

Empathy Closes the Listening Loop (March 19, 2026)

God came to a young man in a dream and asked him, “What shall I give you?” Famously, Solomon replied, “Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil” (1 Kings 3:9). As the newly ordained king of Israel, Solomon knew that he would not govern God’s people well without understanding. Wonderfully, God granted him this request.

Whether he knew it or not, Solomon was seeking the core component of “empathy.” His first request of God was for understanding. He was following the Prayer of St. Francis (long before St. Francis was born) that says, “Lord, grant that I may seek rather to understand, than to be understood.”

But remarkably, the wisdom of Solomon is deeper than a simple reading of his request reveals. For when we look at the actual Hebrew word for “understanding” in Solomon’s reply, we see that what Solomon truly requested was “hearing” (from the Hebrew word “shama”). And this is consistent with what we have been learning...

hearing is the basis of understanding,
understanding is the core component of empathy,
and empathy is essential for connecting with others.

If you want to build better relationships with others, learn to hear. Ask more curious questions, listen a little longer, and verify your empathy with others by asking them, “Am I understanding you correctly?” You have only truly listened if the speaker is understood.

Solomon knew he would not govern well without hearing and understanding.
May God grants us all “an understanding heart.”