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## LISTENING

The skill of listening is essential to being an effective support person. Listening to hear not only what another person is saying but also how they are feeling communicates value and love. This, in turn, creates a safe space and the opportunity to help shape the other's life in a way that can bring healing and transformation.

# LISTENING WELL

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In this lesson you will:

- Recognize the difference between hearing and listening
- Identify factors that contribute to your ability and inability to listen
- Consider the benefits of listening well

## LISTENING WELL

### Hearing and Listening are Not the Same

The skill of listening may be the most important topic when it comes to loving others well. Most of us think we are better listeners than we are in reality. Listening involves not only hearing what a person is saying but also how he or she feels.

**“Listening shapes us;  
not feeling heard twists us.”**

**- Michael P Nichols.**

Hearing and listening are not the same; you can hear a multitude of messages without ever truly listening. Listening requires us to stay present and focused. There are numerous factors that influence a person’s ability and inability to listen. Let’s consider some of those dreadful distractions.

### Distractions to Listening Well

There are two basic categories of distractions: external and internal.

**External distractions** surround us and it is our responsibility to manage them.



A major external distraction is our cell phones. When they are in view or even in our pockets, they have the potential to distract us. Ideally, when meeting with someone, avoid having your cell phone out. If you are “on call” and need to be available in the case of an emergency, you will need to consider how you will address this with the person you are supporting.

Glancing at a cell phone or a watch communicates to the other person that you have a limited amount of time or potentially worse, that whatever is next on your schedule is more important than them. Realize that in most situations there will be a clock on the wall, and if at all possible, schedule buffer time into your schedule.



Try to keep your meeting space free from clutter that might draw your attention. A stack of papers or projects that are waiting for you may cause the other person to feel as though you have too much to do and don’t have time for them.

## COMMUNICATING FOR CONNECTION: LISTENING WELL

Keep this in mind with virtual conversations also. Remove pictures or objects so you have a neutral background, or choose a virtual background that will likely be pleasing to the eye. Do everything you can to make your in-person or virtual space feel warm, welcoming, and free from distractions. If necessary, get feedback from someone you trust to give you an honest opinion of how your space feels.



**Internal distractions** come in all shapes and sizes, and while they may not be immediately noticeable, their presence is felt. A relationship issue, such as having a heated discussion with a significant other, colleague, or friend and not decompressing before you are scheduled to meet with someone else, is an example of a pre-existing internal distraction. Waiting to receive a call regarding medical results, or having a deadline for a major project just around the corner are other examples of this type of internal distractions

As human beings and not machines, there are times when shutting off those

internal distractions may be challenging. Awareness of them will remind you to seek ways to calm yourself before a conversation and to intentionally set those internal distractions aside until after the conversation. Rather than discussing the distraction with the other person during the meeting, take time, before meeting to readjust your perspective. Acknowledge the value and worth of the other person and make honoring your time with them a top priority. Seek to be fully present in the moment, living in the now.

During the session, you may experience pop-up distractions. In that case, it's best to acknowledge them and apologize to the person with whom you are visiting. If you are anticipating an interruption during a visit, communicating that up front is always best. Your mindset should be that It is necessary for you, as a supportive friend, to submit to the needs of the person with whom you are conversing.

Consider:

*What distractions have you experienced during a recent personal conversation?*

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*What could you have done differently to avoid being distracted?*

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### Listening as an Art

Listening is the key to a good conversation and will enable you to ask the right questions at the right time, and make the time together worthwhile. Unfortunately, most individuals experience people who are not good listeners. Nichols states, “Contemporary pressures have, regrettably, shrunk our attention spans and impoverished the quality of listening in our lives. We live in increasingly hurried times . . .”

It is important to realize that listening is a skill and must be developed through practice like any other skill. Nichols has noted that a major reason we fail to listen is because we respond without thinking and crowd out understanding. So when you are going to meet with someone, say to yourself: “It’s not about me!” Choose to focus on the other person and allow for times of space and silence in the conversation so you can thoughtfully take

in the other person’s words as though you were savoring a wonderful and delicious meal. Consider the conversation to be as a gift.

