

The Way Forward: Learning to Listen

Big idea: We must learn to listen.

Purpose: To teach people why it's important for followers of Jesus to know how to listen.

Passage: James 1:19-25 **Verse:** James 1:19

Overview: We live in a world aching to be heard, and we also live in a world that stinks at listening. What if Christ-followers led the way in listening? What if Christ-like listening is at the core of our Kingdom witness?

Opening:

Many of you know that I grew up in this Happy Valley/Clackamas area. When I was little, there was a summer program down off Harmony Road called Safety Town. Safety town is where the kiddos went to learn about **civic safety**—traffic safety, bike safety, home safety, all that good stuff. It was so fun and such a positive experience that I even was a safety town volunteer in junior high. It was a really high stakes application process—the select *cream of the crop* were chosen, including yours truly.

Like every good summer camp, Safety Town had a song for just about everything. One of the more memorable songs goes like this:

*Stop, look, and listen
Before you cross the street.
Use your eyes, use your ears
And then you use your feet.*

We would practice doing that with little motions (stop, look, and listen) and practice it all over the parking lot. I was a nanny for many years in high school and college, and every time I went on walks with the kids—you can ask them—we always sang the *stop, look, and listen* song at every corner.

I love that our community provided such a helpful resource to teach kids at a young age what civic safety looks like.

If you haven't noticed, our world feels pretty chaotic these days. For many of us, it can even feel unsafe. Obviously, our physical safety is still an issue, but the **kind of unsafe I'm talking about is relational**. I think many of us feel the tensions in our relationships. We feel the painful divide of our political views. We feel the frustration of being misheard or unheard. We feel the breakdown in trying to communicate with one another. Trying to cross the divides between us can feel like trying to cross the street with fierce traffic from either side. We don't have a Safety Town song for that.

We're in the middle of a series called **The Way Forward**, trying to figure out what it looks like to follow Jesus in a chaotic world. We're exploring vital spiritual practices that can help us survive and thrive these days such as taking a break, seeking beauty, pursuing gentleness, and being angry well. Today, I want to talk about **listening**. Just like in the little safety town song, **when we stop and practice listening** with our eyes and with our ears, and I would add, with our hearts, we can build safety into our relationships and move forward as faithful witnesses in a chaotic world. **The way forward is learning to listen.**

Turn with me in your Bibles to James, Chapter 1. The book of James is in the New Testament, almost at the very end. Our scripture reader today is Tyler.

Scripture Reading:

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. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do. (James 1:19-25)

Scripture Commentary:

A little context: It's likely the author of this book is James, the brother of Jesus, or one of James' followers. James was Jewish and he was writing to the community of Jewish Christ-followers spread out among the ancient near east. James writes pretty passionately. **He sees the role of the Church, this new community of Jesus-followers, as as playing a critical role in the world; as being a vital witness to the Kingdom of God.** The Church is meant to **live differently**, not just think or believe differently! Just before the passage we read, James reminds his readers of their calling to be the "first fruits" of the Kingdom that God is establishing on earth—a Kingdom of love and justice. It's this vision for the Church that gives James the passion and conviction he writes with. A lot is at stake here.

Let's look back at the text and walk through it together. Verse 19:

"My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" (James 1:19)

Well, that about sums it up guys. You got it? Talk less, listen more. Okay? Thanks for watching today, I really hope this ministered to you....

Just kidding.

Why is it so hard to listen? If we could just do that, wouldn't our world be a better place? A more kind, more gentle, more safe place? How come we can't? What gets in the way?

Notice that the next verse introduces the word "*evil*." If this was just a matter of decision, even if this was just a matter of will, I think we could have figured it out by now. It's not. We are up against a powerful force that has wound itself very tightly around our minds and hearts. We are hell-bent on self-protection and ego-preservation.

This is what the scriptures call the **battle between our flesh** (or ego-self, formed in a fearful and painful world) **and our spirit** (our true, God-given self, being re-formed by the love and grace of God). We need to **treat this issue more like an addiction or a disease** than a matter of *decision* or *will*. In stress, we will default to the path of least resistance, the path we've walked the most.

If we don't learn and diligently practice a *new way*, we will almost always default to being *slow to listen, quick to speak, and quick to get angry*. We must learn how to listen.

