

Introduction

Step to the pulpit and be silent for 15 seconds. Silence is golden! At least that's what the Tremeloes' 1967 hit song said. I suspect though that most of you didn't think the first 15 seconds of this sermon, the silence, was so golden. You probably felt awkward and uncomfortable with it in fact. But it isn't just you. The truth is that silence isn't golden to most of us. But it should be. Notice what Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 3:7. There is "**a time to be silent.**" The Bible and some of God's best friends down through the centuries have recognized the importance of silence to us. Silence really is golden and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

What Silence Is About - Restraint

Let's start by understanding what silence is about. It's about two things. The first of those is restraint. We see that in two of the verses we read. In Proverbs 10:19, the wise man writes, "**he who restrains his lips is wise.**" In Proverbs 17:27, he writes about "**he who restrains his words has knowledge.**" It's clear what those verses call us to do. It's to restrain our tongue.

Ecclesiastes 3:7 defines specifically what it means to restrain our tongue. Solomon observes that there's a time to be silent. Sometimes, circumstances dictate that we shouldn't say anything at all. So, we don't. Solomon also observes that there's a time to speak. Sometimes, circumstances dictate or allow that we should say something. So, we do, following the admonition of James 1:19 in the process, "**be slow to speak.**" We speak moderately in other words. We say no more than the circumstances call for. Do keep in mind something that Thomas a Kempis said in that regard, "**It is easier to be silent altogether than to speak with moderation.**"

I've told you a joke that bears repeating. The monks at a certain monastery had to take a vow of silence. They could speak only two words

and those to the head monk at the end of each year. A new monk arrived at the monastery. At the end of his first year, he came to the head monk's office to speak his two words. "**Room cold,**" he said. At the end of his second year, he said, "**Bed hard.**" At the end of his third year, he said, "**Food bad.**" And finally, at the end of his fourth year, he said, "**I quit.**" To which the head monk replied: "**I'm certainly not surprised. All you've done since you've been here is complain, complain, complain.**"

Restraint isn't that – indiscriminate and absolute. It's discriminate and changing instead. We speak either moderately (no more than we should) or not at all as the circumstances dictate.

A Sampling of Circumstances

At this point, let's examine a sampling of those circumstances in order to know how restraint works itself out in our everyday lives.

First, we need to restrain our tongue when we're accused. People accuse us of being in the wrong in many ways big and small.

Sometimes the accusation is justified. We're in the wrong. So, we don't defend ourselves or make excuses. Because of their insecurities, most people do. But being kingdom people, we're glad we're found out and don't. We say nothing at all to defend or excuse what we did.

Sometimes, the accusation isn't justified. We aren't in the wrong. But still we don't defend ourselves. Being kingdom people, we rest in God's vindication instead. He is our justifier. So we speak moderately. We say only enough to overcome evil and promote good and/or to assist those who desire and need to know the facts of the case.

Several of His co-workers misinterpreted a Christian attorney's actions. They accused him of buttering up the senior partners to make points with them. He restrained his tongue. The only thing he said, for the sake of his Christian testimony, was this, quoting Colossians 3:22, "**I do my work 'heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men.'**" We, like he did, need to restrain our tongue when accused.

We need to restrain our tongue in a second circumstance, when we're uneasy with people. Eberhard Arnold shared a profound insight, **"People who love one another can be silent together."** That's true isn't it? And it's just as true that when we're insecure with people, we use words to adjust how we appear to them. One of the reasons we're always running off at the mouth is because we're concerned about what others think of us. If we don't speak, we fear that they might not know our competence and character or might misunderstand our shortcomings. We speak, therefore, so they'll know or not misunderstand.

But in restraint, we resign how we appear to God. We know, according to Romans 8, that God is for us and that Jesus is on His right hand pleading our case. Knowing that, we don't worry about the opinions of people. We don't say things so they will think better or less ill of us.

This is one of the things I've worked on in my life. I was talking with two pastors one time about the state of the American church. And I said something in the course of our discussion about "the routinization of charisma." I realized the moment I said it that I was just trying to impress them, trying to make them think I was competent. I don't do that anymore. If a reason I'm going to say something is to adjust how I appear to someone, I don't say it.

There's a third circumstance in which we need to restrain our tongue. It's when we want to control people. There are times when all of us want people to believe what we want them to believe or to do what we want them to do. And we usually try to get them to believe or do that by using words to bypass their judgment and will. The fact is that we use words more than any other device to manage people or straighten them out. The tongue really is our most widely used weapon of manipulation. Which explains why we can hardly bare to be silent in this context. It's because it makes us feel so helpless when we are.

But in restraint, we let go of people. We love them and want them to believe and do what is right. We don't control them with words, however, in order to accomplish that. We go through their judgment and

will, not around them. We may say things that inform them. But we never say things that manipulate them.

