

LOVE'S LOST ART

How Can a Man Increase His Influence?

Text: James 1:19-27

Treasure In a Paper Sack

Of all those who have mused over the special ministry God has given to Fathers, few write about it as poignantly as author Robert Fulghum. "Soon after [my daughter Molly] came of school age," he writes, "she became an enthusiastic participant in packing" our family's lunches each morning. "Each bag got a share of sandwiches, apples... and sometimes a note or a treat. One morning, Molly handed me *two* bags as I was about to leave" -- a regular lunch sack and another that had been sealed with duct tape, staples, and several paper clips. What's in this second bag? asked Fulghum. "Something else," Molly said. "Take it with you." In a hurry, says Fulghum, "I stuffed both sacks into my briefcase, kissed the child and rushed off."

"At midday, while hurriedly scarfing down my real lunch, I tore open Molly's bag and shook out the contents. Two hair ribbons, three small stones, a plastic dinosaur, a pencil stub, a tiny seashell, two animal crackers, a marble, a used lipstick, a small doll, two chocolate kisses, and thirteen pennies. I smiled. How charming. Rising to all the important business of the afternoon, I swept the desk clean -- into the wastebasket -- leftover lunch, Molly's junk, and all. There wasn't anything there I needed."

"That evening, Molly came beside me as I was reading the paper. *'Where's my bag,'* she said. *'What bag?'* I replied. *'You know, the one I gave you this morning.'* "Oh, I left it at the office, why?" *'Those are my things in the sack, Daddy, the ones I really like; I thought you might like to play with them... You didn't lose the bag, did you, Daddy?'* Tears puddled in her eyes. *'Oh no,'* lied Fulghum, *'I just forgot to bring it home.'* *'Bring it tomorrow, okay?'* the child said. *'Sure thing,'* said Fulghum. [Molly] hugged my neck with relief. *'I love you, daddy.'*

Fulghum continues: "I looked long at the face of my child." She had been right with what she'd said to me that morning. "In that sack was 'something else.' Molly had given me her treasures. All that a seven-year-old held dear. Love in a paper sack. And I had missed it. Not only missed it, but had thrown it in the wastebasket because 'there wasn't anything in there I needed.' Dear God. I felt that my Daddy Permit was about to run out."¹

The Sack of Speech

Have you ever been there? I sure have and a bet you have too. You don't even have to be a parent to have stood in that Dad's shoes. How many times this past week alone did somebody hand us a paper bag? Maybe it was handed in the form of that

muttered comment by a friend about things not being so great at home. Perhaps the bag was passed in the form of the crinkled brow and unconscious sigh of the person whose elevator or airline row you shared. Maybe it was handed to you by that person who rambled on about the trip just taken, or the soul who hinted his health wasn't been good, or the kid who -- while you were trying to read the paper -- mumbled something about the game coming up or that thing that happened to her in school.

All day long, and every day, people pass these sacks of spoken truth. On the surface, they're not much at all, even brown-bag boring. They are held together by the duct-tape of details we'd just as soon not hear. They are stapled shut with a shrug of resignation or a nervous laugh. They are paper-clipped with claims that "I guess it's this way for a lot of people," or "It was really fun, Dad," or "I hope, somehow, it'll all work out." Because we're busy trying to eat our real lunch -- trying to get fed and on with our agenda -- we tend to sweep these things aside into that wastebasket we reserve for the stuff we don't really need. But what if what is being passed to us is not trash after all, but actually treasure? What if people's words are the trinkets with which they try to express and commemorate the mystery of their lives? What if these baubles in the brown-bag of ordinary conversation contain beliefs and broken-hearts and bashful dreams? What if that sack of speech is priceless, because it contains the stuff of a life "**fearfully and wonderfully made**" by God in his own image? What if this is true?

