

A Questionable Life
Part 3: Listening
November 15th & 16th, 2014

This fall, we're looking at Harbor's mission, which from the day we opened our doors fifteen years ago has been to do everything possible, by the grace and power of God at work in us, to *Help People Find Their Way Back to God!*

We spent the first part of our fall looking at what God has done through Jesus Christ to bring us back into His arms...and for the remainder of the year we're considering this question!

*"Now that the gospel is going to work in us,
how does the gospel work its way out through us?"*

To answer this, we must look at the Scriptures, but we must also look beyond the Scriptures to how Christians throughout history have lived out the gospel! Following His death and resurrection, Jesus' followers lived out their love for Him in such practical and potent ways that Christianity swept the Roman Empire like a firestorm! They literally became famous for their hospitality to strangers and generosity toward the poor; they cared for the sick, and shared their food with all regardless of culture, race, or social status.

They lived such radically questionable lives that it stirred the curiosity of the watching world! And over time, droves of people began bowing their knee to Jesus Christ as King! And we must learn from them if we're to have the same effect...

One of the things that made these Christians so unusual was that they were radically devoted to one another!

We see this in the book of Acts...when the church was literally brand new. Luke writes...

"All the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need." Acts 2:44-45

"All the believers were united in heart and mind. And they felt that what they owned was not their own, so they shared everything they had." Acts 4:32

Over and over, these men and women whose lives had been transformed by Jesus Christ gave selflessly and sacrificially for the good of others!

I want to look at one characteristic that they must have excelled at in order to love one another so well. And I believe that the Holy Spirit longs to shape the same in us...

I'm talking about the ACT of LISTENING!

I believe that there are very few characteristics that will lead you to live a more *Questionable Life*, and with time open wide doors for you to share the greatness of Christ than when you LISTEN!

Go with me to Philippians, chapter 2!

"Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts tender and compassionate? Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose. Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too."

Philippians 2:1-4

Paul says... *"Now that you belong to Jesus...now that his love is stirring in you things like joy, peace, and confidence...and now that the Holy Spirit is knitting you together with a single desire to love and serve Jesus..."*

**Now that the gospel is alive in you...
Let the gospel work its way out through you...**

Then, he shows us how to do that! *"Agree wholeheartedly with one another, love one another, work together hand in hand, take a sincere interest in one another, and humbly consider the needs of others ahead of our own!"*

Now...you might be saying, *"I don't see listening here..."*

And you're right...which is why you have to read between the lines! I would suggest that we can't possibly live out anything in Philippians 2 unless we learn to listen to one another.

Pre-Marital Counseling: 15 years ago, when Beth and I were preparing for marriage, our counselor led us through an exercise called *Assertive Communication and Active Listening!* The goal of the exercise was to communicate with one another three things we would like the other person to do, to stop doing, to do differently...and then to really listen to each other.

Beth and I completed the exercise and when we came back together, I had a list of three things I wanted her to do. And to this day I have no idea what I wrote, but I shared them. However, when it came time for Beth to share...her list was blank! We had known each other for less than a year, and I was already perfectly meeting all of

her hopes and expectations! 15 years later, ask Beth what she'd like me to do differently and then grab a Latte because you're going to be there for a while! **I've got a long way to go!**

Today...I have the opportunity to lead pre-married couples through this same exercise! In fact...it's one of the very first things we do because **assertive communication and active listening** are foundational to everything else in the marriage...be it how we work through **conflict, manage finances**; how we **parent** or decide whose family we visit for the holidays! Even **romance** and **sex** hinge on how well two people communicate with and listen to one another!

Why is that?

We have come to realize the same thing I've observed in countless encounters with couples! HERE IT IS! Many things can be causing strain in our marriage...finances, the rhythm and rhyme of parenting...there was a point when we had four children under the age of five at home! We owned stock in Huggies! We've had to work through in-law issues (I know we're probably alone in that)! The strain ebbs and flows from season to season, but as long as we're taking the time to listen to each other and then seek to respond in a way that honors one another, then our marriage remains strong!

At the same time...many things can be right in a marriage (work, finance, romance), but if two people aren't regularly listening to one another, over time this will cause an unbearable strain on the relationship.

You can't love someone very well without listening! But the moment you begin to listen, you'll be able to love them!

