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Listening in Marriage

There are few things more satisfying in marriage than knowing you what you say and how you feel about a matter is valued by your spouse. There is also nothing more devastating than barriers to communication in marriage. So often I have seen couples who love the Lord deadlocked with each other. Pride or panic has set into the heart and neither wants to listen.

The wife: "He just won't listen to me. I've tried to communicate the importance of many things - even with tears - but it seems to just make him harder toward me. What can I do?"

The husband: "All she does is manipulate. Those tears are just passive anger. She doesn't want me to listen to her. She just wants her way."

Can you see the pride on both sides? Both are convinced the other won't change. This chapter is all about how to break that kind of typical deadlock in marriage through listening.

The Key to Listening: A Teachable Spirit

The key to listening, and to all meaningful growth in the Christian life is to have a teachable spirit. We come into the kingdom humble and helpless like a child. Jesus words are unequivocal: "I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt 18:3, NLT). Humble. Helpless. Like a child. That's the only way to enter the kingdom. It's also the only way to grow in the kingdom. "Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning" (Prov 9:9). "Don't bother correcting mockers; they will only hate you. But correct the wise, and they will love you" (Prov 9:8, NLT). "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Mt 5:6). The person who is teachable is always meditating on God's Word day and night and as a result:

"He is like a tree

planted by streams of water

that yields its fruit in its season,

and its leaf does not wither.

In all that he does, he prospers" (Psa 1:3).

To prosper in marriage, you must have a spirit of meekness and humility. Like a child, you must be hungry to learn, explore, discover, and grow. The problem in marriage is we think we know more than we know. We come with incredible pride and expect to live "happily ever after." Pride forms the false expectations of our fairytale into a nightmare.

The truth is we are called to be disciples of Christ in marriage. A disciple is literally a "student" or a "learner." We must come to every conversation in marriage as a learning child. We don't know much. That ought to lead us to an attitude of humility. If we do not approach every dialogue with our spouse with the teachable spirit of a child, we will be governed by pride and selfishness which

leads to misery every single time. “For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice” (Jas 3:16). As children of God, we are called to listen and learn in marriage. Listening is one of the most important manifestations of true discipleship. Most Christians see the need for humility and a teachable listening spirit, but they don’t know how to listen. Are you in that category? Well, read on. In this chapter, we will discover in very specific ways both husband and wife can listen more effectively to one another.

A Wife’s Call to Listen to Her Husband

A wife is called to show honor to her husband by submitting (Eph 5:22-23). This is a highly offensive word in the twenty-first century, but it is nonetheless a vital concept upon which our culture and society are hinged. For instance, if a boss tells his employees that they need to obey and submit, that would be very offensive. But if he says to them, “You need to listen to me. You need to follow instructions.” That is not only perfectly acceptable, but it is vital for a prosperous company culture.

Is it semantics? Perhaps. We all know there are a thousand ways a husband can ask his wife to submit, that while technically biblical, are attitudinally sinful to the core. For instance, a husband wants to win an argument, and he throws the trump card on the table, and with a demanding tone commands his wife: “the Bible says you must submit, so stop arguing with me.” The husband by doing this has disrespected his wife and cornered her, not to mention he’s chosen to be domineering in his attitude. He could make a similar statement with love and compassion and be within the guidelines he has from God to “love” his wife “as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25).

He might say with a loving, patient tone: “Honey, we need to listen to each other. I’m willing to listen to you. Forgive me if I’ve been a bad listener. One day I’m going to give an account to God for you. I need your support. I want to lead our family in the right way. I want to listen to you, and I need you listen to me.”

Listening is an Important Expression of Submission

Though it is sometimes hard for a wife to hear that she is called by God to submit to her husband, she should understand that the concept is one that comes out of love. The children are to submit to mom and dad. Often if children are not submitting to mom, she will send them to dad, who in turn says, “Children, listen to your mother.” We get it don’t we? One of the highest expressions of submission is listening.

