

**Sermon – “THE MINISTRY OF LISTENING”**

**March 14, 2010  
James 1:19**

All of us who are BAPTIZED into Christ  
have been called into MINISTRY to other people.

That’s the theme of this sermon series: MINISTRY. Your ministry!

Last Sunday we looked inward at the attitude necessary for service....  
the attitude of HUMILITY.

Today we look outward: What does God want us to be DOING?

What do you think?

What is the first, most basic, most important service we owe one another?

My DOCTOR knows!

Years ago when I fell on an icy sidewalk and injured my shoulder,  
he began by saying,  
“Tell me where it hurts.”

Then he listened.

A good COUNSELOR knows

“What’s been going on in your life?” he asks. Then he listens...  
and listens some more!

God knows too.

He tells us in James 1:19:

**Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak.**

The first service God directs us to give one another is to LISTEN.

It is my prayer that as a result of this message,  
you will leave this worship service with quickened HEARING,  
determined to be a better LISTENER.

How urgently this ministry is needed!

How many people there are who are searching desperately for  
AN EAR THAT WILL LISTEN to their anger, their guilt, and their dreadful loneliness.

They seek an ear, but often do not find it,

so they must turn to the bartender

or to their hairdresser,

or make an appointment with a psychiatrist at \$150 an hour  
just to have SOMEONE listen!

But what about the CHURCH?

Isn't this a place where people could find a listening ear?

Sometimes, YES. But alas, sometimes, NO.

Years ago someone gave me a book entitled

CROWDED PEWS AND LONELY PEOPLE.

The thesis of the book is that too often, people do not find the help  
they need in their own church.

"That's how I feel," said the woman who gave me the book. "Lonely."

How about you?

When you come here, do you discover people who LISTEN, really listen to you?

Turn it around.

Do YOU listen to OTHERS?

Listen intently to hear the feelings beneath the words?

Are you willing to pay attention continuously for even a minute  
if you sense they need to talk?

I confess that I don't always.

I get preoccupied. Impatient.

In a hurry to get to the next "stop" on my agenda.

But even if I'm doing my best, one pair of ears is not nearly enough.

YOU must help!

Why so much stress on listening?

Just this – LISTENING HEALS!

Psychiatrist Donald Smith, widely respected as a successful healer  
of troubled people, said,

**The person most likely to get results in helping troubled people is the one who has mastered the art of paying attention...really paying attention! Each of us has woven into the fabric of his being a yearning for attention. Attention heals. It is as simple as that...**

Listening can be a greater service than SPEAKING!

Could that be why some people treasure animals so highly?

And sometimes regard them as better friends than people? An animal doesn't interrupt you. Doesn't lecture you. It just LISTENS!

I have often experienced the following scene:

A person calls me on the phone, voice trembling and full of emotion. Sometimes I have sense enough just to listen without saying much.

The person goes on talking. Minutes pass. The voice calms.

I start to say something that I think will be "good advice," but the person says, "That's all I needed. I just had to get it off my chest. I just needed someone to listen to me."

LISTENING HEALS...sometimes more than speaking.

So James counsels us:

**Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak.**

And therein lies the greatest barrier to listening: the COMPULSION TO SPEAK!

We are convinced that the only real service to be rendered to others lies in TALKING.

We PARENTS are especially guilty of this.

We are so concerned that our children grow up "right" that we are constantly correcting and directing them, talking when they need us to listen.

A 15-year-old girl had finished a session with her school counselor.

She paused at the door:

"It feels so good to be able to tell someone about this," she said.

"My parents don't really listen to me."

It can be the other way around.

Children, do you listen – really listen – to your parents  
when they are tired, when they get irritable, when they are unbearably gloomy?

James says to ALL of us:

**Let EVERY MAN be quick to hear, slow to speak.**

Listening is HARD WORK!

We are plagued by IMPATIENT LISTENING.  
By INATTENTIVE LISTENING that really just dismisses the other person.

German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote  
that there is a kind of **“half listening...because we presume we already know  
what the other will say...or we are busy thinking of our words before we give  
the other a chance to finish.”**

And if that is so – that we cannot listen patiently to another person –  
eventually we will have no time to listen to GOD either!

Which of us, dear brothers and sisters, must not confess today that  
we have not been such listeners as we should?

SLOW to listen to God. SLOW to listen to our neighbor.

How can we ever hope to become good listeners?

Friend, there is help.

The Bible says, **“We love because He first loved us.”**

Let me paraphrase it: “We may LISTEN, because He first LISTENED to us.”

The Good News is that GOD LISTENS!

Patiently. Over days and years and centuries... God has listened.

He who fashioned the ear  
and designed the tiny bones that receive the sonic vibrations  
knows how to listen to the prayer and groans we brought with us  
into church this morning.

When the Israelites were in Egypt, groaning under their slavery,  
the sound came to God’s ear...

**“I have heard,”** He told Moses, **“and I have come to deliver them.”**

His ears are tuned in to you, friend.

He picks up the sound of your quiet, desperate rage,  
the silent tears in you shed as you sit alone in the living room  
with the clock ticking,  
the prayer you are struggling to pray over a guilt you cannot shake.

**While they are yet speaking,** God says, **I will hear.**

GOD LISTENS TO US. And He sends us what we need.

Jesus came as the answer to the prayers of all those agonized centuries...

We sang it a few minutes ago:

What a friend we have in Jesus  
All our sins and griefs to bear  
What a privilege to carry  
Everything to God in prayer!

How He listened! To the disciples in their squabble about greatness,  
to the centurion whose servant was sick,  
to Nicodemus, whose fear led him to come under cover of darkness,  
to the woman with the hemorrhage.

People flocked to Him

Because He LISTENED. LOVED. FORGAVE.

He still does.

We gather together with our fears and tears. We bring prayers, many unspoken.  
He listens to us. He is listening even now.

Have you neglected the ministry of listening?

Ignored the neighbor?  
Listened with only half an ear?

You may tell God about it this morning, because His ear is still open to you.

Look at the cross, and let it be your reminder  
that your cries have been heard by God.

St. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 6:

**At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation.**

**GOD LISTENS TO US...SO WE CAN LISTEN TO EACH OTHER.**

A certain young man, a college student, was having a hard time.

His struggles with his conscience were compounded by a sense of utter loneliness. Family and girlfriend were far away.

But he found help.

Near his dormitory was the home of a professor who often invited him over for dinner. Good as the dinners were, the time afterward was better, for the professor, sensing the young man's struggles, often urged him to stay and talk.

So the young man talked...and poured out his heart's burdens. The professor puffed quietly on his pipe and kept his mouth shut, listening intently. Such listening! For that young man, it was the best of medicines.

I remember it well, for I was that young man.

I don't remember anything the professor told me now, but I remember vividly how well he listened.

In those quiet moments, I really felt that **GOD WAS LISTENING TOO.**

Could God use **YOU** to be His ears?

Surely He who uses our **MOUTHS** to speak the Gospel of pardon and grace could first use our ears

to hear a sin that needs confessing,  
or a fear that weighs heavily on a brother's shoulders.

What a joy to discover that **GOD LISTENS TO US.**

What a privilege to consider that **WE MAY LISTEN TO EACH OTHER.**

A high and holy privilege it is –

given us at the foot of the cross today – **THE MINISTRY OF LISTENING.**