

Side by Side

Walking with Others in Wisdom and Love

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Remember: We Have the Spirit

I had been keeping my recent fears to myself. My wife knew, and she was helpful, but a good rule of thumb is that when you are stuck in hardships or sins, you keep enlarging the circle of those who know until you are no longer stuck. I think this is a good rule, but I had decided I could get through it on my own.

My wife and I were out for a meal with some friends when they asked, “How are *you*?”

In the most casual way possible, I said, “Oh, I’ve been experiencing some odd fears lately.”

Our friends stopped, as if to put all other conversations aside, and considered my fears with me for the next half hour. Then they prayed for me.

Why was that so helpful? Good helpers, such as these friends:

- are present, which is a good thing when fears arise;

- listen, really listen;
- draw you out;
- avoid being impersonal teachers;
- never minimize, are never trite;
- remember.

Those are qualities of Jesus himself, and they are some of the skills we will consider up ahead.

And, on that particular evening, I don't know exactly what these ordinary people did that was most helpful, but they did have impact. My fears lessened from that meal on. One thing I do know is that my helpers were qualified by the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

You Have the Spirit

Everything changed when Jesus came. He died for sins, rose from the grave, and then, at Pentecost, sent the Spirit. The professional religious caste was no longer the titled few. Now followers of Jesus have all the competencies needed to encourage and instruct each other (Jer. 31:33–34).

That is the reason we even consider helping others. We live in the age of the Spirit. Apart from Pentecost,

we would be referral agents who simply introduce needy people to the real experts. We would hold our tongue for fear that we would just make matters worse. With the Spirit, we move toward other people and are amazed that God uses ordinary people to do his kingdom work.

Having the Spirit does not mean that otherwise blank minds suddenly become streams of profound insight and comfort to those in need. We remain fully capable of saying stupid and hurtful things. But it does mean that our ability to help will bear the marks of the Spirit, such as patience and kindness (Gal. 5:22).

The Spirit Gives Wisdom

The Spirit gives us the wisdom of God. This wisdom overlaps with wisdom that we can gather from books and careful observations, but it goes deeper. It is wisdom rooted in the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. It is crammed with guidance from the Father through Christ—wisdom that we could never discover on our own (1 Cor. 1:20–25).

When we are feeling utterly worthless, for example, we can ignore it, debate it, or succumb to it. The best wisdom of the world can't get us much further. In con-

trast, the wisdom of God reveals that worthlessness is about our connections. We are connected to things that have been forced on us, such as the sins of others, or we are connected to things we love, such as work, hobbies, or even the people who love us. It turns out that none of these things are sufficient in themselves to make us whole. The deeper wisdom of God reveals that, by faith, we are connected to Jesus, and then we investigate that wisdom for the rest of our lives in order to understand Jesus more fully.

As Jesus is with us through the Spirit, his wisdom becomes a part of us. This wisdom brings the truths of the cross into the details of daily life.

- God's wisdom leads us to serve others.
- God's wisdom shows us how to forgive those who sin against us.
- God's wisdom makes unity with God and others possible.
- God's wisdom inspires us to take action when there is injustice.
- God's wisdom helps us understand suffering. As the King goes, so we go. Since he was not spared

the cruelties of the world, we should not expect to be spared.

- God's wisdom assures us of God's love. While we were enemies, he loved us. This is the only evidence strong enough to comfort and assuage the inevitable doubts about God's goodness. We trust in the one who loved us and express that faith in love toward others (Gal. 5:6).

The wisdom of God is condensed in Christ and him crucified. If you know that wisdom, you are eminently qualified to help others.

The Spirit Works in Ordinary People

And there is just one other qualification. It is this: you are an ordinary person. God has determined that run-of-the-mill people do most of his work—not professionals, not experts.

But habits die hard. A woman was having problems with her children, and she needed help. She was in a small group—she could talk to an (ordinary) person there. Her church had a pastoral staff—she could ask one of the pastors. She also knew a very smart Bible scholar—she could ask him. As a good American, she

chose the scholar. Within a minute or two, and bored out of her mind, she began to realize that the kingdom of heaven doesn't move forward by mere knowledge.

