

The story is told of two men who were traveling along in a hot-air balloon when they began to realize that they had no idea where they were.

To make matters worse, as they looked at the sky, a storm began brewing and heavy clouds started rolling in.

For a brief minute they came through a break in the clouds and they were able to see a man on a hill just beneath them.

In a shout of desperation one of them yelled to the man, "Excuse me, sir, but do you know where we are?" "Sure!" he said, "You're in a hot-air balloon!" Before the men could respond, a big gust of wind came along and blew them back into the clouds.

Then one of the men looked at the other and said, "That man must have been a Christian." "Why do you say that?" asked his friend. "Because what he said was absolutely true, but it was also absolutely useless."

It's unfortunate that the world often looks at Christians that way. Christians are often seen as believing in things that may be true but that don't really make a difference in their daily living.

It's one thing to say that you believe a certain creed, but it's a totally different thing to have that creed actually transform your conduct.

It's one thing to talk about your faith, but it's something altogether different to live it. These are the very words coming from Jesus' lips in Mark 7.

In verse 6 he says, Isaiah was right

when he prophesied about you hypocrites,
as it is written: These people honor me
with their lips but their hearts are far from me.

We call that giving lip service
or talking the talk but not walking the walk.
Then in verse 15 Jesus says nothing
outside of a man can make him
unclean by going into him.

Rather it is what comes out of
a man or woman that makes them unclean.
Jesus is talking about looking good on the inside.
The Pharisees were more concerned
with what was happening on the outside.
One of the statements that I often make
and truly believe is that the church is always
one step away from the Pharisees.

We focus so much on outward appearance
of everything that we spend little time being
concerned with the inward spiritual life of each other.

I've preached on committed discipleship
for a number of weeks now and especially
on the need to study God's word together
and I have had two people come up to me
and say either I want to start that
or I want to be a part of that.

I am hoping that means then that the rest of us
are already involved in study opportunities elsewhere
or are actively involved in study individually at home.

But Pastor Jeremy I can't put one
more thing on my plate,
one more thing into my dayplanner
or palm or blackberry.

Then my suggestion to you is to
stop planning God into your day
and start planning your day into God.

If you are relying on what little I can
teach or preach to you in 20 minutes
on Sunday morning than that is like

only charging your cellphone
for 20 minutes each week.

I can guarantee your phone will be
dead soon after you have unplugged it.
We spend more time and energy critically
looking at the federal government,
healthcare reform, etc than we do
looking at our spiritual life.

We spend more time and effort
practicing for sports and recreation.
We spend more time surfing the web,
being voyeurs on facebook,
watching 30 minute sitcoms than we do
being in communion with the Creator
who knit us in our mother's wombs,
lived a human life to be close to us,
died a horrible death and gave us
the gift of new life and salvation.

And our plate is too full to give more
than 1 or 2 hours out of 168 hours each week
to grow in our understanding of our bedrock belief?
Jesus told the Pharisees once that you
are like whitewashed tombs,
which on the outside look beautiful,
but inside they are full of the bones
of the dead and of all kinds of filth.
Ouch. The truth hurts.
And it is a truth for all of us including me.

One of the stories that capture our imagination
is the Walt Disney story of Peter Pan.
Peter was the boy who never wanted to grow up,
and so he lived in Never Land and lived
a life of constant fun and adventure,
no responsibilities or cares,
just a never-ending childhood.

Peter Pan makes for an enjoyable bedtime story.
However, many people want to live
a Peter Pan type of Christianity.
They want to experience a new birth and
then remain a spiritual infant,
never going on to maturity.

They say "Feed me, feed me" and always demand to have things go their way and focus only on themselves.

Jesus is saying that part of being a committed disciple is our inward actions and beliefs as well as our outside practices. The book of James in chapter 1 speaks directly to that growth. Turn with me to page? and we find these words.

James 1:19. My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. For man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

Retirement homes are generally quiet places. But the St. Petersburg Times reported that the upscale Spring Haven Retirement Community found their peace disrupted over a nasty incident at the salad bar.

Mealtime turned ugly after 86-year-old William Hocker complained to 62-year-old Lee Thoss about picking through the lettuce. Name-calling soon gave way to punching, and eventually the police were summoned. Those in the way paid a price.

