

EVANGELICAL LISTENING:  
LISTENING SKILLS CAN CREATE STRONG OPPORTUNITIES TO SHARE THE GOSPEL

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## ABSTRACT

One-on-one communication has the power to change how people perceive each other and their message. Listening is a vital skill in communication, but people may be more concerned about speaking when they should begin with listening. God commands Christians to share the gospel. Enhancing listening skills is a valuable way to help this mission. In this study, I intend to show the dramatic impact that listening can have on how other people perceive each other and help communication from a Scriptural perspective. This paper will look at listening from both the listener's perspective and the perspective of the person speaking. The overall focus will remain on the benefits of using good listening skills as we seek to evangelize to others.

## INTRODUCTION

Christians may not know what to do when faced with a challenging situation involving their faith. A Christian visits her uncle when his wife has died, and now, he is angry at God for taking away his wife. He asks her how there could be a God when he would allow that devastating thing to happen. It makes no sense to him. A friend argues at his Christian friend over his beliefs and views them as intolerant. He views Christian ideas as hateful against the gay community and that the church teaches despicable things like sexism or is extremely judgmental of others. All of these situations can be difficult to handle and lead to arguments and fights.

How do Christians respond to these situations? How *should* a Christian respond to these situations? An instinct may take over to jump to the defense of Christianity and the Bible. A Christian may make logical arguments and support their beliefs with the Bible. But biblical attacks and defensiveness usually cause things to get worse and not better.

Can listening be a better tool than a Christian taking a defensive stance? Judging from scientific research, the skill of listening is more powerful than people realize. Listening can open doors in many different ways, especially in an evangelism context.

Richard Carlson sums up listening by saying, “Being listened to and heard is one of the greatest desires of the human heart. And those who learn to listen are the most loved and respected.” Carlson acknowledges the deep human desire to be heard and relates it to how other people view the person who can do it. He describes them as being “loved” and “respected.”

The intent of this paper is to show the significant and surprising effects of listening and how Christians can use these skills in difficult situations. This paper will demonstrate the negatives, positives, and limits of different listening methods for Christians. The skills of listening can create a loving and comfortable context for both the evangelizer and their audience to share the gospel.

## BIBLICAL BASIS FOR LISTENING

### **Our Attitude for Listening to Our Neighbor**

In Mark's gospel, Jesus gives the command to "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31 NIV). Jesus' command comes right after he said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30). By making these two statements back-to-back, Jesus was showing that it is impossible to love God without loving neighbors. No one placed more of an emphasis on that teaching than Christ.<sup>1</sup> His teaching expresses a love for God by loving others. In a radical way, Jesus demonstrated that he included everyone as a neighbor, not merely friends and fellow Jews, but also Gentiles and Samaritans.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of his ministry, Jesus commanded Christians to go out to all the world and make disciples from all nations. In order to do this, we must deal with people who hate us and

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1. James A. Brooks, *Mark Vol 23* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991), 198.

2. James A. Brooks, *Mark Vol 23*, 198.

our beliefs. It is important to remember Christ's command to love others. Our neighbor includes the people who may be hostile and who do not understand our views. Even when it is easy to not listen to them and to fire back, Christians should still have a loving attitude as God has for us.

Jesus' role demonstrates this loving attitude to serve not himself but others. Jesus said, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Jesus wanted his disciples to have the same love for each other as he had for them with his instruction to them before his death: "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you" (John 15:12).

Love follows the example that Christ had set for his disciples. He showed them love and service in many ways as their rabbi and friend. The ultimate love that he had for them was serving them as their Savior and sacrificing himself. He wanted his disciples to love in the same way: to love others more than oneself, i.e., a sacrificial love.<sup>3</sup>

This sacrificial love is challenging to carry out as Christ commanded. When Christians struggle with unloving people and those apathetic to their beliefs, Christ gives a clear example of *how* we are to love them. Christians are to love and listen to Christ and see his life as the pattern to follow. A self-sacrificing attitude means bearing what people say against them and still listening to them even when their words may be harsh and unforgiving. Christ always listened and loved, and we are commanded to do the same. Christians are to look at their neighbor with compassion and love.

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3. James W. Voelz and Christopher W. Michell, *Mark 8:27-16:20* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2019), 918.

### **Listening Related to the Action of Loving**

Paul explains in his first letter to the Corinthians what love is. Chapter thirteen is typically read and cherished at weddings by Christians. It also gives an insight into how a Christian can act lovingly towards others, including listening. Paul uses the Greek word, μακροθυμεῖ, to describe how love works. It has been translated as "being patient" or longsuffering. It is one of the qualities of God's love shown to us (Rom 2:4 and 9:22). When Christians are longsuffering and not quick-tempered, they reflect and imitate God's love.<sup>4</sup>

Listening takes patience. Especially when dealing with people who speak against beliefs that are held dear, patience is crucial. When people attack a Christian for their views, it is easy to fire back and become angry. God reminds his people that patience is a part of love for their neighbor in Paul's letter to the Corinthian congregation. One can reasonably infer that patience is closely related to the act of listening. This patience means that a person must set aside their feelings and purposes of the conversation. It is also essential to be calm and focus on what the speaker said.

Listening also involves a focus on what the other person wants. Paul also describes love in this way, "it is not self-seeking" (1 Cor 13:5), and this quality applies well to the skill of listening. The essence of love is not to focus on oneself but to focus on someone or something else. God displays this love throughout the Bible with his love for his people. Ultimately, He shows his love through the promise of a Savior. God listens to the cries of his people and their

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4. Gregory J. Lockwood, *1 Corinthians* (Saint: Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 462.



prayers. When we practice listening, we reflect on the same kind of love that rescued us from sin.

## DIFFERENT STUDIES ON THE ART OF LISTENING

What Scripture reveals is corroborated by what many social scientists have studied and found to be true. For example, psychology and counseling are significant areas of research for the field of listening. Probably the greatest energy has been devoted to examining how listening works within various human relationships. Listening advice is scattered through books about improving family, marriages, workplaces, friendships, and more. These resources are helpful for specific situations. A disadvantage is that listening is usually not discussed as a skill. It is a skill. As a skill it can be improved and enhanced for evangelism efforts.

