



*Sanctuary in
Jesus*

Week 4 - Part 2
Less is more:
how to respond

In the last few weeks we have focused exclusively on listening skills, the use of open questions to promote greater understanding and build connection, and finally the importance of pausing before responding, then first responding only with sincere gratitude. If you take one thing from this course, my strong preference would be: learn to say thank you to the person who has shared their objection or view, no matter how hard you found it to hear.

This week we are moving on to responding.

This has been the most difficult guide to write.

Everything up until now is good practise that few people do entirely, so every 1% improvement we make together, is 1% towards better connection. If you get it wrong, you are just doing what the vast majority of the world already does!

Responding doesn't work that way.

Responding is like performing surgery. It's sometimes necessary, we can train a bit, but still, no one starts out doing it well. Practise makes us better, but the consequences of our mistakes can be severe.

This is the space in which we are most likely to break our connection with the speaker, deepen their objection or actively do damage to their view of God, faith, church or religion. Truly understanding THAT should make us pause more than once before speaking.

If you are excited or eager to speak, to teach, to correct, to be right, or to show them how much you know, or even to save them by sheer force of your argument, go back and read that paragraph above again. Sit with the idea that you may be about to do irreparable harm. Your eagerness is yours alone, your emotions are driving you, not connection with the speaker nor the Holy Spirit.

When and only when you reach a place of being humbled by the responsibility, awed by the opportunity to serve God, and wholly present and open for helping one of His beloved children with THEIR concern, then you are ready to step forward.

Please understand, the hardest place to testify into is where we care so much about the outcome that we are unable to set our feelings and vested interest aside and serve the speaker.

If there is a long history of contention between you and the speaker on this or related topics, it is often best that you move straight from expressing sincere gratitude for their sharing, to exiting the conversation positively – we cover how to exit in week 6.

This is not a retreat or defeat or a refusal to step up - these are all ego-centric objections. This is a loving decision to refuse to do harm, that gives you the space to go and privately pray for your loved one, and to handle your emotional reaction positively rather than in a way that you'll have to pick over or regret later. In my experience the change of tactic from arguing to walking away, is sometimes the shock-surprise that drives the speaker to be curious about the change in you.

In discipleship terms this process, of setting aside our emotional reactions to serve the speaker, is an example of dying to self and living for Christ. You are acknowledging your reaction and wishes, giving them into God's care, in order to serve Christ by feeding one of His lost sheep. Each time we find a new part of ourselves that needs to die so we can serve, letting go of it is always deeply uncomfortable at first.

As a personal note, I never begin responding without asking the Holy Spirit to guide me. The hard part is remembering to stay open for any guidance that comes!

Your turn

In your group, discuss what kind of damage could happen when someone receives a bad response. Or discuss how a poor response impacted you.

Imagine a loved one has approached you with a deeply held and painful objection to faith. They have just finished explaining it and you now know more about their aversion than you ever have before.

- 1. As a group, identify all the emotions that are coming up for you. Use the emotion wheel as a prompt.**
- 2. Discuss ways that work for you to be able to release or let go of these emotions. E.g. giving them up to God in prayer, releasing them to the sky or earth, writing them down and closing the book, breathing techniques, self-hug and release.**

N.B. What is not a good answer is the gold old British tradition of suppression, repression, concealing, or boxing them up. Sorry chaps! Research now shows us that these habits or repressing emotions lead to physical illnesses so we will love you by advocating for healthy emotional habits!

The watchman

Once we are prepared to respond, aim to become a watchman.

In the Bible watchman or sentinels are posted on the city walls to announce briefly and truthfully the information that is requested.

Archbishop Stephen Cottrell describes them this way: “The Sentinel is one who has had their eyes opened by God, the one who is able to see and know Jesus intimately, in the breaking open of the Word and in the breaking of the bread. This person is turned around and is called to announce (communicate) this news to others, who in turn, have their eyes opened (by God) too.”

This passage raises several important truths – lets unpack them.

1. The opening of anyone’s eyes is a voluntary process between the person and God. As the listener or mentor of the person, the success or failure or even the timing of this process has nothing to do with us. Bluntly, their relationship with God is none of our business and we should keep our noses out of it unless we are asked for information they need.
2. Our job is to announce or communicate the Word of God (remember that’s Jesus). This could simply mean introducing our speaker to Jesus. Which begs the question – who is Jesus to you? The passage says we should know Jesus intimately, so what are the key facets of your relationship with Jesus?
3. Lastly, the breaking open of the Word and the breaking of the bread both point to the cross. This is the core of the gospel. When asked, we teach Christ crucified: innocent, yet paying the debt for our sins because of His extreme love for us – a love that was full, and true while we were still a hot mess of earthly issues.

