

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO DO LIFE WITH ME?



It's a fascinating question: *What's it really like to do life with me?* I want the answer to be: *Amazing! Wonderful! The best!* And in some moments, maybe that's true. But each time I'm uninvited, it's a good time to take a step back and reevaluate some things. And not just about the other person.

I think most of us have the propensity to believe it was the other person's issues that caused her to reject us. And maybe that's true. But I think a more productive use of time is to reevaluate some things about us.

I've tripped through enough relationship potholes to know I bring my own set of imperfections and complications. I could just explain away the hard realities of barriers and breakdowns with others, or I could attempt to look at some possible patterns within myself and pay attention. And by paying attention I mean listen, really listen. There is a story my past needs to tell my present.

And honestly, there are probably a few things others have tried to tell me that I couldn't or wouldn't hear. I gave this some serious thought when I was inspired by a new friend who had physical hearing challenges.

I was at a church conference, sitting backstage feeling the usual pre-message jitters, when the event coordinator asked if I would wear an oblong plastic device hooked to my shirt. Thinking this was a modern version of a lapel microphone, I explained that I was just using a handheld mic so there was no need for a clip-on.

An anxious look crossed her face. She went on to explain that there was a woman in the audience who asked if I would wear this as a special favor so she could better hear my message. I wanted to do this for the audience member, no question. But not really understanding the situation, I grew concerned. I didn't want my blouse to droop or pull in places that would make me hyperconscious, and there didn't seem to be any inconspicuous way to wear the new device. Trust me, I've been in many an embarrassing situation while standing onstage, and I try to avoid adding any more stories like these to my life.

Thinking of other possible solutions, I went to find the sound guy. I asked him if I could clip the device onto the podium or my Bible as long as I stayed close enough for it to still properly work. That's when I got more explanation. For forty-five years, the lady in the audience had never been able to hear a sermon being preached. She'd actually never even heard a prayer being prayed. Her doctor had been working on this special device that would send the specially magnified sound of my voice directly into her hearing aids, allowing her to listen as never before. Me wearing this clip wasn't just a special favor. This was an epic event in the life of this woman.

Now that I'd heard the whole story, I felt like such a heel for worrying about my shirt. I clipped the device directly below my chin and suddenly couldn't have cared less about the shirt droop. I walked onstage and immediately asked my new friend if she could hear me. With blinking eyes and a huge smile, she nodded. Several times during my message, she had tears streaming down her face. So did her friend who was with her. By the time I concluded with a prayer, I knew this was an incredible victory for her lifelong struggle.

It's amazing what a gift it is to be able to hear. I guarantee you, of all the hundreds of people in the audience that day, there was no one listening with more intentionality than my friend with the device. She knew she needed help to hear. The device helped fill a gap she couldn't fill on her own. Once she made use of it, she was able to listen . . . really listen.

I wish there was a device I could wear to help me become a better listener. Not a better listener because I have trouble hearing. No, I'm talking about really listening to make me more aware of the things I referred to earlier that I'm sure others wish I would hear.

To listen or to fail to listen is my choice. Just like when the prophet Ezekiel was being called by God. He was warned that the exiles were unyielding, hardened, and rebellious. *"Go now to your people in exile and speak to them. Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says,' whether they listen or fail to listen"* (Ezekiel 3:11). These people weren't willing to listen to the prophet, because ultimately they weren't willing to listen to God. Ouch.

I never want this to be said about me. But I must admit there are times I don't hear what others are trying to say. This isn't a fun chapter to write. After all, in the context of this book about healing from rejection, I don't want to have to look internally. It feels a little better to blame others for making me feel left out and lonely. It's hard to say, "I may be part of the issue here." But if I want things to get better for me, I need to take a hard look at me.

The most frustrated people are those who feel their lives can only improve when others put forth the necessary effort to make things better. That's problematic since we can't control others. A more productive view of change is to look at ways we need to change. Yes, others may need to make tweaks too. For now, however, let's take some steps forward to examine ourselves and listen to what this may reveal. Back to my original question, "What is it really like to do life with me?"

There is a wonderful set of verses in Proverbs 4:20–27. I like looking at the book of Proverbs as a way to examine my current thinking against the backdrop of God's true wisdom. I guess you could say it serves as a spiritual listening device to aid in me being able to hear truth. Proverbs provides both a goal and route. The goal is successful living and the route is the way of wisdom.

If my goal is to pursue more successful relationships, this wisdom from Proverbs is a great route to take.

Proverbs 4:20–22 is a call to wisdom:

“My son, pay attention to what I say;

turn your ear to my words.

Do not let them out of your sight,

keep them within your heart;

for they are life to those who find them

and health to one’s whole body.”

Verses 23–27 are like a checklist of sorts:

“Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”

“Keep your mouth free of perversity; keep corrupt talk far from your lips.”

“Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you.”

“Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways. Do not turn to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil.”

Let’s unpack this checklist.