### **Different Theories of Listening**

There are also differences in opinion about how to listen. These differences include how much a listener should say, whether or not he should interrupt, ask questions, tell stories, as well as other aspects involved with listening. One listening style cannot be prescribed to everyone. There can be multiple approaches for different people that will be effective.

Some teach that a passive approach is best when listening with minimal interference of the speaker. This listening allows the other person not to be interrupted but to follow their train of thought. Others prefer listening with more questions and interaction from the listener. The rationale behind this approach is for the listener to understand the things that they themselves are curious about the speaker.

Others approach listening are interactive. Statements, labeling, paraphrasing, and many other methods are used to understand the speaker. Each of these methods is used for different purposes and to different degrees.

The paper will demonstrate different approaches to listening with advantages and disadvantages for multiple methods. These are various tools that a Christian can use to interact with someone to share their faith. A Christian should use discretion for each of these methods depending on their unique situation.

### **Professions Where Listening Is Used**

Some professions and careers specifically focus on listening and are instrumental in understanding how others can improve their listening. Negotiators by the FBI are skilled listeners. Their example is especially useful since they operate in conflict settings. They are trained not to do hard bargaining and lay down demands but to listen and empathize with hostage-takers in stressful, life-and-death situations. One former FBI negotiator, Chriss Voss, has advanced training in listening and experience in applying these skills. His listening techniques are well-tested and have produced powerful outcomes that have saved many lives and avoided crises. He continues to teach his listening skills to help businesses better understand their clients and customers.

Ministry is full of opportunities for listening as well. Ministry of all kinds is about listening to people to share God's Word with them. Multiple evangelism books and guides help Christians understand other people and the best way to see the gospel. The research and sources from ministry listening have focused more on cultural contexts than one-on-one communication

but are still beneficial to understanding others. Ministry books have also used listening to care for members and to do outreach with the gospel.

Counseling is another profession where listening is critical. Therapists and psychologists need to understand their patients to give them the best treatment and change their specific situation. Mental health professionals face the challenging task of trying to distinguish what exactly is affecting their patients. Determining mental illnesses is challenging because these illnesses lie on a continuum.<sup>5</sup> Listening is critical to help determine what the mental illness is to help their patient to heal. The sources from these fields of study are valuable in helping others to listen.

Michael P. Nichols is one of the foremost authorities on listening. He is a professor of psychology at the College of William and Mary. Nichols has a doctorate and many other degrees specializing in clinical psychology, family therapy, and couples' dynamics. He is only one of the psychologists whose work is used in this paper. Other psychologists referred to in this paper are Paul Hokemeyer, Sherod Miller, Phyllis Miller, Mark Goulston, Stephen M. Saunders, Nixaly Leonardo, and others. They are accomplished psychologists in their own right and contribute to the study of listening with their research and experience.

### **Why Listening is so Overlooked**

The topic of listening is ignored by many. People do not think how critical it is to listen to others and to understand others properly. Few realize the importance and the influence that can occur when they take the time to focus on the other person.

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5. Stephen M. Saunders, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness Vol. I Recognizing Mental Illness in the Church and School* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2016) 8.

One reason why the skill of listening is so overlooked is that people consider it basic. Many assume they have a good knowledge of listening and how to apply it to their relationships. This skill is so fundamental that it is taken for granted. The majority of people consider themselves much better at listening than they really are.<sup>6</sup>

When people encourage others to grow in their listening skills, those so encouraged may become defensive, harden their stance, and say that they are good at listening. Their self-assessment, however, is usually not accurate. Mark Goulston M.D. explains,

The problem is that while we think our first impressions of people are grounded solely in logic, they're not. In reality, they're a jumbled mix of conscious and unconscious truth, fiction, and prejudice. Thus, from the very start, we're dealing with a fictitious creation—not a real person. Yet that first impression will color our feelings about another person for months or years to come. It'll also affect how we listen to that person because we'll distort everything the person says to fit our preconceived notions.<sup>7</sup>

His view sheds light that people form an incorrect impression of others because of their own biases and preconceived notions. Thus, the picture that we have of others is more fiction than reality. We think we are doing better than we are in the art of listening. All of this points to the need to become better at it.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING

God specially created mankind. Humans are social creatures. All crave similar things in life, including acceptance, appreciation, and a sense of belonging. Whether in good or bad times, we

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6. Michael P. Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2009) 11.

7. Mark Goulston, *Just Listen: Discover the secret to getting through to absolutely anyone* (New York: American Management Association, 2010) 39.

want to share those experiences with others.<sup>8</sup> God gave us mouths to talk and ears to listen that we would communicate with each other and share. Communication is essential for a Christian's life on earth. The most important communication is sharing the gospel. In communication, most people think in terms of talking and sharing their thoughts. However, listening is just as vital.

Everyone craves to be listened to. The yearning to be understood and heard by others is powerful. To truly be listened to means to be taken seriously and that a person recognizes that both your ideas and feelings matter.<sup>9</sup> This listening often does not happen. Every person has this craving inside them to reach out and connect deeply on an emotional level with others. The intense desire for connection grows so much that people are starved for it today; so, when that connection happens, it melts away anger and frustration.<sup>10</sup>

People look back on their lives, and it is easy for them to think of friends or family who have made a monumental impact on their lives. They might not have performed grand acts of love or given insightful advice but have simply listened. In good times or bad, those who listen and fill that need in the heart are admired and cherished.

When this need for listening is not met, it hurts. An insignificant thing like an unanswered phone call or text message can leave someone feeling unresponded to—and troubled.<sup>11</sup> Small troubles like these plague relationships of all kinds and leave feelings of sadness or anxiety because no one seems to be listening. Whether it is in a work environment,

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8. Michael S. Sorensen, *I Hear You: The Surprisingly Simple Skill Behind Extraordinary Relationships* (Lehi, Utah: Autumn Creek Press, 2017) 25.

