



## Foreword

March 2018

Greetings in the name of our risen Savior! Last year, we continued our series on death and dying with the *Let's Talk about Death and Dying* guide. Based upon your feedback, we're continuing the series again with this year's guide *Ministering to the Families of the Deceased*. We not only include the "what to do" for those who die in the faith. We also include those who died unsaved.

As we said last year, death is something we too often are afraid to talk about. However, it's the common denominator of everyone. The final chapter of this guide includes a checklist of things to do when someone dies. We hope that you find this guide a blessing and that you share it with others.

Now, let the study begin!

God bless!

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### death noun

1. **end of being alive:** the ending of all vital functions or processes in an organism or cell
2. **way of dying:** a manner of dying
  - *an easy death*
3. **somebody's dying:** an instance of somebody's dying
4. **end of something:** the destruction or extinction of something
5. **condition of being dead:** the condition or quality of being dead
  - *In death she looked peaceful and composed.*

### (from) die verb

1. **intransitive verb stop living:** to cease to be alive ( *refers to a person, plant, or animal* )
2. **intransitive verb stop existing:** to cease to exist, especially gradually
  - *feelings I thought had died long ago*
3. **intransitive verb stop working:** to stop functioning
  - *The engine suddenly died.*

[c.1135 <possibly from Old Danish *døja* or Old Norse *deyja* "to die, pass away"]

**Disclaimer: Material in this booklet is a compilation of edited and original material. Inclusion of material is not necessarily an endorsement of all of a particular writer's or denomination's views.**

## 10 Things You *Should* Say to A Grieving Person

Tom Fuerst

Source: <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/5591/10-things-you-should-say-to-a-grieving-person>

My post a few days ago, “10 things you should never say to a grieving person,” sparked a lot of discussion, both affirming and challenging to my ten points. Most people were grateful for the list, as it helps them know exactly what clichés to avoid at funerals or in the presence of a grieving friend. A number of concerned people, however, noted that the post is largely negative — that is, it tells us what not to say, but doesn’t tell us what we can say. And while I appreciate the criticism, I think it really gets at the heart of why the original post was needed. But let me tell a brief story first.

### **The pain doesn't go away**

My dad died in a motorcycle accident six years ago. Only 50 years old, he left behind four adult children. Obviously, the news of the accident obliterated us, leaving us all reeling and disoriented. It was the first major death any of us had ever dealt with. At 28 years old, you’re still supposed to have two to three more decades with your dad. Barely into adulthood, I didn’t realize how much I still felt like a child until my dad was gone.

No goodbye...No “I love you.” Just gone.

Predictably, at his funeral endless people, all with good intentions, tried to say consoling things. I realized then and there that I hated the funeral visitation line. The whole experience of having people come through line and feel like they just have to say something to you is awkward and deflating.

I came to wonder, not for the last time, if people really think there’s a magic set of words that can just solve my “problem.” Do people really think that they’re going to be able to string together the right combination of syllables and somehow make my dad’s death less tragic? Surely, they don’t.

But it seemed a lot of folks sure were giving their best effort at it. As if, maybe by saying the right thing my dad would come up out of the grave like Lazarus. In the midst of all the mini-counseling sessions, there was, however, one man who came up to me and said something I will never forget. If you’ve got to say anything at all to a grieving person, learn something from him.

Without an ounce of discomfort or awkwardness, most likely because he wasn’t trying to solve my problem, an elderly gentleman named Charlie came up to me. A few years before, he’d lost his wife to cancer and still grieved her death as he tried to manage survival day after day without her. In all the wisdom that comes along with that kind of grief, Charlie put his arms around me, hugged me, then looked into my eyes and said, “The pain doesn’t go away. You just learn to live with it.” That was the most truthful, brutally honest, beautiful thing anyone had said to me all day. I was tired of tired, canned answers.

I was tired of people trying to snap me out of grief with their clichés. This man spoke unadulterated truth — this sucks. It’s going to suck forever. The only hope in it is that you learn to live with it. Or, in the words of Andrew Peterson, “The aching may remain, but the breaking does not.”

### **Here's the point...**

This man was able to speak such direct truth to me precisely because he knew it firsthand. He didn't need to make up for his own insecurities by settling for a cheap word. No, he knew something of the pain, he knew something of the fruitlessness of answers in that moment, and he knew what could be said and what shouldn't be said.

