

17 August 2014

7 Habits for Christians - 7

“Habit 5: Seek First to Understand”

You know the prayer of St. Francis, right? Actually, it wasn't written by Francis, but that doesn't matter. It begins with, “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace; Where there is hatred, let me sow love.” Sound familiar? It ends this way: “O Divine Master, Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; To be understood as to understand; To be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; It is in pardoning that we are pardoned; And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

That's the essence of Habit #5: Seek First to Understand, *Then* to Be Understood.” Stephen Covey says this is the single, most important principle if you want to be effective with other people. If you want to be effective with other people, the single most important thing you can do is to try and understand them—understand their point of reference and understand them emotionally, that is, on a feeling level.

Let me put this another way: to be known and understood is one of the deepest psychological needs human beings have. And it's a need that not too many people seem interested in or equipped to meet.

This habit is one I have to consciously work at. My instinctive response when I am listening to a person expressing a problem or a concern is to problem solve. “I see the problem; here's what you do.” I know in my head that is not usually the best way to respond. I have to fight myself to keep from doing so, and I frequently lose that fight. It would be much better and more effective for me to first make sure I understand the person, their frame of reference, and their feelings before speaking out of my own frame of reference.

Don't get me wrong, problem solving is good and sometimes exactly what is called for. But in any close relationship—in a family, a partnership, a church—problem solving *can't* be done until you understand the other person's frame of reference and feelings—that's feelings as opposed to opinions—we make trouble when we confuse the two. And even in a purely transactional relationship, can you really do problem solving without first understanding those things?

Suppose you were to go to an optometrist and say, “My vision is getting blurry; I think I may need glasses,” and the optometrist responds, “Here, take these. I've used them from years, and they help me see just fine. I have an extra pair, so you can have these.” You put the glasses on and say, “No, this is worse,” and the optometrist says, “They work for me; you just need to try harder.”

Well, we all recognize how ridiculous that is. But we have a tendency to do just that very thing. “Oh, I know exactly how you feel. Oh, I know just what you should do.” No, we don't.

I could spend some time talking about the stages of deep listening—mimicking content,

rephrasing content, reflecting feelings—but y’all are smart enough to figure that out. Instead, I want to talk about the theology and faith behind this habit so when you practice it, you can be conscious both of God’s presence with you and that you are doing Kingdom of God work.

The bit of theology behind this habit, not to get too Episcopalian or anything, is the Incarnation. In the fullness of time, God came to earth as a human being in the person of Jesus. I don’t think that was done so that God might truly understand us. No, I think it was the other way around. I think God came to earth so that we might begin to understand God a little more fully and be drawn into the incredibly rich life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The love of God became embodied—literally—in the man Jesus. When you practice deep listening you are embodying that love of God for another person in need. Or, as Martin Luther would put it, you are being a little Christ.

There’s faith behind this habit, too. Last week I quoted Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” Now, let me continue to the end of that thought: (still quoting Jesus here) “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

The faith behind Seek First to Understand and Then to Be Understood—and it’s the faith behind Win/Win, too—is that God will take care of us. That sounds so simple. It is simple, but it’s hard. If you’re hungry and poor, it’s hard. If you’re worried about paying off debts, it’s hard. If you’re worried about outliving your retirement income, it’s hard. If you’re filled with envy or desire for the shiny baubles our consumerist society offers, it’s hard.

But when you are able to have and to practice faith that God will take care of you, you’re life is remarkably different. You are less anxious, less stressed and therefore more healthy. You are more peaceful, joyful, loving, generous—are you recognizing the fruits of the Spirit here?

Now, the really tough part here is that you can’t make yourself have this kind of faith. As Martin Luther said, “I believe that I cannot believe in Jesus Christ or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel.” Yes, faith is a gift, not a matter of the will. But it is a matter of the will to receive faith and practice it when it is given. Or to not receive or practice it.

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