Mistakes We Make with Grieving People

by EDWARD T. WELCH

What is your present wisdom on how to care well for those who grieve? I ask this question because most of us truly desire to bless, comfort, and encourage those who are suffering. But, too often, we hurt them with our foolish and blundering words. When grieving people most need words that encourage, we can be at our most inept. All this dulls our display of the "God of all comfort" (2 Cor 1:3). So I will offer some thoughts on this topic, but they are surely not all there is to know, and certainly include much you already do know. Think of this as a group project—a Wikipedia-like article—directed to the church that stimulates your thinking and contributions. As you read, imagine yourself as a participant rather than a mere reader-student so you can bless those near you when grief and suffering strike.

Ask *anyone* about their experience with comforters in times of trouble and they will have a story. I asked my wife, who responded quicker than I expected. Her first thought was a comment from years ago. She was surprised she remembered it. While speaking with a family member

Edward Welch (MDiv, PhD) serves on the faculty and counsels at CCEF. He is the author of numerous books, the most recent of which is titled A Small Book about Why We Hide.

about how hard it had been for her not to be able to have another child, the other person responded, "At least you have two children." Most of us have stories like hers—and so the goal for us is this: to grow in compassion, humility, and skill, especially as we speak with those who live with a deep or persistent hardship.

You can easily find hundreds of lists of what *to* say and what *not* to say to grieving people. I will identify some of the common features of these lists, but we need more than that. Scripture takes us beyond lists. It reveals our hearts, which produce unintentional, though foolish, comments. It also reforms our hearts so that we can invent dozens of ways to bless the grieving and offer care that is shaped by *compassion* and *humility*.

Care Shaped by Compassion

When one of my daughters was three years old, our extended family gathered for a large reunion. At some point my daughter had a mishap that ended in tears, and she was on the lookout for someone to comfort her. As she walked through a room of adults, Uncle John rescued her. He picked her up and said, "Sweetie, I am so sorry. Is there anything I can do to help?" Compassion, of course, makes a difference. It only took one mishap for Uncle John to become her go-to person for all things tragic. He loved her, she loved him back, and I loved him for loving her.

Compassion means that the other person's hardships affect you, no matter how transient those hardships might be. Such a response takes you into the very heart of God. He chooses compassion as the lead in his self-identification. "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God" (Ex 34:6). And seeing the hard future ahead for his wayward people he says: "My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused" (Hos 11:8). Jesus felt compassion for the crowds that followed him because they were "like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34). And when he told the story of the prodigal son, he makes it clear that the Father's compassion is the center of it all. As he saw his son approaching, the Father "felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20).

You will find the compassion of Jesus in his role as your high priest.[1] Here the divine and human meet in the One who experienced the worst of human misery and truly understands yours. His priesthood changes everything. "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15).

Here, then, are some of the ways to follow your Savior and allow compassion to shape your care for the grieving.

Receive compassion. To offer compassion, we start by receiving it. Helping skills are built upon truly knowing the compassion of your high priest toward you. As a way to assess yourself, try this simple test: Do you cry out to the Lord when your troubles accumulate? We naturally seek out another compassionate person when life is especially hard. If we don't have such a person, our troubles might be expressed to an unsuspecting neighbor or even the supermarket cashier. But do you draw near to Christ? The writer of Hebrews invites you to do so. "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4:16). When you speak of your suffering to Jesus, you will notice two natural consequences. You will respond with compassion to others, and you will invite a grieving friend into the compassion of your high priest. So enter into the compassion of Christ, and pray that you would know it more. Talk about it with friends.

> Ask *anyone* about their experience with comforters in times of trouble and they will have a story.

Still, growth in compassion will be different for different people. Some people feel things more viscerally, some less. No matter how intense or flat your emotions might run, compassion is a gift from God. It leads you to respond to a person's grief as a burden to be shared.

Say something. Your helpful words to other people begin here. When your compassion is aroused, say something. When someone you know

---

1. For more on this topic, see Edward T. Welch, "The Priority of the Priesthood for Human Identity," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 32:2 (2018): 8–23.

has lost a family member, move toward that person with love and say *something*. What happened is too important for you to remain silent. Suffering naturally isolates, and our silence isolates even more. But compassionate words draw sufferers into fellowship.

Compassion pursues and speaks. Words, however, can be elusive when the suffering of another person is overwhelming. If you foresee that your words could fall flat, you might default back toward silence and be tempted to say nothing. This, however, is not okay in God's house. We are building a house together where many good words are spoken. The day begins with "The LORD bless you…" (Num 6:24–27), and it ends with the same words. Between those benedictions are more personal blessings that suit specific situations. There are invitations galore. God invites us to speak about painful matters and to speak about him. Likewise, you invite those around you to do the same. The kingdom of God is far from silent, so we commit ourselves to finding good words.

