

► LOVE  
KNOW  
SPEAK  
DO

## 7 | BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS BY ENTERING THEIR WORLD

---

It was one of those moments that a teacher couldn't buy for a million dollars. I was teaching a counseling course required of all third year seminary students in the pastoral track. The class tended to be populated by guys who thought that if they preached well-honed theological sermons, their congregations wouldn't need any personal ministry. They saw my course as a pointless addition to an overcrowded schedule. This didn't make for a lively learning environment.

The first year I taught the course, I jumped right into the material without trying to demonstrate its importance. It was a long, hard semester. The next year, I decided to begin each class with true pastoral horror stories until the class cried "uncle." I told story after story of late night emergencies and relational catastrophes that were scattered throughout my ministry as pastor. I kept it up until it was clear that the students were convinced that they needed what I was about to teach.

In the middle of one of my graphic anecdotes, something happened that I will never forget. An exasperated future pastor threw up his hand and blurted out, "All right, we know we are going to have these *projects* in our churches. Just tell us what to do with them so we can get back to the work of the ministry!" A hush covered the room. In his frustration, this man had verbalized the attitude of many pastors toward the world of biblical counseling, discipleship, and personal ministry. I knew this was a golden teaching moment and I wanted to be a good steward. I asked him to repeat the word he had used for people in difficulty. In hesitating embarrassment, he mumbled, "Projects," as the other seminarians snickered in their seats.

There were many things wrong with this young man's perspective on pastoral ministry, but the most serious is this: it was devoid of love. There was no zeal to incarnate the self-sacrificing love of Christ. He saw lost and struggling people as impediments to what he was called to do, and the need to respond to them as a huge interference. His view of ministry centered on well-delivered sermons and well-attended programs that would produce a thriving and growing church. He saw the church as a well-designed, well-led, successful organization. But when I look at the church, I see a hospital full of people in various stages of dealing with the disease of sin.

Imagine a doctor coming out of an examining room to say to his receptionist, "Sick people, sick people, sick people! All I ever see is sick people! Why don't healthy people ever come and visit me?" The church is full of people dealing with the effects of sin, people who are not fully formed into the image of Jesus Christ. The church is full of people who have lost their way and don't even know it, who haven't made a connection between their daily problems and the transforming grace of Christ. Everywhere you look, you will find couples who are struggling to love, parents who are struggling to be patient, children who are attracted to temptation, and friends who battle the disappointments of imperfect relationships. This is 100 percent of the church's membership!

The church is not a theological classroom. It is a conversion, confession, repentance, reconciliation, forgiveness, and sanctification center, where flawed people place their trust in Christ, gather to know and love him better, and learn to love others as he has designed. The church is messy and inefficient, but it is God's wonderful mess—the place where he radically transforms hearts and lives.

In class that afternoon, I wondered how this student could have gotten it so wrong. But as I drove home that night, the closer I got, the more uptight I became. I was thinking, *Wouldn't it be nice to come home just once to a house that wasn't full of problems I needed to solve?* As I voiced that frustration to myself, it hit me. I was just like my student! I wanted children who had never suffered the effects of the Fall and who possessed the innate ability to make all the right choices. I

wanted family devotions and a few lectures to produce children who would do quite well on their own. I, too, lacked the self-sacrificing love essential in a family full of sinners. Like my student, I saw my children as being in the way of the plan, rather than the focus of it.

## FOUNDATIONAL LOVE

I am deeply persuaded that the foundation for people-transforming ministry is not sound theology; it is love. Without love, our theology is a boat without oars. Love is what drove God to send and sacrifice his Son. Love led Christ to subject himself to a sinful world and the horrors of the cross. Love is what causes him to seek and save the lost, and to persevere until each of his children is transformed into his image. His love will not rest until all of his children are at his side in glory. The hope of every sinner does not rest in theological answers but in the love of Christ for his own. Without it, we have no hope personally, relationally, or eternally.

This love is not a band-aid attempting to cope with a cancerous world. It is effective and persevering. It is jealous, intent on owning us without competition. It faces the facts of who we are and how we need to change and simply goes to work. Any hope for the problems we face—with our own hearts and with a dark and corrupt world—is found in the love of the Lord Jesus Christ for us. Hear the words of Paul:

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;  
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:31–39)

Paul says, “You are the recipients of Christ’s love and nothing can separate you from it.” This love offers hope to anyone willing to confess sin and cry out for transformation.

Yet this is where we often get stuck. We want ministry that doesn’t demand love that is, well, so demanding! We don’t want to serve others in a way that requires so much personal sacrifice. We would prefer to lob grenades of truth into people’s lives rather than lay down our lives for them. But this is exactly what Christ did for us. Can we expect to be called to do anything less? Hear again the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where

there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.

