

Helping Actions For Hurting People

Learning To Minister To Hurting People In A Christ-Like Way

As a pastor in ministry, I am often called upon to pray at large gatherings because I am called “a professional.” This is, of course, said in good humor and is a fun joke. But there are many duties at which a pastor is assumed to be a professional. Though preaching and public speaking are the most well known aspects of a pastor, people often have an intuitive knowledge that the pastor cares (or at least should care) about them on a personal level. This personal ministry is often called counseling. The Bible calls it discipleship and instructs each person in Christ’s Church to be disciple makers.

The writer of Hebrews states “and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”ⁱ Christ redeems us from our sins and uses His servants to implement change and comfort for His people. In light of such words, we, in the midst of suffering and pain, need to not only accept help, but should seek to encourage and minister to others. The grace shown to us by Christ always pushes us to look to the needs of others before ourselves.

No where does the opportunity for such personal ministry come more visibly than when a friend or family member goes through times of trial and hardship. And even though we, as brothers and sisters in Christ, are called to help, and want to help, for various reasons we struggle with saying the right words, feeling awkward about the situation at hand, and fighting our own tendencies toward selfish apathy. In this article, I will suggest a few principles and ideas for ministering to those in grief and crisis.

But first, allow me to set the scene. In August of 2011, my wife and I found out that our daughter, scheduled to be born in December, had a very serious heart condition known as Hypoplastic Left Heart Syndrome. After seeking medical help for the next several months, our Brenna Lynn was born on December 20th. Though the doctors and nurses took excellent care of her and she fought hard, she was too sick to pull through and we had to say good-bye to her February 2nd, 2012.

Though I am not a stranger to loss and grief, having seen the death of many friends and family, including my father when I was six years old, this time of trial with the death of my daughter was undoubtedly the hardest thing that I or my wife have ever endured.

Now, I personally, through the pastoral ministry God has entrusted to me, am privileged to work with people in some of the most dire and hard times of life; the death of a loved one, a strained marriage, or perhaps the loss of a job. However, despite my being consider a “professional,” there were several ways in which God used the actions of other people towards my family during the death of our daughter to reveal ways that I had assumed I was helping people, yet I didn’t find to be personally helpful, and ways that I had never thought of helping others.

That being said, the principles and lessons I will share come from my own experience of grief that perhaps God can use to give you direction as He uses you to encourage others. Note that this is not an exhaustive list, but rather some principles and practical ideas for ministry. These ideas, though not intended to be, became somewhat progressive as they developed in my mind, one being established by the one before it and extended by the one after it.

I. Consider The Needs Of The Individual.

Our tendency can be to expect a universal response from people in suffering. We may remember what was helpful to one person and insist that others to whom we are speaking do the same.

Jesus did not approach everyone the same way. To the self righteous, hardened religious leaders, Jesus said “You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good?”ⁱⁱ Yet to the woman about to be stoned for her sin, Jesus simply said “I do not condemn you, either. Go. From now on sin no more.”ⁱⁱⁱ The Apostle Paul writes “admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone.”^{iv} Of course, the only way to consider the needs of the individual is to listen to them and know them.

Though there are times in which people who have rebelled against God, who have hardened their hearts and dug in their heels, need to be rebuked, we often feel we cannot do biblical ministry without quoting every verse in our mind about the subject at hand, discovering ways a person is failing to walk by faith, and calling them to immediate repentance and obedience. Yet, these people often do not need the prophet Isaiah to pronounce definitive theological judgment. Often, they need Job’s counselors (who sat with him for seven days without speaking) before they opened their mouths. They need a Jesus who stands at the tomb and weeps.^v They need a God who is the God of all comfort.^{vi}

II. Be Quick To Listen, Slow To Speak

This reference is taken from the book of James, the half-brother of Jesus. He writes “*This* you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak *and* slow to anger.”^{vii} Though James is talking about anger specifically, his advice is well to be heeded by all. The well known quote related to this is that God gave us two ears, two eyes, and one mouth for a reason. We are to spend twice as much time listening and watching as talking.

Somewhere along the lines, we began to think that the essence of ministry is problem solving. I see this in my own ministry quite often. It is not uncommon for me to listen to someone’s story just as long as it takes in order to hear what I think is the problem. But after that, it is easy to ignore the rest of what is said. I dish out a bowl of “good advice stew” (i.e. just trust God, it could be worse, at least you will have other children), wish them the best, and move on to the next hungry customer. But all the while, the person who is hurting, angry, frustrated, alone, frightened, or confused is ignored. We do not counsel problems, we counsel people.