Do you share in the person's sorrow in some small way? Speak honest and simple words, "You have been on my heart. I am so sorry for your loss." If not these words, pray and consider what words are on your heart to say. Ask trustworthy people if they are appropriate. But *say something.* Avoid questions at first. "How are you?" is a very good question *before* the onset of grief, but usually a thoughtless one in the midst of it. But say something, write something, or send a card that says something.

Don't start sentences with "At least…". If poorly chosen, your initial words can lead to short conversations. In these conversations, compassion deletes every utterance of the words "at least."

"At least you still have your health."

"At least no one else died."

"At least she is with the Lord."

"At least her suffering is over."

It's as if we expect a grieving person to say: "Thank you, I never thought of that, I feel better now." Or are we enforcing the rule of thankfulness "in all things" in a less-than-subtle manner?[2] There is no version of "at least" in God's house. It suggests that God divvies out his compassion

2. A false but common assumption (based on Ephesians 5:20) that Christians are to be thankful in *all* things. More on this later in the article.

according to some predetermined scale that identifies some sufferings as deserving of less compassion than others. In this scheme, God reserves his limited store of compassion for only the worthiest candidates, and this bereaved person is not among them. That is a pernicious lie.

Any attempt to minimize suffering opposes the character of God. Its dangerous ways are revealed in how the grieving person no longer feels justified to pour out their heart to the Lord. Jesus counters these lies as our sympathetic high priest, and he invites us to come to him with everything that is important to us. So "let us then with confidence draw near." God forbid that we would lessen someone's confidence or direct someone away from coming to him.

Avoid stories about you. Our everyday conversations often begin with someone telling a story from the day, and then the other person shares a similar story, which might one-up the preceding story.

> "Working from home has become more difficult. There are more distractions, more noise, more interruptions. Today I left a meeting to answer a knock on the door, which turned out to be a person selling replacement windows."
>
> "Yeah, I know what you mean. You wouldn't believe what happened to me today…"

If in our attempts to offer some understanding or solidarity to a grieving person, we do something like this, it deflects the conversation to losses *we* have experienced. This might be well-intended, but it is, at least, ineffective. It is not the way of compassion.

Follow the hurting person's lead. Compassion places the interests of the other person on your heart. This means you give them room to talk, and you listen for what is most important to them. You try to understand the path they are walking.

A mother lost her adult son in a car accident. In her grief, she tells stories about him. To follow her lead, you listen. Listen for the reflected beauty of God in her son, whether the deceased son was a follower of Jesus or not. Listen for what is good and human in the best sense—the son's interests, kindness, gentleness, and love. Value his achievements. And when you are moved by what you hear, you might say something

like: "That is a beautiful story. Thank you for letting me know him a little better." Then, if you knew the son, you could share a story of your own.

Follow what is on the grieving person's heart. That is the way of compassion. If you don't know what is of most concern, ask a question.

"Where has your mind been going as you have had to live with such grief?"

"Could you say a little bit about how your nights have been?"

"Could you give me one thing to pray for?"

Such questions might permit you access to the person's deeper griefs.

One of the challenges we face in caring for others is that we want to say something helpful. But if we are preoccupied with what to say next, we miss the simplicity of compassion. Asking good questions helps you keep the focus in the right place.

Compassion pursues and speaks.

Take initiative. Compassion listens, yet compassion is also active. It takes initiative and acts on behalf of others. It texts, calls, sends cards, meets for coffee, and creatively considers ways to serve and help. With this feature of compassion in mind, we understand why it is unhelpful to say, "Please, if you need anything, call me." They won't call. Your words may be heartfelt but it puts the onus on the grieving person, instead of you.

Here is a good example of taking initiative. Reflecting on a hard bout with cancer, a man surveyed the many days when he could barely move because he was weakened by the treatments. He was well-known and well-loved. People took initiative in many ways, but one stood out. As he remembered one particular person, he began to cry. A neighbor would bring over his mower and cut the grass so well that it looked as though it was done by a professional landscaper. It was simple compassion that wanted to *do something*, and it became a gift that was never forgotten.

Here are some others.

"What do you need? I can bring dinner over tomorrow."

"Would it help if I walked the dog?"

"How about if I pick up your kids and take them to the park?"

"Would it be more helpful if I stayed with the kids tomorrow afternoon or brought you a meal?"

Ask around. Talk to the grieving person's friends and join together in a way to serve.

Remember. Compassion means the other person is etched on your heart, which means that you remember them.

