

## 5 GRACE Biblical Counseling Skills: Part 1

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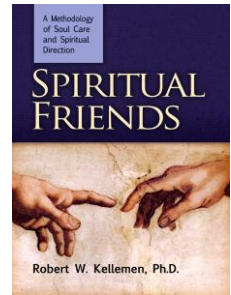
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*Equipping You to Change Lives with Christ's Changeless Truth*

**Note:** I've developed this material from my book *Spiritual Friends*. In *Spiritual Friends*, I equip readers for the four-fold one-another ministry of:

- Sustaining: It's Normal to Hurt—Climbing in the Casket
- Healing: It's Possible to Hope—Celebrating the Empty Tomb
- Reconciling: It's Horrible to Sin, But Wonderful to Be Forgiven—Speaking the Truth in Love
- Guiding: It's Supernatural to Mature—Stirring Up the Gift of God



In this resource from *Spiritual Friends*, we'll learn five biblical counseling and one-another skills of sustaining by using the acronym GRACE.

- *G*—Grace Connecting: Proverbs 27:6
- *R*—Rich Soul Empathizing: Romans 12:15
- *A*—Accurate/Active Spiritual Listening: John 2:23-4:43
- *C*—Caring Spiritual Conversations: Ephesians 4:29
- *E*—Empathetic Scriptural Explorations: Isaiah 61:1-3

### **Grace Connecting: Committed Involvement—Proverbs 27:6**

Grace connecting involves *communion through communication*. You have love in your heart for your spiritual friends. Do they know that? Can they feel it? Do they experience you? Grace connecting allows your passionate love to powerfully touch your spiritual friend.

Putting “grace” before connecting, reflects:

- *The Source of True Connection—Christ's Mercy*: Christ's generous, undeserved love for us is the spring from which our generous, often mutual, sometimes undeserved, love flows to one another.
- *The Nature of True Connection—The Spirit's Generous Sharing*: The Spirit's fruit in us is the nourishment we offer others in their time of suffering. Connection is gift-giving; giving away the fruit the Spirit grows in us. We want to be friendly neighbors who perform all the hard work of mulching, fertilizing, tilling, weeding, watering, and harvesting; and then freely share our bumper crop of ripe, delicious fruit with all our neighbors.
- *The Power of Connecting—The Father's Influence*: The grace of God teaches us to say, “No!” to ungodliness and, “Yes!” to our heavenly Father. When we freely share the attractive fruit of the Spirit, then others are influenced for Christ. “So that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior *attractive*. For the *grace* of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say, ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives” (Titus 2:10-12).

## **Defining Grace Connecting: Proverbs 27:6; 20:30**

What is grace connecting? Let's start with what grace connecting is not.

### *Grace Connecting Is Not*

- *A Warm Feeling*: “Boy, I feel neat when I’m with you.” Spiritual friendship is not always a pleasant experience.
- *Sweetness*: Merely reflecting and mirroring whatever your spiritual friend says. Non-directive acceptance of everything, including sin.
- *A Stage in Counseling*: “We’ll do connecting today and then drop it.”
- *A Technique in Counseling*: “Crying 101.” “Three steps to really caring.”

### *What Grace Connecting Is: Incarnation*

Grace connection is personal involvement with a deep commitment to the maturity of another person.

“Faithful are the wounds of a friend,” Solomon teaches in Proverbs 27:6 (KJV). “Wounds” are a splitting apart as a doctor does for surgery, an exposure. You enter the ER and say, “Doctor, my chest and the right side of my body are killing me!” You don’t want him to simply be sweet. “That must be really hard for you.” You want him to be skillful, competent—able to diagnose and treat your ailment. So, too, with spiritual friendship. You want to be able to compassionately diagnose heart issues, pulling open the soul and peering deeply inside.

“Faithful” means to support, to bear, to be trustworthy. Alonzo, facing the diagnosis of inoperable cancer, wants to be able to say about you, “I trust you with my soul.” “Faithful” also means to be strong, stable. Alonzo wants to know that his words will not overwhelm you. Touch you deeply, yes. Overwhelm you, no. As his wounds are opened, he wants to know that they will not make you faint, that you will not think less of him.

“Friend” literally means “one who loves you, lover.” The Scriptures use the same word in 2 Chronicles 20:7, calling Abraham God’s “forever friend.” Think of God’s grace relationship with Abraham—encounter, intimacy, fellowship, accountability, fidelity, stability—and you will picture grace connecting.

Proverbs 20:30 speaks of deep commitment to maturity. “Blows and wounds cleanse away evil, and beatings purge the inmost being.” “Cleanse” means to rub, to polish, to grind and buff repeatedly. Picture waxing your car, cleaning your silver. That’s hard work requiring time, effort, and commitment. Alonzo wants to know that you will use all your resources to help him in his time of need. Connection means that you are committed to Alonzo’s growth even when it hurts him and you.

## **What Grace Connecting Requires: Romans 5:6-8**

Grace connection requires exposure without rejection, truth with relationship, curiosity rather than analysis, and face-to-face relating instead of back-to-back professionalism.

Christ models *exposure without rejection* in Romans 5:6-8. “While we were yet sinners” (exposure). “Christ died for us” (acceptance). Grace connection communicates, “I see you warts and all, and I still love you, accept you, like you, and move toward you.”

