

Growing Your Ears

James 1: 19-21

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**January 22, 2017
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

Here is a passage written to describe my wife, “Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.” Rhonda follows this verse quite naturally. She has listened patiently to me since I was 17, and the remarkable thing is she doesn’t act like she’s being patient. It always seems to me that she wants to hear. She chooses her words carefully, and it takes a long time to get her angry. In fact few people have the skill to provoke her to wrath. I, unfortunately, have studied long and hard to be able to do it...

As natural as this verse is for her to obey, it is completely unnatural to me. I’m part of a club. Membership requires that people can say of you, “He never had unexpressed thought.” If I feel it, I’ll probably say it. And regarding anger, well, as the old song says, “It only takes a spark to get a fire going...” I can be provoked to anger by a tiny spark. No, you don’t usually see it, but there are several who grew up in my house who will testify, “Watch out when he squints his eyes.” *Speak little, listen much.*

John Gray, the author of the hugely popular *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* suggests this is a man/woman thing. Generally, Gray says, women, in personal relationships, speak to express feelings and respond in words to express empathy. Men speak and respond in order to solve problems.

1737 So a typical scene in a typical bedroom one night during the week might go like this. The husband is watching Sports Center. The wife puts down her magazine and says, “Honey, I want to talk you to about something.”

He knows better than to express what he feels at that moment. So he says, “Sure, dear, what’s on your mind?” What he really wants to know is what kind of trouble he is in and how fast can he get back to the scores.

“Well, I went to the school today. The traffic was terrible, and now they make you park about three blocks from the office, so I...”

Meanwhile, he's thinking to himself, "What's this about? Interview with Ed Orgeron up next. I've got to find the point here." So he asks, just a little more urgently than he intended, "Well what happened when you finally got there?"

"Jesse's teacher says she's not getting enough direction in organizing herself at home..."

"That's it!" he thinks. "This is about organization. I can fix that!" His heart is racing now. He's ready to speak and get this done.

But she continues, "She said that if Jesse had some more guidance from us, she..."

"So, look, we'll draw up an organizational chart. She can have chores to complete every day or no allowance, no TV, no weekend friends."

"But, dear,"

"I'll draw it up. You can give it to her tomorrow."

"John, you never listen to me!"

"What do you mean I don't listen? I said we'd fix the problem. What more do you want?" All hope for Sports Center is gone.

Men, says Gray, listen for two beats and then think of a solution. They figure if it's important enough to talk about, they must be responsible for solving it. So they fix it and can't figure out why their wives are so frustrated.

Women, says Gray, want to talk about how the event feels, and consider what it means before deciding anything. They don't realize that the more they express of their feelings, the more their husbands feel they have to be in trouble for something. And so it goes. Of course these are generalizations, but we can feel the difference in temperaments among people.

Everyone should be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to get angry, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires. This is hard work for many of us. Listening requires a great discipline of focus. It can feel to us like a waste of time, when in fact we are pouring forth a great deal of creative, loving energy.

Few of us realize the power in listening. It is an enormous force. Listening can create transformation. Listening heals. Listening is such a potent exercise that even the appearance of listening can affect others. I once read of a study which showed that patients whose doctors sat down in their hospital room felt that those doctors had spent more time with them, and listened more, even if the time of the visit was exactly the same, or less, than if the doctors had been standing.

To begin, listening means we have to stop moving so fast and turn ourselves toward another person. One of the swords in my heart is the feeling that I am too often just a moving target to my children and my colleagues. They want to tell me something, but have to do it while I am moving from one place to another, putting this away, picking that up, going through the mail, changing clothes, thinking of chores to be done. What kind of message is that? I remember a guy in high school who was a real big shot. He'd ask me a question, then walk away while I was in mid answer. Am I doing that to the people I love the most? Listening has to do with laying down one's life by stopping one's racing mind and restless body enough to turn towards another and communicate, "You are worth my time."

Listening also has to do with regard. We confer significance upon the one to whom we listen. When we stop talking ourselves, and about ourselves, and ask to listen to another person, we are communicating, "I regard you as being as interesting as I am, as worthy of time and attention as I am." For those of us who place ourselves at the center of the universe, this may be a difficult shift. Oh, there are some people to whom it's easy to listen. We hang on every word of the people who are so intoxicatingly beautiful that it doesn't matter what they say. We listen intently to those skilled enough to command attention, or to those with power that can affect our lives. But how about the ordinary, garden variety person? We may not naturally feel drawn to listen and regard someone who doesn't spin our heads or quicken our pulse. We need an intentional shift in the way we view the people around us.

C. S. Lewis in his essay "The Weight of Glory," opens our eyes to the extraordinary glory that resides potentially in every frail, failing human being you meet. He writes, "It is a serious thing...to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship..." What God will make of us as we grow to be more and more like Christ means that the dimmest person you meet could one day outshine an angel.