9. Michael P. Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships*, 9.

10. Michael S. Sorensen, *I Hear You: The Surprisingly Simple Skill Behind Extraordinary Relationships*, 9.

11. Michael P. Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships*, 11.

family gathering, a date, meeting a stranger, it is a disturbing sensation when we feel like no one is listening or cares. This unmet need creates a feeling of emptiness within people.

This emptiness can be challenging and even lead to depression if not met. Paul Hokemeyer says, “At the core of human pain is isolation from others and ourselves. We find relief from this pain in reparative human connections where we are seen and heard as vulnerable human beings.”<sup>12</sup> Relief comes from listening and human connection.

Robin Daniel also demonstrates the importance of listening by saying, “Being listened to with deep attention is a life-changing and life-enhancing adventure, an inner journey of joy and self-discovery, a finding of one’s authentic, original self, freed at last of conditioning—by family, schooling, workplace, society’s trends, fashions and shallow values. This is the route to true liberation.”<sup>13</sup> Daniel makes the point that being heard is a valuable inner journey of self-discovery and finding one’s self. Besides being a need, it is also a discovery process for all people to come to a deeper understanding of who they are.

### **Validation through Listening**

The primary need that listening addresses is validation. When this need is met, it permits another person to feel what they feel. When a listener allows them to do this, it relieves their stress and

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12. Paul Hokemeyer, *Fragile Power* (Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden Publishing, 2019) 4.

13 Robin Daniels, “Obstacles To Good Listening.” *Way* (2016): 13.

helps them feel safer emotionally.<sup>14</sup> Validation has an extraordinary effect on people by disarming them and putting them more at ease.

Validation can be confusing and misunderstood. Even if there is something that the listener disagrees with, there can still be validation. The listener does not have to agree with the other person to validate them.<sup>15</sup>

This lesson is essential for a Christian. As she reaches out with the gospel, she will encounter many opposing world views and different motivations for what they believe. For proper listening to happen, validation is necessary.

For example, she may meet a person who does not see God as a loving God, but a violent God who kills many people and causes terrible things to happen. The response of a Christian does not need to be disagreement. In that instance, a validating response is helpful. A Christian may say she understands where the person is coming from. Her reply does not mean that she agrees with the speaker. This reaction allows the speaker to feel more comfortable and to engage in further discussion.

A critical issue to address in that situation would be *why* the person thinks that. Have they been told that by others? Have they read those things about Christians? Do they have a specific account in the Bible that they think of? Have they had bad experiences in their life? Have they at one time had faith?

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14. Nixaly Leonardo, *Active Listening Techniques: 30 Practical Tools to Hone Your Communication Skills* (Emeryville, California: Rockridge Press, 2020) 131.

15. Michael S. Sorensen, *I Hear You: The Surprisingly Simple Skill Behind Extraordinary Relationships*, 78.

If that person responds and is allowed to defend and explain their beliefs, it offers a special time to connect and build a relationship. During that interaction, the Christian need not focus on ‘right or wrong’ or make a logical argument to combat the speaker. Instead, the Christian’s focus can be on the person’s emotions rather than logic when it comes to validation.<sup>16</sup> Again, it is essential to realize that just because there is acceptance and focus on the person's feelings does not mean there is full agreement on views.

A Christian might be confused by the other person’s beliefs, experiences, and emotions. That is okay. It is beneficial for that Christian to express an openness to hear and listen to the person without judgment. Telling someone that we don’t know exactly how another person feels makes them feel safe in confiding with us. They can realize that they can be vulnerable to us without facing judgment or pressure.<sup>17</sup>

### **Listening to Emotions**

Respecting emotions play an enormous role in listening. Before a Christian can evangelize to others and respect others’ emotions, it is beneficial for them to respect their feelings first and listen to themselves. Looking inside ourselves, understanding and respecting our own emotions is vital in listening. The therapist Nixaly Leonardo explains,

It might seem obvious that to be a good listener; we must have respect for the person who is speaking. However, it may be less obvious that to have respect for the speaker, we have to respect ourselves first! If we don’t respect ourselves, then we risk subjecting ourselves to the possibility of being taken advantage of by a speaker. If we are taken

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16. Nixaly Leonardo, *Active Listening Techniques: 30 Practical Tools to Hone Your Communication Skills*, 131.

17. Michael S. Sorensen, *I Hear You: The Surprisingly Simple Skill Behind Extraordinary Relationships*, 78.



advantage of, then we may foster resentment toward the speaker, which can get in the way of being emotionally and mentally present for them.<sup>18</sup>

She mentions that if people do not have this respect for themselves first, there is a danger of being taken advantage of by someone. Others may disrespect a Christian who doesn't respect themselves for what they want to share. Listening and respecting our emotions helps us treat ourselves with respect.

Another factor to consider is looking at the speaker and how comfortable they are with connecting. Certain people may be harder to listen to and develop a connection with. One reason for this is that people can only enter an emotional depth or pain they have come to terms with within themselves. Many are uncomfortable with being in touch with strong feelings. This inability to connect with deep feelings not only impacts themselves but also communication. Those who do not know themselves and their feelings on a deep level cannot connect in that way with another person.<sup>19</sup>

The inability to connect with feelings may be an obstacle for those who share their faith. If an unbelieving person wants to communicate on a deep level with someone who has faith, this can be difficult for the Christian who is not in touch with his feelings. A person outside the church might try to make sense of pain in their life from loss and hardship. When they communicate that with a Christian who doesn't listen to their feelings and who only know themselves on a superficial level, then a connection will be harder to establish.

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18. Nixaly Leonardo, *Active Listening Techniques: 30 Practical Tools to Hone Your Communication Skills*, 22.

19. John Savage, *Listening and Caring Skills in Ministry: A Guide for Pastors, Counselors, and Small Groups* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) 96.

The advantage is that when a Christian does know their feelings and listens to their emotion, this can enhance their own ability to communicate the truth of the gospel. Besides the level of self-awareness that a Christian has, they will also determine and control how they will act and behave.<sup>20</sup> To listen to yourself is to know yourself and the realm of emotions. This transparency with yourself makes people better communicators, and thus better to share their faith.

