



Has anyone other than me ever said the wrong thing? Of course you have, because we all have said the wrong thing at some point in life. As someone who has delivered thousands of sermons, hundreds of funerals, and numerous other public remarks, I have said the wrong thing on more than one occasion. In fact, I could probably write a book about the unfortunate things I have said. There's no good time to say the wrong thing, but I think it is very safe to say that when you are officiating a funeral is arguably the worst time to say the wrong thing. I once officiated a funeral for a really unique, funny, somewhat eccentric lady. In the course of my remarks I said *she was quite a character*, which was true, and everyone knew it was true. But then, without meaning to, I blurted out *she was a real character, and in this family that's really saying something*. I don't know why I said that, and I was horrified to have uttered such a remark, especially in a funeral, but to this day I am grateful that the family laughed and agreed with me! Sometimes we say the wrong thing because we've turned off the filter in our brain, sometimes we say the wrong thing because we don't know better, but sometimes we just inexplicably say the wrong thing. And sometimes when we say the wrong thing it works out, thankfully to be funny. But at other times, saying the wrong thing can be very hurtful.

As we continue our study of the book of Job, this week we consider *Being A Friend to Those Who Suffer*. Two weeks ago we began our study of Job by examining the first twelve verses of the book. In that brief section Job's life turns from blessed to tragic. Most of the remainder of the book consists of the conversation between Job and his three friends – Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. Reading through the book of Job we find these three men were not very compassionate friends, and not only were they lacking in compassion, they were accusatory to Job, so much so that I think it might be more appropriate to change their names to Larry, Curly, and Moe.

Follow along as I read the speech of one of Job's three friends. This is Eliphaz speaking, and after this portion of his speech, I'll read several verses of Job's response –

Job 22:2-11; 19:25-27 –

**2** *“Can a man be of benefit to God? Can even a wise person benefit him?”*

**3** *What pleasure would it give the Almighty if you were righteous? What would he gain if your ways were blameless?*

4 *“Is it for your piety that he rebukes you and brings charges against you?*  
 5 *Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless?*  
 6 *You demanded security from your relatives for no reason; you stripped people of their clothing,*  
*leaving them naked.*  
 7 *You gave no water to the weary and you withheld food from the hungry,*  
 8 *though you were a powerful man, owning land—an honored man, living on it.*  
 9 *And you sent widows away empty-handed and broke the strength of the fatherless.*  
 10 *That is why snares are all around you, why sudden peril terrifies you,*  
 11 *why it is so dark you cannot see, and why a flood of water covers you.*

25 *I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth.*  
 26 *And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God;*  
 27 *I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!*

There’s nothing like having friends, is there? Friends are wonderful. Who doesn’t want a lot of friends? But sometimes, as friends, we don’t know what to say or what to do when someone is struggling. Even though I have officiated at hundreds of funerals I still find myself thinking *what am I going to say? What do you say? I’m sorry for your loss? I’m thinking of you and praying for you.* And then what? Then it can get awkward, and as we struggle for something to say that becomes the moment when it is easy say the wrong thing.

Job’s friends come to him, I assume, with the intent to comfort him, but they were anything but helpful. In chapter after chapter we follow the story like a debate – one by one, each of the friends brings an accusation to Job and then Job responds. This pattern continues for three cycles and after reading through the entire conversation it’s easy to think that what Job really needed was some new friends.

There is absolutely no evidence that Job was guilty of any of the things that Eliphaz accused him of doing. Poor Eliphaz is trying to come up with an answer as to why Job was suffering and the only way he could make sense of Job’s situation was to believe that Job must be at fault. Sometimes we’re not any different from Eliphaz. We want to assign blame where there is no blame. We want to know there is a reason for suffering, and we are very uncomfortable with the idea that there may not really be an answer.

This morning I have four words of advice to offer, based on Job’s experience with his three friends.

### 1. *Learn to listen.*

One of the things I don’t like about modern communication is that it allows us to believe we can multitask while communicating, which makes us poor listeners. A lot of people have video apps on their phones, such as Skype or FaceTime, but never use them, and do you know why? Because you don’t want the other person to know what you’re doing while on the phone, do you? You don’t want them to see that you have the phone cradled to your shoulder while you are paying your bills or watching TV with the sound turned down and the close captioning turned on. And while we’re not paying attention we suddenly notice the other person has grown quiet and it occurs to us that we are supposed to respond, except we don’t know how to respond because we weren’t listening. Did they ask a question or simply finish a sentence and are awaiting our reply? So we drop our phone, pick it up and say *I’m sorry, I dropped my phone. What did you say?* So not only are we poor listeners, we also struggle with being honest! (Mind you, I’ve only heard of people doing this. I haven’t, of course, actually done it myself).

