

WHAT DO YOU SAY WHEN...?

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Every thinking person is aware that there are many problem situations in life. They arise every day. In the course of a lifetime there is no single life that is free from these crisis situations. When these emergencies come what help and hope does Christianity offer? In these crises what help can a Christian be? When one of these crises comes into the life of someone near you, what do you say?

What do you say when an elderly person tells you of his declining health? What do you say to a friend who has just been told that he has terminal cancer? What do you say to a person who is mentally ill? What do you say when there is serious financial or material loss? What do you say when there has been personal failure and disgrace? What do you say when a bereaved husband feels that he cannot go on? What the Christian says in any one of these emergencies is extremely important because it indicates the degree of his love for the one who is suffering.

General Suggestions

As a general background for helping those who are in difficult situations. I should like to suggest a dozen general principles that may help to guide us in bringing healing and hope to troubled hearts. It would be presumptuous to think that these are the only guidelines, or perhaps even the most valuable guidelines, but I do believe that each of these is a suggestion worth heeding.

(1) Do not deny or discount the problem. Although some of the problems which others feel are relatively insignificant, they are not insignificant to the ones who feel them. We are never very helpful when we brush a problem aside simply because it does not appear significant to us. It is significant to the one who feels it so.

(2) Do not talk too quickly nor too freely. Listen. There are many times when a problem is so deep and the grief so overwhelming that one's presence is more healing than one's words. The clasp of a hand reverent silence may be more meaningful than glib words.

(3) Point out any legitimate rays of hope. Sometimes it can be tactfully suggested that even though the situation is a difficult one, things could be far worse. Perhaps even better, it can be suggested that although things are difficult it is likely that they will be better soon. Sometimes there are specific ways in which a turn for the better can be expected.

(4) Speak of friends who share the burden, who admire the way that one is facing his difficult situation, and who are praying earnestly that the situation may be better. The realization that others share one's sorrow, and that others are praying has often been helpful.

(5) Suggest living one day at a time. If we look ahead into the future and pile up all the duties and tasks and problems that one can visualize, life becomes too difficult to bear. It is only by facing the tasks of a single day that we are able to face life with confidence.

(6) Speak of God's love. There is no greater help that can come to one in trouble than to realize that God is concerned and that God cares. The apostle Paul wrote,

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword? ... Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us." Then Paul pointed out that there is nothing that "shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:35-39).

(7) Speak of Biblical examples of people who faced similar problems. When there is the loss of a child in death, it may be helpful to remember Job who lost not only his possessions but all of his children. In spite of his great loss Job could say, "Jehovah gave, and Jehovah hath taken away; blessed be the name of Jehovah." (Job 1:21). Perhaps even more helpful is the case of David when he lost his child. After a period of fasting and prayer while the child was critically ill, David was told that the baby was dead. David then washed his face, dressed himself in normal attire and went back to his work. When the servants and others were surprised he said, "I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." (II Sam. 12:23). The death of his child was something that he prayed might not happen, but once it had happened he went back to living his life in the normal way, but with one exception. The death of his child did mean a determination that he would live in such a way that he might one day be reunited with his son.

(8) Let us remind the person who suffers that all things work together for good. It was the apostle Paul who said, "And we know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose." (Rom. 8:28). This does not say that all things are good, but it does say that all things work together for good for Christians. This is God's promise and we believe that it helps more than almost any other of his promises when we face some difficult situation.

(9) Quote or read scriptures of hope. Passages in the fourth chapter of Philippians are particularly helpful. "Rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say rejoice... In nothing be anxious; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus... I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therein to be content... I can do all things in him that strengtheneth me." (Phil. 4:4, 6-7, 11, 13).

(10) Mention other people who have come through the same problem successfully. Sometimes those who have been ill and have returned to normal life can be a great help to one who faces a long illness. Sometimes in bereavement the presence of someone else who has suffered the same loss can be encouraging. Not only can we refer to such people, but they can also visit those who are facing a difficult situation with great helpfulness.

(11) Express confidence in the person's ability to face the situation. One of the most helpful things in a difficult hour of trouble is to know that other people believe in you and have confidence in your ability to see the problem through.

(12) Pray together. Many times there is little that can be said and little that can be done to alleviate a difficult situation. Always, however, there is prayer. When something is too difficult for us, we turn it over to God, knowing that he can do all things. A few moments of intimate, earnest prayer may be more helpful than anything else that we can do.

What Do You Say When...

What do you say when an elderly person tells of his declining health? He is ageing and many of the physical abilities that he had in other years are slipping away. In addition, he feels that his prayers are now unheard, as he asks help in

the declining years. The answer begins by pointing out that God sometimes answers prayer "yes," sometimes "no," and sometimes "wait." Also, the suggestion is made that we do not always know what is best and therefore we ought to pray, "Thy will be done." When we leave our affairs completely in the hands of the Lord, letting him decide what is best, our prayers are always heard and our troubled hearts are soothed. We have confidence that God knows best and will do that which is best for us. This is also a time for pointing out God's love. It is a time for remembering that Christ said, "I will be with you always." (Matt. 28:20).

