

3.19 Listening, the Biblical perspective

POST NOVITIATE

Aim

- ☉ To understand the meaning of Listening according to the Bible
- ☉ To learn from the Gospels how Jesus listened
- ☉ To get to know ways we can apply listening in ministry

Materials Required

- ☉ Pen and Paper
- ☉ A Bible

Procedure

Let the participants read Psalm 81 and analyze the various exhortations to listen.

Input

- *Menuha* in Hebrew means rested.
- According to Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Menuha* means purposeful contemplation. A process where one becomes quiet enough inside to see more deeply into life.
- In biblical times, *menuha* was equated with good life, absence of strife, the presence of inner tranquility, and opportunity for reflection (Ps 32: 2)
- God invites people to move beyond passivity to contemplation. Involvement with God implies involvement with God's creation.
- God is attentive – God's own response to creation. On the first day God's spirit hovered, on the seventh day God listened.

1. Listening as a Way to Relate with Nature

- Ancient people were keenly attuned to nature, seasons and events, so were the Israelites who believed that Yahweh brought all these changes.
- Something deep within the heart of these people exhorted them to hear beneath the surface of their lives. Something of the listening God in whose image they were made called them to attention
- The earth taught Israelites to listen. The prophets told them how to listen as they themselves were good listeners. Many of them introduced themselves as being 'called' by Yahweh. The prophets knew that listening was demanding that it would not come without cost.

2. Listening, a Tough Task

- In the wilderness the chosen people listened to their discouragement, to manna and to pillars of fire, with their hopes with renewed excitement, to conquests and harvests. They also listened to the bitter taste of exile in a foreign land. They often grew tired of listening.
- They had leaders to remind them and taught them prayers to encourage them (Ps 81:7-8) "Listen, listen to me..." (Is. 55:2-3).
- The response was profoundly intertwined with the call to serve. (Is. 50:4-5).
- For Isaiah, responding flows from listening. Even the purpose of waking up each day was just to listen to Yahweh.

3. Jesus the Listener

- His life gives evidence that he saw the work of Abba and heard the voice of God in the earth, in the people, in the history of his world.
- He is attentive to nature and it is revealed by his frequent reference to the earth's symbols. He talked of lilies of the fields and birds of the air, the smallness of the mustard seed and the types of soil.
- The scriptures present Jesus as a listener from the earliest days of his youth. "Three days later, they found him in the temple sitting among the doctors, listening to them and asking them questions" (Lk.2:46)
- The synoptic gospels spell out the quality of listening in Jesus' ordeal in the desert.
- It is in the wilderness, in the empty lonely unsure places of life, that Jesus hears God's voice (Mt 4:4)
- Jesus learnt something essential about human communication and its closeness to prayer in the wilderness, that both start with listening.
- Jesus listened to the experience of the 72 disciples on their first missionary journey (Lk 10:17).



- He as well listened to the question of the two disciples of John “where do you live?” and invited them to “come and see” (Jn. 1:39)
- He spent time with the frightened Nicodemus and heard his concern (Jn. 3:4-5)
- Jesus did not sense what was in peoples’ hearts by pressing the “infused knowledge” key on his divine computer. He did not automatically know what people were thinking and feeling because he was the son of God. He had learnt to listen.

4. In-depth listening

- Jesus stressed the relationship between listening and understanding and he spoke of his own sadness when he noticed an absence of listening in those around him. (Mt.13:15)
- Listening requires taking in the message and allowing it to influence our life. This in-depth listening prevents the kind of hardness of heart or human coldness that was so loathed by Jesus.
- Listening demands a conscious choice to expend awareness. According to Robert Bolton “People skills”, as much as 75 percent of oral communication is ignored, forgotten or misunderstood.

5. Pseudo Listening and Passivity

- Two styles of behavior are often confused with listening: pseudo listening and passivity.
- In pseudo listening the person attempts to look as though he/she is listening, but in reality there is little perception of the feelings and reactions of others. The listener does a lot of talking. This listener becomes bored when others are talking.
- Sometimes passivity is confused with shyness. The person is uninvolved and disinterested, rarely talks, never takes the responsibility for keeping a conversation going and maintains a poster of distance.
- We live in a world where there is more talking than listening. We get caught up in our own thoughts to notice other’s needs. Sometimes there is so much noise around us, in us. We cannot pay attention to what our own lives are saying.

6. True Listening

- Reflection describes the process by which we leave the obvious and search for significance. It means putting out into the deep, risking finding something that we didn’t know was there.
- To someone who is guarded, fearful and over controlled, reflection can be a threatening process.
- It requires letting go of rigidity and defensiveness. With regard to interpersonal communication, it means taking an honest look at the style of my interactions with people.
- Rumination can confuse reflection; it is dwelling on something –mentally going over and over the concrete details. It is like being stuck in the mud.
- Reflection means examining something, looking past the details to their meanings. It leads to a clarification of an event or situation.
- Rumination focuses on what happened while reflection focuses on why it happened or how and on what role we played in enabling it to happen.
- Rumination goes in circles, fueling anxiety and depression while reflection goes forward and fuels self-awareness. Reflection listens while rumination worries.

7. Becoming Reflective

Build sometime each day or each week to be alone in a quiet place.
Become quiet inside, to turn away from the noises of life and wait.

Quieting down

- Consciously stopping all thoughts.
- Slowing down the breathing more deeply.
- Tensing and then releasing the muscles to relax the body.
- Becoming aware of any part of the body that seems tight and then slowly loosing it.

We can now focus our awareness on something. We can either choose something to focus on or we can focus on what spontaneously comes into our mind.