“Above All Else, Guard Your Heart, for Everything You Do Flows from It”

This Deals with My Attitude

Have you ever interacted with a know-it-all? Know-it-alls see themselves as a resident expert on almost every topic and are very bold with their opinions. As a matter of fact, they don’t see the thoughts they express as opinions at all. They feel all that they share are absolute facts and aren’t shy about shooting down contradictory ideas.

Does someone’s face pop into your mind as you read that description? Me too! Actually, a couple of people fall into that description for me. Now, mentally shift your criticism of them to a place of grace for a bit. And let your own picture be the one you see matched with this description. I know, I know, this doesn’t perfectly describe you. But what piece of it does? Usually at least one relationship we have brings out little bits of the know-it-all in us. Seek to see it, even if it’s just a hint of it, and determine to try something the next time it starts happening: Guard your heart from the many slippery slopes.

One of the most damaging elements in relationships is pride. That need to be the expert, the right one, the most knowledgeable—it pulls us down into a pit of pride we probably would never label as such. And because pride is so hard to see, here’s a hint of how to know it’s there: The less we feel we need to address pride in our lives, the more it has already blinded us.

Gracious, that's a painful sentence for me to type. Because it forces me to examine something I quite simply don't want to see or acknowledge. But here are some verses that help me pray through this as I ask God to pry open my spiritual eyes and ears:

- *"His pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the Lord his God"* (2 Chronicles 26:16).
- *"In his pride the wicked man does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God"* (Psalm 10:4).
- *"For the sins of their mouths, for the words of their lips, let them be caught in their pride"* (Psalm 59:12).
- *"When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom"* (Proverbs 11:2).
- *"Where there is strife, there is pride, but wisdom is found in those who take advice"* (Proverbs 13:10).
- *"Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall"* (Proverbs 16:18).

We must guard our hearts against pride. Otherwise pride will taint everything else we do, say, and think. There are certainly other things we need to guard our hearts from, but pride is so blinding we'll never see them or be receptive to hearing them if we don't address this first. Then we can see and hear the other things with humility.

"Keep Your Mouth Free of Perversity; Keep Corrupt Talk Far from Your Lips"

This Deals with My Propensity Toward or Away from Affirmation

Do our words build up or tear down?

Imagine there is a bridge over a vast canyon. You are on one side, and a person you care about is on the other side. Every time you dishonor that person with your words, you remove a plank from the bridge. At first this can seem like no big deal. You can navigate around the gaps by stepping over them. But eventually the gaps become gaping holes, causing the journey to the other person to be a treacherous one. Crossing over starts to feel more and more impossible. That's a daunting picture, right?

If I want to keep my connecting bridge strong, there are things I need to assess about the way I'm using my words. Things like:

- Questioning actions without having all the facts
- Assuming the worst about intentions instead of believing the best
- Having a critical tone when discussing possibilities for someone's future
- Needing to say "I told you so" when someone takes a wrong turn
- Competing with another person's accomplishments instead of celebrating them
- Processing my thoughts about someone with others before talking directly to that person
- Seeing someone's issues with bold spotlight clarity while thinking mine are but mere shadows in comparison

Each of these things remove the planks one by one from our connecting bridge. The holes can be repaired, but it will take time and great intentionality to build back with affirmation what negativity has eroded. Here are some affirming questions to start with:

- “Would you help me understand how best to encourage you?”
- “When we don’t agree, what’s the best way to approach a compromise?”
- “What is something you wish I wouldn’t do when we discuss issues?”
- “Is there an area of your life I can better support?”
- “What is something in your life you wish we could celebrate together?”
- “How can we make our relationship more of a priority in this season?”
- “Is there a mutual confidant, friend, or counselor who is mature enough to help us think through and strategize ways to improve our relationship?”

This is just the beginning of a positive list. Keep adding to it as you continue to think through this. These affirming planks will go a long way in putting your words to good use!

“Let Your Eyes Look Straight Ahead; Fix Your Gaze Directly Before You”

This Challenges My Altitude

A friend of mine recently told me she put herself through a 360 evaluation. I thought that sounded interesting, so I asked her to explain. Basically, to increase her ability to see things from another person’s vantage point, she had to circle the issue, looking for her own blind spots.

As a follower of Jesus, we are followers of wisdom. Fixing our gaze directly before us and looking straight ahead helps us to focus on wisdom and not get deceived by our own blindness and assumptions. I get distracted from wisdom and attracted to foolishness when I don’t seek to understand what other people really want. Wisdom seeks to see someone else’s vantage point even if I don’t agree with that person’s perspective. But only from their perspectives can you strategize about how to meet the other people on common ground. Foolishness refuses to acknowledge there’s any other way to look at something but mine. Eventually, others will build barriers to shut this kind of exhausting foolishness out of their lives.

My husband and I have really had to work on this with our relationship. I’m a get-it-done-and-figure-out-the-small-details-later kind of girl. He’s a write-out-every-step-because-no-detail-is-too-small-to-become-a-big-problem kind of guy.

Recently, we were helping one of our adult kids think through the purchase of her first little starter home. My daughter and I crunched all the numbers to get to what would be a reasonable monthly mortgage payment. And then we estimated all the other related monthly bills and were good to go. We found a great deal on a house that fit within her established budget and felt that we’d attended to all the necessary details.

