

“SWIFT TO HEAR”

(Discourse by Jerry Leslie, given at Vancouver, B.C. convention, Sunday, May 9, 1982.)

Theme text, James 1:19, “*Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be **swift to hear**, slow to speak, slow to wrath.*” This text suggests an eagerness to listen and a reluctance to expound without understanding.

It has been said that “We have been given two ears and but a single mouth, in order that we may hear more and talk less.”

Studies show that we spend about 80% of our waking hours communicating; and, according to research, at least 45% of the time is spent listening. In schools students spend 60% to 70% of their classroom time engaged in listening. In business, listening has often been cited as being the most critical managerial skill.

Most individuals are inefficient listeners. Tests show that immediately after listening to a ten minute oral presentation, the average listener has heard, understood, properly evaluated and retained approximately **half** of what was said. Within 48 hours, that drops off another 50% to a final 25% level of effectiveness. In other words, we quite often comprehend and retain only **one quarter** of what is said.

Our listening habits are not the result of training but rather the result of the lack of training. Of the four skills: **Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing**, they are learned in this order from infancy onward: Listening is learned first, then speaking, next reading is learned, and last we learn to write. In order of Use, listening is also first and used most with an average of 45% of these skills devoted to listening. Speaking is next with 30% of use. Reading is used next with 16%, and writing least of all with 9%. However when we consider the order in which these skills are taught, listening is taught least, speaking is taught next least, then reading next most, and writing is taught most of all, though used least.

This suggests that though much comes in through ears, we lack formal instruction on how to retain and interpret what we hear. Without this training we tend to think we understand what we hear, make subjective judgments, fill in the voids and generally contribute to our own tenuous footing.

For example let me tell you a typical narrative delivered in a class business meeting, then ask you what you heard. The class librarian says: “Brethren we need to order some books for the convention. We are low on several things. We have no hymn books which come from The Dawn or Laymen’s Volume Indexes. But we have to allow at least 3 weeks for delivery if we want any of these. We have a couple Poems of Dawn which also

come from Laymen's, but I think we could use a few more on hand. We have only one Question Book and are out of Sermon Books and Covenant Books. These we order from Chicago. We only have \$27.00 to spend and I would like to know what the friends would like to order. We can always get Vines and Strongs on a consignment basis from the book store and return unsold ones."

Now here are some statements about the narrative to show the listening ability or lack of that ability. We mark these as True (T) or False (F) or lack of sufficient information (?)

- T) The class has no hymn books for sale.
- ?) The Dawn will deliver in 3 weeks.
- ?) There is \$27.00 in the library fund.
- ?) The class needs some comment books.
- T) There were four sources of book supplies mentioned.
- F) The class has one Sermon Book for sale but needs more.
- F) The librarian wants to know how to spend the fund.
- F) The book store will let us have the books we want on consignment.

This illustrates that much of what we hear, needs clarification. Without seeking that information, we do others and ourselves a disservice. This discussion could be prolonged at everyone's expense because of presumption of faulty listening.

Now let's review some scriptures on the role of listening. Prov. 20:12, "The hearing ear, and the seeing eye, the Lord hath made even both of them." These two senses are remarkable creations. In rank of sensitivity, the eye might be class #1; but only because it responds to electro-magnetic stimulation of light; while the ear responds to the more physical force of sound waves.

But as a mechanical device, the bones of the inner ear are remarkable. Under normal conditions they are nearly fully developed at birth. Through life they pulse the inner ear fluid against floating nerves that transmit the faintest sound to the brain. In terms of moral symbology, the ear is placed first, like this text in Proverbs, for it relates to "teachableness," for without this quality of spiritual hearing, one might have a good degree of mental acuteness, yet never truly "see" or "hear."

These roots of spiritual perception are traced in Rom. 10:14-17: "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they are sent? As it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things! ... So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

Listening is closely contrasted with speaking in Scripture. Unlike the other senses that operate fairly uninterrupted, this one is interrupted by speaking—doing that which causes another to hear. It is almost a one-way street. The ear will pass the stimulus on, while speaking; but almost no comprehension is registered. It is a lot like the telephone system. Though there is a fast turn-around, the voice signals really only flow in one direction at a time.

