



The Journey of Thomas

Active Participation

By John J. Smid

James 1:19

My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,

Prov. 18:13

He who answers before listening that is his folly and his shame.

Part Two: The Way

The Journey of Thomas has been built in three sections. The first one is based on gaining honesty in our own life. It was a time to develop a better understanding of our own hearts. Each session was designed to help us to become more aware of our own life experiences with the hope we would be more able to share them with others.

The second section is called “The Way”. We are going to introduce some practical tools and skill development to learn more about what we can do to connect more intimately with others. The Way is the “how to” of this curriculum. It will involve building new habits, learning new ways of relating to others that are more effective. We will also have to break some old habits. We begin with Active Participation.

The Art of Listening

Listening to another person’s heart can be one of the most affirming actions we can enter into. Hearing the heart cries, the joys, the desires of another person can build a rich deep relationship and create a connection that will promote a stronger desire to spend time with one another.

Sometimes we are remiss and allow distractions to get in the way of hearing some important things from someone we know. Television, cell phones, busy schedules, or even our own life issues can all interrupt significant interaction with others.

Or when we are faced with a challenging conversation it is easy to respond to defend ourselves or to attempt to “fix” the problem that has arisen rather than to take the time to truly listen to what is being said. Sometimes the details we hear lead us to a misunderstanding of the real issues and our reaction can be to feel hurt or misunderstood and we react out of our own wounds.

So many of us are habitual “fixers” and try so hard to find solutions for our hurting or challenged friends or family. Sometimes the frustration that may come from the conversation can come from our “fixing” ways. Maybe our friend doesn’t want to be fixed; they just want to feel heard. Fixing can be a way of trying to get someone else’s problem out of my already overwhelmed life. Or, it can take focus off of the person and onto how skilled I am at fixing someone else. The motive to overrun another person with our own goals will often thwart listening to their heart.

Relating in a “fixing” mode will often lead to arguing, bantering, and overall a lack of effective relationship.

Prov. 20:3

It is to a man's honor to avoid strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel.

Active participation requires of us to practice the art of listening. Psalm 116: 1-2 is my life verse because I felt so unheard most of my life.

*I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy.
Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live.*

My journey towards Christ started from knowing that He heard my heart cry for help. His personal response to my hurting heart drew me into His hope.

We must learn to listen in such a way as to turn our ears to one another when it is important to do so. It is important to know when it is time to put down the book, to turn off the television, to shut off our cell phones. Can you imagine how much it would help you to know that when we really need to share our heart with the person we have chosen to allow in, that they would turn to us with an undivided ear? I believe that everyone really desires to know they are significant and the when they are in trouble, there will be someone who will care. No matter what kind of bravado we can put up around ourselves, we are all human and I believe need a listening ear at sometime in our lives.

Enter With Our Whole Heart

When we decided to enter into honest, authentic, and transparent relationships we must choose to enter in with our whole heart. This requires of us to set aside our lives for the sake of one another.

Phil. 2:3

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.

Letting go of our personal agendas or rights for the time needed to affirm something in someone else's life that deserves our attention is a skill worth learning. When we have become honest enough with ourselves to know how much we desire to feel heard, to feel significant, we can be much more aware of this need in others.

Maybe that television program can be let go; or the score of the game can be seen at a later time. We might be out to lunch with a friend and we just heard something that pricked our heart and we can put down the drink or sandwich at least for a moment to gain eye contact with our friend letting them know we are listening.

Defensive Posture

We might have found ourselves involved in a difficult discussion with our spouse and we feel defensive about what is being brought out. It would be helpful to develop the self control to not respond in defensiveness. But rather it would be great to learn to turn our ears to the other person to hear them. This will go a long way at staving off fruitless arguments.

Many years ago in my growth as Christian one of the most important things I learned is that I do not really have any "rights". I realized that without the grace of the Almighty God, I am dead and my very breath is a gift from Him. The fact that I am alive is God's provision for me at His will. This helps me to be a lot less defensive with others when I feel challenged or threatened by something someone has said. I also have learned to be honest with myself. At least inside my heart I know that more than likely, there is a lot of truth in a challenging comment or situation. I know that I may hold at least some of the blame for the rift or accusation. It is a pretty thin pancake that doesn't have two sides!

A friend of mine told once that when a conversation is really heated up, it can be like a racing herd of rhinoceroses and not the best time to try to stop them because they will trample you. It was wise to let them run themselves out and then go and deal with the issue that may have caused them to run. I have found this to be such wise counsel. Don't try to come running into a hurting situation with your best memory of God's word. It would be best to listen to their heart.