### “It’s not about me!”

Seek to create a safe space for the other person to communicate. Allow him or her the freedom to voice what matters most to them. The number one thing that individuals seek from conversations is to be understood; to be known. When a person is understood, he or she feels validated and valuable. As a good listener, you are to be a witness, not a judge of the other person’s experience. Nichols writes, “Being listened to means that we are taken seriously, that our feelings are recognized, and ultimately, that what we have to say matters.”

View the one with whom you are engaged as a unique and wonderful person. Individuals can sense when you are genuinely engaged and interested in who they are. Respect that each person you encounter is resourceful, capable, and whole. Do not engage in a conversation with the goal of fixing the other person.

Listening involves far more than being able to repeat back what was said. Listening as an art includes paying attention, taking an interest, caring about and taking to heart what the other person is saying; validating and acknowledging them, being moved and appreciating. According to Nichols, this kind of listening “nourishes our sense of worth.”

## COMMUNICATING FOR CONNECTION: LISTENING WELL

Your goal then, as a supportive friend, is to hear the heart's cry; to go deep enough to allow the holy to be spoken.

Consider:

*What is the goal of listening well?*

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*What effect does listening well have on the other person?*

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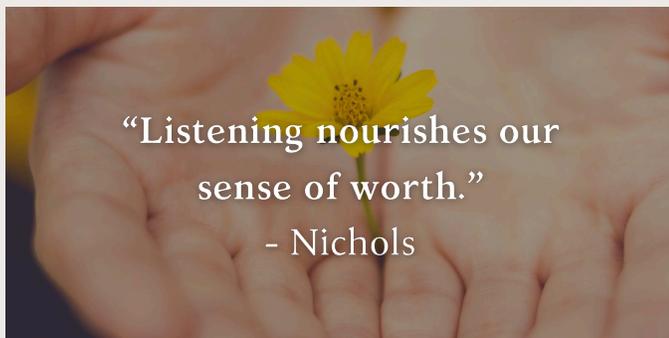
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### Communication Breakdowns

Be alert to the things that will inhibit

your ability to listen and cause communication breakdowns.

#### 1. One's own agenda

If you come to the conversation with a preconceived agenda, you will project onto the conversation your needs rather than attending to the needs of the person with whom you are meeting. Suspend your own agenda and approach the process free of expectations.

#### 2. Time restraints

If the opportunity for a conversation is unexpected - someone drops by for a quick visit - consider adopting the practice of letting them know if you have something else on your schedule. You could say something like, “I can tell that this is an important conversation and I want to be fully present for you, but I have another commitment in x amount of time. Is it possible to schedule another time to have this conversation?”

Most people appreciate openness and honesty about your desire to visit with them and your need to honor another commitment.

#### 3. Transference or countertransference

If you are having difficulty connecting with the other person, you may be experiencing transference or countertransference. Transference is defined as “The way in which a speaker's experience of a listener is unconsciously organized according to preestablished expectations.”

Example of transference:

*A Creekside Community resident who has been raised by a hostile, angry father tends to feel negatively about one of the men who is a supportive friend. The resident finds themselves responding negatively even when this man is trying to be warm and accepting. They are transferring their negative feelings about their father onto this supportive friend.*

Countertransference is defined as a situation in which “the listener has an emotional reaction that interferes with hearing what’s being said.” Another way to express this is hearing the voices of someone from your past. If the other person’s voice brings up something in you that has nothing to do with him/her, you may be experiencing countertransference..

Example of countertransference:

*The supportive friend thinks their client has a similar personality to someone from their personal life, and in response to that thought, they treat them like they might treat this other person.*

As a listener in the grip of countertransference, your mature responses like empathy, perspective, humor, wisdom, and concern for the other person will be distorted through the prism of your emotions. To address this issue, take time after the experience to seek out the root that caused those feelings to emerge. Ask yourself, “What brought that up in me?” This will aid you in avoiding similar

feelings in the future.

#### 4. Preconceived notions

Make a mental note of the times when you expect a person to respond in a particular manner. Even if the expectations are based on knowing a person well, they may hinder the relationship and the other person’s growth. Approach a conversation with the desire to discover - as an adventure. Seek to learn and search out who the other person really is. You are not a mind-reader!

