



Hearing Your Counselee

Summary Statement: One of the most important first steps in biblical counseling is hearing your counselee. The only way to truly know your counselee, their struggles, and how the Spirit desires to apply the Scriptures to their life is by learning to listen to them well.

Competency: Listening well to truly know your counselee and their struggles.

Listing/Summary of Assignments:

1. Read Scripture and answer/reflect on related questions
2. Review articles and discuss the following questions with Leader
3. Practice the competency privately, with family and co-workers, and in group
4. Set a date for a follow-up evaluation with your Leader

Explore

Scripture: Proverbs 8:13, 15, 17

1. Have you ever spoken before really understanding a person or situation? What was the outcome? What does verse 13 say will be the outcome?
2. What does verse 15 say about the importance of data gathering? Why is this so important in counseling?
3. How would you explain the practical principle in verse 17? How would you apply this principle in counseling?

Listen by "WALKing"

Listening is one of the hardest skills to master in life, but it is absolutely crucial to good, biblical counseling. We need solid and practical steps to acquiring this much needed competency.

Read the following article "Listen by 'WALKing'" by Garrett Higbee (from biblicalcounselingcoalition.org):

I don't know about you, but I sometimes really blow it when it comes to listening well. I am too up in my head about what I want to say in response to really hear the other person's heart. In thirty years of counseling and fifteen years of marriage here is what I've have learned:

I can't listen to respond. I need to listen to understand.

St. Francis of Assisi has a famous quote that helped me greatly years ago when I heard it.

"Seek first to understand before being understood."

You do not have to look hard in the Scriptures to see this is a mandate for believers. I love what I call *the legs of the stool of good listening* which is found in Proverbs 18:13, 15, and 17.

"From God's perspective we see that presumption is no small problem. It brings with it shame and folly. He who answers before listening—that is his folly and his shame" (18:13).

"The heart of the discerning acquires knowledge; the ears of the wise seek it out" (18:15).

"The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him" (18:17).

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Who hasn't jumped to conclusions or given advice too soon? When counseling husbands, myself included, I know we often try to problem solve or respond while our wife sighs in the discouragement of not being heard or understood once again. To be fair, sometimes this happens with a husband who is dreaming out loud and a "let's be practical" wife pops the dream balloon, deflating his hope for sharing his aspirations even if they are a bit outlandish.

We see it in parenting, we see it with roommates, and you can find it in just about every small group. It's everywhere we enter into relationship with others. So what's the problem? Why is it so hard to listen well? I have come to believe there are a few universal obstacles to active listening. While I know skill level, time, and even ignorance can be real issues, I think the main reason we don't listen deeply is because we are way too preoccupied with our own life and perspective.

Three Types of People

Let's talk about three types of people who have trouble listening. Their names are clueless, careless, and compromising. You've met them. Maybe you are one of them...but there is hope coming.

1. *Clueless* often assumes instead of seeing clearly or listening deeply. Clueless hijacks the conversation and says something like "yeah that happened to me once...I know exactly how you feel" – seriously? Clueless says stuff like: "Oh I've got it, enough said...I know just what you need" – but the answer is rarely biblical and usually only makes the problem worse.
2. *Careless* loves to give advice. They speak before understanding. Careless might be well meaning but cuts you off and gives you the 4 steps to parenting or the new book that will help you get romance back in your marriage. Careless can be callous and may start barking Scripture at you before you even know they heard you out or care about you.
3. *Compromising* wants to help but settles for image management. Compromising addresses fruit issues instead of root issues. They are bent on fixing you or practicing biblical behaviorism, which is really just "fruit exchange." Compromising says things like: "You just need to stop looking at that stuff, you know that's sin" or "you need to be at church every Sunday and don't worry, your husband will eventually come around."

Clueless, careless, and compromising go to your church...they are there every week. They read their Bible. They may even really care about people. But because they are so caught up in their own life and perspective they often have not applied the Scriptures in the area of *listening well*.

Picture a deep well. There is water at the bottom, but it is a long way down. You can't see it when you look down into the well, it is dark and deep, but you know there is something to be drawn out if your rope is just long enough. The problem is, often the rope is only about as long as your patience in the moment or limited by the next thing on your agenda. Ask God to extend that rope and you will find a richness and depth to relationships like you have never experienced. Proverbs 20:5 states that the heart of man is deep waters but the man of understanding draws it out. That has impacted my counseling in a significant way. So how long is your rope?

WALK

If we agree that listening can be a problem for most of us, then how about some solutions? You have probably heard the saying, "You need to walk in their shoes for a while." There is truth to that but it is more intentional than just empathy. Counseling is

more than giving answers, and listening is not just about information. God has created a place of deep fellowship and community. The local church is God's chosen place for care. So, if the community of believers is the best place to get help, how we care really matters. When it comes to listening remember this:

W A L K: – Watch, Ask, Listen, and Know.

