

# HOW CAN WE REALLY LISTEN?

## the **big** idea

High-quality listening is comprised of focus and follow-up skills that can be learned.

### **ice breaker**

Who is one of your favorite TV interviewers? What can you learn about listening by watching a skillful interviewer at work?

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### **related Scripture**

*To answer before listening—that is folly and shame.* Proverbs 18:13 (NIV)

*The purposes of a person's heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out.*  
Proverbs 20:5 (NIV)

### **challenging wisdom**

*When you're not listening well, you're not fully present. You miss what's behind the words, the deep truth that's coming from a person. It's not about hearing the words spoken per se; it's about connecting with the heart.*  
– Karen Kimsey-House

*Engaging in a spiritual conversation without listening is like driving a car blindfolded.*  
– Doug Pollock

## MINIMIZE BAD HABITS AND DISTRACTIONS

In the novel *The Art of Racing in the Rain* by Garth Stein, the narrator—a dog named Enzo—wryly observes, “I never deflect the course of the conversation with a comment of my own. People, if you pay attention to them, change the direction of one another’s conversations constantly. . . .” He then gives really wise counsel (especially for a dog!): “Pretend you are a dog like me and listen to other people rather than steal their stories.”<sup>1</sup>

Listening requires putting others first, a mindset of serving that doesn’t come easy for most of us. Philippians 2:3 (NIV) puts it this way: *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves.*

How can we listen in a way that genuinely puts others first? The good news is that high-quality listening emerges through skills that can be learned and practiced. It begins when we cultivate curiosity about other people, their stories, and their spiritual journeys. And it continues to improve

as we train ourselves to minimize distractions, listen to the other person with our whole self, and ask follow-up questions that lead to greater understanding.

But first it means breaking some bad habits we’ve developed over time. In their book *Listen Up*, Larry Barker and Kittie Watson suggest ten irritating conversational habits:

1. Interrupting the speaker
2. Not looking at the speaker
3. Rushing the speaker and making him feel that he's wasting the listener's time
4. Showing interest in something other than the conversation
5. Getting ahead of the speaker and finishing her thoughts
6. Not responding to the speaker's requests
7. Saying, “Yes, but—” as if the listener has made up his mind
8. Topping the speaker's story with “That reminds me . . .” or “That's nothing, let me tell you about . . .”

9. Forgetting what was talked about previously
10. Asking too many questions about details<sup>2</sup>

**1 DISCUSS ::** Identify which habits listed above are common problems you have when engaging in conversations with others.

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Moving into someone’s life as a listener and learner paves the way for a meaningful conversation. But the noise in our lives can also be a barrier both to speaking thoughtfully and listening attentively. We’re inundated by messages, advertising, emails, texts, and so many other demands for our attention that we learn to tune much of it out. Unfortunately, we sometimes muffle people who matter along with the static.

As reported by the International Listening Association, Watson and Smeltzer researched listening in the workplace and identified these top-three barriers:

1. Environmental distractions such as phones ringing and other people talking
2. Personal and internal distractions, such as hunger, headache, or preoccupation with something else
3. Rebuttal tendency—developing a counter argument while the speaker is still speaking<sup>3</sup>

We face these listening barriers not only in the workplace, but in all of life. Sometimes we try to pay attention, but the “noise”—literally and symbolically—distracts us. One way to increase your capacity to listen is to silence your phone, turn off the television and computer, stop multitasking, and focus solely on the person who is talking with you.

**2 DISCUSS ::** If you’re in a conversation with someone and they answer their phone, how do you feel? Conversely, if someone sits down to talk with you and turns off their phone, how does that make you feel? What specific distractions keep you from listening well?

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## LISTEN TO THE WHOLE PERSON WITH YOUR WHOLE SELF

*Hearing* is an auditory process, but *listening* involves the whole person—mind, heart, and spirit. Start with your body: Are you facing the person, or slouched and half-turned away? What about your face: Are you communicating interest through alert eye contact, or are you looking drowsy or glancing about the room? Are you mirroring the emotional state of the person, staying in sync with them, or are you allowing yourself to drift into a different wavelength? What about your words: Are they few, or are you interjecting lots of your own thoughts or self-referential responses? (Comments such as, “I know! That sounds just like what happened to me!”) If you ask questions, are they relevant, focused on the person (not you), and do you help bring to the person’s attention what you are hearing and observing about them?

Sometimes a person’s actual words can be a barrier to listening. For example, they might say, “I’m fine,” when they really are not. Psychologist Theodore Reik said we listen best when we not only use our sense of hearing, but listen with what he called “the third ear”—paying attention to tone, body language, etc.

Even if the words sound calm, a person can display emotion in other ways. Notice the subtle incongruities between spoken words and underlying messages: clenched teeth, tight hands, or furrowed brows. You might say, “It seems like you felt upset [or sad, or nervous] when that happened, even though you’re telling me it’s no big deal,” and then listen again. You may be surprised at what they say, or how much they appreciate that you’re seeing beyond the surface.

**3 DISCUSS ::** Recall a recent conversation that was difficult. What specific things might have been different if you had listened with “the third ear” — with your whole self?

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## ASK FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

We often think the way to introduce people to Christ is by convincing or talking, and so while we are supposedly listening, we are really working to compose a brilliant response. But in fact, your talking may be interrupting what

<sup>2</sup> Larry Barker and Kittie Watson, *Listen Up* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 88.

<sup>3</sup> “Listening Facts,” International Listening Association, accessed March 2, 2017, <http://d1025403.site.myhosting.com/files.listen.org/Facts.htm#Barriers>.