#### 5. Unmet needs

It is critical that you do not come to a conversation to have your needs met. It is in those times that you may slip into advice mode - trying to satisfy your need to feel wise or important. You may not be giving direct advice but rather leading the person to where you think he or she needs to go. This does not honor the one with whom you are visiting. It also assumes that you know what is best for him or her.

*Just as a patient would not expect to give his or her doctor medical advice, as a supportive friend you should not expect to have your listening needs met in your conversations. Make sure you have others with whom you can have your needs met such as a counselor, a coach, a spiritual director, a pastor, etc. Our role is to serve, but you can not offer what you don’t have to give. If your tank is empty, you will have nothing to offer. Also, if you find that a particular situation is bringing up unresolved feelings, you need to reach out and address this with a professional.*

## 6. Poorly timed honesty

Honesty isn't always a good thing. Individuals may say they want you to be honest with them, but offering your honest opinion is not always beneficial. Timing is everything. Being honest when you have not built a trusting relationship may wound the other person so that he/she is no longer willing to share their thoughts and dreams. It is crucial that a person feels safe enough to share his or her brainstorm.

As a supportive friend, it is unkind and unhelpful to rescue someone who isn't desiring to be rescued. The other person needs to be ready to accept your help.

## 7. Interrupting

Do not finish a person's sentence or jump in to interject your thoughts. Let the other person lead the dance.

Listen, and remember the acronym WAIT ... Why Am I Talking?

**WAIT...**

**W**hy

**A**m

**I**

**T**alking?

## Characteristics of Listening Well

What makes for good listening?

### 1. Genuine interest

Take a genuine interest in the person with whom you are communicating. One of the greatest gifts of love we can extend to another is the art of listening. Nichols writes, "Genuine listening means suspending memory, desire and judgment - and for a few moments at least, existing for the other person."

### 2. Listening with your whole being

Listen with your whole being to another person's whole being. Miller and Hall suggest that one should focus on both what is said and what is not said. Pay attention to the other person's energy level, their body language, their tone of voice, and the flow of the conversation.

### 3. The 80-20 rule

Eighty percent of the time you should be listening and twenty percent of the time talking - more specifically, asking questions and seeking for more information.

### 4. Empathetic listening

Empathetic listening looks like being attentive. You are largely silent, following, not leading, and encouraging the speaker to go deeper into his or her experience. You welcome the other person to say more; to expand. Sometimes a simple "uh huh," "I see," or "tell me more" frees the other person to investigate what he or she is experiencing.

## COMMUNICATING FOR CONNECTION: LISTENING WELL

Remember, the goal is to understand; empathic listening allows the other person to explore his or her depths.

As an empathetic listener, you will have to balance between thinking and feeling. Nichols indicates, “This requires a deliberate shift from feeling *with* a speaker to thinking *about* her. What is she saying? Meaning? Feeling? You are there to help the other person position herself for growth. If you only feel deeply with another person, you may be incapable of supporting him or her.

### 5. Being comfortable with silence

Allow the individual space to think and process. Both introverts and extroverts need space in a conversation to think. The goal is not just to keep the conversation going. Allow quiet time and

don't force continual dialogue. Recognizing the areas you need to grow in is the first step to becoming a better listener. Listening is not an easy task. It will require attention and practice but it is powerful in supporting people on their journey to becoming all they were created to be.

Notes:

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## DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How is listening (active listening) different from hearing (passive listening)?
2. What is the goal of listening well?
3. Think of someone you know who is a good listener. How do they make others feel heard?
4. What does it feel like to have someone actively listen to you?
5. What are some barriers to listening well? Which barriers most frequently affect your ability to actively listen?
6. What distractions have you experienced during a recent personal conversation? What could you have done differently to avoid being distracted?

## PRACTICE, ROLE PLAY, OR MORE TO CONSIDER

### 1. Practice mindful listening:

Stop what you are doing, close your eyes, and try to see how many sounds you can hear around you and within you. Notice if there are judgments arising and try not to attach to them. Stay with the flow of sounds for the full time allotted or for as long as you can.

### 2. Practice through introductions

Break into groups of two. For two minutes, have one person introduce themselves to their partner. Reverse roles for the second two minutes. Then have each pair introduce one another to the rest of the group.

