

The Art of Listening

A couple of years ago I said to my wife, “many of us are good at preparing what we are going to say, few people are effective at preparing their listening and question-asking.”

God listens to our prayers. He pays attention to them. God is a good listener and we are called to be like Him.

*1 Peter 3:12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are **attentive** to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”*

James 1:19 My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,

John Vawter said, “The truth is, I interrupt because I like to control conversations. I want them to follow my agenda, to proceed at my pace, to end where I would like them to end. Because of that I am quick to speak...slow to listen.”

What are some benefits of listening?

Listening builds up your family members in at least three aspects of their self-esteem. They will feel more significant as a person; that sense of “I matter!” They will feel a greater sense of worth; “my perspective is worth hearing”. They will feel more secure; “I am loved and prioritized. There is no competition with your work or hobbies or their siblings. Listening helps to prevent isolation. The other does not feel alone. This feeling of Isolation is one of the biggest marriage killers, hence the importance of addressing emotional intimacy in marriage. Listening draws out the subconversations. People operate in layers and often it takes real listening to get someone to unravel those layers. Often your family members may be protesting. Instead of reacting to the protest rather listen for the subconversation. This is the thing they really want to communicate but can’t find the words or just don’t feel safe. For example, your spouse might say to you, “You are working too hard and don’t have time for your health and for the children!” Instead of reacting, a good response would be: “Oh this seems to have affected you. Why do you feel so strongly about this?” After 10 minutes of listening to her she says “I guess I am just missing you...” That’s the subconversation. She feels safer to communicate her real needs when she knows you are truly listening.

Listening also helps you to scratch where it’s really itching. Listening builds emotional intimacy. Emotional intimacy is built one conversation at a time. In marriage we make demands for sexual intimacy without taking time to build emotional intimacy. Finally, listening helps you to understand your family members. **Listening is the primary vehicle for truly learning about your family members. Who are they and what do they need from me now?**

Why don’t we listen?

Proverbs 18:2 Fools find no pleasure in understanding but delight in airing their own opinions.

When we don’t listen, it shows that we are fools and do not desire understanding. Listening gives you understanding. If you want to understand your spouse, learn to listen. If you want to understand your siblings, learn to listen.

We know that listening is important in family, so why don’t we practise it as much as we would like? When we understand how our behaviour was learned it becomes easier to unlearn it. **This is the thing to repent of, not just the lack of listening but the reason for it.** Here are a number of reasons why we don’t listen to our family members: We don’t listen because we think we already know; we think we have a solution and assume that is all they want; we generally have a superiority complex that thinks it has figured out the other person, this is often based on pride. Sometimes we don’t listen because we assume that our family members are the same everyday. We forget that people change, hence we presuppose that today’s narrative will be the same

as yesterday's. This is a myth. Another reason for not listening is impatience. The reality is that relationships and efficiency is an oxymoron. Relationships require time. Listening requires time. Maybe we are not used to listening. **Listening is a habit that you build. Many people have not given themselves time to develop listening habits.** As an executive coach I am paid to listen; but for people who come from a background of only telling, listening can be very difficult. It's important to switch roles. Just because you are always telling at work does not mean telling will work at home. Poor listening is sometimes because we struggle with emotional intimacy. When you start to really listen it brings people closer and is extremely powerful. As a result, we may become uncomfortable with the vulnerability or awkwardness it produces. People stop listening sometimes because they are task-oriented problem solvers. That's not always what your siblings, children or family members' needs. Sometimes they want to talk just to process their thoughts. Sometimes they are talking for their own benefit and not yours. Be there for them. Sometimes we don't listen because no one ever listens to us. This can be a form of revenge. We have made an inner vow, "Why should I listen if no one ever listens to me?" Learn to forgive. It's not tit for tat, marriage is covenantal. If you are the better listener, be a role model.

We don't listen because we often practise counterfeits to true listening like *selective hearing*; only listening when it is to do with something that interests you. Other examples of such counterfeits are, tuning out when you don't like the content, pretending to listen, listening only to the highlights or headlines, and **many people listen enough just to reply instead of listening to understand.** True listening is an art anyone can master, and it is a major family life booster.