Paul models *truth with relationship* in Ephesians 4:15. He tells us that the essence of pastoral care involves speaking and living out the truth in love. Consider possible ways to do ministry:

- Truth Minus Relationship: Intimidation/Compliance
- Relationship Minus Truth: Indecision/Confusion
- Truth Plus Relationship: Internalization/Conformity to Christ

Jesus models *curiosity versus analysis*. At the end of John 2, John notes that Jesus knew all people universally and deeply. Yet, he did not allow his full knowledge to blind him to the uniqueness of individuals. Following John 2, Jesus engages two of the most diverse individuals imaginable: the Jewish male moral religious leader and the Samaritan female immoral irreligious follower. Reread both accounts and you’ll see his respect for each. His probing curiosity. His unique interactions and involvement.

Analysis views your spiritual friend as “a specimen” to be dissected, analyzed, and studied. Curiosity sees your spiritual friend as an image bearer to be experienced, a mystery to enter, and a soul to know.

We would all do well to tape the following prayer somewhere in our “counseling” office. Or better, somewhere in our soul. The Spiritual Friend’s Prayer:

“Dear Lord, Help me to approach every relationship as an audience with an eternally valuable human being.”

In John 3-4, Jesus *models face-to-face relating instead of back-to-back professionalism*. He enters their individual worlds. He goes where they are, both geographically and soulfully. He becomes a cartographer of their soul, exploring their personal terrain.

With the woman at the well, in particular, he exposes his humanness. He’s authentic, open, vulnerable, and honest. He connects, touches, and moves toward. He’s anything but surface, fake, phony, uncaring, and distancing.

### **Join the Conversation**

How could you live out the core truth of GRACE relationships: “Faithful are the wounds of a friend” (Proverbs 27:6)?

## 5 GRACE Biblical Counseling Skills: Part 2

### Building a Connected Spiritual Friendship: Galatians 6:1

How do you develop connected relationships? Exploring how *not* to develop grace relationships begins to answer that question.

*How Not to Build Grace Connections: Job 16:2*

Job accused his “friends” of being “miserable comforters.” The word “miserable” means troublesome, vexing, and sorrow-causing. They were the opposite of “comforters”—they were not consoling, sympathetic; they did not feel deeply Job’s hurt. They never said or conveyed in any way, “It’s normal to hurt.”

Instead of grace connecting, they practiced *condemning distancing*. Read the verses below and notice examples of their poor relational abilities flowing out of their poor theology (Job 42:7) and their cold hearts:

#### 1. Superiority: Job 5:8; 8:2; 11:2-12; 12:1-3; 15:7-17

“We’re better than you. You’re inferior to us.”

#### 2. Judgmentalism: Job 4:4-9; 15:2-6

“It’s *not* normal to hurt! Your suffering is due to your sinning!”

#### 3. Advice without Insight/Discernment: Job 5:8; 8:5-6; 11:13-20; 42:7

“Here’s what I would do if I were you.” “Do this and life’s complexities will melt away.” “I have the secret that will fix your situation.” They offered quick, trite advice. They were rescuers, answer men, and cliché makers.

*How to Build Grace Connections: Galatians 6:1-3*

Remember that connecting is a commitment to love another person. It is *compassionate discernment in action*. It is not a technique to be mastered, but a way of life to be nurtured by personal communion with Christ. Communion with Christ leads to connection with others.

Galatians 6:1-3, in the context of Paul’s discussion of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, exposes how *to* build grace relationships.

#### 1. Loving Motivation: “You who are spiritual.”

The fruit of the Spirit characterizes effective spiritual friends. The Holy Spirit is the Comforter who comes alongside to help in time of need. In the Spirit’s power, you are to be a friend acting in the best interest of your friend. You’re a friend acting on behalf of another, interceding for, defending, and advocating. You’re an encourager standing up for, standing behind, standing with, and standing back-to-

back and alongside your spiritual friend. The “spiritual” person is like a *coach* who has been in the game, lost, struck out, but has some game experience that sure does help.

## **2. Intimate Friendship/Knowledge: “Brothers.”**

Spiritual friendship requires intimate family relationship. “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (Proverbs 17:17). “A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24). Picture *best friends* hiking a mountain. One has been there before, so she’s the *guide* who has found a few good routes and gladly shares them with her best friend.

Evaluation forms from folks who have been “counseled” by lay encouragers express this sense of intimate friendship. “Even though we had never met before, our times were like two friends walking together.” “I could feel your concern; we were on the same level.” “You accepted me. You didn’t scold me like a Mom, but were honest like a friend.”

## **3. Communicating Equality: “But watch yourself or you also may be tempted.” “Restore gently.”**

Gentleness looks like a tamed stallion, strength under control, firm compassion, mature self-control, and power and love mingled through wisdom. Christ labels himself “gentle” in Matthew 11:29, saying that unlike the Pharisees who were sin-spotters and burden-givers, he was Rest-Giver and Sin-Bearer.

“Watch” (Galatians 6:1) is the Greek word *skopon* from which we gain our word “scope.” Put yourself under the microscope before examining your spiritual friend. As a grace connector, maintain a strong mental attention to your own potential temptability. Remain humble in spirit.

## **4. Demonstrated Commitment: “Restore.” “Carry each other’s burden.”**

Paul places “restore” in the present, continual tense. Maintain a patient persistence in mending, furnishing, equipping, and setting the dislocated member of the body back in place. Picture the marathon runner. “I love you for the long haul. I’m in this relationship for a lifetime.” Picture the physical therapist who brings her patient back to the place of health by pushing without being pushy.

Paul also describes the spiritual friend as a committed burden-bearer. “Carry each other’s burden” (Galatians 6:2). God calls you to pick up and help carry the weight that overwhelms your friend. “Weight” means anything pressing on people physically, emotionally, or spiritually that makes a demand on their resources. When your friend’s platelets are low, become a spiritual blood transfusion of grace. When your friend’s RPMs are slowing, become their energy conduit.