Submission does not mean a husband has the right to domineer over his wife. This command is not an excuse for a husband to neglect, abuse, or take advantage of a wife. No wife is called to submit to abuse, whether physical or through words.

Let me say to the wives reading this that one of the best ways you can show submission to God and to your husband is by quietly and carefully listening to your husband. It is not easy. It is a major sacrifice. Trust the Lord. Try to get to the bottom of what your husband is trying to say. Sincerely listening is one of the most important expressions of submission. Your husband is not worthy for you to respect him in this way, but God who instructs you is worthy. Carefully listen to give honor to your unworthy husband and your infinitely worthy God!

The Husband is Called to a Greater Sacrifice

While wives are to submit to their husbands by supporting them, listening to them, and allowing their husbands to lead the way, the husband has to submit himself in a greater, more profound way. He must submit himself to God, and lay down his life for his wife. I would propose that a man's submission to God is a call for greater sacrifice for the woman than the woman's sacrifice of submission to the man. He is called to be crucified for his wife, to love her, listen to her, and lead her. The call is impossible with the help of Jesus (Jn 15:5).

A Husband's Call to Listen to His Wife

Indeed, the Bible is clear that a Christian husband is to demonstrate Christlike love by listening to his wife: "You husbands likewise, live with your wives in an understanding way, as with a weaker vessel, since she is a woman; and grant her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered" (1 Pet 3:7).

God calls you to understand your wife. "Few motives in human experience are as powerful as the yearning to be understood. Being listened to means that we are taken seriously, that our ideas and feelings are recognized, and, ultimately, that what we have to say matters." Unless you are a mind reader, the only way a husband can understand is by listening to her express her heart to him.

Listening Encourages Oneness in Marriage

God stated this principle in the form of a command. What word or phrase from this verse teaches us that this is a command? The command to "live with your wives in an understanding way" implies more than sharing the same address. Peter reinforces God's original plan for marriage which states: "the two shall become one flesh" (Gen 2:24). Therefore, living with your wife in an understanding, listening way fulfills, in part, the one flesh relationship of the husband to the wife. What would you say to a husband who viewed this as optional?

Understand by Listening to Your Wife

This is a command to understand. The word "understanding" actually comes from a Greek word which is also translated "knowledge." This particular word means a knowledge based on personal experience. That is, because of what you've done with that person, because of interaction with them, because of heartfelt listening to them, you understand or know them.

This is the same word that Paul used in Philippians 3:10 when he said, "...that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death."

Our culture says, "You just can't understand a woman." But God says to the husbands, you must understand your wife and you must learn to "live with them in an understanding way."

Jay Adams writes: "To be understanding, he must try to enter into her situation and see as much as he can what she is facing from the woman's viewpoint. That is difficult to do, but that is what it means to be understanding of another person: to try to get into her shoes."

What Does it Mean to Understand My Wife?

Understanding involves more than knowing. A husband can know his wife's favorite color, sweater, restaurant, etc. and still not understand her.

Understanding involves learning your wife's communication style. Women, for example, tend to speak indirectly. What your wife may frame as a question ("Does the trash can look full to you?") may actually be a request, an order, or an expectation ("Take out the trash!").

Understanding involves grasping your wife's communication perspective. Women tend to see communication as the glue of a relationship, whereas men tend to see it as something you do when there's a problem. For women, self-revealing conversations are valued because they make them feel close to another. Accordingly, a wife can be extremely hurt when her husband gives her the silent treatment, or she feels he is keeping secrets from her.

Understanding involves appreciating your wife's communication rituals. For instance, when women discuss a problem, they're often looking for concern, not a solution. When a decision needs to be made, they typically want to negotiate a consensus (unilateral decisions by husbands invite resentment and are asking for trouble). Understanding your wife requires cracking her communication code.

Of course, there are exceptions to every rule. What may be true of women in general may not be true of your wife in particular. If you want to understand your wife, study her, pay attention to what she pays attention to. There is no shortcut to comprehending the feminine psyche.

What are some practical ways a husband can understand his wife in the following areas: communication, finances, child rearing?