And maybe that's the problem with much of our conduct at funerals. For many Americans, we spend so much time avoiding suffering that we don't know what to do when it stares us in the face. We don't know what to say. Or, more telling, we don't know that most of us just shouldn't say anything at all.

When I wrote my original post, I had endless well-meaning people say, "Why didn't you write 10 things you *should* say to a grieving person?"

But the question, well-intentioned as it may be, misses the point entirely. We do not have to say anything at all. In fact, most of us shouldn't say anything.

### **Silence is holy and healing**

Since when is silence in the face of tragedy not a good option? Since when do we have to fill every moment with words?

It is a very culturally American thing to feel like you have to talk all the time. Our culture knows as much about silence as it does about grieving, which is to say nothing. We can't be alone with our thoughts on the best of days, let alone on the worst of days. We feel this addictive need to talk, speak, yell, whisper, offer and blather, all because we have no idea how to be silent. We have no idea that silence can, in fact, be holy. And silence is almost never inappropriate.

There is something to be learned from Job's friends in this regard. After he lost his family, Job's friends showed up and for three full days they said absolutely nothing. Their silence was the sound of love and reverence for Job's grief. It was not until they started speaking that they started making mistakes. They wanted to solve Job's grief, give a reason for it, offer a divine perspective on it. But Job, who, unlike many grievors, had the wherewithal to argue back, denied their stupid answers and faulty assumptions regarding both what he needed and the very character of the God they assumed they knew.

### **You just look like you needed a hug**

Let me illustrate the appropriateness and holiness of silence with one other brief story from my dad's death. Shortly after dad's funeral, in central Missouri, I had to return to Lexington, Kentucky, to resume my seminary studies. With my heart still beating off-rhythm, with grief still a dirty film on my soul, I walked back onto campus, eyes low, hoping not to make eye contact with anyone. I was tired of people. I was tired of answers.

In fact, I planned my trip to campus at a time when I knew classes were already in session. I planned to be late to class precisely so I didn't have to talk to anyone. So, when I walked on campus, the courtyard was empty. Well, it was empty except for one, lone figure, a Jeremiah Aja.

Jeremiah was some distance from me walking in a different direction. But when he saw me, he yelled my name and started walking right toward me. Admittedly, I was leery of what was coming.

But when he got right up to me, he simply put his arms around me and held me tightly for a few seconds. Then he said, “You just looked like you needed a hug.” He then turned and walked away. To most people who think they need a quick, home run cliché to solve people’s grief problems, this may actually seem like an anti-climactic story.

But to those who know grief, and know it cannot be solved easily, you will understand why this is a moment I will likely never forget. Nothing profound was said. Nothing profound was done. There was a hug. A recognition of my need. And a refusal to try to make things better. Jeremiah did the right thing. I think we could learn a lot from his simplicity.

In the end, I cannot tell people specific things to say to their grieving friends. Why? Because the things you say and do are always caught up in your relationship

1) with the person who is grieving, and

2) your relationship with grief, itself (have you ever deeply grieved?).

The appropriateness of your words and actions only makes sense in light of how well you know the grieving person, and how well you know what is hurting them.

I don’t mean this to be a cop-out answer. It would be nice if there were 10 things you should say to a grieving person. But that’s just not reality.

But silence is never a bad option. Silence is healing. Silence is holy.

### **So what should we say?**

For those of you who will be disappointed if you don’t get more practical advice, here are some general thoughts on what should happen when you come face to face with grief.

**First**, keep in mind that there is no magical thing you can say to make a grieving person feel better. Nothing. You could find the best thing in the world to say and it still will not undo all the pain.

**Second**, instead of focusing on what you should say, focus instead of listening to them (if they want to talk). Don’t force them to talk, but if they want to, don’t offer grieving advice. Rather, use “active listening skills.” That is, keep asking questions that lead back to their feelings, not yours, their story, not yours.

After listening to their story, you can say, “So, when X happened, you felt Y?” That will invite them to talk about their feeling as much or as little as they want. When I counsel with people, that is often what I spend most of my time doing: “When X happened, you felt Y?” That often sparks more talking on their part, it lets them explore their own feelings, and it also lets them correct you if “Y” wasn’t exactly what they were feeling.

All of this is good precisely because it allows them to do 99% of the talking, while you just have to listen and ask questions ... concrete, specific, emotional questions, not general questions.

