sure that his readers don't gloss over the importance of how they communicate with one another ...

A few sentences later James adds:

*Those who consider
themselves religious ...*

Those who think of themselves as spiritually

mature; those who think they are walking with God and living according to God's will ...

... 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)

It's not doing them or anyone else any good whatsoever.

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.

You'll 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.

And, again, as I said last week, this little formula is the corrective that almost all of us need to begin immediately applying to our interpersonal communications ... because ... it is the *exact opposite* of what comes naturally to 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're *quick* to *speak* ... we transmit our anger verbally or non-verbally; we explode, or we become passive-aggressive in our communication, depending on our personality type.
- We're *slow* to *listen* ... and sometimes we never do.

Now, clearly this is a very destructive pattern.

And if you follow 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*.

And that's why it's important that we unlearn this natural sin-driven pattern and, instead, adopt the pattern James lays out for us ...

Which is ... what?

Fill in the blanks for me.

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

Now, last week we focused on what it means to be "quick to listen" and if you missed the message, I really want to encourage you to check it out online. I think it will be very helpful to you given everything that's going on these days.

But, today, we're going to move to the second

part of what James is teaching: “be slow to speak” which is, obviously, the other side of the coin of being “quick to listen.”

In other words, if you’re *quick to listen*, then, by definition, you’ll also be *slow to speak*.

If your ears (and your heart) are truly open and seeking to understand, you’ll keep your mouth shut (or stay off social media) until it is time to speak.

On the flip side, if you’re quick to speak you’ll also, by definition, be slow to listen.

Why We’re Quick

So ... a good place to begin, I think, is to ask: *why are we so quick to speak and slow to listen?*

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 instead of first listening and seeking to understand?

I'm sure there are many reasons but, in my experience, I see two major factors at work – one cultural and one more personal.

First, I think we're quick to speak because of ...

1. The instant availability and ever-present demand of social media.

It's almost hard to believe that, not too long ago, most people had only two ways of communicating:

- By actually *talking* face-to-face (or ear-to-ear via phone)

- Or by writing a letter or note.

And both of those methods took time and, in some cases, a lot of time.

Today, however, the ever-increasing number of channels in which we *are able to speak* – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Forums, E-mail, and text messages ...

The sheer ability to speak our mind in so many ways almost demands that we do.

For most of us, social media is so culturally imbedded that it's almost hard to imagine *not speaking* (or not responding in some way) whenever the impulse strikes.

In addition to that – and we've seen a lot of this in recent days – there's pressure to "have a take" on everything from ...

- The coronavirus
- To the economy
- To Donald Trump
- To racism
- To the way Andy Reid should coach the Chiefs

Well, maybe not *that one* ...

There is pressure to “have a take” on *everything* ...

AND to put it out there NOW, lest we be perceived by others as being unaware or unsophisticated or uncaring. And, so we do. We put it out there now. We are quick to speak.

That’s the first major factor that I see.

The second is a lot more personal and internal to each of us as individuals.

Not only are we almost *compelled* to speak by “the system” ...

2. We're driven to convince others we are right.

Most of us think that ...

- When things don't go our way
- Or when we are misunderstood
- Or when others “just don't get it” ...

... we have 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."ⁱ

"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

And that describes where some of you are in your marriage right now, and how you got there.

Now, that's not to say that there isn't a time

and place when we need to present and even argue our case.

But there is a point – and many of us quickly and naturally gravitate to it – where we become so *demanding* about it that it becomes counterproductive to our relationships.

Wait For It

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 three things have occurred.

Number 1. We've 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 in great detail last week.

Number 2. We’re convicted that it’s necessary to speak up.

Because, sometimes, when we have gained enough understanding, it becomes clear there’s no point – no value – in responding at all. We should just offer grace and let it go.

Truth is ...

- Not all battles are worth fighting
- Not all arguments worth pursuing
- And not all points worth voicing.

Or ... sometimes ... we realize – especially in

relation to social media – that our “voice” isn’t necessary right now. We’re really not adding anything, at least not at the present time.

I think it’s very interesting that Jesus didn’t begin his public ministry until he was 30, which meant that He spent quite a bit of time as a grown man *without a public platform*. And it certainly wasn’t because he wasn’t qualified!

But he kept quiet; he was “slow to speak” because He knew *it simply wasn’t time* to speak ... a reality which would be good for some of us to consider as well.

So, being “slow to speak” means not responding verbally or online until we understand the person or the situation, and we’ve wrestled with whether it’s really

necessary.

And it also means holding off until ...

Number 3. We have considered the most effective way to express ourselves ...

... which leads us back to that issue of "secondary trauma."

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.

And just so you'll know, James was also concerned about this idea of secondary trauma and how quickly it can become the main thing.

A bit later in his letter, 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 size – just like a small bit or a small rudder also has great power beyond its 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 the constant cultural pressure to "have a take"
- Along with our inborn urge *to be right and to convince others of that ...*

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 (or your tweets or posts) 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 hasty words and your insistence on always being right have pushed people you love away from you.

Your communication is destroying your relationships. And you need to wise up.

Speak Now

Of course, with all of that said, some of you are thinking, "Wow, Rick, maybe I don't need to *wise up*. Maybe I need to *shut up* and just 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. Proverbs 17:28 (ESV)

Or, as someone else has put it: "it is better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to open one's mouth and remove all doubt."

So, "shutting up" is 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 to use if you're a person who follows Jesus (and even if you're not).

When these kinds of emotions and behaviors become characteristic of you, that's a sign that you have to say something.

Specifically – and I've shared this list before on more than one occasion so, hopefully, some of you will recognize it ...

