

Discipleship Skills

LISTENING: SEEKING TO UNDERSTAND BEFORE BEING UNDERSTOOD

The work of making disciples for Jesus Christ is the great mission Jesus has given all His disciples (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16). It should be considered a great privilege for any disciple to take part in fulfilling this mission. Although it is easy to focus on what you should know and say, one of the most critical skills in this work is the ability to understand by listening carefully and thoughtfully. Listening will enable you to know where people have been, where they are, and where they desire to go, and identify their obstacles and questions. Consider, therefore, some Scriptures that will help you be an effective listener in your disciple-making efforts.

PROVERBS 18:2, 13

Verse 2 demonstrates that a fool does not seek to understand and only wants to spout his supposed knowledge and opinions. Unfortunately, those who are trying to teach the gospel can be guilty of one-way communication, wherein they teach and the others only listen. However, it is the wise disciple-maker who will recognize that the other person has important information (e.g., about his/her beliefs, experiences, etc.) that will help you guide him/her to Jesus. Then, verse 13 demonstrates the foolishness of giving an answer before listening to a matter. Sometimes disciple-makers have preconceived ideas about a situation (e.g., through partial information, false judgments, or assumptions) and try to “help” without listening to how things really are (Proverbs 29:20; Job’s friends, Job 2:11-13; 16:2-5). This one will often not be able to help another because he/she will not know what the problems actually are! Instead, you must put your preconceived ideas aside and listen openly and fairly.

PROVERBS 15:28

Thinking before speaking is a critical skill in disciple-making. Situations are often complex, and people’s lives are full of experiences, beliefs, traditions, fears, etc. So, when you are trying to help another follow Christ, you must recognize you are not just communicating information, but that you are dealing with complex people. Therefore, you should carefully

consider each situation to determine how you ought to respond in a way that best helps them follow Jesus Christ, rather than simply expressing whatever comes to mind or how you feel. Each person is unique and may require a slightly different thing to help them make progress in Christ. So, consider what is most needful and helpful for a situation. You can’t always address everything all at once. Some things that may even be true will unnecessarily distract from the main point or confuse the situation.

PROVERBS 20:5

As people are complex beings, their purposes, plans, thoughts, motives, intentions, reasoning, etc., are like deep water. Sometimes people don’t even know what is truly behind the things they believe and do. So, helping them follow Jesus and overcome their obstacles sometimes involves trying to discover and address the hidden things. Although you are not all-knowing, being a good listener who is knowledgeable of God’s truth is a critical skill in identifying and then correcting those things. Questions are an excellent tool for accomplishing this. For example, the question “Why?” is valuable in discovering the true reasons things are the way they are and identifying the real issues that need to be addressed.

MATTHEW 12:33-37

Jesus taught that words reveal what is in a person’s heart, revealing their true natures. Therefore, if you approach disciple-making as a one-way street in which you teach to communicate information and others listen, you will not discover all the things you will need to help them. Listening helps you understand where another person truly is. As you try to help navigate the path forward through whatever obstacles are encountered, you must seek to understand the other person. Take time to learn about them as people. Learn their personal, family, and religious backgrounds. Take the extra time to ask questions as you teach to make sure they understand the teaching and how to apply it to their lives properly.

JOHN 4:7-26

Jesus beautifully demonstrates the art of conversation and listening in this encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. As the Messiah and God in the flesh, Jesus knew this woman’s situation perfectly (contrary to us with the people we encounter). Yet, He still conversed with her by listening to what she said and responding appropriately to keep driving the

conversation deeper! In doing so, Jesus was able to help move the conversation from the casual (water) to the meaningful (about living water and her home life) to the spiritual (worship and identifying Himself as the Messiah). In all this, notice that Jesus did not begin by identifying Himself as the Messiah (v. 26). Instead, He helped lead her to this, in part, by His ability to listen!

ACTS 8:26-40

This account demonstrates Philip's willingness to hear as a critical part of helping the eunuch become a disciple of Christ. First, Philip was dealing with a man who had a history (e.g., religious history, personal responsibilities). It appears Philip did not know this man or his background before the encounter. Second, Philip heard the man reading Scripture and asked a question to begin this interaction (v. 30). Through hearing the man read and this question, Philip was able to uncover that the eunuch saw himself as someone who needed guidance and was having trouble understanding the Scriptures. Third, Philip allowed the eunuch to speak before he sought to explain. Philip was, thus, able to understand at least part of what was holding the eunuch back from understanding Jesus is the Messiah (i.e., not knowing whether Isaiah was talking about himself or someone else). If Philip had assumed the man knew Isaiah was talking about the Messiah, perhaps he would have preached a great sermon that would have fallen on deaf ears. After learning where the man was, Philip then proceeded from that Scripture and taught him the gospel of Jesus Christ, resulting in the man's obedience! This same pattern should help disciple-makers today: Taking time to learn where people are to best help them move forward with the truth!

CONCLUSION

Listening is a critical skill in helping others follow Jesus. Although there are circumstances where one-way teaching is appropriate (e.g., Matthew 5-7; Acts 2), discipleship often involves more personal situations wherein people can be known by those who are trying to help them learn the gospel and grow in Christ. In these situations, you must learn to be an active and fair listener who does not reach conclusions and speak before having understood the situation. Then, you should continue to listen so you can understand others and be better understood as you share God's truths with them!

DISCIPLESHIP QUESTIONS

What is important to understand about those you are trying to help follow Jesus?

How is listening connecting with wisdom in making disciples?

What are some dangers of speaking and trying to help others before you hear and understand?

How is thinking before speaking critical in making disciples?

How does listening help to draw hidden things out of a person, and how can this help in making disciples?

Why will communicating information be insufficient in helping people follow Christ?

How did Jesus demonstrate the skill of listening in making disciples?

How did Philip demonstrate the skill of listening in making disciples?

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