Slow to Speak

This is why the challenge we receive from the Apostle James is so important. James is not just addressing the fathers amongst us, but there is perhaps a special challenge for us here. "**My dear brothers,**" writes James, "**take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak.**" And I will add, especially within our families. I'm probably one among many men who grew up believing that it would be the speaking I did that would be the greatest influence in my children's lives. I think of the cartoon in *Forbes* magazine where a father says to his young boy: "Remember son, these are your tax free years. Make the most of them!" I sometimes slip into thinking that my most important job is to impart wisdom like that to my kids. Jean Paul Richter once observed: "What a father says to his children is not heard by the world, but it will be [audible to] posterity."

There is great truth to this, of course, but let me hasten to add: *How a father listens to his kids, at any age, speaks loudest of all.* Think about it. Who is more likely to grow up with self confidence, self-awareness, and a capacity to articulate his or her thoughts? Will it be a child who has been told what to think a lot or one who has been listened to a lot? Who is going to become the better marriage partner, the more effective manager of people, the superior lifelong learner? Will it be the child who saw leadership pictured primarily in terms of speaking while others take notes; or will it be the child whose Dad modeled the wisdom and influence that comes through listening?

Would the people who know us best and need us most say that we are slow to speak and quick to listen? Do they experience us as someone who highly values the treasure within the sack of speech they hand us daily? James suggests that it is easy to “**deceive [our]selves**” about how well we are actually DOING what God’s Word says. So how do we become even stronger in this too often lost art of listening? Let me touch briefly on several specific practices that might make a difference. I’m going to do it with a simple acrostic. Think of the word “L-I-S-T-E-N.”

Quick to L-I-S-T-E-N

I don’t know if you followed the story of the sailors from Texas, who were stranded in the Gulf of Mexico after the keel of their boat broke off and the craft sunk. For nearly 36 hours, day and night search efforts failed to locate them and both sides nearly gave up. And then in the very early morning of June 8, Coast Guard pilot Justo Rivera, caught a glimpse of the tiny flashing light on the life-vest of sailor Steven Conway hundreds of feet below. Rivera locked onto the tiny pinprick of light and refused to take his eye off it until he’d guided his crew right to the spot where the survivors were.² Can you imagine what Conway and the others felt as that chopper came zeroing in? That’s the kind of influence on other people we can have if we are willing to *truly lock-on to them when they are speaking*. By lock-on I mean to focus not just your mind, but also your body on the person who’s speaking. Put down the newspaper. Lean toward them. Fix your eyes on their eyes. Uncross your legs or arms and communicate your total openness to the other. Make a decision to turn off the outside noise, the other people around, the mustard stain on their clothes. Grant to someone else the gift too seldom given in this world of busyness and distraction. Give someone your total, undivided attention.

Then do the “I” part. *“I” is for “Intuit.” The second step in quickened listening is to focus our intuition on another person -- to try to sense the deeper message that may lie beneath the actual words spoken.* Do you know that communication specialists tell us that only 7-10% of any message is actually in the words? 90% of what others are communicating is conveyed through non-verbal means. A person who says, “I’m doing fine,” while biting his fingernail, sucking in her breath, or tapping his foot may be telling you that they are not doing so great after all.

Jesus was fabulous at intuiting the message behind the manner of people. He looked beneath the surface of the woman at the well or Zacchaeus in the tree or the man at the pool of Bethesda. Jesus saw and heard the inner heartcries of people and helped them name it. And Jesus promised that by his Holy Spirit we would be able to relate to others as he did too. In John 14:12, Jesus said: **“I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.”** Ask the Holy Spirit for help in really hearing the heart of others.

Jesus had a remarkable ability to lock onto people and to intuit what they were really saying. But he also modeled the third aspect of listening. Hebrews 4:15 says: **“We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with [us], but one who has been tempted [and tried] in every way, just as we are.”** *Let the “S” in LISTEN remind us that before Christ ever tried to solve our issues, Jesus dared to share them.* He came and walked in our flesh. The best listeners seek to do this -- to enter into the deep reality of other people’s existence. As Romans 12:15 puts it, they want to be able to truly **“rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn.”** It is out of this shared life that they are able to speak words that truly help and heal. How are you grinning and groaning with others? Are you willing to take the time required to share life and not merely speak at it?

