

Why Listen?
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Allen Power

Ecclesiastes 4:13-5:7

Opening: Paraphrasing the philosopher Epictetus, “*God gave us two ears and one mouth so that we can (what?)*” What are some reasons we don’t listen as well as we should? What are some ways we could work to be better listeners?ⁱ

Another old expression: “*You just can’t tell some people anything!*” Why do some people refuse to listen to wise counsel from others?

Sometimes people don’t (as Jesus said) “have ears to hear (Mt. 11:15.)” They don’t have a hearing problem but a heeding problem (a problem paying attention to wise counsel.) Their ears work fine; the problem is their stubborn will.

Scripture talks about the need to listen well.

Proverbs 1:5 (NLT) — 5 Let the wise listen to these proverbs and become even wiser. Let those with understanding receive guidance

Proverbs 19:20 (NLT) — 20 Get all the advice and instruction you can, so you will be wise the rest of your life.

Proverbs 25:12 (NLT) — 12 To one who listens, valid criticism is like a gold earring or other gold jewelry.

We are all familiar with the words of Jesus’ half-brother James:

James 1:19 (NLT) — 19 Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry.

- Hearing and heeding wise counsel is crucial to living a successful life. That is especially true for those in leadership.

Listening well is even MORE important for followers of Christ.

Mark 9:7...a voice came out of the cloud, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.”

John 10:27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.

Romans 10:17 So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. [If we don't listen to that call we won't hear His voice at all!]

- Hearing and heeding God's voice through His word is essential to life in Christ. That is especially true when we approach His throne in worship.
- Here's the truth that should change us: Wise counsel and God's word deserve both hearing and heeding. A wise person will (to paraphrase James) be quick to listen, slow to speak, and serious about applying what we hear from godly advisors in life and God's word in worship.
- Beginning in 4:13 Solomon gives us a cautionary tale for leaders.

Ecclesiastes 4:13–16 (NLT) — 13 It is better to be a poor but wise youth than an old and foolish king who refuses all advice. **14** Such a youth could rise from poverty and succeed. He might even become king, though he has been in prison. [We're reminded of Joseph] **15** But then everyone rushes to the side of yet another youth who replaces him. **16** Endless crowds stand around him, but then another generation grows up and rejects him, too. So it is all meaningless—like chasing the wind.

- It's a familiar "rags to riches" story about leaders. A poor boy rises to become a powerful and popular leader by listening to wise counsel.
- As years pass the leader listens less to others believing he knows it all.
- When a leader loses their "teachable spirit" that usually signals the beginning of the end of their effectiveness. One day every leader passes from the scene and "everyone rushes to another youth who replaces him."
- Solomon says the cycle repeats over and over and is "meaningless."
- Verse 13 warns of the foolish leader who refuses advice.

- It's unlikely any leader would say out loud they have everything figured out, but their actions may tell a different story. We've all encountered someone who let power and position go to their head to the point that no one can tell them anything. They believe THEY have all the answers.
- If you think you have everything figured out, that proves YOU DON'T.
- Wait a minute, shouldn't leaders have the "courage of their convictions?" Yes, that is true, however those convictions should not be based exclusively on the leader's own ideas. Have the courage of your convictions but don't be a prisoner to your own biased opinions.
- Solomon states a reality that can be hard for some leaders to accept.
- No matter how gifted or effective you are, every leader will be replaced. Your legacy may live on but eventually they will forget who you were.
- We see some lessons for leaders, and for all of us, in this passage.
- Lesson #1 - No matter how gifted or effective they are, every leader has a shelf life. They can extend their effectiveness by remaining "teachable."
- Lesson #2 - Leaders must prayerfully discern when it's time to pass the baton and ask God to help them do that with their self-worth intact.
- Lesson #3 - Solomon says those who refuse wise counsel are fools. That doesn't just apply to leaders. We all need to listen and be teachable.
- The most important place to be teachable listeners is worshipping God.

Ecclesiastes 5:1–3 (NLT) — 1 As you enter the house of God, keep your ears open and your mouth shut. It is evil to make mindless offerings to God. **2** Don't make rash promises, and don't be hasty in bringing matters before God. After all, God is in heaven, and you are here on earth. So let your words be few. **3** Too much activity gives you restless dreams; too many words make you a fool.