Carrying each other’s burdens is not optional, nor the domain of a few. “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). Pastors can’t say, “I just want to preach from the pulpit,” not if they intend on fulfilling Christ’s law. Lay people can’t say, “That’s the pastor’s job,” not if they intend on obeying Christ’s law. Professional counselors can’t say, “I must maintain a professional distance,” not if they intend on living Christ’s law.

**Join the Conversation**

Becky has just told you about her boss's unwanted advances. You know of her past trust in him as a good Christian friend. You know something of Becky's fear, her sense of betrayal, her concerns about telling her husband Jim (who also is a good friend to her boss). How would you provide grace connecting with Becky?

## 5 GRACE Biblical Counseling Skills: Part 3

### Rich Soul Empathizing: Climbing in the Casket—Romans 12:15

Biblical empathy is the ability to sense your spiritual friend's suffering and communicate that "it's normal to hurt." Picture soul empathy with the phrase "climbing in the casket." Many biblical passages urge rich soul empathizing:

- Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn (Romans 12:15).
- If one part suffers, every part suffers with it (1 Corinthians 12:26).
- . . . who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God (2 Corinthians 1:4).
- Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted (Hebrews 2:18).
- For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:15-16).
- In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will (Romans 8:26-27).

Empathy, like connecting, is *incarnational*. Jesus entered our story (Hebrews 2; John 1). He is not only the Author of our story; He is in our story.

Empathy means to suffer along with another, to suffer in the soul of another. It involves feeling yourself into or participating in the inner world of another person while remaining yourself. Through empathy, you see your spiritual friends' world through their eyes as if their world was your own. You seek to understand their inner and outer world from their perspective.

You can picture empathy as placing yourself in the role as *a* lead character in Becky and Alonzo's stories. They are *the* lead characters in their stories; you are their friend, their protagonist. You are no longer simply a reader *of* their stories; you participate with them *in* their stories.

### How *Not* to Empathize with the Soul: Slamming the Casket Shut—Job's Miserable Counselors, Part II

If empathizing is climbing in the casket, then slamming the casket shut pictures its opposite. A return to Job's miserable "comforters" pictures how *not* to practice soul empathy.

### 1. Eliphaz: Job 4-5, 15, and 22

Eliphaz is the master of discouragement and dismay. He provides Job with conditional love while he curses God. Eliphaz teaches that God is good to the good, but bad to the bad. He does not know grace. He does know works: “You can manipulate God into being good to you by being good to him.” What a petty God Eliphaz worships. Eliphaz says to Job, “Don’t live *coram Deo*. Don’t tell God your heart. Be surface.” He misinterprets Job’s words as venting rage at God rather than soul-sharing with God.

### 2. Bildad: Job 8, 18, and 25

Bildad has a somewhat right theology with very wrong application. “The issue is your sin!” Seeing only sin, he is wrong in Job’s case. For God, the issue was Job’s response to him in his suffering. The issue was Job’s privileged opportunity to be a universal witness to God’s goodness. The issue was not Job’s sinfulness. Bildad does not know the man he calls “friend.” He labels (and libels) Job “the evil man who knows not God.”

### 3. Zophar: Job 11 and 20

Zophar also presents a works righteousness. He believes that good works can cover shame.

### 4. Job’s View: Miserable Comforters

How does Job view their counsel? He longs for the devotion of his friends (6:14), which they aren’t. He calls them undependable brothers (6:15), which they are. They can’t handle Job’s doubts, treating the words of a despairing man as wind (6:26). He feels they say, “Forget it! Smile!” However, “Don’t worry; be happy,” does not cut it for Job. His dread remains. “If I say, ‘I will forget my complaint, I will change my expression, and smile,’ I still dread all my sufferings, for I know you will not hold me innocent” (Job 9:27-28). He experiences their total lack of empathy. “Men at ease have contempt for misfortunate” (Job 12:5).

Miserable comforters (Job 16:2) they are. Rather than communicating that “it’s normal to hurt,” they increase Job’s hurt. Having no compassionate discernment, they claim that his wounds are self-inflicted. “How we will hound him, since the root of the trouble lies in him” (Job 19:28). They crush Job’s spirit through their long-winded speeches, argumentative nature, lack of empathy and encouragement, failure to bring relief/comfort, and their closed-minded, arrogant, superior, hostile attitudes based upon wrong motives and a condemning spirit (Job 17:1-5).

Of them, Job concludes, “These men turn night into day; in the face of darkness they say, ‘Light is near’” (Job 17:12). They are like the counselor who says, “Don’t talk about your problems, don’t think about your suffering, and don’t remember your past hurts. Forget those things which are behind!” They have no night vision, no 20/20 spiritual vision, and no long-distance vision; so they have to call the darkness light. Job, however, has long-distance vision. His heart yearns for God and he knows that he will see God (Job 19:25-27).

Job feels no rapport with them. “They torment me, crush me with words. I sense their reproach as they shame me. They exalt themselves. I feel so alone when I am with them. So alienated and forgotten. Here’s how my ‘spiritual friends’ make me feel: alienated, estranged, forgotten, offensive, loathsome.



All my intimate friends detest me; they have turned against me, having no pity on me” (author’s paraphrase of Job 19).

They are unwise. They offer nonsense answers because they’re not paying attention to life, not learning life’s lessons. “You have not wisely paid attention to how things work in the real world. Your academic knowledge, your theologizing, is out to lunch. How can you console/comfort me with your vain nonsense, since your answers are falsehood? You are wrong about life, about me, and about God!” (author’s paraphrase of Job 21).

