

Listen with Care

BLESS Series, January 15 & 16, 2022 | John 4:1-26 (-42)
Senior Pastor Rob O'Neal

LISTENING WITH CARE IS A WAY TO BLESS OUR NEIGHBORS

Listening with Care is difficult for some of us.

The authors of the BLESS study book, which our groups are using, wrote about not listening closely and clearly to the lyrics to popular music. Apparently, one of them heard the wrong lyrics to songs at one point in their lives.

The mistaken lyrics that we walk around with are called "mondegreens."

I don't listen well, so I've walked around with lots of mondegreens over the years.

Like many people, I like to sing in the shower. Years ago, I liked to sing Garth Brooks' mega hit, "Shavin'." In the shower I'd sing, "I'm shavin', shavin' like a man should be." Then I'd get out of the shower and sing while shaving.

One day my lovely wife, Tammi, was kind enough to say to me, "You do know it's 'shameless,' right?" Nope, but that made much more sense of the rest of the song.

Listening with care is difficult for some of us.

Listening with Care is the second component of a BLESS lifestyle.

BLESS is a lifestyle that helps us to live out the Bible's commands to love our neighbors, particularly our lost neighbors.

BLESS is not a strategy. It is a way of living that causes God's love to overflow out of us.

It has five components covered by the acronym BLESS: B stands for Begin with Prayer. L represents Listen with Care. E stands for Eat Together. The first S means Serve with Love. The second S adds Share Your Story.

I seek to live a BLESS lifestyle, and I am hoping many of us will choose to live a BLESS lifestyle.

The BLESS lifestyle includes our topic for today, "Listen with Care."

Listening with Care is critically important.

Listening with Care creates the possibility of relationship, the opportunity to know other people, and the path to get to the heart of the matter.

Jesus is a master of listening. In his earthly ministry, he pointed the way.

JESUS LISTENED WITH ATTENTION

Jesus listened with attention in John 4:1-9:

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. And he had to pass through Samaria. So he came to a

town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour. A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)

Jesus listened with attention by being fully present in the moment by the well.

Jesus was going from Judea in the south to Galilee in the north because his ministry in Judea had attracted the attention of the Jewish religious leaders, something he was not ready to do.

The road through Samaria was the quickest, most direct route.

Jesus and his disciples came to the village Sychar, near ancient Shechem.

It was the sixth hour of the day, midday. The sun was directly overhead.

Jesus was hot and tired, so he sat down by the well located a half mile outside of town.

The disciples continued into Sychar to buy food.

That left Jesus sitting by the well with no agenda. Naturally, he did what we all do when we have spare time. He pulled out his phone and checked out funny memes on Instagram.

He was playing Minecraft when a woman from Sychar came out to the well to draw water.

Jesus put down his smartphone and asked the woman to give him a drink.

She was shocked! Jesus, a man, was speaking to a woman; that was unusual. Jesus, a Jew, was speaking to a Samaritan; the two groups had a lot of mistrust and dislike for one another.

Probably the thing that surprised her the most was the simple fact that Jesus paid attention to her. He noticed her. He saw her. Jesus gave her the gift of his attention.

We struggle to listen with attention because we are usually totally distracted.

Okay, naturally Jesus didn't have a smartphone. We're the ones distracted by our devices.

We're distracted by the noise around us, by our busy-ness, and by our self-focus.

We're so distracted that it makes listening with attention difficult.

To listen with attention, we may need to turn off the noise; Stetson Bennett IV learned that lesson.

Stetson was the Georgia Bulldogs' starting quarterback in the National Championship.

I don't think anyone ever expected Stetson to become Georgia's starting quarterback.

He walked on at the University of Georgia, but he was made a backup to the backup.

People consistently said that he wasn't big enough, fast enough, or strong enough.

Georgia fans expressed their opinions vocally in traditional and social media.

If he was going to succeed, Stetson knew he needed to give the struggle his full attention and that meant blocking out all the noise coming at him, so he bought an old-fashioned flip phone.

He blocked out all the voices distracting him, did his job, and, on Monday night, carried the Georgia Bulldogs to a National Championship.¹

To listen with care, give the gift of attention.

One of our Valley members shared with me this past week that the word "listen" is an anagram for "silent." If you rearrange the letters in "listen," you can make the word "silent." What a powerful point! To truly listen, we must pay attention. To pay attention, we must be silent.

Dallas Willard was a gifted philosopher and theologian. He wrote multiple books on Christian spirituality, including *The Spirit of the Disciplines*. In that book he wrote about silence.

The discipline of silence means stopping the noise around us.

The discipline of silence also means being in God's presence without setting an agenda.

In still other ways, the discipline of silence means not rushing to talk when we are with people.

That's the key to listening with care; we give people the gift of our full, undivided attention.

Willard wrote, "Such practice also helps us to listen and to observe, to pay attention to people. How rarely are we ever truly listened to, and how deep is our need to be heard." - Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*²

Let's listen with care by giving the gift of attention.

JESUS LISTENED WITH INTEREST

Jesus listened with interest in John 4:10-18:

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock." Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true."

Jesus listened with interest by asking questions.

In this passage, Jesus told the woman that she could get living water from him. We could spend our entire time together today talking about Jesus being the living water.

Instead, let's just say that the offer caught her attention and kept the conversation going. Jesus had expressed interest in an area of her life that was obviously important. The fact that she was at the well in the middle of the day by herself told a powerful story about her. She didn't come to the well in the

¹ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/georgia-stetson-bennett-college-football-championship-11641916476>

² Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York, New York: HarperOne, 1999), p. 164.

morning with other women from town for protection and company. She came in the middle of the day, she was clearly alone, and she was clearly vulnerable. Here was Jesus offering her living water while she stood by a well with still water. She asked if Jesus was greater than the patriarch Jacob who had dug that well.