- Verse one in the NLT is blunt: “keep your ears open and mouth shut” in worship. (BTW: That isn’t an excuse to clam up during the songs!)
- Other translations render the first words of verse one as “guard your steps when you go into the house of God.” [“Take off your sandals, Moses!”]
- Verse two reminds us that “God is in heaven” and we are “here on earth.”
- What do those commands tell us about the proper mindset for worship?
- Worship isn’t religious entertainment; it’s a personal meeting with the Creator of the Universe! We should approach worship with a mindset of reverence because God is holy and He has all authority over our lives.
- A nicer way to say have your “ears open and mouth shut” in worship is **Psalm 46:10 (ESV)** “Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!” [“Stop striving.”]
- How does that apply to getting ready to worship (corporate or private?)
- Satan does some of his best work on Sunday morning while Christians are on the way to church. [Striving while driving – stop striving!]
- What are some things we can do to prevent that Sunday morning stress?
- **Psalm 62:1 (ESV)** tells us: For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation.
- We need to be still before our Holy God and listen for His voice.
- Verse one says it is “evil to make mindless offerings” to God.
- The ESV says, “To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil.”ⁱⁱ
- “Mindless offerings” refers to uttering thoughtless words in worship.
- What might qualify as uttering thoughtless words in worship? What did Jesus say about “vain repetitions?” [What does verse 3 mean?]
- The wise person listens before speaking. God welcomes our prayer requests and praise but we NEED to hear HIM before He hears us.

- Consider this: Do we really understand what we SING to God on Sunday?
- As we sing praise choruses and hymns do we ponder the meaning?
- Better question: Do we intend to live like we believe what we sang?
- Do we sing "*I need thee every hour*" and then not talk to Him all week?
- Do we sing "There's nothing that our God can't do" and fret all week?
- Do we sing, "*I am who you say I am*" and live like we ain't?
- We shouldn't sing it if we don't believe it and intend to live it!
- Let's talk about worshiping God as His word is presented in the sermon.
- Having our "ears open and mouth shut" certainly applies when it's time for the sermon. What's your secret for good "sermon listening?"
- Illustration: Like the "Kiss-Cam" at a baseball game, what if the camera focused on you and the preacher asked: "What did I JUST SAY?"
- When some people say, "AMEN!" at least they're paying attention!
- Idea: Listen to the sermon with a silent mental "echo" to yourself.
- Pet peeve about "ears open and mouth shut": People having a conversation during the sermon! Not a whispered comment but an on-going conversation between adults. Why even show up? Just sayin'.
- It's not only about paying attention. [Mother: You heard but didn't heed!]
- When we get better at hearing we need to make sure we are heeding.
- Hearing God's word isn't just an informational seminar. When we hear it God expects us to heed it, in other words, obey what He tells us.
- One last point from Solomon. In verses 4-7 of chapter five, Solomon warned about making "rash" promises to God.

Ecclesiastes 5:4–7 (NLT) — **4** When you make a promise to God, don't delay in following through, for God takes no pleasure in fools. Keep all the promises you make to him. **5** It is better to say nothing than to make a promise and not keep it. **6** Don't let your mouth make you sin. And don't defend yourself by telling the Temple messenger that the promise you made was a mistake. That would make God angry, and he might wipe out everything you have achieved. **7** Talk is cheap, like daydreams and other useless activities. Fear God instead.

- We've all heard them and made them. *"Lord, if you'll just do 'such and such' I promise I will do 'so and so.'"* I'll be a better husband, a more committed Christian, manage my anger, etc.
- Ed Young comments, *"The trouble with these 'emergency' prayers with promises attached is that God takes our promises to Him very seriously. A promise made to God becomes a covenant with Him, and God does not take such vows lightly."*ⁱⁱⁱ
- Extreme example: Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. *"We sold that land and gave all the money to God."* Nope, you kept some of it. Struck dead!
- God is faithful not transactional. He doesn't require us to make vows. It's better to "say nothing" than make a vow and break it. If you DO make a vow take it seriously. If you break it, confess and repent of that sin.

So, What's the Takeaway?

- Hearing and heeding wise counsel is crucial to living a successful life. That is especially true for those in leadership.
- How teachable are we? Would friends and family describe us as open to wise counsel or convinced we don't need the advice of others.
- Anyone who believes they have all the answers has proven they don't!
- Hearing and heeding God's voice through His word is essential to life in Christ. That is especially true when we approach His throne in worship.
- Do we come to worship with a prepared heart? Are we "still" before God?
- Do we actively listen for God's voice? Do we "mean" what we sing?

- If they put a camera on us and asked, “What did the preacher just say?” would we be able to answer or faint on the spot?
- When we’re really hearing God’s word, are we HEEDING it every day?
- Are we careful not to make promises to God we don’t intend to keep?
- When it comes to wise counsel and God’s word, let’s be better listeners!

ⁱ https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/epictetus_106298

ⁱⁱ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (Ec 5:1). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Been There. Done That. Now What?* – Ed Young – B&H Publishing 1994, 2000