

See God's Power Unite His Church
By Ray W. McAllister, PhD

Sermon Transcript in Letter Format

Ray McAllister, to this beautiful church. Grace and peace to you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. May the Lord richly bless you with joy and success in all you do. Today I have a most important message for you about how we can include and empower everyone, regardless of ability. I am totally blind, and I have learned many things from my experience that are relevant to this issue. Before I share this message, though, I need to make some things clear. The focus here is on unity, not everything that the church is doing wrong. We all need to work together for this task to be completed. I also want to remind all of us of the importance of learning to laugh at ourselves. I'll be mentioning a number of common mistakes people make when working with the disabled, mistakes that many of you have most likely made. Instead of becoming defensive or feeling guilty, I invite us all to simply laugh, grow, and move on. OK, so let's get going. To be best prepared, read Mark 10:46-52 in the translation of your choice. Then, remember this acronym, SHARE. It's five things to remember about interacting with the disabled. SHARE stands for **S**low down, **H**ear, **A**dapt, **R**elate, and **E**mpower.

Blind Bartimaeus

Jesus is walking with a crowd of people, teaching them, and, suddenly, He's interrupted. Now, we've all been interrupted, haven't we? We're sitting down at the dinner table, when, suddenly, "ring, ring." We pick up the phone, wait for a few seconds: "Hello, we can tell you how to reduce your debt and get out of debt quickly." Now, here's what I do when I get those calls. I push the button to talk to a human, and I interrupt them: Hello

Are you interested in lowering your debt? ...

Yeah, I have a question for you. How is your sin debt with God? Are you saved? (If they can interrupt my life with their sales pitch, I can interrupt their life with mine.)

So I preach to telemarketers, witness to them. Jesus was interrupted by a ministry opportunity as well: "Master, Son of David, have mercy on me." The crowd, of course, didn't want to be interrupted. They just wanted to sit and listen to Jesus' telling them how to love one another. That is what most of His preaching was about: loving one another. So the man calls out louder. Now I have some experience with this. Being blind, I've had to learn to get people's attention. Say I'm sitting in the back of a classroom. It's the end of class. I know there's no way I'm going to get to the back of the line for the professor before he leaves especially if I expect to get to the next class on time. So I have to call out, "Hey, Prof. Smith, I have a question. ... Hey, I need to see you for a minute, please." I had to learn to make my voice carry. My voice can project. If I didn't have a mic when speaking in public, most people could still hear me just fine. Bartimaeus had to learn this skill, too. He calls out, again, "Master, have mercy on me." At that point, Jesus says, "All right, crowd, this man needs my attention; let's spend some time with him." This is where we get the first letter in the SHARE acronym:

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S: Slow Down

We all need to slow down. Any disability messes up the way the body works. Everything needs to work together so well that when one part is down, it slows everything down. If one sense is damaged, it will slow the whole body down.

One example of this happens in potluck situations. My wife used to work as a waitress. If anybody can move food around quickly, it's Sally. At potluck, she has to get food for herself and for me, and sometimes, even, her disabled mother, also. So when somebody's rushing her through the potluck line, you know that they don't know what they are talking about.

Another time is bagging groceries at the grocery store, in stores where the customer has to do that. It takes me a little longer. My thing is if you complain about it, you can help me bag.

Braille is a slow code for reading. All I'm doing is looking at one letter at a time. I'm not able to skim through the page. So people reading Braille need a little extra time to read it.

Slow down.

We're so busy in this fast-paced society. Everything has to be done five minutes early, and we over-book ourselves. I wonder if God designed us to need to stop and eat so that we'd have to slow down once in a while. Of course, the greatest slow-down is, "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy..." (Exodus 20:8-11).

Jesus slowed down for Bartimaeus, and He has more things to do than we can imagine. He takes time to slow down for each of us. We can follow Him and do likewise.