Areas of Understanding

Marriage is the place for men and women to find expression and fulfillment for their important relational needs. Some of the most important needs are:

Family commitment

Affection

Sexual needs

Companionship

Admiration/Respect

Financial support

Husbands and wives have all these relational needs. But personality, temperament, and gender-differences account for differences in how important each need may be for each spouse.

Honor Her!

The responsibility here is on the husband to give the honor to his wife. Therefore, a husband cannot use the excuse that "she doesn't deserve it." The husband must give honor to his wife by being a learner regardless of his wife's imperfections. When a husband knows his wife, treats her with respect, loves her, provides for her, as the marriage covenant requires, he then honors her.

She Often Needs to Decompress

Being a learner gives honor to the wife. Sometimes a husband does not want to honor his wife by being a learner. A wife often needs to "decompress" and share her thoughts with her husband. Let her decompress. A husband should tenderly listen to his wife and not think she is mad at him even if she sounds completely stressed out. It is often the case that she is trusting him with her heart. She doesn't want you to fix her. She wants you to care about what she is saying.

A Fragile Vase

A husband gives "honor" to his wife "as to the weaker vessel" – as he would handle a precious, priceless, fragile vase. Women are not lesser, but like an expensive vase, they are more fragile than men. They are to be honored, cared for, and protected.

In other words, husbands, treat with respect and sensitivity this fragile creature God has made, called woman. She is not fragile only because you are physically stronger, but because you can crush her spirit with brutish words and actions of disrespect.

Marriage is a Measure

A clear warning is sounded at the end of this Scripture. You want God to listen to your prayers? Then take heed to this command. A husband's prayer life is affected by the kind of learner he is. In other words, marriage is a measure of your walk with God. If a couple is not right with each other, they are not right with God.

Consider some implications to a husband's marriage and family if his prayer life is being hindered by his disobedience to 1 Peter 3:7. According to Psalm 66:18, what are the results of harboring unconfessed sin in our hearts? David says: "If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear."

"Hindered" (ekkopto) is in the present tense and passive. Failure to give due honor to the wife will result in the cutting off of the efficacy of prayer. In other words, a couple that is not in matrimonial harmony will find it difficult to pray together and for one another. A couple's domestic relationship has a profound impact on their spiritual fellowship with God. Our relationship with God can never be right if our relationships with our fellow-men are wrong.

Your wife wants a husband who will call her during the day, listen to her, take her advice, and see her as your very best friend. She wants to be "number one" in your life. More importantly, God requires that we as men care for our wives as a precious, fragile vase.

Ways a Husband May Honor His Wife

Husbands, here are some ways you can honor your wife:

1. Be sensitive to her needs. If you ask what it is she needs, then listen carefully, she will reveal her needs to you. Then ask God to help you meet as many of those needs as you can.
2. Let your actions, as well as your words, show her respect. Don't sit in front of the TV while she washes the dishes, picks up after the kids and gets them to bed. She's more than mommy, maid, cook and nurse - she's your fragile vase, remember?
3. Pay attention to her when she talks with you. Put down the paper, look her in the eyes, and respond in more than monosyllables.
4. Do not speak harshly to her and never tear her down, especially in public. You can deeply wound her spirit by a harsh, discounting word. It's bad enough when you do this in private, but it's devastating when done in public. Remember, a wounded heart finds it hard to give love.
5. Accept her feelings. You may not understand them, but you must respect them as real and viable. Never tell her, "There's no reason to feel that way, Honey." The worst thing to tell a hurting wife who's emotions are out of control is: "control yourself!" Instead care for her as a priceless, fragile vase.

6. Do not compare her unfavorably to someone else and never try to change her. When you criticize, you are saying, I don't like you the way you are. Be different or I won't love you. On the other hand, if you show her you love and accept her just the way she is, she may change simply because she doesn't feel pressured to do so. Regardless, you must commit yourself to allowing her to be all that she can be, not all you want her to be.

7. Never do anything to betray her trust. Unfaithfulness is the ultimate dishonor to your wife. Before God, commit yourself to be a faithful husband. Accept her for who she is, and love her as the woman God made for you and planned to be your wife before the world began.