And then, are you in the habit of testing your perceptions? That’s the “T” in LISTEN. Patricia Goldman of the National Transportation Safety Board, tells of a flight attendant who -- frustrated by passenger inattentiveness during her safety talk at the start of the flight -- decided to change the wording. She said: “When the mask drops down in front of you, place it over your navel and continue to breathe normally.” Not a single passenger questioned her! Being quick to listen means being active about listening. Did I hear you right? Is this what you are saying? It sounds like this... What am I missing?

The “E” in LISTEN is for “encouragement.” Great listeners are like a mini-version of the congregation at some great African-American churches I’ve visited. They support the speaker in his or her effort to communicate. They say “hmm... yeah... really... go on... I see... Yes... right... I get it.” They let you know that SOMEONE is really WITH you and eager to hear you say more.

Finally, there’s the “N” in LISTEN. Negate the impulse to focus the conversation back on yourself. If you’re anything like me, this is the hardest part. As soon as someone else is talking I think of a similar story in my life. I realize how my insights can help them. I start looking for a break in the conversation to jump in with my stuff. But a big part of the art of listening is self-denial. In Mark 8:34, Jesus says: **“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself.”** Or as St. Paul says in Philippians 2:3-4, **“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others more than yourselves.”**

Take Note of This

Do you really LISTEN? Its love’s lost art and worth the effort. Do you remember the story of Robert Fulghum, Molly, and the paper bag? Want to know what happened in the end? “It was a long trip back to the office... the pilgrimage of a penitent. Just ahead of the janitor, I picked up the wastebasket and poured the contents on my desk. I was sorting it all out when the janitor came in... ‘Lose something?’ [he asked]. ‘Yeah,

my mind.' I started not to tell him. But I couldn't feel any more of a fool than I was already in fact, so I told him [the whole story]. He didn't laugh. He smiled. 'I got kids, too.'" So the brotherhood of fools searched the trash and found the jewels and he smiled at me and I smiled at him. You are *never* alone in these things. Never."

The next night, "after dinner, I asked [Molly] to tell me about the stuff in the sack, and so she took it all out a piece at a time and placed the objects in a row on the dining room table. It took a long time to tell. Everything had a story, a memory, or was attached to dreams and friends. Fairies had brought some of the things. And I had given her the chocolate kisses, and she had kept them for when she needed them. I managed to say, 'I see' very wisely several times in the telling. And, as a matter of fact, I did see. To my surprise, Molly gave the bag to me once again several days later. Same ratty bag. Same stuff inside. I felt forgiven. And trusted. And loved. And a little more comfortable wearing the title of Father."

"My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak." For if we keep DOING what God's Word enjoins us to, perhaps our kids or grandkids, best friends, or others will pen our epitaph like this one day: "His thoughts were slow, His words were few, And never formed to glisten, But what a joy to all around, You should have heard him listen."

May it be so. Let us pray...

Loving Father, we give you thanks this morning that you are always more ready to listen to us than we are even to speak to you. We thank you for those who have been your listening agents in our lives -- for each father, mother, or friend who recognized that within the brown bag of our words there were actually treasures of meaning and aspiration worth understanding. Oh God, we want to do likewise for others. And so as we go out into the world today, remind us often that there may be a reason that you gave us only one mouth, but two ears. Make us quicker to listen than we are to speak. Give us that acuity of the Spirit that hears as You do the true voices of your children, even when they are muffled in one way or another. Enable us by our ministry of listening to give to the people with whom we converse a sense of the immense value that You place on their hopes and fears, joys and frustrations; to be encouragers in your name; to mediate your gracious Spirit. For this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

¹ Robert Fughum, *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It*, (New York: Ivy Books, 1989), 25.

² Kevin Moran, Ruth Rendon and Mike Tolson, "Survivors Shed Light on Sea Rescue," *Houston Chronicle*, June 10, 2008