H: Hear

Jesus heard Bartimaeus. H is "hear," not "here." True: in order to listen to someone one must be present "here" with that person. But the H, in this acronym, is "hear."

We know that Jesus heard Bartimaeus because the first thing Jesus did is ask Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do?"

Now we look at that question and say, "Wouldn't Jesus know? ... Obviously the guy wants to see."

The disabled, though, have a struggle in society. We're often pushed around, made to conform to other people's schedules, especially the elderly. They are told when to get up, when to go to bed, when to take pills, when to eat, what to eat, how to eat, how fast to eat it, what to wear when eating it. The disabled often don't get to make decisions for themselves. Jesus knew that what Bartimaeus needed, even more than his sight, was the respect and dignity given to a creation of God. Jesus asked.

I can share a story, and this is where we start the humor stories. I was walking back from church at Pacific Union College (PUC). Suddenly this guy throws his arms around me. I asked him, "Excuse me, what are you doing?"

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He said, "I'm helping you across the street."

"Yeah, but I'm not going across the street." I replied.

Ask first, it really helps and saves a lot of embarrassment. How would you feel if you were in the grocery store, and someone just started throwing things in your cart they thought you needed? Then, we all know what it feels like to have a problem, and all everyone does is give us advice:

I don't like it when people call me late at night.

Well, then take your phone off the hook.

We don't like it when people always give us advice, and yet we do it to everyone else all the time.

Another thing Jesus did is ask Bartimaeus what he wanted. He didn't ask the people with him. This is very significant. The disabled often feel like objects. People ask those standing next to them. There's a time when I was at the hospital for a surgery, and they kept asking the person next to me, "Does he want a wheelchair?"

Now the first problem with that is that it's my eyes that don't work, not my legs. But I kept saying, "No, I don't."

So Sally and I now have a ritual that we do. If anybody does that to us, the conversation goes somewhat like this:

Waitress: So what would he like to eat?

Sally: Ray, what would you like to eat?

Ray: I'd like to eat the spaghetti, please.

Sally: He'd like to eat the spaghetti, please.

Waitress: What sauce would he like on the spaghetti?

Sally: What sauce would you like on the spaghetti.

Ray: I'd like marinara sauce.

Sally: He'd like marinara sauce ...

Give it about two minutes, and the waitress will get so frustrated with how much time is being wasted that she'll start talking directly to me.

Listening is even more than these things. Once, when I was seven or eight, I was visiting a different church than I usually attended. For some reason, I remember this situation so well. In Sabbath school, the teacher put a songbook in my lap. I asked, "What is this?"

“It’s a songbook.” She replied.

“Yes, but I can’t see it very well.” I said.

“Just try.” She replied

Now, was she the one who invented the term, “visually challenged,” as if I am blind because I don’t try hard enough to see? Even though I don’t have any eyes (they’re prosthetic) the problem is that I don’t try hard enough? If I’d try hard enough, I’d grow eyes?

If the kid doesn’t want to sing you can’t make him read the songbook, anyway. What are you going to do, say, “This is a loaded Bible. Read the songbook or you’ll be punished.”

Then there was the time when somebody thought I needed assistance, and I said, “No thank you, I got it.”

I said it two or three times. The person’s friends started piping in and saying, “He’s got it under control; leave him alone.”

She still kept pushing me, “Do you need any help?”

The appropriate thing to do is to ask something like, “Excuse me. May I help you?”

That’s how it’s done for anybody in the grocery story. Then, if the person says, “No,” respect that, unless, of course, life or property is in danger. It’s important for people to feel as if they have choice in this society.

A: Adapt

“A” can also mean, “aid,” or “accommodate.” It all says the same thing. Sometimes we do need to give some help. A lot of times, help can be simple things. I was evaluating a Bible software system and had my wife help me install it. I got through with the installation, and the first thing I find in the program is the help menu with the installation instructions right there. A sighted person would just read the manual, but a blind person would have to wait until the program is installed before reading about how to install it. This would be like a DVD on how to hook up your DVD player. I emailed the company and suggested that they offer to email a blind person the first few chapters of the manual, and they said they’d be willing to do that.

