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Listening as Self-Discipline

James 1:19-27

Who wrote the biblical book of James, when and why? Since James was a common name of the first century, and the book itself does little to reveal its human author, scholars have enjoyed theorizing on the subject. This speculation also extends to the book's timeframe. Was it as early AD 45, shortly after Christ's death? Or was it well into the second century, as part of the church era? Partly due to James's emphasis on Christian action rather than Christian belief, Martin Luther (1483–1546) termed the book “a right strawy Epistle” in the New Testament of 1522. So rather than poke at various background possibilities, we look instead at the book's teaching on the subject of listening to God.

Hearing is one thing; listening is quite another. Hearing is a matter of sound waves striking the eardrum and causing a vibration that the brain then interprets and gives meaning. Listening is hearing and much more. It has to do with practiced familiarity. One person might hear a high, rather scratchy noise from a violin. A violinist might hear a high C that's a trifle flat and in need of vibrato, with a little more ease on the bow. Learning to listen makes the difference.

GROUP DISCUSSION. What settings have caused you to listen with joy or delight? When do you listen with a measure of caution or anxiety?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. On a scale of one to ten, evaluate yourself as a listener. Ten means that you regularly listen to someone else with your whole being, asking appropriate questions and thinking carefully of the feelings, motives and implications behind what you hear. One means that when someone else is talking, you are thinking mostly of yourself with some similar experience or of what you might say next in the conversation.

We are privileged to read Scripture with our modern perspective, but also vicariously with the ears of the early church. Use both perspectives here. *Read James 1:19-27.*

1. Suppose you were an early Christian somewhere in the far reaches of the Roman Empire and this letter comes to your church. Your church leader reads it aloud at your Sunday gathering. What would you find helpful?

What would you find challenging?

What would you want to know more about?

2. What's hard about listening?

3. According to this text, what is the difference between hearing and listening?

4. Analyze verses 19-21. What are we to do and not to do? Why?

5. The section beginning with verse 22 instructs us, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves.” Why might listening to God’s Word become a form of self-deception (use vv. 22-25)?

6. Focus on verse 25. Mentally walk yourself through your most recent participation in a worship service. (Feel free to reread your church bulletin, if available.) What could you do that would continue the worship you began there?

7. What are some practical steps you could take to continue the work begun in that particular worship service?

8. What might be difficult about practicing the kind of religion described in verses 26-27?

9. What listening practices would help a Christian hoping to do the work of verse 26-27?

10. Identify and share one area or relationship where you would like to better practice the self-discipline of listening described in this text.

Begin your prayer with a time of listening silence. Ask God to bring to your mind a relationship that might benefit by better listening on your part. Then pray for that person or situation inviting God's intervention.

Now or Later

Follow up on your listening prayer by scheduling a time or event to share with the person you have prayed for. As you anticipate this event, make every effort to see from this person's perspective and plan accordingly.