



A Primal Faith

Text: Psalm 131

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1. When you hear the word “mother,” what immediately comes to mind?
2. Read Psalm 131.
 - a. What sinful attitudes does David say he has been freed from?
 - b. How did David find freedom?
 - c. David commands his people to “put your hope in the Lord both now and forevermore” (v. 3). Likewise, we should hear this as the application point for ourselves as well. In what part of your life right now are you most in need of the hope that the Lord provides?
3. Rather than running to our Creator for hope and comfort, we often run to created things to numb our pain, fear, and worries.
 - a. To what do you most often turn to numb yourself? (e.g. entertainment, food, alcohol, pornography, purchasing more and nicer “stuff” possibly with money you don’t even have)
 - b. Why will all these attempts ultimately fail?
 - c. Read Matthew 1:23, John 1:1–3, John 1:14, and Hebrews 10:19–25. Jesus came to be God with us. And he went to the cross to remove what stood between us and God and thereby to give us access to God’s presence. What does it mean for you, that God went to such great lengths for you to be able to be with him?
4. Adam said that we—the church, which is the body of Christ on earth—are infused with the Holy Spirit and empowered to bring God’s comforting presence to the hurting world around us. Most often, all this requires of us is for us to be physically present with people in their hurting.
 - a. Think about a time when you were on the receiving end of this sort of “ministry of presence.” When is a time that someone came and sat with you or stayed with you without doing anything for you when you were in a time of turmoil or need? What did it make you feel? What did this ministry of presence mean to you?
 - b. What is a step you can take to press more fully into Christian community? (e.g. Commit to more regular Sunday worship attendance, join a Faithbridge Serve Team, allow yourself to be more vulnerable and transparent with your Grow Group and let them know how you are *really* doing, meeting with 1–2 group members of the same gender from your Grow Group for accountability and encouragement)
 - c. People often struggle knowing what to say or do when someone is hurting. But almost always, the most important thing is to be present and to *listen*. Read the Study Deeper article on “Six Lessons in Good Listening.” Which point stood out to you the most and why?
 - d. Who is someone you know going through a hard time right now? What can you and/or your Grow Group do to show up and be present with that person?

Challenge: As the summer months approach, it can be easy to let things like busy travel schedules overtake the priority of Christian community. What can you and your Grow Group commit to right now to not let that happen in the coming months?

Prayer: Close your group time by praying through this prayer, adapted from Psalm 131, out loud together.

Lord, show us the areas of our lives where pride is creeping in. Show us the areas of life where we are trying to grab the reins, where we are trying to white-knuckle our way through the challenges, where our minds are pre-occupied with things that are not ours to know.

Lord, we surrender all these things to you. Help us find our comfort in you and in your people whom you have graciously put in our lives, as a child is comforted in the arms of its mother.

*Lord, help us remember the hope that we have in you because of the person and work of Jesus Christ.
Amen.*

STUDY DEEPER

Six Lessons in Good Listening

Listening is one of the easiest things you'll ever do, and one of the hardest.

In a sense, listening is easy — or hearing is easy. It doesn't demand the initiative and energy required in speaking. That's why "faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). The point is that hearing is easy, and faith is not an expression of our activity, but our receiving the activity of another. It is "hearing with faith" (Galatians 3:2, 5) that accents the achievements of Christ and thus is the channel of grace that starts and sustains the Christian life.

But despite this ease — or perhaps precisely because of it — we often fight against it. In our sin, we'd rather trust in ourselves than another, amass our own righteousness than receive another's, speak our thoughts than listen to someone else. True, sustained, active listening is a great act of faith, and a great means of grace, both for ourselves and for others in the fellowship.

Lessons in Good Listening

The charter text for Christian listening might be James 1:19: "Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger." It's simple enough in principle, and nearly impossible to live. Too often we are slow to hear, quick to speak, and quick to anger. So, learning to listen well won't happen overnight. It requires discipline, effort, and intentionality. You get better with time, they say. Becoming a better listener hangs not on one big resolve to do better in a single conversation, but on developing a pattern of little resolves to focus in on particular people in specific moments.

Freshly persuaded this is a needed area of growth in my life — and possibly yours as well — here are six lessons in good listening. We take our cues from what may be the most important three paragraphs on listening outside the Bible, the section on "the ministry of listening" in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*, as well as Janet Dunn's classic *Discipleship Journal* article, "How to Become a Good Listener."