The love of Christ is not only the foundation for our personal hope, but our incarnation of that love is our only hope for being effective for Christ with others. Sadly, many of us have forgotten this, and we are resounding-gong people in cymbal-clanging relationships. There is a whole lot of noise but not much real change! As I drove home from class that day, I knew I was going to be called to love my family more than myself. I knew I would need to incarnate the love of Christ. But what I wanted was a good meal, a relaxed encounter with my newspaper, a nice conversation with my wife, and a few moments reading in bed before the lights went out. And I knew that the people in the house would surely step all over my plan!

We cannot be part of Christ’s life-giving work without being willing to lay down our own. That is why Jesus said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26–27). Christ is not calling us to hateful relationships. As verse 27 makes clear, the call is to die daily to our own selfish agenda, so that we may be part of his. Otherwise, we will hinder what the Lord is doing rather than help it.

How much are the people in your life a source of personal frustration? How often do you give in to stress and do things that do not honor Christ or incarnate his character? How often do you see people as obstacles to ministry rather than the objects of it? Whom have you given up on? We have been loved by Christ and called to incarnate

that self-sacrificing love wherever he places us. Do people sense that love in you?

### REDEMPTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

When we forget the call to incarnate the love of Christ, we take our relationships as our own. Soon they are governed by our pleasure, comfort, and ease. We get irritated at people who interfere with these things, and much of our anger is due to the fact that we are relationship thieves. People do not belong to us; they belong to God! Relationships are not primarily for our fulfillment. On the contrary, relationships between sinners are messy, difficult, labor-intensive, and demanding, but in that, they are designed to result in God's glory and our good as he is worshiped and our hearts are changed. Effective personal ministry begins when we confess that we have taken relationships that belong to God and used them for our own selfish purposes.

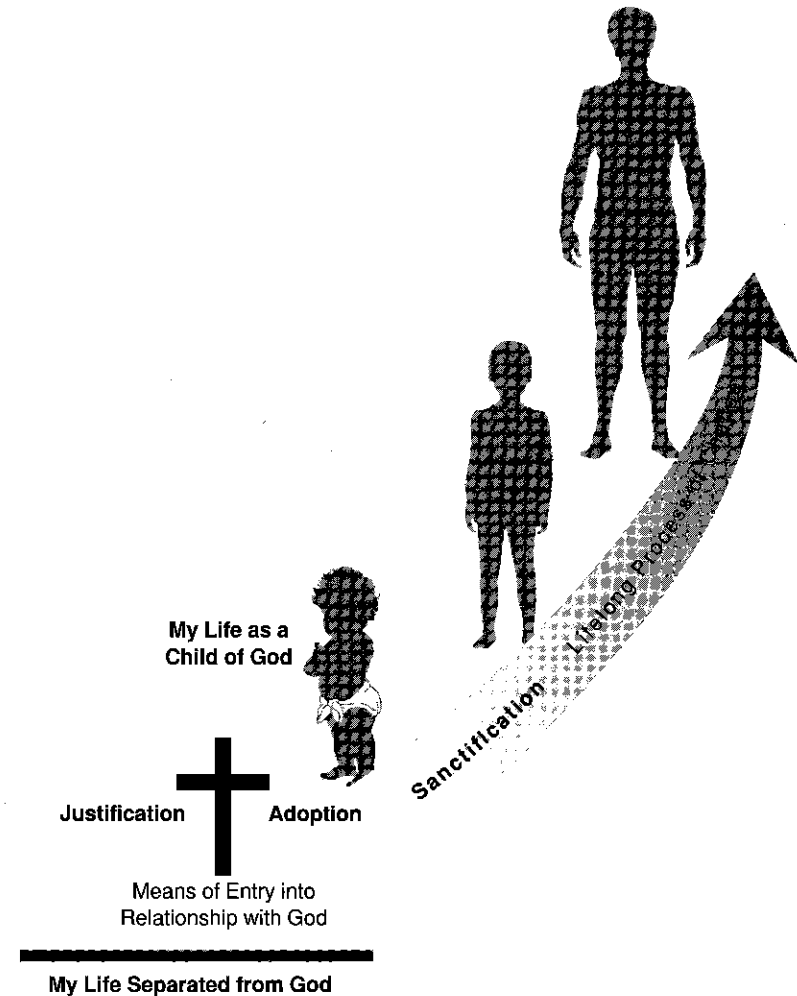
When we have confessed and repented, we are ready to ask what role our relationships can play in the work Christ wants to do. If the relationships God gives us are not mere luxuries for our own happiness, what is God's plan for them? This brings us to the **Love** function in personal ministry. God's relationship to us is loving and redemptive, and he wants our relationships to mirror those qualities. This means at least three things:

1. He has a higher goal for our relationships than our personal happiness.
2. He wants our relationships to be the context for the change he works in and through us.
3. We need to build relationships that encourage this work of change.

