

Transformational Listening
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NBC Chapel—March 16, 2010

Transformation—how does that take place? Through the saving power of Christ, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit, through trials and tribulations, through the study of the Word, through education and learning. It is all of those things, but it does not happen without purposeful decisions on our part. Being here at NBC is one of those choices that causes transformation in your lives, but not everyone who comes is transformed. Should I say that? I suppose we have to be truthful in saying that there are some who start on the journey but are not transformed. Why? It is not because God only chooses to transform some into Christlikeness—He desires that all be transformed! Yet some fight the transformation by the decisions they make, and often that is a result of not listening to advice—bringing me to the point—Transformational Listening.

About three weeks ago, totally overwhelmed by Winter B, I prayed for a message from the Lord—a word to give to you. The answer came in a surprising way through a devotional that I receive by email from a former colleague and pastor. The series has been working through the book of John for a long, long time. We have reached the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together.

3. "I'm going out to fish," Simon Peter told them, and they said, "We'll go with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.
4. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus.
5. He called out to them, "Friends, haven't you any fish?" "No," they answered.
6. He said, "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some." When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.
7. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, "It is the Lord," he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water.

8. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards.

Though this scripture was very familiar, it struck me that the disciples listened to the advice to lower the net on the other side of the boat, *not knowing who it was that was telling them to do so*. This never occurred to me about this section, but the disciples didn't know who was on the shore until after the nets were filled with fish--so who did they think they were obeying? Some random guy walking on the shore? I have always thought that their obedience was rewarded, but how did they know if this was someone to obey? If it was a command clearly from God, no question, but a random man walking on the shore? We would say that we should obey those placed in leadership above us, but this doesn't even qualify as that. Maybe Jesus' presence commanded respect and following even when he wasn't recognized as Jesus? Or maybe their culture was less independent and this predisposed them to be more likely to take advice.

I was on a quest to try to understand this! I looked in several commentaries and found it interesting that none commented on the fact that the disciples obeyed the command of a random stranger.

Most were focused on the fact that they did not recognize Jesus. Matthew Henry said, "He showed himself to them gradually. The disciples, though they had been intimately acquainted with him, *knew not, all at once, that it was Jesus*. Little expecting to see him there, and not looking intently upon him, they took him for some common person awaiting the arrival of their boat, to buy their fish." Even Matthew Henry realized that they obeyed the command of someone they believed to be a complete stranger, yet does not comment on this being unusual. Once again, I wonder if culturally, accepting the advice of a stranger was more acceptable.

I even emailed my former pastor who wrote the devotional. He said,

"I hadn't really thought about the lack of recognition before the obedience. Perhaps the lesson here should have been worded a little more along the lines of recognizing the fact that often we need to learn to take advice and direction from others. It is possible the angle of the sun and the time of day would have allowed anyone on the shore to see into

the shallow waters. That of course does not negate the miracle of the large catch and the presence of the fish in this part of the lake. Most of us suffer from "I" mentality, especially when it comes to our vocation. So there would have been the typical grumbling, the "who does this guy think he is, etc." They were tired and worn out; frustrated because they had followed Jesus and he had died. He rose again and told them to come to Galilee, they had come to Galilee. So now what? So why not go ahead and do what the guy says; it can't hurt. This type of attitude makes John's recognition even more startling and Peter's reaction much more typical."

The one thing that stood out to me in his comments is "Perhaps the lesson here should have been worded a little more along the lines of recognizing the fact that often we need to learn to take advice and direction from others." It is an interesting thought isn't it?

Let's think about the situation a bit more. These were fishermen; that was their trade. They knew the waters, they knew when fish would bite and when they wouldn't, they had fished all night with no luck. Put yourself in their place—would you listen to the advice of some random guy walking on the shore? Not likely. We as Americans are proudly independent and pretty sure that we are always right, so maybe it was a cultural thing? I am not sure, but it made me start thinking about the fact that the advice we ignore may be from Jesus in disguise. He may be trying to provide blessings beyond what we believe are possible—or He may be trying to transform us. It is clear as the text continues on to describe the catch of fish and the interaction between Jesus and Peter, that both blessing and transformation were the intent of Jesus.

Part of being in ministry is giving advice. I have been giving advice as a college professor for over 25 years—in fact, one of my main roles has been that of "Advisor". Every week, I have someone contact me by email, phone, or on Facebook asking for advice. Over the years I have given a lot of good, solid, often biblical advice and probably, regrettably, have occasionally given some bad advice. In teaching and in ministry, giving advice is something I have been paid to do. As a parent, I just gave it for free.

William R. Alger once said, “We give advice by the bucket, but take it by the grain.” How true this is!

