

Discussion Guide
for

**THE
LISTENING
LIFE**

EMBRACING ATTENTIVENESS
in a **WORLD of DISTRACTION**

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IVP Books

An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

Discussion Guide

INTRODUCTION

1. If the natural pattern of life is that listening comes first, why do you think we are so quick to speak before we listen?
2. Do you consider yourself a good listener? Why or why not?
3. Why are you interested in reading a book about listening?

CHAPTER 1: THE LISTENING LIFE

1. How does the intimate, etymological relationship between the words *listen* and *obey* change your view of listening?
2. What do you think about John Gottman's assertion that in the best relationships, people allow themselves to be influenced by the other person (p. 17)? Do you listen in such a way that you are influenced by others?
3. If we are interpreting Jesus' first parable (Mark 4:1-20) as a portrayal of four kinds of listeners, which category or categories discussed in the section titled "The Urgency of Listening" do you fit into (p. 20)?
4. What role do you think listening plays in discipleship? What is the significance of listening in becoming the sort of servant Jesus talks about?
5. What is your take on the famous transfiguration story in which the heavens tell the disciples to listen to Jesus' voice alone? Are there voices you are tempted to listen to above his voice?
6. Do you relate to the distractions listed under the section titled "Open and Closed Doors" (pp. 24-26)? What are the personal obstacles that prevent or hinder you from listening?
7. How do you think our handheld technology is a problem for our listening? What changes do you need to make in your personal relationship with technology?

CHAPTER 2: THE KING WHO LISTENS

1. The author asserts, "It seems that the more power you have in the human kingdom, the less you feel obligated to listen" (p. 34). Do you agree? Do you see examples of leaders in our world who don't seem to be listening? Where do you see examples of leaders who listen?
2. What do you think about the scandal that God, the Divine King, is a listener? Is that good news to you, or does it make you feel uncomfortable? How is the God of Israel different from the Pharaoh of Egypt?
3. Has there ever been anyone in your life, perhaps an authority figure, who surprised you with listening—a parent, minister, mentor, boss, or elder? How did that change you?
4. Do you experience God as one who listens to you? Why or why not?
5. In the section titled "The Jesus School of Listening," what impresses you most about Jesus' practices of listening (pp. 45-48)? Which of his listening behaviors do you most want to imitate? Where do you struggle?

6. Have you ever experienced God's silence in your life, or even what has been called "the dark night of the soul"? What do you think about the idea that God is still present to you even when you don't feel it?

CHAPTER 3: LISTENING TO GOD

1. In the "tale of two mountains," what strikes you about Elijah's story? What surprises you? Do you tend to experience God in the mountaintop triumph or in the mountaintop silence? What do you think about the idea that God's presence can come in silence?
2. The idea that God speaks today, and the ways in which he speaks, are among the most controversial topics anywhere. Do you believe that God speaks, and if so, how? If not, what are the theological or personal reasons that prevent you from believing that God is communicating now?
3. What role do you think the Scriptures play in helping us listen to God's voice?
4. Do you have personal experiences of hearing God speak? Did you share them with others or did you keep them to yourself? How did those experiences shape you?
5. What do you think about the idea that God sings (pp. 68-70)? What feelings does that evoke? Does God's voice sound comforting or threatening to you?
6. What are some ways your life is too loud and too busy for listening to God's voice?
7. Do you tend to view prayer as mostly talking, or do you relate to the conversation about prayer as listening? What do you think about the author's assertion that "prayer without listening is not truly prayer" (p. 81)?
8. Would you like to incorporate the Samuel prayer—"Speak, Lord, your servant is listening"—into your spiritual practices? How might that change your perspective on each day?

CHAPTER 4: LISTENING TO SCRIPTURE

1. Do you relate to the author's lament at the beginning of the chapter about losing his love for the Scriptures? If you are truly honest with yourself, what are the feelings you have toward reading and studying the Bible?
2. What do you think about the popular idea that the Bible is "God's instruction manual"?
3. When you read the Bible, do you read it to be informed or to be formed? Do you prefer language that describes or language that woos? Why?
4. How might your relationship with the Scriptures and with God change if you viewed the Bible as a "stage of encounter"? What if, instead of reading, you went to the Scriptures to listen?
5. Have you ever tried any of the listening practices spelled out in this chapter: praying the Psalms, prayer of the senses or *lectio divina* (pp. 97-102)? Do any of those practices appeal to you, and if so why? If reading this book in a group, consider trying *lectio divina* together. Start with Psalm 23. What sings to you in that text?

