



# LISTENING SKILLS: MASTERING THE ART OF HEARING OTHERS



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# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	4
PART ONE: WHAT IS LISTENING WELL? .....	6
PART TWO: WHY LISTENING WELL IS SO IMPORTANT .....	10
PART THREE: WHY IS IT SO HARD? .....	14
PART FOUR: HOW CAN WE BECOME BETTER LISTENERS? .....	17
PART FIVE: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? .....	21
PART SIX: DIFFERENT KINDS OF LISTENING .....	23
CONCLUSION .....	29



# INTRODUCTION

My brother is an external processor. He's also a night owl. This is by no means a unique cocktail of personality traits. But it just so happens that I am an internal processor and a morning person. And that makes things interesting.

When we were growing up, a night at the Ardiles household would frequently end with both of us lying in our bunk beds, while Zach regaled me with tales from exotic dreams or musings about a movie we had recently watched. As his voice rolled on, I became less able to focus. Slipping in and out of consciousness, I grasped words here and there but rarely understood what he was on about. Not one to give in without a fight, I would resort to various painful tactics to stay awake and offer "Uh-huhs" like olive branches to appease my increasingly suspicious sibling. (This wasn't his first rodeo.)

Eventually, I would inevitably cave. I would fall into the sweet quiet of sleep like a warrior felled by his enemy's shafts—proud to have put up a fight but no match for my foe.

My brother, unfortunately, does not know me to be a great listener—at least not at night. Perhaps my heart was in the right place, but the back of my eyelids always became of greater interest to me than Zach's stories. Looking back, it's obvious that I was nowhere near effective listening, nor did I display the kind of empathetic listening that builds trust. Those moments revealed how easily our listening skills can collapse when comfort or fatigue gets in the way.

In this brief life skill guide, we will examine what typifies listening well. We will see that listening well consists of quietly receiving what a person says, empathizing with what they are expressing, and then offering a thoughtful response. At its heart, good listening skills grow out of empathetic listening, the ability to step into another person's world and hear not only their words but their feelings. When those skills come together, they produce effective listening, the kind of listening that strengthens relationships rather than draining them.

## FIELD GUIDE

We will also examine this topic with the aim of living a life pleasing to God. For this reason, this life skill guide will attempt to go further than most resources on listening. From Dale Carnegie to Elmo, plenty has been said about listening. But most of it assumes that our approach to listening should be primarily utilitarian. Listening is a good social skill, after all. It builds relationships, helps you climb corporate ladders, and rebuilds trust. My goal in this guide, however, is not simply to help you “make friends and influence people.” If I accomplish that, great. But I am aiming at something bigger. I want to help you listen as a way to love others as yourself and to do so for the glory of God—a vision that requires deep empathetic listening, sincere listening skills, and ultimately a life shaped by effective listening.

# 1

# WHAT IS LISTENING WELL?

If you're at all like me, you know a good listener when you see one. Out in the wild, they're about as easy to identify as a white whale in the Sahara. More importantly, you know how you feel *after* your conversation with a good listener. You feel built up, encouraged, and more able to take on life's challenges. Good listeners simply seem profoundly interested in you and your life, and their aim is to encourage you. To adopt a painfully loaded term, you feel "heard" when you're around a good listener—*listener*—a feeling deeply tied to listening skills, empathetic listening, and the kind of effective listening that makes another person feel valued.

As followers of Jesus, we should aspire to be good listeners. After all, God's Word tells us to "be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble" (1 Pet. 3:8). Surely this at least implies listening carefully to others. More explicitly, Scripture tells us to "be quick to listen, slow to speak" (Jas. 1:19, NIV). A command like that goes far beyond technique; it calls us to cultivate the kind of listening skills that overflow from a Christlike heart.

That is where we want to get to. How can we become those kinds of listeners? Before we do that, we need to agree about what constitutes good listening. For the purposes of this guide, we may define good listening as quietly receiving what a person says, empathizing with what they are expressing, and then offering a thoughtful response. This is a simple definition, but it will help us consider all the essential elements of effective listening—and help us understand the barriers of listening that so easily get in our way.

Let's dive in piece by piece.

### ***Quietly Receiving What a Person Has to Say***

This is the most intuitive part of listening, and it happens to be the hardest part. To receive *quietly* means that both your mouth and mind must be still. To listen well, your mind cannot be wandering to your next meal, the buzzing in your pocket, or the funny-looking dog you see out the coffee

## FIELD GUIDE

shop window. Good listening also requires that you are literally quiet—with the exception of audible responses indicating that you’re following with what they’re saying. That’s not to say there are no places for sudden interjections or interruptions, but good listening is characterized by *quietly* receiving what a person has to say.

Quiet receiving is often the place where many of the barriers of listening show up—fatigue, impatience, preloaded responses, defensiveness, or simple distraction. Naming these barriers helps us see how to overcome them, especially if we truly want to learn how to be a good listener.

To elaborate further, it means *quietly receiving* what is said. So often, we jump to conclusions about what a person is saying before they’re even done explaining themselves. Once we reach conclusions, we are really just waiting for that person to be done talking so that we can respond. Good listening involves absorbing and considering what someone says all the way until they’re done. It means pausing before responding. You’ve got to catch the football before lobbing it back. This kind of attentiveness is foundational to empathetic listening, because it allows us to take in not only a person’s words but also their emotions.

