



Part 2: Starting a Spiritual Conversation

Becoming a Better Listener

Learning to listen is perhaps one of the greatest ways to build relationships. When we expend the time and mental energy that it takes to really listen, we communicate to people that they are valuable enough to warrant being understood.

Here are some practical tips on becoming a better listener:

1. **Listen**—don't talk. "Be quick to hear, slow to speak" (James 1:19). Keeping one's mouth closed is the first step in effective listening. For a person to feel free to express his thoughts, the listener must give him the time to speak. But we must not equate our silence with listening. Because the average person can listen at least three times faster than he can talk, the "listener" can be daydreaming, or preparing his brilliant response while the other is talking. Proverb 18:13 says, "He who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him."
2. **Understand**—don't counsel. Of course, there is a place for biblical counsel, but wise counsel can only follow careful listening. Too often, we think that the best thing we can do for a friend who is pouring out his heart about a problem is to offer him a list of solutions. He might need solutions—later—but his first need is to feel understood. Here is a familiar scene: A wife sobs out a story of her chaotic day with the kids, while her husband (at a loss on what to do) puts his arm around her and knowingly nods while holding her hand. After several minutes, she wipes her eyes and says, "Honey, thank you, I feel so much better!" The husband scratches his head and thinks to himself, "What did I do?"

We especially need to listen when a person is experiencing grief over losing a loved one. He doesn't need a lecture on the theology of grieving, he needs someone to listen with compassion. The first—and last—helpful thing that Job's friends did for him when he was suffering is found in Job 2:13: "They sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights *with no one speaking a word to him*, for they saw that his pain was very great."

3. **Listen with your whole body.** According to one psychologist, only 7% of a speaker's message comes from his words; 38% comes from his voice, and 55% comes from his facial expressions. What does that have to do with listening? Even when you are listening to someone, your body is communicating to him a series of messages. Here are some suggestions for listening with your whole body:
- ♦ Relax. Arms that are tightly crossed, or held too stiffly communicate, "What you are saying is making me uneasy."
 - ♦ Face the other person. Sitting or standing sideways says, "I'm not ready to give you my full attention."
 - ♦ Lean forward slightly. This says, "I'm concerned that I hear and understand you."
 - ♦ Look at the other person. You can either look at his eyes or his mouth as he speaks, but a good listener should not glance around or have his attention diverted by sights or sounds. When that happens, it communicates to the one speaking, "You are beginning to bore me."
4. **Explore by asking questions.** A good listener knows that he might not be getting the same message that the speaker thinks he is delivering. Here are some examples of questions you might ask to clarify what you are hearing:
- ♦ "Are you saying that you felt this way ...?"
 - ♦ "What do you think would happen if you did this ...?"
 - ♦ "Let me make sure I understand: You are saying that ..."
 - ♦ "What were your reasons for making that choice?"
 - ♦ "How did you feel when that happened?"

Asking stimulating questions is an art. Proverbs 20:5 says, "A plan in the heart of a man is like deep water, but a man of understanding draws it out." When it seems that a person is having difficulty opening, try questions like these: "What does it take to do your job with excellence?" "If I were in your situation, what advice would you give me?" "What is the greatest pressure you are currently facing?"

Learning to listen can be a great deal of fun and can minister in a great way to others. And who knows, you might learn something!