A lot of assistance, though, is an art. I know we say it’s the thought that counts. This is fine for a secret pal, random, mystery Christmas gift. It doesn’t always cut it in real life situations. Let’s say you ask someone to park your car for you in your driveway, and they accidentally hit the gas pedal instead of the brake, and they drive over your prize-winning roses into your living room. I don’t care how nice the thought is, it’s not going to count in that situation.

Once I was carrying a big laundry basket with me up the stairs in the dorm at PUC. I wedged the basket between my body and the door, the friction holding it there. I reached around to grab the door handle

to open the door. It works great – until someone decides to do a favor and open the door without telling you. I happen to have very good reflexes that God has given me. I was able to catch the basket and save all my laundry from falling onto the floor and getting dirty again. Still, I would have preferred the person let me know what he was going to do or ask first. Had the person asked, I would have said, “Sure,” and reached my arms around and properly grabbed the basket so he could get the door for me. That’s why I say it’s good to ask first.

Here are some basic principles and rules for dealing with different types of disabilities. I’ll discuss blindness first, and it will get the most attention for obvious reasons. I’m not belittling the other disabilities. I know more about blindness.

When you lead a blind person, you let the person take your arm just above the elbow, around the bicep area. The blind person walks behind you. The cool thing is that you don’t have to announce steps or turns because you’re going to hit them. It is irritating, often, to have a conversation interrupted every two seconds, “step ... turn ... step.”

Unless they hit the step before you do, you can just move gracefully, and they’ll feel your body move. Some blind people like being notified about steps or turns, so feel free to ask about that.

Remember, though, please: you are now twice as wide. When you come to a telephone pole, remember that you may walk by it, but the blind person may not. They may be taller than you and hit a tree branch.

When leading a blind person to a chair, set the person’s hand on the back of the chair. We, blind people, know how chairs are shaped. We’ll figure out the rest.

Don’t just grab a blind person without notice. Yes, we live by touch. I give massages. I’m used to touch; it’s my language. It’s nice to be notified, first. Some guy grabs my tie, “I’m fixing your tie.”

I respond, jokingly, “I was wondering if you were going to be doing a choke hold so I might need to test some of my self-defense training here.”

Don’t point: “It’s that way.”

Of course, what is funny, though, is that I sometimes have an intuition as to where the person is pointing, and I’ll say, “You mean, that way?”

The person replies, “Wait a minute, how did you know?”

Similarly, don’t say to a blind person, “It’s the blue one.”

“Oh, the blue one!” I’ll often reply, sarcastically, “OK, which one’s the blue one?”

Describe things when preaching. If you want to get really good at this, listen to an old radio play or show like *Adventures in Odyssey*, *Unshackled*, or *Your Story Hour*. They do it really well. “OK, I’m going to take this knife and...”

The show is described as it's going on. My wife describes television programs to me. Of course, we often watch ones that are most friendly to the blind: "He's walking across the room..."

I can usually pick up voices myself, though, sometimes there are things I miss.

Next for the blind is don't play "guess-who." It was cute when I was eight. I'm over thirty-five now. When someone's doing it all the time, it loses its value. When I know your voice, I will be the first one to pipe in and say, "Oh, is that Jim?"

I did this, myself, to a teacher once. She had taught a course in educating exceptional children, children who are disabled and/or gifted. I called her up one evening and just, out of the blue, said, "Guess who?"

"I don't know." She replied.

"Look, I was in your class. You should know me." I responded. People do this type of thing to me all the time."

"I really don't know who you are." She replied.

Then I said, "This is Ray from your exceptional children class, just demonstrating what happens when people play guess-who."