Finally, it means listening in this way to what a *person* has to say. This implies at least two things.

First, any person you are speaking with is an image bearer of almighty God. They are worth our time and attention. As C. S. Lewis so piercingly put it, “You’ve never spoken to a mere mortal.” This dignifies your conversations with people who would otherwise be considered a waste of your time. This helps quell the rising rush of busyness that prevents us from having prolonged conversations. Your interlocutor is made in God’s image. We listen to God, as our Creator. In a derivative sense, his image-bearers deserve our ear, even if their words don’t bear the same authority over us. Honoring the Lord in this way is at the heart of effective listening.

The second thing to note about the person we’re listening to is the importance of their words to you in the context of your relationship with them and what you know about them. Your pastor’s words to you should weigh differently than your unbelieving co-worker’s words. The warning of an elderly saint in your church should mean more than your peer’s dismissal of your questionable behavior. Good listening does not require blindly following the words of everybody you hear. In fact, an excellent listener may seriously consider someone’s words and dismiss them. In some cases, a good listener may interrupt someone if they feel it is for their good. This requires wisdom and prayer. Considering *who* it is you are hearing is critical to listening well and loving the speaker well—and it is one of the marks of someone who has developed mature listening skills and understands how to be a good listener.

## **LISTENING WELL: THE ART OF HEARING OTHERS**

### ***Empathizing With What They Are Expressing***

Listening well also requires that you empathize with what your conversation partner is saying. After all, simply listening quietly, receiving, and responding is too mechanical to sustain a healthy conversation. Many a conversation has turned sideways because the speaker became aware that their listener didn't really care about what they were sharing. To empathize means to put yourself in their shoes. It is the extrapolation of "weep with those who weep" and "rejoice with those who rejoice" (Rom. 12:15). In many ways, this is where listening skills and especially empathetic listening become visible and meaningful.

Let's be honest. This is exhausting. It is a very high standard which we all frequently fall short of. So often, our hearts are cold or overwrought with our own cares and worries. Other times, we truly care but struggle to understand what others feel. These are some of the everyday barriers to effective listening, and they show us what are the barriers of listening that we need to pray through.

And yet, empathy is essential to good listening. Consider it from the opposite perspective—while empathetic listening might sound impossible and exhausting from the listener's perspective, put yourself in the place of the speaker for a moment and you'll understand why it's so crucial. We all long for empathetic listeners to hear us when we speak. We are thirsty for someone to hear about our burdens and joys and truly feel them with us. Perhaps even more clearly, we do *not* want someone to merely listen to us, pause, coldly evaluate our claims and comments, before offering a measured response. This would be poison to any real relationship.

"People don't care what you know until they know that you care." If this maxim is true, it means empathy is crucial to listening well. Conversation, to some degree, deteriorates if listeners do not empathize with speakers. This is especially true the more personal the words the speaker is sharing are. Hours and hours of small talk go on every day without any empathetic listening. That is because nothing deep is ever discussed, and people don't actually expect anyone to care. They're not actually in a relationship with those people. People we value expect us to empathize with them when we are listening. And when we value someone, we naturally desire to learn how to be a good listener for their sake.

### ***Offering a Thoughtful Response***

Finally, listening well requires that we offer thoughtful responses to the words we have heard. The most important word here is *thoughtful*. This is not to say that every response needs to be elaborate or deeply intentional. I mean quite literally that our responses should be full of thought. Wisdom requires that we consider our words before speaking them. In some

## FIELD GUIDE

contexts, that might mean taking some time before speaking. In lighter contexts, that might mean only saying part of what came to mind immediately until you've had a few moments to weigh whether your complete thought is kind, true, or helpful in the moment.

Consider the example of Jesus when he met the grieving sisters Mary and Martha. Their brother, Lazarus, had just died a tragic and seemingly avoidable death. Mary and Martha separately approach Jesus and say the exact same words to him: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:32). Yet, Jesus responds to both very differently. He challenges Martha, saying, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26). He is bold and assertive. After all, he is her shepherd and knows what she needs. With Mary, Jesus is "deeply moved in spirit" (John 11:33). He cries with her. Truly, here is one greater than all of Solomon's wisdom! This is the wisdom we ought to pray for when we respond thoughtfully to those around us.

Much more could be said on this topic, but these three components fit together to give us a comprehensive idea of what listening well means. But then again, most of us could have written down some version of the last few paragraphs. The hard work is not in determining *what* good listening is, but in *how* to become a good listener. We will address that soon. But first, let's consider further *why* listening well is so important.

### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. Is your listening "quiet"? Or do you tend to speak more than listen when in conversation?
2. Why is it so important to empathize with the person you're listening to?
3. What is a thoughtful response after you've been listening?

# 2

# WHY LISTENING WELL IS SO IMPORTANT

### ***It is vital for communication***

Communication may be the most important skill in life. So says Stephen Covey, the author of the bestselling book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. If you want to have a good relationship with your kids, you need to communicate well. If you want to get married, you need to communicate well. If you want to build a business, you need to communicate well. The problem is that many of us believe communication boils down to speaking clearly and accurately. While that is a key component of communication, listening is just as important or more so. As we've just been considering, people do not care what we have to say if we don't listen when they speak. Or, even if they are listening, we run the risk of saying the wrong thing. In either case, our ability to listen is critical to building any relationship and, ultimately, succeeding in life. This is why growing in listening skills is essential not only socially but spiritually, especially when we remember how often Scripture calls us to "hear," "incline our ear," and understand.

