

**"Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. The friends who listen to us are the ones we move toward. When we are listened to... it makes us unfold and expand." Shel Silverstein.**

## **Links to Listening Resources:**

*God Space: Where Spiritual Conversations Happen Naturally* by Doug Pollock (LifeTree 2009)

*The Power of Listening* by Lynne Baab (Rowman and Littlefield, 2014)

*Finding Common Ground* by Tim Downs (Moody 1999)

*Common Ground* — article by Doug Franck at [http://www.godsgps.com/storage/Common\\_Ground%20article.pdf](http://www.godsgps.com/storage/Common_Ground%20article.pdf)

Q Place is a web-based ministry that picks up and runs with the whole theme of Holy Conversation. <http://www.qplace.com/>

Its reasonably-priced programme called The Arts of Spiritual Conversation is especially useful. <http://www.qplace.com/howqplaceworks/trained-facilitator/the-arts-of-spiritual-conversations/>

There is also a range of listening resources at Equipping Ministries—check out Listening for Heaven's Sake at <http://equippingministries.org/product/listening-for-heavens-sake>

See our mentoring blog at [www.godshapedmentoring.blogspot.com](http://www.godshapedmentoring.blogspot.com) for more articles about listening.

*"Active listening is the gateway to truly building relationships."*

*Viv Coleman*

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# *the godshaped life*



## **Spiritual Practice Fourteen**

# **Listening Our Way In to Spiritual Conversations**

*"Use your heads as you live and work among outsiders. Don't miss a trick. Make the most of every opportunity. Be gracious in your speech. The goal is to bring out the best in others in a conversation, not put them down, not cut them out." Colossians 4: 5—6*

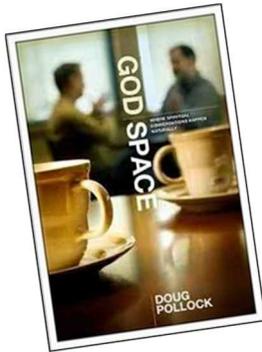
"Practice" means the repeated performance of a task or action regularly over time. A spiritual practice is exactly what the word suggests, a way to be deliberate about matters of the soul. But when we think of Spiritual Practices, we usually think of something inward, solitary, subjective. We don't realise that there are intensely practical virtues, like listening attentively, that also benefit from deliberate and attentive practice.

*"A godshaped life is a flourishing tree" Prov 11: 28*

Eastview Baptist Church 2014

# Listening

*This booklet is based on a series of messages preached at Eastview in 2014.*



Authentic dialogue, says writer Doug Pollock in his 2009 book **GodSpace**, is not found in the evangelistic tracts of last century. Those are “old maps” for a new landscape; today’s places of fruitful spiritual conversation are represented in values like mutuality, reciprocity, openness and respect. Authentic conversations require us to listen attentively. Too often we monopolise the discussion, or listen only for ideas we can correct or critique, something the apostle James warned about:

*"Brothers and sisters, be quick to listen and slow to speak" (James 1: 19).*

Listening reflects the attitude of Jesus who sought to understand and minister to the deep stuff in people's lives. When we listen to others, we embody his humility and self-sacrifice, and reveal the heart of God. When we don't listen, it places roadblocks or obstacles to listening and caring; Dietrich Bonhoeffer once observed that “people are looking for an ear that will listen” but they don’t find it in Christians who always talk when they should be listening. John Stott put it this way:

*"It seems more natural to us to shout the gospel at people from a distance than to involve ourselves deeply in their lives, to think ourselves into their culture and their problems, and to feel with them in their pains."*

(in *Christian Mission* 1976, republished 2008).

Some of us learned about effective listening through Tom Gordon's' *Parent Effectiveness Training* in the seventies. The courses were based on the freedom and grace we give our children—and our spouses!- when we truly listen to them, when we look for, and reflect back, the deep feelings and values beyond the surface words and actions. We learned how to employ "active listening" to reveal what is truly going on in a person. Active listening is an important skill to acquire if we want to engage with people in authentic dialogue. In fact, said Todd Hunter, an Anglican church planter, the most important evangelistic skill for Christians in postmodern society is listening. Instead of just waiting for a person to say something with which we disagree and pouncing on them, we should invest time in respectful curiosity. Hunter noted that in the days of the big crusades and

evangelistic leaflets, people listened their way into the kingdom. These days, he thinks, people are more apt to talk and observe their way into it.

A good way to exercise this ministry of listening is by finding common ground. Maybe it's a movie you've seen, or a hobby you enjoy. You can ask, and expect, God to use your background and experience in opening up conversations that touch on deeper things. People don't like being bullied into decisions that have no real connection, but they are fascinated by anything that transforms lives. Allowing our faith to spill over into daily life, even with those who don't share the same worldview, doesn't mean we have to go for the hard sell. Rather its good listening, dropping a seed here and there, and remembering what Paul wrote about it being who gives the growth (2 Cor 3: 6, see also Mark 4: 26 - 29). Tim Downs' book **Finding Common Ground** makes a good case for being a sower - cultivating fruitful relationships in our community - rather than always wanting to see a harvest from our conversations. He says that when we focus on arguing a non-essential matter with people we work and study with, we draw energy away from the relationship and where it might have led in the future. *"When we consider Error as an assault to be repelled... we end up wandering off on a hundred rabbit trails instead of staying on one that one day might lead to the gospel"* (Downs, p 160). Rather, listening is an art, a sensitive quest to really understand other. One of our pastors says ""words and deeds are partners in sharing Christ."

In her new book about **The Power of Listening** in mission and ministry, pastoral theologian Lynne Baab taps into the idea of double listening. In this context of holy conversation, that means listening to God in our own heart as we pay attention to the words of another about their lives. Not easy, but it can really help us identify what not to say. We might be inwardly thinking, *oh that's wrong*, or *that's sad*, or *that's just like my own story* - and the Holy Spirit might put a little brake on, saying no, its not the time to tell your own viewpoint or your own experience. Those things get in the way. Just listen.



**To Chew Over:** *Todd Hunter said "these days people are more apt to talk and observe their way into faith." Have a think about that. Do you agree? How can you leverage that in your own conversations?*