



4. Hands and heart

Arrival, welcome and introduction

[8.05] Please feel free to have your video switched on or off as you prefer during our time together. We'll have some times of input in a big group like this, and other times in some small groups. As far as we are able, you will be in the same small groups as last week. In the small group discussion feel free to share as much or as little as you feel comfortable. Don't feel in any way pressured to share more than you want to. While we are in the large group it would be helpful to put yourself on mute to avoid any distractions.

Recap

In our first week we looked at the heart and the goal of loving others. God has a goal for each one of us, which is to make us mature in Christ. While there are lots of things we might like to do for someone who is suffering, we can be involved in that work which God is doing. Then in week 2 we looked at the most fundamental thing we can do for someone else, which is to listen. We considered the power of listening and thought about some practical steps for listening well. Finally last week we consider how to speak well to care for someone who is struggling: to speak in order to understand and speaking Scripture into their lives, and how both of those fuel our speaking to God for that person in prayer.

This final week we are going to turn to the subject of practical, ongoing care for someone in need.

Being faithful

[8.10] One of the most basic parts of ongoing care is *being faithful*. We saw back at the start of this course that what we do and the way we act communicates God's love and character. When we care, when we value someone else, when we listen and take time, we remind them of God's perfect love and care.

So it is when we keep going in caring for someone. Just think of some of the Bible verses that speak of God's faithfulness to us:

"the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you."
(Deut 31:6)

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you." (Isaiah 43:2)

"I will ask the Father and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth." (John 14:16,17)

"If we are faithless, he remains faithful." (2 Timothy 2:13)

When we are faithful and keep loving others, we display God's faithfulness to them. Of course, God is perfectly faithful, and we are imperfect; we get things wrong and make mistakes. Faithfulness is ultimately a fruit of the Spirit and will only be produced in us by the Spirit's work. Yet even in our imperfections, as we continue to love others, we show something of the faithfulness of God.

Being faithful in loving others is all about 'walking alongside' others. It's not about walking in front as if we are leading them in some way. It isn't our role to get people to follow us or do what we say. Nor is it about walking behind someone, pushing them along so they rely on our strength. Rather it is walking alongside them through the ups and downs of life, being there as their friend and fellow Christian. And it means staying alongside them for the long haul.

Practical help

[8.15] One of the things that we will want to do as we continue to love others is help them practically. We have already looked at some of the practical ways we can help: listening, praying and speaking God's word are all very practical things we can do to love others.

But there might be other practical needs that we can help meet as well. Cooking a meal, doing the shopping, mowing the lawn and so on. I have shaped this course deliberately to remind us why we do these things and that listening

comes first. But inevitably we will have the means to meet some practical needs as well. And of course we should do so.

When it comes to practical help, it is always better to start small. It is much better to be faithful in a few things than to promise much and not be able to deliver. Remember, our faithfulness displays God's faithfulness. We might love to be able to cook a meal every day for the next month, but is that realistic? Can we follow through on it? Much better to commit to a week perhaps and see if others can help with subsequent weeks than over commit yourself.

Of course, we can slip into overcommitment without knowing it. Offer to get someone's shopping and before you know it there is an expectation that you will do so every week! The person in need is not taking advantage but they have a need, and you have offered to meet it, and they are grateful. Nevertheless it can be quite difficult to then change the status quo.

It can be helpful to offer to do some kind of practical help once to begin with. Offer to pick up their shopping on Thursday but make it clear this one time is what you are offering. If it goes well, then you might offer to continue for a month, or something like that. It is always easier to build up commitments, much harder to pull back from them.

Limits and boundaries

[8.20] This leads us on to one of the most important things to consider with continued care: limits and boundaries. This might seem obvious, but you are not God! One of the ways in which this is evident is that *you have limits*. God does not have limits, but you are not God, and you have limits.

Many of us can operate as if we have no limits but that is not a godly mindset, it is a recipe for burn out. "Well I would rather burn out than rust out for Jesus!" some might say. But I don't see that reflected in the Bible. God's word talks about the Christian life as a race, which we need to race carefully to the very end, not sprint for the first 100 metres of a marathon.

So: you have limits, which means you cannot do everything. That can be hard to hear when you have someone in front of you with needs. But you cannot meet all their needs, and you cannot meet everyone's needs. God has given you only 24 hours in a day and 7 days in a week. He has given you a certain mental, emotional and physical capacity and you need to be aware of that. Going over that capacity is not honouring to God.

I love this passage from Galatians chapter 6. In verse 2, Paul write:

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:2)

This is something at the heart of loving others – to carry burdens and share the load with those in need. But just a few verses later Paul writes:

"for each one should carry their own load." (Galatians 6:5)

We need to hold both of these two together. We want to care and help, to carry burdens. But there are some burdens we cannot carry. Don't forget you are not another person's doctor, counsellor or social worker. As such there will be many things you cannot do for them. In particular be very wary of getting involved in anything concerning money or medical care.

Limits are the reality we need to grasp. Boundaries are the way we manage those limits. Boundaries are about knowing what we *can* do and what we *can't*. They are about knowing and clearly communicating what our time, energy, capacity and expertise is.

