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The Practice of Listening - Part 2

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The Practice of Listening

—Part 2

Pastors are proficient at many things. They are good teachers of the Word. They have been trained to expound the truths of the Scriptures so that their hearers can be challenged, rebuked, encouraged, and enriched. Most preach powerful messages from the pulpit that give evidence not only of thorough exegesis but also of hours spent to ensure the presentation has become interesting and creative and can still be remembered after the Sabbath lunch haystacks are consumed. Pastors are often very good at administration; they can conceptualize problems concisely and oversee the church finances as if it were their own family budget. Ministers are also skilled in making people feel comfortable through their friendly, often chatty, interpersonal style. Pastors also excel at giving advice: wisdom that comes out of years of personal and professional experience is dispensed with ease. However, anecdotal evidence aplenty would suggest that something pastors are not good at includes the spiritual discipline of listening.

Are you listening, really listening?

Listening, as the term will be used in this article, refers to an intentional, focused activity that gives attention to both explicit and implicit messages. It involves not just hearing content but

listening for feelings and tapping into key process issues. Of course, it also includes picking up messages relayed by the nonverbal indicators, such as body language and tone.

Most of those involved in ministry would like to believe that they are good at listening. Good listeners are applauded and sought out for comfort and solace. How can we know whether we are listening or not? The following checklist may help:

- How often do I interrupt the person speaking to me before allowing him or her finish their story?
- Do I change the topic from what the person has told me to what happened to me (implying that the other should not feel so bad because of what happened to me or that they should do what I did because that worked for me)?
- Am I quick to offer solutions, even before the person has finished their story?
- Do I find myself framing an answer in my mind while the other is still speaking?
- Do people who speak to me regularly check in to ask whether I am still listening, or do they ask, “Am I making sense?” or do they say things such as “I am probably boring you”?
- Do I often find myself wishing the person would hurry up and finish their story?

- Do I find my mind wandering, or do I get bored?

It might be worth asking a trusted other (spouse, mentor, associate, or elder) to rate one’s listening skills. If they hesitate, it might be a sign that they are not sure you will hear!

Listening is about being present

Frequently in human communication we are not listening but simply waiting for a gap in the conversation to say our piece, which we compose while the other speaks. The root cause of this unhelpful behavior is usually that we are unconsciously more interested in ourselves than in the person we are supposed to be helping. It may well come from our need to rescue or fix the other person.

But healing power exists in quiet listening, forgetting our agenda, and hearing the other person’s needs. Job’s infamous comforters did well for the first three days with Job. While they listened silently, there was no rebuke from either Job or the Almighty. The problem arose only when they began to speak, seeking vainly to explain pain and suffering. They only alienated Job in his suffering. They were so busy talking that they failed to understand their ignorance and helplessness. At the end of the story, God expresses His anger at Job’s three friends for their misrepresentation of

His character, though their advice largely reflected their society's understanding of God and how He operates in the universe. However, it lacked the empathic heart of God.

One of the foundational concepts of pastoral care is developing the art of "being present." Through a pastor's very intentional listening, people in need feel accepted, validated, and understood. Recent research has shown that what seems significantly most effective in helping the hurting is not the particular seemingly clever interventions that counselors use but rather a collection of common factors that center on the relationship formed between client and therapist.¹ The creation and nurturing of this relationship occurs, at least in part, through listening, taking the person in front of us seriously, and giving empathy.² From the current research, we can safely say that healing occurs not so much as the result of what we do or say but as the result of an empathic, accepting relationship, built through genuine, caring presence.

What makes listening so hard?

The consequences of listening with no agenda other than to be present are most evident in our interpersonal relationships. Arguments usually happen when both sides are talking and neither side listens but are often diffused when those involved are as keen to understand the other as they are to impose their opinion. While many of us are familiar with the basic communication skills (for example: focus on the speaker, reflect back what you think you have heard, make empathic statements, and do not judge), the real issue seems to be our inability to practice these. We can acknowledge the biblical foundation of the spiritual discipline of listening and intellectually assent to its importance; however, the practice of this discipline seems far from easy.

As well as our innate tendency toward selfishness, there are also powerful psychological processes at play that mess with our ability to be present and listen effectively. John Gottman,

famous for his research on what makes marriages last, popularized the term *flooding*, referring to the process of our rational thinking being overrun by a veritable cocktail of chemicals designed to trigger a "flight or fight" response.³ Once flooding occurs, we find it almost impossible to listen, be present, or be empathic because the alarm has been sounded. Daniel Goleman, who popularized the construct of emotional intelligence, speaks of "emotional hijacking." He points out that the neural pathway from the thalamus (the relay center that receives signals from our senses) to the amygdala is quicker than the pathway from the relay center to the neocortex, the center of refined, critical thinking. Because the amygdala stores emotional memory and underpins our emotional responses, we often react to triggers of this neural alarm system rather than to the input from our senses being processed through the rational neocortex.

