

A significant percentage of our lives revolves around communication – whether it’s with people in our homes, friends in our retirement communities or churches, in our places of work, at a store, or a restaurant – remember when you used to go out to eat? – the doctor’s office, at school (online or physically there)....wherever we are, communication is important. And most everyone has room for improvement – especially in our closest relationships. Those are the ones where communication can be most challenging.

Sometimes the problem is in our mode of communication. I came across a quote this week that put it well: **“If we can’t solve the problem via email, Instant Messaging, Text Messaging, Fax, or phone calls, let’s resort to meeting in person.”** Of course, it’s a bit ironic that this is coming to you through an online worship service rather than in person, because we *can’t* meet in person right now. But the mode of communication we use sometimes isn’t helpful. Perhaps, however, the biggest problem with communication – as George Bernard Shaw once said – is the illusion that it has taken place. We think we’ve communicated something clearly, but we haven’t.

So what can we do ensure that we communicate well? How do we stay out of communication traps? Well, as we continue our series in the book of James titled, “FaithWorks” we are looking at a passage today that helps us stay out of some traps that are easy to fall into. We are in week #2 of this new series and today we are looking at James 1:19-27. And today we will read straight through all 9 verses and then we’ll look at what these verses are saying and mean for us in our own communications and the traps we sometimes fall into. Here’s James 1:19-27, God’s Word to you and me today... (James 1:19-27).

So the first communication trap to stay out of is the tendency to be quick to *speak* and slow to *listen*. **James says in verse 19 that we should do the opposite: Be “quick to *listen* and slow to *speak*.”** This is where we need to start in good communication, and we get reminders about this frequently. For instance, not long ago, a husband and wife were sitting on the couch one evening after getting the kids in bed. And after sitting there for 15 or 20

minutes, she nudged him and said, “You weren't even listening, were you?” And the husband thought to himself, “That's a strange way to start a conversation.” So, we can be in the same room as someone, sitting on the same couch even...and not be listening. (No, that is not autobiographical; more like fiction based on true events.)

The Greek philosopher Epictetus made the point in about 55 A.D. – not far from when James wrote this letter – that we were born with two ears and one mouth for a reason: so that we could listen twice as much as we speak. It's a great reminder to listen first, before speaking, which is the point that James is making here.

A deeper question to consider here, however, is: *Why should we listen first? What's the purpose?* Obviously, some of it is what probably most people would call common courtesy. In the language of the Bible, it's a way of loving our neighbor as ourselves. Even if we know more about something than the person who's talking, it shows love and respect to let them speak. It demonstrates that we value them and want to hear what they have to say, and it helps to build them up so they can feel like they've contributed something to the conversation. When my wife and I were engaged we developed a gift registry as a lot of engaged couples do. And Gwen actually let me share my thoughts on stuff like dishware and silverware, even though she was more knowledgeable and interested in that stuff than me. I even vetoed one set of silverware. And she still married me! But it helped me to feel included and encouraged me in our relationship.

Another reason to listen before speaking is because we can learn from others. Even the most knowledgeable person about a particular topic can learn something about that topic. For instance, another person might have a different approach to how to solve a problem that is actually better than the approach we've thought of. Sometimes a fresh perspective – even from someone who's less knowledgeable about something – brings a simple solution to something that we had over-analyzed and made overly complex.

Jesus is a great model for us. **Jesus spent a lot of time listening to people.** He listened to people who were poor, he listened to people who were

wealthy, he listened to religious leaders, he listened to the sick and the dying, he listened to criminals, he listened to government officials, he listened to people who were grieving and others who were joyful...he listened to a wide range of people. All of that listening enabled him to minister to people better through encouraging them and meeting them at their place of need. He taught eternal truths about God, but did so in a way that met people where they were. And he knew where they were in life...he knew what was going on in their lives...because he listened to them.

