

Practising Compassion

Listening for the Heart

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“Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Proverbs 18:21). This is a powerful proverb: Your tongue has the power of life. And your tongue has the power of death. You’ve felt the power of life in someone’s words. You know how tender words can bolster your marriage. You have seen how repentant and apologetic words can restore a broken relationship.

But you have seen that the same tongue that speaks life can also crush a spirit. You’ve also heard words that have felt like the sting of death to your own heart. Words that hurt so much they linger in your soul. Wounding words.

And the honest reality is: You’ve seen your own words do this to others too. Your words can shut down and wound your wife. You try to ‘correct’ someone spiritually – but instead of bringing them closer to Christ, your words land like a hammer on a fragile heart.

SO, HERE’S THE QUESTION:

If death and life are in the power of the tongue, how do we make sure our words bring life?

WORDS OF LIFE

How do we make sure our words bring life? How do we make sure that our words become places where people before us encounter the love of the Father and the compassion of Jesus?

Most people assume the answer is to speak better. But Scripture points us somewhere else first: The path to life-giving words actually begins with listening better – in listening for the heart.

Because many of our death-dealing words are not born from the ignorance of God’s Word or the gospel. They are so often born first from missing the heart and then misapplying our words – even gospel words.

They are the wrong words or spoken at the wrong time. Something that is supposed to be life-giving becomes at best superficial, not touching the heart at all. At worst, it can be wounding, like this proverb states, a death blow.

Proverbs 20:5 says: *“The purpose in a man’s heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.”*

Our hearts are deep waters – your wife’s heart, your child’s, even your own heart is hard to know. And if you respond only to the surface – the facts, problems to solve, mistakes to correct, advice to give – you may still bring death, even when your theology is sound, because you have not understood what is happening in the heart before you spoke.

A GENTLE SPIRIT

Instead of drawing that heart out, we tend to react. We manage behaviour and correct symptoms. We prosecute the person before us. Sure, we might win the moment, but we lose the person. We deal death blows with our words.

But if you learn to listen for the heart beneath words and actions, you begin to be able to discern which gospel words are needed for the heart before you. You begin to give words “*fitly spoken*” instead of “*spirit-breaking*.”

COMPASSION IN ACTION

This is not passive, as people assume listening is – instead it is compassion in action. Understand this clearly: this

is more than being empathetic or having emotional intelligence about others and where they are at, or simply *'tuning in to them'*.

Compassion is about making the life-transforming love of the Father and the gospel truth of Jesus Christ tangible to the person before you. It is bringing gospel hope to those who both sin and suffer. This is our ultimate goal in listening for the heart – that we might be gospel bearers to those we minister to.

Consider how Jesus did this – he always listened first. Then he responded with words or questions or even rebukes that were designed to lead people to himself. We are not able to discern the heart like he was, for he was God, but this is precisely why God calls us to listen for the heart – so that we might draw it out and then so that we might grow in being able to point people to their Saviour, in speaking gospel life to them.

What an incredible privilege but also an awesome responsibility.

POSITIONED TO LISTEN

So how do we grow in this *'listening for heart'*? It does not begin with technique. Compassionate listening begins with knowing your own position before God. You are weak. Needy. Sinful. Completely dependent on Christ for life and salvation. You listen as one who needs words of life yourself.

This is so important because it prevents you from standing over the person you are listening to in judgment and condemnation.

FOR EXAMPLE:

- A man hears another struggling with pornography and says, *"You just need more discipline and self-control."*
- A husband hears his wife struggling with the responsibilities of caring for their home and children and says, *"You just need to be more organised."*

This response minimizes the struggles and points a person to internal personal strength and self-control. It asks them to rely on themselves for change and growth. The speaker acts as if they are capable of this themselves. This is not the gospel and not what the struggler needs. Instead, it is hope in Jesus and his power that they need.