They are “sin-spotters.” They know confrontation only. Thus, they become co-conspirators with Satan the accuser who condemns men and curses God.

### *5. God’s View*

What was God’s view of their counsel? After speaking to Job, Yahweh says to Eliphaz. “I am angry with you and your two friends because you have not spoken of me what is right as my servant Job has” (Job 42:7). They failed to speak of God’s generous goodness and grace. Their God was a tit-for-tat God who could be easily manipulated by and impressed with works.

*Our greatest failure in counseling arises when we speak wrongly of God while we speak to one another.*

### **Join the Conversation**

What additional examples of non-empathy would you add?

## 5 GRACE Biblical Counseling Skills: Part 4

### How to Empathize with the Soul: Climbing in the Casket—Hebrews 4:15-16

Soul empathy involves our capacity for “as if” relating. Ambrose wrote:

“Show compassion for those who suffer. Suffer with those who are in trouble *as if* being in trouble with them.”

Soul empathy requires *compassionate imagination*. We need to imagine what it is like for our friends to experience their life stories. To understand others with intimate knowledge, we must read into their experiences asking, “What is it like to experience and perceive the world through their stories?”

Hebrews 2:14-18 and 4:15-16 teach that empathy is not less than, but more than, intellectual. It is also experiential. Biblical, Christ-like empathy shares the experiences of another, connecting through common inner experiences. Such soul sharing occurs by way of incarnation—entering another’s world and worldview.

As a spiritual friend, the more human we are, the more real, the more fully alive and passionate, the more we will tune into others. Then we’ll experience a sympathetic resonance no matter the melody, dirge, minor or major key, or discordant note.

### The God of All Comfort

Empathy, however, does not come from sharing the same experience, situation, or suffering. No two people experience a situation identically, nor do they share the identical experience.

*Empathy comes from sharing the same dependency upon God.* The God of all comfort, comforts us in our *specific* trouble so that we can comfort those in *any* trouble with the *infinite* comfort we receive from the God of *all* comfort.

I derive a core spiritual friendship principle from these concepts:

*We will be empathetic with others to the degree that we are facing our struggles face-to-face with God.*

When our soul is attuned to others, then we “pick up their radio waves, the vibes of their inner reactions.” Having accomplished this, we need to go the distance. We need to communicate to our spiritual friends in a way that helps them to “have empathy with our empathy.” They need to feel that we feel with them. Otherwise, their sorrow is not shared, it is simply “understood.” When both our “soul radios” are tuned to the same frequency, then we can share our soul friends’ experiences. We share their sorrows by climbing in the casket with them, and they know we are there.

While death is separation; shared sorrow is connection. It is the stitch connecting the wound. It is the healing balm. However, shared sorrow must never be a healing replacement. It must not replace grief. Shared sorrow does not purpose to eliminate sorrow, to rescue, or to cheer up. Shared sorrow purposes to help another to face and embrace sorrow.

## **“Levels” of Empathy**

Effective soul empathy includes several “levels.”

*1. Level One Empathy: “How would that affect an image bearer?”*

Here we understand our spiritual friend through God’s eyes. A foundational level of empathy, it builds upon a *universal* biblical understanding of people.

*2. Level Two Empathy: “How would that affect an image bearer like me?”*

Here we understand our spiritual friend through our eyes. A filtering level, we use our life as a filter through which we relate God’s truth to our friend’s life.

*3. Level Three Empathy: “How would that affect an image bearer like him/her?”*

Here we understand our spiritual friend through his or her eyes. We move from *universal* to *unique* empathy. In this final, deepest level of soul empathy we need to:

*a. Adopt Our Spiritual Friend’s Viewpoint:*

We replace our internal frame of reference with his. We neither condone nor condemn, agree or disagree, at this point. We simply seek to see what it is like to be him—through his mindset and frame of reference.

*b. Express Our Spiritual Friend’s Viewpoint:*

We express in our own words what we sense that she has said, felt, and thought about the situation. We then seek clarification.

*c. Encourage Our Spiritual Friend to Accept His/Her Viewpoint:*

We nudge him to acknowledge his own experience. We help him to verbalize how he sees things and to accept his own perspective.

*d. Help Our Spiritual Friend to Evaluate His/Her Viewpoint:*

She needs to begin to assess how near or far her viewpoint is from reality.

## **Join the Conversation**

Who do you have in your life who empathizes deeply and compassionately with you?

## 5 GRACE Biblical Counseling Skills: Part 5

### Accurate/Active Spiritual Listening: Faith-Drenched Alertness—John 2:23-4:43

Think of spiritual listening as *reflective paying attention*. It is passionate love that says, “I am not the center of my attention. God is. You are. I am third.” As Deitrich Bonhoeffer teaches:

“The first service we owe to others in fellowship is to listen to them. If we fail to listen, there are spiritual consequences. He who can no longer listen to his brother, will soon be no longer listening to God either.”

Jesus listened spiritually to Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman. John places a “narrative marker” just before these two encounters. “He did not need man’s testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man” (John 2:25). Jesus knew the scriptural, *universal* nature of human nature. He also tuned into the *unique* nature of individuals. Jesus could not have encountered two more unique individuals. His approach to them was idiosyncratic—uniquely fitting for each. Jesus listened to their souls and knew their individual stories. To follow His model, spiritual friends:

- Listen to Biblical Principles of Spiritual Listening: God’s Word about Human Words
- Listen with Relational Competence: *LISTEN*

### Listening to Biblical Principles of Spiritual Listening: God’s Word about Human Words

Listening carefully to people’s words is biblical, not secular. God’s Word teaches that:

- Words Are Powerful
- Words Are Meaningful
- Words Convey Soul Messages
- Words Are Worthy of Soulful Attentiveness
- Words Reflect One of Two Life Interpretations

#### Words Are Powerful: Proverbs 18:21

“The tongue has the power of life and death” (Proverbs 18:21). That’s power. The tongue, says James, is a small body part with power far beyond its size (James 3:1-5a). “Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire” (James 3:5b-6). That’s power. Listen carefully to the powerful, life and death words of your spiritual friends.