**Third**, if they don’t want to talk, that’s okay. They’re not going to blame you if it’s awkward — they know it’s awkward for you, because their whole lives are awkward right now. So be okay with it being awkward. Don’t try to solve the awkwardness. After all, the awkward is about your feelings, and you want to keep focused on theirs.

**Fourth**, ask tangible, practical questions. What are the things you need me to do for you at work while you're out? Are there errands I can run for you? Can I shop for you? What are foods you like? (Seriously, if you're going to put together a "make them a meal" community plan, for God's sake avoid pasta! Grieving people get tired of pasta!) Offer to do specific things for them so they can focus on other things, unless of course, they want the mental break. After all, sometimes doing normal chores can be healing because it gives you a sense of equilibrium to do something so mundane.

**Fifth**, as I said above, if you don't feel wise enough to talk with them, or if you don't feel close enough with them, just go be with them. **DO NOT AVOID THEM.** Hug them, ask them a few questions about tangible things you can do for them, pray with them if they're up for it, and let them know you will continue to pray for them. Then leave. It's okay.

**Sixth**, send them texts/emails/cards, etc. over the coming months, on the anniversary of their loss, on the birthday of the person they lost, etc. One thing people forget is that grieving people rarely forget the day a tragedy happened, even if the rest of the world forgets that day. If you want to help someone, don't forget that day, even if you have to write it in your calendar.

**Seventh**, understand that many people will be wrestling deeply with their faith during a time of grief. And that is okay. God is in their grief. God is suffering with them. Their hearts are raw and God is working with that. Don't short-circuit their grief or their questions by cheap answers to eternal questions. Besides, even if you did have the perfect answer from God, would that somehow make their grief less tragic? I don't think it would.

Instead, when tough questions about the faith arise, put your arm around them and simply say, "I don't know what is happening here. But I know that God's heart breaks with yours." Your theological answer doesn't have to be any deeper than that. God suffers with them. God knows grief. He lost a child once.

The time of grief is not necessarily the wisest time for your theological musings. Rather, it is time for you to be God-with-skin-on, being his hands and feet and embracing arms. You don't need to be his mouthpiece.

I hope this provided the tangible assistance many of you were looking for. Though, as I said, I think the best option is holy, reverential silence.

**Your turn:** Do you have any advice from your own experience of grief? Do you have any stories of people who handled your grief well?

## **When a Family Loved One Dies**

Source: <https://www.2equal1.com/advice/when-a-family-loved-one-dies/>

### **What is the best thing you can do for a family that has recently lost a loved one?**

The most important thing that you can do for someone who has lost a loved one is to be there for them. Make the effort to go to them. What you say is not as important as your presence. Remove any preconceived notions that you might have and be ready to listen. You need to find out where they are and meet them there. Jesus always met people where they were and started there. Being there with them is the best thing you can do for them.

Your body language is often more important than your words. Just hugging and holding them can be more important than anything you could ever say. Make the effort to reach out to the family members, hug them and let them cry. Allowing them to release their emotions at this time can be very healing. Being there is more important than the words you say. So often, people worry about what they are going to say in a situation where a loved one has been lost. Again, do not worry about what to say. Listening and finding out where they are and just being there should be your priority.

### **What is a common reaction that a family member might have upon losing a loved one?**

Quite often a family member may be in a stage of denial. The emotional shock of losing their loved one is so great that they can't accept the fact that they are dead. Listen and don't be critical. People often try to pull the loved one out of denial, but quite often that can be cruel. Listen and allow the loved one to go through the process. Be honest with them if they deny the death out loud, but don't be critical. Listen to them and allow them to process what they are experiencing.

At the same time, if after several weeks, the loved one is still denying the death, take stronger steps to help them come out of the denial. If a family stays in denial for too long it can be damaging. I once knew a lady who a year after her husband passed, had still kept his office rented. He had a medical practice and she kept paying rent on the office and left everything set up for an entire year after. This is an example of an extreme case of denial. The best thing to do when someone is in this situation is to get them some professional help so that they can accept the loss and get on with the life that the Lord has for them.

