

The Bill of Wrongs
Luke 18:35-43
Series: Mend Week 2. Listening

The Woodside Church

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In 1989, Pastor and author Tim Keller moved his family to New York City to start Redeemer Presbyterian Church. It grew from 50 worshipers to over 5000. To plant the church, Tim asked his wife Kathy to grant him three years of long hours, and then, he promised, things would change. Kathy agreed, but at the three year mark, no change. Tim said, "Just a couple more months." Those months passed with no change. Here's how Kathy got Tim's attention:

One day I came home from work and noticed the door to our apartment's balcony was open. I heard a smashing noise coming from the balcony. In another couple of seconds I heard another one. I walked out on to the balcony and to my surprise saw Kathy sitting on the floor. She had a hammer, and next to her was a stack of our wedding china. On the ground were the shards of two smashed saucers.

"What are you doing?" I asked. She looked up and said, "You aren't listening to me. You don't realize that if you keep working these hours you are going to destroy this family. I don't know how to get through to you. This is what you are doing." She brought the hammer down on the third saucer.

I sat down trembling. I thought she had snapped. "I'm listening. I'm listening," I said. She spoke calmly but forcefully. Her arguments were the same as before, but I realized how deluded I had been. I was addicted to the level of productivity I had achieved. She saw me listening for the first time, and we hugged.

Finally I inquired, "When I first came out here, I thought you were having an emotional meltdown. How did you get control of yourself so fast?"

With a grin she answered, "It was no meltdown. Do you see these three saucers I smashed? I nodded. 'I have no cups for them. I had three saucers to spare. I'm glad you sat down before I had to break any more.'"¹

Mending a relationship requires listening. Last week we saw Mending begins with ME. I first look at what I did to tear the relationship. Tim Keller could not see how his addiction to work was harming his family. He probably heard his wife's previous requests to slow down. Yet he didn't sit down and listen until she had a China-syndrome meltdown.

This week, as we celebrate our freedoms guaranteed in the Bill of Rights, it's also a good time to be free from the bill of wrongs – the lists in our minds of what a spouse, a parent, a child, friend, coworker or opponent did wrong. For a moment, let's lay aside the bill of wrongs and really listen to what the other person has to say. Listening is a way to show care, support and

¹ Timothy Keller and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (Dutton, 2011), pp. 145-146

love. Listening is the next step in mending torn relationships and making good relationships better. Though it looks passive, listening requires active concentration. Though it looks easy, listening is a skill which takes practice. In this age of great divisions in our nation, there is an abundance of talking but precious little listening. In an article entitled, “Can Deep Listening Heal our Divisions?” Simon Greer writes,

Listening deeply means listening not just with your ears but with every sense you’ve got. It means listening to all that is said and unsaid, to the body language, the tone, the eye movement. This type of listening builds trust, opens doors. Study after study shows—in medicine, marriage, real estate sales, and more—that true listening generates better results. And yet most of us go through our entire education without learning how to do it.²

Some may even pay a counselor just so they have one person in their life who really listens. The book of Proverbs tells us to “listen” 23 times. In Proverbs 31, the mother of King Lemuel had to work hard to get her son’s attention,

Listen, my son! Listen, son of my womb! Listen, my son, the answer to my prayers!
Proverbs 31:2

She probably wanted to prevent him from making foolish decisions.

The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice. Proverbs 12:15

Jesus practiced listening. Even though the Gospels frequently tell us He knows what people are thinking, Jesus still takes the time to ask questions and listen.

As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard the crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.” He called out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Luke 18:35-38

As Jesus passes through the city of Jericho on the way to the Passover Feast in Jerusalem, mobs of pilgrims join the parade. Picture the Ben Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia on the Fourth of July. It’s totally packed. In the middle of this mass movement, there is a blind beggar. When he learns the Lord is passing by he cries out, “Have mercy on me.” Despite the roar of the crowd, Jesus hears this single voice. The people traveling with Jesus tell the beggar to be quiet. But he cries out even louder.

Jesus stopped and ordered the man to be brought to him. When he came near, Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” “Lord, I want to see,” he replied. Jesus said to him, “Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they also praised God. Luke 18:39-43

² Simon Greer, “Can Deep Listening Heal Our Divisions?” Greater Good (1-19-21)

Notice how Jesus asks the blind man: “What do you want me to do for you?” Sounds like a silly question. Jesus can tell he’s blind. So why does He ask the blind man what he wants? It’s Jesus’ practice to listen first, then heal. Listening heals relationships. Good listening is a skill. Thankfully, all of us can become better listeners with a few exercises and a little practice.

First, **Eliminate Distractions – Outside and In.** Proverbs says, “Listen, my sons, to a father’s instruction; pay attention and gain understanding.” (Proverbs 4:1) Begin by paying attention. It’s impossible to listen when we are distracted by driving, making dinner, and crying children. Those other tasks are important and deserve your attention. To really listen, though, you need to be free from these other urgent demands. And by all means, before you listen, put away all technology – television, computers, tablets, cell phones. If necessary, shut them off so they don’t distract you with a ding, beep or buzz. Those are the Outside Distractions.

By Inside Distractions I mean the thoughts which swirl around in your mind while someone else is talking. This is harder to turn off. You may be thinking about the next thing on your to do list, your hungry stomach, what show you’re going to binge watch. Another inner distraction is preparing your reply. There’s a saying “The opposite of listening is not speaking, it’s waiting to speak.” While the other person is talking, you are probably thinking about what to say next. When this happens, you shift your attention to yourself. This prevents you from hearing and understanding what the other person is saying. Another bad habit to avoid is assuming we know what the person needs before really listening. Proverbs says,

To answer before listening— that is folly and shame. Proverbs 18:13

After eliminating distractions, **Assume the Position to Listen.** Much is communicated through body language and non-verbal clues. Sit up, face each other, make eye contact, maybe even lean in a little. Slouching and looking elsewhere not only shows a lack of concern but also prevents you from picking up on messages a person may be sending you through their expressions. I met with someone this week who is a successful salesman and he told me, “It’s all in the face. When a person scratches their head, looks up or squints I pick up clues of what they are thinking and if they are ready to make a decision.” If good listening helps close a deal it can also open a deadlock in a relationship.

