

HONORING A PERSON'S STORY AS HOLY

2 Corinthians 3:2-3

You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

As followers of Jesus, the story of our life is like a letter written from Jesus by the Holy Spirit on the hearts of the people who shaped and formed us. By sharing our story with other people who the Spirit is using to influence us in our growth as followers of Jesus, we allow him to continue to write that story on the hearts of more and more people.

The moment when we get to hear another person's story is a holy moment because the story is about Jesus and his work of grace in their life. It's also an honor because the person is stepping out in faith and vulnerability, entrusting the group with personal information that is to be held in confidence. In fact, sharing our story is like a metaphorical disrobing in the middle of a room full of people. Learning how to respond to a person as they share their story is like re-clothing them with dignity after they have taken this relational risk, and thus, is a vital practice for a community centered around the gospel.

The following principles offer helpful guidance in responding in a way that honors the person, their story, and the Author of all of our stories.

BEFORE THEY SHARE

- Before they share, instruct the group that hearing another person's story is an honor because the person is trusting us with intimate information about what they have experienced-the suffering and the joy-and what God has done in their life. Inform them that it is a holy moment since the story is ultimately about Jesus and his saving work in the person's life.
- Also, remind the group that what the person is about to share in to be held in confidence within the group. Building trust within the group is dependent upon each member refusing to fall into the sin of gossip.
- Invite the group to prepare to respond to the person's story at its conclusion. Healthy responses, which serve as a "re-clothing" of the person, will acknowledge both suffering and grace, and will model sympathy and compassion, engaging at an emotional level by "entering in" to the person's joy and pain.
- Give the group a few examples of what a healthy response might sound like: "Hearing that scene of abuse in your story made me so sad"; "It's so clear that you are broken over your sin"; "I loved when God showed up and made himself known to you!" Or address bigger themes, as well: "I loved hearing how God so faithfully pursued you!" "Abandonment came up over and over. That is so heartbreaking."
- Finally, inform the group that the response time is typically not a time to ask lots of follow up questions or to offer advice. Also, group members should be especially aware of the importance of not hijacking the response time by turning the focus to them and their story ("that reminds me of a time in my life when...").

AS THEY SHARE

- As the person is sharing, pay close attention. Look them in the eye.
- Remove the distraction of technology.
- Give appropriate non-verbal cues that demonstrate attentiveness. Avoid distracting verbal cues (“oh, yeah”; “wow”; “uh huh”).

AFTER THEY SHARE

- When they are finished telling their story, thank them for the honor of hearing it, and for trusting the group enough to share it.
- Lead the time of response by sharing a reflection or two on the person’s story.
- Be prepared to redirect people back to healthy responses if they begin to wander into telling their own story or offering advice.

GOSPEL REMINDERS

- In order to grow in our ability to speak the gospel to one another as a community, it can be helpful to ask this one follow up question: “What truth about the gospel do you need to be reminded of most often?”

PRAYER

- End by praying specifically for the person. Through prayer, address elements of their story. Pray relevant truths of scripture over them, encouraging them and entrusting them to Jesus’ ongoing care and shepherding in their life.
- Also, ask Jesus to protect the person from spiritual attack. After a person brings their story into the light, it’s not uncommon for them to experience attack from Satan and his demons. It can sound like doubt, shame, condemnation, fear, etc. Pray specifically for their protection.