

## The Listening Ear

*Understand this...*

*You must all be quick to listen,  
slow to speak, and slow to get angry.*

(New Living Translation) James 1:19

Imagine living in the Jerusalem area around AD 50-60. Life is tough with dire economic conditions, poverty is rife, and there is particular concern about the circumstances of widowed mothers and orphaned children. Possibly the victims of violence and national conflict in the city at the time, somehow the 'left behind' people saw 'others' as the problem. But then there's a group of people in this city of despair who commit to living differently. Facing exactly the same conditions as those described, they face life with a radically different mindset, because of someone who walked the streets of Jerusalem 30 years earlier - the Messiah called Christ.

Before we see 'others' as the problem, says James the spiritual leader in Jerusalem, we need to do a check-up on our own condition. "So, get rid of all that is wrong in your life, both inside and outside, and humbly be glad for the wonderful message we have received, for it is able to save our souls as it takes hold of our hearts (1:21 TLB). It's a universal message for all Jerusalem people – because, if adopted, city life would change for the better beyond anything they could imagine.

Real Christianity suggests James goes beyond 'listening' to the words of the Messiah. 'Doing what He says means being teachable, and that means listening.

### **It works like this...**

The first activity of the Christian is to listen to the voice of God through His Word (the bible). The Gospels tell the story of how the "Word became flesh and moved into our neighbourhood" (John 1:14 Msg). So He is not only our saviour but also our example for living. "In... relationships with one another," says Paul, "have the same mindset as Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:4 NIV)

So hope-filled people do double-listening because of their love for Christ. They turn to Him first for guidance, wisdom, and support from a person full of grace, understanding, care, and compassion. Then, they copy Him, particularly in how He treated other people.

Recorded in the Gospels are his many conversations with disciples and others who were rich and poor, happy and healthy, distressed and depressed, greedy and wicked, or weak and vulnerable. Every conversation gives a picture of Jesus, who encourages with kindness and compassion. All provide the clearest picture of God emptying himself to 'listen' to the cares and concerns of humanity. He listens to a thief, a prostitute, the clinically depressed, and the deliberately wicked. It was with a heartfelt, gentle word here, a word to the wise there, and able, when necessary to confront and challenge the individual's mindset in the most generous and gentle way possible. and as he 'listened' his body language said, "I understand."

Love is the highest value of the Christian, as Paul explains in the most widely read bible passage, 1 Corinthians 13. As someone once said – and not just about Paul, "Those who experience grace are changed by grace, but grace comes first!"

- In the story of the the prostituted woman, Luke tells how Jesus is present in her company and defends her action for washing his feet with expensive perfume – As he faces criticism from a disciple. He knew her story, and he knew because he listened to the daily challenges she faced – the abuse and ill-treatment she faced from men. (Luke 7:36-50)

- A woman is about to be stoned by religious people for adultery. John records Jesus' concern, for the woman's situation. He sees right through the hypocrisy of her accusers, and with amazing insight and wisdom, makes it impossible for any of her accusers to throw a single stone. They walk away embarrassed, but the woman walks away with more hope than she'd ever dreamed of. He could only have acted as he did – because he listened. (John 8:1-11)
- A dodgy tax official – Zacchaeus is a social outcast through charging more taxes than he should, and pocketing the surplus. Because of his reputation, he was a social outcast, and nobody wanted anything to do with him. In contrast Jesus said, "Let's eat together – in your home." Who knows what they said together? But I reckon it was a great conversation and for sure, Zacchaeus did more of the talking than Jesus. (Luke 19:1-10)
- Luke records the parable of the lost son. A parable is about imaginary people, but is a story Jesus told to teach what God is like. What would our picture of God be like without this story? Is this not the story of God whose compassion extends far beyond what we can ever imagine, expect, or deserve? Isn't this story really more about the father than the son? About how unsettled and distressed he is longing for his son to return home.

He keeps watch outside his home hoping for his son to return. Suddenly he sees someone in the distance who could resemble his son. He runs and runs as fast as he can towards him and embraces the dirty rotten scoundrel and gives him a rollocking? Not at all! Because the story of God is about his amazing compassion and love. It is as if Jesus is saying about God, "I love you more than you can ever imagine – and you can return home. It is yours!" (Luke 15)

"You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry." (James 1:19) What if Jerusalem in AD 55 was filled with folk who lived like that – because of Jesus? What if folk in our time and place chose to live like that? My hunch is that we would live and thrive together better than we could ever imagine!

End.

#### Questions for discussion

1. Love is the highest value of the Christian explains Paul in 1 Corinthians 13. The number one value of the Trans-European Division reads: TO EXTEND LOVE – to the whole person. What does that mean? Llew Edwards says, "Christ loves indiscriminately and excessively." What does that mean?
2. No matter who we are, or what our background is, we all share some fundamental needs. At the very core of our being, each one of us has the universal need to accept and be accepted, to love and be loved, to trust and be trusted, to be free and be fulfilled.

Psychological needs  
 The need for safety  
 Belonging and love  
 Self-esteem  
 Personal Growth

In every society there are organisations that have boundaries which exclude. Call a fellow member of the Conservative Party 'comrade' and you will soon experience exclusion! Share with a fellow member of the Labour Party that 'Boris' is your hero, and you will lose friends

quickly. What is your experience of the church and exclusion – formally or informally? Talk about the inclusion/exclusion tension that exists within our community of faith. How do these connect to 'being quick to listen and slow to speak' – and at the end of the day, the highest Christian value, love?