#### Words Are Meaningful: Proverbs 18:4; 20:5

“The words of a man’s mouth are deep waters” (Proverbs 18:4). “The purposes of a man’s heart are deep waters, but a man of understanding draws them out” (Proverbs 20:5). Words carry the soul’s longings, beliefs, purposes, and feelings. Through careful, caring listening, you perceive the depth of the soul. Through active, accurate listening, you draw out the meaning of the soul—the hidden desires, convictions, goals, and emotions.

### **Words Convey Soul Messages: Psalm 39:1-3; Matthew 12:33-37**

“Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34). Spoken words flow out of the depths of the heart revealing the content of the heart. The good heart bears nourishing fruit conveyed by wholesome words, while the evil heart bears poisonous fruit conveyed by unwholesome words. If you want to know your spiritual friends, then listen skillfully to their words.

### **Words Are Worthy of Soulful Attentiveness: Proverbs 18:13; James 1:19**

“He who answers before listening—that is his folly, that is his shame” (Proverbs 18:13). “My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” (James 1:19). The caring soul carefully listens to words spoken from the soul.

### **Words Reflect One of Two Life Interpretations: Job 42:7**

“After the LORD had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, ‘I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has’” (Job 42:7). Job and his three friends witnessed one situation, but derived two vastly different interpretations. The set of information involved Job’s life experience. The first interpretation consisted of the works, condemnation, cursing, and shame narrative of life inspired by Satan. The second consisted of the grace, faith, openness, and acceptance narrative inspired by God. According to God, Job got him right; Job’s friends got God all wrong.

Whenever you listen, you listen for three sets of stories. Listen for your spiritual friends’ life stories—listen attentively to what they’re saying about what they’re experiencing. Then listen to two possible interpretations of their stories. Listen attentively for signs of Satan’s narrative creeping in. Additionally, listen attentively to God’s narrative gaining dominance. These competing interpretive frameworks are at work in every life story.

### **Join the Conversation**

What application could you make to Bonhoeffer’s quote? “He who can no longer listen to his brother, will soon be no longer listening to God either.”

## 5 GRACE Biblical Counseling Skills: Part 6

### Listening with Relational Competence: *LISTEN*

We can use the acrostic LISTEN to remind ourselves of basic components of competent spiritual listening.

- *L*—Loving Motivation: Proverbs 21:13
- *I*—Intimate Concern: Galatians 6:1-3; Colossians 4:6; James 3:17-18
- *S*—Slow to Speak: Proverbs 18:13; James 1:19
- *T*—Timing: Proverbs 15:23; 25:11
- *E*—Encouraging: Hebrews 3:7-19; 10:24-25
- *N*—Need-Focused Hearing: Ephesians 4:29

### Loving Motivation: Proverbs 21:13

“If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry and not be answered” (Proverbs 21:13). Relationally competent spiritual friends are motivated, like God, to listen for, hear, care about, empathize with, and respond to the hurts of the wounded. Neither secular theory nor human curiosity drives careful listening. Care does. Concern does. Compassion does.

### Intimate Concern: Galatians 6:1-3; Colossians 4:6; James 3:17-18

Paul (Galatians 6:1-3; Colossians 4:6) emphasizes the humble, spiritual, gentle, and gracious concern that ought to accompany spiritual listening. James (James 3:17-18), in a context sandwiched between the use of the tongue and the cause of quarrels, explains that true wisdom for living flows from a heart that loves people and peace, a heart that is considerate and submissive, impartial and sincere.

### Slow to Speak: Proverbs 18:13; James 1:19

James is quite emphatic. “My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry” (James 1:19). Solomon explains why. “He who answers before listening—that is his folly and his shame” (Proverbs 18:13). Relationally competent spiritual friends hear their friend’s story before they tell God’s story to their friend.

### Timing: Proverbs 15:23; 25:11

“A man finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word!” (Proverbs 15:23). “A word aptly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” (Proverbs 25:11). “Apt” means fitting, timely, given in due season—words said at the right time, in the right way, for the right reason because of right listening.

### Exploring: Hebrews 3:7-19; 10:24-25

Both Hebrews 3 and 10 speak of encouraging and clearly imply the necessity of exploratory listening before profitable encouraging. Before encouraging, spiritual friends tune into, see, listen, and hear what is going on in the heart of their spiritual friend.

### **Need-Focused Hearing: Ephesians 4:29**

To benefit others, spiritual friends listen for specific needs. “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Ephesians 4:29). Spiritual friends ask, as they listen, “What is it that my spiritual friend most needs? What are his hurts and wounds? What are her fears and scars? What wholesome words relate to her specific situation? Specifically, given his situation, what words will benefit him?”

### **Join the Conversation**

Using the *LISTEN* acrostic, rate yourself on each of the six aspects of listening. How could you improve your spiritual listening skills, especially in those areas where you rated yourself lower?

## 5 GRACE Biblical Counseling Skills: Part 7

### Caring Spiritual Conversations: Sustaining Theological Trialogues—Ephesians 4:29

People in pain need whispers, not shouts. Don't holler curses; whisper grace.

