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Women of Witness

TIPS TO BETTER YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS

Why Is Listening So Hard?

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Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. (James 1:19)

I don't suppose I need to convince you that the apostle is right when he says we should be "quick to hear." You know that listening is good. Both your personal experience and our Lord's call to "love your neighbor as yourself" make the value of listening clear. Indeed, how will we ever speak words of Christ-centered hope and wisdom if we have not first listened attentively so that we might know what will be profitable to share?

But if it's so obvious that listening is good, why is listening so hard?

Why We Struggle to Listen. Most of us already know what makes for good listening. A good listener does not interrupt. A good listener does not breathlessly wait to insert his own opinion the moment the other person pauses. A good listener asks wise follow-up questions, conveys genuine interest through body language and facial expressions, allows the speaker time to unfold his thoughts, and so on.

I appreciate these skills, and many like them we could name. If you've ever been really, attentively listened to and asked probing questions by a thoughtful and interested conversationalist, you know this for the enormous (and rare) privilege it is.

But I don't believe a lack of skill is the biggest problem for most of us in our listening. Most people are already instinctively good listeners — when they want to be. Even a highly distractible child can become engrossed in listening to an interesting story. All of us pay attention, slow down, ask good questions, and hang eagerly on the answers when we care deeply about the subject matter or the one who is speaking, be it a close friend or a character in a show.

No, the real difficulty with listening well is, alas, the same real difficulty we face in many other endeavors in our lives: a lack of love. Listening is hard because loving is hard. We struggle to listen well, at least in large part, because our hearts and minds are not fully convinced that others are worth listening to. We struggle to listen because we struggle to love our Lord enough to treasure his beloved ones and the concerns that are on their hearts, concerns their words reveal (Luke 6:45).

Two Great Temptations. In the first chapter of James, we get the memorable verse quoted above, calling us to be “quick to hear.” James, in his usual pithy style, then names two great human temptations that prevent us from being quick to listen. We enter one of those many delightful moments where Scripture is completely accessible to a young child while simultaneously guiding an exploration of heart motives that even seasoned counselors never exhaust. What qualities does James oppose to the godly virtue of being eagerly ready to listen? A sinful quickness to speak and to become angry.

Quick to Speak. First, take “slow to speak.” On the surface, this seems obvious: it’s hard to listen when you’re the one talking. But James is giving us more than a truism here. Being quick to speak captures something much more basic, and more sinister, than merely being unskillful or saying too many words. To be quick to speak is, ultimately, to be selfish.

I am quick to speak when I want to impress and our conversation becomes the occasion for me to demonstrate my quick wit, my knowledge of theology, my stories of success in ministry, my humble attitude. I am quick to speak when I want to escape the boredom of listening to details in your life, or comments from your perspective, or topics in general that don’t interest me. I am quick to speak when I want to simply eject from a conversation so I can get on to other tasks, other comforts, other conversations.

In fact, James’s words convict us even of the times we remain silent externally while someone speaks, but give free rein to our distracted thoughts, escaping internally by listening to our own voice and shutting our ears to the person in front of us. None of these wants leads us to take interest in others or what they have to say.

Quick to Anger. The second temptation James warns against is being quick to anger: “Be . . . slow to anger.” While being quick to speak flows from selfish lack of interest in others, being quick to anger flows from proud, self-protective self-righteousness. When I am quick to anger, our conversation becomes a struggle to prove my side right rather than to understand your values, concerns, or perspective.

Quick anger generates accusations rather than honest questions. “How could you have done something so stupid?” “Please go ahead and interrupt whenever you like; obviously what you have to say is more important than anything I might want to share.” Anger too is deadly even when it churns away silently on the inside. “Figures — here she goes again,” and “I can’t believe you could say that when you are the one who always . . .” — thoughts like these push you anywhere but toward a posture of listening.

No wonder James summarizes the entire anger dynamic only a page or so later by saying, What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. (James 4:1–2)

Bottom line: when we don't get what we want, in our way, on our timeline, we get angry. And anger is sure it is right, sure it has the moral high ground, sure it needs to quell dissent. Anger, thus, has no use for listening.

Love Listens. Thankfully, our distressingly common tendency to speak and get up in arms quickly hardly catches the Holy Spirit off guard. He knows us. Fellowship with him transforms our hearts day by day to resemble Christ and put the interests of others ahead of our own (Philippians 2:1–11). He teaches us to listen to others that we might know and love them better (Philippians 1:9). Jesus does not cast us out unaided into an arena of dull and threatening interlocutors, coldly commanding us to “talk less, smile more” (per the dubious advice of Aaron Burr in Hamilton).

Indeed, our God, the best listener in the universe, goes to the opposite extreme in giving aid. He promises to be with us every step of the way to the end of our lives, the end of the age (Matthew 28:20). He then invites us, even entreats us, to pour out our hearts to him constantly as we walk (Psalm 62:8). He inclines his ear — or, as the New Living Translation winsomely puts it, “bends down to listen” to us (Psalm 116:2).

Think of it: the only being in the cosmos who has no need to listen to anyone, for he already knows all things, makes it his special delight to hear our confused and emotionally wobbly chatter. To hear it “without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). To redeem it so he can keep hearing it for eternity (Revelation 22:3–5).

If, then, he who knows all things takes an unrelenting interest in us and listens to us, how can we do any less with our fellow human creatures? He who has ears, let him hear. And let the love of Christ, once heard, empower us to listen to our spouses, our fellow church members, our friends, our children, and our acquaintances with the rapt attention of a child hearing a favorite story, the full concentration of a graduate student studying for an exam.

For with breathless eagerness we will still be listening, in a thousand years, to each other speak of the unique ways God ordered the course of each of our lives for his glory.

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/why-is-listening-so-hard>