

SERVING AND LISTENING YOUR WAY INTO SPIRITUAL CONVERSATIONS 1 PETER 2:12; PROVERBS 18:13

He had a huge passion for butterflies. He traveled the world to add rare and unusual species to his collection. As he move toward retirement, there was only one kind of butterfly left in the world that he needed to make his collection complete. It had been spotted a few times in the deserts of Utah. He made arrangements to stay with some friends who lived near the desert. Day after day, he got up early and came home late, driven by his desire to net this elusive butterfly. Day after day, he returned empty-handed. After a solid month of searching, he thought he spotted this rare butterfly. His heart started to pound. The sun was going down so he knew he had to move fast. When he got to the place where he thought he'd seen the butterfly, he heard what sounded like a man groaning in pain. He quickly blocked it out of his mind because he didn't want to miss the opportunity of capturing the prize of a lifetime. He'd check out the groaning noise later.

A few minutes later he got that butterfly! Was he ever excited! So excited, in fact, that he forgot about the groaning sound he'd heard earlier. But when he got home and started to share the story of how he'd captured this butterfly, he was suddenly jarred into remembering what he'd forgotten. But by now it was pitch dark. He and his friends got up early the next morning and made their way out in the desert to where he thought he'd heard the sounds. After an hour's search, they came across the body of an old prospector. Some time during the night, the old man had passed away. Chasing butterflies has consequences. I wonder how many of us, as followers of Jesus, are chasing butterflies – pursuing stuff we think is really important in life – while ignoring the sound of spiritual groans all around us – other human beings who have yet to find the joy, the forgiveness, the love and the grace of life in Jesus?

A couple of weeks ago I started a three message series called “Creating Space for God: Insights on Spiritual Conversations with Not-Yet-Christians.” We were reminded that every child of God is called to have spiritual conversations with lost people as God provides opportunities to do so. That's clearly assumed in these verses: “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” (Col 4:5-6 NIV) This morning I want you to think with me about two things we can do to prepare the way for good spiritual conversations with lost people. The first is serving and the second is listening. Both can be used by the Holy Spirit to create God space – in other words, space for God to work in the minds and hearts of lost people to prepare them for the message about Jesus. So, first of all, then let's consider...

CREATING GOD SPACE THROUGH SERVING LOST PEOPLE

First, you should know that serving lost people begins with the ability to notice others. Every one of us has a default setting that is hopelessly self-centered. That's one of the marks of the sinful nature that every one of us possesses. Until and unless the Holy Spirit takes up residence in your heart and mind, you don't have much hope of being anything but hopelessly self-centered. Even as followers of Jesus, we struggle mightily in this area. Another word for being physically nearsighted is "myopia." Well, the fact is that all of us are spiritually nearsighted and inwardly focused. You could call that "*my*-opia" as well, I suppose, in that by nature it's always about me, myself and I.

The Bible says, "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people." (Eph 1:18 NIV) "The eyes of your heart" - that's a new spiritual vision, a new spiritual perspective, a new spiritual way of seeing life, others and yourself. Now, if anyone had a different vision, a different perspective and a different way of seeing life, others and himself it was Jesus. Jesus was not self-centered. He made a habit of noticing the needs and concerns of others. When the Holy Spirit takes my residence in your heart and mind, a transformation begins. It's like we get a pair of spiritual glasses – Jesus glasses – that allows us to see everything from His perspective. Part and parcel of getting Jesus' glasses is a new ability to notice the needs and concerns of others. An example of that is found in Acts 17, where Paul – the great Christian leader – was in the city of Athens in Greece. Paul was always on the lookout for spiritual conversation with lost people. What set up many of those conversations was a Holy Spirit inspired ability to notice what was going on in the hearts and minds of lost people. The text there says, "Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: 'People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.'" (Acts 17:22-23 NIV)

All around us – in our homes, at work, at school, living next door - are lost people. Every last one of them has needs – spiritual needs, physical needs, financial needs, relational needs. Some of those needs we can meet through Jesus living in and through us. Serving those lost people by meeting a need in their lives can open them up to God like nothing else. But serving begins when you and I develop the ability to notice others. Here's a great prayer to pray at the beginning of every day. "Lord Jesus, as I interact with others today, help me to see them as you do." How very much each of us need a pair of Jesus glasses!

Second, serving lost people reveals God's character to them. Here's two statements Jesus made. "In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." (Matt. 5:16 NIV) Do you see Jesus' assumption there? Shining your light is a metaphor for serving lost people in some tangible way. What's the result? It

gives them a completely new perspective on God Himself, so much so, that they are open to thinking about God differently. Jesus also said, “But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.” (Lk 6:35 NIV) What’s the potential in doing good to people who don’t like you for some reason? They see God’s kindness reflected in your attitudes and actions towards them.

