

NURTURE:

HOW TO LISTEN, ASK, SPEAK



To shepherd the heart, we must: Listen to the Heart, Ask Good Questions, & Speak the Truth in Love.

LISTEN TO THE HEART

THE IMPORTANCE OF STORY

Every person has a story to tell. Whether the story of their day or of their life, the words they say are full of meaning & importance. If we want to grow in our ability to speak effectively about Jesus and proclaim the gospel (to believers & not-yet-believers), then learning how to listen to a person's story is crucial.

In **Luke 6:43-45**, Jesus helps us understand the connection between words, actions, and the heart. *"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit... The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks."*

Listening to a person's story is like examining a fruit tree. Sometimes the fruit is obvious: financial difficulty, sexual sin, marital conflict, anger, mixed with love, joy, peace, etc. But the real action is under the surface, in the root structure of the tree. According to Jesus, actions & words reveal the heart. And the heart is of primary importance because the heart is the seat of faith. "With the heart a person believes" (Rom 10:10).

A person's story has the potential to reveal where they have replaced Jesus as the only right object of faith. Jesus is the only one who can save, and we regularly look to created things instead. These false saviors will often be revealed in our stories.

Every great story contains four movements: *Creation, Fall, Rescue, Restoration*. God's Story is the ultimate Good News found in the pages of the Bible, and it follows this same pattern. Understanding the pattern of God's Great Story will help us make sense of our stories & the stories we hear from others everyday.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR IN ANOTHER'S STORY

Utilize the 4 movements (*Creation, Fall, Rescue, Restoration*) as a tool for sorting the information in a person's story. Here's some guidelines & key things to listen for along the way. It is important to pray & ask the Spirit to give us ears to hear & to help us ask good questions. And always thank them for sharing their story!

CREATION

We all have a fundamental belief about our origin – who or what gave us our existence, made us who we are, and shaped us into the person we are today.

God's Story begins with him bringing everything into existence. He is the author and main character of the Story, and all things find their worth and value in him. And yet, all of us have looked to someone or something other than God to define us, to give us a sense of worth and value.

As a person begins their story, pay close attention to:

- Early shaping influences
- Family dynamics
- Important life events
- Any God talk

Key Themes: *Origin & identity.* Listen for pride, accomplishments, insecurity, failures, approval, rejection, and statements of worth.

Key Heart Question: *What is my identity? Who or what defines me or gives me worth and value?*

FALL

The world we live in is not as it should be. Brokenness is all around us. Everyone has a fundamental belief about why things are broken. We all tend to place the blame at the feet of others: parents, siblings, friends, teachers, leaders, government. *However, God's Story shows us that our own sin is the primary thing that wreaks havoc on our lives.*

As the person's story continues, listen for.:

- Painful experiences and how the person responded to the pain
- Broken relationships, behavior, attitudes, health, etc.
- Patterns of addiction or abuse
- Any God talk

Key Themes: *Brokenness & blame.* Listen for fear, shame, hiding, blame, guilt, and a victim mentality.

Key Heart Question: *What's my problem? Why are people (incl. me) & things not the way they're supposed to be?*

RESCUE

All of us look to created things to save us, to rescue us, to give us significance, and to make us right with God. Money, possessions, acceptance, approval, relationships, achievements, etc. all seem to offer some hope for repairing the brokenness in our lives by posing as potential saviors. *But the gospel tells a different story!* God is the only one who can put the broken pieces of our lives back together. Jesus is our only hope for *rescue*, salvation, and redemption. His life and death alone can make a person right with the Father.

Statements about *Rescue* may be scattered throughout the person's story, so listen closely for:

- Placing hope in people or things to provide salvation, security, and significance
- Justification of the person's actions, or attempts to fix brokenness on their own
- Judging others or failing to extend forgiveness
- Any God talk

Key Themes: *Redemption & deliverance.* Listen for revenge, power, control, anger, proving one's self, comfort, and self-medication.