In caring spiritual conversations, we use biblical wisdom principles to engage our spiritual friends in discussions that help them to think through their external and internal situation. The core relational competency necessary for this soul care art is the ability to triologue.

In monologues you speak to me; in dialogues we speak to each other; and in triologues together we listen to God. In triologues, we want to make the presence of God the central dynamic in our conversation. We interact in Jesus' name helping people to face personal issues on a personal level.

Our personal relationship with them helps them to deepen their personal relationship with Christ. Spiritual conversations invite our spiritual friends into an exchange so they can experience the passion of having been changed. They invite our spiritual friends into a vivid, robust experience of grace narratives through grace relationships.

Consider just a sampling of biblical passages that depict triologues:

- “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20).
- “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Hebrews 3:12-13).
- “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith . . . And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:22, 24-25).

### The Nature of Spiritual Conversations

The tongue has the capacity to offer life-giving resources that nourish the soul, or to be a power for life-draining energies that poison the soul. “Words satisfy the mind as much as fruit does the stomach; good talk is as gratifying as a good harvest. Words kill, words give life; they’re either poison or fruit—you choose” (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, Proverbs 18:20-21). Spiritual conversation is simply good talk about our good God in the midst of our bad life.

“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Ephesians 4:29). Spiritual conversations are grace conversations. Law conversations crush people and destroy relationships (compare Matthew 23). Grace conversations edify people and build relationships.

“Unwholesome” words are corrupt and rotten like decaying fruit. They’re putrid, defiling, and injuring words. They’re toxic speech—words that poison others, making their spirit sick. Paul’s emphasis is clear



in the original language: “All words of rottenness, do not let come out of your mouth.” Spiritual friends restrain themselves, refusing to speak until they understand what words will be:

- *Helpful*: Good because they flow from moral character and promote beautiful living.
- *Strengthening/Building Up Others*: Edifying words that bring improvement and promote maturity.
- *According to Their Need*: Carefully chosen words that specifically fill up a need, meet a lack, minister to a want, or express care in a difficulty, where it is most necessary.
- *Beneficial/Ministering Grace*: Attractive speech that helps others to receive God’s love poem and become God’s love poetry. They are gift words—generously given, freely granted words that accept, that free, that empower, and that give hope.

To the Colossians, Paul writes, “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Colossians 4:6). Grace words are words of connection, giving, affirming, accepting, freeing, and justifying. They are seasoned with salt—they preserve relationships with God, others, and self.

James, after describing the fiery and poisonous nature of words (James 3:1-8), notes that, “with the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness” (James 3:9). In James 3:10-16, James teaches that Satan is the ultimate source of cursing words—harmful, hurtful, damaging words that wish a judgment upon someone. The most harmful words involve cursing conversations, law relationships, and condemning speech filled with wrath and scorn. Grace words, by contrast, are motivated by purity, pursue peace, and produce the fruit of righteousness (James 3:17-18).

### **The Careful Use of Spiritual Conversations**

Throughout *Spiritual Friends*, you will read literally thousands of sample spiritual conversations. Because of the nature of the printed word, you will not be able to hear the inflection and tone of these sentences. You also will not be able to fully sense the spontaneity and individuality necessary in the skillful use of spiritual conversations. In other words, if you simply repeat to your spiritual friends these samples, then you will come across wooden, generic, academic, and out of touch. The samples are simply meant to stir your imagination, not to limit your creative, individual, personal interaction with your spiritual friends.

Additionally, be careful in the use of questions. I put many of the dialogues/trilogues in question form because they need to be so generic. However, think of spiritual conversations more as a quest to invite Jesus in, not as questions that push Jesus out and people away.

It is wise to question the use of questions, especially the poor use of questions. A few principles might help.

- As a spiritual friend, you’re not an interrogator. You’re not like Detective Joe Friday saying, “Just the facts, Ma’am. Just the facts.” Spiritual friendship is a conversation, not a cross-examination.

- Be aware that questions can cause your spiritual friend to feel like an object to be diagnosed or a lab specimen to be dissected.
- Never use questions as an excuse to avoid intimacy.
- Don't use questions as filler because you're unsure what to say. Instead, simply say, "I'm not sure where to go from here."

When you do use questions, consider some suggestions for using them effectively:

- Always ask yourself, "Will this question further or inhibit the flow of our relationship, of our conversation?"
- Normally ask open-ended questions—ones that can't be answered with a "Yes" or "No."
- Use indirect questions that imply a desire for further exploration, without having a question mark at the end of your sentence. "That must have been hard when your wife left the room." "I bet a million thoughts were going through your mind when your boss said that."

### **Join the Conversation**

Who dialogues with you—listens together to God with you? Who do you dialogues with?

## 5 GRACE Biblical Counseling Skills: Part 8

### The Practice of Spiritual Conversations

Our desire in spiritual conversations is to help our spiritual friends to live *coram Deo* (face-to-face with God). Our quest is to help our friends find God in the midst of their suffering. We want to send them on a God-quest where they bring God back into the center of their life journeys. Spiritual conversations in *sustaining* are a quest to encourage spiritual friends to invite God into their casket.

### Spiritual Conversations and a Quest to Face God

I'm often asked, "Can you employ spiritual conversations with "unspiritual people," with unbelievers, with pre-Christians?" Yes. The following sample spiritual conversations are especially appropriate when working with an unbeliever because they probe and plant seeds.

- I'm interested in how your spiritual values relate to this issue.
- I'm interested in how you are relating your spiritual values to this issue.
- Has your loss made any difference in your spiritual life?
- How are these problems influencing your view of God?
- How are these issues influencing your relationship to God?
- Has the issue you want to resolve made any difference in your feelings about God?
- What source of strength have you turned to in your distress?