What do you say to a person with terminal cancer? When one is only a few weeks or a few months away from death, it is not a time when words come easily. It is not a time for light conversation. It is not a time to joke and say, "Don't you be upset. That's just not going to happen to you." Rather, it is a time for soberly facing one of life's most frightening situations--death. It is a time to remember our Christian hope. It is a time to make real the promises of our Lord. "Let not your heart be troubled: believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." (John 14:1-3). John's words in Revelation 21:4 are also comforting. "He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain, anymore: the first things are passed away." When one faces death, it is a time for deep faith in the eternal promises of God.

What do you say when there is serious illness? Again, it is a time for the reading of scriptures which express confidence and hope. It is a time for remembering God's love. It is a time for sympathetic concern on the part of a friend and it may also be a time when one who has had the illness and has survived can come by for a comforting visit. Above everything else, it is a time for leaving the final outcome in God's hands, knowing that he can do all things and that he loves the one who is ill with his infinite love.

What do you say when a person is mentally ill? First of all, there is a great need to impress the fact that mental illness is not a disgrace. There should be no stigma attached. We live in a world of many pressures. We live at a very fast pace. It is inevitable that sometimes we will fall under the load that we are called to bear. When this happens, it is no more of a disgrace than when one breaks his arm, or needs an operation. The second suggestion is that one immediately call a competent doctor. May the time soon come when we have the maturity to see that it is just as reasonable to call a good psychiatrist as it is to call a good surgeon. A psychiatrist who believes in God, who has accepted the lordship of Christ, and who is earnestly striving to do the Lord's will, can apply techniques and insights that can be very helpful when a child of God is mentally disturbed. This is also a time for impressing the fact that there is great hope for complete recovery. With the modern drugs that are available and with the new insights that are known, it is quite hopeful that a person can be totally well again after mental illness.

What do you say when there is serious financial or material loss? This is a time for pointing out that the main things still remain. The person who has suffered the loss still has his friends, his loved ones, his health, and his opportunities. While there should be no effort to make the loss seem insignificant, if it is of major proportions, there certainly can be a helpful effort to show that in spite of the loss everything is not lost. Perhaps it is a time for remembering Christ's words, "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." (Luke 12:15).

What do you say when there has been failure and disgrace? When one has stolen money, or when there is some moral lapse, or when in some other way one has disgraced himself, it is a time when Christians friends are especially needed. The natural tendency is for good people to turn away from the sinner and to avoid him. However, this is not Christian. It is a time when the sinner especially needs Christian love and helpfulness. Christ came to save the lost and Christians must lend a helping hand to those who have fallen. It is a time to remember Peter's advice to Simon, "Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray the Lord, if perhaps the thought of thy heart shall be forgiven thee." (Acts 8:22). In God's sight there is always the possibility of beginning again. Peter began again after his denial of the Lord. Paul began again after his persecution of Christians. When there has been moral failure and disgrace, Christians can help a fallen brother begin again.

What do you say when there has been an automobile accident and blindness or a permanent crippled condition results? Perhaps there is some ray of hope that can be mentioned. It is good to know that friends are concerned and are praying. It is a time to be reminded of God's love. It is also a time to suggest that we live one day at a time.

What do you say when there is discouragement or despondency? Sometimes deep discouragement and despondency come when there is no outward reason. A person may wish that he might end his life or "get away from it all." Perhaps it is good to suggest that maybe a physical examination is needed, for the problem may stem from some unrecognized physical condition. It is a time for reminding one of God's love and concern. It is also a time for friends to be very real. It can also be meaningful to count one's blessings and regain a balance between problems and blessings. It is a time when one especially needs to be loved.

What do you say when there has been disappointment among one's loved ones? Perhaps it is a wayward husband whose drink problem leads a wife to a life of misery. Perhaps it is a wayward wife who leads a husband to feel deep hurt and sorrow. Perhaps it is children who have departed from the thought patterns and the behavior patterns of their parents. It may be that there are feelings of estrangement between those who once were close to each other. It helps to be reminded that "the end is not yet." Conditions that have become bad, can become better. Suggestions may be made of specific acts to heal and to help. Sometimes it can only be "turned over to the Lord through prayer." It is a time for hope and trust.

What do you say when a bereaved husband or wife feels that it is impossible to go on? When the first impact of loss comes, it is not the time to argue that this feeling is out of place. Accept it, for the moment. Gently, as the hours and days go by, point out that the bereaved companion, now left alone, is deeply needed by the other members of the family, by children and even grandchildren. There is important work to be done and the bereaved can do it. It is also of some value to suggest that many others have faced the same situation and have been able to triumph over the feelings of despair. Time heals. The love of friends helps. God's infinite love and care make possible what seems at first to be impossible.

Conclusion

Christ does have the answer to all of life's problems. May we who wear his name seek out the means and the methods by which his healing message of hope can be brought to sorrowing hearts and lonely lives. It is then that our own lives become important. We are doing something worthwhile. We will feel the great strength that comes from being engaged in an important work and doing an important job. More significantly, our fellowmen will be helped in their hour of need. Most significantly, their hearts will be opened to the message of Christ in all its range of blessedness. It is through this kind of demonstration of love and concern that we will be able to lead those not yet Christians to become children of God.