What is interesting about giving advice is the reaction. I have found that there are some typical reactions when I give advice:

1. Some accept the advice and follow through by acting on the advice.
2. Some seem to accept the advice, but don't act on it.
3. Some accept the advice, but choose a different option.
4. Some immediately disagree with the advice, making me wonder why they asked for it.

You can always tell when something is a common occurrence in the range of human reactions by looking for quotes. This is true for this reaction! Lady Blessington once said: *People are always willing to follow advice when it accords with their own wishes.* And John Steinbeck said: *No one wants advice -- only corroboration.*

5. Some ignore the advice, but actually come back later saying that they should have taken it.

This one even has a song! You may recognize the lyrics to the theme song for the classic movie, *Kelly's Heroes--Burning Bridges* by Lalo Schifrin and Mike Curb

Friends all tried to warn me
But I held my head up high
All the time they warned me
But I only passed them by
They all tried to tell me
But I guess I didn't care
I turned my back and
Left them standing there

Sometimes when the advice I give is not accepted, the results are very predictable. That is when I am overcome with the urge to say, “I told you so”. This actually happened to Paul in the 27th chapter of Acts.

8. We moved along the coast with difficulty and came to a place called Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea.

9. Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Fast. So Paul warned them,

10. "Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also."

11. But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship.

We often admonish each other to not say "I told you so" but Paul did not hesitate:

20. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.

21. After the men had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: "Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss.

22. But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed.

I would imagine, they trusted his word this time.

So, the other side of giving advice is taking advice. It is an interlocking relationship. One person has to give and the other person has to take. The problem is that human beings are very complex.

The matrix of advice interactions looks like this:

Advice Matrix	Accepting Receiver	Rejecting Receiver
Good Advice	Good Decision	Bad Decision
Bad Advice	Bad Decision	Good Decision— Maybe?

That is discouraging! It is possible that the chances for a bad decision as a result of either following or rejecting advice may be greater than the chances of making a good decision. Yet the picture is actually more complicated!

Advice Matrix 2	Accepting Receiver	Rejecting Receiver
Trustworthy person/ good advice	Good Decision	Bad Decision
Trustworthy person/ bad advice	Bad Decision	Good Decision
Untrustworthy person/ good advice	Bad Decision	Bad Decision
Untrustworthy person/ Bad advice	Bad Decision	Good Decision

You see, the person giving the advice does play into the decision we make. A biblical example of good advice given by a trustworthy person and accepted is that of Moses who accepted the advice of his father-in-law about how to rule the people. Exodus 18:24 states that, "Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said."

On the other hand, an example of both rejected good advice from trustworthy people followed by accepted bad advice from untrustworthy people occurred when Rehoboam rejected the advice of the elders and instead listened to his friends. The results were disastrous. . .

I Kings: 12:6-13

6 King Rehoboam asked the elders for advice. They had served his father Solomon while he was still living. Rehoboam asked them, "What advice can you give me? How should I answer these people?"

7 They replied, "Serve them today. Give them what they are asking for. Then they'll always serve you."

8 But Rehoboam didn't accept the advice the elders gave him. Instead, he asked for advice from the young men who had grown up with him and were now serving him. 9 He

asked them, "What's your advice? How should I answer these people? They say to me, 'Make the load your father put on our shoulders lighter.' "

10 The young men who had grown up with him gave their answer. They replied, "These people say to you, 'Your father put a heavy load on our shoulders. Make it lighter.' Tell them, 'My little finger is stronger than my father's legs. 11 My father put a heavy load on your shoulders. But I'll make it even heavier. My father beat you with whips. But I'll beat you with bigger whips.' "

12 Three days later Jeroboam and all of the people returned to Rehoboam. That's because the king had said, "Come back to me in three days."

13 The king answered the people in a mean way. He didn't accept the advice the elders had given him. 14 Instead, he followed the advice of the young men. He said, "My father put a heavy load on your shoulders. But I'll make it even heavier. My father beat you with whips. But I'll beat you with bigger whips."

Thus, Rehoboam, ignored the advice of the elders and accepted the advice of the friends who had grown up with him and now served him. The result is clearly stated in the next verse—"Israel has refused to follow the royal family of David to this very day."

Another biblical example of a trustworthy person (though he did betray David) giving good advice, which was rejected can be found in the midst of the struggle between Absalom and David, Absalom ignored the advice of one who had been trustworthy in the past, once again leading to disastrous results. II Samuel 16:23 states, "In those days the advice Ahithophel gave was as good as advice from someone who asks God for guidance. That's what David and Absalom thought about all of Ahithophel's advice." Despite that, Absalom took different advice and that choice ultimately ended his life.