Focusing

- Focusing is the looking at all sides of something or someone.
- Fixing our gaze and trying to see more deeply into some dimensions of life than we have seen before.
- On a word, a sound, a memory
- On our own feeling or needs
- On the way we have been acting.
- On the feelings or needs of someone close to us
- On world events
- On the plight of the oppressed

- On scripture
- On the weather patterns
- On the first bud of spring

Self reflection

Self reflection is central to total listening and reflective process. In order to ensure that our interpersonal style of is helping rather than hindering our relationship we need to reflect regularly on our behavior:

- How much do I talk? Too much? Too little?
- How frequently do I interrupt when others are talking?
- What does my body posture say to people?
- What do my facial expressions say? Am I conscious of what my face is saying when I am with others?
- Do I welcome feedback? How do I react when I get it?
- How do I let others know what my needs are? Am I dependent? Manipulative? Possessive? Controlling? Warm? Caring? Available?
- How do I act when I am angry? Jealous? Lonely? Insecure? Threatened? Happy? Excited? Obstinate?
- Do I always have to be right? Have the last word?
- How do I express my sexuality? Is it in tune with my religious living?
- Are my feelings and my behavior congruent? Does what I feel on the inside match or fit with what I say on the out?
- Do I experience a real relationship between my Christian values and my treatment of peoples?

It is impossible to be a good listener for other people if we do not listen to what our own behavior is saying. Reflection enables us to listen with our eyes and ears, with our nose...it sharpens our sense of perception.

Stages of listening

1. Attending:

- Attending is paying close attention- noticing and being sensitive to signs in self, others, and the environment that say something about what is going on.
- It is being in touch. In Greek the word ‘attend’ is translated as *diakonos*, the technical term for ministry.
- To be attentive is to minister. In the New Testament times, ministry described:
 - * Christians attending to one another
 - * noticing the needs of the widow
 - * seeing the plight of the poor and the needy
 - * Recognizing the sick in their midst.
- In interpersonal situations attending always starts with me. Knowing what is going inside of us as we interact.
- Attending also involves being aware of what is going on in others. This can help us know something of another person’s world.
- Having this information makes our attempts to respond that much more grounded in reality and maximizes our potential of getting through to another.

2. Following

- In biblical and in a psychological sense, following means staying with another. Jesus wanted his disciples to walk alongside him and learn from him (companionship and learning).
- Interrupting, diverting another with questions, and giving advice, all interfere with the act of following.
- An effective listener helps the speaker to speak. This enables the listener to “come and see” where that person lives on the inside.
- Following involves facilitating “door openers” or non-coercive invitations to talk. We can follow by being genuinely interested; by remaining present and open to the other as they talk and by making brief comments that encourage talking.
- In conversations both among individuals and groups, ‘following’ involves doing anything that makes it easier for a person to talk:- nodding, smiling, matching the facial expressions of the other, maintaining the eye contact, single words of encouragement are also helpful like “really”, “sure”, “Yea”, “me too”, “wow”, “and?”, “oh!” etc.
- Following leads us to another’s world to get a glimpse of the kingdom from another perspective.

3. Responding:

- Learning to move beyond the obvious, getting beneath the superficial, is the goal of attending.
- When the response to another flow from our own needs, or from poor listening skills, our relationship always suffers.
- Responding with understanding completes the listening process.
- Appropriate and understanding responses solidify trust and promote long lasting interpersonal ties. It gives the people the feeling that, “we are with them.”

Ensuring that our response to others is both understanding and appropriate

- Make sure that the response flows from reflection.
- Avoid quick comebacks and snap comments (the old “count to ten” rule is a good one).
- Avoid judging and categorizing what others say.



- Wait to respond until the other has finished talking.
- Comment on what a speaker has said before introducing a new topic.
- Avoid monopolizing conversations, or engaging in frequent “me” talk.
- Develop the habit of frequently assessing what other people might be feeling as they talk.
- Participate in the conversation (remaining silent elevates the tension level in a group).

There is nothing in interpersonal interaction quite so energizing as the feeling of being heard, the expression of being understood.

Review

1. Ancient people were keenly attuned to nature, seasons and events, so were the Israelites who believed that Yahweh brought all these changes.
2. The earth taught Israelites to listen. The prophets told them how to listen. They knew that listening was demanding that it would not come without cost.
3. For Isaiah, responding flows from listening.
4. The scriptures present Jesus as a listener from the earliest days of his youth. “Three days later, they found him in the temple sitting among the doctors, listening to them and asking them questions” (Lk.2:46)
5. Jesus did not sense what was in peoples’ hearts by pressing the “infused knowledge” key on his divine computer. He did not automatically know what people were thinking and feeling because he was the son of God. He had learnt to listen.
6. According to Robert Bolton “People skills”, as much as 75 percent of oral communication is ignored, forgotten or misunderstood.
7. Listening demands a conscious choice to expend awareness.
8. Listening requires taking in the message and allowing it to influence our life. This in-depth listening prevents the kind of hardness of heart or human coldness that was so loathed by Jesus.
9. Two styles of behavior are often confused with listening: pseudo listening and passivity.
10. Becoming reflective involves quieting down, focusing and self reflection.
11. There are three stages of listening
 - Attending
 - Following
 - Responding

Reflection

There is nothing in interpersonal interaction quite so energizing as the feeling of being heard, the expression of being understood. How often do you give ear to people?

Relevant Skills

Compare the Hebrew understanding of listening with the African understanding.

References

- Robert Bolton. *People Skills*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1979.
- Ferder, Fran. *Word Made Flesh: Scripture, Psychology and Human Communication*. Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1986.
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