We have no complaints about knowledge, and there certainly is a place for expertise, but we aren't necessarily going to want help from the person who has access to the most information. We want help from someone with godly wisdom, and that wisdom, which resides fully in Jesus, is in the public domain. A child can understand it, while a scholar might be sitting in the dark. It seems to be a questionable way to change the world, but it's God's way.

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong . . . so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor. 1:26–29)

What a fine strategy. If the beautiful, rich, and talented were the ones who had spiritual power, we would revert to the class structures that have cursed humanity from the beginning. The *haves* would lord it over the

have-nots and take pride in themselves, as if they were fully responsible for their power and blessings. But when ordinary people are used in ways they did not even know, then God is honored. The woman having problems with her children would probably have done better to talk to a wise mom in her small group.

Are you feeling ordinary or a little less so? Do you have the Spirit? If so, you are just the person God has been looking for. When you, in your weakness, move toward others, you honor God and are more powerful than you know. You are qualified by the Spirit.

Discussion and Response

- 1) What are the qualifications of those who have helped you in your times of trouble?
- 2) What did your helpers do that was most helpful?

Move toward and Greet One Another

With the basic qualifications fully met, off we go.

We could start by erecting a small booth in the church narthex, like the one Lucy staffed in the *Peanuts* cartoon, and put out a sign saying, “Psychiatric Help 5 Cents.” That way, we could help our friends and even make new ones.

Yet there are a few problems with this. One is that no one would come for help, even if we lowered the price, because most people do not ask for help. Even desperate people are slow to ask for help.

So we take the initiative and move toward each other. God has moved toward us; we move toward others in his name.

God Moves toward Us

God always takes the initiative. Even when Adam and Eve were exiled from the garden, he followed them into their exile. Watch him pursue his people, as symbolized in the relationship between Hosea and Gomer—a marriage between a prophet and an adulteress wife (Hos. 1:2). When God's people run from him as Gomer did from Hosea, God moves toward them and cares for them as Hosea did for Gomer.

Better yet, watch Jesus. He relentlessly pursued and invited the marginalized and outcasts to be with him.

Our picture of kings is that they are cordoned off from the public, like the Ming Dynasty emperors of China living in their Forbidden City. In contrast, our King does not simply leave the castle door ajar, so a brave subject can enter unannounced. He goes out to the people in everyday garb and personally invites them to stay with him. Jesus is God in the flesh, who stepped down from his throne and entered into the affairs of daily life. In doing this, he removed all boundaries and barriers between him and us.

God comes to us—that is grace, and it starts cycles of grace through the body of Christ.

We Move toward Others

As the King goes, so go his people. He moves toward people; we move toward people. He moves toward people who seek him and people who do not; we move toward those who want help and those who seem distant and marginalized. He moves toward friends and even enemies; we move out beyond our circle of friends to those far beyond that circle.

Imagine how this can transform our churches. Instead of talking to the same people—those with whom we are comfortable and who are similar to us—we treat others as God has treated us. Imagine how aloneness could gradually be banished.

It sounds great, and it is fun to imagine, but it is so difficult to practice, which is as it should be. If it were easy, we could simply do it. But since it's hard, unnatural, and, at times, impossible, we are driven back to, "Jesus, help."

Make no mistake: to move toward others is hard. There are some people we don't click with, some we don't like, and some who have wronged us. It is good to move toward others, but it is not easy.

We Greet One Another

Let's say we actually made it and are face-to-face with a real person. Then what happens? The thought of awkward silences and feeling a little stupid puts this entire plan in jeopardy. What do we say?

We start small. We greet the person.

Greetings are not a form of politeness from a bygone era. They are skills that imitate the Lord, they show respect and kindness to others, and we are meant to grow in them. Listen to one of Paul's greetings:

All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss. (1 Cor. 16:20)

We don't have to kiss someone when we greet them, but when we move toward others, we are to greet them with familial warmth. Since we have been invited, welcomed, and greeted by the Lord,⁷ we have the opportunity to reciprocate. By welcoming the least, we welcome Jesus (Mark 9:37).