We can understand this by considering the way Christ works in our own lives. Scripture uses three words to describe his work: *justification*, *adoption*, and *sanctification*. (See Figure 7.1.)

Fig. 7.1

### The Relational Foundation for Ministry: Salvation as Our Model.



Justification and adoption explain how we enter into relationship with God. In justification by faith, God declares me to be righteous based on the perfect life, death, and resurrection of Christ. In *justification* Christ's righteousness is legally credited to my account. Justification removes the sin that separates me from God and gives me

Christ's righteousness, making me acceptable to God and enabling me to have a relationship with him.

*Adoption* also involves my relationship with God. God not only justifies me, he adopts me; he welcomes me into his family with all the rights and privileges of a son. Justification and adoption give me a full and complete relationship with God.

As a result of justification and adoption, am I okay? This is a bit of a trick question. If you are talking about my *standing* or relationship with God, the answer is "yes." Nothing needs to be added to Jesus' work. I don't need to do anything else to secure God's acceptance. It is a gift of his grace.

But if you are talking about my *condition* as a person, the answer is "no." I still struggle with sin daily, and radical change still needs to take place in me so that I can be and do what God has planned. Unlike justification and adoption, which are events, this work of personal transformation is a process—a process called *sanctification*. Sanctification is the process by which God actually makes me what he legally declared me to be in justification—holy.

This framework sheds light on the ministry God has given each one of us. God doesn't justify and adopt me because I am okay, but precisely because I am *not* okay. He knows that lasting change will take place in me only when I am living in a personal relationship with him. In his magnificent love, he makes that relationship a reality. Only those who have a relationship with God through justification and adoption will undergo the radical change process of progressive sanctification. Without the relationship, there is no personal change. Our relationship with God is the beginning of our salvation, not the end; a necessity, not a luxury.

As Christ's ambassadors, we, too, must begin by building relationships of love, grace, and trust with others. This is the covenantal view of change we considered earlier. Like the relationship God establishes with us through Christ, the relationships we build provide the context for his continuing work of change.

When we see God's work *in* us as the model for our work *for* him, three practical principles emerge:

1. God's redemptive activity always takes place within relationships.
2. God's first step in changing us is to draw us into relationship with him.
3. Our relationships are essential to the work God is completing in us and in others.

This is why our relationships do not belong to us; they belong to the Lord and are holy. God uses them to prepare a people for himself. These everyday relationships are essential to the plan of personal transformation ordained before the world began. God daily gives us opportunities to serve the troubled, angry, discouraged, defeated, confused, and blind. This is the way he works and he calls each of his children to be part of it.

This view of our relationships must transform the way we respond to one another. A tense discussion about disappointments in marriage is more than a time of searing honesty between a husband and a wife. God is at work, revealing both their hearts. He is using the relationship to transform them both. If the couple remembers this, they will respond to each other in ways remarkably different from their normal pattern. But if their only goal is their own personal happiness, each spouse will say, "I want my partner to see how unhappy I am and to try harder to make me happy." If they both have this goal, the conversation will be nothing more than a self-centered war for personal happiness. They may claim to love each other, but at the level of their hearts' desires, both wife and husband are committed only to getting what they want out of the other person.

If this conversation takes place between two people who want to be part of God's work of transformation (sanctification), things dramatically change. It begins with their *attitudes*. When they think of each other only from a horizontal perspective, they are discouraged, hopeless, and cynical. After all, they have done everything they can think of to get the other person to shape up, but nothing has worked. But when they are aware that God is present with his own redemptive purpose, they have every reason for hope. Yes, they are at the

end of themselves, but the Redeemer is active in all of his power and glory. He has been changing them and will continue to do so. There is every reason to believe that he is up to something good in this marital difficulty.

Viewing this moment redemptively will also change their *posture*. In the horizontal model, they stand opposed to each other as enemies with competing agendas. They battle to ensure that *their* will prevails. From a redemptive standpoint, husband and wife stand on the same side. They ultimately want God's will to be done in their marriage. They are not threatened by the presence of an enemy (each other); on the contrary, they know that they are members of the same family. Their Father has their highest good in mind. He will not forsake one in order to lovingly transform the other. So they do not have to compete and they do not have to win. They can be gently and peacefully honest about their relationship because they have forsaken their own agenda for the Lord's.