OUR NEED FOR GRACE

You see, when we forget our own need for grace, we approach others as experts rather than fellow strugglers. We prosecute, judge and condemn instead of encouraging and building and pointing to Christ.

But when we remember our own weakness and need for mercy, how utterly helpless we are to overcome sin, struggle, and suffering, then we come alongside others. We join with them in their struggle with sin or suffering. And we point them to the only one who can help. To the compassionate Saviour, Jesus Christ.

However, knowing your weakness does not mean you come empty-handed. In fact, you should NOT come empty handed. Paul says God comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others with the comfort we ourselves have received (2 Corinthians 1: 3-4).

If you have not allowed Jesus to meet you in your own fear, sin, and sorrow, you will not have comfort to offer. You will not be able to speak words of life, because you do not know words of life.

Do you know how God has met you in your sin and suffering? Can you speak to another about that, pointing to the help you have received? These are words of life.

COMPASSION LISTENING

SO, COMPASSIONATE LISTENING BEGINS HERE:

- › Knowing yourself as deeply needy: So that you come alongside others.
- › And knowing yourself as deeply loved: As one who has received words of life from Christ.

From the position we move into practice. What does listening for the heart, actually look like?

1. LISTEN AS GOD LISTENS

When you read the psalms, you see that God listens to everything: to crying and complaining. To lament and doubt. To praise and joy. To anger and confusion. He has truly *“heard it all.”* He does not turn away. Nor does he stop people from speaking, even when they are not speaking theologically sound words.

We are called to listen like that. To all the things that God listens to. Not to shut people down. Like God, we first allow a person to *“pour out their heart”* (Psalm 62:8).

2. PAY ATTENTION

You cannot listen well if you are distracted. Phones down. Eyes up. Sometimes it means saying, *“I want to hear you – but can we set a time when I can give you my full attention?”* This is creating the space for listening to happen well.

We mirror divine listening when we do this. God sees. He turns his eyes toward us. God hears and he turns his ears to listen. You cannot respond to a heart if you do not attend to that heart (Psalm 34).

Your attention communicates value. It says: you matter and your heart matters. Attention is the first step in creating a place where the heart can be heard. Jesus repeatedly stopped and turned his attention to people. He saw them and had compassion (Matthew 9:36).

3. OBEDIENCE AND RESTRAINT

James 1:19 clearly commands us: *“Be quick to listen.”* Listening is not optional. It is a matter of obedience. It is a spiritual and redemptive calling in your life. And therefore, it is not enough to say *“I am just not good at it.”* You are called to grow in your ability to obey this command. It is a fruit of the Spirit.

And James is clear, you must also restrain yourself and *“be slow to speak”* (James 1:19). Proverbs 18:13 says, *“if one gives an answer before he hears, it is to his folly and shame.”* Therefore, before you speak, before you correct, before you advise, before you even point to Jesus, you are called to listen, and you are called to *‘bite your tongue.’*

4. DRAW OUT THE HEART

Drawing out the heart requires swimming in deep waters. It means going beneath surface actions, words, and even feelings to see what is below. To see what the heart is actually saying. In counselling, I call this *‘Finding the Iceberg.’*

FOR EXAMPLE: when we see anger – is a person angry or are they afraid, or grieving, or anxious? Anger requires one response, fear or grief requires another. You need to know what a person’s iceberg is so that you speak the right gospel message to the heart.

In order to do this, you often need to slow a person down, ask them to tell you about how things make them feel, what they are thinking or predicting in their moments, what they are hoping for, or what they are trying to avoid. These help you access the heart.

Ed Welch always says, *“Make sure you TRACK with a person.”* Especially when a person’s emotional response seems too big for the situation – that means something else is happening in their deep waters. Start there – and ask them to *‘tell you more.’*

6. STAY CURIOUS, NOT FURIOUS

James 1:19 warns us that we are to be slow to anger, immediately after he tells us “*to be quick to listen.*” Why? Because he knows that listening is emotionally dangerous territory. Because the things people say to us are often *hard* to hear.