Here are some listening tips

Look them in the eyes and also watch their body language; actively demonstrate interest in their subject matter as this will encourage them to share more deeply; get rid of the internal noise in your head; choose a place where you are not easily distracted; ask them creative questions that they have never been asked before; practice the 10 minute silence rule and just listen; position yourself as an equal not a superior. Finally, understand their goals for talking to you, are they just missing you and wanting your attention, picking your brain, needing a solution or just need to be heard for a change.

The consequences of NOT listening to your family members

What happens when you fail to listen to your family members? You end up ministering to the wrong thing, missing the mark. It's like misreading the exam question. They feel isolated and rejected resulting in emotional betrayal. The need is so strong that they inevitably find someone else to listen. If that person is of the opposite sex this leads to unhealthy levels of intimacy. Where your words go your emotions soon follow. When they don't feel heard it results in emotional distance, which has a strong impact on sexual intimacy and trust levels often resulting in suspicion and paranoia. When you don't listen to your family members it will affect your growth because a lot of what your family members says to you is in the form of feedback. Your responsibility with feedback is to understand it NOT to defend. People who don't listen to their family members never get to understand them. Ask yourself "How has what she has just said helped me to better understand her? Of what are they afraid? What is stressing them?" If you don't listen to each other your relationship becomes superficial. The networks of men tend to be wider but shallower than those of women. We need to go deeper by opening up a closed spirit through genuine listening. Some people only open up when they know that someone is fully present listening.

Attentiveness is the word, *Ekkremamai* in Greek which means to hang upon the lips of a speaker. It is an attitude of concentration or readiness.

Sometimes we are not attentive to the right things, and we give attention to the wrong things.

Ecclesiastes 7:21-22 Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you —22 for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others.

Hebrews 2:1; *We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.*

There are consequences to not paying close attention to the right things.

Titus 1:13-14 *This saying is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith 14 and will pay no attention to Jewish myths or to the merely human commands of those who reject the truth.*

To what do you pay most attention?

Proverbs 18:13 *“He who answers a matter before he hears it. It is folly and shame to him. Uncontrolled talking hinders listening.*

John 10:27; *“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.”*

Proverbs 12:15; *“The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but he who heeds counsel is wise”*. Counsel is a sign of wisdom.

Ecclesiastes 7:9; *“Do not hasten in your spirit to be angry, for anger rests in the bosom of fools”*. Do not easily provoked.

“Listen or thy tongue will keep thee deaf” (Native American proverb).

Listening is a key to greatness. It is a key to learning. To gain empathy, listen with your eyes, heart and ears. Remember that people have a desire to be understood. One of the destroyers of marriages is when husbands do not listen to their wives. **Most people do not listen to understand, they listen to reply.** We filter things through our own perspectives instead of trying to understand another's frame of reference. When people are in trouble they want to share with someone who will give them all the time to listen. **Make time for listening, it is a sign of honour.** The cornerstone of genuine empathy is the ability to be with someone in their pain or happiness. Empathy is easy to learn. Pay attention to what is left unsaid. Read body language. Engage, this generation is looking for depth, authenticity and empathy. It is easy to recognize empathy when you are the beneficiary. Today we value efficiency, however relationship building takes time. Empathy takes time. It is only when you are on the same page about what's important that efficiency with people is effective.

REFLECTIVE THOUGHTS

- **When was the last time you set aside time to solely listen to someone important to you (as opposed to setting aside time to tell someone something)?**
- **Are you known for mixing with people as a leader (customers, suppliers, employees)?**
- **Do you plan what to listen for as opposed to just what to say?**
- **Do people talk about how great you are or how great you have made them?**
- **How do you start conversations? Do you ask people how they are doing in a conditioned way but then don't listen?**

“Real communication happens when we feel safe” (Ken Blanchard).