Discuss what made the exercise hard or easy, and explore the experience from each person's perspective (introducer; introducee)  
(Credit: WorkSmart Blog. Asnawi Yusof.)

### 3. Practice with a partner:

One partner shares a story of something emotional that happened, and the listener will practice the following techniques:

1. Demonstrating listening through body language and nonverbal responses
2. Reflecting back the content of what the partner shared
3. Reflecting back the emotions that the partner shared

Check in with your partner after you've "reflected" back to them what you understood them to say to be sure that it was accurate.

# ACTIVE LISTENING

## Hearing What People Have to Say

Active listening is a communication skill that helps you understand a person's complete message. It allows you to concentrate on what is being conveyed verbally and non-verbally.

How to practice active listening:

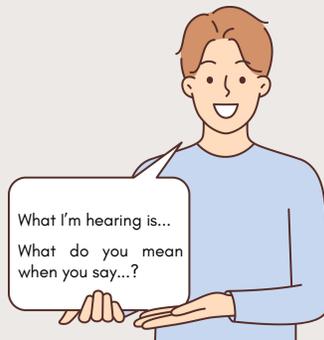
### 1. Pay Attention

Focus on the person who is talking. Notice their tone and body language. Ignore distractions.



### 3. Give Feedback

Reflect back to the speaker by briefly restating in your own words what has been said. Ask open-ended questions to clarify and make sure you understood the speaker correctly.



### 2. Show You're Listening

Nod, smile, and say "yes" or "uh-huh" to encourage the person to continue. Maintain eye contact.



### 5. Respond Appropriately

Once you have gained information and understand the other person's perspective, be open, honest and respectful in your response, even when you don't agree. Avoid attacking or putting down the speaker.



### 4. Be Patient

Wait until the person has finished their point before asking questions or offering your counter argument. Avoid interrupting.

Be sure you really hear what the person is trying to communicate. Active listening is not a checklist to follow, but a means of understanding a person's complete message.

Practicing active listening can increase your productivity, improve your relationships, and help you avoid conflict.

## REFERENCES

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Nichols, M.P. & Straus, M. B. (2021) *The Lost Art of Listening*. New York City: The Guilford Press.

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# Christ-Centered Corner

## *Encouragement From a Christian Perspective*

Our God is One who listens well. David demonstrates His confidence in God's active listening when he writes in Psalm 17:6 "I call on You, God, because You will answer me; listen closely to me; hear what I say."

Active listening is part of God's nature; He is Elohim Shama. Shama is an active word and means to listen and pay attention to; to position yourself as a listener to serve and care for the one who is speaking. The God who listened and was moved by Hagar in her exile (Genesis 16), Hannah in her longing for a son (1 Samuel), and Daniel in His distress over a prophecy (Daniel 9) has placed His Spirit in us. He has given us "ears that hear and eyes that see" (Prov 20:12) both physically and spiritually, and He has clothed us in the humility of Christ so that we can set aside our own interests and be completely available to another person. The gift of God's full attention is fully ours, and we are to pass that gift on in the way we listen to others.

As believers, we are admonished to be slow to speak and quick to listen (James 1:19). Proverbs makes it clear that choosing to do otherwise is the mark of a fool:

*Proverbs 18:2 - Fools find no pleasure in understanding  
but delight in airing their own opinions.*

