

THE COMPASS

**GETTING THROUGH THE DAY: Practical Wisdom from JAMES**

Part 2:

## The Power of Listening

Doug Brendel

Studs Terkel is a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, but he's best known for writing 6 books that hardly contain a word of Terkel's own writing.

Studs Terkel came to fame not as a writer but as a listener.

He chooses a topic, and goes around the country with a tape recorder and interviews people on that topic.

He just lets them talk and talk, and he listens.

Then he goes home and edits the transcripts of their stories, and publishes a book.

One of his books was called *Working*; it was just people talking about their jobs — and it was turned into a Broadway musicale: a series of song and dance numbers based on what people had said as Studs Terkel listened to them.

Mitch Albom wrote the bestseller *Tuesdays With Morrie*, which was based on his experiences listening to the wisdom of a dying man over the final months of his life.

Albom is also an award-winning newspaper writer.

He points out that somebody once wrote "there's no more seductive sentence in the English language than 'I want to hear your story.'"

Albom says, "Maybe they're right. Because often you don't have to do any more than just say that."

We tend to think of listening as passive, but it is active.

We don't just hear with our ears, or even just with our brains.

We hear with our hearts.

And that makes listening powerful.

Listening is a force.

There's a French proverb that says: "The spoken word belongs half to him that speaks and half to him who hears."

**When you listen to someone, there's a power exchange.**

The person doing the talking feels the power surge of being able to bring a part of himself into you.

Maybe it's an influence thing: You give me a hearing, and I feel like maybe I can shape your thinking on some subject.

Or maybe it's a pain thing: I can off-load part of the burden I'm bearing if you let me tell you about it.

Or maybe it's an assistance thing: I can tell you my question or problem, and maybe you can help me come up with an answer, a solution.

I love to be listened to because of the possibility of a desirable outcome.

If you won't listen to me, I can't have any influence with you, I don't have a way of

sharing my pain, I don't have any hope of getting help from you.

But the power exchange that occurs when you listen to someone also goes the other way — and this is what we don't naturally recognize.

Listening is an attribute of God.

All through the Bible — in the book of Job, in Psalms, in Malachi and elsewhere, we find God listening.

When I listen, when I let you talk, when I let you make your case, when I listen to you cry, when I hear your request for help, I'm a little bit more like God than I was when our conversation began.

\* \* \*

So there's power in listening. But **There's also protection in listening.**

The longer I listen, the less I talk — and the less I talk, the lower my chances of bringing my own error into our conversation.

See, Listening and talking can't happen simultaneously.

When the speakerphone was first invented, one of the frustrations was that the technology would only allow voices to travel one way at a time.

In regular everyday life, people talk over each other.

But on the old speakerphones, you had to wait till one person was completely done speaking before you could start talking yourself.

If you started early, they couldn't hear you.

It was like enforced listening — and it made people crazy.

So the scientists kept working on it, trying to make speakerphones function like real-life conversation.

The problem with this supposed advance in technology is that when I'm talking to you, I can't also be fully listening to you.

And this is life!

In the book of James, which is a wonderfully practical guidebook for everyday living, James recognizes this.

He writes in his letter to his friends,

**James 1:**

**19 ...Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,**

**20 for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.**

The good life that God desires for us doesn't entail a lot of verbal conflict, angry conversations and so forth.

But one of the first keys to avoiding our natural drift into conflict and anger is to train ourselves in the God-like art of listening.

If my day typically involves yelling or bickering or red-faced explosions in conversation, James is saying, Doug, God has something better for you.

Let's back up. Let's retrain. Let's start with being quick to listen instead of being quick to speak. Try that. See how it changes things.

Even if someone comes at you intent on hurting you with their words, I think truly hearing them out — truly listening to them, trying to see it from their perspective, is the best decision.

Why? Because by really listening to someone who is angry, you can diffuse their anger.

When they see that we are actually listening to them, they figure out that they don't have to scream or hurt us to be heard.

Which diffuses the heat of the discussion.

This is the practical reality of **Proverbs 15:1: A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.**

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Listening seems easy enough, but it's really difficult. It doesn't come naturally. It has to be learned.