She said she'd remember that in future classes she taught. I knew she'd take it well, and she did. But this is why "guess-who" is discouraged.

Definitely back off if you do play "guess-who" and the person asks you to stop, saying they don't know who you are. I've had people argue with me over this, and it doesn't get anywhere. One time I asked such an arguer, a woman, "If you're going to play guess-who, can I ask you your age?"

Don't pet a seeing-eye dog on harness. The dog is on the job. If you pet a seeing-eye dog when it is on harness, it will confuse the animal. Ask permission first. If the person gives you permission, fine. If not, please don't. It's disruptive.

Finally, it's always helpful to have Braille on the doors of buildings, especially on the restrooms. It's not very expensive.

Deafness

Don't yell! That is like an electric guitar. Turning the volume up only increases the distortion. What to do is enunciate very clearly and move your lips very forthrightly and decisively to be readable if the person is able to read them. Otherwise there's always email. The internet, actually, is wonderful. Writing things down can help. Look the person in the eye, especially for lip reading. It is important to have good lighting in a room. If someone is preaching in a room with Deaf people in it, you want to have very good lighting so they can see.

Finally, when using an interpreter, speak to the Deaf individual in the second person, not to the interpreter. Don't say, "What would he like to eat?"

Say, "What would you like to eat?"

The interpreter will say, "I want to eat spaghetti."

Wheelchairs

Don't lean on a wheelchair. When speaking publically on this, I usually follow that advice with the remark, "Get your own!"

A wheelchair is considered part of the person's body. Leaning on the chair keeps the person from doing what they want to do. It's also just in their personal space.

Try to look the person in the eye. A lot of people talk over the heads of people in wheelchairs because the wheelchairs are down lower. Make sure to look the person in the eye.

Wheelchair accessibility in buildings is always an issue. Be sure to have handicap-accessible parking spaces. Have automatic doors so one can push a button to open them. Have an elevator in your building if the building is more than one story high. Better yet, have a ranch-style building with only one floor. Have handicap-accessible stalls in restrooms. It's also always a good idea to have a ramp up to the platform in a church. People in wheelchairs want to lead out in services as much as anyone else.

Yes, these kinds of things are expensive. So was Calvary. It may be expensive to retrofit existing buildings for these, but, at least, new buildings should all be up to code. Just do what you can. I think it would be ideal to start a grant program to offer churches grants to make buildings handicap accessible.

A good example of aiding and, also, listening: I was taking Akkadian, which is the language of Hammurabi and Sennacherib, at Andrews University. The teacher, Bob Bates, had written the textbook, so he could just give it to me on a disk. He let me visit the Horn Museum on campus and feel the black obelisk replica, which has some cuneiform writing engraved on it, to see if I could recognize the letters. Unfortunately the markings were too small, and I couldn't learn to recognize them. So, instead, he accommodated me by giving me some more Hammurabi laws to translate on the final exam. He was willing to work with me. He, actually, was one of my most accommodating professors.

The classic example of accommodating the disabled is the story of the paralytic in Mark 2:1-12. They got four people together, put the man on a mat, hoisted him up... "He's leaning to the left ... balance him ... he's leaning to the right ... OK, up ... OK, we're going to dig a hole in this guy's roof. ... OK, lower him down, right in front of Jesus."

Honestly, if four people could do that, back then, for someone who is disabled, there's no reason why God couldn't bless somebody with the gift of setting up a van ministry for bringing people who are disabled to church. There's often not even any lifting required.

R: Relate

The disabled aren't just something to be helped as your "pet project." We want a relationship with you. Jesus had time to spend with Bartimaeus. He talked to him, listened to him, and had him follow Him. It's important to think about relationships. I'd like to get to know you.

To help with this, don't be afraid to ask questions about a visibly obvious disability. I've lived with it for quite a while. I'm used to it. Someone will approach me and ask, "Can I ask you a question?"