Your turn

Discuss in your group:

How closely can you relate to the role of a Watchman?

Are there any parts of the watchman role you find difficult?

Building a response

Core issue

A watchman doesn't waste breath announcing sheep moving on the hillside, instead they only speak on what they have been asked to observe. Likewise, we need to answer the main point the speaker has raised.

However, be sure you are truly in the right area. This requires you to listen to more than the words they've said, you need to understand the emotion that is driving them. Is a question about, "how can God care when childhood cancer exists?", really anger at injustice or a deep fear or grief for a loved one?

Always tread carefully and use open questions to ensure you are indeed answering the core issue not the superficial wrapping.

A useful and powerful strategy is to paraphrase what the speaker has said to you at the start of your response. This helps the speaker know what you've heard and where you're starting with your response.

Most importantly, be as brief as possible in your response. Your answer should make the point, then stop.

Truth

We have a children's story about a watchman that lied: the boy who cried wolf. Watchman only report the truth.

Never say anything you will have to unpick later.

If you do prevaricate, in the best case scenario you will be causing your speaker two lots of work – thinking over your first answer, then having to redo that work when they eventually discover the truth. More likely, the lie will break trust and cause damage when discovered.

We may fear how some parts of our response will be received. This can raise up a multitude of reactions in us – the desire to protect the speaker or ourselves, the need to please them, or a wish to avoid contention. All of these are our emotions to handle and may indicate we need to go back round the process of releasing and returning to our servant mindset.

Often saying an uncomfortable truth kindly and sensitively is more respected than hedging, avoiding, or lying.

Phrases that can help here are: “I realise this is going to sound hard...” or “These topics often need chewing over but if you’re ok with it, I’ll do my best to lay it out as I understand it.”

Lastly, a watchman is better off saying they don’t know or can’t see than guessing and causing a stir only to sound the all-clear. In our terms, it is always better to acknowledge what you don’t know and state what you do than get in a muddle speculating.

For instance: When asked what happens to someone’s cat when they die, it is ok to acknowledge we don’t know like this: “I can see you loved your cat very much. There are a lot of different ideas on whether pets go to heaven, but truthfully, I don’t know what happens. What I do know is that God loves each of us as much as you love your cat, perhaps even more! We are also told that those who believe in Christ get to be with Him in heaven, and we’re told once we are there, we will find out these things.”

Your turn

In your group take turns to raise an objection (either one from your group or one from the suggested list below) and have another member practise paraphrasing and giving a brief answer to the objection raised. Feedback to the person practising responding.

Particularly note:

- 1. Any negative emotions or barriers the response generates**
- 2. How well did the listener answer the core issue**
- 3. How calm and regulated was the listener.**

Suggested topics

- **I don't understand how humans go to heaven but pets don't...**
- **The promise of heaven isn't enough, what about the suffering I'm experiencing now...**
- **How can you believe God loves us when...**
- **Why should someone who converted on their death bed get to go to heaven the same as me when I've followed Christ all my life...**
- **I find church services boring, why do you bother with all of that?**
- **You always mention the Bible, it was written 2,000 years ago by men, how can it possibly have anything to say to me today?**

What happens next

A watchman is not responsible for the response from the city. A watchman does not leave the wall unattended. They may communicate again if the situation arises but once that message is sent, how the people respond is on them.

The same is true here.

We cannot do the processing or learning or change of heart for our speaker. No true faith comes from forced conversion. God wants wholehearted volunteers not those flogged into submission or somehow guilted, shamed or attending through duty. He earnestly wants a freely consenting relationship.

So once our message is delivered, the next step is up to the speaker.

That doesn't mean we abandon them – the watchman stays present and, on the wall, ready to respond again. We continue to love and support our speaker. Our lives become the second testimony, our humble ability to make mistakes and quickly acknowledge them and apologise, our ability to love and care without agenda or expectation.

A true change of heart can take months or years. We are unlikely to be the only watchman on duty during that time, but each input is important and useful.

Last thought – practice makes perfect or at least better!

No one is born knowing how to actively listen, regulate our emotions, or respond well in challenging situations. These are all learnt skills that require practise.

The truth is, the first few real attempts will often leave us wincing and wishing we had handled it differently.

May I invite you to approach every opportunity to respond as God providing you with an opportunity to practise.

Give it a go, do your best and reflect.

Over time some objections do come up again and each time you will be a little more experienced in your technique, and a little more sure on the path.

If it goes wrong, humility, good humour, love, and a ready acknowledgement or even apology where something has come out very wrong, go a long way in repairing damage.

Always remember to pray. Pray before, pray afterwards, and listen out for the Holy Spirit guiding you during. This is God's process, not ours, we're just here to do our best.