

Calgary First Mennonite Church
September 28, 2003

PEOPLE WITH EARS

James 1:19-27

I. Introduction

Little Amos was ready to leave the house for school when his mother noticed an unsightly blemish around his mouth. She quickly discerned that the blemish was one that could have been quickly removed so she asked Amos whether he had looked in the mirror before leaving for school. Amos shrugged his shoulders and said he had. "No," his mother said. "I mean, have you really looked in the mirror? Did you see the mess on your face? Chocolate milk or mud or whatever that is?" Amos acknowledged that he had seen it. "And you didn't do anything about it?" Amos shrugged his shoulders again and turned to walk out the door. His mother grabbed him and dragged him back to the bathroom. "As far as I'm concerned," she said, "you haven't really looked in the mirror until you've done something about what you saw."

That's essentially the image James leaves us with in verses 23 and 24 of our text this morning. There are those whose responses to God's direction are like that of little Amos. It appears that they have heard and understood God's direction but there is no evidence of them having acted on that direction. They are not that unlike the ducks in a story told by Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard. There was this country in which only ducks lived. On Sunday morning all the ducks came into church, waddled down the aisle, waddled into their pews, and squatted. Then the duck minister came in, took his place behind the pulpit, opened the Duck Bible and read, "Ducks! You have wings, and with wings, you can fly like eagles. You can soar into the sky! Ducks! You have wings!" All the ducks yelled, "Amen!," and then they all waddled home. Too often, we are like those ducks. We hear God's word spoken to us and we read God's word. We believe what we have heard and read but our problem is often like the problem of the ducks. We hear, read, and believe but then we don't change anything. We keep on living just like before. The question we'll consider this morning is whether we are guilty of listening but not doing.

II. The Man in the Mirror

We'll begin with the central paragraph of our text and then consider how the surrounding paragraphs are an extension of the central theme located in this paragraph. I understand the central theme to be contained in verse 22, a verse that tells us to do what the word says.

In attempting to understand that, I ask first of all what the word is. There is a clue in the previous verse where James referred to the word planted in us, a word that can save us. That's reminiscent of Jesus' story of the sower where a sower scattered seed. The seed was explained to be the word of God and some of that seed became firmly planted in the hearers. So it's probably correct to understand the word here as God's word. And God's word is whatever forms God uses to communicate to us. Primarily it is his written word contained in the Bible. But it is also the truth communicated by other Christians and the conscience God has placed within us and activated by the Holy Spirit's work within us. So the word in this passage is the message of God to us in whatever form he communicates it.

Now James says it is possible to be listeners to the word while being self-deceivers. How do we do that? That's where the man in the mirror comes in. James thinks of someone like little Amos in our introduction, someone who looks in a mirror, presumably sees something he should do something about, but ignores it. He deceives himself by telling himself he doesn't need to do anything about what he saw.

Now, we can certainly be something like that in a spiritual sense, too. We can choose to read our Bibles frequently. We can come to church on a regular basis and sit in the pews, listening to the speakers. We are listening. We can open our Bibles and read along with the Scripture reading, or follow along while the speaker explains the morning's text. We might even make notations in our Bibles or take notes about what the speaker says. We are listening.

But are we really? James' exhortation reminds us that it is possible to listen without really listening. We really listen if we choose to act on what we have heard. Warren Wiersbe comments that too many people make marks in their Bibles but their Bibles never mark them. If what we read and hear doesn't have any impact on how we live, then we haven't really read and heard.

Then we are like the man in the mirror who sees but doesn't do anything about what he sees. James goes on to compare the mirror to the perfect law. What does he mean with that phrase? I don't believe he is thinking about law in a technical sense here or the Old Testament Law as Jews understood it. He is simply thinking about the whole of God's directions to us. God has told us much about how we should or shouldn't live and those directions for living are perfect. James reminds us that there is a freedom in choosing to live by what God instructs. God's intentions are that we find contentment and security in doing what is right and a freedom from enslavement to what is wrong for us.

III. Application 1: Listening

Having considered James' central theme of needing to put into action what we hear, we return to the first paragraph, James 1:19-21, where listening is at the core of

James' thoughts. He has some very helpful ideas for us as we consider how we should listen. First, he reminds us that listening is about being slow. That is, listening requires that we be slow to speak and slow to become angry. In other words, when one listens one should be careful not to overreact. We likely all know people or perhaps we are people ourselves who find ourselves jumping in to respond to another person's communication with us before giving that person the opportunity to fully express himself or herself. Or we recognize that we or other people sometimes become angry already as another person expresses himself or herself without even allowing the other person to finish or before fully understanding what the other person expresses. James reminds us that listening like that isn't much good. Listening requires some slowness in carefully considering what the other has said to us.

It would be easy to get into some communication theory here but that's not really the point. The point is that it is important to carefully consider what someone is communicating to us. As I was looking at some communication theory, I did come across one amusing story that speaks to this point about listening, though. It seems that a woman came to a lawyer insisting that he assist her in obtaining a divorce from her husband. "I must have a divorce from my husband immediately!" The lawyer asked, "Do you have grounds?" "Yes, about five acres." "I mean, do you have a grudge?" the lawyer questioned. "No, just a carport." Then the lawyer asked, "Does he beat you up?" "No," the woman replied. "I get up before he does." Exasperated, the attorney demanded, "Madam, why do you want a divorce from your husband?" "Because it is impossible to communicate with that man!" Jim and Sally Conway, *Traits of a Lasting Marriage*, p. 64) We quickly understand that here was a woman who was not adept at listening. And how would she ever understand what someone wanted to ask her or tell her if she was not going to listen carefully. In the same way, James is saying that if we react to communication to us with quick words or anger (and in this case he is thinking of God's communication) we will not hear what is being communicated to us.