Barriers to Good Listening

Listening is vital in God's purpose for marriage. The exercise of caring and careful listening is one of the most important tools God uses to conform us into the likeness of Jesus.

"One of the best wedding gifts God gave you was a full-length mirror called your spouse. Had there been a card attached, it would have said, 'Here's to helping you discover what you're really like!'"

~ Gary Ricucci

Listening is an exercise of great discipline. It's like skiing – get distracted and all the sudden you've hit a tree! Be careful of the barriers and traps that inhibit good listening.

Poor timing. It's hard to listen if you are having a conversation by ambush. It may not be the right atmosphere or mood. Perhaps the environment is not conducive to talking productively. It may need to be a private conversation, but people are around. Perhaps your spouse is distracted because of the need to sleep or a difficult day. It's always important to ask: "Is this a good time to talk? If not now, then when would be a better time?"

The "fix-it" mentality. The purpose of listening is to enhance companionship. Sometimes a way to get out of listening (especially for men) is to have a "fix-it" mentality. The attitude is: "Let's fix this and get this over with so I can get on with more important things (like the game, the show, the whatever)." A fix-it attitude is a blessing when it comes to a "honey-do" list kind of conversation, but most marital conversations reveal the need for genuine companionship and a serious investment of time. Most conversations in marriage are not quick "fix-it" conversations. A majority of the time your spouse needs quality time with you, a shoulder to lean on, and a listening ear.

The "silent storm" barricade. Maybe you're familiar with this scenario: Driving together in the car, both of you looking straight ahead and not saying a word. Someone apparently was in the wrong, and the other person is bound and determined for this fact to be acknowledged. Yet nothing can move forward because no one is saying anything. The "silent treatment" helps no one in marriage. It's also known as ignoring, giving the "cold shoulder" and similar idioms, has the technical term of "unresponsiveness," and is also considered a form of emotional manipulation. The silent treatment is sinful and selfish and obviously puts a stop to any conversation. It is a destructive habit for several reasons:

It is a form of manipulation.

It breaks into pieces the opportunity to communicate

It asserts total dominance over the circumstance while disrespecting the spouse

A few of the many messages that the "silent treatment" often gives the partner are: it tells the partner that they are not important; it is punishing the other in retributive style; it tells the partner

that there is no compromise – either my way or the highway; it brings insecurity and lack of trust.

One author explains it this way: “Silent treatments ensue when both people feel they’re right. Silent treatments are usually the result of spouses having too narrow a view of the truth. Just because you’re right doesn’t mean your spouse is not right also.”

Many resort to ignoring their spouse and giving the Silent Treatment as a method of protesting not only their spouse's refusal to give-in, but in some cases because they have felt so slighted by their spouse's stubbornness, that they do not feel that they can say anything without it being rejected. It's a type of defense; or protection against continued rejection.

What's the answer to this “silent storm”? Personal repentance is the only answer to the silent treatment. Often both spouses choose this tool of manipulation at the same time. If one of the spouses gives in, they give the Lord's Spirit a place to work. Here is a strategy to repent of the silent treatment:

Stop giving “opportunity to the devil” through your anger (Eph 4:27).

Put off “anger” by putting on “tenderness, kindness, and forgiveness.” In other words, stop thinking of yourself. Don't be controlled by your toxic emotions.

Realize the root of most anger that fuels the “silent storm” is usually pride. “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (Jas 4:6). Silent treatments are usually the result of spouses having too narrow a view of the truth. Put another way, we often believe our version of the truth is infallible. We must come to ever disagreement in marriage with humility, knowing we are all fallen human beings with twisted hearts (Jer 17:9). Almost always in an argument, we are prone to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt when it comes to understanding the truth. We think we are right. But consider this: just because you're right doesn't mean your spouse is not right also. There are certain foundations of truth relating to theology that are not negotiable. But in marriage, most of the areas of conflict are quite small and even nit-picky and are most certainly negotiable. Be willing to see things from your spouse's perspective. Take them at their word. Put down your pride. That can be hard when you have a completely different perspective. Ask God for grace to humble your ego and your pride. Nothing good has ever come from a conceited attitude, but humility is the seed of phenomenal blessing in your marriage. “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you” (Jas 4:10).