After a loss, especially if a loved one died, the grieving person experiences a flurry of concern that extends a few days beyond the funeral, but then disappears. As other people get back to their routines, the grieving person has just begun to feel the fuller weight of loss and isolation. Those with compassion, however, remember.

> "I wanted to let you know that I was thinking of you and prayed for you this morning. I prayed for you because I know that this is the anniversary of your wife's death, and I am still so sorry for your loss."

When someone experiences grief, they will notice two constants. (1) Grief persists much longer than expected. Later it can be accompanied by pleasures and the matters of daily life, but grief persists. (2) Those who mourn are blessed by simple and small acts of compassion: being remembered at anniversaries and holidays, or being asked if a particular illustration during the sermon was hard to hear. Such small words and actions are received by a weary soul as inklings of life.

The skill you bring to your pastoral care depends on compassion as your starting point.

Care Shaped by Humility

Humility is compassion's partner. Humility requires that we serve those who grieve, eager to know what would bless them rather than unilaterally deciding what they need. It means you accept that your comforting skills are inadequate, that you don't always know what is helpful to say or do, and you can't fully understand another person's pain. But you *are* confident in these truths.

- Jesus hears you because he has forgiven sins once and for all and nothing separates you from him.
- You need to learn and grow.
- The Spirit will help you.

Look to Jesus to discover more details about humility. Watch him and see that humility means we come to serve. The image of Jesus etched

on our minds is when he took on the role of a servant by washing the disciples' feet (John 13). He, our King and Savior, bowed down to serve others. Then listen to his words. He is our high priest whose words "deal gently" with us (Heb 5:2). He identifies himself as "gentle and lowly" (Matt 11:29). Paul imitated this gentleness, which he described as the way a nursing mother cares for her young child (1 Thess 2:7). Gentleness is humility's tone. In Jesus, it is expressed through his words that heal and are inevitably kinder than what you expect.

> Look to Jesus. Watch him and see that humility means we come to serve.

Humility opens a world of possibilities. You can ask close friends of the hurting person what might be helpful to say or do. You can read Nancy Guthrie's book, *What Grieving People Wish You Knew about What Really Helps (and What Really Hurts)*.[3] Most importantly, humility takes you to prayer—prayer for *yourself*. "Lord, teach me. Help me. Teach me to love and to say words that build up." By the time you pray with the suffering person, perhaps your own neediness coupled with confident prayer will become a tradition.

Here, then, are some specific ways to be a humble, Spirit-led servant to the hurting.

Pray for them. "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace." When we love a grieving person, we know that there are limits to what we can do. We do not have the power to remove the grief, and even love and compassion will not always break through. So, we pray for grieving friends. Prayer acknowledges that only God can reach a grieving heart.

For grieving friends who have put their trust in Jesus, ask them: "What is one way I can pray?" And for people who have not yet trusted in Jesus, you can still offer to pray. Even those decidedly uninterested in God are generally grateful to be prayed for when their world falls apart. You could bring it up this way: "I wonder if I could ask a question? You

---

3. Nancy Guthrie, *What Grieving People Wish You Knew about What Really Helps (and What Really Hurts),* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

have been on my heart and I have been praying for you. Is there anything, in particular, I could pray for?"

If the person is open to the idea but nothing comes to mind, you can pray for:

- God's comfort
- his power to help them make it through the next hour
- a reason to keep going
- an ability to love other family members
- anything that could be seen as a gift or blessing from him

Then pray. Pray for the person who stands in front of you. Pray at that moment. Many of us have never prayed aloud for another person outside of designated prayer times. But praying when face-to-face is a more personal way to bless those we love.

Accept that you don't fully understand. Humility does not pretend to know what lies within the grieving person. Even if you have gone through a very similar event, each person's grief is unlike any other. "Each heart knows its own bitterness" (Prov 14:10). Overconfidence in your knowledge of the person will only lead to further pain for them. Though we *want* to understand, we cannot honestly say, "I understand." We need to listen to them and hear the cries of their heart, only then do we even begin to understand.

Hold your advice. An expert does not have to spend much time listening because they already know what other people need. When you give advice to a grieving person, you take on the role of expert. Experts may have reasonable intent—they want to relieve some of the burden of suffering—but they are self-confident, and they are wrong on at least two counts. First, experts actually think they can relieve grief. Second, they distance themselves from the grieving person as they assume the role of teacher, making the grieving person their student.

Advice is "this is what I think would help (and I know you need it)." Green tea, a daily jog, a vitamin supplement, a move to another house, a vacation, a pet. These are not necessarily bad ideas, but they leap over humility and never ask, "What have *you* found helpful and important?"