Now, not all anger is bad—Pastor John talked about this last week. James makes the distinction between *human* anger and *godly* anger—bad anger and good anger. Bad anger is hot-tempered; quick to react. It's ego-driven, defensive, reactive, and it brings out the worst in us, rather than fighting for the best in us, which is what godly anger does. In Exodus, God describes Godself as slow to anger—a more literal translation is actually “long of nostrils”, meaning God has long nostrils that allow God to take a big, deep breath when God is upset. James is calling us to be long of nostrils, too. To be able to take a big deep breath in the heat of the moment, when we are feeling defensive and want to react, and continue in a posture of Christ-like listening.

Let's talk about verse 21.

“Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.” (James 1:21)

In Sunday school growing up, I was taught to always ask, “What's the therefore, THERE FOR?” Great little bible study tip ;)

So, James, what's the *therefore* there for? In the verse right before, James is saying our human anger—our defensiveness, reactivity, ego-driven arguments are a dead end—THEREFORE, because we KNOW it's a dead end, stop the car. Don't just keep driving.

Jesus talks about this in the sermon on the mount: if something is causing you to sin, stop that thing, get rid of that thing. If **Facebook** is bringing out the worst in you, stop getting on Facebook. If doing a deep dive into **YouTube** news videos is fueling unproductive anger in you, stop consuming click-bait news. If certain **relatives** time and time again are unable to have a meaningful conversation with you about something you disagree on, stop trying to have those meaningful conversations with them. **If it's a dead end, you actually have permission to stop the car and turn it around.** Get back on the road that leads to life.

James talks about this so powerfully. Defensiveness won't save you. Winning the argument won't save you. Fighting for our ego will only lead to death. In the original language, the words translated “*humbly accept*” means to *welcome* or to *surrender to*. **Only as we actively and regularly surrender to the truth of who we are—our identity in Christ as individuals and as a new community—will we know true salvation.** Only then can we learn how to listen.

Maybe it's just me, but isn't it true that listening stops when the ego enters in? Do we stop listening as soon as someone says something I disagree with? As soon as I feel that responsibility to set someone straight? As soon as I feel threatened or afraid? I think my ability to truly listen is directly related to how faithfully I am welcoming, and surrendering to my true-self in Christ. I have this little mantra that I repeat to myself often that helps me remember who I really am in Christ: **I am Good. I am Beautiful. I am Loved. I am Worthy. I am Enough.** Remembering and repeating these truths helps me soften into them.

The best listening can happen when I receive the hospitality Christ gives to me and extend that hospitality to those around me. The person in front of me, or the person I'm having an issue with, has a new identity to me, too. She is my sister. He is my brother. This person is beloved of God. When I'm surrendered to this God-reality, when I humbly accept the word *planted in me* as James puts it—now there's some room in me, in my heart and my mind to receive that person's words and to listen for their heart in their story.

Listening is such a **VITAL practice** for followers of Jesus. **In order to listen, we have to surrender to the truth of who we are in Him. In order to listen, we have to surrender to**

the truth of the beloved in front of us. Talk about a way forward in this chaotic world! We've gotta learn – or relearn – how to listen.

Now, not all listening is created equal. You know this. James goes on to talk about listening to the word of God—the Spirit of Christ in us, leading us toward freedom. **A key point he makes is that there is bad listening and there is good listening. There is *listening that's lifeless* and there is *listening that leads to life*.** I would argue that so much of the listening we do these days is the lifeless kind. It's listening that bears no fruit in our lives. We listen on the surface. We listen to consume information. We listen for our opportunity to make a counterpoint. We listen for what relates to us. We often fail to listen for the heart. We often don't listen to love.

The good and bad news about listening is that **listening is a skill.** It's not something that comes naturally and, in fact, like we looked at earlier, it actually has a lot of forces working against it. We have to be intentional here. A few verses later James talks about how ***training our tongue is central to being a faithful witness to the Kingdom of God.***

A little story: Last month, my sister and her family fostered a dog. Many of you know, I started dog- fostering this summer and, because I've had one whole dog for 10 whole days, I'm pretty much an expert in dog training now. The day my sister got the dog, I went over and helped them settle in. My nephew, Jakey, has been wanting a dog forever. He was so excited and a little nervous figuring out how to interact with this new pup. Because I'm a total dog trainer pro, I showed him the ropes.

This dog—his name was Fuggle—(I know, I know)—didn't really have any house manners. He jumped on chairs and tables, he struggled to go potty outside, you know; that kind of stuff. I gave Jakey a little crash course in positive reinforcement training. I showed Jakey how to redirect when Fuggle did things that we didn't want him to do and how to cheer him on when he did the things we did want him to do.

At the end of the day, my sister, who is a school teacher, made the comment, "I'm so glad you were here to model for Jakey. Having that model is so important when we're trying to learn something new." All you educators out there are probably nodding your heads—modeling is so important to the learning process.