One resident was bitten in his attempt to stop the fight, another knocked down. Thoss' mother, herself a resident, tried to rescue her son. The octogenarian suffered a cut on the arm.

While no one was seriously injured, Thoss now must find a new place to live. Those retirement home residents did not take time to listen, and they were quick to speak and become angry. While we may smile at the incident, the fact is that you and I struggle in the same way. How often have you said something to someone and wished that you had listened before speaking?

Or when was the last time you got angry?
Oh! You may not have said anything
or even hit someone, but inside you were annoyed.

James outlines three distinct marks
of growing in spiritual maturity.
Today we focus on the first.
He sets down for us the first of
several spiritual litmus tests.
See how you do.

He says be quick to listen.
The first characteristic of growing in
spiritual maturity is that we should be quick to listen.
But, "Listen to what?"
The primary meaning of "quick to listen"
seems to be quick to listen to God's word.

The context of this exhortation
from James is God's word,
for in both the preceding verse (verse 18)
and the following verse (verse 21) James
is speaking of "the word of truth"
and "the word planted in you."

And so James is saying that you must
have an open ear to hear what God
has said in his word.
Jesus constantly rebuked the religious leaders
of his day for their inability to "hear" him.
They heard the truth with their ears,
but Jesus' point was that they had
never learned to listen with their hearts!

It's possible to have good hearing physically,
but to be very hard of hearing spiritually.
Your primary task as a Christian is to tune
your heart to hear the word of God.

Pollster George Barna reports that 52%
of all American adults do not read the Bible at all.
That is not surprising.
What is surprising though is that only 26%
of evangelical Christians read their Bible daily.
Is it any wonder that so many professing
Christians are not being transformed

by God and God's word?
To be quick to listen to God's word means
spending time each day reading God's word.

In the Old Testament,
hearing was a part of obedience.
It was inseparably linked. Shema
is the Hebrew word meaning "to hear."
The Old Testament law is encapsulated
in the Shema, found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5,
"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.
Love the Lord your God with all your heart
and with all your soul and with all your strength."

This carried over to the New Testament
where the Greek word for "obey"
and to really hear is hupakouo.
It is hearing that results in obedience.
It means that you paid attention
to what God was saying.
To hear is to do.

That means that you must be eager to hear it,
to sit under it, to submit to it,
and to incorporate it into your lives.
You must be teachable and attentive to the word of God.
This means making it a priority to set aside
consistent times of solitude to read
God's word prayerfully and reflectively.

It means reading the Scriptures
with an attentive heart,
sensitive to the Holy Spirit's prompting as you read.
Some of you are thinking,
"What time alone?"
Maybe you have grown slack.
Or you have never really started.
When you become quick to listen
your life will change.
Through reading the Scriptures,
God will transform your thinking.
You need to resolve today to set aside
regular times in your schedule for the reading of God's Word.

The ancients had a special form
of devotion they called lectio divina.

It means “divine reading.”
The idea originated with St. Benedict, an Italian monk.
He taught his followers to read
the Scripture out loud slowly.
Then, as a part of the Scripture
particularly spoke to them,
they would carry that word
around with them all day.

I have used this method before and
it has been very meaningful.
For instance, in my devotions one morning
as I was reading a section in the Gospel of Mark,
I read where Jesus said,
“Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation”

I carried with me through the day
the simple phrase “Watch and pray,”
and all day I considered what that meant for my life.
You can write the phrase on a
small piece of paper and carry it with you.
It is a simple way to keep the Word of God
before you in a consistent way.
It is nothing big, but it is enough
to make a difference in your life —
a small act of being consistent.

Robert M’Cheyne served as the
pastor of St. Peter’s Church, Dundee in 1836.
Though so young, he was known throughout Scotland
as “the saintly M’Cheyne.”
One of M’Cheyne’s continuing concerns was to
encourage his congregation,
and himself, to read the Bible.

M’Cheyne was one of the first to
prepare a scheme for daily reading
through the New Testament and
Psalms twice each year,
and through the rest of the Bible once.

Or you might personally prefer simply
to read straight through the Bible,
beginning in Genesis and ending in Revelation.
Maybe vary your reading by using different translations.
But what happens to most Christians

when they decide to start reading the Bible?
They quickly get bogged down in their reading
—usually in Leviticus! And so they stop reading.