### **Conveying Emotions**

Conveying emotions is fundamental in listening. As children grow up, it is easy to spot the emotional development that comes with years of social experience. Early on, children do not know their emotions well and have difficulty understanding what they are feeling. For example, children and adolescents will substitute anger, a feeling they are more familiar with, for sadness.<sup>21</sup> As they grow and mature, they will understand themselves, and thus others, in a more profound way and convey those emotions more clearly with others because they will be able to listen to themselves and identify what they are feeling.

As people share their views with others, emotions play a big part, much more when topics include such deeply personal matters as religious beliefs and one's world view. How does a Christian handle that? Conversations that have personal values and emotions can be difficult to navigate.

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20. John Savage, *Listening and Caring Skills in Ministry: A Guide for Pastors, Counselors, and Small Groups*, 51.

21. Stephen M. Saunders, *A Christian Guide to Mental Illness Vol. I Recognizing Mental Illness in the Church and School*, 75.

The solution is to listen. When we are locked into a conversation and listening well, we must—at least momentarily—suspend our own needs. It is better to think of putting emotional needs on a shelf when listening to someone else.<sup>22</sup> “Shelving” emotions is a way that Christians can show love when they listen to others. Instead of being passionate and potentially upset about how the other person feels about Christianity, God, or the Bible, it is better to hear them out and fully understand why they think the way they do. After that has been done, then it is good to communicate emotions.

Emotions are challenging for most people to communicate. Some might take an approach of being soft and not wanting to give offense, while others will be straightforward and not care how they come off to the other person. Psychologists study to see what are healthy ways of communicating and listening. Sherod Miller, Ph D. and many other researchers and psychologists have studied how emotions work and say this about them,

Many of your emotions operate below the conscious level. They impact your chemistry, blood pressure, heart rate, and muscle tension and are observable externally as non-verbal behaviors—facial expressions, bodily movements, or voice tone and intensity... Each of these six basic emotions is recognized non-verbally across cultures: happiness, sadness, anger fear, disgust, surprise.<sup>23</sup>

Realizing each of these emotions in ourselves and others is crucial for spreading the gospel to others. Directly identifying and giving words to feelings help communication.<sup>24</sup> If someone insults beliefs that we have, that can feel like a personal attack against us and stir up anger and

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22. Nixaly Leonardo, *Active Listening Techniques: 30 Practical Tools to Hone Your Communication Skills*, 23.

23. Sherod Miller and Phyllis A. Miller, *Collaborative Marriage Skills: Couple Communication I* (Evergreen, Colorado: Interpersonal Communication Programs, Inc. 2007) 53.

24. Sherod Miller and Phyllis A. Miller, *Collaborative Marriage Skills: Couple Communication I*, 68.

resentment. In that situation, listening and communicating that frustration is wiser than ignoring and covering it up.

For example, if someone says that the resurrection of Christ is illogical, not able to be proved, and foolish to believe in, such statements may cause feelings of anger for a Christian. In that situation, a Christian should speak up and say that they felt hurt by that comment because that is what they believe. A temptation may be to ignore saying anything, but it is dangerous not to address issues like that when they do come up. It is wise for the person to listen to what you have to say and how your emotions are affected.

Situations like that may escalate if the speaker makes offensive comments about Christianity and faith. It is best to specifically recall what was said that was upsetting and seek clarification and listen even more. Asking for clarification can confirm what was said and give more time to reflect on emotions and identify them. Especially in stressful situations, it is always better to listen more than to jump to accusations or lash out angrily, which is a temptation for many.

If a Christian has contributed to the escalating tensions, he should admit it. If the other person offended him, he should listen for hints about what was said that might have offended them first—and own up to it.<sup>25</sup> This transparency will show the speaker humility and that they are being listened to, and that there is a genuine yearning by the listener to form a connection without any escalation.

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25. Nixaly Leonardo, *Active Listening Techniques: 30 Practical Tools to Hone Your Communication Skills*, 139.

## POOR LISTENING

### Filling in the Gaps of Communication

All people struggle with listening in their own way. Even when we try to do our best, listening carefully involves taking in a lot of information, information that can be frequently distorted in our minds as we absorb it. John Savage says,

The major interpersonal gap occurs when the listener infers something different from what the speaker intends. It is quite possible to decode different messages from the same encoded message. For example: You get a call from a friend at your church, saying that two persons want to come and visit some evening during the next week. They want to spend an hour with you. Your friends do not tell you why they want to come, and you are left to infer their intention. You can decode their purpose in a variety of ways.<sup>26</sup>

With any communication, whether in-person, over the phone, video chat, or via text, there are always multiple ways to interpret the listener's gaps. Everything said is not always clear. This communication hardship is made even more challenging through the topic of implicit messages as Nichols explains:

Implicit messages tell us more than what's being said; they tell us how we're meant to receive what's being said. Depending on the situation, "Let's have lunch" could mean "I'm hungry," "I'd like to see you again," "No, I don't want to go to dinner with you," or "Please leave now; I'm busy." The statements "I love you" and "I'm sorry" are notorious for having multiple meanings. Knowing the other person can make it easier to decode implicit messages; speculating about his or her motives can make it harder.<sup>27</sup>

This challenge of communication and the potential for poor listening is the same for Christians.

They may be forced to fill in gaps and try to figure out implicit messages when they are listening. Even without intending it, they may 'decode' incorrect statements from the speaker.

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26. John Savage, *Listening and Caring Skills in Ministry: A Guide for Pastors, Counselors, and Small Groups*, 17.

27. Michael P. Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships*, 55.

Much of poor listening happens without people knowing they are making incorrect inferences. A Christian's focus should be recognizing gaps and realizing there is a high need for clarification from the speaker.

### **Preaching**

A Christian should also be aware of a common conversational roadblock that kills a conversation and weakens the opportunity for listening. The style of communication called "preaching" is dangerous for everyone. A Christian may have a lot of zeal to preach the gospel, share Bible verses, and tell others about their church. Everyone loves to talk about their passions and things they know well. This zealotry may cause uneasy feelings on the part of the person we are trying to reach.