So while we benefit from listening, our listening is not only for our own benefit. It's for the benefit of the other person. Of course, in a two-person conversation, *someone* has to speak first. You can't both listen first and speak second. And I'm not sure that the order – listening first, speaking second – is ultimately what matters: it's the *principal* of giving space to the other person or people to speak, and you genuinely listening to better understand them. Perhaps that's especially important if you're the first one to speak in a conversation because the other person doesn't have a blank canvas on which to paint their words. In other words, if you are listening second, chronologically speaking, then there's extra effort needed to make sure that your listening is first in terms of emphasis and understanding of the other person. So listening is so important in communication, and our tendency to speak first and listen second is a trap we often fall into.

The second communication trap addressed here is anger. I'm guessing there's been some anger lately that has boiled up and over in some of our homes this week. It might not be anger at anyone or anything in particular: just angry at this whole pandemic and being stuck in our homes; or there might be interpersonal anger in the household as you try to manage work and kids and meals and so much more. In a family of 6 like ours, for example, there are 15 different relationships being managed and worked out under one roof – and every one of those relationships has two perspectives on it. And then we've got relationships with extended family members and co-workers and teachers and others that we are each maintaining as well. It's easy for tensions to rise and anger to come out. Not that that's happened in our home this week at all.

Here's the thing about anger though: If it gets the best of us, it will muddy our communication. And anger gets the best of us when it rises up quickly and when we just as quickly express it. Notice James doesn't say, "Don't be angry." Anger is part of the range of human emotions, but it needs to be kept in check. On more than one occasion we see Jesus looking at people in anger who are judging someone else. But the anger doesn't consume him or cloud up his communication. For us, sometimes we need to just take some deep breaths or even walk away from the situation for a moment so any anger that's in us can subside and not control us.

There was once a couple who had been married 25 years who are great examples of this. One day the husband found a box in the attic, and in it he found three bonnets and \$2,500. He asked his wife about what he found and she responded, "Every time I got mad at you, I knitted a bonnet." The husband was proud that in 25 years, he had only angered his wife three times. "OK," he said, "that explains the bonnets, but what about the \$2,500 dollars?" The wife smiled and said, "That's money from all the bonnets I've sold."

So, taking a break, stepping away from the situation can prevent our anger from rising up quickly and overwhelming us, and allowing us to communicate better. And maybe you can knit some bonnets and pay for a vacation to Hawaii, right? But after we step away, then we can come back and express our frustration and anger in a healthy way; or maybe we realize that we need to listen to the other person first – such as a child who won't do his or her homework, or a spouse who doesn't do their part in the marriage – and let that person share their side of the story so we might understand them. That's a godly way to handle our anger, and live a righteous life that pleases and honors God.

And then the last trap people fall into that is addressed here is forgetting that actions communicate louder than words. What we *do* communicates as powerfully as anything we might say. Specifically, James is writing here about how we communicate in regards to our faith. First, he takes the whole listening thing – be quick to listen – and expands upon it in verse 21 and especially in verse 22 and following. He writes in verse 21 to "humbly accept

the word planted in you, which can save you.” So what word “saves” us? It’s God’s word – the word made flesh is Jesus Christ, and God’s written and proclaimed word, as well.

Then verse 22 and following expands upon this to this next communication trap: Don’t just listen to the word, but do it. Don’t just analyze it and think about it and say “that’s nice”...James is saying: live it out. We could summarize this with the familiar saying that “actions speak louder than words”...or “practice what you preach.” Jesus says to let the light shine, and to bear fruit, and uses other metaphors as well to remind us that hearing the word is not enough. We are to live it out. And thing is: our actions communicate. They communicate more powerfully than our words.

We need a reminder of this every now and then. Too frequently, people forget this and their actions end up communicating something completely contrary to what they communicated with their lips, and completely derail the good message they spoke with their lips. The police officer who’s caught selling drugs on the side; the pastor who has an affair; the teacher who cheats on her taxes; the UW grad who wears Cougar clothes to church...can you imagine the hypocrisy?¹ 😊 But in all seriousness, the list goes on where people’s actions don’t line up with what they say or with what they believe.