My encouragement to you is to read
your Bible each day, and to find a
method that works for you.
If you get bogged down in Leviticus (or any other book),
skip it, and come back to that book.
I have given you a sample reading plan in your bulletin today.

But to be quick to listen
also means something else.
Listening to one another.
President Franklin D. Roosevelt got tired
of smiling that big smile and saying the
usual things at all those White House receptions.
So, one evening he decided to find out
whether anybody was paying attention
to what he was saying.

As each person came up to him
with extended hand, he flashed that big smile
and said, "I murdered my grandmother this morning."
People would automatically respond
with comments such as "How lovely!"
or "Just continue with your great work!"

Nobody listened to what he was saying,
except one foreign diplomat.
When the president said,
"I murdered my grandmother this morning,"
the diplomat responded softly,
"I'm sure she had it coming to her."

Most of us are not very good listeners are we?
We have become a people obsessed
with being heard instead.
Every political or topical talk show
is about who is the loudest
at getting their point across.

The recent town halls are a prime
example of how we no longer know
how to be in dialogue and still disagree with each other.
The loudest voice wins.

Erma Bombeck said It seems rather incongruous that in a society of super sophisticated communications, we often suffer from a shortage of listeners.

But Jesus isn't the loudest voice and if we are too busy talk and shouting about whatever all the time we will miss what he has to say to us through each other as well.

Quick listeners have the best interest of the one speaking in mind. They are more concerned about making sure the person speaking to them knows they are being heard, than about being heard themselves.

Self-defense is not a component of quick or active listening. To be an active listener requires courage and humility. You must value the importance of what you are hearing in order to really listen. Listening requires tuning in both mind and heart. It is an active process that requires our full attention.

Here are few short ways to quickly listen and listen well. First be accepting. We need to see people as Jesus did. If people do not matter to God, Christ would not have any reason to go the cross, but He did.

Jesus showed us that grace loves, serves, forgives, doesn't keep a record of wrong and then dangle them over someone's face. Demonstrate that love, acceptance and forgiveness of Christ to another. God has settled our accounts, so let us then help others by dying to our need to settle accounts!

Second make eye contact. Instead of looking elsewhere, pay attention to another. Eye contact really says, "I am here to listen". Eye-eye contact tells the other person

you are interested in really hearing, in caring.
It shows you are not distracted;
you are tuning in, not faking but making contact.
It shows you are not annoyed
or can't wait to fire back a response.
If we can't listen to someone
we can see eye to eye,
how can we then listen to God
whom we cannot see?

And third Hold the phone.
Just like phone conversations,
make a conscious effort not to respond,
even in your head, till the other has finished talking.
Think of how a phone conversation
would sound if everyone starts talking at the same time.
Be truly attentive, hear completely,
and respond with heart not the head!
Watch the body language!
Your body language will send messages
if you are "slow to speak"
or already framing a rebuttal.
Be really slow to jump to conclusions.
People want to know you care
before they care how much you know.

To be quick to listen to God's word
also means that you prepare your heart
to hear God's word whenever it is taught.
When the word of God is read and preached,
you are to pay attention,
to listen with faith and reverence
so that you might understand and apply it to your lives.

A visiting preacher came to an
African American church one Sunday.
Just prior to the time when he was to deliver his sermon,
he noticed a strange noise in the congregation.

It began as a low mumble and
then slowly began to increase in volume.
The people were almost chanting.
Then he could hear them.
They were saying, "Yes, Lord, Yes! Yes, Lord, Yes!"

The visiting preacher asked the pastor

what in the world they were doing.
The pastor responded by saying,
“These folk believe that when God’s Servant
comes to bring them God’s word,
that God really does have a word for each of them.

And they come every Sunday with prepared hearts,
expecting to hear from God as his word is preached.
And when they say, ‘Yes, Lord, Yes!’
they are telling God in advance that they
will do whatever he tells them to do
today even before he says it.”

How well is your heart prepared
to hear God’s word each week?
Do you come expecting to hear from God?
How well would you do on a test of reading the scripture?
Somewhere between reading your bible everyday
and it makes a nice bookend?
How well do you listen?

Jesus wants our whole self not only the outside
we bring to worship or wed nights
but the inside created by God.
I encourage you to explore how deep
your faith really is and where it needs to go deeper.
Be quick to listen. Amen.