Does this sound unrealistic? Have we slipped so far from God's purposes for relationships that we can't conceive of doing this? When you study what the New Testament says about relationships, this is the model that emerges. For example, what is God's goal for your parenting? It goes way beyond clean rooms, good manners, proper dress, the right college, a good career, and marrying well. In all these things God calls parents to work toward something deeper and more lasting. Paul captures it in Ephesians 6 when he calls parents to bring their children up in the "training and instruction of the Lord." This radically changes the parental agenda. Gone is the horizontal focus. The call is to be part of God's work of heart transformation—to help the child change from a self-absorbed sinner to one who loves God above all else. Paul's model of parenting is distinctly redemptive, but when parents forget that moments of difficulty are moments of redemption, they stand in the way of what the Lord is doing.

Or take this model to a more formal counseling context. A person asks to talk with you about a complicated situation. You can see that she is very discouraged—almost paralyzed. What should your goal be? It is wonderful to offer wisdom that clarifies confusion and makes the

situation bearable. It is grace to offer her understanding, comfort, and hope. It is good to function as her advocate where appropriate. But a deeper focus must shape this counseling moment.

God is continuing his work of transformation in this woman's heart and life. He has brought her to the end of herself, revealing the fruit of her choices and behavior. He is in the process of revealing her heart. His goal is that she would be conformed to the image of his Son, one step freer from her bondage to the creation, and one step closer to the freedom of worshiping the Creator. His goal is that he would consistently rule her thoughts and motives; that increasingly, her identity would be rooted in him rather than in the arid soil of personal achievement or the acceptance of others. Timidity and cynicism would give way to courage and hope rooted in his presence, power, love, and grace. God's goal is deeper than emotional and situational change. It is nothing less than personal transformation.

### WHAT DOES A REDEMPTIVE RELATIONSHIP LOOK LIKE?

What practical things can help the quarreling husband and wife to function redemptively? How can the counselor build a relationship that promotes God's work in the discouraged, struggling woman? How can parents establish such relationships with their children? How can pastors build them into their ministry? What do relationships that promote personal change look like? Scripture highlights four things when it calls us to love someone in a way that promotes God's work of heart change. Each aspect of Love promotes relationships where God's goals are central. (See Figure 7.2.)

1. *Enter* the person's world.
2. *Incarnate* the love of Christ.
3. *Identify* with suffering.
4. *Accept* with agenda.

FIG. 7.2

### The Four Elements of a Loving Ministry Relationship.

#### A Loving Ministry Relationship

1 Enter	the person's world,
2 Incarnate	the love of Christ.
3 Identify	with suffering.
4 Accept	with agenda.

In this chapter and the next, we will consider these elements of love in a redemptive relationship.

#### ▶ ELEMENT OF LOVE 1: ENTER THE PERSON'S WORLD

There is no shortage of need in this world. Our problem is that we miss the opportunities God places in our path. How can we pursue them effectively? We begin by recognizing the *entry gates* God gives us, the means of entry from a casual relationship to a life-changing one. How can you recognize them?

It helps to understand what an entry gate is not. First, it is not the *problem* the person wants to talk about. We can focus on the problem and miss the person in the middle of it. Biblical personal ministry certainly includes problem solving, but it must be person-focused. God's work of change certainly involves changes in situation and relationship, but it has radical personal transformation as its core goal.

Second, the entry gate is not a particular *situation or circumstance* in the person's life. Beneath these are deeper heart struggles that are God's focus. Nor is the entry gate another *person* or a *problem in relationship*. We should resist the tendency to be entirely problem-focused in ministry. When we have a problem focus as we listen to people, we will be like someone at the shooting gallery at the county fair. We will be hunting for problems like they are plastic ducks floating by, and when we hear them, our goal will be to shoot them down. We will listen for a problem word (adultery, doubt, fear, lust, stealing, greed, envy, conflict) and then fire away until we have said everything

we know about the Bible's views on the topic. Not only does this do violence to the way God wants his Word to be used, it completely misses the heart struggles of the person with the problem.

This is why it is so important to recognize God-given entry gate opportunities. An entry gate is a particular person's *experience* of the situation, problem, or relationship. To recognize an entry gate you do not ask, "What are the problems in this person's life?" Instead you ask, "What is this person struggling with *in the midst* of the situation?" Or, "What has this person in its grip right now?" The entry gate is not what you think the person is struggling with; it is the struggle the person confesses. People will tell you how they are struggling, and their struggle will give you common ground with them and a door of opportunity into a deeper level of ministry.