### **What if I want to help, what is the most important thing to offer to someone who has just lost a loved one?**

Practically speaking, ask them what they need to have done. So soon after a loss, many people have their regular everyday things that need to be done. Ask them what you can do to help them. Right after a loss the loved one usually is very paralyzed by the situation. Give practical help. They may need help with preparing food, going to the grocery store or getting meals together for family from out of town. They may need places that family and friends can stay as they come in for the funeral. They may need help with banking or running any kind of errands. They may need help making calls to family members or friends, especially those who are important to them, but that may live at a distance-those who are very close to the family, but that they may not see every day.

Of course, there will be people that they want to call, but you can relieve a lot of stress once the arrangements are made by doing something as simple as calling their friends and family, letting them know of the death, the time and location of the funeral, once the arrangements have been made. These are just simple things you can do to help the immediate family that can be overwhelming to them, depending on the circumstances.

Again, the most important thing you can do is to make yourself available to them at this time. We have a very large family, and I remember when my brother died, my daughter took his van and made it her job to pick up all family and friends that were flying in for the funeral. She may have made seven or more trips a day. Several trips involved picking up more than one party that was coming in from all over the country. She too was dealing with the loss, but it was something she felt led to do, and it was very helpful to the immediate family not to have to be concerned with those details. Because she was mostly picking up family and friends that she knew, it was comforting as well to them.

She could fill them in with any details and be there for them, and together they could work through the feelings and the emotions that they were experiencing after the death. She wanted to simply be able to greet them as they arrived, and not have them picked up by a stranger. This is just one example, if for any reason you are limited in time, you can also help by finding other friends and family members that can take the time to help with some of these details. Helping those in grief with simple, normal everyday tasks and the things that need to be taken care of to make the necessary arrangements can mean more to them than anything else at this time.

**What other advice would you give?**

Don't expect answers from someone who is grieving, and at the same time don't try to give them. Listening and allowing the loved one to process is the most important thing you can do at this time. Allow them to cry, share memories and express the feelings that they have at this time. Encourage them by sharing a story about how the Lord has brought you through or worked in your own life.

## Peace in the Eye of the Storm: Ministering to Those Who Grieve

Jan Bentley PsyD, LMSW

Source: <http://centennialparkcounseling.com/peace-in-the-eye-of-the-storm-ministering-to-those-who-grieve/>

### Our Good-Byes are not Forever

Someone has said that when we lose a parent, we lose the past. When we lose a spouse, we lose the present and when we lose a child we lose the future. That is exactly how I felt as I sat at our kitchen table in the early morning hours of June 22, 1994 and heard the police officer say that our precious daughter, Cheri, our only child, had been involved in a car accident, just six miles from our house, and was killed instantly.

At that moment my dreams and hopes were shattered and in the days and months that followed I experienced the deep pain of living *IN THE EYE OF THE STORM*. The journey of grief is not an easy road. Often I prayed desperately that God would “hang onto me” and help me be obedient to His plan for my life. My prayer was that this experience would not be wasted, that somehow God would use it for His glory. My courage to go on came/comes only from knowing the character of God and knowing that I can *TRUST HIM*.

As I look back, through the wisdom of years I now see, through a rainbow of tears, that I was not in the eye of the storm. Rather, *I WAS IN THE EYE OF A MIRACLE*. God’s faithfulness kept me safe as He carried me through my deepest pain.

### Characteristics of Grief and Loss

The grief response is multifaceted and includes all aspects of one’s being, the behavioral, cognitive, emotional, physical and spiritual, simultaneously. This holistic experience of grief often causes the sensation of “going crazy.” Contrary to public opinion, there is no right or wrong way to experience grief. Each person has their own timetable and style of grief. However, the following are common symptoms recognizable in most grieving people:

#### Emotional Symptoms

- Anger—may be directed at oneself, others, the deceased, and yes, even God
- Anxiety—about losing another loved one and about the future
- Depression/Sadness—thoughts of despair and hopelessness. Not wanting to go on without the deceased.
- Fear—that self and others will forget the deceased
- Guilt—may be obsessed with the “what ifs” and “if onlys”
- Helplessness—feeling unable to cope or get better and that no one understands

#### Behavioral Symptoms

- Sleep disturbances
- Appetite disturbances
- Social Withdrawal
- Crying/intense at times
- Restlessness/Over activity
- Dreams of the deceased
- Desire and need to talk about the deceased

### **Cognitive Symptoms**

- Confusion/difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Preoccupation with thoughts of the deceased
- Senses presence of the deceased

