

Listening Evangelism—Everybody Has a Story to Tell!

Introduction

A great way to begin an evangelism encounter is by taking the time to listen to others to learn of them. Everybody has a story and they are eager to share it. Ultimately, there will be three stories involved in this process: their story, your story, and the central story—the story of Jesus. In the next section we will learn how to tell your story, make it fit into God's greater story—the greatest story ever told.

Listening is sometime difficult for us because when we take the time to listen to others we move away from being the center of attention and invite someone else into that space. When a believer genuinely listens to a non-Christian with real concentration and expresses sincere care for their struggles and their pains, something very powerful happens: tensions dissolve, anxieties lessen and fears diminish. Listening is so simple to do and it's a gift with tremendous healing power that we can offer to others. Learn to hear people out. Let them talk about their past, share their experiences and express their views. People like to feel that someone is interested in what they have to say and appreciates what they have to contribute. Regrettably, taking time to really listen to what others are saying is very scarce in the Christian community.

How to be a good listener

First of all, recognize that listening has to be learned. We teach children to speak and adults to speak in public, but we don't teach listening - so it's hardly surprising that most of us are not very good at it. Next, appreciate that listening takes time - but, as the Greek philosopher Epictetus put it: *"God gave man two ears but only one mouth that he might hear twice as much as he speaks."* Normally, listen while seated. This will show commitment and aid concentration.

Compose yourself physically. So don't twist your legs around each other or cross your arms, but instead be loose and open. Compose the space physically - if it is your space as opposed to someone else's office or a café. So try to have a quiet, welcoming space. Now listen with an open mind and an open heart - free of preconceptions and prejudices. To listen effectively, concentrate totally on the speaker and what is being said. Avoid the temptation to be preparing mentally an immediate reply.

Give visual encouragement to the speaker - such as facing the speaker, offering eye contact, and indulging in mild head nodding. Give oral encouragement to the speaker - such as, in conversation, periodically using words like "yes", "I see", "I understand" or even just sounds like "mmm" or "ah". Don't interrupt. Let the speaker tell the story in his/her own words and at his/her own pace. Don't rush to fill a silence. Often a speaker will be more forthcoming or revealing if he/she is given a chance to compose his/her thoughts. God will provide the right time for you to tell your story (testimony) and share the Gospel story.

Beware of making judgements and instead ask open questions - so not "You must have hated that", but "How did you feel about that?" If you want to be sure that you've understood a

particular point, reflect it back to the speaker and check that this really is what he/she meant. When you want to remember a detail - such as a name or meeting arrangements - repeat immediately and aloud whatever it is you wish to remember. Then, as soon as it is convenient, write it down.

If you're listening at a meeting or a conference, take notes. This will aid your concentration at the time and assist your recall after the event. When someone says 'Can I talk to you sometime?' try to make the time immediately to have a conversation. If someone has a worry or a suggestion or just a query, the sooner one can address it, the better for them (and, if you have a relationship with that person such as parent, partner or manager, probably for you).

Finally, the last thought on effective listening is knowing when to stop listening. At first, this may sound strange to you because the whole idea is to get people to talk while you listen. But there are occasions when the wise and proper thing to do is to stop listening. There are people who just like to talk and they simply do not know when to stop talking! It is possible that they consistently will not talk about spiritual things and go off on "rabbit trails." In this manner, they abuses your willingness to listen by taking an excessive amount of your time or taking time which is inappropriate. In a polite way you need to end the conversation.

Listening Technique POINTERS

A great way to begin an evangelism encounter is by taking the time to listen to others to learn of them. Everybody has a story, and they are eager to share it. Listening is difficult for us because when we take the time to listen to others, we move away from being the center of attention and invite someone else into that space.

When a believer genuinely listens to a non-Christian with real concentration and expresses sincere care for their struggles and their pains, something very powerful happens as tensions dissolve, anxieties lessen, and fears diminish.

- Listening is so simple to do and it's a gift with tremendous healing power that we can offer to others.
- Learn to hear people out. Let them talk about their past, share their experiences and express their views.
- Sincere listening is scarce.

