

Listening Edge

Today, we're going to talk about the pastoral care listening edge, how to really begin to be a listener. Before we start this, I sort of want to just give you what I believe the vision of pastoral care. The vision of pastoral care is to really help someone take that next step in what God is wanting to do or heal or change in someone's life. I have to get into that by thinking of the adventure of all that. Pastoral care is an adventure with those in your care. In the sense, you get to walk beside them, with them in a journey. This area of pastoral care work is multifaceted. It's full of surprises, unexpected problems, opportunities for profound insight into the human situation. Now, I didn't make that up. That's what the *Introduction to Pastoral Care* by Charles Gerkin says.

Pastoral care is one of—to me—one of the fun, enjoyable, challenging, frustrating, all of those things altogether and there is not a boring moment in being a pastor when you have those pastoral care journeys, narratives, and stories in your life and God uses you to bring His grace, His mercy, His challenge, His change to those of your care.

Now, for you to really be good at pastoral care and have those best practices, it really does start with listening. If you think about theology of listening, it really comes on to this. You are ministering to the image bearers of God. Another way to put it: you are imaged in your church those saints in Christ. James 1:19, "My dear brothers, take note of this. Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry."

What we're going to talk about today are just some of the techniques or some of the skills, the best practices of having a listening edge in pastoral care. Now, when you start a session or sessions with people, here are some principles to keep in mind, to write down, to practice, to think about. First of all, when you listen, listening makes those in our care feel special. People feel respected, valued, interesting, loved. Our conversations go deeper. Our relationships build more trust. By listening, we model that very skill for them as they deal with the relationships in their lives.

When you listen to someone, you say, “You are important enough to me for me to listen to you.” I’ve had some neat little experiences with that where just by having the attitude of listening, somebody will break down in tears right in my office and I’ll go, “Are you okay?” “Pastor, I’m just so thankful that you’re listening. Somebody’s finally listening to me.”

As we look at more pastoral care listening techniques, here are just some things to keep in mind. Look comfortable and comfortably toward those who you are listening to. In other words, if you’re stressed out and sitting back, no. Sit up straight. Lean slightly forward to demonstrate your interest. Your body language. You don’t want to be doing this. [does a certain posture] You want to have that certain “Who are you?” If someone is upset, having those myriad sort of looks of concern but being fully at the table with those you’re listening to.

Again, some of the steps are scenes that we assume to do it. But I just want to remind you of these techniques. Show you understand. “Oh, uh-huh. Hmm, I see.” Nod. Ask questions that keep the revelation coming. Somebody may start a conversation and they say, “Well, in this situation with my child, I’m just really concerned. My child is now all of a sudden not talking very much.” “Oh, okay.” When you ask a question, do they respond? No, not really. “Oh, okay. Have you seen evidence in your house that something’s happening?” And then they talk and say, “Well, I noticed that my son is listening to music for long periods of time.” “Oh, okay. What kind of music?” And you start getting questions and raise eyebrows.

Ask more questions. “Well, what happened when you asked him this question? Did you ask him what kind of music he’s listening to?” “I did and he said he’s listening to this kind of music.” “Oh, okay. Well, how did you feel about that?” “I was very saddened because my parents told me...” What happens is you’ll kind of get engaged in the narrative because what people will do is they’ll sort of like sometimes give you an answer, and if you’re not with them, they’ll sort of stop and then they’ll sort of think like you’ll what to say or you’ll how to fix the situation when you still haven’t heard the whole story. Remember: don’t cross your arms.

Focus on the speaker. When they're talking, just stay with them. Here's what happens. What we can do is our minds are capable of thinking about the Green Bay Packers, how they beat the Pittsburgh Steelers in the Super Bowl while someone is talking about a very troublesome situation. Now, again, it doesn't happen all the time but we are capable of thinking ahead, thinking of other thoughts. Here's another thing that's very common. If somebody is talking and we already have it fixed in mind before we even heard what the full story was.

Proverbs 18:13, "He who answers before listening that is his folly and his shame." I have to admit it. As a pastor, I've done that and I'm kind of an extrovert so we extroverts out there have to really be careful. But I've done that where I'm thinking I heard what I heard. Over the years I have, by God's grace, trained myself to fully be with the person I am talking to and listen and keep other thoughts out of my mind. You know what I've noticed over the years? My ability to care, my ability to encourage has gone up when I have kept thoughts out of my mind whether it's thinking ahead or thinking about something else.

Here's another pastoral care listening technique that's very important. Don't get on the listener stage. Let them shine. Don't tell the speaker, "The same thing happened to me last week, last year, last church" unless they specifically ask. Let them talk. That happened so often because we'll listen to somebody and then our immediate thinking is to apply it to something that's happened in our life. So what we do is that we will say, "Yeah, I know what happened. This happened to me once." But what we are not doing is we're not letting their story be their story. We're cutting them off.

