

Listen

John Kline served many years as a civilian professor for the US Air Force Air University where he gained a reputation as a leading expert on communication and listening. Dr. Kline has recounted a true story of radio communications between a pilot and a control tower operator that illustrates how crucial it is to *listen* to others. According to the actual transcript, during their conversation the operator repeatedly ordered the pilot to descend to 8,000 feet, while the pilot repeatedly responded with, “Right, heading for 2,000 feet.” Neither end heard the difference, the plane descended to 2,000 feet and according to Kline, eventually, “both the pilot and his copilot crashed into the side of a mountain and died, victims of a fatal accident, the result of poor listening in the air and on the ground.” Cause of death? Not listening! *

I have attended many an evangelism course that suggested the best way to say this or say that, or to ask this or ask that, in order to share the Gospel. But for some reason no one has ever recommended listening to the other person first. Preparing the thoughts and words we might say can be very helpful. But if we don’t apply careful listening first, how can we gather accurate information or learn about the true needs of others? How will we know the current state of people’s hearts, or what obstacles might rise up to block their ability to hear the lifesaving message we offer?

If effective listening isn’t front and center in our Kingdom work, what will happen, for example, if we meet someone whose only perception of the Bible is, “it has always been used against me!” If we don’t hear that message first, and begin to share rehearsed phrases or quotes from Scriptures, there is a good chance our relationship with that person will suffer a fatal crash, and our opportunity to share the grace of God will be lost. Cause of death? Not listening.

Nicodemus knew what it was like to have someone listen to him. Jesus listened with great care to the current state of Nicodemus’ heart before He answered with a message of God’s great love and gift of eternal life. (John 3:1-21) Evidently the impact of being truly heard touched Nicodemus very deeply, because later, when the Pharisees denounced Jesus, Nicodemus responded by asking, “*Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?*” (John 7:51)

Listening matters in our relationships with fellow Kingdom workers as well. On one hand, careful listening can bring joy and growth. By tuning in when others speak, we can be encouraged about the spread of the gospel, and hear words of wisdom from our leaders. (Acts 15:12-21) On the other hand, if we fail to listen to a brother’s gentle warning about our sin, we could endanger our souls and discredit our work. (Matt. 18:15-17) If we don’t listen with care to a sister’s words, how can we know what is truly on her heart so we can pray specifically for her and her Kingdom work? Inattention to others can even cause relationships and ministries to sputter and eventually die. Cause of death? Not listening.

The ability to listen well is so valuable to our Kingdom work, that it is worth the time and effort to develop our listening skills. Proverbs 18:13 warns, “*He who answers before listening—that is his folly and his shame.*” May we all heed that warning!

Group Discussion:

(Please note: There are no right or wrong answers to the discussion questions. Let the Holy Spirit work through each member of your group. The best learning will happen when everyone shares his/her own insights, questions, concerns, and ideas.)

1. Complete the following sentences. [If possible, have one member of your group write your answers where others can see them, on a white board, flip chart, or even a notepad if the group is small enough to gather around it.]
 - a. The last time someone did not listen to me, or hear what I was saying, I felt_____.
 - b. The last time someone listened carefully to me and really understood what I was saying, I felt_____.

2. Consider your responses to the above as you discuss the following: What impact might effective listening have on the relationship: a) between a Kingdom worker and an unbeliever? b) between Kingdom workers?

3. Read John 3:1-21 aloud, then discuss the following:
 - a. What do you “hear” Nicodemus saying in v. 2?
 - b. Based on Jesus’ reply in v. 3, what do you think Jesus heard Nicodemus saying?
 - c. What else do you “hear” Nicodemus saying, or asking, in v. 4-15?
 - d. Based on Jesus’ reply, what do you think Jesus heard Nicodemus saying, or asking in v. 4-15?
 - e. In what ways did Jesus’ careful listening change the conversation?
 - f. What was the ultimate outcome of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus?

4. Complete the following sentence. [If possible, have one member of your group write your answers where others can see them, on a white board, flip chart, or even a notepad if the group is small enough to gather around it.]

The last time I did not really hear what someone else was saying to me, it was because_____.

5. Discuss some specific actions you could take to overcome the obstacles/barriers to listening that you identified through the above activity.

6. Give each member of your group a chance to share any prayer requests he or she has. Listen carefully to each other’s joys, cares, and concerns. Each member of the group should pray for the person on his or her left and so on.

*John A. Kline. 2003. *Listening Effectively: Achieving High Standards in Communication*. Prentice Hall, pp. 2-3.