Jesus implied that he was indeed greater than Jacob. We could talk about that all day as well, but let's focus instead on the fact that what Jesus said is that the living water he offers becomes a spring inside the person that gives eternal life.

Jesus had her attention. He had spoken her language. He knew her need. She wanted that water; it addressed so many practical needs in her life. (She didn't yet fully understand.)

Next, the conversation turned to more personal matters. With the promise of living water and eternal life hanging in the air, Jesus instructed the woman to go and call her husband.

Jesus had gotten to the very core of this woman's condition in life. He asked a very good question, "Where is your husband?" He was listening to her.

She wanted to talk! She had no husband. She had had five different husbands in the past. The person she was with at the time wasn't her husband. She wanted to talk! I wonder if she poured her heart out to Jesus and told him everything—all the dreams, all the mistakes, all the broken promises, all the hurt that led to this point in her life. I wonder if she didn't tell him everything.

Jesus listened with interest by asking questions.

People are starving for someone to show genuine interest in their lives!

In 2019, the American Psychological Association published an article raising the alarm about rising levels of loneliness and social isolation in our society.

Before the pandemic, half of American adults reported that they felt lonely.

The article and others like it include all kinds of horrible lists of impacts from loneliness and isolation; there was an epidemic of anxiety, depression, and all kinds of bad things.

Listen to this from the study: "There is robust evidence that social isolation and loneliness significantly increase risk for premature mortality, and the magnitude of the risk exceeds that of many leading health indicators..."

People are dying for someone to listen!³

To listen with care, give the gift of interest.

Showing interest in another person is as simple as asking good questions.

I love asking questions. I'm a naturally curious person. Asking questions is easy for me.

However, plenty of people have told me that they don't know what questions to ask.

Our Local Outreach Team has created a short list of questions you can ask anytime. Those questions are available on a flyer you can get in person and on our website.

Two of the easiest to ask as, "Tell me your story" and "What are you into?" If you can remember just those two questions, you can begin listening with care by giving the gift of interest.

Get that list of questions. Put it in your wallet or purse if you need to. From that point forward, you will always be ready to give the gift of interest to the people where you live, work, and play.

³ <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/05/ce-corner-isolation>

Let's listen with care by giving the gift of interest.

JESUS LISTENED WITH INTENT

Jesus listened with intent in John 4:19-26:

The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."

Jesus listened with intent by being ready for the conversation to go deeper.

This is where we can see that Jesus had a plan for this conversation.

He opened the door by inviting the woman to talk about her life. Immediately upon feeling heard, she had spiritual questions. Because Jesus heard her, she took her questions to him.

There are lots of things in this passage we could spend our entire time together talking about.

I want you to see that listening created the opportunity for the conversation to go deeper and that Jesus took the conversation to that deeper level.

This led to the deepest part of the conversation. She affirmed that one day the Messiah would make her questions clear. She gave Jesus an opening, and he took it. He said, "I am the Messiah."

Listening with intent leads to opportunities to take conversations to a deeper level.

When we listen to lost people with intent, we hear their pain and start real conversations.

People are hurting!

When we look at our neighbors, it's easy to see their disobedience. They think differently than we do. Consequently, they talk differently and behave differently.

We can be deeply frustrated by the way they think, speak, and act.

However, lost people think, talk, and act like lost people. There's no surprise there.

Underneath all that, though, they are hurting. Disobeying God always leads to pain.

If you listen to a lost person long enough, their pain will come out. Will we listen?

To listen with care, give the gift of intent.

Don't feel a need to keep conversations at a surface level.

When we listen with care, our intent is to allow the conversation to go deeper into areas of pain and spiritual questioning. When we listen with care, our intent is to talk about God, if possible.

To listen with care, allow the conversation to flow to deeper matters. Expect it!

To listen with care, give the gift of intent.

LET'S LISTEN WITH CARE

Let's find good places to listen.

I have always found that the front seat of the car is a good place to listen to my sons. My sons don't enjoy sitting down face to face to have a heart to heart. That's not their nature. I discovered that when my boys turned into teenagers. They stopped talking freely. I knew I needed to keep the conversation with them going, though, so I needed a solution. I tried lots of things, but my most successful strategy was putting the kids in the car, driving somewhere, and letting the conversation develop. Sitting side by side, looking out at the road while there was music on the radio seemed to work. We would start by talking about little things. Then we almost always found a way to bridge to more important things. Some people like to talk while they're doing something else, like working or playing ball. Some people find it easy to talk sitting around a bonfire or over a meal. Where are your places to listen?

Let's come out from behind our fear.

Some of us are afraid of listening because we're afraid of people. Some of us are afraid of listening because we're afraid we won't know what to say. The Holy Spirit helps us to banish those fears so that we can listen with care. The Bible tells us that God the Holy Spirit guides us when we speak and listen for him. In **John 14:26**, Jesus promises us:

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

Listening is accessible for us all. It's something we can all do.

Let's listen to one person this week.

Let's listen to a loved one, a Christian, a neighbor, or even a lost person. Set an appointment with that person, if necessary. Plan five questions you can ask, and make sure you ask at least three. Listen to what they say. Listen with attention, interest, and intent. See where God the Holy Spirit takes that conversation. Listen with Care. It's an important way to BLESS our neighbors.