We're saying that your stage is not truly the stage and that our experiences like "When I was a child, we had to walk ten miles to school" when someone were to say, "Well, you know, I just really struggle with walking a mile to school." Then right away we talk about how "You think that's bad. You think your pain that you're dealing with your marriage. Why, just the other week, this happened in our marriage. But we're so perfect. We're so good. We solved the whole problem and we think you should solve it too." What you're doing is you're really not letting them shine as the speaker. You all of a sudden throw them off the stage and put yourself on the stage.

More listening care techniques. Stay quiet even if they are attacking you. That happens sometimes where a pastor wants to talk to you. The speaker needs to be heard. Don't defend yourself. They will feel respected and heard and you'll really hear the whole argument. When somebody has a problem with you—and pastors have occasions when people are going to have problems with us because the pastor gets to be transferred, various things because we're the authority figure and they've had an authority figure problem in their past. A lot of times they'll be angry at you about something. Okay, fine. Let them talk and let them say the whole thing. If there is something you can change or you can improve, listen to it. But understand that a lot of times, someone just needs to talk.

In the process of talking and hearing the whole discussion, you will find that you'll be able to—if there's something you did do wrong—ask for forgiveness. If there is something that is totally not appropriate, it's an accusation, it doesn't make any sense, you actually get to hear the whole inappropriate argument and then address it with compassion and kindness but not just sort of like defend yourself. There's that old Shakespeare thing "I think thou dost protest too much" thinking. If somebody has something to say and they're even attacking you and the first thing you do is constantly defend yourself, defend yourself, it's almost like you communicate that there's probably a lot of truth in that because it sure did hit a chord. "I think thou dost protest too much." So the reality is stay quiet even if someone's attacking you and listen to even them.

More pastoral care listening techniques. Get into the conversation. Become the respectful detective. Again, back to asking questions. But wait until the speaker has completed talking. Again, don't interrupt them like we mentioned before. Ask questions like we mentioned before. If I hear something, restate their point to make sure you didn't misunderstand them. As being that respectful detective, you really want to know what is being said. "What you are saying is that..." It's just not preventing your thoughts from thinking ahead or thinking of something else. It's about thinking about what's being said and sort of having that snooping around to understand it to the depth. So you're that respectful detective.

You're on a quest. When you're listening to someone, you're on quest. It is an enjoyable quest of beyond. You're asking, "What you are saying is that..." And then what happens is people respond. "No, I'm not saying quite that. I'm saying that and this." "Oh, that and this. Are you meaning this by that?" What happens is you have the ability to really have someone understand what they're dealing with.

We've had a good session here today on some more techniques. In our next session, we're going to even talk about that mastery of listening even more. I have actually two case studies today that I thought would be interesting pastoral care that come to me on a regular basis. The first case study is someone says, "Pastor, I just am struggling with doubt." Okay. Or you're evangelizing someone and that issue comes up. Now, I've put it in the pastoral care and not into the evangelism talk here because a lot of times, that struggling with doubt is a pastoral care issue more than it is just faith and doubt issue.

One of the things that I understand when someone says, "I'm struggling with doubt," I don't necessarily think it's just an evangelistic issue. I am very much concerned about who they are. Hebrews 11:3 says, "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible." So, the reality is faith sort of is a little bit of a nebulous issue and that's the true honesty for everybody. You can say to everybody "I wasn't there at creation but I believe." But why? It's a common struggle. Put yourself as a pastor in that common struggle.

What pastors can sometimes make a mistake of is to be the answer man. "So, you're struggling with doubt. Oh, you're a bad person. Don't you know the Bible says this and that? What did your parents say..." instead of just being human with them. Pastoral. "I understand that we all struggle with doubt, George." Our faith is based not in the certainty. It's faith-based certainty, not certainty-based faith. You can share that with people that you are in a relationship with God by faith. You did not see tangibly Jesus right there like Thomas did. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who do not see and yet believe."

There's something awesome about faith. One of the things I share with people when they come to me especially if there is pastoral struggle is faith and so forth. I kind of go, "I'm kind of glad there's that

certainty as the foundation of Christianity.” And they’ll say, “Why, Pastor?” “Well, it’s because what if I had fifteen seconds of Heaven certainty, what would that do for me?” Now, some people may say, “Well, then your faith will not be challenged.” “Oh, but I’ve had other challenges.” I’ll give you a few.

