

The Art of Listening

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“Why are you entering the United States?” the immigration officer asked.

“I’m teaching,” I replied.

The officer looked concerned and began reading the letter I’d handed him describing the purpose of my visit.

“You’re not teaching,” he said. “You’re lecturing!” He handed me back the letter and welcomed me to the country.

I learned two things. First: there’s a difference between teaching and lecturing. Second: I realized that I have a reputation as a lecturer in my family.

It’s one thing to lecture in a classroom. But I want to be known as a listener when it comes to marriage and other meaningful relationships.

Quick to Listen

The Bible emphasizes the importance of listening.

Proverbs 17:28 says, “Even a fool is considered wise when he keeps silent — discerning, when he seals his lips.” I think of this advice often when I have nothing to say to others. It’s okay to stay quiet. It’s okay to listen. It may even help.

Proverbs 19:13 says, “The one who gives an answer before he listens — this is foolishness and disgrace for him.” I’m guilty of this. I must slow down and hear others speak rather than jump in with my thoughts.

Proverbs also tells us to listen to wisdom (Proverbs 8:32-34), to advise (Proverbs 12:15), and to life-giving reproofs (Proverbs 15:31). On the other hand; we shouldn’t listen to wicked lips (Proverbs 17:4). Sometimes it’s important to stop listening.

But generally, it’s wise to let others speak. “Counsel in a person’s heart is deep water; but a person of understanding draws it out” (Proverbs 20:5).

When we listen well, we help others form thoughts they've never had before. We draw things out of them that would never have emerged without the help of a good listener.

One of the clearest texts on the importance of listening is in James 1:19: "My dear brothers and sisters, understand this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger." In other words, hurry up and listen, but slow down — way down — when you think it's time to speak.

We do this because it's how we love others. When people feel heard, people feel loved. The problem: this is hard! "Listening means caring more about hearing others than being heard," writes Rusty McKie. It means putting the perspective of others before our own and putting their needs ahead of ours.

"Listening is hard because loving is hard," observes Alasdair Groves. But if we're going to love others, we need to learn how to listen well.

Jesus the Listener

The good news is that we can learn to listen.

Learning from other listeners is one of the keys to learning how to listen. One of the best listeners in history is Jesus. If anyone had the right not to listen, it was him. He's God. He knows everything. But he was always asking people questions, always listening to what they had to say.

My favourite stories are when Jesus listened to people who weren't used to being heard. I love how many questions Jesus asked of the woman at the well in John 4. Jesus asked her good questions that drew her out and enabled him to meet her needs deeply.

One day, Jesus passed a blind man. He would be just the kind of person most people would pass by. The man cried out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" People shushed him, but Jesus stopped and listened. "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked (Luke 18:41). Jesus listened and answered his request.

The most startling example of divine listening, though, is more recent. The Triune God listens to us. Really listens to us. In fact, when we don't know what to pray, the Holy Spirit prays for us (Romans 8:26). He knows what's on our hearts, and he's listening.

How?

I'm tempted to list some steps to become a good listener. I won't. I'll give two that get to the heart of the issue.

First, pray for a heart to love others. If listening is an act of love, what we need most is a change of heart so we can care for those talking to us.

Second, do what James says: be quick to listen and slow to speak. It takes practice, but we can learn to let others talk more and lean in when they do.

Listening is one of the greatest gifts we can give others.

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