There are, however, so many people we could greet. Even in a small church, there are too many people to greet personally. We don't aim to become serial greeters who offer a brief and boisterous "Good morning," then move to the next person and offer the same greeting.

Consider whom you are greeting. They are children of the King, your brothers and sisters. Some might feel lost, which is all the more reason to greet them. Others might be seeking something but are unsure *what* that is, and we have the privilege to invite them to a place that could be home. Others we have seen before, but we don't yet know their names.

Greetings, of course, take time. This means our greeting list might be short, because we have a finite amount of time when the church is gathered—or when a friend is walking by on the street. We cannot greet everyone. So here is how we prioritize:

- The visitor (what Scripture calls the “foreigner” or “alien”) comes first.
- The visitor who returns comes next.
- The less popular, the introverts, the marginalized, or those sitting alone come next.
- Then come the children. Jesus singles them out as examples of the marginalized.

- “Hi, _____” is offered to as many people as possible, which doesn’t have to be accompanied by a hug or a handshake.

Good friends are interspersed through these greetings, but they are left for later if time is short.

A reasonable application of Scripture is to greet one person we don’t know or don’t know well every time we gather with others in the body of Christ.

And if we feel a little awkward? All the better. Some people are naturals at moving toward others, greeting them and striking up a conversation. Most of us are not. So we pray that we will share in this feature of God’s character. We move toward others, not because we can do these things with ease but because of Jesus.

Discussion and Response

- 1) Sheer willpower might not get us very far, even in something as simple as moving toward others and greeting them. A better way is to consider how God does this with you. How *does* God move toward you?
- 2) How do you plan to act on the call to move toward others?

Have Thoughtful Conversations

Once the greetings are over, the pleasure of knowing someone begins. This means having thoughtful conversations—ones that go below the surface niceties. We don't aim to draw out problems so that we can be helpers. We are simply interested in knowing another person, which is a basic feature of everyday love.

It doesn't always start well though. There you are, in front of someone you don't know.

“Good morning. My name is Susan.”

“Hi. I'm Naomi.”

And then . . . nothing.

This seems to happen more often with men than women, but the thought of it is enough to keep you among safer relationships.

Or maybe you notice a person who seems to keep a distance, so you go over and introduce yourself.

“Good morning. My name is Bill. I don’t think we’ve met.”

“No.”

“Welcome to our church. Have you been here before?”

“No.”

Hmm, he seems perturbed, but you decide to keep trying, and you search for a question that could elicit more than a yes or no.

“Are you from around here?”

“Yes.”

So much for a better question.

“Okay . . . I just . . . wanted to say hello.”

Very awkward, but don’t let it discourage you from moving toward him and those like him. As you do this in the name of Jesus, you are doing a fine thing. Success is measured differently in God’s kingdom. And who knows? Maybe he’ll keep coming to church, and after another dozen greetings, he might begin to trust you with a few more details.

Knowing and being known—by design we enjoy human connections, and those connections are forged over time through normal interactions and questions that gradually ask for more. Such connections are the foundations for mutual help, and they are helpful in themselves since they are expressions of love.

Think of the best conversations you have had. They probably included give and take, keen interest from both parties, talking about things that are important. Our aim is to learn from those conversations and duplicate them whenever possible.

Following are some ideas about how to have these thoughtful conversations.

An Initial Script

During a first greeting, we usually have a few prepared remarks and stock questions:

“I don’t think we have met. I’m Joe.”

“Have you been here before?”

“Have you lived here for a while?”

Subsequent conversations have their standard lines too:

“Nice to see you again. How have you been?”

“How 'bout those Phils?”

“Beautiful weather, isn't it?”

We can locate those questions in the X-ray from [chapter 1](#) among the various rings or concentric circles. Those rings identify the events, circumstances, and influences in our lives.

There are many other questions:

“Married?”

“Any kids?”

“What kind of work do you do?”

“Are you going away this summer?”

“What are you doing for the holidays?”

