

SESSION TWO

Love Pays Attention

Reading adapted from a message by John Ortberg

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It's a common scene. A couple sits at the breakfast table. One spouse (let's say the husband) is immersed in the newspaper, while the wife is pouring out her heart. Frustrated, she finally complains, "You're not listening to me."

"I can repeat every word you said," is the standard response. He proceeds to demonstrate. Is she satisfied? No! She doesn't want him simply to be able to replay her words. A tape recorder could do that. She wants him to be fully present. She wants him to put down the paper, look her in the eye, and pay attention to her.

Being heard is not enough. She wants to be *attended to*.

Attention is one of the most powerful forces in the world. Along with food and water, a baby needs to see the attentive gaze of a human face to develop properly. When we grow up, we still need to be attended to.

I went to graduate school for several years to learn about clinical psychology. There was one thing I learned quickly. The thing people value

as much as direction or insight when they go to someone for counseling is to be in the presence of another human being who will actually look at them, listen to them, pay attention to them, and treat their lives and hearts as though they mattered.

God's greatest commandment for building community is "love one another." A primary work of love is paying attention. It is such a valuable thing that we don't just give it—we *pay* it. It's like money.

The Attentive Face of God

One of the great miracles of life is that God pays attention to us. This is partly why the writers of Scripture speak so often of God's face. The great priestly blessing that God himself taught the people of Israel says: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace" (Num. 6:24–26).

To turn your face toward someone is to give them your wholehearted, undivided attention. It is not the casual listening of a preoccupied mind. It is a statement saying, "I have nothing else to do, nowhere I'd rather be. I'm fully devoted to being with you." This is the kind of attention God devotes to us.

The priestly blessing says that God will not only turn his face toward us, he will make it *shine* on us. The shining face is an image of de-

light. It is the face of a proud parent beaming while a child plays in his first piano recital. It is the radiant face of a groom as he watches his bride walk the aisle. Faces that shine and grow radiant only happen in the presence of the deepest kind of love.

This is how God loves us. God pays attention to us. To lose God's loving attention was, to the psalmist, to lose everything:

My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, Lord, I will seek. Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger; you have been my helper. Do not reject me, or forsake me, O God my Savior!

—Psalm 27:8–9

Nothing was worse than the thought of God hiding his face.

God pays attention. Close attention. "The very hairs of your head are all numbered," Jesus said (Luke 12:7). We often take it as a sign of love if someone is able to notice a haircut or change in hairstyle. Marriages have been known to break up over the *failure* to notice. God has numbered every hair! If one falls out, he notices. He may not replace it, unfortunately, but he notices. Jesus is not teaching here about God's capacity to process information or crunch numbers. He is teaching that God is infinitely attentive to even the smallest details of our lives.

God pays attention.

Attending to People

What does it mean for you to pursue the work of God? It is to grow to see as he sees, listen as he listens, attend as he attends to the people in your relational world. But what, specifically, does attentive love do?

Love remembers. What's his favorite movie? What kind of coffee does she like? When is his birthday? Love recalls the significant events that happened in a friend's life last week. Love remembers a loss that was suffered a year ago on this day. Love is in the details.

Love notices. In her book *You Just Don't Understand*, Deborah Tannen tells the story of her great-aunt, who had a romantic relationship when she was in her seventies. Obese, balding, misshapen by arthritis, she did not fit the stereotype of a woman romantically loved. But she was. By a man who also was in his seventies.

One evening she had dinner out, with friends. When she returned home, her male friend called and she told him about the dinner. He listened with interest and asked her, "What did you wear?" When she told me this, she began to cry: "Do you know how many years it's been since anyone asked me what I wore?"

When my great-aunt said this, she was saying that it had been years since anyone cared deeply—intimately—about her.

If you want to do the work of God, pay attention to people. Notice them. Observe them. Take time to highlight what you find attractive, winsome, praiseworthy. We have the power to delight each other's hearts when we notice and celebrate each other.

Love listens. There are people around you today who need more than anything else for you to “put down the newspaper” and pay attention. When you are sitting around the kitchen table or within the circle of your small group and someone speaks, “turn your face” to them. Look them in the eye. Give them your undivided attention. Be fully present with them for that moment—even if it's only a moment. Listen to the words of their mouth. Listen to the words of their heart.

An amazing thing happens as we become more intentional about attending to people. We become a little more able to attend to God. Slowing down, being fully present, focusing, listening. They are the same skills needed to deal with our own *spiritual* attention deficit disorder. As we grow in our ability to attend to people, there's a good chance we will grow in our ability to attend to the “still, small voice” of God.

Paying attention is a powerful thing. It can transform relationships. It can transform our hearts. “Let anyone with ears listen,” Jesus would often say.

Pay attention!

SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

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our exercise this week is simply to *listen*. Attending to people with a responsive heart is one of the most concrete ways to express Christ's love. Through various encounters this week—whether momentary or substantial—practice the discipline of listening. In doing so, consider the following:

- When a person is talking, make eye contact. Literally, “turn your face toward them.” Give them your full attention.
- Make every effort to be fully present in the conversation. If your mind starts racing to other things you must do, just *stop*. Remind yourself that this moment—even if it's only a moment—is a powerful opportunity to love as Jesus loved.
- Commit, at least for this week, that you will not interrupt.
- Try to enter into the person's experience as you listen. What are the feelings behind the words? Consider asking, if appropriate, “How did you feel about that?” or a similar question that reflects genuine interest.
- Resist the temptation to formulate what *you'll* say next while the other person is speaking. If there's a pause in the conversation, avoid shifting the focus to yourself.

Stay with the person and their story.

- As you listen to another person, listen with a “third ear”—one attuned to the Holy Spirit. What might God be saying to you through this person? What might God want to say to this person through you?

Once each day, pause to jot down some observations. How hard is it to stay fully focused on someone else? Are you finding it more difficult with some people than others? How often do you find yourself subtly (or not so subtly) bringing the conversation around to yourself? How did different people respond to your listening? How are you being impacted personally?