### **Physical Symptoms**

- Fatigue/lack of energy
- Aching/weakness of muscles
- Hollowness in the stomach
- Tightness in chest/throat

### **Spiritual Symptoms**

- Reassessment of one's faith and belief system
- Faith that once brought comfort may feel empty
- Feeling disappointed with God
- Feeling betrayed by God
- Conflict between experiencing the "peace that passeth all understanding" and questioning God, His wisdom and faithfulness

Be sensitive to those who grieve; following are some do's and don'ts:

#### **DO:**

- Make contact as soon as possible either in person or by phone
- Go the funeral home if it is possible and do sign the register
- Extend your sympathy—presence and physical touch/hugs are important—no words are necessary
- Send a sympathy card, plant or memorial
- Bring in meals
- Give a listening ear, most people in grief have a strong need to talk
- Share memories of the deceased
- Send notes and cards of encouragement
- Remember the special dates (birthday, anniversary date of death, etc.)
- Remember the family in prayer long after the funeral. Often the second year of grieving is more difficult than the first.
- Remember that grieving is a process, takes time, and is a healthy response to significant loss.
- Offer to pray with the grieving person
- Remind them that God grieves with us.

#### **DON'T:**

- Please don't ask for details about the death, the family will share if they so desire.
- Please don't use clichés such as "time will heal," "God never makes mistakes," or "Romans 8:28."
- Please don't avoid talking about the loved one.
- Please don't say "you understand or you know how I feel," **unless** you have lost a loved one.
- Please don't say "at least you had her for 24 years." What year would you choose for your loved one to die?
- Please don't say to "shape up" after three months of grieving. The normal grieving process takes two to five years. (Grieving is the price we pay for loving. Encourage them to grieve well.)
- Please don't question if I am over it yet. I will never be "over it."
- Please don't be my Holy Spirit, just let me talk if I want to and cry when I must.
- Please don't judge my spirituality but try to see as God sees, try to love as God loves.

## Ministering after Suicide

Tina Fox

Source: <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/5112/ministering-after-suicide>

Early in my ministry, a young parishioner completed suicide. Her death devastated our church, our community and me. Following her funeral, many attendees shared with me their story of a loved one who had died by suicide, and each spoke as if the death had just happened. Those painful memories were fresh and raw. I left the funeral heartbroken, my eyes suddenly opened to lives haunted by unhealed grief.

Recurrent pastoral encounters with suicide and mental illness have marked my ministry through the years. I still have much to learn about ministry within the context of suicide, but three practices have helped me along the way.

### **1. Speak openly about suicide.**

A suicide leaves survivors—family and friends who deeply loved the deceased. Many people don't know what to say to survivors. Suicide is a taboo topic in our culture and churches. Most survivors of suicide are abandoned to work through their grief, while friends and family remain silent, whispering behind their backs but completely avoiding the topic in their presence. Much of this reaction is understandable: we hesitate to use the word “suicide”, so we speak in hushed tones, sharing vague details, hoping to change harsh reality through ambiguity. Suicide is painful, awkward and difficult to talk about, but avoidance doesn't change reality.

In my experience, suicide survivors are hungry to talk through the details once they sense you will be a compassionate presence. Let them talk. Ministers ought not avoid the topic with grieving families because it makes us uncomfortable. Suicide is uncomfortable to talk about, but for the sake of those you serve, get comfortable with being uncomfortable.

With the family's permission, talk openly about what happened with others. Remove the stigma of suicide by addressing it boldly, lovingly and prophetically. Let us not perpetuate misconceptions about suicide by failing to speak with the confidence, love and honesty to which God calls us.

### **2. Remember that emotions are complex.**

When people die by suicide, their surviving family and friends can feel a bewildering array of emotions. Sadness and pain are common in all grieving, but with suicide, less socially “acceptable” emotions can be just as strong. Experiencing these emotions is unpleasant for suicide survivors and hard for us, as the listener, to hear.

Survivors may feel great anger: “How could my loved one take his or her own life?” True, suicide is not really a choice, but the result of deep anguish and (oftentimes) mental illness. Still, let survivors be angry. Help them acknowledge and express anger safely and without judgment.

Many ministers are surprised when survivors express a deep sense of relief. Perhaps their loved one battled mental illness for a lifetime. That struggle was likely marked with times of success and relapse, emotional and financial struggle and relational difficulties. Repeated suicide attempts may precede the final, “successful” attempt.