Listening to the Wounded Heart

I have worked with a lot of wounded and abused people over the years. I have been wounded too. I have learned that what I needed more than anything else in order to experience healing was an ear of concern or validation. I typically figured out the rest with the Lord and over time. Because I knew this about myself it has made it much easier to learn the skill of listening to others rather than trying to remove the pain by my insights or instruction for them. I can easily slip into a teaching way and therefore I also learned that this is a skill that must be practiced.

An example of this is when I was in my forties, I told my sister that my step father had crossed some serious sexual boundaries with me when I was only ten years old. After I shared this with her, she just looked at me with tears in her eyes and said, "John, I never knew this happened to you. I am so sorry". I cannot tell you how much healing occurred in my heart that day just because someone that was there, who knew the people involved, said they heard and understood. I felt validated, and a salve of healing poured over my wound that day. All she did was to hear my heart and I felt it deep inside. She didn't try to minimize, fix, or over compensate through her own efforts.

Can You Relate?

Active participation in one another's lives requires the sacrifice of our own. Jesus modeled this in setting aside His own life for ours. He is asking us to do the same for one another.

Can you relate to what someone has shared? When I was in a terrible situation in my life with broken relationships and increasing shame, a friend told me to go to an Al-anon/Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. He said that I might find a better group of friends there. I had nothing to lose so I went. I will never forget the impact I experienced at that first meeting. I don't remember what it was but I openly shared something about my life and a lady across the room stood up and said, "John, I can relate to what you have shared". That one act of listening moved me to a brand new life with God. I learned the Serenity Prayer and felt led to seek God the next time I was experiencing the pain I had gotten myself into. Her active relating that day helped me to feel less alone and more motivated to seek help. I believe this was the first time I sought God from my heart to His.

One of my favorite scriptures is:

Heb. 13:3

Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

As Christians one of the most powerful tools we have is the ability to share the testimony of our life experience with those who are stuck or bound by their own prisons. Active Participation leads us to put our own lives in the shoes of someone else's experience, because we recognize we have been there. We have all known a prison, a shame filled experience where we were so bound we may have been unwilling to leave the prison cell due to our own fears. We needed desperately to know we weren't alone. Someone coming alongside us who would just listen can be the trick!

To actively listen to someone's heart will require us to get into our own hearts. It may be a vulnerable place for us to go but taking the risk is worth it. It is a personal sacrifice we become willing to make for the sake of God's kingdom and His people.

Prayer for today: Lord, today I will encounter others as I experience the day. Help me to turn my ears to their lives in such a way that I will listen to their heart beat. Help me to see the store clerk as you do and enter into

their lives with eye contact if for no other reason but to acknowledge that they are loved by You. For those that I know and love, help me to set aside my life to hear them when they need my ears to listen. Help me to let go of my rights to being right or knowing best and to learn to listen to another's needs and perspective.

Practical Application: Find three conversations during this week where you can find something someone else says of a vulnerable nature that you can relate to. Find a way to share with the person how you can relate to something they told you about their life. This will require a practice of listening to what others are really telling you about their life and circumstances. It will also stretch your own life experience.

Write three feeling statements regarding the concept of active participation in someone's life:

"I feel _____

About sharing something vulnerable from my life with others

Because _____"

"I feel _____

About learning to listen to others more effectively

Because _____"

"I feel _____

About putting aside something I treasure in order to value another person

Because _____"

On the next page, I have included some helpful information to gain a better understanding of the consequences of focusing on the problem vs. focusing on the heart and the person. I hope this is helpful.

Responsible For, or Responsible To?

When I feel responsible *for* others:

I tend to try to fix:

I protect
I attempt to rescue
I control
I carry their feelings

I don't listen

I feel:

tired
anxious
fearful
liable

I am concerned with:

the solution
answers
the circumstances
details
being right
performance

I expect the person to live up to my expectations.

I am a manipulator

When I feel responsible *to* others:

I can show empathy:

I can encourage
I share
I confront
I level with

I am more sensitive

I listen

I feel:

relaxed
free
aware
healthy self-esteem

I am concerned with:

relating to the person
their feelings
the person

I believe that if I just share myself, the other person has enough to make it.

I am helper-guide.

I expect the person to be responsible for their own actions.

I can trust and let go

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