Archie Bunker used to say, "The reason you don't understand me, Edith, is because I'm talkin' to you in English and you're listenin' to me in dingbat!"

The social psychologist Dr. Tony Alessandra, who actually wrote a book called *The Power of Listening*, says we tend not to listen effectively because it's such hard work.

"Listening is more than just keeping quiet," he says. "An active listener registers increased blood pressure, a higher pulse rate, and more perspiration."

And then Dr. Alessandra adds what might be the most difficult component of all: listening "means concentrating on the other person rather than on ourselves."

This sounds suspiciously like **Romans 12:10: ...Honor one another above yourselves.**

But why is it such hard work to listen? Why does my blood pressure go up?

For one thing, it's physical. Literally.

Dr. Alessandra observes that the average person speaks at about 135 to 175 words a minute, but—" — and here's the problem — the average person "can listen to 400 to 500 words a minute."

So what does the poor listener do with all that time on his hands?

Dr. Alessandra says most people daydream, or think up what they're going to say next, or mentally argue with what the person is saying at the moment.

"It's like listening to two voices at the same time," he says.

Which is not really listening at all.

I still have to work on this consciously, to this day.

I'm not a natural listener; I'm a natural talker.

I don't know of any magic potion you can drink to instantaneously make you a good listener.

I think this is a matter of training.

You have to work at it, and then work at it again tomorrow, and work at it again the next day.

And when you fail, you have to work at it some more. And then some more.

You never hear of a course in listening. You probably didn't have a listening prof in college. Nobody gets a master's degree in listening.

This is a skill that has to be acquired in the college of everyday life.

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So there's power in listening, and there's protection in listening.

**But there's even greater power, and greater protection, in going the next step:**

## RESPONDING to what I hear.

Let's say you come to me with something to say. You have some advice for me. You want to *influence* me in some way. (This is that influence thing we talked about earlier.)

God may be using you to bring me more into line with his design.

If I listen to you, and respond to your influence, I'm stronger.

My life gets better.

Listening to you, and responding appropriately, turns out to have been empowering for me.

Will everybody who gives me advice give me godly, healthy advice? No.

But it can still be good for me to *listen well* even when someone tries to influence me in a destructive way ... because as I let the Spirit of God speak to me at the same time, I'll discern the danger — and that discernment training is good for me.

That reliance on the voice of God is good for me.

I am learning to listen more wisely.

Listening to you, and responding appropriately, turns out to have been empowering for me.

Or let's say you come to me hurting. You have a heartache to share. (This is that pain thing that we talked about earlier.)

If I listen to your heartache, that's a good thing — but if I then respond, if I reach out to you in your pain, if I share your burden, my heart enlarges.

There may be nothing in the world I can do but cry with you, sympathize with you, put my arm around you, give you my handkerchief.

But my compassion muscles are getting stronger. I'm becoming more like the compassionate Christ.

I'm a stronger, better person for that.

Listening to you, and responding appropriately, turns out to have been empowering for me.

Or let's say you come to me with a problem. (This is that assistance thing, that help thing, that we talked about earlier.)

If I listen to you, maybe I discover a way I can help you.

If that's the case, God is using our interaction to make me more of a servant. More like Jesus.

My servanthood instinct is getting tuned up.

My life is richer when I'm serving than it is when I'm being served, so listening to you, and responding appropriately, was empowering for me.

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You know, we talk a lot about the 2 Things: Love God, love people.

Jesus said in **Matthew 22:36-40** that these are the greatest commandments, the most important things in life.

But we tend to think of love in the same passive, kind of dreamy way we think about listening.

Love tends to be this ethereal sort of feeling, and listening seems to be something we

just do sort of all the time, in the background of our lives. It's like a default thing. But love is an action, and listening is a tremendous, practical, proactive way to love. We could revise "Love God" and "Love people" — we could say "Listen to God" and "Listen to people."

Our ministry's founder David G. Brown has said: **"Being heard is so much like being loved, that most people cannot tell the difference."**

I agree. Listening is a loving action.

But I have to go beyond just listening to God. I have to respond.

When you talk to me and give me good advice (here's that *influence* thing again), if I listen to your wisdom but I don't respond to it — I don't act on it — it doesn't do me any good.