Why should we be surprised when survivors express relief? The roller-coaster has stopped, and survivors can feel relief that their loved one's pain is ended. But they may even feel a sense of personal relief that the ruthless "ups-and-downs" of mental illness have ceased. They don't want to feel relieved, but feelings, especially unpleasant ones, do not come and go at our bidding. Ministers must grant to survivors the liberty to feel unpleasant emotions, without being censored or "fixed."

When we deprive suicide survivors of a safe space to talk through difficult feelings, the grief stagnates. Survivors limp along, never fully healing, never fully returning to life. The grief associated with suicide is complex grief that may include crippling guilt and shame. Survivors unfairly bludgeon themselves for a lifetime for failing to do "more" to prevent the suicide. This is hard, messy stuff. We must enter into the survivor's unique pain, and walk with them where they are, as they are.

### **3. Above all, point them to Jesus.**

In all things, point them to Jesus. Jesus looked on people's pain with the deepest compassion. He wept over death and died to destroy sin, despair, brokenness, and pain. Point grieving people to the God who died for them – the God who knows our suffering intimately. Our crucified and resurrected God understands the pain of even the most complex, unimaginable losses.

I don't have all the answers, and it's been my experience that most grieving people don't really want answers anyway. They do, however, need a whole lot more than you and I can possibly give to them. They need something that only God can give: grace, healing, peace, hope, love and redemption.

Ministers can and must walk with suffering people, showing empathy and deep compassion, but it is Jesus who heals the broken heart. Point them to Jesus. Patiently, persistently and compassionately remind them that Jesus is with them. Help them see that Christ's suffering reveals to us a God who is not distant from our pain but enters into pain with us. Our God can be trusted to heal and deliver.

## When an Unbeliever Dies: Offering Comfort without Distorting the Truth

George Lawson

Source: [https://www.tms.edu/preachersandpreaching/when\\_an\\_unbeliever\\_dies/](https://www.tms.edu/preachersandpreaching/when_an_unbeliever_dies/)

My theology tells me that it is not right to lie, even if my intended purpose is to bring about a good outcome. We are not to “do evil that good may come” (Romans 3:8). Lying is a violation of God’s character and will. God is the God of truth. He cannot lie, and He does not condone lying in the Scriptures (Titus 1:2).

Lying is never right, never loving, and never necessary. Followers of Christ are to be truth tellers. This does not mean we have the permission to be crass, unkind or uncaring in our speech. We are commanded to speak the truth in love, but we are always commanded to speak the truth. This does not change whether we are talking about good news or bad news, joys or hardships, life or death.

One of the greatest and most challenging speaking invitations a pastor will ever receive is to speak at a funeral. A bereaved family will often request a pastor’s presence to speak words of comfort, hope and peace. Sometimes they will even call this speech the *eulogy*, which literally means *good words*. It brings a family great relief to hear a minister say:

“We are comforted that his suffering is finally over” *or...* “She is in a better place now” *or...* “I know that we will see him again”

But what if those words are not true because the person did not know Christ? Are they still “good words”? And if these words are not true, are there any words of comfort we can share that are true? This is not just a question that ministers face, but one that is common to every Christian seeking to offer words of consolation for those in mourning.

Thankfully, there are words of comfort and truth that we can share with those who grieve, even when we are uncertain about the eternal destiny of their loved one who died. We don’t have to abandon the truth of Scripture in order to offer consolation. Below are a few “good words” we can honestly share about those who have passed away, with a clear conscience.

### 1) God is a God of Hope and Mercy

If Scripture did not record his conversion, no one would have expected the thief on the cross to go to heaven. He spent his whole life in manifest rebellion towards God. Even while hanging on a cross, he hurled accusations against the perfect and holy Son of God (Matthew 27:39-44). Yet, we discover that his heart was changed in the last moments of his life; his sins were forgiven, and he was promised paradise (Luke 23:40-42).

As that example illustrates, we cannot know for sure what the condition of the person’s heart might have been in the moments right before death. God’s mercy is rich, vast and incomprehensible, “for He says to Moses ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So, then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy” (Romans 9:15-16). While we must be careful not to presume on God’s grace nor to offer false hope to grieving loved ones, we can say without fear of contradiction that “God is a merciful God and His mercy is available even up to the point of death.”

