

Gospel Shepherding: Listen for the Heart // Part 1

“Each tree is recognized by its own fruit.” - Luke 6:43

The Importance of Story

Every person has a story to tell. Whether the story of their day or the story of their life, the words they say are full of meaning and importance. If we want to grow in our ability to speak effectively about Jesus, to proclaim the gospel (to believers and not-yet-believers!), then learning how to listen to a person’s story is crucial.

In Luke 6:43-45, Jesus helps us understand the connection between words, actions, and the heart. “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briars. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.”

Listening to a person’s story is kind of like examining a fruit tree. Sometimes the fruit is obvious: financial difficulty, sexual sin, marital conflict, anger, mixed with love, joy, peace, etc. But the real action is under the surface, in the root structure of the tree. According to Jesus, actions and words reveal the heart. And the heart is of primary importance because the heart is the seat of faith. “With the heart a person believes” (Romans 10:10).

A person’s story has the potential to reveal where they have replaced Jesus as the only right object of faith. Jesus is the only one who can save, and we regularly look to created things instead. These false saviors will often be revealed in our stories.

Every great story contains four movements: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. God’s Story follows the same pattern. God’s Story is the Great Story, the story that helps us make sense of all other stories. God’s Story is the ultimate Good News, the gospel that we find on the pages of the Bible. Understanding the Creation–Fall–Redemption–Restoration pattern in God’s Story will help us make sense of our stories, and of the stories we hear from people everyday.

Briefly consider the four movements of God's Story along with the themes that emerge in each one.

Creation

God creates everything out of nothing, including Adam and Eve, who are made in his image. The key themes in this movement of the Story are origin and identity. It shows us where we've come from and what defines us.

Fall

Sin enters the world when Adam and Eve disobey God. Relational brokenness, hiding, shame, blame, separation from God, sickness, and death are all now a part of our world. However, future deliverance is immediately foretold.

The key themes in this movement of the Story are brokenness and blame. It reveals the source of all brokenness in the world and who is ultimately to blame for it.

Redemption

God enters a covenant relationship with Abraham, and his descendants, Israel. Throughout their history, he rescues and redeems them in countless ways. He is their loving Father. Finally, God becomes a man in the person of Jesus Christ, and through his life, death, and resurrection, redemption from sin and reconciliation with the Father are made possible for all people.

The key themes in this movement of the Story are rescue and deliverance. It displays God as the only one who can rescue us and put the broken pieces of our world back together.

Restoration

After the resurrection, Jesus ascends into heaven and sends his Spirit to dwell in his followers and to restore them as image bearers. At this first coming, Jesus began his rule and

reign in his people. He will someday return to judge the world and to restore all things by ushering in the new heavens and new earth. His kingdom will come in fullness!

The key themes in this movement of the Story are hope and transformation. It shows us what our hope should be for the future, and who will be the focus of that future reality.

What to Listen For

Utilize the four movements as a tool for sorting the information in a person's story. Here's some guidelines and some key things to listen for along the way. In settings where taking notes is appropriate, use the Creation-Fall-Redemption-Restoration tool as a guide. It is vitally important to pray and ask the Spirit to give us ears to hear, and to help us ask good questions if needed. And always thank the person for sharing their story!

Creation

We all have a fundamental belief about our origin – who or what gave us our existence, made us who we are, and shaped us into the person we are today.

God's Story begins with him bringing everything into existence. He is the author and main character of the Story, and all things find their worth and value in him. And yet, all of us have looked to someone or something other than God to define us, to give us a sense of worth and value.

As a person begins their story, pay close attention to:

- + Early shaping influences
- + Family dynamics
- + Important life events
- + Any God talk

Keep in mind the key themes of origin and identity, and listen for pride, accomplishments, insecurity, failures, approval, rejection, and statements of worth.

Key Heart Question(s):

- + *What is my identity?*
- + *Who or what defines me or gives me worth and value?*

Fall

The world we live in is not as it should be. Brokenness is all around us. Everyone has a fundamental belief about why things are broken. We all tend to place the blame at the feet of others: parents, siblings, friends, teachers, leaders, the government.

However, God's Story shows us that our own sin is the primary thing that wreaks havoc on our lives.

As the person's story continues, listen for:

- + Painful experiences and how the person responded to the pain
- + Broken relationships, behavior, attitudes, health, etc.
- + Patterns of addiction or abuse
- + Any God talk

Keep in mind the themes of brokenness and blame, and listen for fear, shame, hiding, blame, guilt, and a victim mentality.

Key Heart Question(s):

- + *What is my problem?*
- + *Why are people (including me) and things not the way they are supposed to be?*

Redemption

All of us look to created things to save us, to rescue us, to give us significance, and to make us right with God. Money, possessions, acceptance, approval, relationships, and achievements all

seem to offer some hope for repairing the brokenness in our lives. Education, government, recreation, and self-fulfillment can grab our attention as potential saviors, too.

But the gospel tells a different story! God is the only one who can put the broken pieces of our lives back together. Jesus is our only hope for rescue, salvation, and redemption. His life and death alone can make a person right with the Father.

Statements about Redemption may be scattered throughout the person's story, so listen closely for:

- + Placing hope in people or things to provide salvation, security, and significance
- + Justification of the person's actions, or attempts to fix brokenness on their own
- + Judging others or failing to extend forgiveness
- + Any God talk

Keep in mind the themes of rescue and deliverance, and listen for revenge, power, control, anger, proving one's self, comfort, and self-medication.

Key Heart Question(s):

- + *What is my solution?*
- + *Who or what will rescue me and fix what is broken?*

Restoration

There's a deep longing within each of us for change, for things to be different tomorrow than they are today. For some, this means finding a job or a spouse. Others hope for world peace and a fair distribution of resources, a Utopian society. The desire to "have it all" is a longing that many share. What we're all craving is a mending of the brokenness that surrounds us. We want restoration, but we want it to look a certain way.

Because of what Jesus has done, restoration has begun. In every circumstance, he is present, and he offers peace and joy. As Jesus' followers, we are indwelt with his Spirit. He is restoring us as image bearers who can begin to live in the way we were originally created to live. Someday,

Jesus will return to judge the world and to usher in the new heavens and new earth. The Father, Son, and Spirit will be the focus of our existence for eternity!

The last half of a person's story might include:

- + A preferred version of the future
- + The statement "everything would be okay if my circumstances just changed."
- + The desire for other people to change
- + God talk

Keep in mind the themes of hope and transformation and listen for entitlement, self-focus, comfort, avoidance, and apathy / loss of hope.

Key Heart Question(s):

- + *What is my hope?*
- + *What will the world or my world look like when all is as it should be?*