“Where do you live?”

“Where did you grow up?”

“What's happening in your life?”

“Everyone in your family healthy?”

These are fine questions, but, like appetizers before a good meal, we don't want to get filled up on them, because they ask for nothing personal. Good conversations go a little farther.

Follow the Affections

We hope to learn what is important to the person we're talking to, which is another way of saying that we hope to hear what is on his or her heart. The way in is to listen for what is dear, what is loved, what is feared, what is hard—we listen for how someone feels. For example, we certainly want to know the age and names of someone's children, but we also want to hear stories about the children that reveal parental affection, hopes, or griefs.

Have you ever had an initial conversation or one early on in the relationship in which the one with whom you were conversing was emotionally flat throughout?

“Are you going anywhere this summer?”

“Yes, we usually spend time with my husband's family.”

“Do you enjoy your time with them?”

“It's okay. That's what we always do.”

Now what? A bland response gives you very little direction. It leaves no room for follow-up. So you are left looking at each other, or you change the subject.

We listen for signs of life. A question about the holidays might reveal the pleasure or pain of gathering with extended family. A question about health can reveal thankfulness or fear. So we keep our ears open for details that are important to someone. This may sound clinical, but it's not. It's what you do naturally when you are interested in someone. You follow the affections. You follow what excites, what is prized, and what is hard.

We want to know others, but we can't know them by simply amassing the events of their lives. Personal knowledge is what we go after. When we hear Scripture say that God knows us (e.g., Ps. 139:1), it means that he knows our pleasures and griefs, loves and loathings, and he has us in his heart. How do we do this for someone we are trying to move toward? We do it by asking questions that get at what matters.

"What did you do this week?" That question gets information.

"How are you?" This question gets closer to the heart.

There are two versions of the *how* question. The first is a mere greeting that does not anticipate an answer other than a reflexive, "Fine. How are you?" The second

version is revolutionary, and some people have never been asked it. When someone responds with a perfunctory “Good,” or “How are *you*?” you can respond with, “How are you, *really*? How has your week been?” Now we are getting personal. We can even dust off those other questions that sought only surface information and aim for deeper knowledge that way.

“How is work [really] going for you?” A superficial response, such as “Good,” now becomes, “I am concerned about budget cuts and the future of my position.”

“How is school?” A response such as “Almost over” can be followed up with, “Has there been anything you have especially enjoyed?” or “Any plans for next year?”

“How are your children?” Children are always important to parents, so you’ll be sure to hear something about a person’s heart with this question. And a parent will love you for asking.

We listen for likes and dislikes. We listen for feelings and emotions because they reveal hopes and fears. And we listen for God’s place in it all.

Mere information can be boring. “I woke up, had a bagel for breakfast, took a shower, drove to work . . .” Blah, blah, blah. If the conversation threatens to stay

in information purgatory, just bust in when there is a pause.

“And how are *you*?”

We move into another person’s world, walking side by side. We want to be moved by the things that move her. Then, having her on our heart, we pray for her or ask how we can pray for her.

Prayer

Once we pray with or for someone, we are in the on-going story of his life, and it is an honor to be there.

We hear information.

We hear what is important to him and let that settle into our own heart.

We pray for him.

Then we follow up the next time we see him:

“I’ve been thinking about your son. I am praying he would not be defeated by the failure he feels in school and would keep talking about it with you.”

“I have been praying for your relationship with your boss and that you’ll have patience, wisdom, and confidence that God is with you. How is it going?”

All this might seem to be help at its most minimal, and, in one sense, it is. Up to this point, we have not given hours of time. We greet one week, ask a few follow-up questions the next. It doesn’t seem like much. But those who receive even this minimal care from someone are blessed.

Knowing others well enough to pray for them—that’s help at its most basic and at its best.

Discussion and Response

- 1) We can all grow in conducting these daily and more intentional conversations. How do you hope to grow? What will you do in order to grow? Who comes to mind? Who will you get to know better this week? How will you do it?
- 2) Who in your life is one step ahead of you in knowing people? What does that person do?