Key Heart Question: *What is my solution? Who or what will rescue me and fix what is broken?*

RESTORATION

There's a deep longing within each of us for change, for things to be different tomorrow than they are today. For some, this means finding a job or a spouse. Others hope for world peace, a Utopian society. The desire to "have it all" is a longing many share. What we're all craving is a mending of the brokenness that surrounds us. *Because of what Jesus has done, Restoration has begun.* In every circumstance, he is present, and he offers peace & joy. As Jesus' followers, we are in-dwelt with his Spirit. He is restoring us as image bearers who can begin to live in the way we were originally created to live. Someday, Jesus will return to judge the world and usher in the new heavens & new earth. The Father, Son, & Spirit will be the focus of our existence for eternity!

The last half of a person's story might include:

- A preferred version of the future
- The statement "Everything would be okay if my circumstances just changed."
- The desire for other people to change
- God talk

Key Themes: *Hope, transformation.* Listen for entitlement, self-focus, comfort, avoidance, apathy, loss of hope.

Key Heart Question: *What is my hope? What will the world or my world look like when all is as it should be?*

HOW DO I LISTEN FOR THE HEART AS A GOSPEL SHEPHERD?

- We need to begin by *asking the Spirit* to give us ears to hear and a willingness to speak the truth in love.
- When meeting for the purpose of shepherding, *ask the person to come prepared to share their story.*
- In a shepherding setting, *consider taking notes while listening.*
- Whether hearing the story of a person's life or the story of a person's day, *always listen for the heart.*

HERE'S SOME THINGS TO LISTEN FOR IN A PERSON'S STORY:

1. **Emotional words.** (*I'm angry. I'm afraid. I was really hurt.*)
2. **Interpretive words.** (*This shouldn't happen. I guess I'm getting what I deserve. I wonder if it's even worth getting up in the morning.*)
3. **Self talk.** (*I'm such a failure. I am not smart enough, pretty enough, etc. I have accomplished this and this and this. I always got good grades and performed well in various activities.*) Listen closely for pride & insecurity.
4. **God talk.** (*I tried hard to obey God. How could God let this happen to me? God's never done anything for me. God is punishing me.*) Listen closely for denial, blame, and an unwillingness to take responsibility.
5. **Stated motives.** (*I wanted to get even. I wanted revenge. I was so ashamed, I decided to never tell my parents. I need people to like me. I need their approval. I feel so guilty, I could never forgive myself.*)
6. **Patterns of behavior, positive or negative.** Listen closely for power and control.
7. **Destructive or repeated sin.** (*I started using drugs when I was 12. I smoked pot every day for 5 or 6 years. I slept with more women than I can count.*) Listen closely for sources of comfort & self-medicating.
8. **Abuse or neglect.** (*My dad would scream at me if I came home with C's. I was raped by my step-brother when I was 12. I used to play alone in my room most of the time. The kids at school used to call me fat.*) Listen closely for a victim mentality.
9. **Dad & Mom.** (*I've never met my dad. My mom gave me everything I wanted. My dad said he wished I was never born. I don't remember my dad hugging me. Nothing was ever good enough for my mom.*)

Whether in a group setting or shepherding situation, *always provide encouragement to a person who has just shared their story.* In a group setting, consider asking a few follow-up questions right away.

ENCOURAGEMENT AFTER THEIR STORY

- Thank you for sharing your story. It is an honor to hear it!
- Your story is an amazing story about God & his work (most won't see this, but say it anyway). *God is in this!*
- It is very easy to focus on your circumstances at a time like this. I completely understand. But God is primarily concerned with your heart in this situation. He wants to keep pulling your focus up out of the mire of your circumstances onto him. Keep watching for your heart responses in the midst of this trial.

SPECIFIC QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER CLARITY (IF NEEDED)

- Tell me about your relationship with your dad
- How did you feel when that significant event happened?
- Did that hurtful situation ever get resolved?
- How old were you when that happened?

GENERAL QUESTIONS

- Where are you still struggling to believe the gospel?
- How has this situation helped you see your sin more clearly?
- Where do you see God at work in this situation?

ASK GOOD QUESTIONS

The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out. Proverbs 20:5

HOW DO I ASK GOOD QUESTIONS AS A GOSPEL SHEPHERD?

