

# “Improving Your Listening”

James 1;19-27

January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2002 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

Listening Style	Human Oriented	Task Oriented
<p><b>Leisure Listening</b> (pleasurable) Have a strong sense for pleasing and stimulating communication. Are more relaxed than others but are less interested in getting down to the business at hand. They need to enjoy life but also focus on the tasks at hand.</p>	Your Rating:	
<p><b>Inclusive Listening</b> (comprehensive) Not strongly committed to a central position and have a wide listening band to absorb a broad scope of information. Greatest interest of listening is in searching for speaker's major idea or point. Tend to construct a framework to relate incoming information but may be gullible.</p>		Your Rating:
<p><b>Stylistic Listening</b> (mannerisms – medium) The medium is as important as the actual words. The speakers' style and background are judged as much as the content of their communication.</p>	Your Rating:	

Listening Style	Human Oriented	Task Oriented
<p><b>Technical Listening</b> (systematic) Listens for “how I can do a better job.” A narrow band of listening usually concerned only with results pertaining to improving the task at hand. Focuses on listening to fields related to physical sciences. Dislikes terms lacking specific precision. Needs to be aware of human aspects as well as things and tasks.</p>		Your Rating:
<p><b>Empathetic Listening</b> (emotional state) Highly tuned into the emotional states of others, dependent upon receiving cues of the other person's feelings in order to adopt position on speaker's emotional needs. Greatly affected by speaker's non-verbal communication. Need to discern accuracy of their perceptions of speaker's feelings and appropriateness of checking it out.</p>	Your Rating:	
<p><b>Non-Conforming Listening</b> (critical) Begins listening from a firm position, judging all information by that. Quick to evaluate speaker's position. Has a narrower band of listening but considerable critical prowess.</p>		Your Rating:

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We don't know which "James" wrote the Biblical book by that name but tradition says he was the younger brother of Jesus. He was the one who became the predominant leader of the Jerusalem Jewish Christian church after Peter left. If he were living today, he could probably make his living by writing sayings for companies that make wall-mounted plaques sold in gift stores or write for Hallmark Cards. He had a knack for saying things with practicality.

He could make a statement that had breath in its scope, balance in its thinking and yet be brief. Look again at verse 19 of the text. The advice is for one to be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger.

The street wisdom of it is that we should go about our life, taking in as much as we can and yet resist dishing out our anger and frustration. His sense of balance appears again in the verses to follow.

In verse 22 and following he suggests that we be "doers of the word and not hearers only." That once we receive insight and gain perspective, we are to incorporate these things in our behavior. If we do not integrate our values in the way we treat others, we are like the person who looks in a mirror but forgets the image we see as soon as we walk away from it.

Thoughts and concepts, then, do not become a part of us until we integrate them in our life-style. If we live mindfully about what we're doing with ourselves, we will be blessed and live with integrity.

What I hope to do in this time period is to focus on James' advice about being quick to listen – and then give you a tool that may help you be more mindful about different kinds of listening. Because if we can upgrade our awareness of the quality of our listening and that of others, this could be a practical lesson on improving this area of our lives. It should improve what you do and noticeably improve how you relate to others. But remember what James suggests: if we gain some insight on an issue, it must be carried over into our actions in order for that insight to be incorporated into our

life's pattern. You don't know how many people in this church have come to me and complained that their spouse never listens to them. Could this be your spouse?

"There is no such thing as a bad listener; there is only a person with inflexible listening habits."<sup>1</sup>

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Our listening habits, and attitudes about listening, are directly related to our individual needs. People who are poor listeners have inflexible listening habits – usually because they think that their needs never change. In reality, our needs continually change both in our work and in personal settings as we go through life. The basic task before us, in terms of listening improvement, is to broaden our spectrum of listening habits so that we can more appropriately match how we listen with our social context. And if we are improving in these areas of life, we are growing in our mindfulness and that's what spiritual growth is about.

My goals, then, are to ① help you identify your usual listening attitudes and then ② help you more appropriately see how better to match your listening attitude in task and human relations settings. Finally, ③ I hope to help you increase your flexibility in how you listen to the people in your life – maybe how you listen to and for God.