Quotes on listening:

"No one ever listened himself out of a job." **Calvin Coolidge**
"The first duty of love is to listen." **Paul Tillich** (1886-1965) Theologian
"I've never learned anything while I was talking." **Larry King**, Television talk show host.

Thoughts on listening:

- It is polite and a courtesy to others
- Helps understand where others are coming from in their thinking
- Earns the right to be heard
- In order to understand you must hear

We call this “active listening” because listening is really defined as “wanting to hear.” Someone said, “listening is silent flattery.” As you practice it, you’ll understand more and do better. Listening involves consciously working to understand the person's thoughts and feelings, then verbally reflecting what you understood back to them (almost always in the form of statements) to complete the communication loop.

Helpful scriptures:

- **Proverbs 18:2**

“A fool has no delight in understanding, But in expressing his own heart.”

- **Proverbs 18:13**

“He who answers a matter before he hears it, It is folly and shame to him.”

- **James 1: 19**

“So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.”

Studies have shown that non-Christians feel Christians don’t listen enough to them or care about who they are. In an article by **Outreach Magazine** a non-Christian was quoted as saying, *“I’d say 75% of these people don’t really care who I am. They just want to build up their church or something. They don’t even ask me what my name is”*

Tips on being a better listener:

- Pay attention. Focus on the person sharing the story. We must not only listen but hear what is being said. Listening is always other centered—not self-centered.
- Show genuine interest. Ask short clarifying questions like, “What brought you to this place in your life” or “How did you arrive at this conclusion.”
- Be courteous. Don’t keep interrupting the one talking.
- Be patient. Don’t ever look at your watch when someone is talking. Don’t try to end the conversation. Let them talk as long as needed.
- Don’t be judgmental. Listen to what their heart is saying as well as their lips. Don’t “speak down” to them. Do your best to communicate acceptance.
- Listen for expression of interests in the area of personal background, family, vocation hobbies, recreation or culture.

- Listen for expression of felt needs. Are they lonely, fearful, or emotionally wounded? Have they been hurt or offended?
- Listen for clues of their perception of Christian believers and churches.
- Listen for expression of previous or present religious experience, without pressure or condescension.
- Learn to ask inquiring questions that are “open-ended.” Something like, “So, what brought you to our city?”

Here is a great “listening acrostic” that will help *soften* the witnessing experience:

Smile. If you see someone without a smile, give them one of yours!

Open expression. Keep your hands down and away from your face.

Forward lean. Isn't it great when you are talking and people “lean in?”

Touch. A handshake or a hand on the shoulder can work wonders!

Eye contact. Don't stare at the floor or ceiling and don't “look them down!”

Nod. This is an effective way of saying “I am listening to you!”

So many in our world are troubled and so many have never had anyone to listen to them: Do you remember the Tucson, Arizona murders by Jared Loughner? Listen to just a little bit of this New York Times article:

To Defend the Accused in a Tucson Rampage, First a Battle to Get Inside a Mind

By JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN and MARC LACEY

Published: February 12, 2011 New York Times Newspaper

TUCSON — [Judy Clarke](#), the public defender for the man charged in the [Tucson shooting](#), [Jared L. Loughner](#), has made motions on his behalf and entered a plea for him of not guilty. But one of her most essential acts of lawyering came when she patted Mr. Loughner on the back in court last month, leaned in close and whispered in his ear.

For the small cadre of lawyers specializing in federal death penalty cases, getting the defendant to trust them, or just to grudgingly accept them, can be half the battle. That is especially true when mental illness is a factor, as it may be in the case of Mr. Loughner, a troubled young man accused of opening fire on a crowd on Jan. 8 in an attempt to kill Representative [Gabrielle Giffords](#).

In her unassuming, almost motherly way, Ms. Clarke excels at getting close to people implicated in awful crimes. In jailhouse meetings that can stretch most of the day, she listens intently and grows to know her outcast clients in a way few ever have in their troubled lives, colleagues say.

We can't help but wonder if someone had paid this kind of attention before he committed this horrible crime then the outcome might have been different. ***The difference is in whether or not we will take the time to listen to people.***