The thing is, many times we don’t actively listen. We all could benefit from something I heard years ago – *there’s a reason God gave us two ears and one mouth; he wants us to listen twice as much as we*

*speaks*. We need to listen because there are many people who need someone to listen. Maybe you are one of them, and in this loud, busy world, where everyone is moving so quickly, you arrive at the point where you are ready to throw up your hands and shout *listen to me! Someone, please, listen to me!* We wonder at times why people do or say things that seem strange to us, but they often are attempts to get our attention, in an effort to try and find someone who will listen.

One of the failures of Job's friends was that they weren't really listening to him. They were so busy listening to themselves and tossing accusations at Job that they could not – or would not – hear what Job had to say about his innocence. There is a time to talk to a person who is suffering and there is a time to be still and listen. Ironically, the two most unhelpful classes I had in seminary were preaching and counseling. I will leave it to you to draw whatever conclusions you want from that comment, but suffice it to say that I could have used some help learning how to do the two things received most of my attention. I have had to learn from experience how to put together a sermon and how to present it, and I've had to learn from experience how to counsel with people. What I have learned about counseling is that most people simply want someone to listen to them. I'm always surprised at how often, when people come to talk to me, they say *wow, I feel so much better. Thanks for the help.* And I haven't said anything! It's simply that people need to be heard. I was riding with someone years ago and he told me about seeing a counselor, and the counselor was charging \$125 an hour. This was in the early 80s, so that was a lot of money to pay a counselor. I remarked that *I hope you're getting some really good advice for that kind of money*, and he said *oh, she doesn't say anything. I'm willing to pay that much money just to have someone who will listen to me.*

Listen again to some of the accusations made against Job – 4 *“Is it for your piety that he rebukes you and brings charges against you?*

5 *Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless?*

6 *You demanded security from your relatives for no reason; you stripped people of their clothing, leaving them naked.*

7 *You gave no water to the weary and you withheld food from the hungry,*

8 *though you were a powerful man, owning land—an honored man, living on it.*

9 *And you sent widows away empty-handed and broke the strength of the fatherless.*

Wow. If all that is true, perhaps Job should have been renamed Snidely Whiplash. But it wasn't true. These were accusations Job's friends were simply making up! Remember what God says of Job in chapter 1? Listen to the way in which God speaks of Job in that chapter – 8 *Then the Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.”*

I think it's obvious that if Job had done any of what his friends had accused him of doing, God would have taken note and not called him *blameless and upright*. The bottom line is that Job's friends did far too much talking. Someone needed to say to them, *just stop talking guys!* Instead of debating with Job they should have been quiet and listened to him. Their words were certainly not helpful to Job, but a kind and compassionate ear would have been of great help to him.

Listen. Listen. Listen. And then listen some more.

## 2. *Offer compassion, not judgment.*

Job's friends did one thing right – they came to see him. And they might have even brought casseroles, although in my opinion that would only add to his suffering. If you come to see me in my time of suffering, please don't bring me a casserole. I would prefer a salted caramel truffle blizzard from Dairy Queen.

Job's friends were trapped in the theology of the time, which was a reward/punishment view of God. Surely he would not suffer unless he had committed some grave offense against God. But Job protests that he is innocent and has done nothing against God. His friends, though, will have nothing of it, and

continue to push Job to admit to his offenses. At first, Job's friends are somewhat gentle in their accusations, but as Job continues to protest his innocence his friends grow more accusatory and sharper in what they have to say, claiming he is too prideful and even saying that God had punished him more lightly than he deserved – now there's an encouraging word from a supposed friend!

There are certainly times when we say the wrong thing, but Job's friends did not misspeak. They didn't stumble on their words. They said exactly what they believed, and in doing so, Job's friends actually rub salt into his wounds by blaming him for his condition. Job's friends instinctively responded to his suffering by blaming him for his situation. Because the theology of the time was a system of rewards and punishments, in their mind Job got exactly what he deserved. If a person was righteous, God rewarded him with a blessed life; if he was sinful, he was punished according to the severity of his deeds. Because Job was suffering in such a severe manner, the conclusion of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar was that Job must have committed a very grievous sin. But Job had done nothing wrong. He continues through the entire book to protest his innocence, and he is disappointed by the accusations of his friends. And, in an especially tragic turn, Job's friends eventually make up stuff in order to accuse him more severely. There is a good deal of sadness in reading through the story of Job and listening to the accusations against this good man. He was suffering through no fault of his own, and when he needed the love and support of his friends he instead received condemnation and judgment.

It is important to remember that sometimes people do suffer because of their own actions, but not always. In this world in which we live there are plenty of reasons why people suffer, and sometimes they do suffer because of their actions, but there are plenty of times when people suffer through no fault of their own. The deck is stacked against a lot of people. If you are a person without many resources in this world your life is going to be difficult, not because you have done anything wrong but because our world favors people who have the blessing of resources. But even when a person is very blessed in life it does not guarantee that they will escape difficulties. People get sick. People have accidents. Companies downsize. I am not meaning to sound harsh; I am simply stating some facts of life.

