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Karen: We’ve been talking about coming alongside people and ministering to people in pain. And in this next lesson we’re going to be talking about actual interventions. So how do you actually minister to people in pain?

Alice: And how do we do that, Karen?

Karen: Well, one of the first steps and one of the points that we need to make in this lesson is that you really can’t skip this first step of just plain old listening to people when they talk about their pain.

Alice: But a lot of people really don’t listen well.

Karen: No, we have a tendency to really like to talk about the answers that we’ve come up with for our own lives, and sometimes what happens is that we actually start solving a problem that doesn’t actually exist.

Alice: I’ve been there; I’ve done that.

Karen: Absolutely. I think we all have. And I think it’s just so important to take the time to really listen to people’s pain, because if we don’t, sometimes people resort to extreme measures. I do that when my husband doesn’t answer his cell phone. I start calling him back repeatedly. It’s very annoying.

Alice: Yeah.

Karen: But you resort to extreme measures when you don’t feel heard or feel understood.

Alice: It reminds me of something that Coretta Scott King had said when she said that “violence is the language of the unheard,” and if you feel that you’re not being heard often enough, you not

only call frequently on your cell phone but you may do some other things as well.

Karen: So listening to people is that first key step, and we really need to stop and take the time to slow down and listen to the person; listen to the pain that they're experiencing. And I think it's important, though, that we talk about what listening is not, because it is so many other things. But it's not some of the things that we sometimes think about.

Alice: I was just thinking about that as you were talking, and I thought one thing listening isn't, is just letting the other person vent. There are times when I'm with somebody, and the person just goes on and on and on and on saying the same things over and over with increasing anger. And I think, wait a minute; this isn't helpful.

Karen: Sometimes venting just reinforces the problem. Sometimes a person does need to talk about the issues that are occurring for them. But for the most part, listening is just really helping to help you understand the problem and helping the person really understand the problem that they're experiencing.

Alice: But you also said just a few minutes ago, Karen, that listening is not trying to solve the problem, because lots of times I listen to somebody and I think I know exactly what's wrong and so I'm right there with the answer but it turns out to be not the answer to the real problem.

Karen: Absolutely not, and this is a stereotype, but oftentimes my husband and I, when I come home and I say, "You know, I've had a hard day at work," he can sort of jump right in to that problem-solving stage. And listening really is not that problem-solving stage. You really have to step back and understand what's going on for the person.

Alice: But I've also heard you say that listening is not just sharing your perspective, not just giving the person your advice and what you think needs to happen. You're not ready to do that until you have truly listened.

Karen: And I think there is definitely a time and place for sharing your perspective. So, for instance, when you're listening to somebody who's going through the pain of a divorce, and you're really sitting there wondering whether you agree with

divorce and whether you agree with divorce particularly in that situation. There can be times when you are anxious to share your perspective, but during that first step of listening is not the time and place to share your perspective. You will hopefully get other opportunities in the future. But initially at the point of listening, you just need to listen.

Alice: And I think that going along with that is the idea, as well, that you don't want to jump in rebutting what the other person is saying. I mean, I may have a position on divorce, but that's not the point at which I need to jump in and say, "Oh, but you're wrong!" It just doesn't work.

Karen: And sometimes besides sharing our perspective, we might also want to rebut a person's perspective. So, for instance, if somebody comes to you and says, "You know, I didn't pass this test, and God didn't let me pass this test." Sometimes you might have the perspective: Well, it's because they didn't study.

Alice: Yeah, don't blame God.

Karen: Right, it might not be the first step to actually rebut their position. Initially, what you want to do is just take the time to listen to the pain that they're experiencing. Listen to the fact that they're very upset that they didn't pass this particular test.

Alice: But not to rebut and also not to try to read their mind.

Karen: And I'm an expert in trying to read people's mind.

Alice: Well, you're trained to do that.

Karen: I have listened to a number of people experiencing pain, and I think sometimes that I have things all figured out when actually I do not. And I have to keep reminding myself, even as a professional, as a licensed psychologist, I need to keep slowing myself down and saying, listen carefully first. For instance, if you're talking to somebody who says, "My plant just died," I might be thinking, boy, I wonder if they're grieving their mother's death because their mother gave them this plant. Well, it might just be that this person is struggling with wishing they had a green thumb like their neighbor, and until I take the time to listen, I don't know exactly what the issue of pain is that this person is experiencing.

Alice: So it seems to me that we have said that there are a lot of things that listening is not. Listening is not just letting people vent. Listening is not just sharing my perspective. Listening is not trying to rebut what the person has said. Listening isn't even trying to read somebody's mind. So what is listening, Karen?

