

Listening in evangelism

(flip a coin onto the floor OR start whispering – “we hear what matters”)

The most obvious part we play in evangelism is proclamation of the Gospel and testimony about God's work in our own life. There is no 'good news' without proclamation (Romans 10:14 How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?). At times proclamation is all that is needed for a heart prepared by God to respond. Similarly, testimony about our own salvation and our ongoing experience of God dovetails the gospel message with real life.

Often though, our role in evangelism involves more than proclamation & testimony. It is beautified by our service and character (Titus 2:10; 1 Peter 3:3-4; Col.4:5-6) and it is validated by the love we have for one another (John 13:34-35).

Listening, however, is also critical to evangelism.

LISTENING TO GOD

In evangelism, as in all Christian life, God plays particular roles and we play particular ones. The most important agent in evangelism is God's Holy Spirit. He prepares hearts - convincing people of their sin, righteousness & judgment (John 16:8) and drawing all to Christ (John 12:32). He creates opportunities for the Gospel (sometimes dramatic ones); gives us courage while giving the gospel and brings the right words to our minds (Eph.6:19f; Col.4:3; 2Thes.3:1). So, noticing and responding to the Spirit's work is very important in evangelism.

Our faith gifted bro/sis are often more advanced in their understanding & practice of this kind of listening. Notice their expectation that God is at work; that He will act; that He has something they need to hear; that He will empower the work He gives them to do and so on. These expectations lead to alertness to God's voice that is appropriate.

LISTENING TO CULTURE

Jesus had different approaches to different people. The authors of the gospels selected and organized their content to fit the audience they intended to address. Paul adjusted his approach in response to his understanding of the culture he was in, to minimize unnecessary dissonance & maximize receptivity. The gospel is polarizing enough without creating unneeded conflict (2 Cor.2:14-17; 1 Cor.9:22).

We need to understand the cultures/sub-cultures we interface with. Our own culture has changed so much in the past few decades what we have to work to understand the implicit assumptions that your friend may not even realize themselves.

Our intellectually gifted brothers/sisters are often great sources for this kind of information. Ask them what they're reading. Ask them to explain it to you.

But, this is a poor substitute for listening to the person you are evangelizing. You don't know how they have integrated the culture they appear to be part of with the other parts of their life.

LISTENING TO THEM

We must listen those we want to hear our message. God wants us to be careful listeners and know that we are not so inclined. Otherwise, He would not say, *"be quick to hear, slow to speak and to anger."* (James 1:19).

The purpose of this workshop is to provide tips for becoming a better listener so we can help prepare hearts to hear the gospel.

"If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame." Prov.18:13

Why listen?

- **We listen to represent God** (2 Cor.5:20)

When we think of representing God we naturally think about announcing God's purpose & plan. But, we also represent God by our demeanor. What does your behavior suggest you believe about the God you represent?

If we are to represent God, then we are compelled to communicate that they matter to God by communicating that they matter to us in part by listening to them.

- **We listen to learn** (Proverbs 1:5; 18:13) – It is hubris that causes us to think that we know 'all about' what's going on prematurely.

The gospel doesn't change but the 'shape' of the audience varies, meaning that the gospel has to be presented in a way that touches their perspective; using language that makes sense of the message to them; that supplements their current understanding; that takes into account the moral, emotional, social & intellectual features of their perspective. We need to communicate what they are ready to hear often **before** we can communicate everything they need to hear. Good luck doing that without taking the time to listen.

Ephesians 4:15 encourages us to speak the truth in love but what truth applies to them in this situation? I cannot presume to know how they feel or how they behaved in response to some event based on how I would have felt or acted in the same situation. In finding out the details (i.e. events, feelings, and behaviors) I can begin exploring the deeper areas (i.e. beliefs, desires).

- what is their felt need
- what are they receptive to at this moment

"The purposes of a person's heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out."

Proverbs 20:5

- **We listen to love** – One critically important way to express love to someone is to be genuinely curious about them. When we seek to understand another person, we are expressing God's affirmation that they matter. Also, when people feel heard it comforts them – they are understood. Job makes this point when he says,

Listen closely to what I am saying. You can console me by listening to me. Bear with me, and let me speak... Job 21:2-3.