- *We must be led by the Holy Spirit!* It's his job to bring conviction, and he is the primary shepherd. He alone knows the depths of a person's heart, and he will guide us as we lovingly pursue people with good question. Pray before, during, and after any shepherding conversation, asking the Spirit to speak.
- *Often the Spirit will provide great questions immediately after a conversation.* Write these down for future reference.
- *Ask lots of questions throughout the conversation, especially in the beginning.* We like to say, "Ask 10 questions for every pronouncement."
- *Ask open ended questions that can't be answered with a "yes" or "no,"* as these questions do not provide much information, and can leave room for us to make a lot of assumptions about the answer.
- *Sometimes the best question is not a question. "Tell me more..."* is a great way to invite a person to tell more about what's going on in a their heart.

SOME GOOD QUESTIONS TO USE

The following is adapted from Paul Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands* (pp 170-178).

What? Ask people to define their terms. *"What did you mean when you said...?"*

How? Ask people to clarify what they mean with concrete, real life examples. *"How did that situation unfold? Give us some more detail."*

Where? and When? Ask people to provide more information about the details and the order of events. *"Where were you when this happened? When did this happen?"*

How Often? Ask people to describe the frequency of their struggles. Ask them about themes and patterns. *"How often do you do this?"*

Why? Ask people to explain why they responded as they did in a given situation. Ask the person to share their reasons, values, purposes, and desires. *"Why were you feeling frustrated?"*

A WORD ABOUT "WHY?"

"Why?" is a great question because it helps uncover the motives of the heart. We sometimes call it *the Why Shovel*, because it helps us dig around to get to the root of a problem. However, a few cautions should be noted.

"Why?" can sound condescending, judgmental, & even rhetorical (a question whose answer is so obvious that the question itself helps prove a point). "Why on earth did you do that!?" clearly implies that the person asking the question thinks a poor decision was made. The question does not invite an honest, vulnerable response.

Also, "Why?" is sometimes used as a one-word question, which can sound accusatory, and does not invite an open dialogue. If a wife says to her husband, "I'm feeling sad and frustrated," and he responds by simply asking, "Why?", she is likely to perceive that he is upset because she is feeling sad, and wants to hear her reason so he can refute it.

"Why?" can be a powerful tool that must be wielded with wisdom and the sensitivity of the Spirit.

SPEAK THE TRUTH IN LOVE

...speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. *Ephesians 4:15*

HOW DO I SPEAK THE TRUTH IN LOVE AS A GOSPEL SHEPHERD?

- *We must be led by the Holy Spirit!* Pray and ask him what to say. We should only speak if the Spirit leads us to speak; but if the Spirit leads us to speak, we must speak!
- *Ask lots of questions throughout the conversation, and especially in the beginning.* We like to say, "Ask 10 questions for every pronouncement."
- *Consider our own motivation.* Pray through it. Is it our desire to honor God and point the person to him? Are we fearful of the person, or are we resting in our identity as a child of God?
- *Proclaim Jesus as much as possible.* He is the hero of every person's story, and the real savior we all need in every situation.
- *Keep the goal in mind: repentance & faith.* Proclamations should help lead a person to Jesus.

SPEAK THE TRUTH IN LOVE BY...

- *Making proclamations concerning identity much more than actions.* We always live out of who we believe we are, but we often forget the truth. Remind people of their true identity, not merely what they should do.
- *Avoiding simple advice or quoting scripture in a way that is unhelpful.* If someone confesses worry, it probably won't help to remind the person that Jesus said, "Do not worry" three times in Matthew 6. Rather, focus on their identity as a beloved child of God, and remind them of the Father's great care for them (which Jesus highlights in Matthew 6!), a truth which can free them from worry and fear.
- *Not judging the person's heart.* 1 Corinthians 4:5 warns, "do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes ("motives"-NASB) of the heart." If we have preconceived judgments about a person's heart ("I know for sure why they did that!"), they will come through in our communication, and our speech will not be filled with grace. We need the Holy Spirit to purify our motives before we speak.
- *Asking permission before making a pronouncement.* "Can I tell you what I'm seeing?" This ensures that the person is open and ready to receive a direct word.
- *Utilizing very direct communication as the Spirit leads.* As long as the Spirit is prompting it, and it is spoken in love, we need to be obedient to say what the Spirit is leading us to say. Sometimes he will lead us to say something very directly, without asking for permission!
- *Calling people to repentance.* Often, we have to ask, "Is there anything that would prevent you from repenting right now?" or "Would you like to talk to the Father about this right now?" This simple but direct question can help people cross the threshold of repentance and renewed faith in the gospel.