### ***It is an underdeveloped ability***

Listening well is also an important skill to develop because, despite being vital to communication, we pay it relatively little attention. Consider this—there are two primary means by which we intake information: reading and listening. Similarly, there are two primary means by which we output information: speaking and writing. Of these four, we spend far and away the least amount of time preparing ourselves to listen well. We dedicate years to the other three abilities but scarcely think about listening. Like a neglected muscle, many of us have an atrophied ability to listen well. This does not mean that listening is more important than speech or the written word, but that we have paid it far too little attention and thus are sorely underdeveloped in this area. And yet, the Bible reminds us repeatedly—

## FIELD GUIDE

through its many verses about listening—that listening is not optional but central to the life of wisdom.

### ***What God says about it***

Most importantly, we know listening is important because God’s Word says so. In fact, the Bible has a surprising amount to say about listening. These scriptures on listening help us understand just how deeply God values a receptive heart.

#### ***Listening to God***

First, the Bible says the most about listening to God. While not the focus of this guide, it is the primary category Scripture offers when it comes to listening. Creatures ought to attend to their Maker’s words. This is implied in passages about obedience.

In John 14:15, Jesus teaches,

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

How can we obey if we’re not listening?

Deuteronomy 6:4–5 commands God’s people to listen explicitly:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”

And again in John 10:27:

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”

These passages lay the foundation for how to listen to God—a posture of humility, obedience, and attentiveness. They also remind us that listening for God is not mystical guesswork but a steady attentiveness to His Word.

#### ***Listening to people***

Second, the Bible gives us a framework for how we ought to listen to people. This listening is derivative of our responsibility to listen to God, since all human beings bear His image. This is addressed indirectly in passages which command us to “value others above ourselves” or “be humble and compassionate.”

Listening is also addressed directly in James 1:19, which tells us that every person ought to be “quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.” Or in Proverbs 18:13:

“If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame.”

## **LISTENING WELL: THE ART OF HEARING OTHERS**

The Bible on listening is clear: listening to others is part of our duty before God and neighbor.

Thirdly, Scripture clearly communicates that we ought to listen especially carefully to a particular group of people: the wise. God's Word tells us in no uncertain terms that listening to wise people is critical to our flourishing. Consider these three proverbs:

“Incline your ear, and hear the words of the wise, and apply your heart to my knowledge” (Prov. 22:17).

“Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future” (Prov. 19:20).

“The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise” (Prov. 15:31).

It is clearly essential to our flourishing that we listen to the right people. We've already unpacked that this is part of listening well: understanding who the speaker is. Yet, the wisdom of Proverbs ups the ante. There is no in between—either you listen to the advice of the wise or you are a fool. And fools are headed to destruction. Their marriages, families, businesses, and churches are in danger of falling apart—and even their very souls are in peril.

Scripture also offers us a positive picture. If we are good listeners, getting wise people in our lives is like getting a beautiful piece of jewelry: it is a sign of wealth and flourishing.

“Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold is a wise reproof to a listening ear” (Proverbs 25:12).

Finally, we cannot forget the comfort of knowing that verses reminding us that God listens to our prayers—such as Psalm 116:1, “*I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy*”—assure us that God is the perfect listener, and His attentiveness fuels our desire to listen well.

Clearly, the Bible has a lot to say about listening well. Even beyond the pages of Scripture, we can see so many important reasons to listen. This begs the question: if it is so important, why do we have such a hard time doing it? Other things, like exercise and building a career, are important, and we spend countless hours planning how to go about them. Why do we neglect listening?

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. How has talking to a bad listener made you feel?
2. What part does listening play in good communication?
3. Are people generally good listeners? Why or why not?

## **FIELD GUIDE**

4. How do we know whether God cares about our listening?

# 3

## WHY IS IT SO HARD?

I would suggest there are at least three reasons we struggle to listen.

First, we are more interested in ourselves than others. There is a deep self-centeredness in each of us—no matter how well we may mask it. God designed us to worship, and yet, because we are sinful, we most often want to worship ourselves rather than God. Even for Christians, this self-centeredness is a constant battle. At the end of the day, listening is about valuing and showing interest in someone else. Oftentimes, we don't actually feel that interested in what a person is saying to us. Our minds constantly wander to our own struggles, burdens, and anxieties because we are far too concerned with ourselves.

And because of this inward pull, our *listening skills* weaken. They don't deteriorate because we lack ability, but because we lack the spiritual posture that quiets our hearts enough to truly attend to another person. Scripture repeatedly shows that good listening begins with humility.

A second common struggle is that we are confident we know how we should respond before we hear someone out. Consider the account of the USS Lincoln, supposedly released by the Chief of Naval Operations in 1995. Somewhere off the coast of Newfoundland, the Lincoln began a radio exchange with a Canadian crew.

Americans: "Please divert your course 15 degrees to the North to avoid a collision."