And so James is encouraging us here to make sure our actions line up with our words. It’s easier said than done, and we won’t get it right 100% of the time. But we’re also not without hope or help in this endeavor. In fact, James gives us some practical insight on where to turn, and that is in verse 25 when he writes in verse 25, **“The one who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he or she had heard, but doing it – that person will be blessed in what they do” (James 1:25).** In other words: pay attention to what God says...don’t forget it...and then live it out.

It’s like the story about the lady who got pulled over by a police officer. After they came to a stop, he walked up to her car and asked, “Is everything ok?” “Why yes,” she said. “Is there a problem?” “Well” said the officer, “You were going only 25 miles per hour and the speed limit here is 60...so I thought

there might be something wrong.” “Oh, I thought the signs with the number ‘25’ were the speed limit signs.” “No,” said the officer, with a bit of a chuckle. “Those tell you what highway you’re on. Highway 25.” “Ok. Thank you!” Said the lady. Then the officer noticed her three friends in the car who all looked rather pale and a frightened. “Everything ok with them?” He asked. “Oh, they’re fine,” said the lady. “We just came off of highway 101!” She forgot, or didn’t know, the laws of the road. Didn’t pay very close attention...and didn’t live it out rightly.

The law that *we* are to look intently into and not forget, and to live out...is God’s law. In fact, really, this is an expansion of what he wrote earlier about being quick to listen. We want to listen to God’s voice to us through His law. So, what is this law to which he’s referring? Well, Jesus speaks of the law frequently. For instance, in Matthew 5:17 he says that he didn’t come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. The Ten Commandments are what “the Law” most frequently refers to, and Jesus says that they can be summarized like this, “Love the lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” So the law James is directing us to pay attention to and not forget is summed up like that. And the focal point of it is Jesus: He ultimately and perfectly fulfills it, while we do so imperfectly.

And the point James is making here is to pay attention to it and live it out. It’s not enough to take a quick glance at God’s law – such as the Ten Commandments – or to take a quick glance at Jesus...and then forget about it and carry on as though it’s not important. Talk about a communication trap! God’s law...Jesus as the fulfillment of it...is vitally important for us. Too many people – even within the church – take a quick glance at Jesus and then just kind of move on, forgetting what they’ve seen and heard, and don’t really live it out.

And that becomes a deadly trap in our own lives but also in our communication with others – like driving 101 MPH on highway 101 and terrorizing the passengers in the car. We need to keep looking at Scripture – which is both a mirror and a window – to be reminded who we are and how God calls us to live: Like today’s passage that reminds us to emphasize

listening over speaking and not to let anger get in the way of our communications, and that our actions speak louder than our words.

And maybe most importantly, turning to God and his word keeps us in relationship with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which nourishes our own soul. We are reminded of God's love for us...we see that His actions are even louder than his words, as seen in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And when we keep turning to His Word we are better equipped to communicate – not just in general as we listen first and handle our frustration and anger appropriately...but we become equipped to share the Gospel. To share our faith – not only in what we say but also in what we do. This is where “actions speak louder than words” is so important because how you and I live out our faith in the world is critical to communicating the gospel.

God has given us good news in Jesus Christ. He lived, died, and rose from the grave, giving us peace with God our Creator and the promise of eternal life through faith in Him. And that's a message worth communicating, and we want to stay out of these communication traps when we do it. That's a message worth understanding deeply and living out. It's something that is life-changing. And we reflect it in our lives when we live it out...When we not only hear it, but hear it and do it. As I mentioned last week, Jesus differentiates between the person who hears his word and does it and the one who hears his word and doesn't do it. One has a foundation for life that will withstand the storms, and one has a foundation that won't.

(Sermon Graphic)

So how are we doing in avoiding these communication traps? Are we listening enough – not just to check the box and say we listened, but to actually understand the other person, and to hear where they're coming from rather than making assumptions? Do we have anger that needs to be dealt with so we can communicate clearly when we do speak? And how's our communication in terms of what we do: Do we practice what we preach? We're not going to get any of that perfectly. Fortunately, God's grace is sufficient, and he's quick to forgive. That's the message of the cross. That's the Gospel message that God has communicated to us. And that's a message worth communicating clearly.

ⁱ See the message from 4/12, Easter Sunday, for more context on this.