### Spiritual Conversations and a Quest to Face What Was Lost: "Life is Bad!"

Sufferology teaches that before our spiritual friends can see how truly good God is, they have to first be brutally honest about how horribly bad life is. Therefore, we want to engage our spiritual friends in conversations that help them to face what was lost. We might call these "casket questions and integrity conversations." They help our spiritual friends to muster the integrity to explore honestly their disappointments and damages from a triune relational perspective—how it affects their relationships to God, others, and themselves.

- I'm so sorry you're going through this.
- I can see and feel your grief and pain.
- What is this loss like for you? What are you feeling right now?
- What do you wish were happening instead of what you're going through?
- Have you ever faced a loss like this before?
- What has been robbed from your life due to this? What is missing?
- What are you grieving over the most? What hurts the most in this situation?
- What do you fear the most in this situation? What if that happened?
- What's the worst-case scenario? What if that happened?

### Spiritual Conversations and a Quest to Face God in Loss

First, triadialogue about how bad life is. Next, triadialogue about bringing God into the center of the loss.

- What are you doing with God in your suffering?

- Where is God in all this?
- What might God be up to in all of this?
- Have you been able to share your heart with God? What have you said?
- What are you sensing from God?

### **Spiritual Conversations and a Quest to Wrestle with God**

Biblical characters like Jacob, Job, David, and Paul, among many others, not only knew that life was bad. They not only knew that God was good. They also wrestled with the tension between a good God who allows evil and suffering. Spiritual friends encourage their friends to do the same.

- What do you think the Bible says about feeling and expressing anger or disappointment toward God?
- What Scriptures could we look at that illustrate how God's people have talked to God when they felt that He was not hearing their cry?
- If you were to write a Psalm 13 or a Psalm 88 to God (Psalms of Lament and Complaint), how would it sound? What would you write?
- How would you compare your response to your suffering to Jacob's response to God in his suffering? To Job's response? To David's response? To Paul's response?
- If you painted a picture of how you sense God right now, what would you paint?
- What is it like for you when God seems deaf to your cry?
- When your soul shouts, "Where is God now? Where are His great and precious promises when I need them?" and the Scriptures teach that God is everywhere present and always faithful, which do you believe? How do you go about choosing which to believe?

### **Spiritual Conversations and a Quest to Cling to God**

Wrestling with God is biblical (biblical candor and lament). As our spiritual friends wrestle, they must cling.

- What is your suffering teaching you about God's power and your weakness?
- How could your agony cause you to cry out to God for help, love, strength, joy, peace, or deliverance?
- If you knew that God would say, "Yes," to your prayer about your situation, what would you be praying?
- If God were to immediately answer, "Yes," how would you respond?
- What Scriptures could you turn to in order to understand God's perspective on your suffering?
- What passages have you found helpful in gaining a new perspective on your suffering? To find comfort as you go through your suffering?
- When else have you experienced suffering similar to this? What did you learn about God in that situation? What would you repeat and what would you change about your response to that situation?

### **Spiritual Conversations and a Quest to Not Lose Faith/A Quest to Sustain Faith**

Historically, one of the main roles of sustaining has been to help believers to draw a line in the sand of retreat. To say, "My faith has been shaken, doubts have arisen, but I will not give up. I will not surrender to despair. My hope will remain. My faith is sustained."

The following trialogues, in addition to helping believers to explore and sustain their faith relationship with God, can be helpful when relating to the unsaved.

- Has your loss made any difference in your feelings about God?
- It feels like your faith is slipping away from you and that's scary for you.
- Tell me your perspective on the age-old question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?"
- It's hard to feel anything but sadness because of your son's death, but some part of you would welcome genuine faith and consolation.
- How does your faith in Christ fit into your feeling and thinking about the loss of your son?
- One part of you wants some genuine relief from your deep sorrow, but you don't feel open to the peace and assurance that your faith might give.

### **Join the Conversation**

What are some of the trialogues from today's post that most resonate with you?

## 5 GRACE Biblical Counseling Skills: Part 9

### Empathetic Scriptural Explorations: Sustaining Biblical Dialogues—Isaiah 61:1-3

*Spiritual conversations* use broad theological concepts to prompt people to ponder more deeply their walk with God.

*Scriptural explorations* use specific applicable biblical passages to help people to relate God's truth to their circumstances.

Isaiah 61:1-3 provides the purposes for sustaining scriptural explorations:

- Preach good news to the poor.
- Bind up the brokenhearted.
- Proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.
- Proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God.
- Comfort all who mourn.
- Provide for those who grieve in Zion—bestowing on them:
  - A crown of beauty instead of ashes,
  - The oil of gladness instead of mourning, and
  - A garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.
- Call and envision people as:
  - Oaks of righteousness and
  - A planting of the LORD.
- Display the LORD's splendor.

Notice the ultimate purpose of all soul care—helping your spiritual friends to display God's glory by trusting in His goodness in the midst of life's badness.

Specifically for sustaining, empathic scriptural explorations relate God's truth to your spiritual friend's life to encourage candor, complaint, cry, and comfort/communion. Imagine that you've connected with Alonzo. He senses that you're in his casket with him. You sense that you understand something of what he's going through. Having heard some of the depths of his soul through listening to his words, you're praying silently for opportunities for the two of you to listen together to God's Word.

In a natural, friend-to-friend manner, you long to help Alonzo to invite God back into the picture, into the casket with him. Your quest requires a loving understanding of Alonzo, biblical wisdom about the character and purposes of God, and biblical knowledge of Scripture. It also requires a wise, humble, and bold commitment to helping Alonzo to connect with God—his ultimate Spiritual Friend.