Canadians: "Recommend you divert YOUR course 15 degrees to the South to avoid a collision."

Americans: "This is the captain of a US Navy ship. I say again, divert YOUR course."

Canadians: "No, I say again, you divert YOUR course."

Americans: "THIS IS THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER USS ABRAHAM LINCOLN, THE SECOND LARGEST SHIP IN THE UNITED STATES' ATLANTIC FLEET.

## FIELD GUIDE

WE ARE ACCCOMPANIED BY THREE DESTROYERS, THREE CRUISERS AND NUMEROUS SUPPORT VESSELS. I DEMAND THAT YOU CHANGE YOUR COURSE 15 DEGREES NORTH. THAT'S ONE-FIVE DEGREES NORTH, OR COUNTER MEASURES WILL BE UNDERTAKEN TO ENSURE THE SAFETY OF THIS SHIP."

Canadians: "This is a lighthouse. Your call."

Though humorous, this communicates something important. Even if we are adequately interested in the person we are speaking to, we may grow weary of listening to them because we quickly draw a conclusion from their first few words or sentences. This makes the remaining words they say superfluous. We tap our foot, so eager to be a help that we undo much of the good our words would have done by our impatience. Their words become inflammatory rather than informative. In the process, we quit listening and miss what could possibly be important information that could shape our counsel or response. As we have already covered, we don't merely listen to people to gather information, but hearing them out is certainly an important part of listening well.

This is also why *Bible listening* matters so deeply: Scripture trains us to slow down, hear fully, and resist the impulse to assume we already understand. Learning to listen to God's Word forms habits that carry over into listening to people.

Finally, we often don't listen well because we are limited emotionally. This struggle is true of all human beings. Except for Jesus, every other person we speak to has a limited ability to empathize with the speaker. We may be truly listening, paying attention, and caring for this person, but simply lack the emotional bandwidth to empathize with them.

And yet, when fatigue overwhelms us, we remember that *Jesus listens* perfectly. Throughout the Gospels He never rushes, never dismisses, never avoids the hurting but bends toward them. His attentiveness becomes both our comfort and our model. And we cling to every *God listens to our prayers* verse—such as Psalm 34:17, which reminds us that "The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them"—because God's perfect listening assures us that our own weak listening does not condemn us but invites us to grow.

This becomes painfully obvious the longer you consider what listening well actually is. At times it feels attainable, but most of the time it is a daunting task—especially depending on the depth and breadth of your relationships. However, in response to that, we should not lower our idea of what good listening actually is, but rather realize how much sin has tainted our lives. Even more importantly, we ought to realize how great and compassionate a Savior we have who does not have these sorts of

## **LISTENING WELL: THE ART OF HEARING OTHERS**

emotional limitations. The hymn writer Cecil Alexander described Jesus in this way:

*His heart that's touched with all our joys,*

*And feels for all our grief.*

He is never “out of it,” and his social battery never runs out. Praise God. Yet, we experience our emotional limitations constantly. This is part of what makes listening well so hard.

***Reflection Questions:***

1. How does what we worship inform how we listen?
2. Why is listening hard for you?
3. When do you find listening most difficult?

## 4

# HOW CAN WE BECOME BETTER LISTENERS?

There are many practical tips and helpful ideas for improving our listening skills represented in dozens of books, podcasts, and blogs. Some of the most useful tips, in fact, come from secular writers. I have in mind authors like Katie Murphy and Stephen Covey who have contributed meaningfully to literature on listening. (If you're looking for a deeper introduction to the topic, consider Murphy's *You're Not Listening*. Although coming from a secular perspective, she offers keen insights.)

This wider body of work reminds us that good *listening skills* are never automatic—they are cultivated through practice, humility, and prayer.

Having read several of these, I'd suggest two practices and four principles for becoming a better listener.

### ***Practice #1: Become fluent in support responses***

A helpful distinction in popular literature on listening is between support responses and shift responses. A support response builds upon a previous comment by empathizing ("Oh! Wow!") or digging deeper ("So, you told her to send the email?"). It means contributing to the conversation while leaving the spotlight on the person you're speaking with. Support responses can be contrasted with shift responses. These, as you might expect, entail shifting the topic from one thing to another. Or, even if the topic remains the same, relating your thoughts and experiences on the topic in such a way that the spotlight clearly shifts away from the other person.

Shift responses are not always wrong. In fact, it's not hard to imagine that someone who only uses support responses would be a wearisome conversation partner. Part of building relationships is sharing your own

## **LISTENING WELL: THE ART OF HEARING OTHERS**

experiences and thoughts. However, a regular pattern of refocusing conversations on yourself will not make for good listening.

Support responses also cultivate *empathy and listening*, because they require us to slow down, stay present, and affirm that the other person's experience matters. As we practice this, we grow in *Listening and understanding*, not merely reacting.

### ***Practice #2: Before serious conversations, pray and put your phone away***

A professor of mine once told me that “words create worlds.” While an expansive claim, it rightly encapsulates the reality that our words convey meaning that can shape the world around us. That is to say, our words are powerful. In light of this, all our conversations should be seasoned with prayer. Before weighty conversations, we would be foolish not to prepare ourselves by praying for our words to be few and careful, for our listener to understand us rightly, and for good gospel fruit to come from the encounter. Prayer can even extend into the conversation itself, as brief internal cries for the Lord’s help in the moment. Easy to overlook, but essential, prayer displays the humility that acknowledges we are not capable of handling difficult conversations on our own.

