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Listening

THE MOST OVERLOOKED SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE





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The most overlooked spiritual discipline—Part 1

Do you wonder whether God ever feels like standing at the top of His celestial staircase and calling down to the world, "Would everybody please listen?" Our lives are continually surrounded by noise. The noise interferes with our purpose and gets in the way of fulfilling God's purpose on earth. There is really only one way to turn down the noise of our own incessant chatter, only one way that cuts through our narcissism and focuses our attention on God, our own soul, and the trials and struggles of those around us—the practice of the spiritual disciplines referred to in Scripture.

Discipline is not a popular word, but there is a long Christian tradition that holds the spiritual disciplines in high regard, and we ignore them at the peril of our own spiritual well-being. The spiritual disciplines are those habits that nurture spiritual health and maturity—or sanctification, if you like. The Bible speaks about them frequently; though in its typically unsystematic way that leaves us culling and organizing from across the Scriptures to create the categories and lists that we find so handy for remembering everything from doctrine to practice.

Various writers from different Christian traditions over the centuries have collected and defined the spiritual disciplines that shaped these Christians according to the emphases of their faith tradition. And though these different enumerations have many overlapping and synonymous categories, there is no agreement on a definitive list. Characteristically, these lists share disciplines such as prayer, study of the Word, praise, worship, confession, giving, and fellowship. Other disciplines are less consistently named, such as chastity, contemplation, fasting, service, and simplicity. Most of these come backed up with a formidable list of Bible verses that can be easily collated by a quick look in a concordance. Three of the most popular, for example, are prayer, with more than 240 references; praise, with more than 200; and worship, with more than 150.

The most often mentioned but least often noted discipline

But one spiritual discipline is virtually never mentioned in these lists even though this discipline is featured often in Scripture. That is the discipline of *listening and hearing*, two words treated synonymously in the Bible. These two words are mentioned about 700 times in the Bible. About 500 are in the imperative or instructive form, as a practice to be followed. Listening is implied in such disciplines as prayer, contemplation, and meditation, but listening as a discipline in its own right often becomes obscured. There are obviously too many texts with "hear" or "listen" to list, but some of the better-known include the great Shema, the prayer that forms the centerpiece of Jewish prayer services, "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one," (Deut. 6:4),* and the New Testament repetitions of "Whoever has ears, let them hear" (Matt. 11:15; Mark 4:9; Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Certain books that particularly emphasize listening are mainly books of instruction, prophecy, and gospel: Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Samuel, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, and Revelation.

The fruit of listening

The Bible associates listening and hearing with many spiritual qualities. A partial list in no particular order, with selected references, includes compassion (Exod. 22:27); justice (Deut. 1:16, 17; Mic. 3:9); wisdom, instruction, and understanding (Deut. 4:1; Job 5:27; 34:16; Prov. 1:5; Matt. 15:10); reverence (Deut. 4:10); discipline (Deut. 4:36); blessing (Luke 11:28; Rev. 1:3); the presence, attention, forgiveness, and intervention of God (1 Kings 8; 2 Kings 19:16); the Word of the Lord (Jer. 22:29); confession (Neh. 1:6); praise (Isa. 24:16); spiritual direction (Isa. 30:21); humility and teachability (Jer. 13:15; Neh. 9:17); reproof (Jer. 36:3); counsel (Ezek. 3:17); trust (Mic. 7:7); encouragement (Zech. 8:9; 3 John 4); testimony and witness (Matt. 11:4; Ps. 66:16); healing (Luke

5:15; Acts 28:27); obedience (Deut. 5:27; 31:12); spiritual fruit (Luke 8:8); belonging to Jesus' family (Luke 8:21; John 8:47); believing (John 9:27; 11:42); and listening as a gift of God (Rom. 11:8). A more complete list of godly character could hardly be compiled.

The discipline of listening becomes crucial because, as Scripture says,

> The heart is deceitful above all things
> and beyond cure.
> Who can understand it?
> (Jer. 17:9).