When people are preached to, they may feel belittled and regard the person speaking as pompous or self-righteous.<sup>28</sup> There are exceptions to this where the speaker asks the Christian to explain their faith, and they want to know more. In these instances, it is vital to share the gospel and their faith in an evangelical way with an awareness not to spend too much time talking. Those instances are appropriate times to talk more.

### **Debates and Arguments**

When people talk about what they are passionate about, fervent debates take place. In many debates and arguments, there is little listening that takes place for true understanding. Often there are challenges and questions asked by each party. In this context, it can be extremely frustrating

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28. Nixaly Leonardo, *Active Listening Techniques: 30 Practical Tools to Hone Your Communication Skills*, 139.

to feel as if one doesn't have "the answer." Emotions build. The truth is, drawn-out arguments can be dangerous. Interpersonal gaps can form in disputes when respectful listening is absent.

John Savage comments:

‘Distorted Full Information’ is a gap in which represents information and emotions sent to another person in which communication is complete but filled with distortions and misperceptions. These distortions come from incorrectly decoding the message of another but believing that what has been received is correct. The listener may misinterpret, misquote, misread, and misconstrue what the speaker is sending.<sup>29</sup>

In times of heated arguments and when emotions are high, people should realize what is happening and take a step back to calm the situation.

Talking to someone who is quick to misquote or misconstrue what you have to say is not a pleasant experience. If done often enough or if deep wounds and insults are inflicted, people will feel so hurt and angry that it can cause a complete retreat from any relationship, potentially for years.<sup>30</sup> When there is eternal salvation on the line, Christians better beware of this potential consequence and listen gently, patiently, and with understanding.

Part of the problem of misquoting and misconstruing is the listener’s mind. Michael Nichols says, “Listeners often don't hear because they have a preconceived notion of what we're going to say. Or they can't hear us because they can't suspend their own needs or because what we say makes them anxious.”<sup>31</sup> A Christian who interacts with someone must not categorize that person on the beliefs that he thinks that they have. His mind might jump to them believing in their church’s stated doctrine when, in reality, it may be much different.

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29. John Savage, *Listening and Caring Skills in Ministry: A Guide for Pastors, Counselors, and Small Groups*, 12.

30. Michael P. Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships*, 13.

31. Michael P. Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships*, 45.

Some Christians may be tempted to turn to apologetics and lean on logic to defend their faith in arguments. However, Eggert and Kieta make a valid point saying, “Apologetics is not about winning arguments. It is not about convincing people that the Bible is true. It is about getting a hearing for the gospel.” “Getting a hearing for the gospel” is what careful listening is all about.<sup>32</sup>

### **Bad Questions**

When people express their beliefs, it is helpful for a Christian *not* to ask any “why” questions. For many, this advice may be strange. I am sure that many ask “why” questions out of positive motivations without intending any harm.

The challenge with “why” questions (in many cases) is that it can be seen as judging.<sup>33</sup> “Why” usually tends to do that and make people feel defensive.<sup>34</sup> Imagine if someone were to ask you, “Why did you *that*?” or “Why do you believe *that*?” It can be intimidating to answer those questions, and a person may assign negative motivations for why they are being asked that question.

Questions that start with “you” can also appear to be challenges that put the other person on the defensive. Especially with questions that start with “you,” there is a danger of putting that

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<sup>32</sup> Arthur A. Eggert and Geoffrey A. Kieta, *Clearing a Path for the Gospel: A Lutheran Approach to Apologetics* (Sun Prairie, Wisconsin: Terra Pax Lutheran Publishing, 2017) 4.

<sup>33</sup> Nixaly Leonardo, *Active Listening Techniques: 30 Practical Tools to Hone Your Communication Skills*, 62.

Note that some of these numbers are superscript and some are not. Check your footnotes for consistent SBL numbering

<sup>34</sup> Chris Voss, *Never Split the Difference: Negotiating as if Your Life Depended on it* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2016), 203.



person on the spot. They may feel like they are being examined.<sup>35</sup> There is a risk of coming off as either accusatory or judgmental when using “why.” Even if a person can back up their belief or give a straight answer, it is best to take a gentler approach.

### **Assumptions and Expectations**

Bad listening can begin before someone opens their mouth. A dangerous part of communication is coming in with assumptions or expectations of the other person. Many judgments are made within the first few seconds of meeting someone. As Christians, it is crucial to understand the assumptions that we make about people and how that can affect communication.

Some groups of people have assumptions made about them more than others. One of these groups involves the rich and famous. Looking at how people have assumptions about them and how they live can help us realize how we may do that to other people.

Paul Hokemeyer is a well-known psychologist who treats society’s elite, including the ultra-rich, celebrities, athletes, actors, politicians, and many other high-status people. He states, “Although our world creates a privileging of celebrity, wealth, and power, we don’t appreciate the degree to which those features isolate the human beings who live within that identity.”<sup>36</sup> Through his therapy, his mission is to create an understanding that people are all people no matter what their status or economic level in society.

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62. 35. Nixaly Leonardo, *Active Listening Techniques: 30 Practical Tools to Hone Your Communication Skills*,

36. Paul Hokemeyer, *Fragile Power*, 3.

Hokemeyer admits that he can fall into this trap of having assumptions and expectations of others. He recalls a time when he saw a famous person on the street and saw them get into a taxi. His reaction was astonishment and anger at this unique sight. He could not understand why a celebrity would stoop to using an ordinary taxi instead of something better like a private car. Dr. Hokemeyer said, “I was full of judgments, demands, and expectations by making that celebrity a ‘highly charged object’ rather than a human being.”<sup>37</sup>

He had expectations and assumptions about that celebrity, even as a therapist who treats that kind of clientele. All of us are similar to that. Even if it might not be a social or economic divide, we tend to make assumptions and isolate people in our own ways. These unhealthy views come when people look at clothes, hear accents, see where someone lives, make assumptions based upon of gossip, and judge many other aspects about a person before speaking.

Christians should be aware of how this affects our views and how we might approach someone or listen to them. This can be handled in unhealthy ways by not even wanting to approach or listen to someone in the first place because of preconceived notions.