In this process of learning (or re-learning) how to listen, where are we seeing good listening modeled for us? Certainly not on social media. Not from the news. Not from our political leaders. From our families? Maybe. From our churches? Can we say that's true? Are we known for our listening?

James was passionate about the church bearing witness to this new reality of God's Kingdom—leading the way in justice and love. It all begins with being quick to listen. I am convinced that the way forward in these chaotic times is learning how to listen.

What does **listening that leads to life** look like? Well, I'm so glad you asked. In the spirit of modeling, I'm going to invite my friend Josh up and we're going to practice some listening skills.

- **Active Listening:** Paraphrase what the speaker is saying to verify that you have correctly heard and interpreted their words. (Try using some version of the following statements.)

What I'm hearing your say is . . .

Is there anything else?

Thank you for sharing with me.

- **Distraction Recovery:** Admit and own getting distracted while the other person is talking. Ask for a repeat. (A better tool than pretending for when you get distracted.)

I'm sorry, I got distracted. Would you mind repeating that? I care about what you have to say.

We live in a world aching to be heard, but who is listening? What if Christ-followers led the way? **What if Christ-like listening is at the core of our Kingdom witness?** I'm convinced that it is. Jesus said that people will recognize his disciples by their love. Love can't happen without listening. We must learn to listen.

I'm not just here to tell *YOU* to be a better listener. I am right in it with you. This past week I can think of daily, maybe even hourly, examples when I tuned out when someone else was talking, when I checked my email when I was supposed to be on a video call, when I misinterpreted what someone was saying because I was filtering it through my own experience instead of just staying present with them. We all have to learn (or re-learn) how to listen.

For each sermon in this series, we are identifying a key practice for you to try out. The hope is that by the end of the series, after exploring all these practices, you will identify one or two practices that you want to carry forward with you as you seek to follow Jesus in a chaotic world.

Here's our practice for this week:

Practice low-stakes listening.

We rarely get better at things by just being thrown into the deep end. You can try to get better at listening in a high-stakes argument if you'd like, but like I said earlier, in stress, we are going to default to our most well-worn path. I'd prefer to practice good listening, to create some better paths, when the stakes are a bit lower.

For example, when I'm on a video call this week, I am going to practice just being on that video call. That's a biggie for me. My ego-self likes to be ultra-productive and my temptation is **STRONG** to check other things off my list while half-listening. If I do get distracted, I'm going to reroute and practice my distraction recovery skill, confessing and refocusing. So that's my low-stakes listening commitment for you this week.

How about you? How will you practice low-stakes listening this week?

Maybe you will initiate a conversation that's just geared toward really hearing the other person, asking what they've been thinking about.

Maybe at dinner one night this week you and your spouse or a friend could practice some of the active listening skills we modeled, asking about each other's days and repeating back to what you heard.

Maybe you will practice listening to yourself, making room in your own heart by processing something that's nagging at you by journaling, or prayer, or a conversation with a friend.

Maybe when you read a text or Facebook post from someone you don't just consume that information, but you let it live with you a little bit, you ponder it; you pray for that person.

Pay attention to how your low-stakes listening practice impacts you this week. What comes up for you? Does your ego-self start to clamor? Does it provide an opportunity to welcome, to surrender to your true-self in Christ? Does it lead to life? We're not going to be Christ-like listeners overnight, but we can keep showing up, and by God's grace we can *learn* to listen.

Closing:

Earlier I said we have so few models for good listening—listening that leads to life. That wasn't entirely true. We have a model in God. God is a good listener. Did you know that? God's listening is celebrated all throughout all of scripture.

- When the people of Israel were enslaved by Egypt, God said to Moses: "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering." (Exodus 3:7)
- The psalmist writes, "You, Lord, hear the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry." (Psalm 10:17)

Time and time again we read about God hearing the cries of God's people, about God being moved with compassion and love. God's listening isn't the kind of listening we read about in James, listening that quickly moves on to something else, that forgets, as if what was said didn't even matter. God's listening leads to life. Ultimately, God's listening led to Jesus. God listened and, in response to that listening, became flesh and dwelt among us in the person of Jesus. God's listening led to an incarnational love. God's listening led to a sacrificial death. God's listens. And even now, the scriptures invite us to call out to God, to express our hearts and our cares to God. Why? Because God cares for us. God listens.

We talk a lot about being the hands and feet of Jesus. What if we also began to be the ears of Jesus? What if we learned to listen, as He listens to us? We are loved and listened to. May we bear witness to that kind of love and listening in our world.