Additionally, however, prayer should be paired with a simple action—putting your devices away. We’ve all been part of conversations where the other person is glancing down at their phone. In fact, most of us have been the ones glancing down at our phones. Putting your devices away signals to the other person that we consider our conversation with them more valuable than whatever is happening online. Instead of being at the reach of literally millions (if not billions) of people, we narrow our audience down to one. So, flip your phone over and leave it there. Drop it in your bag. Turn on “Do Not Disturb.” This will immediately make you a better listener.

Removing distractions is one of the simplest ways to strengthen our *listening skills*, because it frees us to give others the kind of focused attention we so often desire ourselves.

### ***Principle #1: Everybody is worth listening to, at least for a while***

When approaching a conversation, rehearse to yourself the command of Philippians 2:3, “In humility, value others above yourself.” This is a basic prerogative for a healthy conversation and one of the planks on which it rests. In a new relationship, you must believe the person you’re speaking to has something valuable to say. This is not squishy sentimentalism, but a command coming to you straight from Scripture. However, there may be people who, after a time, prove themselves not to be worth listening to. Scripture clearly has a category for avoiding or tuning out certain people

## FIELD GUIDE

(see Prov. 13:20; 14:7). This does not undermine their worth as individuals. Still, it does teach us that it is possible to forfeit the trust we initially extend.

Seeing each person as an image bearer naturally deepens *Empathy and listening*, urging us to approach every conversation with dignity, patience, and compassion.

### ***Principle #2: You won't understand what that person is saying until they're done talking***

In a society that reads headlines (and for whom 280 characters is now a drag), it is often truly difficult to hear someone out until the end. The average American attention span is supposed to be less than ten seconds. Yet, we must make a habit of listening to people all the way. It sounds so simple—you can hear your mom telling you this before you head out to school. Even still, we need to remember to wait until the person we're listening to is done speaking before we start.

This discipline trains us in *listening and understanding*, reminding us that wisdom grows from hearing a matter fully (Prov. 18:13).

### ***Principle #3: Listening should characterize us more than talking***

James 3 encourages us to tame the tongue. Oftentimes, we assume James means we ought to watch our words. Surely, he also means we sometimes ought to be quiet. As Christians, we so often want to offer our counsel before we even listen, like overzealous doctors dosing out meds after just glancing at their patients.

Learning restraint is a key part of mastering *listening skills*, because silence—when practiced with love—opens the door for empathy, clarity, and wisdom.

### ***Principle #4: Listening is one of your greatest tools in evangelism***

It is to the Christian's benefit that there are very few listeners out there today. So many relational doors open for us just by offering a listening ear. A 2012 study by Harvard professors using brain imaging found that people sharing personal information about themselves felt the same sensations as when enjoying a good meal (King, 12). In a digital age marked by loneliness, it should come as no surprise that people are starved for conversation. Certainly, for our non-believing friends to be saved, we must preach the gospel to them. However, simply listening to them will give you a stronger relationship in which to do this preaching. Your ability to listen well may be the greatest tool in your evangelistic toolbox.

Furthermore, in the actual act of sharing the good news, a crucial aspect of evangelism is understanding who we are evangelizing and encouraging or exhorting these individuals in helpful ways. For instance, my evangelism

## **LISTENING WELL: THE ART OF HEARING OTHERS**

should look different if I'm speaking to a nominal Christian who is living with his girlfriend versus my Hindu barber. Both of them are lost. However, as I listen to them, my goal is to identify which lies they are believing and counter them with the gospel truth. This is not to put unneeded pressure on those of us sharing the gospel. The salvation of the lost is never our doing. However, listening well is one of the tools that God, in his kindness, uses to draw the lost to himself.

Evangelism rooted in *empathy and listening* shows people the gentleness of Christ, and evangelism anchored in *Listening and understanding* helps us discern how to apply the gospel with accuracy, compassion, and truth.

### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. What distracts you from listening well?
2. Why should you listen to others?
3. When listening, why is it so easy to interrupt? What does that say about you?
4. What does listening have to do with evangelism?

## 5

# WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

If this life skill guide were to stop here, it would have little value. Sure, we've covered tidbits of wisdom. But those tidbits would be like the ingredients on a cold pizza, sitting in a dark oven with no heat applied to them if we don't put the whole picture together by listening well. That's why we need to get into the animating principle for listening. What is it that brings life to this skeletal structure we have examined? How can we, as Christians, offer something better than the self-help books on listening?

That's the issue with all the world's advice on listening. There are many great ideas or tips. I'd encourage you to pick up a copy of *You're Not Listening* by Kate Murphy or read Stephen Covey's chapter on listening in *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. But, at the end of the day, these authors only offer us selfish motivations for listening. Listening will give you the kind of friends that make you feel good "on the inside". Listening will help you build your network. Listening will allow you to influence people and ascend to new professional heights. Each of these authors, for all their insight, starts from an emotionally bankrupt state. They suggest listening to fill yourself up. More friends. More influence. Like Carnegie said.