The second point James makes about listening seems to be that our listening to God can be hindered when we condone and culture sin in our lives. It would seem likely that when James reminds us to get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent in verse 21, he has in mind that idea. It seems clear that when we condone and culture sin in our lives, God has a hard time getting through to us. We are not inclined to hear him. So another factor in us doing a good job of listening is for us to deal with sin in our lives, acknowledging it, confessing it to God and requesting forgiveness. When we do that, we demonstrate humility and we make it more likely that we will hear what God is saying to us. Arrogance, after all, is clearly a hindrance to listening. So, we recognize that there are things we can do in our communication with God that will make it more likely that we will hear what God has to say. We should be such listeners.

IV. Application 2: Doing

Then we move on to the third paragraph of this morning's text, James 1:26,27, where James turns his thoughts to the other half of his theme, and that is doing. Listening by itself is not adequate. Action must result. James picks on a few things as examples of actions believers must take. He returns to the idea that quick words can be harmful. If you think of yourself as religious, he says, but don't control your words, your religion is useless. That James thinks of that example when he searches for a way to communicate the importance of action demonstrates how important words are. People who otherwise follow God carefully can do real damage with their tongues. James emphasizes how inconsistent that is. We'll return to the theme of the tongue in a later sermon from James so we'll leave that specific application at that for this morning.

James also thinks of another example when he says in verse 27, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." Does James mean that doing those two things encompasses all that God wants from us, that we become perfect if we accomplish that? William Barclay comments that James' words serve to remind us that sacrifice and service are what God cares about. Religion often emphasizes the form of public worship but the worship God is truly interested in is our sacrifice and service. That's an important truth. Both truths are important. As Christians, we need to be people whose tongues are in control, who demonstrate our commitment by caring for the oppressed, and who maintain personal purity.

But the overall point of the paragraph is that listening requires action. Unless the way we live changes and is transformed in the direction of what God wants from us, we aren't truly listening. Then we are like people who don't have ears.

V. Conclusion

I want to tell you an African fable about people who don't have ears. This is a fable recorded by Levi Keidel, a long-time Mennonite missionary in Africa. Keidel, *African Fables*: vol. 1, pp. 62-65)

People Don't Have Any Ears

ONCE UPON A TIME there was an old lion who was not able to hunt as he once had. He noticed that people have large bodies and run slowly. So he started catching people.

Many people lived in the village of Tshiawa. One day the lion caught someone in the village down the path from them. The next morning the village chief climbed up onto his hut roof and cried out, "Listen, my people. A bad lion is in our forest. Today no one will go to the stream or to the field. Everyone must stay in the village. Do you hear?"

Everyone listened carefully. They all obeyed except one woman, Meta. Her water gourds were empty. She didn't see how she could do without water that day. How would she cook? How would she bathe her baby? She must have water. She would make a quick trip. It wasn't far. She put her empty gourds into her long narrow carrying basket, balanced the basket on her head, and went to the stream.

Everything seemed to be all right. She arrived at the stream, walked into the shallow water, and filled each of her gourds. She put them into her basket and was lifting it onto her head when SWISHHHHH, from the bushes the old lion leaped upon her and killed her. He was carrying her along the prairie path to his den when he met strong Mr. Leopard.

"Where are you going with all that good meat?" asked Mr. Leopard.

"I'm going to my den," answered the lion.

"Why don't you let me help you carry such a heavy load?"

"No, thank you. You needn't carry it for me," answered the lion. "But I must admit I am a bit tired. Would you watch it for me? That way I can go get a drink of water and rest in the shade a bit before continuing the long journey to my den. You won't eat it, will you?"

"Of course not. Would a child steal from a grandfather? I'll guard it well."

So off went the lion, leaving the leopard to guard.

The leopard waited a long time. The sun climbed higher and higher. It grew hotter and hotter. Meanwhile the leopard grew more and more hungry. Whenever he looked at the fresh meat before him, his mouth watered. How hungry he was! Finally he thought to himself, "I'll just eat one of her ears. The old lion would never know the difference." He ate one. After a bit he ate the other one.

Finally Mr. Lion came back. He looked at his catch. Then he looked at Mr. Leopard.

"Where are her ears?" he asked.

"Oh friend Lion, people don't have any ears."

"Oh yes they do; they always do. She had ears when I left her with you. What happened to them?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lion, but people don't have any ears. If you like, I will prove it to you."

"Then you'd better prove it," the lion growled.

"All right. This evening just as the sun is going to bed, meet me at the path-crossing near the village," invited the leopard.

That evening just as the sun was setting, the two animals met at the path-crossing. Then the leopard led the old lion through the tall grass to the edge of the village. There they waited quietly.

People in the village were stirring around frantically. No one could find Meta. She had evidently gone for water in spite of what the chief had said.

Soon the lion and leopard saw the chief of the village climb onto the top of his roof. Then they heard him cry out, "Listen to me, my people. This morning I told you there was a lion nearby. I told you not to go to the forest or the stream. Meta refused to listen to my words. She went anyway. Why don't you people obey me? Why don't you listen to me? You people don't have any ears."

The leopard turned to the old lion and said, "There, you heard what the man said. People don't have any ears."

Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Matthew 11:15, RSV). Do you have ears? Are you using them to listen to what Jesus says? Or do you turn them off when there's something you don't want to hear?

What are we like? When God tries to communicate with us, do we have ears or don't we? If we are people with ears, we will be careful to hear what God says and then we will put it into action. Let's choose to be people with ears.