A powerful example of how not to make bad assumptions of others is found in Jesus’ ministry. In John chapter four, the account shows Jesus having a conversation and listening to a Samaritan woman. He did not judge her unfairly or avoid the Samaritan. Christ loved her. To avoid assumptions, Christians should have the same love and compassion as Jesus had for that woman and not make any judgments.

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37. Paul Hokemeyer, *Fragile Power*, 216.

## Giving Advice

One of the temptations that people have when listening is to give advice. The speaker may have good intentions, but giving advice is not good listening. Especially when people give unasked-for advice, it is bothersome. It can feel like a person is being told what to do, that the person's feelings may not be valid because they would not have those problems if they followed the unasked-for advice.<sup>38</sup>

Advice can also be dangerous because it can cause people to get defensive.<sup>39</sup> They may feel anxious or uneasy and try to avoid any direction that feels like criticism. Instead of feeling validated and heard, giving advice can push someone further away.

Robin Daniels warns against giving advice when he says, "A core danger of advice is that it may be based on what has worked for the listener or someone known to the listener. These solutions and ways forward may not be appropriate for the speaker."<sup>40</sup>

This approach may also foster dependence. Those who readily receive advice and want more may always look to that person to help them with their problems. A better strategy than giving advice would be to review options with the speaker to determine their path. Even if it is not the quickest solution, the speaker will become more able and better advice-givers to themselves.<sup>41</sup> For those who seek to give advice, especially Christians who have positive

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38. Michael P. Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships*, 84.

39. Michael S. Sorensen, *I Hear You: The Surprisingly Simple Skill Behind Extraordinary Relationships*, 34.

40. Robin Daniels, "Obstacles To Good Listening." *Way* (2016): 14.

41. Robin Daniels, "Obstacles To Good Listening." *Way* (2016): 14.

motives, it is best to refrain. The only time where it may be appropriate to give advice is if someone asks directly. Even then, it would be better to introduce an answer by saying you want to share your perspective.

## GOOD LISTENING

Michael Nichols has a great definition of listening when he says, “The essence of good listening is empathy, which can be achieved only by suspending our preoccupation with ourselves and entering into the experience of the other person.”<sup>42</sup> Good listening is the goal of the Christian when they evangelize with others. Good listening and the skills that accompany this are ways to show love to a neighbor on a deep level.

Included in Nichols’ definition is the word empathy. This concept is an important idea that could use further clarification. Leonardo describes this term as the ability to sense another person’s feelings and imagine what it’s like to be in their position.<sup>43</sup> To put yourself in another person’s mind is difficult. It means coming out of your mind and trying to imagine what it is like from a completely different perspective.

Empathy is a powerful and complex brain function. Chris Voss shares research investigating what happens to the brain when good listening takes place:

In an MRI brain-scan experiment, researchers at Princeton University found that neural resonance disappears when people communicate poorly. The researchers could predict how well people were communicating by observing how much their brains were aligned.

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42. Michael P. Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships*, 10.

43. Nixaly Leonardo, *Active Listening Techniques: 30 Practical Tools to Hone Your Communication Skills*, 6.

And they discovered that people who paid the most attention—good listeners—could actually anticipate what the speaker was about to say before he said it.<sup>44</sup>

Good listening is tuning into the speaker. The listener gets on the same level as the speaker so that their thoughts are similar. As Christians interact with people from different cultures, religions, and world views, they can enhance communication by tuning towards the other person to understand them better.

Many studies have looked at the brain and found other remarkable discoveries. The brain uses mirror neurons to allow someone to feel someone else's emotional state. These neurons have also been called 'empathy neurons' or 'Dalai Lama neurons.'<sup>45</sup> These neurons play a central role when mirroring another person. Mirroring is when a listener physically and behaviorally copies a speaker. Examples include matching eye contact, body posture, tone, and more. According to a 2005 study, speakers who used mirroring had more likability and persuasiveness.<sup>46</sup>

Christians can use these lessons to connect with more people. Listening and observing someone's body language and tone can be a way to show the person that is speaking you are interested in what they have to say and are listening closely.

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44. Chris Voss, *Never Split the Difference: Negotiating as if Your Life Depended on it*, 53.

45. Mark Goulston, *Just Listen: Discover the secret to getting through to absolutely anyone*, 19.

46. Nixaly Leonardo, *Active Listening Techniques: 30 Practical Tools to Hone Your Communication Skills*, 12.

## Listening to Label

Labeling is when a listener names the emotions of a speaker. The listener gives a name to the speaker's feelings and identifies how they feel.<sup>47</sup> It gets the listener close to the speaker without knowing about all the details. Labeling may not seem like a powerful tool because it is only using a few words. However, merely noticing, acknowledging, and naming an emotion gives the speaker confidence that they understand their message's emotional content.<sup>48</sup>

Just like listening and observing another person's emotions, labeling our own emotions is beneficial. When the listener can list their feelings to the speaker, they can understand each other and form a closer bond.

After labeling an emotion, the next step is to stay quiet. It may be tempting to finish or follow up, but the best plan is to be silent. This silence invites the other person to respond.<sup>49</sup> The hope is that the other person will reveal more about themselves.

Labels can be helpful in stressful or awkward situations. Chris Voss, a former FBI negotiator, would use this in his hostage situations. He says, "What good negotiators do when labeling is address those underlying emotions. Labeling negatives diffuses them; labeling positives reinforces them."<sup>50</sup> If a situation may be uncomfortable or frustrating, it is useful to

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47. Chris Voss, *Never Split the Difference: Negotiating as if Your Life Depended on it*, 54.

48. Nixaly Leonardo, *Active Listening Techniques: 30 Practical Tools to Hone Your Communication Skills*, 10.

49. Chris Voss, *Never Split the Difference: Negotiating as if Your Life Depended on it*, 56.

50. Chris Voss, *Never Split the Difference: Negotiating as if Your Life Depended on it*, 57.

bring that out in the open. It helps to say, “It seems like you are frustrated or angry right now.” Labeling can be a useful tool to defuse and calm challenging conversations.

Christians can use labeling to help them, and others bring feelings out in the open. Labeling helps create vulnerability and also understanding between both parties. To the person being labeled, it sends the message that they are being listened to and heard.