Keep in mind that Job was making this request even though he was saying outrageous things about God that provoked his friends into premature 'feedback'.

Part of loving is empathizing. Empathy is the ability to imagine what it is like to be them. It also involves the capacity to communicate our awareness so that they feel understood. Of course, it is impossible to empathize when we are focused on being heard or understood ourselves. I imagine that most of your fights are fights to be heard & understood.

A great listener has the ability to delay their desire to draw conclusions, correct or instruct.

- **We listen so they can listen** – Have you noticed how many times God asks questions? Why would He do this? The God who knows everything asks questions and listens because He knows that **we** need to think and speak.

- People are often confused about their problems. They feel stuck. They are ambivalent. If they do not believe that you understand, they will find it very difficult to receive your "wisdom." On the other hand, when someone feels heard, understood and loved, defensiveness can diminish enough for them to entertain alternative beliefs and desires.

- Often, we don't even have to offer alternative perspectives because when they gain clarity about their perspectives, they may understand themselves how to proceed.
- People are most receptive to change when they have been able to think aloud about their own inner workings. Some people think best when they speak their thoughts aloud.
 - Few people have carefully formed their world view and have felt little need to evaluate it, because their culture agrees with them. If they have not spoken aloud to a considerate listener then they may not have even heard themselves enough to question themselves.

HOW TO LISTEN

Listening is not passive. Careful listening is more strenuous than talking because it is easy to talk about our own thoughts, but it is difficult to accurately understand another person's.

Be spiritually minded. As Christians, we believe that all spiritual and relational healing is the work of God and not something we can do by our own power. The proof that we believe this is that we bathe our time with prayer and we attend to what God's Spirit may be trying to do. Sometimes, more experienced Christian workers omit this preparation because they "have had so much experience" or because they just read a book that all their conversations seem related to. These attitudes are fleshly self-sufficiency and should be consciously resisted.

A spiritually minded person can relax. Most of us withdraw or too quickly proclaim out of fear. In most cases you will have plenty of time to testify, witness or sort out the many complex or emotionally charged things you are hearing. Discipline yourself to move toward those you may be tempted to correct or escape. Your goal is not complex. Just remind yourself, "My job at this time is to make it easy for them to fully express their perspective."

Pay attention to non-verbal communication (theirs and yours). Their facial expressions, body movement, posture, and breathing rate are all important clues to what they are thinking or feeling. Tone, volume and tempo of speech are also important in this regard. Look at their eyes (if gathering thoughts, they'll look around; when ready to speak they'll lock eyes) If they become agitated, angry or withdrawn it may tempt you to answer the issues they bring up – slow down. Just because they lead with their head doesn't mean you should hit it. It may help to simply reveal what you're seeing and ask them about it. Saying, "You seem angry, are you angry?" in response to body language allows them the chance to reveal more. Good listeners help people reveal what's on their minds in part by their own body language.

Communicate non-verbally that you are interested in what they are saying. Maintain an appropriate amount of eye-contact. Nodding occasionally, coupled with appropriate facial gestures helps to give the other person confidence that you are sincerely interested. Sitting in an open, relaxed way will encourage self-disclosure; sitting behind a desk with arms folded will impede it. Lean forward at important statements. Take note of any distracting non-verbal habits you may have and eliminate them. Finger tapping, rocking, or staring off into space may help you to concentrate, but they communicate disinterest to them and therefore discourage self-disclosure.

Give appropriate verbal encouragement. An occasional "uh-huh" or "hmm" as well as questions like "Can you tell me more about that?" OR "That's interesting, how long have you felt that way?" communicates interest which encourages self-disclosure.

Silence is another way of encouraging self-disclosure. It invites revelation and it invites the Spirit into the dialogue (pray in the silences).

"We have become so contaminated by our wordy world that we hold to the deceptive opinion that our words are more important than our silence." Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, p.58

Exercise: Taking turns (2-3 minutes each) tell what your highest high or lowest low has been over the past few weeks and why. The listener is not to speak. Practice body language that encourages disclosure (e.g. smile, eye contact, lean forward, nod your head, etc.) AND practice noticing their words & body language.