Is the entry gate strategy still fuzzy in your thinking? Here is an example. Imagine that a woman from your church calls you. She has been married for fifteen years and has three children. She awakens one morning to find that her husband is gone. She rolls over to turn on the bedside lamp and notices a note leaning against it. In it, her husband announces that he has left the marriage. He has fallen in love with someone else, taken his clothes, emptied the bank account, and hired a lawyer. Immediately after reading the note, your friend calls you. Ask yourself: what has this woman in its grip at that moment? What is she struggling with right then? In her heart, what is she experiencing? What has the power to paralyze her and rob her of hope?

The obvious answer is fear. She is flooded with terrifying questions: "What will happen to my house? How will I provide for us? Will he want the children? What will my family think? What will I tell the kids? How much is left in our bank account? Who has my husband talked to and what has he said? How can I face people? What does this other woman have that I do not?" Perhaps the scariest question of all is, "Why would God let this happen to me?" Fear is the most significant heart issue at this moment. It is where the war is taking place and where your ministry begins. This woman would not be helped by a recap of all the Bible has to say about marriage and divorce. If that's all you offer, you will likely lose future opportunity to help her.

On the other hand, helping her face her fears gives you a wonderful opportunity to show love and build a ministry relationship. When we speak to people's real struggles, they respond, *This person has heard me. This person understands me. I want more of this kind of help.* This is the power of a loving relationship. So an entry gate is not the objective problem a person has encountered, but his particular experience of that problem (fear, anger, guilt, anxiety, hopelessness, aloneness, envy, discouragement, desires for vengeance, etc.).

### RECOGNIZING ENTRY GATES

How can you recognize the entry gates God sends your way? Listen with purpose. Focus on the *person* in the middle of the problem. As she tells her story, it will come out as a chaotic mix of the present, the past, emotions, and personal interpretations. Train yourself to listen for four things that will show you where the person is struggling.

1. Listen for *emotional* words. ("I'm angry." "I'm afraid." "I can't stop crying.")
2. Listen for *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. Listen for *self talk*. ("I am such a failure." "This always happens to me." "I don't have what it takes to face this.")
4. Listen for *God talk*. ("I thought I was doing what God wanted." "He simply doesn't hear my prayers." "How could God let this happen to me?")

Remember, your focus should be on the person and what she is struggling with at that moment. As you listen for the four things listed above, look for a theme (anger, fear, guilt, hopelessness) to emerge. Then grab hold of that theme, meet the person in the midst of that struggle, and incarnate the loving Lord she may be unable to see. We know that God has not given up on the person, gone home, or gotten busy helping others. But the dark clouds of circumstances can

blind a person to the God who is there and active. God is her only source of hope as she faces a situation that is out of her control. As she is flooded with questions (many of which no one can answer), what she really needs is the rest that can only be found in the Lord who is "an ever present help in trouble," who will never leave her or forsake her. In these first moments of ministry, I have a wonderful opportunity to reveal God to someone who is having trouble seeing him. He is here! He understands! He is able to help! He is up to something good!

Have you ever had a frustrating experience you wanted to share with someone? Perhaps you had an important appointment that you missed because you were held up in traffic. How would you feel if you told your friend, only to have him respond with a lecture on the fact that you took the wrong way and that he learned years ago that there was a much more efficient route you could have taken? How would you feel if he interrupted your story to share a tale of his own that had no connection to what was troubling you?

Your friend was not listening for *you* in the middle of your story. His responses may have had some logical connection to the facts you shared, but they weren't helpful because they didn't connect with the impact of the situation on your heart and life. In your friend's mind's eye, he saw traffic, but he didn't see you. He didn't see you nervously looking at your watch. He didn't see you desperately trying to make a call. He didn't see you pounding on the steering wheel. He only saw traffic and when he responded, he spoke to traffic and not to you. In many little ways we have all faced this frustration. But imagine the pain of facing a huge struggle, only to feel as if no one is really hearing you; no one is speaking to what you are battling in the midst of your crisis.

This is not God's way. We can offer love that is personal and specific, not aimless and platitudinous. We can follow the model of the Wonderful Counselor, the Good Shepherd who goes right to where his lost sheep is, wraps him in his arms, and carries him to a place of safety. Following the Lord's example means that we communicate several things to a struggling person:



*Let the person know that you have heard her struggle.* As you see the theme emerging, you need to restate it for her, ideally in her own words. In so doing you are saying, "God has sent you someone who hears you, who has begun to understand what you are going through." Let her know that your focus is on her as a person, not just the issues she is facing.

*Let the person know that God is there and that he understands the struggle.* Don't do this by referring the person to a theological outline. Turn to passages of Scripture that speak to the exact thing that has her in its grip. In so doing, you accomplish two things. You help her (1) to recognize that Scripture speaks to the deepest issues of human experience and (2) to see that God meets his people most powerfully in experiences where they fear he is absent.