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There are two sets of situations in which we find ourselves in terms of listening. ① First there is the general or immediate situation. ② Secondly there is the more intense or focused context of listening.

① In our general or immediate context, we listen for things we consider to be most important to us. This takes place anytime, whether we are riding on a bus or entering a room full of people. It is our all-around approach to listening in our life.

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<sup>1</sup> This quotation and the entirety of the descriptions of listening behaviors, is taken directly from John Geier, Dorothy Downey, *The Attitudinal Listening Profile System*, Performax Systems International, Inc. 1980, revised 1982.

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② Intense listening takes place when we have particular demands placed on our time and abilities. These times when we are in a focused situation where there are usually fewer people – often just one person, and where there is a more intense form of communication in a quieter setting. We do this kind of focused listening when we are talking with a coworker at lunch or when we are sitting alone, sitting in a class or early in the morning before the demands of the day are upon us.

Whether we are listening in a general or in a focused context, we will tend to listen with high or low levels of ability in each of six areas of listening outlined in the chart. Some creative researchers, in the field of listening, have taken the letters of the word “listen” and used them to define the six attitudes of listening.

Look at the chart if you have access to it in print.<sup>2</sup> Let’s make this material practical for your life.

As I summarize each of the six listening attitudes, consider rating yourself (in the appropriate box to its right.) Either mentally or with a pencil, rate yourself as either an “H” for high or an “L” for low.



**Leisure Listeners** have an accurate ear for what pleases them. Their basic philosophy is “You only go around once in life so you’ve got to enjoy yourself when you can.” This results in a *listening attitude* that looks for pleasant stimuli and one which is disinterested in the kind of messages that demand intensity of effort or those which are perceived as causing stress, work or discomfort. People with leisure listening are more relaxed than others and they want to stay that way.

Leisure listeners are good at picking up non-verbal messages that accompany the spoken words. For example, they are sensitive to vocal changes, differences in cadence and tone of someone’s speech. If they sense a voice inflection

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<sup>2</sup> You will notice that the first letters, of each of the section titles, spell the word “listen.”

that has a loving touch or an affectionate air about it, they will focus more intently on it.

On the other hand, leisure listeners can turn away their attention when they hear vocal changes which indicate stress or discomfort in the other person. They will take note of it and if it continues, they will either leave that physical conversation or mentally tune the speaker out. Leisure listeners seem to have a sixth sense which enables them to avoid entanglements in relationships which might get too intense. But they do hear the spoken word well when they are interested in the work or the social situation. People who are strong in this kind of listening attitude will probably not be the people who will hear the manager’s first suggestion: “shall we get down to the business at hand.” They will probably not sense the impatient gesture which indicates “let’s get back to work.”

Leisure listeners often tune in and out of conferences and meetings. A sermon at church, a keynote address or a demonstration of equipment, may be the automatic setting where they drift off and begin to think about a fishing trip on the next weekend, the vacation plans or the children’s birthday party.

The greatest challenge to leisure listeners is to retain their enjoyment for life but make sure life doesn’t pass them by when they are not focused on the tasks at hand. So, if you will, rate yourself as high or low (“H” or “L”) over to the right in that box.



**The Inclusive Listeners** like to know what is going on so that they can become more meaningfully involved. They are usually not strongly committed to a central position from which they “hear” and accept or reject information. Instead, they tend to have a wide listening band and they absorb a broad scope of information. Their greatest intensity in listening comes when they are searching for the speaker’s major idea or their most important point.

Because inclusive listeners are open to a large span of information, the central idea is essential to how they process things they hear. The main idea

provides them with a hook on which to hang related ideas. Gradually, they fill in an outline of the less important ideas that are coming to them in the presentation. But without having “the central idea,” they can’t start to process the amount of information that they are being given.

Because they are working with an outline or framework to receive the information, they are more easily able to avoid information overload. For instance, an inclusive listener will like outlines of the sermon on Sunday but if the sermon has a point that doesn’t relate well, or seems to go off on a tangent that isn’t centrally related to the main idea, the inclusive listeners will easily tell themselves, “that illustration isn’t very good” but go on and wait for something better to come by.