Some people look down on boundaries as if they are somehow not Christian. As I have said already, looking after our limits is something we ought to do as Christians. But boundaries involve saying 'no' and it can easily slip into our minds that saying 'no' is somehow uncaring and unloving. Yes, saying 'no' is something that Jesus did.

Consider this episode from Mark's gospel:

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." (Mark 1:35–38)

Jesus was presented with a ministry opportunity - an eager crowd of people. But Jesus says 'no', I need to go somewhere else, that's my mission. What would we have done?

So don't be afraid to say 'no'. Of course, do so lovingly and sensitively. "I can't do that I'm afraid, but let's think about someone else we could ask..." But know your limits and guard them.



Discuss: How do you feel about the idea of limits and boundaries? Have you been in a situation where you have needed to protect your boundaries or overstepped your limits?

Involving others

[8.30] Ongoing care is about loving others for the long haul. But it's vital that we realise this is not something we do alone! We can, and should, involve others in caring for another person.

This might be sharing the load of practical assistance for someone, as we have already seen. It might be bringing another person with you when you visit someone who is sick, so if your mind goes blank, they can chip into the conversation. It might be talking over an issue with someone else to share your own emotional load.

Bringing in others helps to prevent us thinking we are the one who needs to fix everything. It reminds us that we are not another person's saviour. Instead we point toward Jesus our saviour.

Calling on experts

When we think about involving others, it is important to know we can, and should, call on specialist help as well. We cannot be the expert on everything and we are likely to cause problems if we try. It is never wrong to say "I don't know." When we do find ourselves saying that, there are others we can call on.

If there is a medical issue, then the person's GP is the first port of call. You can't deal with a GP for someone else but you can encourage and help them to make contact. If the need is urgent, there is A&E. In both those situations (when there isn't a pandemic!) you can go with the person as a way of helping.

If the person is struggling with financial issues, don't try and be a financial adviser if you are not. There are other organisations out there, such as Christians against poverty, who can help.

If there is a spiritual issue you need help with, obvious the church is there and I would probably be the person to come to in the first instance.

If the issue is more emotional or psychological, then counselling is a very helpful path to take. This can be accessed through the GP or as a private client, and there is a directory of Christian counsellors available through the Association of Christian Counsellors (acc-uk.org)

If all these cases, do make use of expert help, but don't leave the person behind. It's not a matter of moving them onto someone else, but walking alongside them through the process. A GP or counsellor can't tell you what the person has discussed with them. But the person is completely at liberty to do so if they want. Continue to be there for them and be part of the process as they feel comfortable.

Helping the suicidal

[8.37] Suicidal thoughts are more common than we think, and one of the biggest killers, especially of men. Churches can be places where suicide is never discussed and where thoughts of suicide are kept quiet, making the potential for problems much worse. Here are a few thoughts about dealing with someone who is having suicidal thoughts:

1. Don't be afraid to talk about it. There is this idea that talking about suicide and taking your own life makes people more likely to do so. That is simply not true. While you don't want to normalise or glamorise suicide amongst everyone, especially young people, it is okay to talk to a person about suicidal feelings. Don't be afraid to ask someone "Are you having thoughts about harming yourself?" By being able to talk about their feelings, it can make them much more manageable, reducing the risk of them acting on their thoughts.
2. Look for signs of concern. A person talking about dark thoughts or feelings of harming themselves doesn't necessarily make them an immediate risk of suicide. But you should be aware of signs that could indicate that they are more likely to act. You can think of these signs as the classic detective ideas of means, motive, and opportunity. So do they have the means of taking their own life? Have they got a plan of how they would do it (pills, knife, etc)? Do they have the motive to do so? That is, are they at an especially low point? Has something occurred that could tip them over the edge? And do they have the opportunity to act? Are they talking about a time and/or place? Are they left on their own at the moment in a vulnerable state?

3. If they are in danger, act. If you are meeting with someone and you think they are in real danger of harming themselves, don't leave them alone if at all possible. In London, the easiest way to respond is to take them to the nearest A&E, where there will be a mental health professional on hand to help them. If you are not with them, you could encourage them to do this themselves, or to call a crisis line such as Samaritans or a local mental health team. If you are very worried, and especially if you think they are alone and have acted on their feelings to kill themselves, call the police.
4. Encourage them to get help. If someone is considering suicide then they probably need help from a mental health professional. If you are not one of those, then ensure that they seek help from someone who is. Their GP is a good first point of contact, and you could even go with them to the appointment if they are worried.
5. Walk with them through the pain. If you are not a mental health professional, you can still help! They need good friends who will stay with them through the difficulty of feeling so low that you want to take your own life. Keep walking with them and checking in with them. Show them the love of God through your care and consistency, and when it is appropriate, point them to the Lord Jesus Christ as the source of their hope.

Persisting in prayer

[8.42] I want to finish with the very practical and foundational thing we can do, which is to pray. Jesus told parables to encourage his disciples to pray and not give up. So as we think about ongoing, continued care, we need to be persistent in prayer for people in need.

Prayer does change things. But it also reminds us that we are not someone's saviour. We are not there to try and fix things. That is Jesus' role and in prayer we see the work of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit in a person's life. Whatever is going on and whatever else we can or cannot do, we can always pray. It is the bedrock for everything we do in loving others.

So let me pray now.

Question and answer

[8.45]

[9.00] Prayer and finish