To get there, Alonzo needs to face life. He has to look in the mirror and acknowledge the ashes. Like the Jews of old, he must tear his garments and cover his head with ashes. He must mourn and grieve, singing the psalmists' laments. He has to face life so he can face God. In other words, he needs to practice biblical candor, complaint, cry, and comfort.

How do you help Alonzo to experience candor, complaint, cry, and comfort? You could tell him—"Cry now!" Not so wise.

Or, you could teach him the four stages of biblical suffering. “Alonzo, for you to heal there are some biblical stages that we see evidenced in person after person throughout the Bible: candor, complaint, cry, and comfort. Let me share the passages and teachings that show us why we should do these, how we should do them, and the help they offer.” Better—in a given situation, in a given way. However, still not best.

The most helpful, effective way is the way of dialogues that use scriptural explorations to encourage personalized candor, complaint, cry, and comfort.

With Alonzo and others, you can use the following dialogues as a basic pattern for exploring biblical narratives/stories, psalms, or passages together.

- *How do you react to this biblical story/psalm/passage?*
  - *How is it different from your situation? How is it similar?*
  - *How have you been responding differently? Similarly?*
  - *What in this story/psalm/passage would you like to add to your response? How could you do that?*
- *Imagine writing a story/psalm/passage somewhat like this one regarding your current suffering.*
  - *What would your relationship to God be like in your story/psalm/passage?*
  - *What role would you play in your story/psalm/passage?*
  - *Who else might be in your story/psalm/passage?*
  - *Are there any characters in this story/psalm/passage who remind you of any people in your life?*
  - *How would God give you strength in your story/psalm/passage?*
  - *What would the theme of your story/psalm/passage be?*
  - *How might your story/psalm/passage turn out?*
  - *How would God work out your story/psalm/passage for good?*

### **Join the Conversation**

Consider a difficult situation in your life. How would you use some of the dialogues questions in today’s post to relate a specific passage to what you are going through?

## 5 GRACE Biblical Counseling Skills: Part 10

### Empathetic Scriptural Explorations and Candor

You sense that Alonzo is on the verge of embracing his loss, but he's fearful. Tentative. You'd love to see him "step on the mat with God so the wrestling match can commence." Perhaps you share:

- *Alonzo, you've shared a lot. There's obviously so much going on inside. Rightly so. Yet, so far we've not talked much about where God fits into your picture . . .*

You have all sorts of options concerning how you proceed. You could be quiet, sit back, and wait, which might be quite useful. Or, you could share:

- *I'm curious about where God is in your suffering.*
- *Alonzo, could you tell me what you're doing with God in your suffering?*
- *I'm wondering where God is in all this.*
- *What might God be up to in all of this?*

Perhaps your conversation might run like this.

*"Alonzo, have you been able to share your heart with God?"*

*"Well, yeah. Some. I guess."*

*"Great. What have you said?"*

*"Well, I've told Him how confused I am. And shocked. And worried . . ."*

*"Wow. That's a lot. You and God sure are on great speaking terms! What are you sensing from God as you share with Him?"*

As you continue to talk, you sense Alonzo's openness to explore further his relationship to God. Now you have the opportunity, together, to explore a relevant biblical narrative or character. As you do, you can explore specific implications and applications.

- *Alonzo, David experienced something like this. Stalked by Saul, his life was on the line. He faced the valley of the shadow of death. Could we look at his situation and his response?*

If you're talking with Becky who is a sexual abuse victim, it might sound more like this:

- *Becky, Tamar experienced something like this. Her half-brother betrayed her sexually. Could we look at her situation and her response?*

### Empathetic Scriptural Explorations and Complaint

Below you'll find some examples of scriptural explorations and complaint.



- *What does Psalm 88 suggest about expressing your anger, disappointment, or complaint toward God? How could you relate this to your response to God?*
- *God promises that all things work together for good for His children (Romans 8:28). What are your thoughts about that promise? What do you think about a passage like this? What good purposes has God already provided to you or in you through these events?*
- *If you were to write a Psalm 13 or a Psalm 88 to God (Psalms of Lament and Complaint), how would it sound? What would you write?*

### **Empathetic Scriptural Explorations and Cry**

Below you'll find some examples of scriptural explorations and cry.

- *What Scriptures could we look at that illustrate how God's people have talked to God when they felt that He was not hearing their cry?*
- *If you were to write a Psalm 72 or 73, how would it sound? What would you write?*
- *Based upon Psalm 13, how could your situation cause you to cry out to God for help, love, strength, joy, peace, and deliverance?*

### **Empathetic Scriptural Explorations and Comfort/Communion**

Below you'll find some examples of scriptural explorations and comfort/communion.

- *Let's explore John 9, God's purposes in suffering, and how they may relate to your suffering.*
- *If you were to write a Psalm 42 and 43, where David moves from confusion to communion with God, how would it sound? What would you write?*
- *Based upon Deuteronomy 8, how do you think you can grow through your suffering?*
- *How could you relate Paul's perspective on his suffering in Romans 8:17-28 to your life? How could taking on his perspective alter your perspective?*
- *Let's explore how Paul found comfort in his despair in 2 Corinthians 1. What applications could you make from his life to yours?*

You can use scriptural explorations as powerful homework assignments. For instance, between now and the next time you meet, Becky could write her own psalm to God. Or, she could simply "journal her feelings to God." When you meet again, you dialogue about her writings.

### **Join the Conversation**

Of the five biblical counseling GRACE skills of sustaining, which ones do you most want to develop further? Why? How?

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