So, what have we learned? That we need to spend more time thinking about the advice we give and the advice we take. You are all preparing for Ministry and that means that you are going to be part of the matrix—hopefully the trustworthy/good advice part—the times when you feel you didn't give good advice will be humbling and remind you of your reliance to God.

I have observed that those who learn to listen to advice during their college years go on to fruitful ministries. I hate to say this but, those who won't listen to advice most often do not reach the graduation platform.

In this sense, what I am talking about tonight is at its core a key to transformation. Proverbs 19:20 says, "*Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise.*" In other words, advice is transformational when accepted. It will lead to wisdom!

It must be said though that not all advice is equal. I Googled "advice" and got 281 million hits! How do we weed through all that to find God's voice in the midst of the voices? First we need to distinguish between levels of advice: (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/advice>)

- **Suggestion** implies something more tentative than a recommendation
- **Recommendation** is weaker than advice and suggests an opinion that may or may not be acted upon
- **Advice** is a practical recommendation as to action or conduct
- **Persuasion** suggests a stronger form of advice, urged at some length with appeals to reason, emotion, self-interest, or ideals
- **Counsel** is weighty and serious advice, given after careful deliberation
- **Exhortation** suggests an intensified persuasion or admonition, often in the form of a discourse or address

We sometimes hear exhortation as recommendations and therefore have a "take it or leave it" attitude. I believe we need to consider the weight of the decision and seek out wise counsel. Sometimes we make major life decisions based on suggestions or recommendations from those who have not spent time in careful deliberation about our situation—instead we need to listen to persuasion, seek out wise counsel, and reflect seriously on exhortation. We often worry a lot, but spend too little time in research and critically thinking about our options. Studies have proven this!

One such study states that, “Behavioral experiments in psychology demonstrate that people have much less information-processing capability than accepted theories presume” (Martin, 1985). In other words, we really are not very good at thinking through problems. While this statement is from a study of business decisions, it describes reality. We tend to oversimplify, base decisions on what is comfortable, and listen to those who agree with us—just as Rehoboam did.

One of the institutional objectives for NBC is that students will demonstrate “critical thinking skills necessary to interact effectively in a culturally diverse and increasingly pluralistic world.” What that means is that we as faculty and administrators have committed ourselves to the task of helping students to be transformed by wisdom. I have never seen that on a job description, but I live it every day. Giving advice to students is a humbling occupation. Sometimes when I am giving advice, I am speaking to myself also. We are all on this transformational journey together.

I do wonder if our society predisposes us to be skeptical of advice. So many leaders have fallen because they didn’t even listen to their own advice—it does make us leery. Yet, we need to realize that good advice is not necessarily dependent on the character of the advisor and when the character of the advisor is in line with the advice that certainly should make us sit up and listen! A few weeks ago here on campus we conducted Ministry Progress Interviews. For those who have not had this interview, it is administered by a panel of three faculty members and/or administrators. Imagine, having the combined wisdom of 75+ years of ministry experience completely focused on you! This should be one situation where our skeptical culture should not interfere with our listening heart.

Let’s go back to where we began. Jesus is standing on the shore and a boat load of discouraged disciples are trudging to shore. They hear the stranger on the shore ask them if they caught any fish. You can hear the tiredness in their voices as they answer, “NO...” “Throw your nets on the right side and you will find fish.”

There it is—the pivotal moment in their journey. Who is the man on the shore? Why should they listen to him? I don’t know what made them listen, but I do know that when God directs me

through the voice of another person, I know it deep in my spirit. Imagine with me if they had not listened to the voice? How would their day have been different? They still would have made it to the shore and they would have realized it was Jesus there, but they would have been empty-handed and the lesson would have been much different. It would have been a hard lesson. Thankfully, they did listen, and were transformed from that trudging, discouraged, group of men into an exuberant crew who found great joy in communing with Jesus himself.

I wonder how often the hard lessons could be learned in a much easier way—possibly a more joyful way if we would listen to the voices of wisdom around us. I could tell you of several of those times in my own life.

Did I ever get bad advice? Yes, but my heart knew it was not the voice of God speaking to me and in no way justified not listening when I did know it was a message from God. Sometimes, I was just too busy to realize that the wisdom being given was from God. Other times, I was too far away from God to recognize the wisdom as a message from God. Only later did the words come back to me with a sinking realization.

The times when I did slow down and listen, resulted in life-changing decisions. There were other voices that clamored to be heard, but the call to obedience from the messenger sent by God was as clear to me as the voice of Jesus on the shore.

Transformational Listening? It is more than hearing; it is accepting the advice that God is directing to us through those he has placed in our lives. By listening, truly listening, we will be transformed. *“Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise.”* Proverbs 19:20

Reference:

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