Inclusive listeners are most intense in listening at the beginning of a conversation or presentation. Once they have the key idea, they can relax and process the rest. If they do not have that, though, they often intensify their listening and become frustrated until the main idea or point begins to emerge. If you find yourself frequently wondering “What’s the point?” you may be this kind of listener.

Inclusive listeners are most attentive to the spoken word because it is with words that ideas and concepts are formulated. They usually pay attention to non-verbal messages but only the gestures that indicate an important point or a central idea.

Because inclusive listeners do not have a firm opinion from which they accept or reject information, they tend to be widely accepting of information but at times they can be gullible. They tend to listen and accept at a literal level. Sometimes they may find that someone has taken advantage of their gullibility.

So again, rate yourself, over to the right, as to whether you are high in that listening stance or low.



For the **Stylistic Listener**, the medium (or the form in which the communication is taking place) is as important as the actual words. If we

recall “pushy” communicators in history – like Hitler or Castro who transmitted their compelling oratorical style within the hypnotic trappings of flags, pageantry and crowd psychology – we can understand how they held so much power over Stylistic Listeners.

Stylistic listeners closely evaluate the speaker’s mannerisms and the social context in which the message is delivered. One stylistic listener may judge the attire of the speaker and turn the hearing receiver down several notches because of unpolished shoes. Still another may place a high importance on the proper use of grammar or sentence construction. The use of slang, such as “you guys” will have the end result of less listening by this type listener.

But the whole is greater than the sum of the parts for the stylistic listeners. They listen carefully for those non-verbal messages which tell them something about the overall style of the speaker.

For example, some organizations have a preferred style within the organization that projects a competitive, high-spirited winner (who dresses in a particular way and participates in appropriate organizational activities. The stylistic listeners enjoy the stage presence of the ministers in one church in our area, who sit up front (in matching white suits) while one of them talks on a white phone to someone, (apparently giving orders from his command post.)

Stylistic listeners, who function within a certain framework of style, will give an attentive ear to anyone who has their preferred style of communication. The speakers who project a cooperative, somewhat academic style, will not find a ready ear with stylistic listeners in that specific setting.

Many stylistic listeners weigh what the speaker says against their background. They are especially tuned into introductions which tell something about the speaker in a formal presentation. When interacting with another individual, they are particularly receptive to hearing about the person’s history.

The greatest challenge for stylistic listeners is to listen – even when there is no identifiable style of presentation. Rate yourself as high or low in that type of listening.



**The Technical Listener**, or systematic listener, is usually one who listens for “how can I do a better job.” The listening frequency of technical listeners is admittedly somewhat narrow but technical listeners hear very well within that frequency. The breadth of listening is narrow for this type of listener because many people have thoughts, feelings and opinions about how to do a better job – but the technical listeners are more concerned with the results of research or experience which pertains to the task at hand.

Technical listeners have chosen to limit their reception to those people who are *qualified* to tell them how a better job can be done. They tend to pay more attention to fields in the physical sciences, such as engineering (in which specialized knowledge has been systematized, researched and expanded into process and procedures.) When technical listeners have responsibilities in human relationship areas such as management, or when they work in fields in the social sciences, they experience “frequency static.” That is, when they hear words like “human resources,” “self-esteem,” or “self-actualization” they feel some sense of confusion in the lack of clarity of the words. They question their relevance to the precision kind of information they prefer to hear.

Sermons on Sunday, that talk about what the speaker *thinks* or *feels*, are uninteresting to the technical listeners. They want to hear about order or doing a better job at certain tasks.

A mistake technical listeners can make, then, is to close themselves off from emotional communication. For instance, to technical listeners, another person’s frown may be thought to be related to the task under discussion. They may assume that the other person is frowning because they do not understand the technical specifics about which they are talking.

The frown, however, may actually mean an upset stomach, boredom, anger or irritation. Technical listeners should work at getting beyond the superficial level of non-verbal messages and take people’s feelings into serious consideration.

