

Listening and Doing

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 16th Sunday after Pentecost, September 8, 1991 at Oxford High School. Scripture Lessons: Proverbs 2:1-8; Psalm 119:129-136; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:31-37

The letter from which we read our Epistle lesson claims to be written by James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. Ancient Christians believed the author was James, a brother of Jesus. Before the death of Jesus, James didn't believe that Jesus was the Messiah and Lord. He was converted after the resurrection of Jesus when, St. Paul tells us, the risen Christ appeared to him. James became the foremost leader of the Christian church in Jerusalem after the death and resurrection of Jesus. He was tried and sentenced to death in A.D. 62, because of his faith in the risen Christ as Lord and Savior. His letter to Christians emphasizes hearing and obeying God's word. Real faith in Christ will always be expressed through obeying Christ.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Look around and you'll see ears of all sizes, ears with attached and unattached lobes, ears sticking right out from the sides of heads, or hidden by hair (*"Do You Have Your Ears On?", Worldwide Challenge*)

Despite these ears, we all have a hearing problem. We *all* do. We're all like the deaf man in the Gospel lesson. We don't hear very well what others tell us. We don't listen very well to God.

Jesus makes the deaf to hear. He says to us this morning, "Be opened!" He wants to open our ears to listen to one another and to hear what God is saying to us. We need the touch of the Risen Christ to enable us to hear one another. We need the touch of the Risen Christ to enable us to communicate more effectively.

The number one complaint I hear about the church is that we don't communicate very well. Sometimes poor communication is caused by deafness. Sometimes it's caused by not speaking. In talking with fellow clergy I realize this is a problem in nearly every church. Poor

communication.

And it's the same in our homes. Failure to communicate, the inability to listen to each other, is what both men and women now say is the single most important cause of American divorces. 64% of all divorces in the U.S. is blamed on poor communication. We don't listen very well to our spouses.

Patterson and Kim, in their book, The Day America Told the Truth, tell of in depth interviews they had with people throughout the U.S. They write, "Women want men to open up their ears and listen, ... to understand who women are and what they need. Men want women to do the same for them."

"We heard comments such as these", they write: "My husband was a hundred percent inattentive and thought only of himself." "He doesn't understand who I am." "She doesn't know me." Why? We don't listen.

Listening is an expression of love. Jesus said the first and greatest commandment is, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, strength, and mind; and the second is, thou shalt love your neighbor as yourself." When we listen to people, we're expressing love. The theologian, Paul Tillich, wrote, "The first duty of love is to listen (RD article)." And when we listen to God's word, we're expressing our love for God.

Think of the things that keep us from hearing. St. James infers that anger can keep us from listening. "Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness."

If we listen carefully, and if we're slow to anger and bridle our

tongues we can, so often, avoid misunderstanding what someone is saying to us. Sometimes when we misunderstand what people say, we get angry. Our tongues become unbridled. Husbands and wives, for example, after living together for years, sometimes jump to conclusions about what they say to each other. When the wife starts a sentence, the husband thinks she's harping on an old subject that always makes him upset, and without even listening to what she's saying, he gets angry (Nederhood).

Christopher Reilly, in a book that I give to newly married couples, writes of a couple he counseled. Rod and Sarah are poor listeners. They got divorced about a year ago. Rod went his own way, bitter, resentful, defeated. Sarah remained in the house with their infant son, completely confused, outraged, hurt, and embarrassed about what she saw as the sudden breakdown of their marriage.

Rod blames his wife. He says she's a poor listener. He's tried, but he never could get through to her. He once came home from work and wanted to tell her about his disappointment at the new job opportunity he accepted. It wasn't at all what he expected and he really wanted to quit the job and look for another one. When he tried to share his feelings, she angrily left the room shouting, "You made your bed, sleep in it". She left without really listening and understanding.

But neither was he listening to her. His wife was pregnant. He couldn't hear her saying, "This is no time to quit your job and go looking for

another one!" Anger and an unbridled tongue can keep us from listening to one another.

Being an effective listener requires two things. We've got to deal with the things inside us which keep us from listening. We've got to deal with our attitudes. James says, "Rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness." Get rid of everything inside that's blocking your ears and keeping you from listening. What are the things that keep *you* from listening? Think about it? Can you put your finger on what's keeping you from listening to your husband, wife, friend, child or parent?

But secondly, James says, we need to welcome with meekness the Implanted word. It's not enough for someone to plant words in your ears. ~~You've got to receive that implanted word, humbly... that is, with the~~ attitude that maybe this person really is important and valuable and loved, if by no one else, at least by God.

Ray and Sue are effective listeners. Look at them. They're having dinner together at their favorite restaurant. Sue's speaking. Notice what Ray's doing. You say, "Well, he's not doing anything." But he is! He's doing a lot. Ray is silent when Sue speaks. He maintains eye contact with her. He nods his head ever so slightly every once in a while, and leans just a bit forward. His arms are crossed loosely and resting lightly on the edge of the table in front of him.

By his posture, his non-verbal body language, he's communicating that

he's listening to Sue. He's attentive to what she's saying.

Notice something else. He's unconsciously mirroring what he sees his wife doing. They seem to lift their eyebrows simultaneously. She smiles. He smiles. She squints her eyebrows at one point and so does he. He's not playing games. He doesn't even know he's doing this mirroring. Ray's non-verbal behavior and attentive silence are saying to Sue, "Hey, honey, you have something important to say and I'm listening to you. I love you. (Reilly)"

Now St. James was concerned, not just that we listen to one another, but that we listen to God. When we really listen to God and do what God says, we're saying to God, "Hey, Lord, you have something important to say and I'm listening to you."

~~God's word is a life giving Word. God's Word is able to save us... save us not just from hell but from ourselves... save us from our self-centeredness... save us from everything that separates us from one another and from God.~~

How do we listen to God? Do the words simply go in one ear and out the other. Or does God's Word make a difference? Does God's Word change us? How's the Word of God mirrored in our lives? What if we listened to the Word of God, both written and preached, the way Ray listens to Sue?

James was writing to Christians who'd come to church and hear the Word of God preached but they weren't really listening. They thought they were religious. They spoke about their personal relationship with Jesus.

They could quote the Bible. They had religious experiences. But they weren't really listening to what God was saying. They weren't doing what he was telling them.

God was telling them that pure religion is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. God is telling us that if we really have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ we'll see others with the eyes of Jesus Christ and we'll reach out to those around us who are most vulnerable and most liable to be forgotten. And we'll keep ourselves unstained by the world's values. The person who is stained by the world is one who values money, possessions, status, job or even family, more than Christ.

The United States is filled with people who've heard the Word of God. They pick up the Bible and read it. They turn on their radios and t.v.s and watch Robert Schuller or Billy Graham. They go to worship services and after the reading of Scripture they confess, "This is the Word of the Lord." In their hearts they know it's true. But if we listen... if we really listen... we'll do what God says.

Let us pray: Grant, we beseech you, almighty God, that the words which we have heard this day with our outward ears, may, through your grace, be so grafted inwardly in our hearts, that they may bring forth in us the fruit of pure religion and undefiled religion, to the honor and praise of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.