

# “Tough but Good”

by Tim Haluga

“How’s your week been?”

“Well, it’s been tough, but good.”

“Tough, but good” is a very short and simple answer. But seemingly simple language can have *a lot* of different meanings depending on the context. How tough is “tough”? How good is “good”?

For example, what if I told you that this person – the one who’s had a “tough, but good” week – was just fired from her job on Tuesday?

Well, then it would seem like a bad situation.

“But actually,” I told you, “she hated the job.”

“Well then it could be a good thing,” you might say.

“Yeah,” I said, “but although she hated it, it was at the University, and it provided free tuition for her daughter. Now that she’s lost her job, her daughter might have to drop out of school.”

My point is that with each new revelation about this person’s life, more and more meaning gets added to the statement “My week was tough, but good.” And on top of all this, “tough but good” would mean something *entirely* different if instead of losing her job, I told you that her parents were in from out of town and staying at her house last week! Then “tough, but good” would have a *very* different meaning!

Now I used general language in that first example. But the same principle applies to seemingly specific language too.

Say I was leading a discussion and asked everyone in my Group what Bible translation they use. One person might reply, “I always use the King James version.”

Now that statement communicates one simple and specific thing, but we all know there are also lots of layers of meaning underneath. If this is our first group discussion, I might be unsure of what exactly this person is trying to say. But if I’ve grown familiar with this person, I might know that his day job is a scholar of Old English and so he likes the wording of the King James. Or I might know that his mother, who initially led him to Christ, raised his on the King James Version, and so there’s a strong emotional tie there. Or I might know that he’s just belligerent, stubborn, and trying to pick a fight.

But my response – and your response as a discussion leader – could vary *dramatically* based on your understanding of who this person is and what lies behind his seemingly specific statement.

Understanding someone else increases our capacity for communication. That's why, on a first date, two people might spend the whole evening tripping over one another. But an old married couple could have a conversation that sounds something like:

"Did you just see – "

"Mmm-hmm."

"Why did – "

"I don't know."

Having grown together and shared their lives with one another, the old couple is able to communicate a lot of specific meaning with not very many words. And as we become more intimate with other people in our ABFs and Home ABFs we increase our understanding of their lives, and thus the context out of which they speak. And as we begin to understand the context out of which they speak, their words and sentences begin to take on greater and greater meaning.

Initially someone in your group might make you constantly scratch your head and mutter, "I just don't *understand* what they're *thinking!*" But as you spend time getting to know them – understanding their thought pattern and their life experience – suddenly they begin to make a lot more sense.

I've met quite a few leaders in my life who seem to be out of touch with the people they lead. It can be really frustrating because it seems like the people you're leading are always acting irrationally, or not thinking things through.

I remember a student at Moody – where I went to college – who was always breaking the rules in order to do crazy stuff. He'd kayak down the Chicago River and climb to the top of a halfway constructed building in the middle of the night. I think he was a thorn in the Dean of Students' side, and so he was always being reprimanded or put on probation for his seemingly uncontrollable behavior.

In my experience it seemed like the Dean saw this student's behavior as rebellion and disregard for authority, which - no doubt - it was. But I don't think the Dean ever understood this student's intense desire for adventure in his walk with Christ and his life on earth. The student dearly wanted to be a missionary to the most remote peoples on earth, and he saw his time at Moody as a time of preparation – physically and spiritually. Similarly, I don't think the student ever understood the Dean's intense desire to guard the physical safety of the students. The Dean didn't want any pastoral or missionary careers to get cut off before they'd even begun just because of one foolish decision.

I'm not suggesting that either side was right. However, I am suggesting that if both sides understood more about the other, communication between the two might have been more meaningful and there might have been resolution – even cooperation – in the relationship.

I think most of us would be surprised to find out what the people in our Home ABF or ABF really mean when they pray or talk about their lives, or even discuss Scripture.

There might be someone in your Group who's told you for years that she "believes in Jesus." Unfortunately by, "I believe in Jesus," she might mean, "I want to be able to do what I want in life and still go to heaven, so sure, I'll come to church and recite some empty words."

Or there might be someone who's been telling you that for years that he's been, "working on his marriage." But maybe what he really means is, "I tell my wife why all our marital problems are her fault and I try to get her to change."

And that's where building relationships and understanding people's lives on a deeper level can really help. All of a sudden a conversation that used to seem flat and boring can come alive with meaning and tell you – as a Group leader – all sorts of things about the people in your group, *and* all sorts of ways that you might be able to teach, help, or encourage them.

A foundational principle of understanding the Bible, as you know, is to read a verse in light of all the other verses around it. I could quote part of a verse to an unbeliever – say, Genesis 3:4, "You will not surely die" – and that verse might be nothing more than arbitrary words to him. But for you and me those words are loaded with meaning because we know the context of that verse - who said it, who it was said to, and the story that's happening around it.

In the same way, when we lead discussions or talk to people in our Groups, at first we might only understand the surface layer of the conversation. But as we slowly begin to get to know one another and understand the context of each other's communication – the history of people's lives and the thoughts and emotions behind their words and phrases – people's hearts will be revealed and we will be able to shepherd them in more specific, direct, and helpful ways.