So, the greatest challenge for technical listeners is to increase their listening frequency so that they can tune in on the human aspects associated with doing a task. We live in a world of people as well as things.

Rate yourself as high or low in terms of this listening type.



**The Empathetic Listeners**, as you would guess, have an accurate ear for the emotional states of other people. Empathetic listeners are heavily dependent upon receiving cues of the other person’s feelings in order to adopt a position which reflects that speaker’s emotional needs. For example, empathetic listeners perk to attention when they detect changes in tone of voice. They pick up quickly on fear, anger, excitement, rage, sadness, depression, or simple preoccupation.

Visual changes in the speaker also are perceived and the speaker’s eye contact is an important factor. An empathetic listener will greatly be affected if the communicator’s eyes have either a glassy stare of disinterest or the direct gaze of interest. Just about any bodily gesture is picked up by the empathetic listener and is interpreted as acceptance or rejection. This is true especially of touch. Empathetic listeners do, of course, hear the spoken words but they are focusing in on the non-verbal communication to the same extent.

The greatest difficulty for empathetic listeners is that they receive non-verbal messages well but they may not accurately interpret them. They are usually perceptive in their hearing but the only way they can check out the accuracy (of what they think the other person is feeling) is to ask.

When they hear slowness of speech in a voice on the phone, they may wrongly judge that the person is disinterested in them, when, in reality, the person is just tired from lack of sleep. Checking the accuracy of what empathetic

listeners perceive about another's feelings is appropriate in some situations but not in others. In counseling or coaching settings or in a close personal relationship, it is appropriate to focus on the other person's feelings. It becomes less appropriate to do this in casual social or work settings because in these cases it is intrusive and needy. Therefore, the empathetic listeners tend to be more effective in close relationships (where feelings information can be validated) and in work situations like counseling (where there are more intense listening contexts.)

Rate yourself as high or low in this kind of listening in the box to the right.



Lastly there is the **Non-Conforming** or critical listener. This way of listening starts with a firm opinion and judges all incoming information according to its relevancy to that position.

Non-conforming listeners are most attentive to information which is relevant to the position they hold. They are quick to evaluate if the facts justify the speaker's position and how strong that position is compared to their own. In contrast, listeners who do not have this firm position tend to absorb more information.

Although non-conforming listeners admittedly have a narrow band of listening, they tend to have considerable objectivity. While non-conforming listeners listen to the verbal and non-verbal messages, they tend to consider non-verbal messages such as touching and encouraging tones to be soft or weak.

Non-conforming listeners bring their critical faculties to bear on what is being said. They use the fact that we can think much faster than we can talk. Therefore, they take time to listen and they often think far ahead of the speaker – guessing where she or he is going with the presentation. Non-confirming listeners are able to give careful scrutiny to their listening if they tune into the subject. They do not like mistakes, however, and they have little tolerance for opinions which fall outside of their judgment on things.

Determine if you are high or low in this area.



Now as you consider these different listening styles, you see that each of them fall in either of the two columns at the top: human relations or tasks. This means that you may have listening strengths that relate best to human relationships or relate more to accomplishing tasks. You may be more relationship oriented than task oriented. You may be more task oriented than relationship oriented.

But life consists of both human interaction and task completion. If we would apply all this to James' advice, we can probably see areas of our listening habits that could be brought into a better balance. Balancing, in this case, would involve observing where our tendency is (things or people) and then trying to be sensitive (as the social context dictates) to developing our listening skills for the appropriate need.

Generalities, certainly, but sometimes we can go through life in either a feelings-relationship orientation or a work-task orientation exclusively and then miss out on half of life. So as James reminds us to be quick to listen, the advice demands more discipline than we first may have thought. We may want to remind ourselves that there is listening and then there is intelligent and context-sensitive listening.

As Christians, we should be the best listeners in the world. To do so, we should be working on improving the flexibility of our listening habits. Because "there is no such thing as a bad listener; there is only a person with inflexible listening habits." Are you listening for God like you listen to others in your life? 🙏

