



JANUARY 2003

“Everyone who is called by My name...I have created for My glory.” – God in Isaiah 43:7

I had such a great time helping teach the GraceLife Conference at Emma Gray Methodist church in Woodruff, SC this month. The 15 attendees were so gracious. I started this Conference by asking, **WHAT IS GOD'S GREATEST PURPOSE FOR HIS CHILDREN?** I shared how Jesus' parable of the prodigal son can reveal the profoundly simple and simply profound answer to this vital question.

The prodigal son parable is about a father with two sons -- one son left home and behaved badly -- one son stayed home and behaved goodly. Much has been taught about the son who left home and “sowed his wild oats,” but I learn more from the son who stayed home and “was a good little boy.” The fact is that both sons were prodigal (wasteful) in that they both sought to live out of their own abilities and selfish desires – one son just appeared to be better than the other son. The son who stayed home became frustrated when his father unconditionally received the wayward son home with open arms and even gave him a celebration feast. *Luke 15:29* tells us three revealing comments by the frustrated son.

1. “Lo, these many years I have been serving you.” This son focused on **SERVING** his father.
2. “I never transgressed your commandment at any time.” This son also focused on **OBEYING** his father.
3. “However, you never gave me a feast, that I might make merry with my friends.” This son was seeking favor from his father based on his service and obedience. This son was basing his relationship with his father on his **BEHAVIOR**, not on his **BIRTHRIGHT** from his father.

The father's response is so precious and powerful, “Son, you are always with me, and ALL that I have is yours.” You see, the son's service and obedience were not what the father was deeply desiring from his son. The father's greatest desire and purpose for his son was to unconditionally receive what he had already unconditionally given his son...all the possessions the father had...his birthright...his very namesake. I love how the father starts out his response with the tender term “son.” I can just hear the father's heart, “Oh, my dear son, don't you realize how much I love you and I have already given you ALL that you will ever need?”

This parable points us to God the Father's greatest purpose for His children – to unconditionally receive (without any conditions to serve or obey Him) what He has already unconditionally given...which is everything...the very life of His dear Son Jesus Christ...His very Namesake! Our birthright by grace is the name of Jesus! So, God's greatest purpose for His children is for us to glorify the name of Jesus! But what does this mean? Do we glorify Jesus' name by talking and singing about Him, or by good works? Not exactly. Hebrews 1:3 tells us exactly what it means to glorify God: “The Son (Jesus) IS the brightness of the Father's glory!” Jesus IS the glory of God! So to glorify God is to shine the life of Jesus!

So now, *how* do we shine Jesus? I now shy away from that word *how*, because it tempts me to carry the burden of figuring out *how*...a burden I cannot carry. God doesn't want His children to resolve to figure out *how* to DO anything except to **BELIEVE** Him...that's all...to **RECEIVE** what God has already provided through the cross...to take Him at His word that Christ is risen and He's alive IN each child of God!

I am learning that receiving and shining come through **SURRENDER**...a surrender of my need to understand *how* to make my life work out...a surrender that confesses my bankruptcy yet cherishes Christ's all-sufficiency in me. The questions each of us must answer include, “Is God really trustworthy? Can I really surrender (entrust) my need to understand to Him? My flesh so wants to understand...to have some control. Will God be sufficient for me when others misunderstand me?” Now here's the miracle. When our focus is on the life of Christ in us, guess what abounds? True service and obedience! But when our focus is on service and obedience, guess what doesn't abound? Yep, true service and obedience!

IN SUMMARY, THE GOSPEL IS NOT ABOUT JESUS...THE GOSPEL IS JESUS! Paul knew this starting with his surrender on the Damascus road. Paul desired to know Christ, not about Christ (*Philippians 3:8-11*). And he desired to proclaim Christ, not truths about Christ. Hear Paul's heart: “*Him we preach... according to His working which works in me mightily*” (*Colossians 1:28*). And when God's children fulfill God's greatest purpose of ministering Christ to others, the words we speak are “spirit and life” to others (*John 6:63*).

LISTENING WITH EMPATHY

Through Joy's healing process, God is teaching us to listen even more to each other's heart, and to speak words of spirit and life that truly heal in every way. Her incision is nearly healed...there is just one teeny tiny hole still draining. The doctors have extended her IV antibiotics through February. Since July, Joy has used nearly ten gallons of antibiotics blended with tears. She is still weak in body, but hopeful in heart.

And in God's perfect timing and provision this month, I had a watershed week at Luther Rice Seminary in Atlanta for training in listening with empathy...the key to ministry. If we minister the life of Christ to others we encounter, we will be empathetic, because that is the character of Jesus. On the back, I want to introduce you to Justin, a fellow student from Texas, and Dr. Phillips, our teacher at the Seminary that week. Both are gifted listeners. Also on the back is something I wrote, “You Listened to Me.” Listen and enjoy.

GRACE NOTE

The world says “Seeing is believing.” You can know about Jesus this way in your head.
Jesus says “Believing is seeing.” You can know Jesus Himself this way in your heart.
(Thanks to EternityNow Ministries for nurturing me to write this Grace Note.)

To the left is Justin, a truly neat person I had the privilege to share with as we studied and practiced listening at Luther Rice Seminary. Justin has a heart to minister Christ to Mexicans at the Texas border.

To the right is Dr. Tom Phillips who passionately taught us that week. He is a marriage counselor and founded an Atlanta Crisis Pregnancy Center.

I am so thankful for that defining week. I hope you enjoy "You Listened to Me." It is my testimony, and anyone's testimony, of God revealing His unconditional acceptance through a friend.



"You Listened to Me"

by Gregg Gibbons

When I felt so alone...you listened to me.

When I had a loss for rational words...you listened to me.

I was so confused and overwhelmed, but...you listened to me.

When I couldn't even listen to myself...you listened to me.

I felt like a total failure, but...you listened to me.

God felt so far away from me, but...you listened to me.

In my self-righteous anger, I didn't deserve that...you listened to me.

In my self-pity parties, I didn't deserve that...you listened to me.

Some people told me much about Jesus, but...you listened to me.

Some people reminded me of Scripture passages and principles, but...you listened to me.

Some people told me they would pray for me, and that's great, but...you listened to me.

Some people tried to understand my awkward words, but...you listened to me.

Some people tried to suppress my feelings, but...you listened to me.

It was such a dark place, but...you listened to me.

I kept seeing a glimmer of hope and light when...you listened to me.

Your penetrating relevant words were evidence that...you listened to me.

Your tender yet confident words were soothing to my hurting heart because...you listened to me.

Many times you said not a word, but I knew without a doubt...you listened to me.

Even in your silence I heard you say "I love you" as...you listened to me.

I saw in your eyes the compassion of Christ because...you listened to me.

Jesus Himself met me where I was as...you listened to me.

Then, a miracle began to happen because...you listened to me.

My own ears began to unplug because...you listened to me.

Then my own eyes began to see Truth, because...you listened to me.

I began to see my anguish in view of the cross because...you listened to me.

I, like the thief on the cross next to Jesus, had nothing left to try, but still...you listened to me.

I guess I, like the thief, was calling out to Jesus to "Remember me," and through you indeed...He listened to me!

Imagine that, the Creator of the universe...He listens to me!

My tears of anguish are turning into tears of joy because...He listens to me!

My ears are being tuned to hear the cries of hurting people only because...He listens through me.

Our ears are the foundation of any true ministry in the body of Christ if we realize...He listens through us.

I'm free! Jesus is now real to me and to others I listen to, because for one brief moment in time...you listened to me.

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd who gives His life for the sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow Me" (John 10:11, 17).