Go back to the text...and ask yourself...

"Can we possibly agree wholeheartedly with someone unless we first listen to them?"

"Can we look out for the interests of others unless we first seek to understand their interests?"

"Is it possible to really love someone in a sustained way, unless we know them...and how can we know them without listening to them?"

I think we'll agree that it's not possible...and this is just a handful of verses. In the New Testament alone, we are called to care for one another in over 40 distinct ways...

"Encourage each other and build each other up..."

1 Thessalonians 5:11

"Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you..."

Romans 15:7

"Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you."

Colossians 3:13

Let's be honest...the only way we can encourage and accept one another, or forgive those who offend us is if we're willing to take the time to listen!

*Now...it's one thing to say, 'we must learn to listen in order to love,' but it's a wholly different thing to develop the habit of listening! So...in a moment I'll suggest several ways you can put this into practice. But first, let's look at why the majority of us find this to be such a difficult practice!

Look at verse 3 again...

"Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too."

Philippians 2:3-4

Some translations say... 'Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.'

Vain Conceit – is a word that means, *"to be glory empty; or, to be hungry for honor, respect, and assurance."*

To be glory empty is to live with such a deep need for approval that it causes us to look to others and say, 'I am nothing unless you tell me that I matter...that I'm important!

When a young child falls to the floor in the middle of a busy shopping area and screams hysterically because they're not getting their way (By the way, this hasn't happened in our family because I'm a pastor)...the child is basically saying *"If you don't tell me that I'm more important than everything else, I'm going to rise up against you."* **That's vain conceit!**

Vain conceit is the reason that friendships break apart; it's why spouses call it quits and business partnerships unravel and neighborhoods are torn apart by violence. At the center of the storm are people saying, *"I need to be glorified...to know that I'm more important than anything else. Pour your life out for my happiness!"*

Our first response is... "I know someone like this!"

Don't you see? Paul is saying that vain conceit is not just something that exists 'out there,' in the world. He's talking to Christians. This is a problem that runs through our hearts...

Why are we this way?

Author Lewis Smede says it this way...

"Pride (hunger for glory) is, in the spiritual sense a refusal to let God be God; to grab God's status for oneself. It's wishing to be the Creator, independent, reliant on one's own resources. And that is the greatest illusion, the delusional fantasy of all fantasies. The fantasy that we can make it as our own gods leaves us empty at the center. Therefore, we learn to swagger, we're attacked by demons of fear and anxiety, so we bluff. We look around, and whenever we see a new person...we are unconsciously wondering, 'how can this person contribute to my need to prove that I count.' Life, therefore, becomes a constant battle to use people to bolster your sense of self."

(Lewis Smede)

Smede is saying that we were created to delight and rest in God's eternal love...to worship Him as the Only One worthy of our deepest affection. He's our Creator and Sustainer and Provider, and therefore deserves all glory and gratitude in our lives. Yet, we're constantly trying to grab God's status...to be our own gods...to make it on our own! As a result, instead of glorifying God, we want people to glorify us...

We're GLORY HUNGRY! We need people to say to us, 'you're good, you're worthwhile!' We look for approval in our relationships, in romance, at work. But here's the deal...when you have to have someone's approval you will no longer see them as another human being to know and love and serve, but as someone to bolster your sense of self!

Now...we don't have the time to talk about all the ways that our hunger for glory leads us toward selfishness or disunity or indifference toward others...

I simply want to suggest that our constant preoccupation with how people see us keeps us from taking an active interest in them!

So...we don't get around to listening...and therefore we find it virtually impossible to love!

Cool: Early on in our marriage...Beth actually called me out on this! I was in a conversation with someone who was sharing some very difficult things about their life, and yet I was literally lost in thought and a million miles away! Beth took notice, so she pulled me aside afterward and said... *"Did you even realize that when they were sharing some very difficult things with you, your response was, "Cool." I was responding to this person's hurt with "Cool."*

I was a terrible listener...and therefore I didn't communicate care, but carelessness! If not for the grace of God and the honesty of my wife, I'd still be that way...

***Take a moment to consider the question...**

Do you regularly listen to others? I don't mean...do you hear people speak. There is a great difference between hearing and taking the time to listen!

Let me give you some questions to ask...