Be non-judgmental and empathetic. You wouldn't want a doctor to hand you a prescription without looking over lab results and listening to your complaints and concerns. Yet, all too often we offer true but misplaced or premature advice.¹

Avoid the tendency to focus only on evaluating the moral and/or theological correctness of statements they make. As Christians, we know that truth is important. We know that they will need to bring their thinking into conformity to God's Word in order to be saved. But our ability to apply truth will be hindered unless we truly understand how they view things. Temporarily suspend your desire to correct, in the interest of gaining better overall understanding. Give yourself as fully as possible to drawing out and understanding their situation.

Of course, being non-judgmental and empathetic does not mean you should become relativistic theologically or morally. It does mean that you communicate acceptance to them regardless of their beliefs or behavior. It also means that you communicate an understanding of the legitimate parts of their perspective, even if you disagree with their response to it. For example, if they say, "I am never going to believe this crap," you could reply with a mini-lecture about the danger of rejecting Christ. You may be biblically correct, but it can be ineffective and unhelpful. On the other hand, you could say something like "I can see how your past experiences have made what I'm telling you seem stupid." This statement communicates empathy and encourages further communication.

Exercise: Taking turns (2-3 minutes each) describe a disappointment you had or still have with God. If it's in the past, try to talk about it as if it's an unresolved present problem. Listeners keep practicing your listening. Be silent when they grow silent. Notice their eyes when they grow silent. If they are looking around, wait, they may be formulating their thoughts. If they look right at you in their silence you may use words (sparingly) in order to keep drawing them out.

Check for understanding. Effective listening involves putting what they have said into your own words and re-stating it. "I think you said _____. Is that what you said?" OR "So, are you saying _____?" This lets them know you are listening, and insures that you understand them.

The philosopher Daniel Dennett says about good debating that:

- you should attempt to re-express their position so clearly, vividly & fairly that they say, "Thanks, I wish I'd thought of putting it that way."
- you should mention any points of agreement.
- you should tell them what they have helped you understand better

I like his perspective because it captures the idea of working hard to understand and feed back what you have heard them say.

Some people list facts without embellishment. You might need to ask how they interpreted the event, how they feel about it, and what they intend to do about it.²

¹ "You need to trust God" is both true and unhelpful because without listening, neither you nor they know what, in particular, they need to trust God about.

Don't assume that their reactions mean what they would mean if you were reacting like them..

Validate what you have learned about their views. Validation says, "I get why you feel that way." It does not mean they are right to feel that way or that they should keep feeling that way. It means that feeling that way makes sense in light of what you know about them. If you really don't get it, don't say that you do. Admit, "I'm not getting what you are saying yet, help me understand how you came to that conclusion."

Ask good questions. I put this last because while questions are very important, they are all too often used instead of listening.

Look at the handout entitled JoHari Window.

What do they know about themselves?

In a sense, most of the 'how to listen' material is helpful for this area. There are things they know about themselves that are common knowledge for them and their close relationships but which you may not be aware. Also, there are things they know about themselves that they've hidden from others. Listening well and with empathy creates an environment where they can disclose these things to you.

What do they not know, that you see?

Everyone has blind spots, things others see that they do not. Simply tell them what you notice and then ask them to help you understand what it means. We often notice things in conversation but feel we need to know why without simply noticing out loud what we see or hear and asking them what it means.

Bad listeners are presumptuous. They see behaviors, decide what motivated those behaviors and then act as if their interpretations are true. Now instead of being helped, the "interpreted" friend begins having to battle against the conclusions of their "listener."

So, for instance, you could say, "You seem troubled by something, are you?" OR "I notice that you spend a lot of time alone. Help me understand why that might be."

The better we know someone the richer our 'out loud' observations can be and the richer our conversations.

What do neither of you know about them?

Sometimes we may be aware of what triggers our feelings or our thoughts or our behaviors but we may only partially understand. Asking questions can help round out their understanding of themselves and our own as well.

