

IS ANYBODY LISTENING?

My children think I have the easiest job in the world. They tell me, "Dad, all you have to do is sit and listen to people, nod your head, and say, 'Uh huh' every now and then." Somehow they find it hard to believe me when I tell them it is hard work that takes time and energy. Usually they just smile and say, "Sure, Dad."

Of course, the kind of listening that I am referring to is not what many people think it is. For some, it is a temporary and unpleasant interlude between opportunities to say what they want to say. Instead of giving attention to what others are saying, they are often thinking about what they are going to say next, either to amaze or amuse their friends or to confound and convince their opponents, while it may pass for conversation, it is no where in the ballpark of communication. There is no true fellowship taking place.

If I were to suggest one good reason for developing the art of listening, it would be found in 1 John 4:7: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and every one who loves is born of God and knows God." Listening is an important and necessary expression of love. There is not a person on the planet that doesn't want to be understood, to be assured that someone knows us, is sensitive to what is happening in us, and still accepts and cares for us. It is impossible for anyone to do that except for the one who truly listens. Listening says, "I care about you. You are important enough to invest the time and effort that is necessary for me to understand you." Simply said, love listens.

The apostle James gives us one of the classic biblical statements on listening: "But let every one be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to get angry" (James 1:19). The first thing to notice about listening is that we have to give our undivided attention. Undivided attention requires eye contact. This means that we probably won't do a good job of listening if we are trying to watch a ball game, read the newspaper or run the vacuum cleaner at the same time. We can demonstrate our love and respect for that person by putting whatever it is that is distracting us aside and focusing on what they are saying to us. If it is impossible for us to give our undivided attention at that moment then we should set a time when we can and follow through with it. Undivided attention will also require that we keep our minds from wandering. If our minds are not riveted to what is being said, it will become quite easy to take mental excursions to places more interesting. But we can discipline ourselves to pay attention if we choose to do so.

The second point that James makes is that good listening doesn't interrupt. We are to be "slow to speak". All too often we think we know what the other person is going to say, so we jump in and finish his sentence for him. We may also be quick to express our disagreement, or to offer advice before we have fully understood the problem. We interrupt in more subtle ways as well. Even something as insignificant as a look on our faces can say, "Oh boy, here we go again. How many times do I have to listen to this?" Sometimes we interrupt a conversation in order to do something we think is more important but could wait until later. The telephone has probably cut off more profitable communication in our homes than any other single thing. There may be times that we should let it ring, or answer it and ask if we can call the party back, or just leave it off the hook. If God wants us to listen to one another, then we need to put a high priority on it as well.

Let me encourage you to begin to think of listening as a means of ministering to others. It does not take a great deal of training. It simply takes a willingness to feel what the other person is feeling, see the situation through his eyes, and sympathize with him. It doesn't necessarily mean that we have to be in total agreement with him, but it does mean that we are willing to help him bear his burdens and demonstrate Christlike love (Gal. 6:2). May God give each of us His grace as we attempt to show His love through the art of listening.