I thought Art would be thrilled with all our processing when we verbally presented everything to him looking for his support. He wanted everything written out on paper from start to finish. I could have pushed back, confident we'd done what we needed to do, and then just left him out of the rest of the process. But as I forced myself to look at things from his vantage point, I saw the wisdom in taking the time to write everything out in much more detail than our simple version of running the numbers. We didn't get as detailed as he would have, but we met on the common ground of getting much more on paper than before.

Rising above my own vantage point to circle around and see his was a better altitude from which to see the bigger picture. Had I dug my heels in and refused to meet Art in the common ground, we would have missed some expenses that eventually could have caused our daughter some financial setbacks. In the end we adjusted her remodel budget and were able to set her up for success.

“Give Careful Thought to the Paths for Your Feet and Be Steadfast in All Your Ways. Do Not Turn to the Right or the Left; Keep Your Foot from Evil.”

This Is About My Actions

Okay, last evaluation. Now that we've been diligent with our attitude, affirmation, and altitude, we must analyze our actions past and present. Sometimes when I've veered from wisdom, I have to go back to reevaluate past actions in order to go forward in restoring present relationships. To do this we must backtrack, back up, and back down.

- **Backtrack:** Admit we've been wrong. If we're brave enough to start the restoration process by owning one issue where we were wrong, it will start to soften other hard places.
- **Back up:** Ask for forgiveness. This will give the other person a safe place to stand while considering the next step.
- **Back down:** Intentionally show that person the action for which we asked for forgiveness is an area where we are making strides of improvement and breaking unhealthy patterns.

I'm very thankful God's Word helps me see things I need to pay attention to. Nothing will give you emotional laryngitis like living in close proximity to someone who refuses to listen. Having emotions but no voice chokes the life out of relationships. How tragic for the one silenced. But also, how tragic for the silencer, who throws so much richness of relationship away.

Whew . . . we've covered a lot here. I don't picture these pages to be a one-read section. I know I'll revisit all we've just processed again and again as I make progress in various relationships. Learning to listen requires strategies to improve our hearing. Just as my friend's life changed when she was given a hearing device, I pray this section gives you a relationship revitalization.

And the next time you ask the question, “What's it really like to do life with me?” I pray the answer makes you and those you love smile.

What's It Like to Do Life with Me? Assessment

Instructions: You read “What’s It Like to Do Life with Me?” and now it’s time to really assess this in your personal life. Next to each statement in the list, note whether that statement is true or false for you the majority of the time. Then, cover your responses and have a trusted friend or family member write their answers about you on the other page. At the end, prayerfully compare the two sets of answers to see what it’s really like to do life with you. Make sure you both have time after doing the assessment to talk about your responses and how you might be able to improve in the areas that need attention.

Pray this before comparing both sets of answers:

Lord, thank You for the gift of refinement. Thank You for extending grace to me because I so desperately need it. Thank You for _____, who so lovingly wants to help me become a better version of me. I pray You’ll give me the heart to read these answers without hesitation, hurt, or bias. Help me to see Your guidance through this assessment, and show me areas where I can grow. I want to bring the fullness of Your presence everywhere I go, to everyone I meet. In Jesus’ name, amen.

ASSESS YOURSELF

TRUE	FALSE	
		My friends and family know they can count on me to encourage and support them.
		I am easily approachable and others are able to confront me when I’ve offended them.
		I am the first to apologize.
		I am quick to extend grace and understanding.
		In a conversation, I listen well and wait for my turn to speak.
		I am more oriented toward giving grace and have difficulty speaking truth.
		I am more oriented toward speaking truth and have difficulty giving grace.
		I acknowledge others when they have a better idea than mine.
		I celebrate the success of others, even when I may not experience success of my own.
		I process my thoughts before speaking directly to someone, especially in a heated discussion.
		I assume the best instead of the worst.
		I remain my authentic self regardless of my surroundings.
		I am quick to forgive without holding grudges.
		There are topics or negative emotions that I avoid discussing.

OTHERS' ASSESSMENT OF YOU

TRUE	FALSE	
		I know I can count on my friend to encourage and support me.
		My friend is easily approachable and it's easy for me to confront him/her when he/she has done something wrong.
		My friend is the first to apologize.
		My friend is quick to extend grace and understanding.
		In a conversation, my friend listens well and waits for his/her turn to speak.
		My friend is more oriented toward giving grace and has difficulty speaking truth.
		My friend is more oriented toward speaking truth and has difficulty giving grace.
		My friend acknowledges others when they have a better idea than him/her.
		I feel that my friend understands and respects my opinion even if he/she disagrees.
		My friend celebrates the success of others, even when he/she may not experience success of his/her own.
		My friend processes his/her thoughts before speaking directly to someone, especially in a heated discussion.
		My friend assumes the best instead of the worst.
		I can trust my friend to be authentic, regardless of his/her surroundings.
		My friend is quick to forgive without holding grudges.
		There are topics or negative emotions that my friend avoids.