Maybe I tell myself that taking your advice will have a downside; it will be inconvenient, or it will be uncomfortable, or whatever.

But if anything, I'm uneasy from then on, because I know I didn't do what you recommended, and I would have been ahead overall, in the grand scheme of things, if I had taken your wise advice.

Listening wasn't enough. I needed to respond to what I heard.

Or when you come to me with your heartache (here's that *pain* thing again), if I listen to you but I don't respond with compassion, that encounter doesn't bear any good fruit.

Maybe I tell myself that your pain isn't my problem, or maybe I tell myself it would be hypocritical to act all sad with you when actually I don't really understand your issue, or maybe I tell myself I don't want you to start bringing me all your problems, or whatever.

So I just kind of keep my distance. Withdraw. Back away.

But then our relationship languishes, or even sours. You go on hurting, or feel even worse, and I feel crummy too.

Listening wasn't enough. I needed to respond honorably, compassionately, to what I heard.

Or when you talk to me and I see how I could actually help you (here's that *assistance* thing again), but I don't go there — maybe I tell myself I don't have time, or someone else could probably help you better than I could — neither you nor I can feel very good about it afterwards.

Listening without responding is detrimental to us both.

In the same way, I can listen to God and wind up almost worse off than before, because I didn't respond to what he said.

I can read the Scriptures, I can pray, I can sense the way God is speaking to me, the way he's trying to influence me, to bring healthy change into my life — but if I don't respond to that, then I can wind up just feeling miserable, because I know there's a better way, and I'm not going there.

Or I can hear the voice of God's Spirit in my conscience — a friend of mine who grew up in rural Arkansas says "we just call it a hunch"; but whatever you call it, if you've committed your life to God, he's committed to guiding you, speaking to

you, giving you the benefit of his wisdom day by day — if God speaks to me through my conscience about taking a certain course of action, or avoiding a certain course of action, and I decide against that “divine hunch,” I wind up uneasy, unhappy. And maybe having to learn a lesson the hard way, who knows?

It’s not the kind of guilt I feel when I do something obviously wrong. It’s just a kind of feeling where I sense that I just could have done better, I could have come out better, maybe stronger, maybe healthier, maybe more *satisfied* I guess is the word I’m looking for.

James went through this. He saw his friends going through this stuff all the time. He said don’t fool yourself. God is trying to help you; do what he says. Here’s how he puts it:

**James 1:**

**22 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.**

**23 Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror**

**24 and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.**

But then he talks about the person “**who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom**”

“Looking intently” is a term in the original language of the Scriptures that suggests stooping down to get a better view. Peering. Straining to get a clear picture. James is talking about someone who wants the facts. Someone who wants to know what God’s best really is.

What would “looking intently” mean in your life?

Maybe attending a Bible teaching every week is a stretch for you. Maybe this qualifies as “looking intently” into God’s plan for your life.

Maybe you’re reading your Bible every day — or maybe 3 times a week, or whatever. Maybe for you, this is “looking intently.”

Maybe you’re establishing a particular prayer time each day, where you’re training yourself to talk to God and hear from God. You’re “looking intently” into God’s plan for your life.

Maybe you’re reading Christian books. Maybe you’re tuning in to Christian music on your car radio and using travel time to worship God. For you, this is “looking intently” into God’s design for your life.

But in any case, you’re taking steps, you’re organizing your life in such a way that you’re taking some steps toward God.

You’re thinking about it. You’re serious about hearing from God, getting closer to God, discovering more of God’s best for you.

You’re becoming the person James is talking about, **who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom.**

And what’s this “perfect law” he’s talking about?

It's not a grid of religious rules; it's a life of freedom in Christ.

It's the life we have the privilege of living when we've given ourselves to God, and he starts walking with us and talking with us every day, and we have access to his wisdom, his power, his love!

James says the person who looks intently into that perfect law — someone who really pursues a living, daily relationship with God — **and continues to do this** [he's talking about training, working on it consistently, taking baby steps, learning to listen every day], **not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it** — [not just listening, but responding]

What happens to this guy? — **he will be blessed in what he does.**

He'll have the best life. The richest life.

Maybe not the biggest bank account. Maybe not the hottest car.

But the deepest peace. The most satisfied spirit.