



Listening actively in the power of the Holy Spirit

Goal

Grow in our skill to listen our way into spiritual conversations

Introduction

As we think about planting seeds of the gospel, the next skill we need to cultivate is that of listening. Author and speaker Brene Brown says, “Be as passionate about listening as you are about wanting to be heard.” Why is listening so important?

Bible Passages & Questions

Proverbs 18:13 “To answer before listening, that is folly and shame” (NIV). *Can you think of a time where you responded to a situation or comment before you listened well?*

Proverbs 20:5 “The purposes of a person’s heart are deep water, but one who has insight draws them out” (NIV). *Share about a friend who is skilled in drawing people out through good questions.*

James 1:19b “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (NIV). *Why does James need to tell us to be slow to speak and quick to listen?*

Read & Discuss [Adapted from *God Space* by Doug Pollock, pages 54-63]

For the first 15 years of my ministry with Athletes in Action, I [Doug Pollock] routinely approached spiritual conversations with this question in the back of my mind: “What do I need to say to these lost people to help them get on the right track?” I realize now that this attitude set me up to habitually commit several misdemeanors that greatly hindered the possibility of divine dialogues.

- **Hijacking the conversation**, steering it in a direction to achieve my goal.
- **Exceeding the speed limit**, dumping all the information I knew on anyone who showed even a little interest in spiritual things.
- **Failing to observe the signal**, sometimes I proceeded when I should have stopped, stopped when it was time to go, or recklessly moved ahead when I should have exercised caution.

SPIRIT-LED LISTENING Nothing creates God Space faster than Spirit-led listening. When we demonstrate that we are truly seeking to understand people—not simply change their points of view—we create a safe environment that allows them to open up at a deeper level. As others feel genuinely understood, they also begin to better understand themselves.

Perhaps the greatest value of Spirit-led listening is that it communicates true humility and sends this powerful message: “I accept and respect you.” In a self-centered, what’s-in-it-for-me kind of world, Spirit-led listening will cause you to really stand out. Think about it: When was the last time you were listened to in a non-judgmental, agenda-free, compassionate way?

At the same time, I’m not suggesting that we simply nod and murmur “uh-huh, uh-huh” again and again. This kind of listening is anything but passive. It’s a sensitive but assertive quest to truly understand someone else. It requires you to probe, explore, and reflect back on what you’ve been hearing so that you truly understand what’s been revealed to you. This kind of listening seeks to discover people’s stories, to learn what interests them, to understand what turns their crank. After you’ve demonstrated that you’re a “safe” person, most people will eventually come to share their struggles, their doubts, and even their beliefs and unbeliefs about God.

Principle 1: Go. The Great Commission begins with a two-letter word: go. Listening begins with a heart that’s willing to move toward the people in our lives.

Principle 2: Significant spiritual conversations usually occur when you least feel like having them. Any time you feel anxious, fearful, uncomfortable, or downright scared to death, there’s a good chance that a significant spiritual conversation is waiting for you on the other side of those feelings—if you don’t give in to them.

Principle 3: Good questions create great opportunities for listening.

Good “wondering” questions:

- are born out of a desire to better understand someone
- flow naturally out of your context and your conversations
- demonstrate that you have listened thoughtfully
- are open-ended and promote more dialogue and reflection
- probe sensitively and reflectively into someone’s belief systems
- compel others to investigate the Christian life.

“Wondering” is not:

- using questions to gain control of a conversation so you can get your point across
- a set of memorized questions to herd people toward a decision you think they should make

- a springboard from which to launch into a monologue

Good ways to start “wondering”:

- “That’s an interesting perspective; I’m wondering how you arrived at that conclusion?”
- “I’m wondering what role religion has played in shaping your life?”
- “I’m wondering if you’re searching for something?”

Principle 4: Validate before moving on. Always verify what you thought you heard by reflecting back the thoughts and feelings of the people you’re listening to. Reflective listening can be a powerful device to help you hear what people are *really* saying. Spend some time reading the reflective listening phrases that follow. Make these ideas a part of your spiritual conversations.

Reflective listening phrases:

- So, if I’m hearing you right [briefly paraphrase the *feelings* and *ideas* you thought you heard].
- Let me make sure I’m tracking with you. You’re . . .
- You’re saying you feel . . . because . . . Is that right?
- Wow! You’re really . . . when you think about . . .
- What you really want me to grasp is that . . .
- It’s like [use a word picture to convey the feelings or ideas you heard] Does that capture it?
- So what ticks you off the most is . . .
- So what excites you most is . . .
- So the really big thing for you is . . .

Principle 5: When you’re invited to speak, be brief. Divine dialogue happens when we continue to keep the spotlight on others and what they want to talk about.

Principle 6: One way to tell if you’ve truly connected heart-to-heart is if you’re welcomed back. Imagine what would happen if all Christians showed up in the culture with fewer words, and with ears eager to listen. I think we would discover what doctors today have known for a long time... if they listen well, the patient’s body will tell the doctor how to be an instrument of healing.

I hope you see the implications for the people in your life who need spiritual healing. If you’re willing to take the initiative and listen—both to the people around you and to the Holy Spirit—I don’t think you’ll ever wonder again how to start a spiritual conversation.

Discuss: *Which of these principles stands out as something you need to grow in? Where could you practice this principle this week? How could your team create an environment of listening well?*

Next Steps (Individually & Collectively)

Complete the following statements as honestly as you can (from Pollock, *God Space*, page 57).

When others are talking to me

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| 1. I find myself finishing their sentences. | ___ rarely ___ occasionally ___ often ___ usually |
| 2. I give my opinions before hearing them out. | ___ rarely ___ occasionally ___ often ___ usually |
| 3. I get restless and impatient. | ___ rarely ___ occasionally ___ often ___ usually |
| 4. I lose track of what is being said. | ___ rarely ___ occasionally ___ often ___ usually |
| 5. I mentally rehearse what I'm going to say next. | ___ rarely ___ occasionally ___ often ___ usually |
| 6. I take control of the conversation. | ___ rarely ___ occasionally ___ often ___ usually |
| 7. I interrupt with frequent comments or questions. | ___ rarely ___ occasionally ___ often ___ usually |
| 8. I am suspicious of hidden agendas. | ___ rarely ___ occasionally ___ often ___ usually |
| 9. I try to immediately diagnose their problems. | ___ rarely ___ occasionally ___ often ___ usually |
| 10. I worry about responding, instead of listening. | ___ rarely ___ occasionally ___ often ___ usually |
| 11. I tell them how to fix their problems. | ___ rarely ___ occasionally ___ often ___ usually |
| 12. I listen briefly and then begin talking. | ___ rarely ___ occasionally ___ often ___ usually |
| 13. I tend to contradict what has been said. | ___ rarely ___ occasionally ___ often ___ usually |
| 14. I misinterpret what has been said. | ___ rarely ___ occasionally ___ often ___ usually |
| 15. I answer before I understand. | ___ rarely ___ occasionally ___ often ___ usually |

If you answered “often” or “usually” to **three or more** of these questions or if you answered “occasionally” to **eight or more**, you could benefit dramatically by improving your listening skills.

Discuss your results with a friend, teammate, or ministry coach. What “stung” most from this list? Why?

Additional Resources

Doug Pollock, *God Space: Where Spiritual Conversations Happen Naturally* (Group Publishing,, 2009)

Tim Downs, *Finding Common Ground: How to Communicate with Those Outside the Christian Community . . . While we Still Can* (Moody Publishers, 1999)