For instance, some are not that emotionally or cognitively aware and so they may be able to talk about something that happened (trigger) and what they did in response (behavior) but not have much of a sense of what they felt or thought. Asking about these other areas can help them tremendously. Over the course of a conversation or many conversations you or they may begin to notice patterns of feelings, thoughts, or behaviors as well as events that usually trigger such patterns. Here we can begin to ask the deeper question about their beliefs and desires. Beliefs and desires drive how we feel, think, act and what triggers us. A trigger is a trigger because it threatens a desire or exposes a belief. Recognizing these patterns will help them begin to understand what trusting God entails for them.

See the Going Deeper handout.

² We'll talk about how to do this a little later.

Exercise: Taking turns (2-3 minutes each) return to one of the topics you've discussed with your partner. Try to work them around the diagram above the dark line.

Listening to Culture

How (Not) to be Secular, James Smith

Shows about nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture, Thomas Hibbs

Seeing through cynicism, Dick Keyes

A Brief History of Thought, Luc Ferry

Mars Hill Audio <https://marshillaudio.org>

Listening to God

Waiting on God, Murray

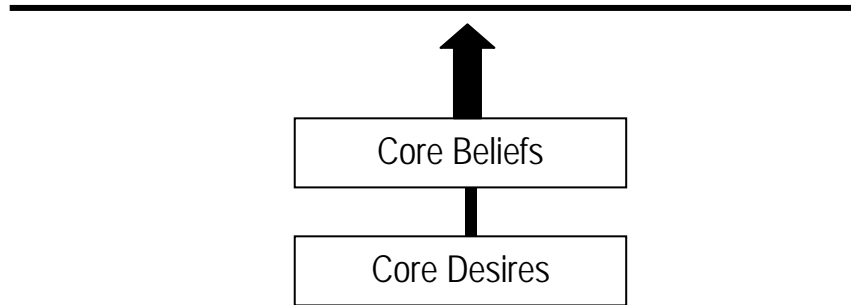
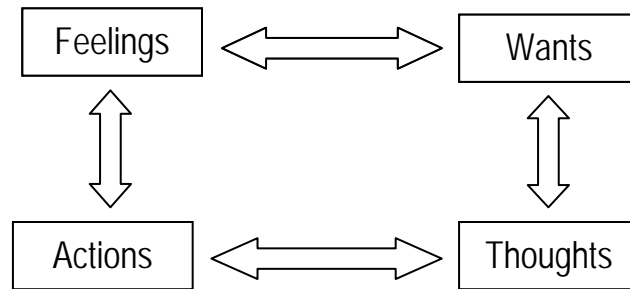
Hearing God, Willard

Listening to people

The Relationship Cure, Gottmann

Going Deeper

Trigger (see, hear or remember something)



Listening Challenges:

- They may be triggered by something and interpret its meaning ("you are so arrogant!" OR "God is an ass!"). You'll need to ignore the conclusion and ask, "What did I say that led you to think that I'm arrogant?" OR "...that God is an ass?" In this way, you're taking them back to their observations rather than reacting to their conclusions.
- They may express a feeling and blame you or God for their feeling. Again, reacting to their blame is not helpful. Ask questions about, summarize & validate the feeling without 'biting' on the blame.
- They believe their thoughts are unquestionably correct. But, countering their certainty is less helpful than asking questions about their thoughts.
- They may believe their behaviors are justified but you may find that asking them about the fallout from their actions leads them to doubt their confidence in the rightness of their actions.