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

- If most of your thoughts about a 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. You have to have a conversation.

#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

- *That* person never gets the opportunity to defend themselves in front of the person you're dumping your garbage 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 that hurt someone.

Avoiding Trauma

So, let's say that we realize it's time for us to speak up. It's time to "say what you 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've kept ourselves under control instead of just letting it loose.

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

Here's some advice that Paul gave just a few sentences before what we just read:

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)

Practically speaking, the question to ask before communicating – especially when we’re amped up – is “I am about to communicate in way that tears down or builds up?”

Let me say that again.

The question to ask before communicating – especially when we’re amped up – is “I am about to communicate in way that tears down or builds up?”

Of course, you can’t ask yourself that question if you’re quick to speak, which is why we need to be slow to speak.

So, let’s talk about communicating in ways

that tear down and ways that build up.

And I know 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 overstating the negative.

A while back, psychologists at the University of Denver studied more than a hundred married 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 correlation between whether couples come from 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 ...

- *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

They believe the worst about each other. And because of that they “horribilize” each other. They turn each other into “objects of wrath.”

Somewhat related to that ... to avoid causing unnecessary trauma ...

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. "You ought to be damned – eternally punished by God."

As if that's going to help!

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.

Occasionally, I'll go golfing by myself and I get joined up with a couple other guys, some of whom are quite proficient in their use of profanity.

And, typically, what happens is we play a few holes and then the inevitable happens.

One of them will say to me ... "so, Rick, what

do you do for a living?” and I tell him.

And I’m not exactly sure how it happens, but I’m quite certain that *he* then tells *the other guys* that I’m a pastor.

You know how I know? Because, while the profanity doesn’t completely stop, it reduces to about a third of what it was.

And do you know why that is? Because you might not be able to *stop* the stream once it starts, but you *can* avoid starting it.

So, to avoid causing unnecessary trauma to your relationships ... don’t start. Don’t direct profanity at another person.

Another thing – and I’ve personally learned this one the hard way ...

3. Hit “pause” before using email, text or social

media to express anger.

Proverbs says ...

A fool shows his annoyance at once ... Proverbs 12:16 (NIV)

And I have the emails to prove it. I've done it and I've regretted it every single time.

What happens to me – and probably to you, too – is when I get mad and I start writing, I become very eloquent and verbose about how right I am and how wrong you are. I become like Shakespeare.

And it's very easy to do that because it's all one-sided. I'm talking to you – at you – and you're not there to respond and push back.

And when I was younger – in my early years as a pastor – I hurt quite a few people this way and, in some of those cases, I ruined

relationships. It was over after that, even though I tried to apologize.

What I've done since then – and I recommend that you do the same – is one of two things.

- I write it all out and I let it sit overnight.
- Or, I write it and I send it to someone else who knows me and my propensity to fall into this ditch. And I invite them to give me feedback and correction.

In almost every case, one of two things happens:

- I realize that my anger is more about me and my junk than the person. They just hit a sensitive spot in me, so they don't deserve what I was going to pour out on them, so I don't. I hit delete.

- Or, I ratchet things down in what I've written so that the person is open to further dialogue.

If you want to keep from adding drama and trauma to your relationships, stop immediately expressing your anger through emails, texts, and posts.

4. Next suggestion I have is to use “I feel” statements instead of blaming.

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.

The Bible says ...

A man who lacks judgment derides his neighbor, but a man of understanding holds his tongue. Proverbs 11:12 (NIV)

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 or “deriding” 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 using the phrase we talked about last week instead: *Can you help me understand?*

"Can you help me understand why what I did causes you to feel that way? I really want to 'get this' because I'm not intending to be as insensitive as a brick. Really, I'm not. So, help me understand how this is affecting you."

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

Assignment & Conclusion

Well, I suppose we could keep adding to the list but, I think you get the point. You're smart. You know these things.

But, can you imagine what it would be like if everyone in our country who claims to follow Jesus would implement even half of them on a consistent basis?

I think we'd see some big changes. The dialogue would feel completely different and we could start focusing on the problems we face, one of which isn't "the other side."

But maybe that's too much to imagine so let's narrow it down.

What if just the people in this room or watching online did some of these things for just one week?

- One week of not immediately

responding to every single issue in the whole world.

- One week of sleeping on it before hitting “enter” or “send” on those angry words.
- Maybe even a week of no cable news or, dare I even think it – no social media. “Oh, but the world will end without my take.”
- One week of thinking about – and then adjusting – how we’re going to communicate before we do.

What would happen if all of *us* did things that lead to peace instead of things that amplify conflict and increase the secondary trauma? Just for one week?

I think it would be worth finding out, so *that’s my challenge to you*. For the next week, be

“slow to speak” as much as possible.

And just see what happens.

Of course, as we always say (because it's true) ... You can only give to someone else what you've already received yourself. You can't fill someone else's cup when your own tank is empty.

... which means, in this case, you can't be a person who brings peace to your communication unless peace already exists inside of you.

And for some of us that's where we need to start. We need to turn to the source of peace – God himself – and cast all of our cares on Him instead of carrying them by ourselves.

So, I've asked the band to lead us in a song that helps us to do that.

- If you're in the room, I'm going to ask you to stand right now.
- If you're watching online, turn up the volume so you can sing along on this, too.

Don't check out on us just yet. OK?

1. Next week – “slow to become angry” ... why we get angry and how to handle it (instead of expressing it in ways that are destructive).
2. Sign up for 9:30/11
3. Thanks for giving online or thru the mail.

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://www.richardboelssonsw.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/>

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