A wife says, “*You never help me.*” And immediately we want to defend ourselves: Never? Really? Can’t she see how hard I work? And you pull away from her in frustration.

We can get angry and answer in anger instead of responding to the heart they are revealing. We miss the reality that this wife feels alone, overwhelmed, and maybe even abandoned (even if that is not actually true). Instead of listening, we react. We correct. We defend. We push back. We get furious.

And the moment we do, we can see the other person visibly shut down. You might see her shoulders slump, her mouth tighten, and her words and responses get clipped. She pulls away and withdraws. Sometimes the conversation escalates into a fight, but many times it just completely disappears.

THIS IS A SOBERING REALITY, BROTHERS: If your wife, your children, or your friends cannot raise concerns, have a different opinion than you, or bring their sin or suffering to you without you becoming angry, defensive, or sitting in superior judgment, you are teaching them something. You are teaching them that silence and withdrawal is safer than honesty with you.

So they stop speaking. They hide. They simmer. And eventually – often unexpectedly – they explode. Not because they are irrational. But because you have not created a space where their heart can be heard without punishment. They do not expect compassion. They expect anger, frustration, impatience.

SO THE INVITATION HERE IS THIS: When anger or defensiveness rises inside you – don’t treat it as a signal to attack or withdraw. See it as an invitation. An invitation to curiosity. To understanding why both you and they have such strong feelings here – because remember strong feelings indicate that something is in the deep waters that needs exploring, both in her heart and yours.

Instead of asking, How can they say this? Or How can they accuse me of this? Ask, “*Why do they see it this way?*” Ask them to help you understand.

Be curious, not furious.

This is one of the most transformative shifts you can make. When you feel defensiveness and anger arise, do an internal reminder: to get curious – not furious. Go exploring! Ask questions and seek understanding.

7. ACCURACY MATTERS

Lastly, Romans 12:15 says, “*Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.*” You cannot do that if you are misreading the heart. So, you need to check your understanding. Ask: Am I understanding you? Am I on the right track? Is it more like this or like that?

This humility is important to drawing up those deep waters. Assume nothing, always humbly ask. Because our accuracy about the heart is critical. It helps us fulfil our purpose in listening: To speak words of life, not death.

Remember that our goal in compassionate listening is to make the life-transforming love of Jesus known to the person before us. We want them to see Jesus. If we are not accurate in our listening, we will miss the mark. We will risk speaking ‘death’ words, not life words.

It is not only what we say – but how we say it, when we say it, and why we say it that matters. We can speak many ‘*right words*’, and yet they may land falsely.

LISTEN BEFORE YOUR RESPOND

So, brothers, LISTEN FIRST. Learn to listen for the heart so that your responses, your words, your reactions will not harm but heal. They will point to Jesus, not to yourself. They will be words of life and invitation. They will create safety and hope. This is the compassion of Christ in action. This is one way we can clearly imitate His compassion.

Listening for the heart is not easy. It is time-consuming and costly. It requires humility, patience, restraint, and again, courage. In addition to growing in listening well, we will also have to grow in responding well. Choosing words “*fitly spoken*”, that are a “*tree of life*” to the hearer. This is another area of growth.

And brothers, you will not always get it right. You will fail. Your own heart will at times get in the way of hearing the heart of another.

GOD HEAR US ALL

When you are feeling inadequate, remember: You are not entering these conversations alone. You have a God who never misunderstands the heart.

THE FATHER listens perfectly where you fail.

THE SAVIOUR speaks gospel hope where you misspeak.

THE SPIRIT brings comfort when you bring clumsy words.

And this Spirit is also at work in you to help you mature and grow and obey his command to listen. He will work in your heart so that you grow in bringing words of life.

This is not easily done, but brothers, it is one of the clearest ways you can reflect the compassion of Christ.