



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### Portrait of an Apology: “Let Your Victuals Stop Your Mouth.”

James 1:19-21

By Matt Hook

Does your family have sayings that are passed down? Mine does. One of the favorite sayings comes from my grandmother – my Swedish, praying grandmother. She’d be 100 this year. When I think of her this Mother’s Day, I think of her dinner table. She’s the one who would fix a whole table full of food for just the two of us when I would drive out to see her when I was in seminary. My family loves to eat, and we love to talk, and that doesn’t always mix well. When we’d be talking too much at the dinner table, she would say, “Let your victuals stop your mouth.” What a great line! (Note: it’s pronounced “vittles” like Granny did on the Beverly Hillbillies). In other words, stop talking with your mouth full. Or stop talking and start eating. We Americans talk a lot; and subsequently, we don’t listen. Of course, there was the time my mom said to my sister Jaema “stop talking with your mouth full!” and Jaema came back with one of the best lines of her life: “But it’s not full...I could fit more in it!” (Hey kids—next time you forget and talk with your mouth full, try this at home on Mom and Dad!) Then they’ll say “Let your victuals stop your mouth!”

My daughter Joy was watching TV downstairs when my wife Leigh called out, “Joy, come to dinner!” No response. A short time later Leigh called out again “Joy, come to dinner!” Again, no response. Finally, Leigh literally shouted, “Joy, come to dinner!!” Whereupon Joy came up the stairs, ran in to the kitchen, and with an innocent look on her face said, “Sorry, Mom. I didn’t hear you the first two times.”

Let your victuals stop your mouth! If we seek to build a portrait of an apology, as Steve preached last week, we’ve got to *stop* the debt-collecting. And we’ve got to *start* listening with a listening heart.

**One thing is clear about today’s world: there is a serious shortage of good listeners.** And again, it’s nothing new. James was aware of this in the first century. He penned these words: 19 “*My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, 20 for humanity’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. 21 Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.*”

**First, James writes “Be quick to listen.”** I think we’re afraid to really listen to people. Listening, *really* listening, listening all the way through the last word of the other person, is a loving way to let the other person know we really care. It’s giving up control (of the conversation) to the

other person. It's laying down our agenda, and it's picking up the relationship. And it's the framework of the portrait of an apology.

A listening heart, on the other hand, concentrates so much on the other person that we forget about ourselves. That's love. Wanting God's best for the other person means letting that other person truly be heard...by you! James puts it plainly: *Be quick to listen!*

**If we practice listening first**, James implies we avoid the two major problems to building a portrait of an apology: Any request of forgiveness, any hope of reconciliation stops when we talk too much and when anger controls us. **First, James writes "Be slow to speak"**. We talk way too much. And even when we're not talking, we're not listening. We're trying to think of what we're going to say when the other person slows up enough for us to break in. That's not communication. That's manipulation. If we try to manipulate others for our own gain, we know nothing about Calvary's love.

In Paul's famous words we hear at weddings, "love is patient and kind". The problem is most of us aren't. **Clear listening takes time. Take time.** Listen how James says it: "Be *slow* to speak." Our excuse is "Who has time," yet *time is the key*. James names it three times here: be *quick* to listen, *slow* to speak, *slow* to anger. He's talking about time. Now, I believe we're trying the best we can. The problem is we've completely lost our focus on what's really important. The greatest use of your life is love. The greatest expression of your love is time. We don't give those we love our time! Instead, we wind up slaves to our schedules, and we starve our families of our time...and our love. But we've forgotten. Many of us wouldn't interrupt a golf outing, ball game, or shopping trip for anything in the world. We've totally lost our focus. The greatest expression of your love is time. The time to love is now.

A married couple was sitting at the breakfast table. The man, reading the paper, says: "Honey, listen to this news item: A study was done that shows conclusively that women speak twice as many words as men!" Wife: "Well, we women always have to repeat ourselves because you men never hear us the first time we say something." To which he replied "What did you say?" Psychologists have documented that women communicate for the sake of relationship, while men communicate for information.

James says "*Be slow...to speak.*" Something else about the world: **It loves noise. Beware of noise.** Karl Marx was wrong. Religion is *not* the opiate of modern man, constant noise is. People will listen to *anything* to avoid silence. I'd love to lead a congregation that turns the TV off, that mutes the commercials, and offers people a safe place to be *heard*. The problem is, even when we begin to block out the noise, we try to fill it ourselves, so we talk and talk and talk, never getting to the apology.

- Grandma says, "Let your victuals stop your mouth!" Honor God. Paul writes Timothy to aim for God-honoring speech. "*But avoid all empty (vain, useless, idle) talk, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness.*" 2 Tim. 2:16.
- I lack self-control in this. I struggle, probably because I want to be liked. I want to "help out" the other person so nothing is awkward. When I get rolling, Leigh often says "Honey, take 'em to coffee." Or what really kills me is when she says on Sunday afternoon "You know, you preached through 2 good endings this morning." ☺ (Land the plane!)
- I really believe you can usually tell the moment when you switch over from what God wants you to say to move into your *own* agenda, continuing on in the flesh—in your own strength, rather than God's. So we talk.