Now, first of all, that is a question. If I said, "No," they'd already be condemned. Secondly, I know what the question's going to be: something about my blindness. I'm going to play ignorant and say, "Well, what's your question?"

"I'm wondering. ... Can I ..." the person replies.

Now, I'm trying to be patient, but I want to challenge people to grow. Finally the person will say, "How long have you been that way?"

"What do you mean by 'that way?'" I reply.

"You know." The person replies.

I don't want to just assume, so I say, "Well, no, I don't know."

Just be open and ask. I'll know you're ready to hear the answer when you do ask. Ask anything you want to ask as long as you're not afraid to hear the answer.

Next, don't be afraid to use visual metaphors when talking to the blind. Someone might say, "Oh, I see what you're saying. ... Oh, I'm sorry, to use the word 'see.'"

My thought is, "I'm blind; get over it! It looks to me like you see difficulty in saying what you're saying, but I see it differently."

I consider it my mission to teach people how to see.

The third point is to learn to laugh. We're all going to do silly things. I'll share one story at someone else's expense and one at my expense to illustrate this.

First, at someone else's expense: I was getting on an airplane once. The flight attendant felt the need to introduce me to the rest of the passengers. Really, it wasn't necessary. So she stuck her foot in her mouth as follows: "Hi, welcome to this flight. This is Ray McAllister. He'll be with you, and he's blind today."

"Today?" I replied, and paused.

Laughter erupted around the cabin, and that was that.

One at my expense: I was sitting with some people at a table. I was talking with this lady. Her husband wasn't saying anything. I wasn't certain where he was. I asked, "Is your husband still alive?"

"He's sitting right next to me." She replied.

Maybe that's what he gets for not speaking up. We all had a good laugh about it.

E: Empower

I often illustrate empowerment with some origamis. I show a flower, Heidi, the disabled hibiscus. The flower is disabled because it does not have a vase. The flower is not able to just stand up. I put the flower in a vase, and then the flower can stand up. A real flower, in a paper vase, can also be watered and nourished. The disabled flower is not just accommodated, but empowered to reach its potential. Of course, when I show these origamis, I describe them, as, for example, a red flower and a silver vase, so the sermon is more accessible to the blind.

There are things that hinder empowerment. One thing is saying "you can't." First, "can't" is a four-letter word. People use it like one. I had one teacher in high school who was trying not to say that word. After I started waterskiing and jumping off the top of the house boat on a high school trip, she seemed to realize that I could do anything I set my heart to doing.

Many people aren't even given the chance to try and fail. If I'm given the space, I'll succeed by God's power.

Another hindrance is using a disability as a handle. One time I went to a hairdresser, and I heard someone say, "Oh, the blind guy is here."

I went over to them and said, "Hi, I'm the blind guy."

Let's be fair, if the hairdresser said, "Hey, the black lady's here," how would that have been taken? We don't use someone's disability as a handle, unless it's the only way, in a life-and-death emergency, to say, "Uh, there's a blind man trapped under the rubble." Getting a haircut is generally not a life-threatening emergency.

Next is the issue of bullying, mocking, or what I call, "peer abuse." This is a major obstacle to empowerment.

I remember when I was in eighth grade, I couldn't use the combination locks to store my regular clothes in a locker for gym class. I had to set my pants on top of the lockers. The other students would hide my pants during P.E. I don't know which of our church doctrines says to hide a blind person's pants. What I see in the Bible is that one is cursed who leads the blind to stray out of the path (Deuteronomy 27:18). God is forgiving, but it is still a sin to take advantage of the disabled.

I know the difference between having fun and being mean. We need to learn to listen. If I tell jokes about myself, or about blindness, it's probably OK to jest and tease a little bit. Situations that go on too

long are generally a problem. We don't want to hurt people. People have scars for life over things that happened in school.