Offer biblical instruction (and admonition) very carefully. Humility extends to how we use Scripture, too. Who could argue with giving

Scripture to a grieving person? Yet it can be susceptible to the same problems as giving advice. When Scripture is offered without compassion, and with self-confidence that you know what the grieving person needs to hear, it hurts.

Unhelpful instruction might begin with a question. These questions are not actual readings from Scripture, but you could easily find proof texts for them.

- "Have you been able to thank and praise God through this?" (The grieving person hears: "You should. Maybe that is the real problem.")
- "What is God trying to teach you through this?" (The grieving person hears: "Maybe your problem has to do with sin. The sooner you see it and repent, the quicker you will get through your grief.")

These, of course, are leading questions and add insult to injury. They suggest that the grieving person is spiritually lacking and not in sync with the Spirit. These implicit admonitions put new burdens on the hurting person, and unless you realize it and ask for forgiveness, your relationship will be damaged.

As we build our wisdom in pastoral care, we need to remember that being theologically correct is not enough. "Right" words have been spoken by Pharisees, Job's comforters, and demons. Compassion doesn't settle for being right. Compassion asks: Do my questions satisfy the law of love? Humility adds: Are you willing to solicit the wisdom of others? Is it wise and helpful to ask these questions at this time? We need to also remember that a proof text is best understood in consultation with the rest of Scripture. A common example of this is Proverbs 26:4, "Answer *not* a fool according to his folly." Then the next verse adds, "*Answer* a fool according to his folly." A single verse does not necessarily speak to everyone's situation. Life and pastoral care are complicated and resist predictable answers.

Let's return to why the two questions listed earlier are inappropriate.

First, Scripture does say we are to give "thanks always and for everything" (Eph 5:20). Praise and thanks are, indeed, to flow from the heart of God's children. We are thankful to God, who in Jesus Christ fully revealed his love and faithfulness to unfaithful people. We are also

thankful for the many expressions of life that flow from his continued presence with us and in this world. This extends to provisions for daily life and the beauty of creation. But there are things we are *not* called to be thankful for: sin, Satan, death, violence, victimization, and other forms of injustice. Following our Father's lead, we make judgments and rightly decide that some things are decidedly *not* good and giving thanks for them would be ungodly.

Scripture also says, "there is a time for every matter under heaven" (Eccl 3:1). Times of mourning are not when we encourage someone to look on the bright side and give thanks and praise to God. Indeed, Proverbs argues the opposite: "Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day" (Prov 25:20). Grief is a time to lament with the sufferer, and the psalms of lament can guide us.[4] These psalms mark times when we pour out our heart to the Lord, as this writer did when he described the grief of Jewish exiles.

> Compassion asks: Do my questions satisfy the law of love? Humility adds: Are you willing to solicit the wisdom of others?

> By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" (Ps 137:1–3)

Mourning is the order of the day in these psalms, not thanksgiving. And this mourning is consonant with the will of God. It reflects his own heart as he too waits for the day when mourning will end for his people.

The second inappropriate question—"What is God trying to teach you?"—is a refrain taken from Job's comforters. It makes a connection between someone's specific sin and suffering. It assumes that there is something amiss to which the person is blind, and God needs to bring out the big guns so that they will get the message. But Job's friends were wrong about the reason for Job's suffering and God rebuked them for it

4. For example, Mark Vroegop's book *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy: Discovering the Grace of Lament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019).

(Job 42:7–8). And the New Testament goes on to suggest a very different reason for suffering. God typically brings his people on the *via dolorosa*, making suffering an element of our union with Christ and participation in his life and death (Phil 1:29). And yes, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Rom 8:28), but a person's suffering is not a riddle to be solved so we can discern the specifics of God's sovereign will.

Of course, it is not contrary to humility to bring Scripture to a person who grieves. Scripture, after all, is the very word of life to our souls. Instead, humility asks the grieving person.

"Do you have a favorite Scripture?"

"Has there been any passage that has strengthened you?"

"Is there a particular Scripture that we could read together?"

"Could I read a verse to you that I read this morning and it helped my heart?"

Questions like these enter through the portals of compassion and humility. When you bring Scripture in this way, you could paraphrase Augustine: Love God, proceed with love and humility, and read whatever Scripture you please.

Here is an example.

A woman was sitting in the hospital room of a dear friend whose death seemed close. She asked her friend, "Do you believe that to die is gain?" She was echoing the apostle Paul's words, "For me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21). That question was at the crossroads of implicit accusation and humility with compassion. One path says, "no, you probably don't believe this right now," the other says, "the words of Paul are so important, let's consider them together." At that moment, in which humble love and compassion were standard fare in the relationship, the hospitalized woman never detected a hint of accusation. She heard words from her friend that fixed her on spiritual reality and invited a response that kept her occupied for the next day, after which she responded with a smile, "Yes, I do believe that." The words from her friend were perfect.

