



In Search of a Lost Art

Listen with curiosity...the greatest problem with communication is that we don't listen to understand. We listen to reply.—Roy T. Bennett

For those of us living in the United States, we find ourselves in the midst of one of the most contentious pre-election seasons in our national history. Whether the divide expands over taking a stand on hot button issues such as the economy, inflation, social programs and justice, foreign policy, or our national defense, or perhaps it's growing over the candidates themselves, and their political base and platforms, we seem to have lost **the art of listening**. It's nearly impossible to hear any sort of competing narrative. This challenge in communication is not limited to the world of political drama. Differences among church congregations, social media groups, communities of friends and once-close family units all can struggle to listen in times like these. And, the print, television and social media worlds love all the talking. But, **has listening become a lost art?**

Have you ever had the experience of sitting across from someone, sharing your deepest thoughts and feelings on a topic, only to wonder whether or not the other person is really listening to you? Perhaps the other person is nodding and gesturing in agreement, and offering plenty of minimal encouragers such as *yes* and *uh-huh*, yet you don't truly feel heard. The other person continues to interrupt your train of thought with what they want to say. To be sure, this pattern of communication is both maddening and unfortunately, all too common.

Roy T. Bennett's point as quoted above is a good one: **we don't listen to understand; we listen to reply**. We don't listen with a curiosity; we listen with an anxious desire to be heard. Watch any of the early Sunday morning political television shows, where Congressional leaders and think-tank consultants are interviewed as expert special guests. Rarely do these expert special guests listen carefully to the questions the network moderator is posing. Rather, the Congressional leaders and think-tank consultants wait to hear the sound-bite they are specifically looking for, and then proceed aggressively to answer the question, or speak to the topic they want to address. This technique in communication is one of the hallmarks of modern-day media training. It's called *talking points in politics*—rarely if ever do we hear of listening points. **The art of listening is missing altogether.**

Can we listen to someone else who holds a view we disagree with, and perhaps disagree with strongly? Can we hear the other through the emotional points of counter-argument built up in our minds? To take this one step further: can we repeat back the point the other person is making so we know, and they know, we understand what they are saying? This can be some of the most difficult work we do in communication, especially when emotions are running high.

It's interesting that James concludes his thought in his letter by addressing the emotion of **anger** as it pertains to communication (James 1:19). **We do get angry, don't we?** Communication can be an emotional business. Hearing a position we disagree with strongly

can have us speaking not only quickly, but forcefully. **Listening can lead to us leaving the room.**

The image of Jesus standing quietly in front of an angry crowd, in the face of unjust and hateful charges against him, is a powerful reminder for us. Falsely accused by those with aggressive political agendas, **Jesus remained silent**. *He listened closely and completely* to the words being spoken at him, yet, he did not react in anger (Matthew 26:59-63, NIV). Although the severity of the moment for Jesus was far greater than anything we may ever face, he chose to listen and not respond. His indwelling and transforming life in us can give us the strength to do the same, especially when emotions run high.

The art of listening is both a practice and a gift. When we listen to another person, truly listen, we do so with a heart that is centered in Christ Jesus. We remain open, humble, trying to understand with an honest sense of curiosity. That doesn't mean we must agree with what the other person is saying. It doesn't mean we won't feel emotion. It just means we extend respect and brotherly or sisterly kindness in making sure the other feels heard. **In listening this way, we extend the strength and the grace of Jesus**. This type of communication is a gift of God's grace. As we allow that gift of grace, through Christ Jesus, to work within us, we learn, we grow and we relate more closely to those we listen to. His grace helps us to cultivate **the art of listening**, even in the most contentious of times. When we do keep up with what is happening around us, we can do so from our rest in him. □

—Ed Dunn