George Herbert put it another way. He noted that the country pastor in his rounds must enter every cottage no matter how “loathsome it might smell.” And you can bet that in England in 1600, the cottages of the poor were plenty loathsome. The pastor goes to such homes, though, because inside, “there is God and one for whom God died.”

The motor mouth at the next desk, the man who stands too close when he talks, the woman who’s forgotten that eight pounds of make-up and a short skirt won’t make her twenty again, the long-winded neighbor, the stammering relative, the interrupting child, the needy client—there is one for whom God died. There is one in whom God is weaving a mighty story. There is one who could one day be glorified with Christ and shine in splendor. As Lewis says, all these dullards are potential gods and goddesses.

Be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to get angry. It helps in listening to remember how important to God is each person to whom you have the opportunity to listen, how endlessly interesting to God his children are. After all, God himself delights to listen to us! He pines to hear what we have to say. He, the King of kings, attends us when we pray. He waits for us to speak to him. Such dignity and worth God confers on us, and asks us to confer on others in his name.

It helps in listening to pretend you are a sleuth attempting to solve a mystery. You are Sherlock Holmes watching, waiting and sniffing for clues. What is this person telling me about what matters in her life? Everyone has passion for something. What gives her delight? Everyone carries a burden of pain—how does her pain get expressed in what she’s saying? This person is unique in all the world. If I were to compose a prayer of thanksgiving for her life, what would I mention? Listening to people can be fascinating, if we learn to regard them properly. We gently handle what they have been through, we honor where they are, and we anticipate what God is making them to be.

Such listening doesn’t mean just nodding our heads or parroting back what we hear. It involves active, creative inquiry and sympathetic response. Listening is more than being a wall. As we receive another’s story, we can make comparisons. When I have been in a similar situation? How did I feel? How would I feel if I were in this situation?” We do this not so we can interrupt with our story, but so we can connect, at a level of deep fellow feeling. Our listening expresses sympathy, and communicates a connection to the one who’s speaking.

A few football seasons ago, I received an unsigned letter in the mail from an unknown address. It arrived three days after the Miami Dolphins, my team since childhood, had suffered a humiliating loss to the dreaded New York Jets. All that was on the page was numbers—21-16, the score of the game, and a verse, Job 2: 13. I went to my Bible and read, “So they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him; for they saw that his grief was very great.” I knew who sent it. I knew this was a verse he lived by, and not just in times of silly losses like football games. He understood the value of being there for someone, of listening without speaking. Not in a wooden way, but in an attached, caring, way, staying seven days and seven nights if need be, just to be there.

The power of a listening presence is amazing. I can remember a time when a teenager in the church had lost her mother quite suddenly. Already emotionally and mentally fragile, this dear girl was at risk for a huge crash. Her friends poured out their love by their presence. When I returned to the home, I was particularly moved by all the young people who were at the house. They came from all over, some just from across town, some returned from college. They came, and they sat, and they listened. They didn’t leave when it got hard. They didn’t tire. Some stayed 24 hours a day. Just to say by their presence, “You can’t fall. We are here. We have you.” And they listened without judging, to whatever feelings came out. They listened, received, inquired, hugged, and hung in there. There is power in listening, power to heal and transform.

Psalm 14:3 says “Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips.” That’s a prayer I need to pray every day. God shut my mouth before the wrong thing comes out. The wrath of man does not accomplish the righteousness of God. If I’m burning to slam someone, it’s probably not constructive. If I’m bursting to spew it out, it’s probably not what is needed. God put some duct tape on my mouth. Put an interrupting chip in my brain—let there be a ten second delay between my feeling reaction and my mouth’s expression, so I have time to think, to choose, to detach. Make me slow to speak, slow to anger.

Because you and I have something much more powerful to do than mouthing off. Do we think it expresses power if we can give someone a tongue lashing? It’s easy to hurt people with words; there’s very little skill even in the wittiest put downs. *The real power is in listening.* We can use our mouths to make inquiries, to ask to listen.

On the mission field of your daily life, you will meet many people. Play a game with yourself this week. Look for what is usually overlooked. Can you uncover a diamond in the rough? What stories of wonder can you receive? What stories of pain can you learn and then bear because of the inquiries you make? How many people can you see in a totally new light because you have asked to listen?

Remember, too, your *phone* is a powerful instrument of ministry. With it you can contact people all over town, all over the country and even the world. You can wield it to make inquiries, to bear pain, to offer sympathy, to be the ears of Christ in the world. So whether you are out and about, or at home, find a way to initiate listening. Slow down enough to be found by someone who may honor you by entrusting you with their words and their story.

Men, remember, listening doesn't mean you have to solve the problem! Women, remember to tell the men it's not their fault so they can relax. And men and women, "be gentle with each other, for everyone is bearing a heavy load."