

Ten Reasons to Listen to Questions Before You Answer

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Meditation on Proverbs 18:13

"If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame."

1. It is *arrogant* to answer before you hear. Humility does not presume that it knows precisely what a person is asking until the questioner has finished asking the question. How many times have I jumped to a wrong conclusion by starting to formulate my answer before I heard the whole question! Often it is the last word in the question that turns the whole thing around and makes you realize that they are not asking what you thought they were.
2. It is *rude* to answer a half-asked question. "Rude" is a useful word for Christians. It means "ill-mannered, discourteous." The New Testament word for it is *aschēmonei*. It is used in 1 Corinthians 13:5 where modern versions translate it, "Love is not rude," but the old King James Version has "Love doth not behave itself *unseemly*." This means that love not only follows absolute moral standards, but also takes cultural mores and habits and customs into account. What is polite? What is courteous? What are good manners? What is proper? What is good taste? What is suitable? Love is not indifferent to these. It uses them to express its humble desire for people's good. One such politeness is listening well to a question before you answer.
3. Not answering a question before you hear it all *honors and respects* the person asking the question. It treats the person as though their words really matter. It is belittling to another to presume to be able to finish their question before they do.
4. Careful listening to a question often reveals that the question has *several layers* and is really more than one question. Several questions are all mixed into one. When you see this, you can break the question down into parts and answer them one at a time. You will not see such subtleties if you are hasty with your answer and not careful in your listening.
5. A question sometimes reveals *assumptions* that you do not share. If you try to answer the question on the basis of your assumptions without understanding the questioner's assumptions, you will probably speak right past him. If you listen carefully and let the person finish, you may discern what he is assuming that you do not. Then you can probe these assumptions before you answer. Often, when dealing at this level, the question answers itself. It was really about these deeper differences.
6. Questions usually have *attitudes* as well as content. The attitude sometimes tells you as much as the content about what is really being asked. In fact, the attitude may tell you that the words being used in this question are not all what the issue is. When that is discerned, we should not make light of the words, but seriously ask questions to see if the attitude and the words are really asking the same question. If not, which is the one the questioner really wants answered?

7. Questions have *context* that you need to know. So many thoughts and circumstances and feelings may be feeding into this question that we don't know about or understand. Careful listening may help you pick up those things. It may be that there is just a small clue that some crucial circumstance is behind the question. If you catch the clue, because you are listening carefully, you may be able to draw that out and be able to answer the question so much more helpfully.
8. Questions are made up of words. *Words have meanings* that are formed by a person's experience and education. These words may not carry the same meaning for both you and the questioner. If you want to answer what they are really asking, you must listen very carefully. When the possibility exists that their question is rooted in a different understanding of a word, we will be wise to talk about the meaning of our words before we talk about the answer to the question. I find that talking about the definitions of words in questions usually produces the answer to the questions.
9. Proverbs 8:13 says it is our "*folly*" to answer before we hear. That is, it will make us a fool. One reason for this is that almost all premature answers are based on thinking we know all we need to know. But that is "*foolish*." Our attitude should be: What can I learn from this question? The fool thinks he knows all he needs to know.
10. And finally Proverbs 8:13 says that it is our "*shame*" to answer before we hear. What if you are asked publicly, "My wife and I have had serious problems and we were wondering . . ." and you cut the questioner off by giving your answer about the value of counseling and what counselors might be helpful. But then they say, "Well, actually, what I was going to say was, "My wife and I have had serious problems and we were wondering, now that our counseling is over and things are better than ever, how you would suggest that we celebrate?" Then you will be shamed for not listening.

Still learning to listen with you,

Pastor John