Take parents of adult children for instance. We love our children so desperately that we're tempted to manage or straighten them out with our tongue. But we shouldn't. In his book *20 Hot Potatoes*, Tony Campolo writes a chapter titled "What Should You Do if Your Grownup Children Are Making Decisions that Could Ruin their Lives." He shares three guiding principles in that regard: (1) Realize that you will have to live with what you say for years to come; (2) Do not make threats; and (3) Say what you have to say once and with sufficient clarity and emphasis so that you don't have to say it over and over again.

Those then are a sampling of circumstances that illustrate what restraint is about. When it's a time to be silent, we say nothing at all. And when it's a time to speak, we do so moderately, saying no more than the circumstances dictate or allow we should.

What Silence Is About – Listening

Silence is about a second thing. The first is restraint. The second is listening. We see that in James 1:19, which links the two together. James commands us, "**be slow to speak**", which is to restrain, and, "**be quick to hear**", which is to listen. We strain our ears, in other words, as we restrain our tongue. We listen attentively to what people say.

James commands that for a reason. How deep is people's need to be listened to. What people say to us comes from inside them – from their thinking, feeling, and willing. Consequently, not listening to them communicates that we don't value what is inside them, which in turn diminishes their self-hood. But listening to them communicates that we do value what is inside them, which in turn enhances their self-hood. A penetrating little maxim captures the gist of this well, "**A good listener is a silent flatterer.**" How deep is people's need to be listened to.

But how rarely they are. It's a fact that most people are slow to hear and quick to speak. They want to "get their two cents in" as we say

it, and that's what they're thinking about while someone is talking – their two cents. They're far more concerned about what they're *going to say* than about what he or she *is saying*. So they listen inattentively or with “**half an ear**” as one author says it.

How deep is people's need to be listened to, but how rarely they are. Which explains much of the wrath in human life. Much of the wrath in homes, work places, dormitories, schools, and yes, even churches is the result of people not being listened to.

That's why Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote what he wrote about listening in his remarkable book *Life Together*. Listen as I read an excerpt from it: “**The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them.**” He was absolutely right.

I'd explain it this way and please grasp how life transforming these insights are. The first response of love is attention. Love's first impulse is to direct itself with focus to the beloved. And that impulse begins with what the beloved says. *Love begins with listening!* As Bonhoeffer said it, love is the very first service we owe people. So let's love them by listening. Let's direct our mental, emotional, and bodily processes with focus to two things: hearing and understanding what they say.

A magazine article for salespeople defines specifically how we do that. It uses an acronym called “A LADDER to Becoming a Better Listener.” The acronym goes like this: **L**: Look at the person speaking to you. **A**: Ask questions to clarify and understand. **D**: Don't interrupt. **D**: Don't change the subject. **E**: Empathize. And **R**: Respond verbally (words) and nonverbally (body language). That's practical advice. When we do those six things, we're listening and loving.

That then is what silence is about. First, it's about restraint. We speak either moderately or not at all, as the circumstances dictate. And second, it's about listening. We direct ourselves mentally, emotionally, and bodily with focus to what people say.

Silence and Spirituality

Now, according to James 1:26, both of those are critically linked to our spiritual lives. Notice James' hard-hitting insight here. If we aren't silent (don't restrain our tongue and listen), our religion is worthless.

That teaches us two things. First, we can judge the depth of our relationship with Jesus, and our Christlikeness, by the degree to which we do or don't restrain our tongue and listen. If we routinely dominate conversations and/or listen with half an ear, we need to reflect on what that says about us spiritually. And second, we can grow in our relationship with Jesus and Christlikeness by restraining our tongue and listening. Silence, in other words, is a spiritual discipline. It's an activity of ours that the Holy Spirit uses to deepen our relationship with Jesus and to make us more like Him.

I know that's true because I've experienced it. I've practiced the discipline of silence extensively the past ten years and have grown spiritually as a result. For instance, I was with several pastors who began discussing life after death in the Old Testament. My Master's Thesis in seminary was about just that and I was strongly inclined to give my "ten cents worth" on the topic. But I decided to practice the discipline of silence instead. I restrained and listened. I did that in order to grow in Christlikeness, which through the Holy Spirit, I did.

In the end, silence is indispensable to our spiritual lives. It places us before the Holy Spirit in such a way that He can do two things: deepen our relationship with Jesus and make us more and more like Him.

Conclusion

Quaker author Richard Foster recounts a Christian's testimony that aptly concludes this sermon. It goes like this: **"The more I practice this discipline, the more I appreciate the strength of silence. The less I talk, the fuller are words spoken at an appropriate time. I think I am beginning to really enjoy God."** Do what that Christian did and you'll find out what he found out. Silence really is golden!