## QUESTIONS

One of the most powerful ways to tune into another person is through using questions. Questions allow the speaker to talk more about themselves or about any subject they want to share. While sharing, the speaker frequently gives the listener information that was not asked about.<sup>51</sup> This freely given information is useful in building connections. John Savage illustrates this point as the speaker “opening a door through which you are invited to come.”<sup>52</sup> The more information a Christian gets to learn about the speaker, the better rapport they can build with them. They can use that information to fully understand the person they are speaking to and feel more comfortable sharing the gospel.

Certain questions can be risky. Some risks include disrupting the spontaneous flow of a talker’s story, leading the conversation away from critical information, shifting the focus from the talker’s experience and interests to the listener’s.<sup>53</sup> They can also cause someone to feel

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51. John Savage, *Listening and Caring Skills in Ministry: A Guide for Pastors, Counselors, and Small Groups* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) 30.

52. John Savage, *Listening and Caring Skills in Ministry: A Guide for Pastors, Counselors, and Small Groups*, 31.

53. Sherod Miller and Phyllis A. Miller, *Collaborative Marriage Skills: Couple Communication I*, 89.

touchy and create an environment where the person answering the questions may feel untrustworthy or misunderstood. As a result, they may shut down or act defensively.<sup>54</sup>

Questions are smart to use, but tact is required. The listener should always put themselves in the speaker's mind and think closely about appropriate questions for the speaker. Unlike starting questions using the words "why" and "you" in questions (covered previously), it is better to use "I" as much as possible, and it also helps to start with the word "might."<sup>55</sup>

Real-world examples of this would be instead of saying, "Why do you believe that?" or "You believe that?" It would be better to ask, "I might not understand. Could you explain that to me more?" Other gentle approaches to asking more about religion or beliefs would be: "I am wondering if you consider yourself..." "May I ask you a question about what you think about..." All these approaches are done with a tone of having a compassionate approach that avoids any manner of judgment. Through this soft tone, the speaker will hopefully understand that the listener intends to understand and connect above all else.

Questions do not need to be about discovering beliefs when first meeting someone. When establishing a connection for the first time, a good approach is to connect on an individual level to understand someone as a person. If the situation allows a spiritual conversation, it is an excellent opportunity for a Christian to share God's Word.

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54. Nixaly Leonardo, *Active Listening Techniques: 30 Practical Tools to Hone Your Communication Skills*, 63.

55. Nixaly Leonardo, *Active Listening Techniques: 30 Practical Tools to Hone Your Communication Skills*, 9.



## PARAPHRASING – Checking for Listening

Paraphrasing is a powerful tool to help listen and understand the speaker's message. Like questions, the speaker checks for understanding. This tool is not merely saying back precisely what the speaker said verbatim. Paraphrasing is the act of saying something back to the speaker in the words of the listener.<sup>56</sup>

When a person uses this tool, they seek to clarify that they understood the speaker correctly. If the paraphrase was inaccurate, then the speaker has the opportunity to correct the situation. If the paraphrase was correct, the speaker would feel that the listener understood and heard their message.<sup>57</sup> It is a compliment to the speaker when the listener can convey her message back accurately.

Just like validation, this skill does not demand that the listener agrees with the speaker's view. It only ensures that the speaker's message has been received, whether or not the listener agrees with what was said.<sup>58</sup> For example, a speaker might be discussing how they cannot understand a seven-day creation and list several reasons why they believe in evolution. It would be helpful and kind for a Christian to check for understanding in this situation by paraphrasing the speaker's arguments and points. The more detail a Christian can give in this scenario, the more the speaker will feel complimented by being represented and heard. This response will

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56. John Savage, *Listening and Caring Skills in Ministry: A Guide for Pastors, Counselors, and Small Groups*, 23.

57. Nixaly Leonardo, *Active Listening Techniques: 30 Practical Tools to Hone Your Communication Skills*, 9.

58. Sherod Miller and Phyllis A. Miller, *Collaborative Marriage Skills: Couple Communication I*, 100.

have a reciprocal effect of the speaker wanting to know more about the Christian and to listen to them accurately to return the favor.

People like to be understood accurately. This exercise in listening builds confidence, trust, and the relationship itself.<sup>59</sup> Christians can use this tool to check for understanding the other person's view correctly. The better a Christian can understand and summarize others' perspectives, the better he can cater the message of the gospel to that person, and the more willing a person will be open to hearing what they have to say.

### **Story Listening**

Everyone loves a story, and each person has an astonishing story to tell. Most of the time, only a surface level story is told. People will be extremely grateful when someone is genuinely interested in someone listening to them with their heart.<sup>60</sup> It is a big compliment to listen attentively to someone else's story.

Telling a story is a form of self-disclosure and gives a beautiful opportunity for someone to listen. However, this disclosure happens at different levels. The more abstract a story, the more the speaker is trying to protect herself.<sup>61</sup> Abstract stories do not include many names of people, places, or specific feelings. The context of this story is kept distant.

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59. Sherod Miller and Phyllis A. Miller, *Collaborative Marriage Skills: Couple Communication I*, 101.

60. John Savage, *Listening and Caring Skills in Ministry: A Guide for Pastors, Counselors, and Small Groups*, 7.

61. John Savage, *Listening and Caring Skills in Ministry: A Guide for Pastors, Counselors, and Small Groups*, 78.

Stories can go much deeper than a short abstract tale. How ‘deep’ or ‘shallow’ a story is has to do with the speaker’s vulnerability. By telling a deep story, many things could happen. The listener might become aware of more meaning behind it than they initially thought.<sup>62</sup> Listeners and speakers learn more through deep storytelling.

Another factor to consider for the listener is what kind of story did the speaker share with them? Is it a happy or sad story? John Savage argues that people are much more likely to share painful stories than happy ones because there is a risk with happy stories. Stories of joy by some may be perceived as if the storyteller were either crazy or a sinner.<sup>63</sup> Sadness and sorrow are usually things that people can mutually agree on. Therefore, these stories are safer to share. According to Savage, sad stories may be used as a form of protection or to keep the ‘level’ of the story shallower and safer for the speaker.

