

Did I Say the Right Thing?

Responding Well
to Those Who Grieve

MITCH A. SCHULTZ



Dedicated to my dear wife Elaine, my awesome son Brett (also a cancer survivor), and my wonderful daughter Breanna.

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Did I Say the Right Thing?

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Preface

I HAVE STOOD ON BOTH SIDES OF LOSS. As a pastor, I have ministered on countless occasions to those who are mourning the loss of a loved one. As a husband and father, I have also received such ministry while suffering through losses of my own. My wife, Elaine, underwent emergency brain surgery in Liverpool, England, in 1998. She spent the first month of her recovery in a coma. When she awoke, virtually all of her ability to communicate was gone. It would take another month in the hospital and many more at home for Elaine to relearn how to talk, comprehend what others were saying, and read and write. Her journey back continues to this day.

A short while after Elaine's release from the hospital and our family's return to the States, our twelve-year-old son, Travis, was diagnosed with a brainstem tumor. After completing radiation treatment, Travis fought for his life for ten months, losing the battle on August 22, 1999. A full account of our family's struggle with both Elaine's illness and Travis's death is chronicled in my book *Fires of Sorrow*.

I have written *Did I Say the Right Thing?* as a pastor and as one who has suffered loss himself, not simply as a mourner looking for an outlet. My aim is to encourage the church to see the care of those who grieve and mourn as a ministry of the highest priority.

Many do not know how to respond to people suffering with loss. I hope that what I have written will help people to become deeply involved in the lives of those who grieve and mourn and to minister to

them with all of the love and care found in Jesus Himself.

As you read, it will seem at times that I am frustrated that more was not done for us during our time of loss. This is not my intent. I have allowed some frustrations to seep through, because it personalizes what I urge Christians to do. I trust you will understand.

May God bless you and prepare you for ministering to those He has in store for you who grieve and mourn.

Introduction

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED exactly what to say to someone mourning the loss of a loved one? Or have you ever said something and afterward just wanted to kick yourself?

I remember so well making a major blunder just after the first funeral I helped to officiate. Everything seemed to go smoothly until I approached the daughter of the woman who had died. Without even thinking about what I was going to say, I blurted, “You must really feel close to God right now.” The daughter’s only response was to stare at me with a sense of disbelief. Even though she was my friend, that stare contained a thousand admonitions to just shut up!

I learned from that experience to consider carefully the impact of my words on people who are grieving. However, my own experience with loss has taught me well that being careful does not mean I should retreat altogether. Though many do withdraw from those who mourn for fear of offending them, the church needs people willing to break through and serve.

Serving those who mourn must be viewed as a vital ministry, because it is. If you find yourself alongside someone suffering from loss, God is likely asking you to play a strategic role in bringing that person back to a place of restored usefulness. Initially your role will be to comfort and encourage, but it doesn’t stop there. The goal of ministering to believers who have suffered loss involves helping them through their pain to become more effective servants for Christ, servants who are willing to allow God to use their pain to reach others.

In 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul writes fifty-seven verses to encourage readers with truth about resurrection from death. These verses have provided profound comfort to those who grieve, and they are frequently read at funeral services. They offer hope for a future when loved ones will be reunited. However, in the final verse of the chapter, verse 58, Paul brings the issue to the here and now: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.”

Paul’s words, read during my son’s funeral, prompted my own decision to serve out of my pain. I remember thinking I was not to be satisfied with the eventual easing of my pain. God was urging me to give myself fully to His work, and this painful experience would fuel my commitment to obey. As Paul wrote elsewhere, “Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day” (2 Cor. 4:16).

To help you improve in responding well to those who grieve, I offer you ten guidelines. I use the expression “responding well” because there is no way to respond perfectly. Nothing you can do or say can possibly erase all of the pain or replace the one who has died. If someone loses a child, that child is gone. If someone misses his or her spouse deeply, there is no profound word to bring the spouse back. Nevertheless, words and actions can and do strengthen, encourage, and restore the broken heart to a place of usefulness before God. Every grieving situation is different, but these general guidelines will provide you with parameters for ministering effectively to your hurting friend.