Third, serving lost people creates receptivity to the message about Jesus. There’s a marvelous phrase found in Romans 2:4 (NIV) that goes like this, “... God’s kindness leads you toward repentance.” Now, if your personal experience of God’s kindness created space for God to work in your life – to make you think about life differently, Jesus differently and others differently, then God’s kindness will have the same effect on others potentially. God’s kindness, goodness, love and grace is often experienced through His people – a kind word, something you did that was thoughtful, an act of loving service or meeting a need. You see that same truth assumed in another Bible verse that says, “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” (1 Peter 2:12 NIV)

William Barclay, an English theologian, said, “More people have been brought into the church by the kindness of real Christian love than by all the theological arguments in the world.” He’s absolutely right. Serving is love demonstrated. Serving is love with skin on – not just something you say, but something real and tangible that person can see or feel or experience. It’s spiritually powerful! It has prepared the way for more spiritual conversations than you can count. Why? Christian leaders, Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, explain: “Good deeds create good will, which opens the heart to good news.”

Here’s one simple suggestion. When you can combine service with prayer, God space is almost always created instantaneously. My next door neighbor, Cordell, lost his job recently. His wife is working so their basic physical needs are getting met. I was strongly impressed by the Lord to just go next door and ask Cordell how he was doing. After he shared with me the circumstances of how he lost his job, I also asked him if I could pray with him. He said, “Sure!” and he seemed genuinely appreciative. Since then, I’ve had more opportunities to ask him how the job search is going and to remind him that I am praying for him. I hope and pray that it leads to more spiritual conversations with Cordell.

Entire churches can serve lost people which can create receptivity to the message about Jesus. I was blessed to hear about something that Cedar Creek Church located in Perrysburg, Ohio – in the Toledo area – did recently. On a Friday night after a long week of work, single moms in the community were invited to the church for a night of pampering. Two hours of free childcare were provided, along with some fancy hors d’oeuvres, manicures, pedicures, facials and full massages while relaxing music played in the background. Is there any

connection between a serving ministry like that and the fact that every four months or so Cedar Creek Church baptizes 75 to 100 new Christ-followers?

That leads right into a fourth observation. Serving lost people is not an end in itself. As Doug Pollock puts it, “If good deeds create a road for our good news to travel, let’s finish the trip.” Our ultimate purpose is not simply to do nice things for others. Even what our culture thinks of as the “big things” - the elimination of poverty, injustice and world hunger are not this life’s biggest issues. A human being’s relationship to the God of the Universe and where he or she is going to spend eternity is this life’s biggest issue. Serving is a way to create space for God to come in and do what is most important. Otherwise, as individual followers of Jesus or as a church we become like the Peace Corps, the Boys and Girls Scouts or Habitat for Humanity. All of those are great organizations with great people doing commendable things, but they aren’t intentionally seeking to address humanity’s greatest need – a relationship with the God of the Universe. That’s why followers of Jesus serve. That’s why the Church of Jesus Christ serves. When we show up in our everyday worlds with our Jesus’ glasses on and begin to notice needs and then meet them – no strings attached, no invitations to church, no gospel tracts – the lost people around us can begin to experience the Kingdom of God in a tangible way. God Space is created. Here’s something else that can create space for God and lead to great spiritual conversations. In fact, it should be part of any spiritual conversation itself.

CREATING GOD SPACE THROUGH LISTENING

When you hear that phrase “spiritual conversation” do you assume it involves you talking most of the time? You know, you giving a gospel presentation, quoting the Bible or pointing out the contradictions in a lost person’s ideas about God. I wouldn’t be surprised if most of us said yes. We’re so used to assuming that witnessing, evangelism and sharing our faith demands that we speak and lost people listen. In reality, perhaps the most effective thing you and I can ever do when it comes to creating space for God to work in the life of a lost person is to shut up! I’ll admit it. This is a growth area in my own ability to have spiritual conversations. I’m so programmed to go into “explain mode” or “persuade mode” that I need to learn a whole lot more about going into “listen mode.”