Once the primitive defense system kicks in, we become flooded, and our urge for flight or fight becomes irresistible.⁴ As listening is about being present for the other, we need to first soothe our own reaction (rather than blame others for how we are feeling) and then endeavor to return, using the listening skills that we have developed. The ability to be able to do this hinges on our own self-awareness; if we are in tune with our own emotional reactions (and the physiological manifestations of the emotional arousal), then we can become skilled at emotional containment.

Another powerful process that can make it difficult or even impossible to be present for another comes as a phenomena known in psychology as *transference*. Transference occurs when a current situation triggers memories of a previous experience or series of experiences with significant persons from our childhood. These memories are then transferred to the current person, who then can be mistakenly seen as causing the current emotional reaction that we are experiencing. We will then react to the person in our presence as if he or she were the person who caused

us hurt during our upbringing. As these reactions are largely unconscious, we are not aware of why we have reacted in certain ways to a particular person. Transference reactions, if not explored and brought to the surface, can be powerful saboteurs of a listening, accepting presence.

As stated in our previous article,⁵ the Scriptures admonish us to listen to ourselves by being aware of our own spiritual and emotional needs. When I take the time to increase my self-awareness, I become more aware of the signals of emotional flooding, triggering, or a transference reaction. It is simultaneously true that God exists as grand and omnipotent as well as personal and indwelling (Rom. 8:11). In a digital age, where our lives are constantly peppered with messages about who we should appear to be, what we must own, and what we must strive to become, the advice of the psalmist appears more relevant than ever: "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10, NIV). In the stillness God can guide us in His ways.

When I am in tune with my own experiences I am better able to hear the experiences of others. I am better able to know when an emotional hijacking has taken place and ask for God's healing and calming presence to help me empathize with the pain of others.

A few suggestions on how to listen

Here are a few very practical suggestions as to how we might listen to ourselves, others, and God:

- Make a conscious effort to acknowledge your emotions as you experience them, rather than seeing them as an interruption or nuisance to your list of activities. Our emotions, while not always telling the whole story, tell an important story. We ignore our feelings at our own peril.
- Make a practice of spending some time alone each week. In solitude, we turn down the noise of our lives and can hear the stirrings of our own disquiet.

- Become intentional about listening to others. Give them 100 percent of your attention and put everything else in your mind on hold. Occasionally paraphrase back to the speaker, to make sure you listened well. Also ask yourself what else the person might be communicating that you find implicit rather than explicit.
- Be careful not to tell your story until you have heard the other's story. Or better still, leave your story for another time, so that you can focus on the person who seeks your listening ear.
- As God has many languages and numerous voices, seek to hear with ears wide open, so that you may not miss the presence of God in our broken world. Do not limit the ways that God may speak to us. "Our




heavenly Father has a thousand ways to provide for us, of which we know nothing."⁶

- Check your prayers—how many of your prayers are requests and in how many are you reaching out with open ears and receptive heart, ready to listen to your Father? Try praying and only giving thanks to God for all that you can think of to be thankful for.

So, why practice the spiritual discipline of listening? Because that is what God did when He sent Jesus.⁷ Because it works. Because as we first listen to God through His Word,⁸ our well-being improves. Because our relationships with others improve. Because it is a great alternative to running away from that which we do not want to deal with, either in ourselves or in others. Because God asks us to listen. 🙏

- 1 Barry L. Duncan, Scott D. Miller, Bruce E. Wampold, and Mark A. Hubble, eds., *The Heart and Soul of Change: Delivering What Works in Therapy* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2010).
- 2 John C. Norcross, ed., *Psychotherapy Relationships That Work: Evidence-Based Responsiveness*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- 3 John Gottman, *The Relationship Cure: A 5 Step Guide to Strengthening Your Marriage, Family, and Friendships* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001).
- 4 Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 1996), 17.
- 5 See part 1 of this series, "The Most Overlooked Spiritual Discipline—Part 1," in the February 2017 issue of *Ministry*, 6–9.
- 6 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1940), 330.
- 7 John 11:41b, 42a "Then Jesus looked up and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me'" (NIV).
- 8 Ellen G. White, "The Bible is God's voice speaking to us, just as surely as if we could hear it with our ears." *My Life Today* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1952), 283.

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