What can happen when we jump the gun and speak before we truly understand people is that we end up counseling a person, but not the person in front of us. We counsel a person of our own invention who exists only in our mind. Thus, to be servants of God who speak the truth in love^{viii}, we must listen to the cares, fears, desires, and hopes of the people to whom we minister. What a joy that we serve a God that not only created us and knows our problems better than we do, but stepped into our world, became a man, and lived among us.^{ix} Thus, the writer of Hebrews states “Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.”^x

III. Helping Is Not Simply About What You Say To A Person, But About Who You Are To That Person.

At the hospital where Brenna was cared for, the philosophy of the staff was that of a team approach to care. Brenna did not have one doctor over everything, or even one doctor over a particular area. She had several doctors working on each area; cardiology, surgery, respiratory, etc. This approach was a very helpful approach that insured the best care.

Yet, with such an approach, various personalities are brought to the table. Some individuals, while incredibly gifted, had the personality of a rock, while others, just as gifted, were more encouraging in nature. While God used both individuals in mighty ways to accomplish beautiful things, when my wife

and I needed to hear bad news, we responded much better to the doctors who had spent time with Brenna, who had spent time with us, who we considered to be friends.

Sometimes we reason that as long as we speak truth, people will respond rightly. If not, that is his or her problem. To be sure, God does call us at times to speak the truth to people with whom we have very little, if any, relationship. Yet, we need to have the humility to ask how far we may push for the truth or if we are the best person to give this truth to this person.

Further, we must remember that what we do for a person in the moment is far more important than what we say. Is it any wonder that, when speaking of personal ministry, the Apostle Paul wrote “So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things *put on* love, which is the perfect bond of unity.”^{xi}

The people who meant the most to us as a family were the friends who came to the hospital, not to simply be truth speakers, but they came to share a pizza with hungry parents. They, at a moment’s notice, dropped what they were doing to spend time with us! There were people who were never able to visit the hospital who shared that they were fervently praying for us. People sent us cards (even gift cards for gas or Red Lobster!). There were nurses and doctors who sat and listened to us. Even now, there are those who remember my daughter’s monthly birthdays who send me notes encouraging our family. I remember very little of what these people said, but I saw Jesus in what they did.

IV. Offer To Do Specific Things

Few things are more awkward in life than looking into the eyes of a sufferer, trying to help, but not knowing how. We often mutter some well meaning phrases, ask if the person needs anything, and then head off on our way.

What you may or may not realize is two things. First, by the time you have said “If you need anything, call me,” thirty people before you already said the same thing. To the one saying such things, it seems to be the best thing to do, but to the one hearing it, it has become meaningless.

Second, in such a scenario, the burden of thought falls not on the one offering to help, but on the one receiving help. It becomes the task of the sufferer not only to suffer well, but also to think of how the one offering can help.

What is the solution? The greatest helpers to us as a family were the ones who, while acting within the parameters of our given relationship (again, see principle three), simply did things. They brought food. They showed up. They sent cards. They watched our other daughter. They prayed. “But,” the objection might be, “what if I want to help, but don’t know if what I want to do would be received well?”

The answer is both simple and complex. It is simple because the solution is to ask the sufferer if it would be ok to help them in a particular way. It is complex because we ought not to ask WHAT to do, but IF to do. Rather than asking “Is there anything I can do?” we ought to ask “May I watch your child for you?” “Are you taking visitors?” “May I bring a casserole (for the Baptists reading this!) for dinner on Thursday?” This approach does several things. First, it demonstrates that you really do want to help. Second, it takes the burden off of the sufferer. Third, it actually meets needs.

There is so very much that could be, should be, or would be said if time, space, and need were provided. Undoubtedly, you will have read this article and thought of ways others had helped you as well. These were just some of the more important lessons God impressed upon me to enable me to grow as a loving truth teller, as a disciple maker, as a counselor representing the Wonderful Counselor.^{xii} As ambassadors for Christ^{xiii}, may we represent Him well, doing all, whether in word or deed, in His name,^{xiv} and may He use us in powerful ways to accomplish His will!

ⁱ Hebrews 10:24-25

ⁱⁱ Matthew 12:34

ⁱⁱⁱ John 8:11

^{iv} 1 Thessalonians 5:14

^v John 11:35

^{vi} 2 Corinthians 1:3

^{vii} James 1:19

^{viii} Ephesians

^{ix} John 1:14

^x Hebrews 2:17-18

^{xi} Colossians 3:12-14

^{xii} Isaiah 9:6

^{xiii} 2 Corinthians 5:18-20

^{xiv} Colossians 3:17