End the silent treatment. Begin by asking forgiveness for any rude behavior that came out of your pride. Do not expect your spouse to either immediately grant you forgiveness or confess their faults to you immediately. Before the Lord can bless you, you must first take full responsibility for your own actions.

Refocus the conversation. Try to talk about something that is unrelated to your disagreement. Since the argument is often a battle of egos, the issue isn't usually truly that important, so much so that we often quickly forget what the disagreement was all about in the first place.

Interruption. “If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame” (Prov 18:13). In marriage, it is wise to do more listening than giving advice. The greatest temptation is to make assumptions. Half-baked ideas are the result of not listening to your spouse. It is vital to gather all the information before you offer your opinion. “Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent (Prov 17:28).

Hot button issues. Your spouse showers you with blame statements, leading with criticism, anger and escalation. You retaliate with anger, defensiveness, or withdrawal, and the conversation ends abruptly. The stress response gets activated, setting up “fight, flight, or freeze” reactions, as both

partners are now overcome by fleshly, cold hearts.

If you want to be a good listener, first, identify the “hot button” issues in your relationship. Finances? Sex? The kids? How do they play out in your relationship?

The temptation is going to fight evil with evil – in this case answering insults with more insults or worse. “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:17, 21).

Prepare your heart by reading and surrendering yourself to Ephesians 4:31-32, “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

Before having a discussion about any your “hot button” issues, reflect upon these four questions:

How can I lift the burden and be kind to my spouse regarding this issue?

How can I be tenderhearted and really see things from my spouse’s perspective?

Am I willing to ask forgiveness for my own wrongs and not hold any grudges against my spouse? Be careful not to ruin your own repentance by bringing up your spouse’s sins. Instead trust God to work in your spouse’s heart.

What do I appreciate about my spouse in spite of this issue?

As you try to be a good listener, do your best not take personal offense at the “hot button” issues. Try to listen carefully without getting personally offended. “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (Jas 1:19, NIV). “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Prov 15:1). Prepare yourself ahead of time. Determine ahead of time to be kind, tenderhearted, and humble in asking for forgiveness. Remember your goal is to listen and understand, not defend yourself. If you do respond, be careful of your choice of words and tone of voice. Your goal is to be a good listener. Don’t let your own angry defensiveness get in the way.

Distracted listening. If your spouse is talking to you, don’t be preoccupied with something else. This is especially hard with men. Most men are single-taskers and most women are multi-taskers. That means in order for a wife to get her husband’s attention, she probably has to give a verbal cue that he needs to stop doing whatever he’s doing because it’s time to talk. He has the God-given ability to hyper focus on whatever is in front of him. It’s one of the reasons men can succeed in the rough and tumble world – they are able to focus on one thing and block everything else out. It’s not just a male thing – it’s also true for women, but is likely more true for men. Perhaps your spouse says they’re “paying attention,” but isn’t “showing attention.” There might be a complete lack of any acknowledgement regarding what’s been said. The temptation is to get discouraged, decide to quit communicating or shut down. If you tend to be a distracted spouse, be sure to put down your phone, close the computer laptop, turn down the media, turn off the game, i.e. stop what you are doing, and look your spouse in the eye and listen. Be there for your spouse. Be all there. “... a wise man listens to advice” (Prov 12:15).

Information overload. You have those days when you “kitchen-sink” it, talking about multiple, seemingly unrelated issues simultaneously, often nagging, or guilt-provoking. You may tend to cascade from one issue to the next without establishing a central focus or connective theme. You wonder why your spouse tunes out, pays halfhearted attention, or gets angry or defensive. The atmosphere becomes more and more tense.