One girl said to another: *“I can only stand him for an hour. He gets tired of listening after that.”*

“The most called upon prerequisite of a friend is an accessible ear.” Maya Angelou, the Heart of a Woman

New York Times: Sometimes the news is in the noise and sometimes the news is in the silence.

Elaine St James in Inner Simplicity said, “It's amazing how much you can hear when no one is saying anything.”

Often it is easy to talk, convince, persuade etc. We often have the mindset that we have the best thoughts to share but in doing so we are missing out on a whole world of ideas that could enrich us, this is pride. Give yourself the “silent” test. .i.e. how long can you be quiet for in a conversation. Often it is easier to judge based on stereotypes than engage in conversation. We honour God’s creation by being attentive to it.

SOME KEYS TO HELP US LISTEN

- 1. Giving up the need to win (in a dog eat dog world).** Needing to win each day to keep our self-images intact. Recognise that you are moving through life deaf to what others might have to say. Is your drive to win stronger than your desire to become like Christ? Shape up or ship out attitude . Realise the difference between victory through intimidation and transformation through service.
- 2. Being humble about our opinions**
Philippians 2:3-9; Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name”. Consider others better than yourselves. This helps you peel the layers and you will reap through the listening you have sown.

1 Corinthians 13:12; “ For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known”. We know in part. Are your arguments marked by humility or pride? Love or hate? Respect or disrespect?
- 3. Be willing to admit that you may be wrong**
For example, saying “you misunderstood me instead of saying I miscommunicated”. If you are misquoted you can respond by saying “I don’t think I said that but if I did, I did not mean to say it. What I meant to say was...” It’s more important to listen to your critics respectfully than to prove your position indisputably.
- 4. Carefully considering other people’s words**
Many are likely to learn about the love of Christ by your attentive silence than from your expert opinions (as opposed to assuming you understand what they want to say).
- 5. Resisting pressure to have instant answers**
This inhibits dialogue. *Proverbs 11:14; “Where there is no counsel, the people fall, but in the multitude of counselors there is safety”.* Solomon’s concern was that we are protected from our ignorance as opposed to being heard.

Proverbs 15:22; “Without counsel, plans go awry, but in the multitude of counselors they are established”. Men find relief in their cave. Women find relief from stress when they discuss how overwhelmed they are. Each can feel misunderstood. The guy forgets about it by distressing with sport often.
- 6. Be willing to negotiate**
Exploring root conflicts e.g. in marriage. Often it gets so emotive we forget the key root issues. Find common goals and places of agreement. Jesus listened to the Samaritan woman at the well, and to Nicodemus at night. Ultimately the question is, do we want to be like Jesus?

ACTIVE LISTENING: THE ART OF MAKING SOMEONE FEEL HEARD

Be conscious of your own behaviours which take away from this:

e.g. "As I get it..."

In other words....

I hear you saying....

So, what you are saying is....

So you think we should.....

You're feeling that...

I think I hear you saying...

Do I understand you correctly...

Would you please tell me more about...

Short responses help:

- Tell me more
- Wow
- Really
- And then what
- Go on....

Reflection Questions

1. How would you describe your current listening habits? Are there patterns or tendencies you recognize that hinder effective listening?
2. In what ways does your listening build emotional intimacy with those close to you? How can you improve in this area?
3. Do you often find yourself listening to reply rather than listening to understand? How might shifting this mindset transform your relationships?
4. What are some specific reasons why you struggle with listening? (e.g., impatience, distractions, pride, or lack of practice).
5. How do you handle situations where someone is sharing their concerns indirectly or through "subconversations"? Can you think of recent examples?
6. What steps can you take to eliminate distractions and cultivate the habit of focused listening in your daily interactions?
7. When was the last time you consciously used active listening techniques, such as reflecting back what you heard or asking follow-up questions? What was the outcome?
8. How can practising humility and admitting when you are wrong enhance your ability to listen attentively?
9. What changes can you make to prioritize listening over speaking in your relationships, especially with your family members?
10. How might improving your listening skills help you reflect Christ's love more effectively to those around you?