1. Good listening requires patience.

Here Bonhoeffer gives us something to avoid: “a kind of listening with half an ear that presumes already to know what the other person has to say.” This, he says, “is an impatient, inattentive listening, that . . . is only waiting for a chance to speak.” Perhaps we think we know where the speaker is going, and so already begin formulating our response. Or we were in the middle of something when someone started talking to us, or have another commitment approaching, and we wish they were done already.

Or maybe we’re half-eared because our attention is divided, by our external surroundings or our internal rebounding to self. As Dunn laments, “Unfortunately, many of us are too preoccupied with ourselves when we listen. Instead of concentrating on what is being said, we are busy either deciding what to say in response or mentally rejecting the other person’s point of view.”

Positively, then, good listening requires concentration and means we’re in with both ears, and that we hear the other person out till they’re done speaking. Rarely will the speaker begin with what’s most important, and deepest. We need to hear the whole train of thought, all the way to the caboose, before starting across the tracks.

Good listening silences the smartphone and doesn’t stop the story, but is attentive and patient. Externally relaxed and internally active. It takes energy to block out the distractions that keep bombarding us, and the peripheral things that keep streaming into our consciousness, and the many good possibilities we can spin out for interrupting. When we are people quick to speak, it takes Spirit-powered patience to not only be quick to hear, but to keep on hearing.

2. Good listening is an act of love.

Half-eared listening, says Bonhoeffer, “despises the brother and is only waiting for a chance to speak and thus get rid of the other person.” Poor listening rejects; good listening embraces. Poor listening diminishes the other person, while good listening invites them to exist, and to matter. Bonhoeffer writes, “Just as love to God begins with listening to his Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them.”

Good listening goes hand in hand with the mind-set of Christ (Philippians 2:5). It flows from a humble heart that counts others more significant than ourselves (Philippians 2:3). It looks not only to its own interests, but also the interests of others (Philippians 2:4). It is patient and kind (1 Corinthians 13:4).

3. Good listening asks perceptive questions.

This counsel is writ large in the Proverbs. It is the fool who “takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion” (Proverbs 18:2), and thus “gives an answer before he hears” (Proverbs 18:13). “The purpose in a man’s heart is like deep water,” says Proverbs 20:5, “but a man of understanding will draw it out.”

Good listening asks perceptive, open-ended questions that don’t tee up yes-no answers, but gently peel the onion and probe beneath the surface. It watches carefully for nonverbal communication, but doesn’t interrogate and pry into details the speaker doesn’t want to share, but meekly draws them out and helps point the speaker to fresh perspectives through careful, but genuine, questions.

4. Good listening is ministry.

According to Bonhoeffer, there are many times when “listening can be a greater service than speaking.” God wants more of the Christian than just our good listening, but not less. There will be days when the most important ministry we do is square our shoulders to some hurting person, uncross our arms, lean forward, make eye contact, and hear their pain all the way to the bottom. Says Dunn,

good listening often defuses the emotions that are a part of the problem being discussed. Sometimes releasing these emotions is all that is needed to solve the problem. The speaker may neither want nor expect us to say anything in response.

One of Dunn’s counsels for cultivating good listening is: “put more emphasis on affirmation than on answers. . . . [M]any times God simply wants to use me as a channel of his affirming love as I listen with compassion and understanding.” Echoes Bonhoeffer, “Often a person can be helped merely by having someone who will listen to him seriously.” At times what our neighbor needs most is for someone else to know.

5. Good listening prepares us to speak well.

Sometimes good listening only listens, and ministers best by keeping quiet, but typically good listening readies us to minister words of grace to precisely the place where the other is in need. As Bonhoeffer writes, “We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God.”

While the fool “gives an answer before he hears” (Proverbs 18:13), the wise person tries to resist defensiveness, and to listen from a nonjudgmental stance, training himself not to formulate opinions or responses until the full update is on the table and the whole story has been heard.

6. Good listening reflects our relationship with God.

Our inability to listen well to others may be symptomatic of a chatty spirit that is droning out the voice of God. Bonhoeffer warns,

He who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too. This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life. . . . Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother, but only for himself and for his own follies.

Good listening is a great means of grace in the dynamic of true Christian fellowship. Not only is it a channel through which God continues to pour his grace into our lives, but it’s also his way of using us as his means of grace in the lives of others. It may be one of the hardest things we learn to do, but we will find it worth every ounce of effort.

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/six-lessons-in-good-listening>