### 2) God is a God of Love and Grace

Second, we can express thankfulness to God for the common graces He allowed the person to experience in this life. The Scriptures speak of a common love and non-saving grace that has been

provided to all mankind. In Matthew 5:44, Jesus issues a command to love our enemies, because our Father who is in heaven “causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” God showers His love in general ways even on those who are His enemies (cf. Acts 14:17). Therefore, we can point to the common grace and goodness of God as we recall the undeserved blessings He graciously permitted the person to enjoy during his or her years on this earth.

### **3) God is a God of Justice and Righteousness**

We can also provide comfort by reminding our hearers that God will always do what is right and just. In Genesis 18, Abraham questioned the justice of God when he learned about the impending doom of Sodom and Gomorrah. As we follow the narrative, we discover that God gave Sodom and Gomorrah every opportunity to repent. He was even willing to withhold His fury on an entire city, if He could find just ten righteous people who lived there! The Lord’s incredible grace and longsuffering is highlighted in this narrative. He is a God in whom there is no injustice, and He knows how to separate the righteous from the wicked. Comfort comes by reminding the grieving that they can trust the Lord to do what is right with respect to their loved one who died. There is no injustice with God, is there? “May it never be!” (Romans 9:14).

If we keep our comments anchored in the immutable character of God, we never have to fear offering “good words” that are not also true words. No matter who has died, we can boldly say that God is a God of compassion and faithfulness, of wisdom and power, of sovereignty and providence, and of righteousness and justice. Even if the person who died never responded in saving faith, their unbelief does not alter the perfect character of God in the least.

Finally, I would commend to you an additional “good word” that needs to be shared at any funeral or conversation about a loved one who has passed away.

### **4) God is a God of Salvation**

We don’t have to know the eternal destiny of the dead person, to know with certainty what message they would want us to give to their family and friends. In Luke 16, Jesus shares the only message an unbeliever ever attempted to send back to earth: “Warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment” (Luke 16:28).

The “good word” that ultimately needs to be heard is the “good news” of salvation. The holy God who created all things and against whom all people have sinned, will forgive and provide eternal life to all who turn from sin and trust in His sinless Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). Jesus died as a sacrifice for sin but rose in victory over death and offers His perfect righteousness as a gift to all who believe (2 Corinthians 5:20-21).

Our words of comfort need to lead people to the God of all comfort, where souls that grieve can find solace in His truth. He is both the God of comfort and the God of truth.

God does not distort the truth to alleviate grief and neither should we. We don’t have to abandon the truth of Scripture in order to offer sincere consolation to those in mourning. Thankfully, there are words of comfort that we can honestly share with those who grieve, even if we are uncertain about the eternal destiny of the recently departed. We are not obligated to say anything about the person who died, but we are obligated to tell those still alive that only through the gospel can they truly rest in peace.

## How Do I Minister to an Unsaved Friend Whose Loved One Died Without a Relationship with Christ?

Randy Alcorn

Source: <https://www.epm.org/blog/2010/Oct/25/how-do-i-minister-unsaved-friend-whose-loved-one-d>

In today's blog, I'm answering a question asked by a reader:

*How would you respond and minister to unsaved friends or family (or even strangers) who have lost a loved one and assume their lost loved one is in Heaven, even though that person clearly did not have a relationship with Jesus Christ?*

That's a good question. I've been in that exact situation. I think the answer is that we do *not* have an obligation to try to convince people that their loved one was not saved. I think what that would do is lay a responsibility on us to impose an opinion we have, and although that opinion may very well be accurate, it will just cause unnecessary distress to that person in the midst of their loss.

This is very different than a person who believes their loved one who is still alive is saved, when they are clearly not. That's when we need to sit down with them and say, "You think your brother, your father, your son, your daughter, your spouse is saved, but there is clear evidence they are not." We need to pray for that person as we would pray for an unsaved person, relate to them, and reach out to them. We need to look for ways to get the gospel to them, because there are many indications they are unsaved. But when someone's loved one has died, what is the point in trying to persuade them that their loved one is in Hell? I don't know what that would accomplish.

What might help you personally on this—and I have reassured myself about this many times—is to realize that we do not know what happens inside a person before they die. We don't know whether the Holy Spirit of God has done a work of grace in someone's heart and life at the last moment. They may have been aware of the hours, minutes, even just seconds leading up to their death and cried out to God for deliverance.

