

# Learning to Listen

**JEREMIAH (7:13)** spoke on behalf of God, saying: "**When I spoke so persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer.**"

Thus he includes both rules for **good discipline**:

- **ANSWER** properly when spoken to
- **OBEY** at once, (obey = *ob* + *audire* = listen toward).

These are also the rules for **good manners**, and honoured as ideals even when poorly practised.

This article is about listening, that listening which is required for learning, a disciple listening to his master. It is not about learning by Socratic dialogue, nor about conversations generally.

Learning new ideas, and adopting new ideals, depend on four aspects of learning:

- **learning religion**
- **learning good will** (a corollary of religion)
- **learning to listen**
- **learning not to interrupt** (a corollary of listening).

## Learning Religion

Religion depends on listening to God:

"Faith comes by hearing," Romans 10:17;

"Speak, Lord, Thy servant is listening," 1 Samuel 3:9;

"The still small voice," 1 Kings 19:12 — translation unique to KJB (AV), the euphemism for conscience.

## Learning Good Will

"Glory be to God on high, and on earth, peace to men of **good will**," Luke 2:14. Ideas and ideals are lost by the mangling of these words in the present ICEL Mass translation. Christianity is concerned supremely with love, and love means "willing what is good", i.e. love is practising good will towards others.

Good will or its absence decides if we smile, look stolid, or snarl — whether I shall be a man, a mouse or a rat. People do not need mice or rats, but they do need to receive and to give good will.

## LEARNING TO LISTEN

Listening better will free us to be able to receive:

- **truth** i.e. about facts
- **wisdom** i.e. intellectual maturity in truth and love.

Moreover, learning to listen, hence learning to think, can unshackle us from many modern fads and fashions.

We learn from listening to the thoughts which are in other people's minds. It is by listening that we enter their minds — whether by conversation, letters or books or electronic media.

## Listening to Lectures and Sermons

The lecture and the sermon are particular forms of learning by listening. They work well when they stimulate listeners to **ACTIVE LISTENING**, i.e. listening as an action, a mental activity, not a passivity.

Lectures and sermons can fail because of:

- the **incapacity** of the lecturer or preacher
- his **poor preparation**
- listeners who can't or won't **make an effort to listen**.

Tutorials/dialogue sermons, as alternatives to lectures/sermons, have their own weaknesses, especially if the listeners are accustomed to:

- **interrupting**
- **contradicting**.

There are, of course exceptions, as noted below.

## False Expectations

Debates on Lectures versus **Tutorials** get lost in a fruitless search for a utopian system. The fact is, there isn't one! The search is illusory, and often damaging.

Frenetic searchings for perfect systems, so common in education, often produce worse systems, even distorted systems. For instance, poor phonics teaching should have been remedied by good phonics teaching, not replacement by the look-say method.

## LEARNING NOT TO INTERRUPT

A corollary of learning to listen is **learning not to interrupt**; indeed, of teaching oneself not to interrupt.

Interruptions can shatter the concentration of:

- **the speaker**
- **the interrupter** who shatters his own receptiveness
- **the other listeners**.

There are, of course, exceptions. Some speakers thrive on interruptions. The ruling factor is whether the listening/understanding is more effective, and that *things make better sense*. Some interruptions do help synthesize ideas and build coherence; but many do not.

There are some who interrupt for unworthy motives:

- out of uncurbed childish immaturity
- simply to big-note oneself
- arguing for the sake of arguing, and not for truth
- reducing objective truth to subjective opinion: beware of mental corrosion and moral relativism!

Learning not to interrupt means making oneself:

- **patient** (the first item in charity: 1 Corinthians 13:4)
- **storing queries in memory**, not blurting on impulse
- **humble** towards other people, especially the teacher
- **self-control** over tongue, hence words and thoughts.

## Children and interruptions

In a disciplined school classroom (once universal) children had to put up their hands for attention and wait to be called upon to speak; they had to hold their questions or comments 'in memory'.

Meal times at home can also teach 'listening without interrupting'. It does not come naturally...

## Modern Media and Original Sin

The modern electronic media reduce ideas to mere **snippets of information, and inhibit real listening**.

Hacker's 'speeches' in *Yes, Prime Minister* are trivia: his mind trivializes them in advance, rather than let the media do it for them. It is all merely vacuous!

The media almost seems to expect poor concentration, and thereby ensures an incapacity for listening. A blather of words suffocates ideas.

## CONCLUSION

Listening is **an art** that is **both taught and learnt**.

A grown-up who missed out growing up must teach himself Patience, Consideration for others, Holding his tongue, and Concentrated attention and thought.

A good test of a lecture is to ask, "What did he say?" You can't discuss what you did not hear.

Orders or directions given to man or child are best tested by asking, "What did I say?" If he can't repeat it, he was not listening effectively. Yet life or death may depend on it. Certainly, Heaven and Hell do!

Father James Tierney