The answer to “information overload” is to be “be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (Jas 1:19, NIV). This means choosing your battles, focusing on one issue at a time to address, and prioritizing what is most important. As you address one issue at a time, take your time to listen carefully to what your spouse is saying. Theodore Roosevelt rightly said, “Nobody cares how much you know, until they know how much you care.” Take time to show you care by listening, not just dump-trucking all your problems on your spouse. Take the care to grow in companionship by patiently listening to your spouse’s ideas and suggestions.

Hogging the airtime or filibuster. “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but whoever restrains his lips is prudent” (Prov 10:19). This happens when one spouse monopolizes the conversation with their own agenda (“me focus”). The conversation becomes a monologue with no room for an exchange. They overload with run-on sentences and paragraphs, often at a breakneck pace. The filibuster is a similar form of selfish communication. The spouse repeats the same offense over and over again. This is especially common with men since they have an amazing ability to focus on one problem. I personally have been guilty of this with my own wife. Being able to focus on a problem with an eye to a good solution is good. Filibuster takes that good ability and makes it toxic until you are using the problem like a sword to hurt your spouse. “There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (Prov 12:18). The result is an aggravated spouse and an escalated conversation that leads to the offended spouse shutting down in frustration. The solution to hogging the airtime or filibuster? Stop talking and start listening. “It is to one’s honor to avoid strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel” (Prov 20:3). A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control (Prov 29:11).

Strategies for Good Listening

What would it be like if you were a better listener for your spouse? When I ask married couples to explain what they would feel like if their spouse took the time to slow down and truly listen to their desires or frustrations, they almost always reply:

“I would feel loved.”

“I would feel cherished.”

“I would feel like a priority.”

Listening is hard work. It takes a full commitment of heart and mind to give your spouse your full attention. One of the reasons listening is hard is because you and your spouse are so very different. Pastor and Christian marriage conference speaker, Mark Gungor notes: “Because marriage is the place where two very different people, emerging from two completely different families of origin, come together to live for a lifetime, there will be conflict. The ways each partner makes decisions, resolves differences, spends money, et cetera are often Grand Canyons apart. This means there are going to be misunderstandings, incorrect assumptions, and flat-out fights through which we must navigate. But do not fear. Conflict is not a sign that you should not be together, and it is not necessarily a bad thing.” With that in mind, here are a few tips for good listening.

Face your spouse and maintain eye contact. If the person were your child you might demand, “Look at me when I’m talking to you,” but that’s not the sort of thing we say to a spouse, friend or colleague. The eyes are the windows to the soul. Being willing to look someone in their eyes is a sign of sincerity and genuine interest.

Be attentive, but relaxed. The dictionary says that to “attend” another person means to: be present, give attention, apply or direct yourself, pay attention, remain ready to serve.

Keep an open mind. Listen without judging your spouse or mentally criticizing the things they tell you. If what is said alarms you, go ahead and feel alarmed, but don't say to yourself, "Well, that was a stupid statement." As soon as you indulge in judgmental bemusements, you've compromised your effectiveness as a listener. Listen without jumping to conclusions. Remember that your spouse is using language to represent the thoughts and feelings inside their brain. You don't know what those thoughts and feelings are and the only way you'll find out is by listening.

Don't spend the time planning what to say next. You can't rehearse and listen at the same time. Think only about what the other person is saying. Concentrate on what is being said, even if it bores you. If your thoughts start to wander, immediately force yourself to refocus.

Be genuinely interested in what is being said to you. "Genuine listening," states Nichols, "demands taking an interest in the speaker and what he or she has to say. Taking an interest can easily be sentimentalized by equating it with sincerity or caring. Sincerity and caring are certainly fine characteristics, but listening isn't a matter of character, nor is it something that nice people do automatically. To take an interest in someone else, we must suspend the interests of the self. Not only is listening an active process; it often takes a deliberate effort to suspend our own needs and reactions."

Don't interrupt and don't impose your "solutions." The one who gives solutions without gathering all the information is foolish (Prov 18:13). "Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent" (Prov 17:28). "Listening" writes Nichols, "is a strenuous but silent activity." Children are taught that it's rude to interrupt. Certainly, the opposite is being modeled on the majority of talk shows and reality programs, where loud, aggressive, in-your-face behavior is condoned, if not encouraged. Interrupting sends a variety of messages. It says:

"I'm more important than you are."

"What I have to say is more interesting, accurate or relevant."

"I don't really care what you think."

"I don't have time for your opinion."

"This isn't a conversation, it's a contest, and I'm going to win."

We all think and speak at different rates. If you are a quick thinker and an agile talker, the burden is on you to relax your pace for the slower, more thoughtful communicator. When listening to someone talk about a problem, refrain from suggesting solutions. "To listen well, you must hold back what you have to say and control the urge to interrupt or argue." "Whoever guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself out of trouble" (Prov 21:23).

Somewhere way down the line, if you are absolutely bursting with an important solution, at least get your spouse's permission. Ask, "Can I share with you what I am thinking?"

Pay close attention to what isn't said—to nonverbal cues. I've heard this called "information gathering." Pay attention not only to words, but to tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions, etc. Albert Mehrabian shocked the world with his studies on human communication. He concluded that ninety-three per cent of all communication is non-verbal. We glean a great deal of information about each other without saying a word. Even over the telephone, you can learn almost as much about a person from the tone and cadence of their voice than from anything your spouse says. When I talk to my dear wife, it doesn't matter what we chat about, if I hear a lilt and laughter in her voice, I feel reassured that she's doing well. Face to face with your spouse, you can detect

enthusiasm, boredom, or irritation very quickly in the expression around the eyes, the set of the mouth, the slope of the shoulders. These are clues you can't ignore. When listening, remember that words convey only a fraction of the message (about seven per cent).

Summarize, summarize, summarize! We are called to be of one mind. "Finally, all of you should be of one mind. Sympathize with each other. Love each other as brothers and sisters. Be tenderhearted, and keep a humble attitude" (1 Pet 3:8). Whenever you are making a commitment with your spouse, you should summarize and repeat what you think your spouse has just said. "Is this what you are saying? You want me to take the trash out tomorrow morning?" This demonstrates that you care. In conversations that often result in commitments about future obligations or activities, summarizing will not only ensure accurate follow-through, it will feel perfectly natural.

Summarizing is also helpful when your spouse is trying to communicate an offense you may have committed. You might say: "I understand that I should not have corrected you in front of the children. That was disrespectful. Do you forgive me? I will try never to do that again. What else have I done that was offensive? I sincerely want to understand." It's vital that you communicate your full understanding by summarizing. Be careful to be sincere, humble, and never be condescending in your tone when summarizing.

Summarizing shows a deep care that you want to clearly understand what your spouse is saying.

Determine to listen like Jesus. "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love" (Eph 4:2). Listening is often going to be an incarnational activity. You may feel the urge to be defensive. Don't follow that urge. Instead cover the perceived offenses in love and keep on listening. "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth" (Isa 53:7). Jesus could have brought down His Father's wrath upon humanity, but instead "demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). He cried out, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). One of the most effective ways to bless your spouse like Jesus is to give them a listening ear.

Have compassion and try to be understanding of the different ways your spouse perceives things and communicates. Don't allow yourself to be irritated or annoyed by your cultural differences. Remember God made you different on purpose.

The Goal: Empathetic Listening

God had a perfect design in marriage making you male and female. This means God intends you and your spouse to work in harmony in marriage. It may be a little clumsy at times, but if you work at it, you can be like a beautiful orchestra. You may be wondering: how can we empathetic listeners when we are so different? Mark Gungor explains: "Once you understand why your husband acts that way, or why your wife thinks that way, it will change how you feel about him or her, though nothing has really changed. Compassion will come with an accompanying perseverance— all because you now understand. I cannot overstate the importance of understanding." Compassion will help you to be a better listener. You can be an empathetic listener even if you are angry or hurt. The secret is not really a secret – love your neighbor as yourself. Listening in marriage is truly a step of Gospel faith.

-by Matthew Black