What makes a good listener is someone who truly cares. Loving someone else (in the true sense) requires that you listen to them. Applying the principles and practices we've discussed so far without this is like giving a new paint job to a car with no engine. It may pass as good listening to a casual observer, but anyone who gets close will realize—this thing is not going anywhere. In fact, as adept as we may feel at appearing interested in others, we are equally adept at sniffing out fake listeners. We notice the glances at the phone. The interruptions. The constant shift responses. Unless we have hearts that are truly changed to love others, none of this will be of any use.

So, how do we learn to care for others? The root of the matter is this—a good listener is built from the inside out. You will never truly listen well so long as your main goal is to impress others or yourself. It may pass as good

## **LISTENING WELL: THE ART OF HEARING OTHERS**

listening, but let someone up close and they will realize. What we all need is a heart changed by the gospel. The gospel is the message that shifts our affections away from ourselves to Christ.

What is the gospel? It is the message that “when we were dead in our sins and trespasses,” Christ came to give his life for us. Although we are morally bankrupt before God, he looked on us in love and paid the greatest price to bring us to himself. You will never be a good listener unless you spend time gazing at the God who mercifully hears his people. Nowhere is this clearer than in the Psalms. Time after time, God bends his ear to hear the psalmist’s cry (for example: Ps. 6:9; 18:6; 34:17, 120:1). Until you realize that God has listened to you when you least deserved it and has responded with the utmost empathy, grace, and love you simply cannot offer others the kind of listening they so desperately want.

So, soak yourself in the Psalms. Spend an hour reading the Psalms and note how many times we see that God listens to his people. Also consider Christ’s life. On the way to Jericho, Christ stopped when he heard the blind beggar pleading for mercy. He listened as his disciples bickered about who was the greatest among them and, although he did rebuke them, he also patiently taught them what true greatness in God’s kingdom looks like. Realize that you are the blind beggar and the selfish disciple. Rejoice that the same Jesus who showed incredible kindness and patience in that day is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Notice also how this actually helps you become a good listener. If you don’t have your heart full of gospel fuel, you will not be able to consistently offer good responses. If you’re listening carefully just to make yourself feel better, your interest in others will only last as long as you feel morally superior or like a kind person. Similarly, you’ll never be able to offer the kind of critique that defines a healthy relationship. This would risk the very premise on which your actions are based. Yet, it will also be the thing that causes the relationship to wither away.

Want to become a better listener? Soak yourself in the gospel of grace every day. Let God’s Word dwell in you richly. What happens then? God himself dwells in our hearts through faith. Our hearts are slowly but surely transformed into caring, warm hearts. Not hearts that think less of ourselves or more of ourselves, but think of ourselves *less*. Know that God listened to you when you least deserved it—let that shape you into a good listener.

### ***Reflection Questions:***

1. What does the gospel have to do with our listening?
2. God listens to us. How does that inform how we should listen to others?

## 6

# DIFFERENT KINDS OF LISTENING

Having covered the topic of listening more broadly, I want to offer some brief thoughts on a few specific kinds of listening.

### ***Listening to sermons***

The weekly routine of a Christian reaches its crescendo during the Lord's Day gathering. This service reaches its own crescendo when one of the church's appointed elders teaches from God's Word for God's people.

Gallons of ink have been spilled to explain right principles for preaching, yet there is a corresponding task which gets little attention: listening to the sermons! Most of us will never preach at our churches, but we will listen to hundreds or even thousands of sermons. So, how do we listen to these sermons well?

#### 1. Prepare yourself throughout the week.

For most of us, preparing to hear from God's Word on a Sunday amounts to the same as stretching before a race. On the hectic drive to church, we might pray for God to open our ears and humble our hearts. Or, if your church allows time for this in the service, it might not even make the car ride. But like a stretching session, this practice is not nearly all you need to be ready on race day.

Preparing to hear from God's Word on a Sunday also requires the daily runs you need to prepare for Sunday's higher intensity. The daily routine of placing yourself under the authority of God's Word is the same routine as we follow on a Sunday, but private and (possibly) briefer. Like a racer, if you skip these practices, you'll be out of shape and unprepared at the starting line. Like a racer whose body is constantly losing fitness unless he trains, our hearts become stale and self-centered when we do not spend time in God's Word. Our wills calcify and become brittle, leaving us intractable and cold to our Father's words.

Thankfully, the remedy is simple—pick up your Bible, incline your heart to his Word (Ps. 119:36), and take a few laps around the block. When your feet

## **LISTENING WELL: THE ART OF HEARING OTHERS**

hit the starting blocks on Sunday morning, the track will be well-worn and your heart ready to run.

(Briefly: many churches encourage their members to read the sermon passage for the upcoming Sunday throughout the week. While not essential, this is a helpful practice which I'd encourage you to adopt.)

### **2. Focus.**

Practically speaking, one of the greatest obstacles to listening well to a sermon is distraction. Work. Tiredness. Troubled relationships (some of which may be within your line of vision). These are constantly begging for our attention, while (sometimes) the preacher's voice seems further and further away.