Walk with the counselees...here's what that can look like:

Watch for sign posts that point to the heart like nonverbal communication and tone. What do you see when they come into the room? Where do they sit? What is their posture like? Are they sighing or fuming? Loud or quiet? What is their facial expression? Do they look you in the eye? Do they use humor appropriately? All these are signs that give you some ways to show concern or make observations by way of questions.

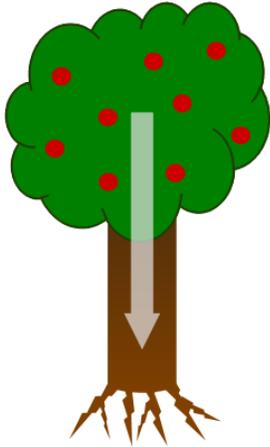
Ask questions that reveal the heart. Don't assume you know them. Be sure to check out what you think you see or have heard. A great caveat is this: "A question pricks the conscience but an accusation hardens the heart." Ask questions that get to motives and desires like, "What do you really want? What do you value most? Do you think what you want most is in line with what God wants most for you (James 4:1-6)?" Jesus asked great questions. Do a study on some of His questions as he encountered souls along His path.

Listen to understand first, not just to respond. For me that now looks like a minimum of two hours the first time I counsel someone. I do what I call a life story. Starting with family history from ages 0-12, adolescence 13-18, emerging adulthood 19-22, and on to chapters that are five to ten year increments of their life until the present day. I want to know as much as possible. I ask a ton of questions about relationships, particular times of pain or trauma, their testimony, lies they may have bought into along the way, and where God is in each chapter of their story. Imagine if someone knew your whole life story before they spoke a word into your present situation or heart issue. It not only helps us to ask better questions and give better advice, it shows them that we have time for them and that we care. Which leads us to this...

Know if they are open and teachable. Do they want to get well? When we do an assessment we listen for how severe the issue is for sure, but we don't make their crisis the focus of our urgency. Our urgency is to get where God is in the moment. What does He have for them in this? Are they willing to look in Scripture for that with us? Can they own their part in getting right or getting well? Finally, are they accountable and connected to a healthy community? If we listen well we see what is going on in their heart and life, **not** by assuming but by drawing out the heart.

The diagram below is a great illustration of the process of listening and drawing out the heart.

Tracing the Fruit to the Root



Symptoms / Behavior

What we overtly observe/hear

Patterns

What we hear and see over time

Desires / Motives

What is known by God

The fruit or symptoms are sometimes obvious. There are other times when you have to be quite observant to see or discern the heart issues. The trunk of the tree is patterns or themes you hear in their story or if you are part of their life, you see it over time. The roots of the tree represent the heart which is where all things originate (Proverbs 4:23, Luke 6:45). Don't settle for picking or rearranging fruit. Don't judge them for being stuck in a pattern of behavior that is sin (Galatians 6:1-2; & 1 Corinthians 6:11). Draw them out and help them see the heart issues driving their behavior.

I commend to you the art of good listening. More importantly, God commands it in His Word. He gives us His Spirit to discern and be sensitive to spiritual things. He gives us the fruit of patience to wait and pause...even during awkward silence. He gives us compassion as he has comforted us in very dark times. He warns us to be clued in, careful, and uncompromising in our care before we counsel.

So, who do you need to listen to? Maybe there is someone you need to ask forgiveness from. Whatever the case, I know I have learned a tremendous amount from seeking to understand before being understood. Practice W-A-L-K and watch your relationships go deeper and your counsel be more effective. May God get the glory as you listen with listen with care and in His Spirit.

Questions based upon article:

- Have you ever had someone be a Clueless, Careless, or Compromising person in your life when you were struggling? What did that feel like? Have you ever been one of these people to someone struggling? What was their reaction?
- Which one of the W.A.L.K. steps to good listening do you think are the hardest for people to do? Why? Which step do you need to work on the most?

- Explain the Fruit to Root diagram and principles in your own words. What is the reason for seeing life struggles and sins in these 3 different categories?

Experience

- In your quiet times this week, spend more time patiently waiting on the Lord to reveal Himself in His Word to you. Resist the urge to quickly read to get what you want so you can move on with your day.
- Make a concerted effort to really listen to your spouse, child, co-worker or friend. Ask them afterward, how they would rate you as a listener. Ask them what was encouraging to them and what you could work on.
- When you observe counseling with your mentor, note how they listen to their counselees well and where they could do better. Feel free to ask them about your observations and get their feedback.

Evaluate

- What was it like to wait on the Lord to listen to Him? What was encouraging? What was hard?
- What did your spouse, child, co-worker or friend say about your efforts to listen to them better? What do you need to work on?
- What did you see in your mentor when they counseled in regards to their listening skills? What was helpful? What did they share with you about their development in this area?

Additional Resources

- Deepak Reju - <https://biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/2015/05/12/are-you-a-bad-listener-or-a-good-listener/>
- Paul Tripp – *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands*