

# Listening And Loving

- helping hurting people find wholeness

## WHOLENESS<sup>1</sup>

### Everyone mature in Christ

‘The secret is Christ in you the hope of glory,  
It is him we proclaim.  
We warn everyone, teach everyone in all the ways of wisdom  
so as to present everyone mature in Christ.’  
[Col 1:27-28]

The proclamation of the gospel of peace focuses the spotlight of *shalom* on the individual. The vision of *shalom* becomes a reality only as people personally come to ‘peace with God’ [Rom 5:1]. This is not inner tranquility, but the whole person, completely integrated within themselves, and in harmony with the character of God. The Greek *eirene* [peace], which translates *shalom* in the New Testament, is used by the writers to mean ‘the eschatological salvation of the whole person’ [Von Rad]. What the Hebrew prophets of the new covenant looked forward to [Jer 31:33-34; Ezek 36:26-27], becomes a reality through the person and work of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Salvation is ‘total salvation’. The whole person is saved by God. It has been said that the word *soteria* [salvation] is used in eight different ways: saved from illness [Matt 9:21], physical danger [Matt 8:25], the world [Acts 2:40], lostness [Luke 19:10], sin [Matt 1:21], God’s wrath [Rom 5:9] and saved for eternity [Heb 9:28]. A person is saved *from* everything that would prevent them from fulfilling God’s potential and *for* everything God has destined for them. To see everybody engulfed by this wholeness of the *shalom* of Jesus was the driving force in Paul’s life, ‘To this end I am toiling strenuously with all the energy and power of Christ at work in me’ [Col 1:29]; and should be for us.

### One another’s burdens

‘Help to carry one another’s burdens,  
in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.  
[Gal 6:2]

Evangelism and pastoring flow together. In the new covenant, ‘fishermen’ have shepherds’ hearts, and ‘shepherds’ have a fisherman’s eye; ‘evangelists’ and ‘pastors’ intertwine together [Eph 4:11]. Their common concern is to see people come to life and wholeness in Jesus. Their shared burden is caring about people.

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<sup>1</sup> This subject is often viewed as ‘specialist’, with a small percentage of Christians being interested in it, while the majority thinking it is not something they can become involved in. The purpose of this session (and the next) is to show that every Christian is called upon to be involved with caring and sharing with others; it is part of the gospel. It also tries to break web of counselling jargon that has grown up around pastoring and present the practical challenge to every Christian.



The simple fact is that coming to the wholeness and fullness of *shalom* is a process. A process that is often alive with *crisis* [repentance / conversion<sup>2</sup>], but a *process* none the less. Each one of us is involved in this process, each of us is being 'changed from one degree of glory to another' [2 Cor 3:18]. This is both an exciting and humbling reality.

God's proclamation of life and *shalom* goes out to everyone. Each person is unique. Every individual has particular needs – physical, mental, emotional, spiritual – each influencing the other. Our responsibility, personally and corporately as the church, is to help other people towards maturity in Jesus. This will take time and commitment, but it is at the heart of being a disciple of Jesus. It will also be an important part of our own maturing process. We will be a community of people bearing one another's burdens together; and growing!

Some people will face such serious difficulties and obstacles in their lives that they will need the help of specialised counsellors or psychiatrists. But even then our friendship and love will be an important part of their path forwards. This unit [and the next] is not attempting to provide professional skills. It is highlighting the fact that there is a great deal every Christian can do in helping others to find a way forward in God and prove his power in their lives. Remember that we are speaking about people whether or not they have affirmed themselves as disciples of Jesus. Crisis and choice are vital, but the process is essential; and God does not draw the same strict lines across the story of a person's spiritual journey that many Christians do.

## LOVING AND ACCEPTING

### Binding broken hearts

'He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
To proclaim liberty to the captives.'  
[Isa 61:1]

Jesus uses these words as a hallmark statement about of his public ministry [Luke 4:18]. Throughout his travelling and teaching we see him fulfilling these words, and he does so in a spirit of unconditional love and acceptance.

#### EXERCISE 1:

Note 5 occasions when Jesus showed unconditional love and acceptance in binding up the broken-hearted and releasing captives.

**EXERCISE 2:** Choose 3 examples from the above exercise and identify from them what we can learn about unconditional love and acceptance.

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<sup>2</sup> The major crisis is the encounter with Jesus and the decision about discipleship; but following this the crisis / process still continues.



## Agape environment

‘Love knows no limit to its endurance,  
no end to its trust, no fading of its hope;  
it can outlast anything.  
It is, in fact, the one thing that still stands  
when all else is fallen.’  
[1 Cor 13:8, Phillips]

The church is the God-created environment for people to find healing and forgiveness; it is the womb of the new creation. It is the place where the Spirit of God, moving among and within his people, can set them free and make them whole. It is the place where the bruised, broken, damaged and disorientated can come to find comfort and restoration [Isa 42:3; Matt 11:28-30]. It is the place where anguish and despair can be assuaged. It is the place where truth is so powerfully present that weeping and tearing repentance can flow.

The presence of this environment depends entirely upon the community of faith being baptised in and breathing *agape* love. This word, almost unused in classical Greek, was used by the scribes of the LXX to speak of God's love and is infused with dynamic new meaning by the early Christians in the light of the teaching and example of Jesus.

*Agape* is the love which makes up God's essential being, 'God is love' [1 John 4:7-8, 16]. 'He is love as he is everything that he is, as the triune God in himself' [K Barth]. *Agape* is love that is essentially a response of the will rather than emotion; it is primarily revealed in actions rather than feelings. It is extravagant [Rom 5:8], it is selfless [John 15:13]; it is to do with redemption [Mark 10:45], reconciliation [Col 1:22] and forgiveness [Matt 26:28].

*Agape* has been 'poured out within our hearts by the Holy Spirit' [Rom 5:5]. The love with which we are to love is God's love poured into us and overflowing out into the lives of others around. God has made us the medium of this love to the world, 'a stream of divine blessings which must flow without intermission to other people' [Luther]. *Agape* is the refusal to see, think of or deal with another except in the light of what Christ has done for them. It is everything God is to them; and to fail to express *agape* to others in this way is to throw into question the reality of our experience of God [1 John 4:8].

## Affirming acceptance

People within the church and outside the church must know that whoever they are and whatever they have done here is a community of people who will accept them unreservedly. It cannot be a theory; it must be a tangible, practical reality. We must regularly and openly declare our commitment to and acceptance of individuals and people as a whole. Everyone must know that in this community of faith it is guaranteed that:

- people will be loved
- people will be accepted without reservation
- people will receive unreserved forgiveness no matter what.

People should be actually told:

‘We are going to love you, no matter who you are, or what you have done; irrespective of your appearance or your behaviour.’

For a person who can face no more rejection, no more guilt, no more silence, no more failure, this is the only environment that will save them. Jesus accepted sinners as they were, and they found life as a consequence. Only the Holy Spirit can empower us to be like this.

At the heart of the local Christian community of faith there should be a river of ‘friendship’. This involves time and commitment; while there are finite dimensions in terms of time and resources, these must be mixed with an infinite amount of love sourced in God. Some people will receive more than others; but our response to them must not be judged or measured by their response to us. Many people have been hurt by failed promises by others [including Christians] and they simply have little reason to trust. They will have to find confidence and healing at that very point before they can even begin to respond.

Remember that acceptance is not agreement. Acceptance does not ignore, or condone, or license behaviour. People are aware of their guilt and failure; they need acceptance. The strong environment of *agape* creates the base in which truth can be shared. ‘Love covers a multitude of sins’ [1 Pet 4:8].

## **LISTENING AND LEARNING**

### **Creating confidence**

People with difficulties often need help to begin to express themselves. There is guilt, embarrassment, confusion and much more. Even if they have asked for help they may need to talk generally, or around the subject, to begin with; until they feel at ease with you and with their thoughts. Give people space.

Other people may not feel free to open up to anyone, but reveal their need through statements and attitudes. Wisdom is needed to gently find an opening; a question, an observation ... Watch for clues.