When we speak, we only tell what we think we know, and it might edify others. But when we listen, we open ourselves to learn, to be taught! This is why our text of James 1:19 encourages a bridling of the one that the other may be receptive.

This readiness to listen was illustrated by Samuel in the house of Eli. (1 Samuel 3) At first he did not comprehend and sought Eli as the speaker. After three times he was counseled to answer to God. Only then did he begin to hear and be instructed. Samuel had to be educated to discern which voices to hear and the source. So too must we. A mother may waken at the slightest whimper of her child and be oblivious to the pounding rain. So our spiritual listening must be selective. We must be wide awake at the first sign of the Lord speaking to us through whatever instruments, and ignore whatever is not the Good Shepherd's voice.

But hearing is not enough. A cognizance of words is not enough. We change only when we learn; and we learn by pondering. We ought to weigh the words of another with the same gravity with which they are spoken. And even then our first impressions are not always the best.

There are some practical aspects of listening. Listening touches our relations as brethren in a very vital way. We find them in the Home, Class Studies, Discourses and Fellowship. One problem arises in any listening environment: the ear-brain connection can process thoughts faster than the mouth can speak. So we tend to fill the space between words with our own thoughts, which may be quite different from the speakers, or our mind simply wanders to more filling, satisfying reflections than the speakers. And here is where trouble begins.

Here are some suggestions for better reception from a discourse, which is really an extended period of one-way flow of information:

- 1) Prepare, if you can, by familiarizing yourself with the subject.
- 2) Look for the main ideas of the speaker. Try anticipating his direction.
- 3) Make mental and written notes and summaries of his expressions and questions to be checked later.
- 4) Associate his context with your own experiences.
- 5) Pay attention to "How" things are said, to sense how the speaker feels about the subject and what aspects are most important.

These things will help us discipline the thought process against straying tendencies. These suggestions along with review of the subject in the days following will fix a higher percentage of information in our long-term memory.

Studies and Business meetings are a fruitful ground for listening principles. What percentage of time do we devote in preparing our comments? or preoccupied that our opportunity to speak will pass, in contrast to pondering the expressions of others? There are always some who have a comment or two or three on every point; while others speak not at all. Sometimes the best service we can be is to ask our question, then listen to the answer!

Here are some rules for good listening in studies:

- 1) We must not be overly critical of words chosen. We can read the intent, even if the best words are not used.
- 2) This leads to the next point—to discern between words used and ideas intended. This can be done without presuming motives or side issues or conclusions not addressed. Psalm 19:13, “Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins...” This means taking one another at face value, and not reading more than is said.
- 3) Straightforward questions can help.
- 4) We must guard our emotional bias in studies and business meetings if we are to benefit from listening.

It isn't so easy to listen to what another has to say without it filtering through our preferences to hear what we want, or suspect our fears are being voiced. To avoid these traps, we must understand what words mean to the one speaking and what his context is, in contrast to perhaps our own.

Consider these sample statements: “God will yet judge Babylon.” “The Harvest goes grandly on.” “The 40 year harvest ended in 1914.” “The north wall of the Grand Gallery represents the death of Jesus.” “The well-mouth represents the death and resurrection of Jesus.” Or consider these for business meetings: “I realize you've been working on this project for some time, but I think we need to look at other alternatives. There are a lot of details of which you are not aware. We tried that in class a few years ago and it really messed things up. Isn't that deacons' duties?”

In most of these comments, our emotions jump to the front to block our hearing of anything more one has to say. We are preparing our rebuttal while they are yet speaking. Though the ears may hear, the brain is too busy with its own defense to try to understand what is being said.

It has been said: “I know that you believe you understand what you think I said; but I am not sure you realize that what you heard, IS NOT WHAT I MEANT.”

James 3:17 says: “The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated...” The Amplified Bible translates it this way: “Willing to yield to reason.” And Phillips renders it this way: “Approachable.” Obviously this implies a certain trust in the motives of another. There are many occasions when we can yield to one another. This is implied in Peter’s words: “all of you be subject to one another.” (1 Peter 5:5)

The world teaches us to be suspicious, dominating, to strike before we are struck. Paul tells us to submit “yourselves one to another in the fear of God.” (Eph 5:21) This does not mean to be undiscerning or not discriminating, but it does mean first knowing what a person means. This may require some clarification, some questions. Then to evaluate the relevancy and importance, the truth or error of the position.