As self-centered beings, we are in desperate need to hear from the Source of truth. Even as Christians, we find it easy to confuse our own will and desires with those of God. Many of us may have had experiences with well-intentioned Christians who have been doing their concept of the Lord's work but in fact have been creating more harm than good. Indeed, the greatest damage to the name of God is not bad people doing bad things; it is good people doing bad things in His name. Hence the Bible's emphasis on listening, hearing, and "giving ear" to God in order to avoid, or at least minimize, our tendency to confuse our will with that of God. Psalm 19 notes at length how listening to the law, instruction, and statutes of God refresh, make wise, give joy to, and enlighten the soul and heart, helping us discern error and overcome even our hidden faults.



The second dimension of listening to God can be practiced by learning to hear each other.

How to listen to God

Listening to God is a discipline requiring practice. The primary way to do so is through *the Word*, written and spoken. The Word provides the standard by which to measure all other sources of hearing God, hence its absolute centrality.

The Spirit is the second way of hearing God: through solitude, prayer, and confession, the Spirit of Truth speaks directly into our heart's ears.

Spiritual mentors are another way for us to hear the word of God, as we practice submission and mutual accountability. Mentors are a key feature in the development of spiritual discernment of biblical characters, from Joshua to Samuel to Elisha and from the Twelve Apostles to Timothy (cf. 2 Tim. 4:11).

The final way is through *experience*—trial and error. Road testing the will of God is vital but must always be subject to the other ways of listening in order to prevent us from making God into our

own image and, thus, hearing from God what we would like Him to say. Too often we road test first, instead of using the Word, the Spirit, and our mentors to help discriminate between those prompted by our own limited understanding and those which are genuinely of God. The Bible encourages us to practice laying aside our mind-set and hearing the mind-set of God. "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5).

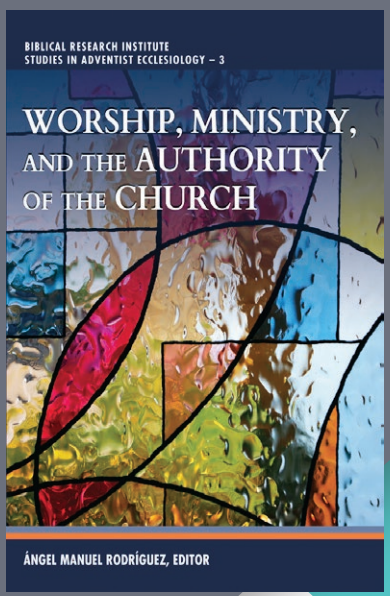
A three-way spiritual discipline

Spiritual disciplines are advocated as ways of connecting with God. So, too, is listening. But learning to hear God can be difficult: He is not present in the flesh, and for many, He rarely speaks audibly into their lives. There are other dimensions to spiritual listening, and all contribute to our capacity to hear God. And in doing so, they also expand our capacity to grow personally and minister effectively.

The second dimension of listening to God can be practiced by *learning to hear each other*. Biblical listening is associated with relationship and empathy between humans (Job 31:35; Gen. 23:13–15; Gen. 42:22) and with romantic love (Song of Solomon 2:14; 8:13). The Bible encourages listening in order to have listening reciprocated (Judg. 9:7) and notes that silence comes as a pathway to wisdom and understanding (Job 33:31, 33; 34:2, 10, 16). As we have already seen in Philippians 2:5, having the mind-set of God in place of our own is something we should bring to our relationships with each other. The whole concept of biblical mentoring is premised on listening to each other.

Frequently, in conversation we are simply waiting for a gap where we can jump in and say our piece, which we are composing while the other speaks. We are still in our own mind-set. *We are not really listening.* We need to practice hearing each other, for others are the concrete realization of the presence of God. Doing someone the favor of actually listening to them is as Christian an act as giving food to the hungry and visiting the prisoner in jail. " 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me' " (Matt. 25:40).

There are many biblical concepts that are counterintuitive to sinful humanity: the last shall be first; the meek inherit the earth; laying down my life will save it; and the leader is servant of all. Growing from the last is yet another paradox: I *feel* powerful when I talk; I *am* powerful when I listen. In another counterintuitive truth, the higher the position of leadership, the more the leader needs to listen. Usually we associate leadership with talking and following with listening. But



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while powerful preaching can change a church, sensitive listening will more likely bring about better and more committed change.