Why is listening so important? First, listening to lost people prevents mistakes in spiritual conversations. Here are two Bible verses to hang our thoughts on today. “To answer before listening— that is folly and shame.” (Prov. 18:13 NIV) And then, also, James 1:19 (NIV), “My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” True, those are general statements, but they very much apply to spiritual conversations with lost people. When we make listening a big priority, we can avoid some serious mistakes when it comes to sharing our faith. Doug Pollock uses imagery borrowed from driving a car. He suggests that learning to listen will make it harder for you to hijack the conversation. You can hijack a spiritual

conversation by trying to steer it in a direction that you think will achieve your goal of leading a person to trust in Jesus. It quickly becomes a one way monologue rather than a conversation. Listening will also make it harder to exceed the speed limit. Meaning what? Sometimes in our desire to give a gospel presentation or invite a lost person to make a decision about Jesus we give too much information too soon. In many spiritual conversations more is less and less is more. And then, Holy Spirit-empowered listening, will help you avoid missing the signals that are there in any conversation – especially spiritual conversations. When should I put on the brake? When should I step on the gas? When should I be cautious? When should I go for it?

Secondly, listening to lost people is active rather than passive. It's not the kind of half there and half not there, "uh huh... yeah" kind of listening we sometimes have in our conversations as human beings. Like when Cheryl and I are sitting on the couch at home watching TV and all of a sudden Cheryl asks me, "Were you listening to me?" Gulp! Then I have to admit that I heard half or nothing of what she had just said. I hate when that happens! That's not what I mean by listening in spiritual conversations. This kind of listening is hard work. It means real, intentional concentration and focus. It calls you to ask for clarification when needed and to reflect back what you think you heard so that you're sure you understand. This is listening with a purpose. You want to discover this person's story, interests and passions. You are, first of all, seeking to understand this person so that somewhere down the road you can be understood.

Way back in 1816 – almost 200 years ago – a young French doctor named Rene Laennec made a cylinder from a sheet of paper and used it to examine a patient. He discovered that the inside of your body makes sounds that can be isolated and amplified through a tube. He went on to invent the stethoscope. It's really a listening device. By listening carefully and intently to the sounds different parts of your body makes, doctors can diagnose a problem that can lead to healing. Lost people are folk who need spiritual healing. Quite often, God can use our active listening to move them towards that healing.

Third, listening to lost people involves asking good questions. That's another growth area for me personally. Ask more questions and make less statements, Rick! Like what? Here's a sample. "What would you like to say to Christians if you knew they would listen? Have you ever had a Christian try to convert you? How did you feel about that? Has God ever seemed real to you – how and when? If you could ask God one question, what would it be? What do you think is the core message of Christianity? What's the hardest thing about Christianity for you to buy into?" Questions like that promote conversation.

Finally, it's good to remember that – just like in serving - listening to lost people is not an end in itself. For instance, it is possible to spend too much listening and give a person the impression that you're a kind of therapist. Or, you can ask someone so many questions that you come off as some kind of Grand Inquisitor.

At the end of the day, it's about what helps a conversation just move along naturally. The ultimate hope is that you can point someone to Jesus. Let's just remember that nothing creates space for God to work faster than Spirit-led listening. It demonstrates that you're truly seeking to understand a person and not just change his or her point of view. Listening done well sends an important "I accept and respect you" message to any person – and especially any lost person - with whom you are fortunate enough to have a spiritual conversation.

I don't know her name, so let's just call her Debbie. Debbie works at a local community college and often buys and eats her lunch in the cafeteria. Debbie began to notice the lady who took her money in the cafeteria – short, gray hair... fingernail polish that changed with the holidays... and a nametag that said "Dottie." The next week she told Dottie she liked her nails and noticed that she had a bad chest cold. The next week, Debbie asked Dottie about her cold. Dottie said it wasn't better and she was concerned because she'd had breast cancer. She was afraid the cancer might be back. Two weeks later, Debbie saw Dottie again and asked her how she was. Dottie confirmed that the doctors had told her that her cancer was indeed back. She teared up and Debbie promised to pray for her. The next week she brought Dottie a present – a book on facing cancer with faith, hope and humor as well as a card just thanking her for being there. She also offered to go to treatment with Dottie sometime. Dottie grabbed her hand and said, "Thank you so much!" Then she asked Debbie to come around to the other side of the booth to give her a hug. Eventually, Dottie had to quit her job because of her cancer. Debbie's church hosted a "We love Miss Dottie" fundraiser and raised over \$1000 for her family. Dottie was shocked and amazed that strangers would care for her in this way. I like how Debbie puts it, "God has planted Dottie firmly in my heart, and I can't stop praying for her." I don't know the end of that story, but it's moving in the right direction, isn't it?

That's how spiritual conversations can start and what they can lead to. That's an example of how to make the most of every opportunity. Put on your Jesus' glasses. Notice. Serve. Listen. And when there's an opportunity to explain what it means to entrust your life to Jesus for eternity, go for it. God will help you. Let's not be guilty of chasing butterflies when God wants to use us to create space for Him in the lives of people who so very much need Him.