Now that you are focused and in the position you are ready to listen. My coach, Dr. Bob Logan is an expert listener. In a recent article he writes,

Whether you are trying to help someone move forward, solve a problem, or initiate change, it’s almost like you’re a detective on a case and you’re listening for clues. If you miss something, it could turn out to be central to solving the case.

He offers these exercises to improve your listening.

1. Mm-hmm. Next time someone comes to you with a problem or an issue, listen by spending the first 10 minutes saying mm-hmm. Invite them to say more. Doing this is much, much harder than it sounds.

2. Wait to Relate. We are conditioned to relate and that's a good thing—most of the time. Yet once we start “relating” we take the focus off the other person and put it on ourselves. For the second 10 minutes of the conversation, commit to making no statements—only asking questions. This means no stories from your own life, no examples of what others have done in this situation. While circumstances may be similar, they are never the same.

3. Stay curious. When you are ready to ask a question, think of yourself not as the expert having the solution but as someone interested in learning more. For a simple example, not: “Have you tried talking to so-and-so?” but “What have you already tried?” Just as questions help doctors properly diagnose a disease, questions allow us to learn and understand what's really going on.³ Proverbs reminds us,

The purposes of a person's heart are deep waters, but one who has insight draws them out. Proverbs 20:5

Giving advice, suggestions or directions tend to shut a person down. Staying curious and asking questions is like dropping a bucket down a long well to draw out what's deep.

4. Silence is Golden. This is also hard. Silence makes us nervous. We feel the need to fill the space with conversation. A brief silence can feel like an eternity. Yet if we immediately jump in we may prevent a person from thinking through what they are trying to say. Giving someone the silent space to reflect and think may open the door for a deeper, more valuable truth to come out. When I train caregivers to listen I give them this clue: If a person is silent and looking down, let them be. Just wait. When they look you in the eye, that's the sign they are ready to talk again. You may even ask, “What were you thinking about just then?”

5. Get Confirmation – Finally, to show you really heard what they said – try rephrasing it in your own words. “So you don't like it when I squeeze the toothpaste tube in the middle?” It can feel awkward, like you are a parrot repeating what's said. Yet getting confirmation does two things – it shows you really received what they said and even encourages them to tell you more.

So now you are focused, positioned and practicing good listening skills. Next comes the crucial question: What do you do with what you hear? It's one thing to listen as a coach or counselor to someone else's problem. It's quite different to listen when you may be the problem. Your first reaction is to defend what you think or feel, to dismiss what you hear, to deny what is said. You may be tempted to pull out the bill of wrongs they did. Your thoughts and feelings, your perspective and opinion are important and deserve a listening ear. Hopefully the other person is listening to you as you are to them. According to Proverbs, you will receive a rich reward when you listen, learn and then lead a different life.

Like an earring of gold or an ornament of fine gold is the rebuke of a wise judge to a listening ear. Proverbs 25:12

³ Bob Logan, *Three Listening Exercises*

https://christiancoachingtools.com/articles/3-listening-exercises/?mc_cid=f13beac489&mc_eid=536e41f891

Listen to advice and accept discipline, and at the end you will be counted among the wise. Proverbs 19:20

It's difficult to receive critique and criticism. Yet our greatest growth often comes when we listen to someone who tells us the honest truth, when we change our behavior and character based on the hard truth we hear from others – from our loved ones and even from our critics.

I began this message talking about Tim Keller. His ministry was centered in New York City – a place known for being harsh, critical and rude – especially when it comes to faith. He gained respect and even brought many skeptics to faith in Christ because he was willing to listen. Being a famous author and preacher, he received his share of criticism and attacks in person and on the internet. Yet, as one of his colleagues recalls,

Tim could receive criticism, even criticism that was unfair, and it wouldn't wreck him. In his words and example, he taught me that getting defensive when criticized rarely, if ever, leads to healthy outcomes.

He also taught me that our critics can be God's instruments to teach and humble us: First, you should look to see if there is a kernel of truth, look for what you may indeed have done wrong. Identify your own shortcomings, repent in your own heart before the Lord for what you can, and let that humble you. It will then be possible to learn from the criticism and stay gracious to the critic even if you have to disagree with what he or she has said. Second, pray for the critic, that he or she grows in grace.⁴

Tim Keller often engaged in public discussions and debates with non-believers and secular humanists. In one such forum,

The secular humanist struggled with a point he was making and was unclear, something that happens often enough in public speaking. Keller could have chosen to go in for the kill rhetorically and make his opponent look foolish. Instead, he paused and asked, "Is this what you mean?" Keller then restated the secular argument in a clearer, better way, arguing against his own point of view.⁵

He really listened and was willing to learn...even from a critic. Tim Keller passed away on May 19. Tributes, even in the New York Times, described him as courageous, humble, reconciling, refreshing, invigorating and above all Christian. Tim and Kathy Keller were married 48 years. Thank God he sat down among the broken china and listened.

⁴ Scott Sauls, *Befriend: Create Belonging in an Age of Judgment, Isolation, and Fear* (Tyndale House, 2016), page 16

⁵ <https://religionunplugged.com/news/2023/6/22/top-5-tributes-to-the-late-dr-timothy-keller>