This is why Paul commended the Bereans: Acts 17:11, “in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” Notice the balance between readiness of mind while listening and following up with a discerning searching of the scriptures to confirm Paul’s words. Emotion is much too fragile a basis to listen and judge a context. Sometimes our first reaction is not the best. Other times it is; but we will never know, unless we give what we hear a fair trial.

Now let’s turn our attention to the kind of listening necessary in personal contacts and fellowship. Again we ask: how much of our listening is preoccupied with the defense of our own thoughts and feelings, and how much with what our friend has to say? Obviously if both only listen, nothing is shared. It must be a two way street. We only suggest we be very sensitive to the needs of one another.

There may be non-verbalized fears, tensions, pre-occupations lurking just behind the words spoken, that if unperceived could make our responses only further alienating. Or if perceived, holds the possibility of walking over the threshold of discovery and renewal, with a friend.

Take for example a brother or sister who, every time you see him or her, tells you the same stories from the past, time and time again, until you can nearly repeat them verbatim. On the one hand we can say, “Yes, brother, I know, I’ve heard that before; but I’m interested in how you view such-and-such issues today.” On the other hand, we may with sensitivity, realize the brother may have lapses of memory, and dwells more in the past. Or, he has some very painful present experiences, in that dwelling on the pleasant recollections of the past fills a void in the present. So then we can say, “I realize these experiences mean a lot to you. What lessons have you gained from them? How do these

experiences from the past affect your outlook today? How are things the same, or different today?"

Now consider these expressions and evaluate what your response might be:

- 1) I don't know why, but I can't seem to get my life together, and my prayers seem less effective. In fact I find it hard to bear certain things before the Lord.
- 2) Why does sister so-and-so have to always bring that up in these meetings?
- 3) I've been concerned about, and rethinking the course that our witness activity should take at this late date.
- 4) I didn't mean to start a fire yesterday, but why do brethren take issue with everything I say?

We submit that in these comments we need to listen, to be sensitive to the speaker's background of thought and feelings. They may need a little objective probing, while discreetly keeping our own emotions and bias on an even keel.

Here are a few rules for effective listening in these more personal exchanges:

- 1) Watch as well as listen to your companion.
- 2) Determine your own bias, and allow for it. Don't let emotionally charged phrases throw the conversation off course.
- 3) Focus on key thoughts and words to determine their intent.
- 4) Before answering, be sure you understand their point of view. Evaluate the logic and credibility of what you hear.
- 5) Never betray a trust of confidence, but do express your concern about evil speaking, or that others should be given a fair hearing.
- 6) Lastly, be a clear sounding board, in such a way that you help your friend to understand himself better and for you to understand him better.

There is another and even more intimate relation in fellowship. It is the healing aspect of listening to a friend—to feel his need. It may require you to take on his need to pray with him, to weep with him, to say "I'm near, I care, share; what you need, I'll not betray your trust." Then to listen with your whole mind and body.

Prov. 17:17, "A friend loveth at all times, and a brother is born for adversity." Prov. 18:24, "A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly; and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother." We will conclude by considering how we listen to God's counsel in our own lives, it does not involve other persons' words.

We have the stern warning from Jas. 1:22-24: "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass; for he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was."

Our spiritual hearing needs fine tuning. Isa. 30:21: “Thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left.” (Consider Manna for Feb. 1.)

This is more abstract than physical hearing. We need to listen to God’s disciplines and blessings His providences in the days and nights of our own experiences, our victories and mistakes. These can be heard only with spiritual hearing. We need to listen to the counsel of His Word and examples of old. Psalm 19:1-4, 7: “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.”

Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Elijah, Daniel and the Apostle Paul all heard the voice of the Lord. He speaks no less to the feet members in these last days. Notice, the counsel to each of the Revelation churches was: “To him that hath an ear to hear, let him hear.”!! Finally we are assured that God listens, Psa. 94:9, “He that planted the ear, shall he not hear? He that formed the eye, shall he not see?” Psa. 35:15, “The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open to their cry.” Isa. 65:24, “It shall come to pass that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I WILL HEAR.”