Don't start a sentence with "Just...". Another common variation on inept biblical instruction is the use of the word "just."

"Just pray."

"Just read your Bible."

"Just believe."

"Just" expresses neither compassion nor humility. Compassion listens to what is on the other person's heart; "just" casually tosses out generic bromides. Humility recognizes that suffering is complex in its causes and course; "just" has the answer and knew it before the grieving person spoke a word. Humility also knows that other people have wisdom from which we can learn. "Just" assumes that the other person has somehow forgotten that prayer is a good thing and you need to remind them, or the other person is a child who has not quite learned the rudiments of a godly life. Humility will never demean others.

When the word "just" is spoken, the expert consultant has finished the job. A simplistic explanation for a complex problem. Nothing is left to say. People's needs are ignored. Though this might be marginally acceptable with a cheap consultant, it is not what we expect in God's house. Here, God speaks and invites us to respond. We speak from our hearts; he listens and responds. Back and forth. Life with God is participatory and talkative. Though he might speak a word so powerful that it arrests us and causes us to reflect on his words, at some point he anticipates that we will speak to him about those reflections. In human relationships, we follow this pattern whenever we can.

Be cautious with theological questions. Over time, you might hear questions like this from the grieving person: "Why did God do this? Why is he silent?"

These words seem to be specifically answered in Scripture. For example, a person says, "This is more than I can bear." Scripture responds, "He will…provide…that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor 10:13). Wise care seems obvious. The person asked a direct question and you give a direct answer.

Still, as a general rule, *don't* answer theological questions until you understand more about the question. Some comments are burdens to be shared; the person is not asking for an answer. Actually, most theological questions are personal questions in disguise.

"Can people who commit suicide go to heaven?"

The obvious response is, "Tell me more about why you are thinking about suicide?" The person might be thinking about a friend, in which the real matter is how to help. Or the question is even more personal. The person asking is thinking about suicide.

The questions that chronic sufferers have about God are often personal. They feel abandoned and punished. Their words are cries from their heart, and their questions are rhetorical. To launch into an answer is to violate compassion that desires to know the person, and it violates humility if you think you actually have the answer before even understanding the person's true concern.

> Most theological questions are personal questions in disguise.

Humility could lead you in this way. "Please tell me more." And, "Have you been able to speak these questions to the Lord?"

Pray with them. Humility prays. Grief and loss are meant to be spoken to God. At first, you might pray on behalf of the other person. That is the honor called intercessory prayer. You pray what the other person has spoken to you. You gather in a promise of God, such as how he "comforts us in all our affliction" (2 Cor 1:4). Where else can you turn? Then you ask if the grieving person would pray together with you. While grieving, this, of course, is much more difficult than it seems. We can speak *about* God easier than we speak *to* him. If speaking to the Lord has been hard for them, invite them to speak to God with you. Praying together with those who grieve may be the most important means of care you can offer. It is God's desire for us to come to him in this way.

> Pour out your hearts to him. (Ps 62:8)
>
> The LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save,
> or his ear dull, that it cannot hear. (Isa 59:1)
>
> He who planted the ear, does he not hear? (Ps 94:9)

God invites us to ask him the hard and painful questions on our hearts: Why God? Why have you forsaken me (Ps 22)? Why do you stand far away (Ps 10)? He hears our cries and is our only true refuge.

We know we are on the right path when, together, we speak to the Lord. With practice, we can come to him, with confidence, even

boldness. "O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!" (Ps 130:2).

Learners for Life

How have you learned to care well for others? What might you add to these lists? We want to learn from each other, and keep learning.

One of the pleasures of life in Christ is that the more we grow in wisdom and care for others, the more we desire to grow. There will never come a time when we think we have mastered compassion and humility and can move on to the next topic. As learners, we will still toss out platitudes like "God is in control," but maybe this time we will be convicted and apologize. Maybe we will read the last four chapters of the book of Job as a refresher for our own hearts. Perhaps we will beseech the Lord to teach us how to love deeply. Or perhaps, we will keep adding to our lists of what to say and what not to say, and look to learn from people who know just how to help (like the lawn mower man) or speak apt words, at just the right time.

Imagine a church—and a group of friends, and a family—that cares for suffering and grieving people in a way that builds up and brings together, in a way that the compassion, gentleness, and humility of Jesus are on display.

The Journal of Biblical Counseling

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

www.ccef.org