



Lesson 3 Listen

What do people want? To be heard. What bothers them even more than being taken advantage of is not getting a hearing to make their case. On the other hand, even the most agitated and stubborn of persons may turn into soft-spoken, reasonable people by a person who listens well.

When I was principal of a high school, I promised my students I would listen to them when they came to my office. I conceded that I likely would side with their teachers most of the time, but not without giving them a hearing. When I did that well, they in turn ended up willing to accept discipline.

I know the affect that a person's hearing or lack of hearing has on me. I remember taking my car to a repair shop and explaining the car's problems to the manager. He nodded his head and smiled, but his manner towards me conveyed that he was not taking me seriously. With as little as I know about auto mechanics, he may not have needed to listen; he most likely had an inspection system that would uncover the car's real problems. But his manner expressed that he was not listening, which made me suspect that the car would not get proper attention and that he really did not care that it did. If he had looked me in the eye attentively and responded to my comments with consideration, I would have walked away impressed with his wisdom and integrity, willing to pay whatever large sums would be placed on my bill. Instead, I determined to find another repair shop.

Do you see my point? That shop manager may have excelled at seeing that his customers' cars are well serviced, but his manner communicated otherwise and dissuaded me from doing further business with him. We all, however, are guilty of the same fault. Someone comes to us with a suggestion about how to do something better. We have a lot to do; we know the idea will not work; and so we brush his words aside and move on. Later we find him moody and uncooperative. Whereas we thought we saved time avoiding "needless" listening, we now must take even more time dealing with an offended brother. Had we initially made the investment to listen (and convey that we were listening), we could have saved ourselves needless trouble. For one thing, it is quite possible that the idea was a good one. We then could have benefited from the idea and



simultaneously motivated the individual to work cooperatively. But even if the proposal was not useful, our listening would have conveyed to the proposer that we cared enough to listen; and so all the more he would have been willing to listen to us and work with a good spirit.

How do you convey that you are listening? Ask pertinent questions that help the speaker explain himself clearly and communicate that you have heard his words. (I'll say more about this in the next message.) Another way is through physical expression – looking the speaker in the eye, nodding your head, smiling or frowning in understanding. Give verbal response – from mere sounds of assent to phrases communicating agreement, curiosity, or even disagreement. The point is that the speaker is trying to read you, and he gets his cue from your expressions as to whether you are hearing and how he should then proceed.

Even when you disagree with what a person is saying, you need to listen well enough to understand why he believes and acts the way he does. You need to demonstrate a measure of empathy. Conveying empathy will earn you the right to be heard. Indeed, you will often find your counsel is not even needed.

Once a woman was expressing to me over the telephone her fears about her cancer. She was afraid! As I listened, I responded with comments such as "sure you do" and "I would too." Finally, she interjected, "You mean it's okay to feel this way? Everyone else tells me I should have more faith." "You should have more faith," I replied. "But if I were going through what you are, I would probably feel the same way." I communicated to her that I was taking the time to listen, really listen to what's going on inside her; that I wasn't formulating answers as she poured out her heart. As a result, without my supplying answers, she began to express her faith in God. Once she knew that I listened, she could do some listening on her own.

One of my "secrets" to pastoral care is not having to have ready-made answers. More often than not Christians know the "answers." What they need is an empathetic ear. I have listened to believers pour out their despair and anger with God, and by the time they were through (maybe an hour later), they have concluded with appreciation for God's grace and blessings. What happened?



One is that they were allowed to "get it all out." Releasing their pent-up emotion helped them think more clearly. The other reason is that because I did not interrupt with "wise" sayings – because I did not defend God – they in turn did not have to defend themselves. Once they no longer had to hold up defenses, they could then listen to what their hearts already knew – that God is always with them, that he is always good, that his grace surrounds them.

Knowing that my first job is to listen rather than have answers readied has been a relief for me. I can relax and be more attentive since I don't have to search for an immediate answer. I am free to empathize – to feel the anger the griever feels, to feel the pain and the confusion. Consequently, when I do have something to say, he will listen; he will listen because he sees in me someone who cares and who understands. He no longer needs a defense system.

A woman whose husband committed suicide came to see me periodically. She found me helpful for a number of reasons. One is that I would listen without judging her feelings. Another is that I would not have a snappy answer. Once, after she poured forth frustration about some matter, and I remained quiet, she smilingly said, "You are suppose to have answers!" She smiled because she knew there were no pat answers, but also because she appreciated that I wasn't trying to manufacture any. Another reason she benefited from our meetings is that I reasoned with her instead of speaking at her. We thought through her issues together, so that most of her answers came from within her and thus took true hold of her.

Again, we were able to reason together because I listened to her. I was able to pick up her thoughts and feelings and help guide her own thinking, rather than impose my thoughts on her. I operate from the belief that most people are reasonable. If they will let their defenses down so that they are able to do their own listening, they more often than not will come to their senses, i.e. to their senses as Spirit-filled Christians.

What keeps their defenses up? Interruption will. I might interrupt to inject my own opinion which opposes theirs and thus keeps their guard up. Or I might pick up on some trivial information and take the conversation on a tangent, which communicates that I am not intent on hearing what is important. Another action that keeps their guard up is forcing their situation into my philosophical box. Perhaps I've learned a school of



counseling by which I then interpret everything I hear and then impart my counsel. People do not want to be packaged, especially pre-packaged. They do not want me to pick up on a few statements, make a quick diagnosis, and then prescribe a bottled remedy.

They want to know that they have been heard. And if they have come to you to judge the matter of a conflict, they want to know that you have heard their side. They even want to know that you have heard the other side. Understand what is going on in their Christian conscience. They defend themselves, justify themselves because they know from their Christian conscience that they must have a good reason to do what they did – get angry, impose their will, whatever it may be. Yet, that same conscience causes them to feel the guilt of their actions and they want a fair judge to render verdict. If I can convey that I am fair, then they will consent to my decision even if it goes against them. Indeed, if I have demonstrated myself to be a good listener, they will often arrive at the verdict before I get there.

It is surprising what people will do once they believe they have been heard and understood. They confess what they have kept secret; they repent; they come up with solutions for their own dilemmas, and they will give the listener the credit for digging it out of them! They will thank the listener for coming up with the answers that he never gave!

Remember, what people want is to be heard. When they believe they have been heard, they themselves become hearers.