While requiring sacrifice, solutions do exist for these problems. Let your work know that you are unavailable for two hours on Sunday morning. This might not be possible depending on the season you are in or simply your profession. However, most of us can achieve this. If your colleagues or boss ask why—what better opportunity to testify to the value we place on our relationship with Christ? If you find yourself struggling to unplug from work, ask for God's help. Power your phone off or put it on "Do Not Disturb". Years down the road, what little effect this may have on your career (if any) will be incomparable to the eternal good of listening to God's Word preached.

Prioritize sleep on Saturday night. Again, this is an opportunity to testify to the people around you about what you value. Not sleep by itself, but attentiveness to God's word. Show up to church well rested. And, if you need it, don't be too pious to get some help from a cup of coffee. These are simple steps to help you listen well.

### **3. Respect God's Word.**

The sermon starts. Oof. This guy's voice is really obnoxious. His points don't even make sense. His exegesis is clear, but listening to him is like eating a flavorless protein bar. Such ruminations are common on Sunday morning. These often aren't entirely incorrect observations, nor is the preacher guiltless if indeed his delivery is akin to chalk.

However, none of these critiques should be at the forefront of our minds when a preacher takes the pulpit. The primary method which God has ordained for Christians to be regularly taught is by hearing his Word preached in the context of a gathered church. Indeed, God has given to men the authority and challenge of explaining his Word to his people. This is a fearsome and wonderful task. However, the task he has given his people is similarly demanding: accept the authority of the under-

## FIELD GUIDE

shepherds in your church and hear the authority of God's Word through their teaching.

### 4. Be a Berean.

On the flip side of the coin, Christians also have the tremendous responsibility to evaluate and determine whether the teaching they hear from their church's pulpit is true. In the main Bible study room in my childhood church, vinyl lettering covered one of the main walls. It said, "...they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11). What a wonderful example our Berean brothers and sisters set for us so long ago! They respected God's Word, assumed the best of those teaching them, but then pored over God's Word themselves to see if Paul's words held true. This is part of our priestly responsibility under God's new covenant: we must learn to understand God's Word ourselves to protect the church and, ultimately, preserve the gospel (1 Pet. 2:9).

### 5. Discuss, pray, and remember.

In C. S. Lewis' classic novel, *The Silver Chair*, Eustace and Jill are on a quest to find a lost prince. Before they set out, they meet the noble Aslan on a high mountaintop, where he gives them signs that will help them fulfill their quest. He carefully instructs them to rehearse these signs every night lest they forget and lose their way. The air will become much denser and foggier once they leave, he warns. As he sends them on their way, he exhorts them, "Remember the signs!"

As Christians, we need ways to remember the signs. Normally, Sunday morning is the clearest time of the week. Local churches are outposts of heaven and the future reality of God's coming kingdom. When we're there, we get small but real glimpses of what is really true and what will really be our future. Step out that door, however, and the fog descends. It is so hard to remember the signs.

For that reason, we should develop regular habits to remind ourselves of what we heard on Sunday morning. Beyond our regular Bible study, we ought to make a regular habit of discussing Sunday's sermon over lunch after church. Set a reminder on your phone to pray for a particular fruit of the Spirit based on the sermon. Ask older Christians at your church how they meditate on a sermon throughout the week. There are many habits that will help us remember the signs. Or, to use God's words, to help not forget how we look in the mirror (Jas. 1:22-25).

### ***Listening to the talker and the timid***

We all know people who are prone to talking too much. We also all know people for whom every sentence is like giving birth to a child. As we've

## **LISTENING WELL: THE ART OF HEARING OTHERS**

already seen, in order to listen well to both of these types of people, we must be aware of who we are listening to.

### **1. Assess.**

Get to know the person you're talking to. This will take hard work when you're talking to the timid. But you'll need to figure out if they are quiet because they feel insecure or because that is simply the way they are wired. Similarly, if you're talking to a talker, you want to find out whether their talkative nature is because they are nervous to be around you or if they have a bubbly nature that is native to their personality. This is part of the process of getting to know them.

### **2. Adapt.**

If someone is talkative, be willing to interrupt them. You may realize that to contribute to a conversation (or make it a conversation), you must insert yourself in ways that might otherwise seem forceful. If someone is very quiet, on the other hand, be willing to bear through the awkward silences. Spend time considering the right questions to ask. Quiet folks become very adept at deflecting questions, but the right question can penetrate that armor. Be willing to sit through the silence to see if they will open up.

### **3. Accept.**

At some point, loving a quiet or talkative person may mean simply accepting the way they are and either 1) listening more than usual or 2) talking more than usual. We do well to push people and encourage them to grow, as described above. However, there comes a time to accept a person's way of being and be willing to bear some of the cost yourself.

### ***Listening to critique***

As we have already discussed, listening well involves discerning who you're listening to. In this case, it's helpful to think of people in a few different buckets. In today's digital age, there is a vast swath of people who do not know you and yet have access to you and (depending on how public your life is) can comment publicly on their evaluation of you. Then there are people who know you personally. Finally, there are those who know you best.

First, critiques from strangers will often be based on motivations or deeds that simply are not true. Again, depending on how publicly you live, there may be dozens or hundreds of people commenting on your life. These comments should weigh on us the least—although they tend to do the opposite. It is tempting to feel smug in light of these wrongful critiques. We feel like victims or martyrs. But even as we try to tune out the noise, we must remember that we, too, have likely spoken like fools against those whom we did not know.