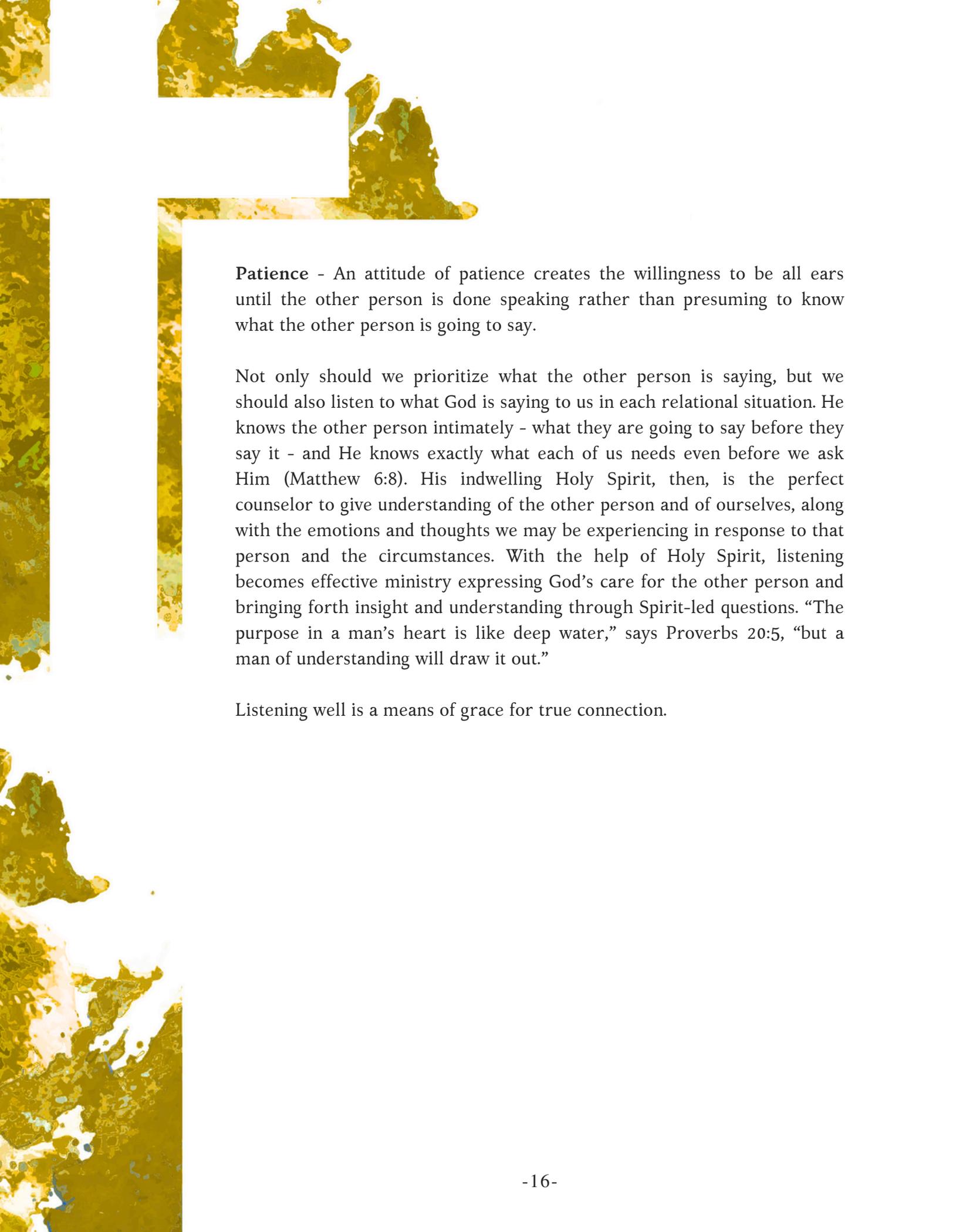
*Proverbs 18:7 - The mouths of fools are their undoing,  
and their lips are a snare to their very lives.*

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

*Proverbs 29:20 - Do you see someone who speaks in haste?  
There is more hope for a fool than for them.*

The fruit of the Spirit gives us all we need to accomplish the mandate of listening well:

**Love** - Listening well flows out of a heart of love that recognizes the value of the other person. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "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."



**Patience** - An attitude of patience creates the willingness to be all ears until the other person is done speaking rather than presuming to know what the other person is going to say.

Not only should we prioritize what the other person is saying, but we should also listen to what God is saying to us in each relational situation. He knows the other person intimately - what they are going to say before they say it - and He knows exactly what each of us needs even before we ask Him (Matthew 6:8). His indwelling Holy Spirit, then, is the perfect counselor to give understanding of the other person and of ourselves, along with the emotions and thoughts we may be experiencing in response to that person and the circumstances. With the help of Holy Spirit, listening becomes effective ministry expressing God's care for the other person and bringing forth insight and understanding through Spirit-led questions. "The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water," says Proverbs 20:5, "but a man of understanding will draw it out."

Listening well is a means of grace for true connection.