As Christians evangelize and talk to people, they can recognize what is being shared with them when a story is being told. It is helpful to know that this is not merely a story but a form of self-disclosure. The listener can gauge (to an extent) the level of how comfortable the speaker is with them by what level and kind of story is shared with them. It is an opportunity to respect the speaker’s boundaries if the story is relatively superficial. On the occasion that the speaker’s story is deep, the listener can move forward more easily and share more of themselves.

Telling stories to each other is a way of exercising empathy. Neuroscience and neuropsychology study storytelling. Mary Hess documents the benefits of storytelling and how it creates connection empathy. Through storytelling, she witnesses how people are able to

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62. John Savage, *Listening and Caring Skills in Ministry: A Guide for Pastors, Counselors, and Small Groups*, 81.

63. John Savage, *Listening and Caring Skills in Ministry: A Guide for Pastors, Counselors, and Small Groups*, 81.

understand themselves and their stories in a complex and deep way that builds empathy through the mirror neurons in the brain.<sup>64</sup> Stories are a potent tool and a great chance to make a connection.

One way of sharing a story is to tell a personal story. If the Christian feels comfortable doing so, they may want to try to go to a deeper level of the story to be vulnerable and share more of themselves. It may not have to be an in-depth story about something traumatic or a loss that happened, but the more in-depth a Christian can go with their neighbor, the more a connection may grow.

A second opportunity for a Christian to share a story is relating it to God's love or the Bible. This story might not even have to be about themselves. It can be about how the person's story reminded them of a Bible account. Depending on what level of story is shared, the person may know it. Even if they do not know the story shared, it is good to point someone to God's Word and point them more towards the gospel.

### **ACCUSATION AUDIT**

Listening involves understanding why the other party might be upset with you or your beliefs. This technique can help with those situations. The term 'accusation audit' comes from Chris Voss's book, *Never Split the Difference*. He compares this to what defense lawyers do with their clients. Some lawyers will tell the court in the opening statement the weaknesses of their case and everything their client is accused of. This strategy may seem counterintuitive, but it is

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64. Mary E. Hess, "Finding a Way into Empathy through Story Exercises in a Religious Studies Classroom" (Essay from Religious Studies News, January 2020)

purposeful. The technique has also been called “taking the sting out.”<sup>65</sup> The ‘audit’ will disarm the other party so that there will be no surprises, accusations, or dirt that they cannot bring up unexpectedly.

This strategy can be useful in evangelical settings. Christians evangelizing to others may be upset and angry with the church, the pastor, or anything else related to religion. Most people would try to defend themselves and argue it is not always the case. There is a better option. It is best to agree with them to a certain degree. It is even better to listen to their concerns and add more to *their* argument. This stance is not sacrificing beliefs but fully understanding where some people are coming from and placing yourself in their shoes. Usually, most points of view have some common ground that both can agree on.

For example, a woman argues that she will not join a church because churches ask for too much money and greedy people in the church take it for themselves. A Christian could argue against this and not get anywhere, they could agree completely with her point, or the Christian could agree with her in some respects to make the woman feel validated and heard.

Some churches strongly insist on giving and go too far with asking members for money. Greedy and corrupt people within some churches do steal offerings. Even more than that, some churches may use money irresponsibly and waste it. When that is said to her, that will disarm her. She will not need to argue because the arguing was done for her. The lady has been listened to and validated. That does not mean that she will agree and join the church, but she may have more appreciation for Christianity.

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65. Chris Voss, *Never Split the Difference: Negotiating as if Your Life Depended on it*, 65.

This ‘audit’ also may include an apology of the listener. The listener should do this if they misinterpreted, misunderstood, or misrepresented the speaker. It is a hard thing for a person to do. Most people will accept an apology because they will respect the humility and the effort to prove yourself worthy of their trust.<sup>66</sup>

The listener’s relationship with the speaker should grow in trust even if it may only be on the basis of one conversation. Christians have a great opportunity to display humility and compassion in many ways as they communicate. When they take the chance to admit faults and miscommunication, that will help the listener to trust them more and to be more eager to what they have to say.

### **Conclusion**

Listening happens every day. Frustration and anger boil up if someone refuses to listen. Healing and joy come when there is an open ear. Listening connects to the deeply-rooted need to attach with others and to share love with them. This skill can grow and be developed to deepen every kind of relationship and not just in a setting where one wishes to share the gospel.

The motivation behind using these skills is not to manipulate any person or their emotions. The heart of a listener, especially a Christian, should be focused on pure motives and not for any gain for themselves. Some may think of skills such as listening and other proven ways of influencing a person’s psychology as underhanded or dishonest. Some may use these tools in harmful ways for themselves.

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66. Mark Goulston, *Just Listen: Discover the secret to getting through to absolutely anyone*, 185.

God has blessed mankind with the gift of communication. It is good stewardship to use these many tools of listening. A godly person will acknowledge them and use them to love their neighbor. God loves his people every day and listens to them. He shows what a Christian's life should be like and tells us exactly how we should treat each other, with an attitude of love. That attitude includes listening and taking a sincere interest in others.

Having a sincere interest in others can be hard for people. All of us have trouble listening to ourselves and our neighbors. Poor listening can be harmful because of the lack of understanding, lack of care, and focus on oneself. Good listening allows us to truly understand each other and step in each other's shoes.

Listening skills can be developed and sharpened if there is a will. I hope that Christians will realize the tremendous impact that a seemingly simple skill can have. When Christians share the gospel with others, I hope that the listener's focus is not on what will be said in the future, selfish desires, or random thoughts, but attentively on the other person. Talking with someone else will make the Christian realize that they are a sinner the same as them. They need a savior just as bad.

When a genuine and empathetic connection is made through this skill, a message can become more comfortable for the Christian to share and the hearer to receive. The message that God wants all to know is the salvation that comes by His Son, Jesus. Christians are entrusted to deliver that message to all nations. God equips us with many different talents, abilities, and skills for this mission. I pray Christians will use their skills of listening for His purpose.

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