Job challenges the idea of reward and punishment, which is an idea that still resonates today, unfortunately. If you are my age or older, you might have some agreement to the old saying that people should just *pull themselves up by their bootstraps*. That was more possible in generations past. It was more likely that when one *played by the rules* – got a good education and worked hard – that life would go well for them, but that's not nearly as true today. Not only do some people not have the resource to afford bootstraps, is it also a reality that our children and grandchildren are living in a very different world, and they will struggle in ways in which we did not, and we cannot blame them for the difficulties imposed upon them by this rapidly changing world. Just like Job's friends, it is easy for us to blame someone's suffering on their own actions, when they may be innocent and may be suffering unjustly. Compassion dictates that we use our ears more than our mouths, listening to what a hurting person has to say, offering care and refusing to be judgmental, and knowing when to speak and when to hold our tongue.

I will, however, say that Job's friends did another thing right – they allowed Job the opportunity to vent his feelings. They might not have listened to what he had to say, but they did give him the chance to speak. Allow people the opportunity to vent their feelings and emotions when they are hurting. It isn't going to hurt God, but it may hurt them if they don't express themselves. I think some people are afraid of venting their emotions, but the Bible – especially the Old Testament – is remarkably open in presenting the challenges that people bring to God. Read through the 22<sup>nd</sup> psalm, and as you do you will hear the pain and anguish that David is venting to God. In psalm 137:8-9 we read *O daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us – he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks* (note: the context of this psalm is when the people of Israel had been taken away into exile into Babylon, where they then lived for over seven decades. The hardships they had endured there, and the struggle of being away from their homeland for

so many decades, left a great deal of bitterness in their hearts. Those verses expressed a desire for revenge against their enemies, but note that it is not implying that God either committed such an action or that God was even asked to commit such an action. This is an anguished cry from a broken human heart and spirit.) It's hard to imagine that the creator and God of this vast universe would be challenged or upset by something you or I would have to say. Being compassionate to those who are suffering is one of our greatest, and most difficult callings, and it begins by allowing the other person the freedom to vent their feelings. Listen with not just your ears, but with your heart as well, and as you listen, don't make judgments, but offer your love and compassion.

### 3. *Don't Be Afraid to Ask for Help.*

I don't really know why it's so hard for us to seek help. Maybe it's just ingrained in us, as we live in a culture that teaches us that we are to be strong and self-sufficient, attitudes that do not lend to the vulnerability that it takes to ask for help. I will be honest and admit that it is very, very difficult for me to ask for help, even when I really need to do so, even when I really need to talk to someone, and even when I really need some good advice. I will very quickly tell you there is no shame in seeking help and yet I will act as though I am ashamed to seek help. I will very quickly tell you that everyone needs help at various points in life and should never hesitate to reach out and yet I will rarely seek help and reach out for it. The old saying of *physician heal thyself*, in my case should be, *pastor, listen to thyself*.

It has been noted many times in recent months that the suicide rate is climbing across almost all segments of our society. Almost 50,000 people take their lives each year, which makes suicide the 10<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death in America. Suicide is an absolutely devastating event, and one that many families face. My family has faced it, and those who are left behind struggle with the consequences for the remainder of their lives. (Here are two helpful links about suicide – <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org> and <https://medlineplus.gov/suicide.html>).

Please, never be afraid to ask for help, and when someone comes to you for help, understand the difficulty and vulnerability that is involved in asking for help. All of us have been, or will be, in that position of asking for help, so we must be compassionate helpers and encouragers to those who seek out our help.

### 4. *Give friends a break.*

There are two sides to the coin of suffering. One is when we are the one suffering and feel let down by our friends and the other is to be the friend who has disappointed someone. Maybe it's partly because of my vocation, but I have too often been that friend who has disappointed someone. It is important to remember that we've all said the wrong things. We've all let people down. We're not perfect. We do our best, but sometimes, our best isn't enough. Sometimes we are disappointed by our friends, but sometime we are the friend that disappoints.

I have wondered on more than one occasion about Job's relationship with his friends after his life was restored. Did he see them again? Did he maintain a relationship with them? He had some very good reasons not to, but maybe Job gave them a break. I'd like to think that Job was able to overlook the failures of his friends and that he extended grace to them. If so, I'm sure it wasn't easy, but Job was a very good man, so I like to think he was able to offer the grace they needed.

We all need friends. There are a lot of struggle in life. There's a lot of loneliness. There's a lot of stress. We wonder who will listen to us. We wonder if anyone cares. Be a friend to someone in need. Be a friend and listen. Be a friend and offer compassion and not judgment. And be a friend to your friends even when they disappoint you. Thank God for our friends!