The most painful thing someone ever told me in school was by a fellow classmate who said she wished I just went to a blind school so I wouldn't be such a burden on people. Apparently she did not understand the importance of empowerment. So I'm not such a burden, put me to work, have me help out. I was playing electronic drum for vespers programs in high school. I was doing what I could to help out. The net result of all this is that I learned, in school, not to trust. We can prove this by looking at two trust fall experiences I had. In eighth grade, I fell back, and the rest of the class caught me with no problem. In twelfth grade, with the same group of kids, I couldn't do it. I'd gone bungee jumping six months earlier, but I couldn't do the trust fall. I trusted them intellectually, but I didn't want to be close enough to them for them to catch me. They'd hurt me too much.

Empowerment, in a church setting, would be visiting someone who is disabled and asking if there's anything the person would like to do to help out in the church. Note that what the person is good at doing may not be one of the standard things done in worship. Maybe the person is deaf and paints. Maybe the person could present a painting that would relate to the sermon being preached, and, then, have a number of paintings on display in the foyer afterward.

Maybe someone is blind but is a poet. Have that person illustrate a sermon with a poem or just present a poem in lieu of a special music or just before a special music. Think creatively. Think outside the box. The disabled are already outside the box, anyway, so if we don't think outside the box, we're excluding them.

In Job 29:15, Job says that he was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. Now being eyes to the blind is more than just throwing food to someone. It's being what the person lacks. To be someone's eyes means we're seeing for them, not thinking for them. Then, what does Jesus say? Whatever we do to the least of these, we do to Him (Matthew 25:40). That means that if our church is not reaching out to the disabled, we're not letting Jesus inside. It also means that whatever they've done to me, they've done to Jesus. They blindfolded Jesus, beat Him, and said, "Who hit you?" They teased Jesus, as well. (Do we want children doing things to the disabled that were done to Jesus at His crucifixion?)

Finally, I'd like us to think of the idea of the body of Christ. The body of Christ, in 1 Corinthians 12, is a group of people that all have different gifts. Because of that, we all need to work together. We have different gifts. Some gifts may appear as if they're less important, but they are very important. When one part suffers, all suffer. If one member of the body is disabled, isn't the whole body disabled? The only solution to the problem is for us to learn to stand in unity and help each other.

In closing, I'd like to share a poem that I wrote that illustrates this idea. It summarizes the whole concept of the SHARE model, the ideas of slowing down, hearing, adapting, relating, and empowering. The poem follows:

A Prayer of Healing (September 21, 2010)

I am the hand
That is withered and sore
The eye
That does not always see clearly.
I am the foot
That is bent to the side
The tongue
That stammers and struggles for speech.
I am the heart
Daily broken by sorrow and care.
I am weak
But God is strong.
I have a place
A purpose
A life
A chance
To fulfill the passion of my Creator.
For we are one body
With one Blood in our veins.
We have one Spirit
And one head
Even Christ.
And the Lord of love
Who is no respecter of persons
Grants to all
The joy of His work.
For not even the strong are strong by themselves.
I see the church
As a bride on her day of marriage
But lying in a bed of sickness
For shame and confusion
About her broken members
Keeps her from rising

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In spite of them
In thanks for them
And so she wastes away
Soon to become herself as weak.
Heal us, O Lord
And we shall be healed
Save us
And we shall be saved
For You are our praise, our delight
And if we learn to move in unity
We may get up
Step
Leap
Into
Paradise.

The fact is that Jesus demonstrated the SHARE model with us. We were stuck in sin, and He, the eternal, Great I AM, **slowed down** to enter our limited existence. He **heard** our cry when we said we were suffering in sin. He **adapted** to us by going to the cross. I can't think of any more accommodation than dying on a cross for the world. Then he **relates** by seeking a relationship with us so that we can be together with Him. Finally, He wants to **empower** us to succeed so that we can be with immortal lives again in Heaven to live forever. He did it for us. It was good enough for Him, and it's good enough for us, and that is our call.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.