

2021-08-14 Learn Their Story Col 4,5-6

Title: BLESS – Learn Their Story

The Apostle Paul provides some practical and timely wisdom for us:

Colossians 4:5-6 NRSV

5 Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. 6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.

These two verses have some of my favorite words and ideas embedded them. They speak of living wisely. They speak of eagerly seizing the opportunities God opens for us to speak blessing into the world. When he says our words should be seasoned with salt, he isn't advocated salty speech (sorry!) but instead that what we say would be experienced by others as nourishing, preserving, and above all delicious!

When Paul speaks of outsiders, he means anyone whose life has not yet been transformed by the gospel and by being part of the church. Paul understands that a Jesus-shaped life may not make sense to people who haven't experienced it firsthand. And he knows that the right conversation changes everything!

Here's another translation that is especially helpful:

Behave wisely toward outsiders; buy up every opportunity. Let your conversation always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you should answer each individual.

Colossians 4:5-6 (MJ Harris, trans)

This morning I'd like to suggest that best way for us to "buy up every opportunity" is to become people who are really comfortable having spiritual conversations. **Christians should be the best conversationalists!**

Let me say right up front that I am NOT a good conversationalist, but I want to get better. Yes, as everyone knows I am a very good talker. I know all about talking. I am an extreme extrovert who is far too fond of the sound of my own voice. But that isn't what a great conversationalist. The best conversationalists are not those who are great at speaking. They are the ones who are great at listening! They don't just tell a great story, they make it easy for other people to tell their stories too.

When I say that Christians should be the best conversationalists, I am saying that – first and foremost – Christians should be the best listeners.

Great conversationalists are like great interviewers. They know how to ask what I call “the beautiful questions.” That is, they ask the questions that prompt a person to pause, to say, “Oh wow that’s a great question!” and then to feel safe enough to reveal a bit more of their true and inner selves.

So guess what? For those you who say, “I am too shy, too quiet, too introverted to be a good conversationalist,” I’ve got news for you: If Christians should be the best conversationalist, then Christians introverts can be the best of all! **Great conversations are all about asking beautiful questions and then listening – really listening – to the answers.**

Beautiful questions don’t have to be deep or complicated. The most beautiful questions are often the most simple. A few weeks ago I mentioned a really great interviewer, Kelly Corrigan. I’ve been listening to her podcast “Kelly Corrigan Wonders.” I mentioned something she said that really stuck with me: “We all live in our heads, so make it nice in there.” She did a great interview with Annie Jean Baptiste, who is the Head of Product Inclusion at Google. They were talking about confirmation bias and how to break out of it. Baptiste described a training at Google in which the trainer paired up the participants and then said, “I want you to ask your partner ‘who are you?’ five times.” Baptiste described emotionally daunting it was to be repeatedly asked that question and find herself becoming more and more vulnerable.

Then Corrigan described how she has been training herself to say “tell me more” to her kids. Her daughter would come home from school “in a mood,” Corrigan would ask, “what’s going on?” and her daughter would say, “Oh I just have so much homework and I am so stressed.” Then she would say, “Tell me more.” The daughter would say, “Well we have this group project and Tara and didn’t even show up” and Corrigan would ask again, “Tell me more.” “Well Tara and I have been in a fight because of this stupid thing that happened with Jimmy,” and Corrigan would say, “Tell me more.” As a mom, she loves it because it means she doesn’t have to come up with any answers or solutions, but it helps her kids *get to the thing that is underneath the thing*.

This, to me, is exactly what happens when we decide to “buy up every opportunity” to BE with people and LEARN their stories. We aren’t coming to these opportunities with an agenda, or a solution. We don’t see people as projects to complete or problems to solve. We come with the complete faith and confidence that as we listen well to people and learn their stories, they will discover that *the thing that underneath the thing* leads them closer to God.

Listening to other people this way means we listen with ears of faith. That is, we are listening with the intention of noticing the golden threads of God’s love and grace and presence and activity in their lives. When I listen like this, I am listening...

I am listening...

- To the other person
- To myself
- To God

- For shared meaning

As I do so, I aspire to **listen generously**

With curiosity – I am about to hear something amazing!

With care – If it's important to you, then it's important to me. (Often best expressed through a silent pause.)

With compassion – “Be kind; for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.” – Rev. John Watson (1850-1907). Kindness requires that we set aside our critiques, biases, and judgments. But not reason!

Today, more than ever, it is difficult for us to listen well to one another. Our divided and divisive culture desperately needs people who practice gracious speaking that is born out of gracious listening. We are very familiar with the barriers to generously listening:

Barriers to listening generously

- Jumping to conclusions
- Impatience
- Hot button issues
- Anxiety
- Defensiveness

Rather than complain about how other people don't listen well to us, we can pay attention to the things in ourselves and ask God for the grace to let these go so we can stay curious, caring, and compassionate.

But what if they ask us a question? What if they invite us to share our story? What if God is opening up an opportunity for us to give a reason for the hope that we have (1 Peter 3:15)?

My counsel is that, at first – while we are getting better at listening to other people's stories – it is best to keep our answers simple, personal, and sincerely from the heart. Make it less about “the Bible says” (because we don't know the complicated relationship other people have with the Bible and with the those who have wielded it in less-than-gracious ways), and more about what we know in our bones. But also remember that **The right answer is usually another question.**

For example, if someone asks me “How can a loving God let all these bad things happen?” I might respond with something like, “I think a lot about that too. What are the bad things that concern you most right now?” Staying curious, I am trusting that some “tell me more” moments will emerge. Maybe I will share a little bit about how God has met me in my difficult moments, but the greater thing would be allowing this person to share more of what is happening inside them, and really listening.

The right answer is usually another question.

- Practice asking beautiful questions
- Be curious *really*
- Avoid yes/no questions; Start with *how, when, where or what*
- Or even just, "Tell me more."

In so doing, we will buy up every opportunity, and experience one of the most fun and joyful things a Christian can experience: Seeing God at work in someone else's life.

Let us pray.