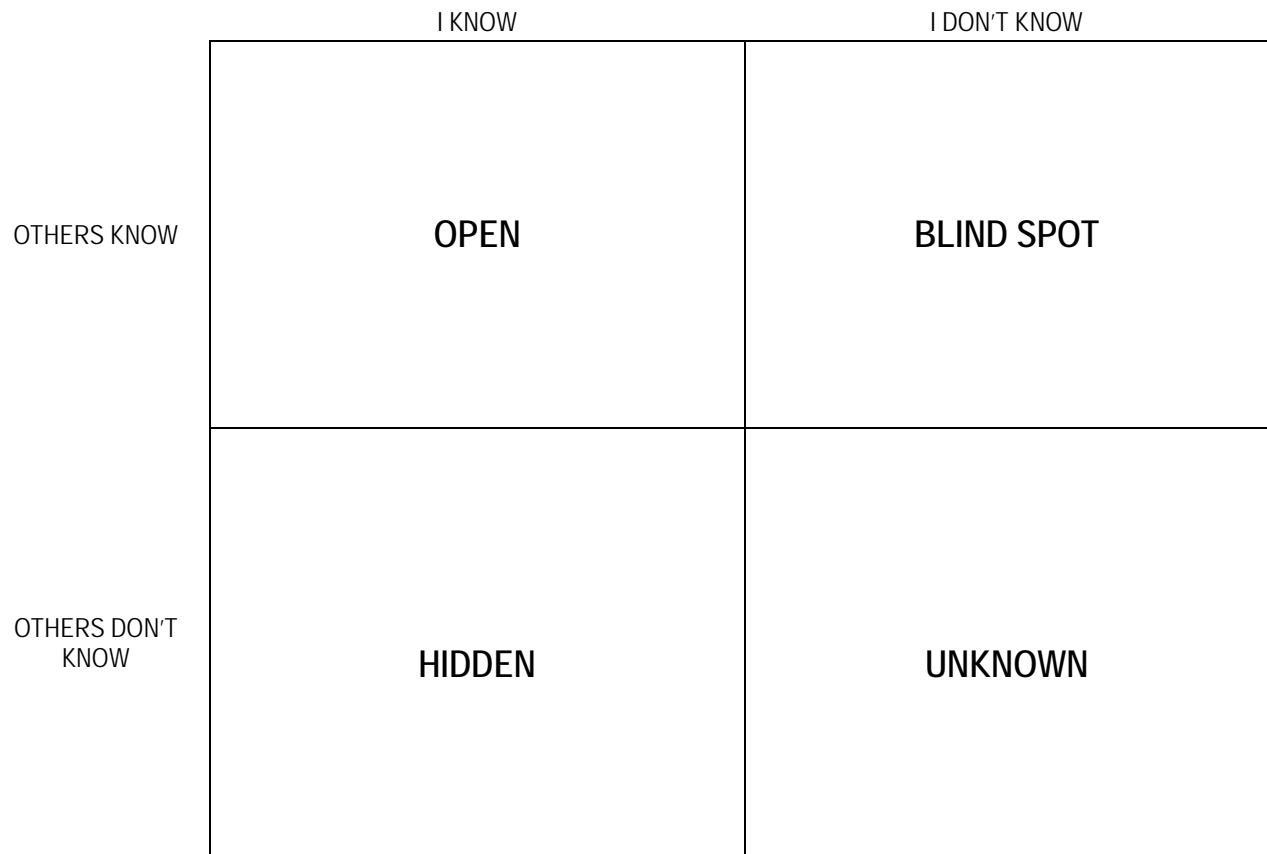
Personal challenges:

- Say what you see without interpreting
- Say how you feel without blaming. Your emotions are your emotions, they may have behaved in a way that provided a context for your feelings to emerge but they didn't cause them.
- Say what you're thinking but be tentative about whether the thoughts are true or not.
- Say what you did without justifying yourself.

Practice these things with your own friends & family. It will improve your relationships tremendously and it will train you to become a better communicator with those you want to hear the gospel.

JoHari Window

(after *Joseph Luft & Harrington Ingham*)



Open quadrant - what is known by the person about him/herself and is also known by others. This area should enlarge as relationships become deeper.

Blind Spot quadrant - what is unknown by the person about him/herself but which others know. This area shrinks when people reveal what they notice to their friend.

Hidden quadrant - what the person knows about him/herself that others do not know. This area should diminish when they reveal/confess hidden things.

Unknown quadrant - what is unknown by the person about him/herself and is also unknown by others. This area shrinks as God reveals and friends help explore deeper beliefs & desires (c.f. Going Deeper).