6. What role do you think the character of the listener plays in the process of listening to the Scriptures?

CHAPTER 5: LISTENING TO CREATION

1. In your relationship with creation/nature, are you closer to Saint Francis or Homer Simpson?
2. What do you think about the ancient Celtic idea that there are two books to study: the Bible and “the Big Book” of creation? How does this mesh or conflict with your theology?
3. Does creation “preach” to you, as described in Psalm 19:1-4? If so, what messages has it preached? Do you have particularly poignant memories or stories of creation speaking to you?
4. What do you think about “the spiritual discipline of the long walk” (pp. 115-17)? Have you practiced something like this before? Does this appeal to you? Why or why not?
5. Are you someone that lives in rhythm with the seasons of the year (pp. 121-25)? Do you live in a climate that facilitates or hinders that? What benefits would living seasonally have for your soul?
6. The section on “Creation’s Groan” delves into some topics that are controversial in some Christian circles (pp. 125-29). Do you experience creation groaning in the world around you? What role do you think humanity plays in relationship to creation? Do you think the world is getting better or worse?

CHAPTER 6: LISTENING TO OTHERS

1. Do you relate to the author’s confession that he ran away from the feelings of others? Are you someone who is able to “stay in the feeling” of other people, or do you subconsciously try to escape?
2. Do you use the phrase “I just listened”? Do you think it is easier to listen or to talk? Why?
3. Have you ever spent time around a great listener? If so, what did you learn from him or her about listening?
4. The section “How to Be a Bad Listener” lists the common practices of bad listening (pp. 139-42). Which of these practices stand out to you? Which have you observed in others? Which have you observed in yourself? Give some examples. Why do you think people fall into those bad habits?
5. Do you find the “Pushing the Arrow” image helpful for listening conversations (pp. 143-48)? Where do you struggle in keeping the focus on the other person?
6. The author says, “If your life is saturated with busyness, hurry and distraction, then your listening will be scattered and rushed” (p. 150). Do you relate to this statement? What does your listening style reveal about your lifestyle?
7. What do you think about the idea that the best listeners listen for the “conversation happening below the surface” (pp. 151-53)? Have you had experiences where someone presents a problem to you, but that problem isn’t truly what the conversation is about? What are the dangers of trying to listen between the lines of what another person is saying?

8. How would your personal conversations change if you were open to God's presence and guidance in those conversations?

CHAPTER 7: LISTENING TO PEOPLE IN PAIN

1. "Sometimes people use the Bible in a way that makes hurting people feel like God is telling them to shut up" (p. 159). Do you agree or disagree, and why?
2. When have you personally experienced fellow Christians to be helpful or harmful in times of pain?
3. When discussing preemptive assurance, the author lists phrases commonly employed in times of suffering such as "everything will be okay" and "God works all things for good" (pp. 162-63). What are some other clichés that you have heard or used in these situations?
4. Do you agree that anxiety is the greatest enemy of listening to people in pain? When do you experience anxiety in conversations? Do you agree that the hardest people to listen to, when they are hurting, are those we are closest to? Why or why not?
5. Have there been moments in your life when someone else has "killed the moment" (p. 169)? When have you killed other people's moments?
6. Are you able to weep with others before you try to heal them (pp. 171-74)? If not, why?

CHAPTER 8: LISTENING TO YOUR LIFE

1. Do you relate to the different voices the author hears in his head? If so, when has your head felt like a classroom of seventh graders?
2. In your family and church background, when were you encouraged to pay attention to what is happening inside of you, and when or were you taught to "forget" about yourself?
3. Do you agree that the way you listen to yourself will determine how you listen to others (p. 178)? How have you seen this to be true?
4. How can you learn to "love the enemy voices" in your head (pp. 181-83)? What are the specific enemy voices that speak the most in your head? Do you have names for them? How might showing compassion for them change your perspectives?
5. Are you able to listen to your emotions? How were you taught in your family to respond to your emotions? Which emotions were acceptable, and which were not? How would you like to change how you respond to your emotions?
6. How adept are you at listening to your body? How would you like to change your relationship to your body?
7. Under the section "Listening to Our Scripts," the author lists several common "scripts" such as "I'm loved only when I am good" and "my worth is in taking care of other people" (p. 196). What are particular scripts that you believe and live by, even subconsciously?

8. Instead of thinking of vocation as answers you offer the world, what do you think of vocation as questions you bring to the world (pp. 196-98)? What question(s) wake you up in the morning?

CHAPTER 9: THE SOCIETY OF REVERSE LISTENING

1. Do you have any examples of servant leadership being practiced in your community? What would need to happen for your church to become a place where those who have power listen to those who don't? What practical steps might you take?
2. Are your church and neighborhood filled with people who look like each other, talk like each other and vote like each other? In what ways is it becoming more difficult in our society to listen to each other, especially when we disagree?
3. How does your church define unity? What is the general community response to people who disagree with the status quo?
4. How would you say your community does with listening to outsiders? What role do you think listening plays in mission and evangelism?
5. Have you ever practiced, as a community or as individuals, the sort of community walk outlined in the section "Listening to Your Community's Story" (pp. 210-12)? If so, explain. If not, how could you and your community benefit from such a walk?

EPILOGUE

1. What is keeping you from embracing the gift of listening?