- In conversations, do you do the majority of talking or listening? If you're unsure, ask someone you trust! (Ask a friend...when we're together. Ask a spouse!)
- Do you enter into people's experiences to empathize and encourage, or are you eager to share your experience.
- When you ask people how they're doing, do you really care...or do you quickly follow with how you're doing?
- When you have a meaningful conversation, do you follow up with them to see how they're doing? And if there's a way to encourage, provide care, or offer support, do you act on it? ***Listening often leads to acting!***

"Christians so often think they must always contribute something when they are in the company of others – that is the one service they have to render. They forget that listening can be a greater service than speaking...Just as the love of God begins with listening to His word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is listening to them. It is God's love for us that He not only gives us His word, but also lends us His ear." Dietrich Bonhoeffer

***If we're being honest, most of us recognize we have room to grow...so the question becomes, 'How?' First, Paul says that the answer to pride is humility...**

Paul knows that humility is the one thing that you cannot work on. The moment I say to you, 'Go be humble,' and you try to do so, you fail. Ask someone that you look up to, 'how'd you become so humble' and if they say... 'Here's how I became so incredibly humble,' you need to find someone else.

Real humility isn't thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less. You see...the more we talk about humility the more you're going to think about yourself.

What do we do? Paul goes on to say that we need to look at someone else?

Look at verse 5...

"You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross. Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Philippians 2:5-11

This is actually a beautiful hymn that the early church sang and recited about the greatness of Jesus Christ! It's not just a song, it's a story in three parts...the incarnation, cross and ascension of Christ. This is the gospel! It tells us who Jesus is and what He did for us!

Jesus was God...beautiful, glorious, worthy of honor and worship! His was the name above every name! And yet, he gave it all up! He emptied himself of glory, and became a man!

In Isaiah 53, the prophet, writing about Jesus, said that He had no beauty! He was ignored, beaten, tortured, despised, rejected, and eventually killed.

Why?

Jesus was willing to become empty for our good! When he did, God raised him up to the highest position of honor, where now, Jesus has the name above every name! He is Lord...and is working in the lives of His people, redeeming and restoring us!

Jesus emptied himself so we could be full. He became small so we could be great in the eyes of the Father! He lost His glory to give us the approval of our Heavenly Father that will never go away...

In Jesus' life and death, we see that the way to become infinitely happy is to seek the happiness of others. The way to be most glorious is to lay down your glory for the good of others.

If you want to be the young man or woman that God designed you to be...humble...self-giving...one who listens intently and is radically committed to your neighbor...then set your eyes on Jesus! Listen to his song! Christ-centeredness is the only remedy for self-centeredness.

***Now...in these last few moments, let me give you a few simple ways to put this into action...**

First, Bless and Eat

*Two weeks ago, I encouraged you to bless three people (explain). Last week I encouraged you to eat with three people...and I want to encourage you to continue doing those things...

**As you do...incorporate the habit of listening into your blessing and dining!
#1 – Listen to three people this week!**

James 1:19 – *“Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: you must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry.”*

Be quick to listen...

Can you imagine what would happen if we made it our habit to out-listen one another. Not to be quick to talk about ourselves, or quick to get out of here and on with our lives...but to say, when I gather with my church community, I'm going to listen to others! And then, you looked for ways to bless them? Can you imagine what would happen?! We'd actually love one another...and Jesus would be glorified!

Then, what would happen if you went back to your home...your neighborhood...and workplace...and determined, I'm going to listen! Hearts...stories...joys, fears, disappointments, needs...

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You'd become weird, because no one does this! But a good kind of weird! Jesus would be glorified!

No one listened like Jesus...

Matthew 14 – This morning, I was reading in Matthew 14. Jesus' close friend and cousin, John the Baptist, was killed by Herod...Jesus finds out, and the text says He withdrew to a secluded place for rest...to grieve John's death. As he went, a crowd followed, and Jesus saw the crowd and he heard their need...they were hungry...physically and spiritually! Jesus had compassion on them, He healed them, He fed them and taught them... AMAZING!

Go to the gospels over and over and spend time with Jesus. Listen to him...watch him...and ask Him to shape this area of your life!

**No one listened like Jesus!
And no one should listen as well as Jesus' followers!**

PRAY!