In one personal instance, convincing arguments beat down opposition to spiritual reformation but left a trail of casualties. In another later instance, after the humbling experience of learning that in listening is real power, a listening leadership motivated most of those being led to work harmoniously to bring about change. Both talking and listening resulted in change, but listening caused less damage and resulted in more permanent progress.

The last form of hearing encouraged by the Bible flows from this: *to listen to oneself*. Soul awareness is featured in many verses (1 Sam. 1:15; Job 7:11; Pss. 31:9; 35:3; 42; 62:1–5; 130:5; 131:2; Prov. 19:8) and is associated with satisfaction and renewed life (Isa. 55:2, 3). Listening to myself allows me to identify my needs and have them addressed instead of sublimated and ignored. In so doing, I am in a far better state to welcome and receive God's healing love and grace. Traditionally, Protestant Christians have been very nervous about any inward focus out of fear of pride and self-sufficiency. But the largest book of the Bible also contains the greatest density of introspective language. Imagine the Psalms without their powerful expressions of the poets' own soul. Try removing all of the "I, me, my" statements from the Psalms and see how poorly and ineffectively they read. It was in recognizing their own pain, distress, anger, and joy that the psalmists burst into song, sought the Lord with passion, and praised His name with abandon.

Jesus the Master Listener

Jesus was often called "the Master Teacher," but might He not also be called "the Master Listener"? Let us examine the Gospels on Jesus' experiences as a listener. First, *He listened to His Father*. Jesus insisted that His entire ministry on earth was simply carrying out the will of the Father, and all that He taught was merely what He had heard from His Father (John 6:38; 7:16). To do that must have involved a lot of listening on His part. He noted that even the Spirit worked in the same way, only reflecting what He had heard (John 16:13). There are also many references to Jesus praying, and a few of them detail that He could tarry in prayer for many hours, even all night (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16; Luke 6:12; Matt. 14:23). While we do not know the specific content of those hours in prayer, He cannot have been talking the whole time; a good part of His prayer time was listening. In Gethsemane, He prayed to be relieved of the agony of the cross. But He accepted it, demonstrating that He was listening to the will of the Father.

> *I* feel *powerful when I talk; I* am *powerful when I listen.*

Second, *Jesus listened to others*. Having listened to His Father, His heart was hypersensitive to those around Him, to the point where He could hear their unspoken, even unrealized, cries. Nicodemus, the woman at the well, Zaccheus, and the paralytic who was let down through the roof, among many others, had their appeals to Him answered; not just in full but beyond what they had articulated. And in hearing their very souls' cry, He best demonstrated the loving heart of His Father.

Third, *Jesus was sensitive to the speaking of His own soul*. He could tell the difference in His spirit between a purposeful touch and the random shoving of the crowd (Luke 8:45, 46). His many hours in prayer testify to His awareness of His own need of the Father. He grieved over an unrepentant Jerusalem (Matt. 23:37). In the Garden of Gethsemane, He begged for relief from the impending cross. At Calvary, He articulated His thirst.

God, the Ultimate Listener

Have you ever wondered, why is God powerful? This has much to do with Him being a listening God. He is "El Shama" or "Ishmael," "the God who hears me" (Gen. 16:11); the Word made flesh (John 1:1–3); and the Comforter, sent to convict and guide (John 16:12–15). God listens more than the rest of the universe put together. He hears not just every human prayer; He hears a sparrow fall; He keeps track of the ever-decreasing number of hairs on my head (Luke 12:6, 7). We find the uniqueness of the Christian faith right here in God's eagerness not just to tell us things but to demonstrate to us that our cry for salvation has been heard. God made Himself manifest and dwelt among us. God was so serious about listening to His children that He became one of us.

The theory and theology of this is all very well, but the question remains of how to practice this invaluable discipline. Fortunately, we live in an age where the practice of listening has been well-researched and its benefits clearly attested. The second part of this article exploring the practice of listening as applied to the role of the pastor will be published in the April 2017 issue.

* Scripture references are from the New International Version.

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