God is trying to say to the person.

If you find yourself interrupting, ask yourself whether you were really listening, or just waiting for your turn to talk—which is not listening at all. When someone pauses in conversation, don't jump in right away. Give them space to think.

**4 DISCUSS ::** When you find yourself tempted to interrupt or you're focused on coming up with the right "answer" to people's questions, what's really going on? What do you think drives us to do that?

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Instead of composing your response while the other person is talking, listen carefully and ask yourself, *What does this person really need?* (Usually, it's not advice.) Consider this: In a series of six studies that followed 100 couples for the first seven years of marriage, researchers at the University of Iowa found that both husbands and wives feel lower marital satisfaction when they are given too much advice from a spouse, as opposed to too little. And—surprise!—unsolicited advice is the most damaging kind.<sup>4</sup> If this is true in marriages, it is probably true in every significant relationship.

As you're listening, notice small but significant comments and then practice the art of the follow-up question. The follow-up question can open the conversation like the door in the wardrobe opens to Narnia. Say, "Tell me more," or "How does that make you feel?" or "What makes you think that?" Then, be willing to wait—even in a few moments of silence—for them to share their thoughts or even to figure out what they think, since many people have never actually worked at articulating their beliefs. Take time to hear their whole story, not just their thoughts on spiritual matters.

**5 DISCUSS ::** For you, what is the hardest part of asking follow-up questions?

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Unfortunately many Christians miss the golden opportunities for follow-up questions because they fail to allow their God-given curiosity to emerge. Christians can often err on either extreme of the conversation continuum—being

conversationally too aggressive or too passive. But when we listen actively enough to stir up new areas of curiosity, the description of Proverbs 20:5 can begin to become the reality for us: *The purposes of a person's heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out* (NIV).

When we verbally express our curiosity about what's important to people (their lives, careers, family, and so on), we create an open, safe, and nonjudgmental forum for authentic dialogue. Our questions invite people to search for answers and naturally stimulate them toward discovering the condition, plans, and purposes of their own hearts.

**6 DISCUSS ::** Describe a conversation you've had in which you had the privilege of exploring a meaningful topic with someone. How did it impact that person? How did it impact you?

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There is a cost to curiosity. Wondering requires us to give up the illusion that we can manipulate or argue people into our point of view. Manipulative approaches communicate disrespect and stifle the supernatural allure of the Kingdom. Curiosity calls us to give up our need to control the conversation. It starts when we unleash our God-given inquisitiveness to ponder what we're noticing and hearing. A good balance of listening and curiosity helps a conversation move along naturally. If we are listening well, our wonder begins to percolate. If we are curious, we'll get plenty of opportunities to listen. As we continue to balance these two, only God knows where the conversation might lead.

**7 PRACTICE ::** Pair up to practice curiosity and listening.

Person 1: Ask the following question and let your curiosity lead to follow-up questions: "Who has been the biggest influence on your life, and what lessons did that person teach you?" Refrain from responding with your own ideas.

Person 2: Respond to the questions.

After a few minutes, switch roles.

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Discuss: When both people have finished, share what it was like to talk about a meaningful person in your life with someone who was curious and helped you to talk freely.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Bernstein, "The Perils of Giving Advice," *The Wall Street Journal* online, June 25, 2013.

## PRACTICE ON YOUR OWN

Ask someone who knows you well, “What can I do to become a *better* listener?” Armed with their feedback, prayerfully look for conversations where you can practice the techniques of good listening they propose. If they give you several suggestions, just work on one at a time—for example, maybe you will spend a whole day just focusing on not interrupting. Notice how it impacts your ability to listen.

## GETTING THE BIG IDEA

Listening requires a serving mindset, which begins with focus. Get away from distractions. Turn your face, body, and full attention to a person when you listen to them. Listen with “the third ear,” paying attention to more than just the words, and stay curious.

## RESOURCES TO CHECK OUT

- *A Listening Ear* by Paul Tournier (Augsburg Fortress)
- *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction* by David Benner (InterVarsity Press)
- <http://www.wikihow.com/Be-a-Good-Listener>

## QPlace STORY

After the funeral service, Karen and her church hosted a meal for the grieving family and friends. As Karen entered the room, she recognized the daughter-in-law of the man who had died. After filling a plate with food, Karen walked over, introduced herself, and asked Connie if she could sit with her. Connie nodded, but her expression seemed closed and unwelcoming. Karen wondered what was going on in her life as every attempt to start a conversation seemed to hit a wall. Noticing Connie’s short responses and averted eye contact, she was tempted to get up and go help in the kitchen. But her heart told her to stay and listen.

As they were eating, Connie’s husband came to the table. He was able to talk more easily, and Karen listened intently for a thread that might lead back to Connie. When he made an offhand reference to her job, Karen turned to Connie and asked where she worked. At first, Connie only shared a little about her work as a convenience store

manager. But Karen was curious and asked follow-up questions to draw her out. And then, little by little, Connie began to open up. Every piece of information that Connie volunteered revealed a way to ask another question. Karen listened and learned as Connie poured out her difficulties at work—feeling betrayed by her company at being moved from a location she loved to one that she hated; having a long commute from home, away from her grandsons who used to visit her each day at work; and working in a horrible environment where she found urine in a bucket on a store shelf, and where an employee found a fetus among the mounds of litter in the parking lot.

Karen had interpreted Connie’s distance as rejection, but discovered that it was really the misery of Connie’s employment situation. Too heavy to approach in light conversation, her story required an ear committed to really listen. Karen was patient enough to offer Connie that gift.



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