## FIELD GUIDE

It's a different story when you face criticism from people who actually know you. There is often a nugget of truth in criticism coming from someone we know. We must be willing to accept our fallibility and examine our thoughts, actions, and motives. Sometimes, this will help us grow. Other times, we may find that these critiques are truly unfounded. Either way, we must have the humility to listen and self-examine.

When we face critiques from our closest friends (especially our elders in the faith), we should listen up. If someone kindly critiques you, this should catch your attention. In fact, if they successfully critique you without doing so harshly, you should note that. Get close to that person. Bring them into your inner circle. Not many people are willing to be honest and loving enough to tell the truth while working not to hurt you.

What if you face regular critique from a close friend or a spouse? Bitterness becomes a huge temptation. Especially within our churches, this manner of disagreement is so poisonous. John Newton addressed this situation in a letter, saying:

If you account [your opponent] a believer, though greatly mistaken in the subject of debate between you, the words of David to Joab concerning Absalom are very applicable: 'Deal gently with him for my sake.' The Lord loves him and bears with him; therefore, you must not despise him or treat him harshly. The Lord bears with you likewise, and expects that you should show tenderness to others, from a sense of the much forgiveness you need yourself. In a little while, you will meet in heaven; he will then be dearer to you than the nearest friend you have upon earth is to you now. Anticipate that period in your thoughts, and though you may find it necessary to oppose his errors, view him personally as a kindred soul, with whom you are to be happy in Christ forever.

Criticism is always hard to take. But, by remembering God's love and discerning *who* is offering the criticism, this criticism need not tear us down. Instead, it can become an instrument for growth and a reminder of God's love.

### ***Listening to praise***

As difficult as it is to listen to criticism, praise is far more dangerous. There are several reasons for this. First, pride is rooted deep in most of our hearts, and we need little encouragement to think highly of ourselves. Additionally, we are typically very accepting of any praise. While we might analyze critiques down to the minutiae, we accept praise broadly. While we accept critique with nuance, we embrace praise as though it were

## **LISTENING WELL: THE ART OF HEARING OTHERS**

wholly founded. Finally, most of us are starved for praise and affirmation. Few things will cloud our judgment like a stream of unwarranted praise.

Praise is a strong substance. How can we listen to it well?

Allow me to suggest a few ways:

1. **Bear in mind who is speaking.** We return to this theme again and again. Is this praise coming from a mature believer? A new Christian? Someone whom you have authority over? Someone whose life you wish to emulate? Knowing who is speaking will help you weigh their words.
2. **Deflect praise when it's appropriate.** God always deserves the ultimate praise for our lives and actions. Beyond that, there are always other people to whom we owe great debts. Why do athletes, actors, and musicians always thank their parents when accepting an award? Because it becomes totally apparent in that moment that they could not be there without them. So, defer praise when you ought to.
3. **Accept praise and move on.** Sometimes, we do deserve measured praise. In God's kindness, he sometimes helps us to do great things for his kingdom. While ultimate credit goes to the Lord, it may be appropriate to receive the praise. In these cases, we should avoid the tendency to draw more attention to ourselves by publicly disavowing anything praiseworthy. Thank the Lord for what he allowed and move on. Just as we tend to dismiss criticism outright, we have an inverse tendency to linger over praise. Remember, this will never satisfy you. Thank the Lord and move on.
4. **Remind yourself that God's praise will be last and loudest.** As a Christian, the praise that you must long for the most is God's. In Christ, we have been reconciled to him and assured of his love. Part of our daily duty as Christians is to remind ourselves of that. Praise will lose its seductive power when you know you have God's approval now. And one day, if you persevere, you will hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

While we've just spent some time considering various different kinds of listening, I hope you can see that doing them well requires largely the same skills. Listening quietly. Empathizing. Responding thoughtfully. These are still the skills that make up a good listener.

### **Reflection Questions:**

1. Do you find it difficult to listen to sermons? If so, why?
2. Do you resonate more with the talker or the timid? Which do you find more difficult to listen to?
3. How have you responded to criticism in the past?
4. Why is praise sometimes harder to receive than criticism?



# CONCLUSION

Let me take you back to the old bedroom in Apache Junction, Arizona where this guide began. Say you could travel back in time to listen in on a night of Zach's storytelling. I hope we would now agree on a few things.

First, I hope you would agree I was a bad listener. I *was* quiet. But... I was usually not empathetic to the stories being told nor were my responses thoughtful. Furthermore, I did not think to interrupt him at times to interject my own thoughts or explain how I felt.

Secondly, I hope we can agree on what it might have looked like to listen well in that moment—enjoying his stories, entering into his enthusiasm, and making an effort to contribute as well. It wouldn't be marked by fearful or frustrated quietness, but by content listening and support responses building off of and enhancing whatever story was being told.

Lastly, I hope we can agree that there is a significant reason I did not listen well. It's the same reason I (and probably you) still struggle to listen well every day. We have not fully worked into our hearts the reality of who we are in Christ and the character of the God we serve. It's only by dwelling deeply on these things that we will become good listeners. Realize God listens to you. He really does. Every day—rain or shine, good day or bad. Let that shape you into a good listener as you listen to others.



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