The Psalms are particularly helpful here. I think the Psalms are in the Bible to keep us honest. They remind us that living by faith is not easy. The life of the believer is a daily war fought in our hearts, and the battles are dramatically depicted in the Psalms. Again and again, the Psalms put words to the struggles of the people God sends my way. But the Psalms do more. They are not only dyed with human struggle, they are dyed with the presence of the Lord. Again and again they remind us that we have hope, not because we are able and wise, or because circumstances are easy, but because God is our Father.

*Let the person know you will stand with her.* Returning to the example of the friend counseling you after a traffic jam, the friend's words gave the impression that all you needed to do was recognize your mistake and acknowledge that you paid the price for your error. He believed he did his job properly and moved on. The problem is he didn't counsel *you*, he counseled the problem. He didn't recognize what you were struggling with as a result of the traffic jam. Little wonder that he felt free to throw a quick correction at you that in no way addressed the thoughts and desires of your heart. He thought he had been helpful, but he wasn't. He was right that you went the wrong way, but he forgot that in doing so, *You missed your appointment!* And the implications of *that* fact would still trouble you. I fear that many of us offer care that doesn't cure because, from the outset, our eyes are

so focused on the problem that we miss the person and the struggles within.

One of the most common struggles in crisis is the feeling that you are all alone. Because of this, it's very discouraging when people throw quick answers at you and walk away. It feels as if they have quickly let go of your life and gone back to their own. This is why it is so important to incarnate God's "I will be with you" promises from the outset. In so doing we address a theological lie, the lie that God is absent in trouble. We offer people a living, loving presence that puts real flesh and blood on the presence of the Lord. We also do battle with the Enemy, who whispers in the ear of the believer, "Where is your God now?" Let the person know that you not only will help her address the problems she is facing, but you care for *her* and are with *her*.

#### THE BEGINNING OF CHANGE

When you seek to minister to people in this way, their hearts will respond in three ways that set the stage for more ministry—and more change—in the days ahead.

1. *Horizontal trust.* Often, people in difficulty do not open up easily. They are afraid of further hurt and find it difficult to entrust themselves to others. But when I can connect with the person's real experience in the midst of a trial, I have an opportunity to engender trust. The person says to herself, *He really heard me. He understands what I am going through. He appears to be a person I can trust.* This willingness to trust is crucial to a relationship in which God's work can thrive. As you seek to serve this person, you are asking her to place the "fine china" of her life in your hands. You are going to ask her to talk about the most important and sensitive issues of her life. She will only do this when she trusts you. Most of our conversations are impersonal and self-protective. We talk a lot, but without much substance. We reserve moments of personal self-disclosure for people we trust. Trust is vital in a heart-changing relationship.

2. *Vertical hope.* God not only surprises struggling people with his grace, he calls them to do things that are difficult and unexpected, things that contradict the person's normal instincts. God is going to say, "Hear me. Trust me. Follow me." If the person is going to follow the Lord, he needs to look in his face and see hope. But often a person under great trial looks at the Lord and sees anything but hope. So, in those early moments we are helping the person to see the Lord, to recognize that he understands the secret struggles, that he is present with him or her, and that he offers help that really helps. We want to help the person move toward the Lord rather than away from him. We want to help a person who is hiding, avoiding, denying, accusing, doubting, running, or giving up to become a seeker—and not just a seeker after help, but a seeker after God. This is important because a counselee is not a counselee until he is a seeker.

3. *Commitment to the process.* A person will rarely come to you and say, "I know that God wants to work wonderful change in my heart. I wondered if you would be willing to help." The person may not be seeking help at all, just a place to vent and tell his story. He may be searching for an ally or someone to validate his actions and interpretations. Even when people make a formal appointment to talk with me, not all of them are committed to seek help or to change.

But when you have identified with a person's struggle and offered the hope of God in the midst of it, he will want more. I always tell my students to aim low at first. They shouldn't try to solve a world of difficulty in a few moments. The main thing they should try to accomplish in their first talk with a person is to help him to be willing to talk again. The first talk may be nothing but venting, but the second talk signifies some kind of commitment to God's process of change. That is my goal—to encourage the person to entrust himself to him.

#### ENTRY GATE QUESTIONS

Recognizing entry gate opportunities involves learning to ask the right questions. Here are some entry gate questions you might ask the

woman whose husband left her. (However, it is unlikely that you would ask all these questions at once, especially when she first calls.)