Karen: I think listening is fully grasping the pain that the person is experiencing. Listening is experiencing. It's listening to the whole nine yards. It's listening to every piece of the issue that the person is struggling with in the midst of their pain. So, for instance, if I have just recently lost my job, I might be feeling a sense of betrayal from my supervisor. I might be wondering how I'm going to pay the mortgage. I might be feeling embarrassed that I have to tell my friends and my neighbors about having lost my job. Listening is listening to the whole painful experience that this person is going through.

Alice: And it sounds to me as if that takes time.

Karen: It absolutely takes time, and it takes undivided attention on our parts to really do a good job of listening. I think it's a step that we so often want to skip when we're ministering to people in pain, and we just need to slow ourselves down and listen.

Alice: So how do we listen best?

Karen: I think there are many ways, but one of the main ways is to just paraphrase back for a person what they said. So if I say to you, "I am so upset that I just lost my job." How might you rephrase that?

Alice: "Well, so you just lost your job."

Karen: Exactly. It's . . .

Alice: It's as simple as that.

Karen: It's so simple to just paraphrase back for a person. One person might say to you, "I just—I'm so upset. I just wrecked my car. It was raining. I was backing up. I didn't really pay attention." And in reflecting that back might be as simple as saying to the person, "You're so upset. You were in a hurry. You wrecked your car." It can be as simple as that.

Alice: But what that does, I think, Karen, is that it shows the person that you've really heard what he or she said.

Karen: Absolutely, and I think some people who minister to people in pain might feel concerned about just reflecting. They may feel concerned about whether it's doing any good for this particular person, because it kind of seems simplistic.

Alice: But I don't. As I'm listening to you, I'm thinking, wait a minute, when that person reflects back to me, this person has heard what I said, or this person couldn't do that and I'm being heard. And there's something already very important about that.

Karen: There's something very human, a human need that we all have to just be heard and to be understood. And when we communicate that to people, a person has an incredible "aha moment" of feeling heard and feeling listened to.

Alice: Which is very therapeutic.

Karen: Very therapeutic for people. Absolutely. And as we said, you don't have to agree with a person as you're reflecting back. So for instance if somebody has just lost a thousand dollars while gambling, you don't have to agree with gambling to actually be able to just reflect back to them, "Boy, I hear that you're really upset by having just lost a thousand dollars." So some ministers also might be worried that they aren't getting the reflection correct.

Alice: Well, that's true. I could easily see myself worrying about exactly that—that I'm just not doing this right.

Karen: And one of the things that a minister can do when they're listening to somebody else is just plain old ask the person: "So, did I get it right? Am I hearing you right? Is that what you were saying to me?" And just checking with the person to see if you're tracking with them is just a really important part of rephrasing.

Alice: You know, that's very helpful, Karen, just understanding that I can just say, "Did I get it right?"

Karen: There's so many times where we put expectations on ourselves to be mind readers, to be able to catch people's ideas very quickly; and we don't have to do that.

Alice: Okay. Well, that's very helpful. But now one of the things that you have said earlier is that we don't pass judgment. We don't just jump in saying, "Well, that was wrong, or that was bad, or that was something else."

Karen: There may come a time and place where you have the opportunity to share your perspective in the future. But initially that first step has to do with just listening without judging. So interesting, Jesus said, "Judge not."

Alice: That's true in Matthew 7. [See Matthew 7:1.]

Karen: Yes, absolutely, and there's another saying. "There but for the grace of God, go I," is a saying that you hear a lot. You hear people say that. And I looked it up on the Internet, and it was actually based on the experience of a man named John Bradford, who looked off in the distance and saw criminals being hung, and he said, "You know, there but for the grace of God, go I." And I think his point is that as we minister to people in pain, we have to bring with it a sense of humility that we ourselves could have gone down that path were it not for the grace of God.

Alice: And that's a very helpful reminder, Karen, because it is so easy in life just to think that I am where I am and I enjoy the good things that I enjoy because somehow I deserve it or somehow I'm worth it, when in fact we all are where we are just by the grace of God.

Karen: None of us are deserving of the grace that God gives us. Each one of us is a sinner who is forgiven, who is loved by God undeservedly.

Alice: That's true.

Karen: And each one of us as we minister God's grace to others, we administer that same grace that we've received to others who are in pain.

Alice: And we do that by listening and by listening well.

Karen: And that is our first step. So in this lesson we've talked about many things that listening is not. We've talked about how listening is not solving problems; it's not sharing our perspective; it's not rebutting. It's just reflecting back to the person what you've heard them say, and that is a step that we cannot skip.

And we also have to remember that we listen without judging. It's a point that Jesus made to us. He emphasized it. We need to listen without judging, and in doing so we provide people with that unique human experience of being heard.