

P.S.

LISTENING ISN'T EASY. It sounds as though it *ought* to be easy; we have all the apparatus for it, after all. But evidently it isn't. Consider this. How many good listeners do you know, and how do you yourself measure up according to this particular yardstick?

Apparently the average person listens for only seventeen seconds before interrupting. That doesn't sound very long, does it? Could you tell someone how you really felt in only seventeen seconds? Could you tell them what was going on in your life in any way that transcended the superficial? Could you talk about anything within such a short time frame that was at all deep or non-trivial?

So what is going on here? What makes 'good listening' such a difficult skill?

I suppose a lot of it revolves around selfishness. It is easy (particularly in this age, perhaps) to be so consumed by oneself and one's own interests and affairs that one has little time for anyone else. 'Don't you think I've got enough problems of my own?', we might be tempted to think; 'Why should I listen to yours?' On other occasions we might just be so fascinated by ourselves—our own perspectives, experiences or interests—that we ride roughshod over what someone else is trying to say, especially if they are less able communicators than we.

This then becomes a problem of the ego. In the Scriptures, Haman and Lamech are great examples of egotistical men. Can you imagine either of them stopping to listen to what someone else had to say? Of course not. Instead, they assembled their own family members around them to listen to them trumpet their own greatness. Their wives and families (and anyone else they could muster) were only sounding boards for their own egos. It would be a pity if we were to become miniature versions of them.

Jimi Hendrix is alleged to have once said, "Knowledge speaks, but wisdom listens". Whether or not he ever did I have no idea, but it is worth staying with the thought nevertheless. If it is true that knowledge speaks, it is often even more true that ignorance speaks. How many of us have had to endure the tedious ramblings of people who pretend to knowledge they don't have? But even if we *do* know, as in Hendrix's maxim, there is often a better and wiser course than telling everyone else about it, unless, of course, they do want to know, or it is genuinely

Seventeen seconds

better for them in a real practical or spiritual sense if they do.

Wisdom, then, is less full of itself. It listens because it is concerned about others, not only itself. It listens because it recognises that what is already known is not the last word, and that by listening it is always possible that one might learn more.

As Christians, it is worth paying attention to both of these points. We have ears to hear, so let us hear what God has to say, and let us concentrate upon it. Let us be more interested in what He has to say rather than giving our own opinion. We have ears to listen to one another as we share our experiences of life in Christ and our interpretations of the Scriptures.

We have ears to hear, so let us listen, too, to one another's trials and needs. Let us be concerned for them, attentive to what they are trying to say (whether consciously or not) and what their needs might be. Listening is not the same as hearing. It involves greater effort, greater concentration on the one speaking, and less of self; it requires great perception and discernment.

It is in this aspect of listening to one another's needs that we shall be imitating our Father in heaven. God has ears, the Scriptures tell us, and He uses them to hear the cry of His people and to respond to them. He listens to what they have to say, even when they cannot find the words, for He knows them infinitely. He knows what they ask, even before they voice the words. This is a highly developed listening skill indeed!

So many times in the Bible God acts and delivers His people when they cry unto Him: "The eyes of the LORD are upon the righteous, and His ears are open unto their cry" (Ps. 34:15); "The LORD is nigh unto all them that call upon Him . . . He also will hear their cry, and will save them" (145:18,19).

On a number of occasions He waits until He hears their cry before He acts. Unlike Him, we are not 'automatically' in tune with the needs of others. We need to listen so that we too can act to show mercy, sympathy or kindness. We must not be so busy talking that we fail to spot another's need or have no concern for their point of view.

In short, it would be a pity to be like the dumb idols, of whom it is written, "they have ears, but they hear not" (135:17).

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