Number one is maybe I would be too robotic in my walk with God from then on. It’s like if you actually saw Fifteen Seconds of Heaven, now my will, my ownership, my participation—one thing that doubt does is really keeps me all on and I don’t go complacent. “Okay, I got to serve God because I know it’s all real and because I know for certainty it’s all real. Whether I want to serve Him or not, I’m going to have to because Heaven is real and hell is real.” See, have someone realize that God set it up that it is by space so that when we come to Him, we come to Him with our whole will, our being. When the Holy Spirit comes to us and nudges us along and all that stuff, our wills are not crushed yet. Our faith is developed.

God gives us just enough creation where without excuse is enough. But then, there’s the Word of God and that’s enough. But did on the common place with a parishioner who’s struggling with doubt. Now, there are some excellent books. If their issue really is apologetics, it’s just an intellectual struggle, fine. You can get some great books out there that you can give to someone who struggle with like the arguments for the existence of God and all those things. But I’m talking about the pastoral care side.

The pastoral care side is let someone know no matter how strong your faith is that you have a common struggle with them. This is not the evangelism course. This is not the apologetics course. This is just when someone comes to you, don’t blow them away with the ten existence for God unless they want to hear about it. Instead, go back to the earlier thing. Listen. What you’ll find is that a lot of times, they’re not struggling with faith.

They’re struggling with their childhood church upbringing. They’re not struggling really with faith. They’re struggling with an abusive father who used the God card to discipline them. They’re not struggling with faith. They’re struggling with a pastor who did something inappropriate so now they have an authority issue. Or a mother who was overbearing or a grandparent or some bad experience in

the past. They come to you in their injured churchness struggle with doubt. Understand the pastoral care dimension by which you're coming to them. There will be plenty of time for the books on the existence of God. There will be plenty of time to talk about other things that help them in their faith. But when they come to you, "Pastor, I struggle with doubt," listen before you start shooting all the arguments for the existence of God.

I have one more just pastoral care practical discussion that you're going to have quite a bit. A pastor addicted to alcohol, television, pornography, addicted to material things. I'm addicted to painkillers. I'm addicted to drugs. There could be chemical issues, medicating issues, accountability, support issues, spiritual issues, restitution issues. These are all going to be issues that are going to be relating to someone who is addicted.

In 2 Peter 2:19, one of the things that were told in the Word is they promised them freedom while they themselves were slaves of depravity. For a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him. When someone says, "Pastor, I'm addicted to...", the first thing I'm going to do is listen. We're in the listening presentation here. Listen. Try to get in your mind. Is this a chemical issue? I'll give you some examples of a chemical issue.

Nowadays, with Ritalin being prescribed to kids and what not, somebody could be given Ritalin at age twelve. And then what happens by the time they're twenty-two or twenty-three, they have been sort of in that chemical pathway for so long that when they stop Ritalin, they have this addiction to medication. Sometimes that chemical medication will even translate into marijuana addiction or alcohol addiction and so there's almost like a chemical thing.

As you're listening, in your mind trying to find out what am I dealing with here so that I can help them make the next step to get the appropriate treatment and help for them. For some people, it's a medication issue. They had a rotten childhood. They were sexually abused. They were physically abused. There are issues related that they're struggling with a great bitterness. They have struggled through the divorce of their parents. So now they have to deal with that. What will happen is alcohol or addiction

makes them feel better. It sort of helps them escape for a little bit. So you want to know that too because their next step in help will be related to how you can identify sort of that trail of addiction.

There might be, as you're listening, accountability and support issues. You'll find that when that person is accountable, they do better. How are they accountable? How are they not accountable. So you want to listen for that because they help them take their next step. You want to sort of hear what they need. There are spiritual issues. It could be where their relationship with God is of such that these addictions are open game for them and you want to listen. Find out where their walk with God is at a particular time.

There might be restitution issues such as they're addicted and they've harmed others. They've beat their spouse or they've hurt their children or they've broken a relationship or there are job issues. All that in all part of listening, and as you're listening to them, you want to help them see that they are a slave to whatever has mastered them. The only free person there is is someone who is freed by Christ, someone who is in that walk with Christ.

Is it going to be quick, easy answers here? No. We're talking about listening. As a pastor you're often the first responder or a pastoral care responder. Yeah, you're not probably having a twelve-step program in your church. You're not doing all these things. But I will tell you. In that session that you have with them, if they come in and you listen, they are much more willing and wanting to hear you as you're suggesting what their next step is in treatment.

By listening, you know how to pray. By listening, you know how to encourage. You know how to bring that accountability in that structure, in that culture of accountability that someone who's addicted to something needs. Anyway, there you go. Two case studies. Things to think about and to pray about in your preparation to be a pastor.