Above all else the person needs to know that what you share together will be treated in absolute confidence. That there are no circumstances in which anything will be revealed or even implied to another without their prior permission. If the circumstances are such that you need advice to help them, this can usually be gained without having to reveal anything about them in particular. If it is essential they get help from someone else they will almost always see the reason why and can be persuaded. You can go with them to give them support. Confidentiality does not



mean that the person helping is open to being held to ransom by their promise of silence. The promise of confidentiality is to give the person in need confidence, not a means of manipulation. It takes wisdom and experience to develop this skilfully.

In everything the relationship must be one of friendship, love and trust. You do not get the impression of 'counsellor / counsellee' in Jesus' powerful interaction with people. He is our model. Jesus shows us that we are to share *ourselves* above all else. Technique has its place, but at its best it is only a vehicle for sharing ourselves. Anything else and it becomes a mask to hide behind; that is never the Christian way.

## Learning to listen

As the person begins to speak we need to listen. The only way in which we are going to find out what the person's difficulty is, is if we listen. Serious listening requires privacy and uninterrupted time. If it is appropriate and the person is willing, it is often helpful for two people talk and listen with the person. Four ears are better than two; and male and female ears together are much better tuned! Of course, the person talking must feel equally comfortable with two as with you.

Listening is something we take for granted, but few of us know how to listen. It is a skill that must be developed; like playing an instrument or speaking a foreign language it must be constantly practised and there is room for development. We can never stop learning how to listen.

Listening is hard work. It demands total concentration. There are a number of levels of listening that must all be going on at the same time:

- ❑ **Listen intently:**
  - undivided attention, our mind must not wander
- ❑ **Listen carefully:**
  - noting the things that are said and not said
- ❑ **Listen observantly:**
  - use eyes and ears; note body language, facial expression
- ❑ **Listen feelingly:**
  - what emotions are being expressed or suppressed?
- ❑ **Listen discerningly:**
  - be prayerful and spiritually sensitive

## Hearing and understanding

As we listen we need to be noting what we hear and try to come to understanding about the needs of the person we are wanting to help:-

- let the person tell their story in their own way
- don't impose yourself upon them by too many questions
- avoid attempts to summarise what they have just said
- don't make observations that suggest you already know what the issue is

If you fail in these approaches then you will inhibit the person, mask their true feelings and prevent real help being given to them.

Listen and note:

- ❑ **recurring names:**
  - parents, spouse, friends, colleagues, etc.
- ❑ **recurring themes:**
  - loneliness, rejection, anger, fear, frustration, etc.
- ❑ **recurring phrases:**
  - 'I wish ...', 'I hate ...' keys to issues
- ❑ **throwaway phrases:**
  - muttered asides can signpost important areas
  
- ❑ **what is unsaid:**
  - key figures and feelings conspicuous by their absence
- ❑ **what is half-said:**
  - topics too sensitive to touch yet
- ❑ **way in which it is said:**
  - detect the underlying attitude

Do not be afraid of silence. In pauses don't talk too soon or too much. Sense the silence; be at ease in it, learn to use it:

- is it a creative silence; reflecting, gathering thought or emotion?
- is it an empty silence; awaiting a question or a prompt?

Questions are important keys to conversations, but the listener must use them with great care. They should aid the speaker, like a foothold or handhold aids a rock climber. Unobtrusive and gentle, enough to help and encourage them in their forward movement. Ask 'open questions'; ones that require more than 'Yes' or 'No' as an answer. Encouraging the person to talk will help them to objectify their feelings, making them clearer and easier to choose what to do with.

In everything be aware of your body language. Be relaxed. Look at the person throughout. Let your eyes and smile give support and encouragement.

In all of this a picture is being painted, a map is being drawn, a person is revealing themselves. We are listening, learning and coming to a place of understanding from which we hope prayerfully to help them. It is this we will discuss in our next session.

## Questions and Reflection

1. Why is it that Christian churches are often not places of love, acceptance and forgiveness? What strategy needs to be adopted to bring about a change?
2. What qualities make a good listener?



### 3. Write a short paragraph on each of the following questions

Why do you think we are so often such bad listeners?

Why do we so often fail to hear what people are really saying?

What qualities do you think are essential in a person, and a community, that genuinely loves?

What practical steps do you think a local community of faith ought to take, and maintain, to be a place where people know that they will be listened to and loved?

### Reading and Resources

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