Take the person who has been in a coma for a period of time and is unresponsive. Everyone might think, "They were in this accident. They didn't know Christ when they left home that day, so obviously they still don't know the Lord." But we don't know what God is doing in someone's heart and mind—bringing back to their memory aspects of the Gospel that have been shared with them, and things they've read and heard. In their weakness—in their most vulnerable, least independent, most dependent state—they *could* be turning to Christ in faith. We may be surprised and delighted to one day see them in the presence of Christ.

Now, that should *not* be a false assurance for someone to say to themselves, "Then it doesn't really matter if I share the gospel with them, because maybe God will do a miracle in their lives shortly before they die." Of course, not—we should do everything we can to bring them the truth. But once someone has died, I think it is appropriate to say, "We don't know." This can encourage someone to think, "Maybe they did come to faith in Christ and maybe one day I will see them in God's Kingdom." To me, that seems like an appropriate way to *encourage* rather than *discourage* someone.

The bottom line is, when you're talking with an unbeliever, your concern should be to share the gospel with them. You're not trying to address the issue of whether family members of theirs who have died in the past were saved or unsaved or whether they're in Heaven or in Hell.

What is clear is that you should share the gospel with them, and talk to them about Heaven and Hell and whether *they* will go to Heaven or whether they will go to Hell. Jesus said in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father but by me." We must believe and have faith in Jesus Christ in order to be saved and go to Heaven.

If *they* raise the question, "Are you saying that my father who died is in Hell?" you can say, "I don't know where your father is, because I don't know what the condition of his soul was when he died. He may have turned to faith in Christ. And you probably wouldn't be in a position to know that unless he was able to tell you."

## Funeral and Memorial Service Checklist

Source: <http://elegantmemorials.com/funeral-service-checklist>

Planning a funeral can be a very stressful and difficult task. Often, the person in charge of making the funeral arrangements are grieving and may not have a clear understanding of the wishes of their deceased loved one. Listed below are several questions that can serve as a guide or a checklist for helping you through the sometimes painful process of planning a memorial or funeral service.

### NOTIFY

- Doctor or hospice nurse
- Coroner
- Funeral home
- Clergy
- Relatives and friends
- Executor of will
- Insurance company
- Policy number
- Bank account number(s)
- Credit card account number(s)
- Professional organizations
- Veteran's discharge or claim number
- Employer
- Landlord
- Utility companies
- Post Office
- Social Security office
- Social Security number

1. Do you want a religious-based, traditional funeral service or non-traditional memorial service?
2. What are you going to do with the body? Casket, urn, or maybe the body won't be present?
3. Who will officiate the service? Will it be a minister, family member, friend or celebrant? Will it be a religious or secular-based service?
4. Are you considering cremation? If so, what are you going to do with the ashes? Burial at sea, green burial, traditional or dispose of them in another way?
5. Have you written the obituary and published it in the newspaper?
6. Will you have other memorial printing, such as funeral programs or memorial folders? If so, who will be in charge of producing these items (i.e. the funeral home, church or use funeral program templates to create your own memorial service bulletin)
7. Who will give the eulogy or other funeral speeches? If there is more than one person giving the eulogy or tribute? Have you met with each person to make sure they aren't going to say the same thing?
8. Will you use pre-designated Pall Bearers or Flower Bearers?
9. Have you chosen the setting for the Service? It could be at a park, lake, beach, a favorite spot, or a traditional site (church/burial site).
8. Will there be a theme to the Service? The theme can be a hobby the deceased enjoyed, their career, culture, or their relationship to you.

9. Do you want to use symbolic gestures such as releasing butterflies, doves, balloons, naming a star, or a memorial quilt?
10. Are there any items of the deceased that you would like to have present to make the service personal? Glasses, photographs, childhood items, hobbies, music, or candles are some examples.
11. What type of funeral flowers will you use for the Service? Who is bringing the flowers? Will you order corsages and boutonnieres?
12. Is there a poem selection or other funeral reading? Who will the readers be?
13. Is there going to be a scripture reading or prayer? Who is going to read the Scripture?
14. Who is in charge of the music selection? Will there be a pianist, organist, flutist, soloist, and flutist? Are there any special songs you would like to play?
15. Where is the Reception or gathering after the Service? Who is going to set-up and bring the food?