- ◆ "What came into your mind as you read the note?"
- ◆ "What are you struggling with most right now?"
- ◆ "What are you facing now that you thought you would never face?"
- ◆ "What are you feeling?"
- ◆ "What are you afraid of right now?"
- ◆ "Are you feeling angry? Where is that a real struggle?"
- ◆ "Describe how you see God right now. What do you think he is doing?"
- ◆ "Do you feel hopeless? Do you feel like God is asking you to do the impossible?"
- ◆ "What questions do you wish you could ask your husband?"
- ◆ "What questions do you wish you could ask God?"
- ◆ "When you can't sleep, what thoughts keep you awake?"
- ◆ "What part of the situation is getting to you most?"
- ◆ "What regrets do you struggle with?"

As you ask questions like these, listen for themes that show you where the war is raging within this woman. The goal is that the resulting horizontal trust, vertical hope, and commitment to the process would provide a platform for God's work of change. But this is just the first way I seek to love the person. Let's now consider the second.

#### ▶ ELEMENT OF LOVE 2: INCARNATE THE LOVE OF CHRIST

If someone asked you how God uses us to change people, what would you answer? Is it just through the things we say? Do we simply confront people with the truth and call them to obey? Is personal ministry just a biblical form of talk therapy? Or does God use us in other ways to change people?

Think of the people God has used in your own life. Was it just

because of what they said? No doubt God used their words powerfully at key moments. No doubt you benefited from their advice, insights, honesty, and confrontation. But in what other ways did God use the relationship to encourage change in you? Perhaps their willingness to forgive you taught you more about the true nature of forgiveness than any conversation. Perhaps you learned about the resources of Christ by watching them endure great difficulty. Maybe you began to grasp the power of biblical love by watching them love someone who was quite unlovable. Perhaps they stood as evidence that the promises of God were true as you saw them fulfilled in their lives. Maybe it was their willingness to stand with you for the long haul that gave you strength to continue. If you stop to reflect on these people, you will quickly recognize that their ministry was made up of more than words.

As Christ's ambassadors, it's not just what we say that God uses to encourage change in people; it's also who we are and what we do. During his ministry on earth, Jesus said, "If you have trouble believing what I say, then look at the things I have done. They are all the evidence that you need" (paraphrase of passages like John 14:11). As ambassadors, we are not only called to speak the truth but to be real, living, flesh-and-blood illustrations of it. We are not just God's spokespersons; we are examples. We are not simply God's mouthpieces; we are his evidence. Our lives testify to the power of his grace to transform hearts. It is seen in the way we display the love God has shown to us.

### THE RIGHT CLOTHES FOR THE JOB

Colossians 3:12–17 captures what it means to incarnate the love of Christ in ministry.

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as

the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Verses 15–17 contain one of the New Testament's clearest calls to personal ministry. In this remarkable passage, Paul calls us to activities we would normally assume are restricted to formal ministry. We are called to have Scripture so deeply engrained in our lives that we are wise and thankful, and thus always ready to teach and admonish (confront) one another. Paul is calling us to a state of biblical readiness for the ministry opportunities he will bring as he changes us through the ministry of others. The passage summarizes what this book is about. But to really understand it, you must start with verse 12.

Here Paul uses the metaphor of clothing—the thing that covers us, identifies us, and describes our function. Paul is reminding us that what we "wear" (that is, the character qualities we put on) to moments of ministry is as important as what we say. The list of character traits Paul gives is a summary of the character of Christ. Paul is saying, "If you are going to be involved in what God is doing in others, come dressed for the job!"

Paul's view of change involves process as well as content, the manner as well as the message. It involves teaching with my life as well as with my words. As I incarnate the character of the Lord I am calling people to trust and obey. In effect, Paul is saying, "If you are going to teach and admonish one another, you must first put on Christ." God changes people not simply because you have spoken the truth to them, but because those words were said with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and love. When we do this, we be-

come the physical evidence of the truths we present. We are not only incarnating truth, but Christ himself.

From all physical appearances, they were a lovely young couple. She had called me and asked to get together. As we sat down, the emotions in the room changed. She began to cry before I had prayed or asked my first question. The more she cried, the more he squirmed in his chair in embarrassment and anger. She was beginning to tell her story when he jumped up with a red face and said, "I can't do this! I can't talk about my private life to some shrink [which I am not] who may not have a clue and who definitely doesn't know me!" Looking at his wife, he said, "If you are stupid enough to subject yourself to this, then have fun, but I'm out of here!" And he stormed out of the room. I quickly prayed aloud for both of them and told the wife that I was going out to talk to him. I found him in the parking lot, ready to get into his car. He glared at me and said, "Would you please leave me alone?" I told him that I understood that he was angry and afraid and that it was hard to share private struggles with other people. I told him that I was willing to be patient, and that I would do whatever I could to help him get through the discomfort of these early moments. I said a few more things and told him I was going back to rejoin his wife.