I once had the dad of a teenager say to me “I don’t understand my kid! He won’t listen to me!” Think about it... (You can’t understand anything or anyone, until you’re willing to stop talking and listen.) Let your victuals stop your mouth!

Then James says “**Be slow to become angry.**” Angry people are poor at listening to others. Remember, in order to listen effectively, you must be concerned about others. ANGRY PEOPLE ARE NOT. They are upset people upset with people. But they are not concerned for them.

MANY OF US BREW a lot more than coffee. We brew anger. The problem is, our brewing anger produces careless, hostile words. Angry people consistently speak before thinking. (Because IN THE MOMENT it feels so good!) An angry person will bite your head off at the door. Not because you’re whistling, not because you’re home, but because THEY are angry inside. (In Mark 7:20, Jesus himself says “*“What comes out of a person is what makes them unclean. For from within, out of people’s hearts, come evil thoughts...”*”)

THERE IS A DIRECT LINE between our speech and our heart. Notice that James says “*Be slow to become angry.*” He doesn’t say don’t ever get angry, but because our words can be so damaging, we must avoid deep, long-abiding anger that seeks revenge.

It’s easy to understand anger. It happens when we hold too tightly to our agendas. It happens when we don’t know ourselves, and when we don’t know God, really know him, really know his world-stopping love for us. We have trouble with anger, and thus listening, because we want others to conform to us and validate us. Angry people look to others to give an agreeing nod or an affirming vote. When people don’t receive validation, they feel thwarted. ANGER BECOMES their way of responding to their perceived hurt. If this is you, if your mouth and anger are out of control, there are practical steps to help:

- Try writing and reviewing your thoughts and feelings. Not emailing them! ☺
- Confide in a friend.
- Let your victuals stop your mouth long enough to put yourself in their shoes.
- Learn to laugh at yourself. Quit taking yourself so seriously!!!!!!!!
- Immerse yourself in the Scriptures. Begin with Proverbs!
- Practice forgiving. Let your will take over your emotions. Drop the grudge!

*“Let every person be swift in listening, and slow in speaking, for only then will you be able to avert that angry attitude of heart that seeks to inflict pain in the lives of others.”*

BE HONEST: How many arguments have you really won by overpowering your adversary in anger? How many people have you positively influenced by your anger? How many people have you won to Jesus Christ by your angry outbursts? OUR HUMAN ANGER is always putting up walls. Our anger’s ultimate goal is to pin people to the wall and leave them there—defenseless, embarrassed, and paid back.

So often we stumble badly here. Hear an anonymous poem simply titled “Listen.” *When I ask you to listen to me and you start giving advice, you have not done what I asked. When I ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me why I shouldn’t feel that way, you are trampling on my feelings. When I ask you to listen to me and you feel you have to do something to solve my problems, you have failed me, strange as that may seem...so please, just listen and hear me. And if you want to talk, wait a few minutes for your turn and I promise I’ll listen to you.”*

**Effective relationships are based on effective listening**, an art that is difficult to master, because it

means we must take an intense interest in the person who is speaking. Listening is the art of closing your mouth and opening your heart. It's a fine art.

Imagine if we became a church of RELATIONSHIP ARTISTS, treating people like masterpieces. What if we treat those around us like the priceless treasures they are, even on the bad days? Imagine if we were to leave a legacy like Van Gogh, Rembrandt, Da Vinci, or Dali; only our medium is the canvas of people's lives. Our artwork of an apology would impact generations to come! Really, when you think of it, God's the Artist-Designer, and we become the restorationists: rebuilders, redeeming others, repairing lives, caring for the masterpieces around us like the staff of the Louver Museum or the National Gallery. We handle them with care, we let them know they can be free them from debt, apply forgiveness, and bring out their original beauty. All done by listening first, and handling our words with care. Do you want to change your own life starting right now? Try this in every encounter: love people and treat them like the masterpiece God designed them to be. Think that would impact our communities and eventually the world?

James says for that reason, 21 *“get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”* This evil that is so prevalent, is everywhere: too much talking and anger. So, if you choose to act in this new way; if you choose to love the unlovable, give more than you get, asking nothing in return, live by faith, offer hope to the least and the lost, and listen first, you will be going very much against the customary flow. *Humbly accept God's word planted in you.* Live like no one else, so you can live abundantly, like no one else! Let your victuals stop your mouth so you can paint your portrait. Begin with a listening heart, create, and restore the masterpiece in one another.

Let us pray: Lord, you've said we have a direct line from our hearts to our mouths. So fix me, Jesus. Fix my heart. Fix my soul. Fix my mouth and the words that come from it. Fix my ears, and give me a listening heart. Fix my relationships. Apply your medicine to it. Make me a relationship artist—that my life and my love may be like a portrait of your goodness for the world to see. We pray in your precious and powerful name. Amen.