As I walked down the hallway, I realized that he was behind me. He said, "I can't run away . . . I just can't," and this time we began to really talk. Months later, we recalled that first day and he told me that he did not remember what I had said to him in the parking lot, but the fact that I came after him was what God used to soften him. It was not what I said but what I did that God used to rescue a man on the verge of destroying his life.

There are four main reasons to incarnate Christ in the relationships God gives us.

1. *It is a protection for you.* In personal ministry, the sin of the person you are helping will eventually be revealed in your relationship. If you are ministering to an angry person, at some point that anger will be directed at you. If you are helping a person who strug-

gles with trust, at some point she will distrust you. A manipulative person will seek to manipulate you. A depressed person will tell you he tried everything you've suggested and it didn't work. You can't stand next to a puddle without eventually being splashed by its mud!

Galatians 6:1 says, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted." In ministry relationships, not only is the heart of the person I am helping being revealed, but my own as well. I am capable of being angry, proud, self-righteous, argumentative and harsh, impatient and unforgiving. When I do, I get in the way of what the Lord is doing. I need the very Christ I am holding out to the other person. The comforting reality is that he is working on us both!

We need to be aware of our reactions to the people we serve. They will sin against us in the same way they have sinned against others. One of the most loving things we can do is to be committed to humble self-examination: How do we respond when sinned against? As the person's sins become part of our experience, are we demonstrating the power of Christ's grace? Are we incarnating Christ as we deal with sin? Sometimes we will live up to our calling as Christ's ambassadors; at other times we will fail. Even then, we can minister effectively if we apply the gospel to our own lives by confessing our sin, asking forgiveness from God (and the other person when appropriate), and claiming God's strength to go on and serve him faithfully.

2. *It offers a living example.* We do not have to struggle to come up with creative definitions of the character qualities God desires his children to display; instead, we have an opportunity to model them. If we follow the example of Christ, the person we are seeking to help should experience in us what real love, compassion, gentleness, forgiveness, forbearance, kindness, and humility are like, even though we are fallen human beings. In this way, moments of personal ministry are not just the lecture part of a class; they are the lab as well! Life isn't just discussed; it is lived! The things God calls us to do and be should be evident in the person who is ministering—as that person depends on Christ.

**3. It gives evidence of what the Lord can do.** The goals we lay out for people can seem unrealistic. They will have trouble imagining how they could ever do these things in their present circumstances. They may be so aware of their failures that they will see God's new way as completely impossible. Personal ministry provides a sweet opportunity to speak to this doubt and fear, not only in words, but with your life as well.

If I am following the example of Christ and functioning as an ambassador, I will live as evidence that what the Lord says is true. He has given us everything we need to do what he calls us to do. He is with us in trouble. He will supply everything we need, when we need it. His grace is sufficient when we are weak. He gives wisdom as it is needed. When I love an unloving person, when I am gentle in the face of angry arguments, when I am patient in the face of failure, when I speak kindly to one who is unkind, and when I ask forgiveness when I have sinned, I demonstrate that God's calling is possible. It is possible not because we are wise and strong or because our circumstances are easy, but because *he is with us* in the power of his glory, goodness, and grace.

**4. It keeps Christ central.** The hope we offer people is more than a set of strategies. Our hope is Christ! In him alone do lost, confused, angry, hurt, and discouraged people find what they need to be and do what God intends. We are not gurus. We are nothing more than instruments in the hands of a powerful Redeemer. The hope and help we offer is always focused on him. The most important encounter in ministry is not the person's encounter with us, but his encounter with Christ. Our job is simply to set up that encounter, so that God would help people seek his forgiveness, comfort, restoration, strength, and wisdom.

It is foolish to embark on personal ministry without counting the costs. An ambassador not only delivers the message of the King, he incarnates it as well. He stands in the King's place. Just as Christ's ministry to sinners meant sacrifice and suffering, so it will for us (though

on a different level). Because suffering is inevitable, we must be aware of our response to those trials. Are we representing the King well? Are we willing to die to ourselves to see life in this other person? Are we willing to be mistreated for the sake of the gospel? Are we willing to involve ourselves in things we would normally avoid so that Christ would change someone through us? Are we willing to be splashed by the mud because we find joy in serving Christ, even when we realize we have gotten dirty?

May Christ strengthen us to love as he has loved and to be part of his work of transformation in people's lives. May this love not only direct our words, but our lives. May we stand as the example, the evidence, and the incarnation of our great Redeemer!