

Being a Surrendered Participant: Reading Scripture Aloud

**An Interview with Rila Yang Hackett
By
Tracey Marx**



When I think of introducing you to Rila (pronounced Reela) Yang Hackett, I want to call her a Master Scripture Reader. I'm not sure that's an actual title, but it is one that I'd like to bestow on her.

Rila serves regularly as a volunteer scripture reader in her congregation and also as a coach for other readers. Over the years, she has developed a method for preparing and a style for reading scripture passages aloud in worship (vivid but not overdone) that bring the text alive and makes it accessible and engaging to listeners.

Her voice, articulate and exquisitely intense, is a gift from God to her church community and to Scripture Echo. Rila has been an encouraging presence since we began over ten years ago and is one of the voices on all of the recordings.

It was my pleasure to sit down with Rila, on a cold January afternoon, to sip ginger tea next to a fire, and to talk about a topic near to both of our hearts. We began by talking about scripture reading in general, and ended with her thoughts about Scripture Echo worship scripts. This conversation led to further thoughtful reflection by Rila. My questions and her answers are found below.

- **You take reading scripture very seriously, in contrast to others who might prepare without as much thought and focus. You elevate the reading of scripture to a more important place than simply a prelude to the sermon. What got you started?**

In the spring of 1997, a dear friend of mine, Alison Siewert, who directs the drama portion for the Urbana Missions Conference, had five of us do a dramatic reading of major portions of the Gospel of Mark.

I remember thinking, "That would be fun since I read pretty well. I don't stumble over words and I'm understandable."

But when we got together, I realized that what she was looking for was way more than I was accustomed to doing. Alison wanted a vivid, alive presentation of Scripture that naturally flowed out of thoughtful study of the passage. She believes (as I do now) that understanding the context of the stories, what was going on behind the scenes, and the

tone with which Jesus was speaking is the foundation for good public reading. She didn't want drama for the sake of drama because that feels artificial and therefore won't connect. But she always encouraged us to know and be true to the real life drama that was going on in those first century accounts and to communicate it through our reading.

I remember feeling very uncomfortable with this process because it wasn't something I did. It definitely pressed hard against my comfort zone. At that point, I hadn't even done much scripture reading. And now I had to read major portions, be very prepared, and know the story so well that I could almost tell it without the script in front of me – speak the story as if it were my own. That was my first exposure to scripture as storytelling. And because the process was so new and stretching, I found myself waffling between loving and hating the challenge!

But that experience got me onto the path I'm currently on.

A year later, I attended a conference where Dennis Dewey was doing scriptural storytelling. He told major portions of scripture verbatim – without the printed word in front of him. He demonstrated the beauty of God's story through the beauty of oral tradition.

I was quite inspired and decided that I would prepare my next reading in a similar way. The following Sunday, my husband, Don, preached on Luke 7: 36-50 (Jesus' feet being anointed by a repentant woman while He is having dinner at the home of Simon the Pharisee). I practiced speaking that text until I could nearly recite it verbatim. My goal wasn't memorization; my goal was knowing, living in, and telling the story as best as I could.

Now there are definitely risks when you step out and read or speak in this way, especially if your congregation isn't used to hearing scripture in this manner. That day, if I'd been paying closer attention, I'm sure I would have noticed a fair number of perplexed looks from folks. But be encouraged and stay the course. There are plenty of others who will connect with your reading. And, the bottom line is that we (the readers) will be blessed immensely by our careful attention to God's word.

- **What do you desire for the listeners when you read scripture?**

Well, I definitely don't want them to be bored. Of all the written material that exists since the beginning of humankind, God's word is the most captivating, the most personal, the most healing and beneficial for our living... definitely the least boring. But we get bored, don't we? -- Especially those of us who've been in the church for awhile. It's as if we've been inoculated so that the hearing of scripture no longer affects us. Maybe we think it's just some ancient text that doesn't apply to us today. Or we miss the "hooks" that link these ancient stories to our own. If you (as a scripture reader) read a passage as if

it has no bearing on your life, it's likely that the listeners will also believe it has no bearing on their lives.

The passing down of scripture was oral tradition. Story is what catches us, captures us, and remains in our memory. There's a reason the story is there and we're meant to see how God's story beautifully intersects with ours. Actually, more than that. We're meant to discover that our stories reside inside of God's bigger story.

When I read Scripture, I ask to be a vessel or a conduit for God. I ask Him to do what He loves to do – use His word to bring hope, healing, and light to people. Think about how much God delights to hear us say “God is speaking to me” or “these verses are for me.” Obviously, I can't control how people hear or receive God's word – that's the job of the Holy Spirit -- but I can be a surrendered participant. And being a surrendered participant means I've asked God for wisdom and revelation, prepared as best as I can, and prayed for open hearts for those hearing His word (myself included).

- **Do you ever feel intimidated by the idea that your interpretation makes a difference to the way that someone hears it?**

Yes, because preparing to read scripture is a bit like preparing a sermon. Sometimes I think, *Wow, my spoken interpretation of this text could be off and could lead people to misunderstand God's heart.* It is a faith journey. I have to trust that if I've asked God to have His way in my reading of the text, He will. I have to trust as I do my part, God will honor that and be faithful. I try to remind our readers that if our heart posture is to bring glory to God, He *will* accomplish that – even if we trip and fall on our way to the microphone.

- **What's the best way you like to prepare to read scripture?**

For services like Good Friday or Christmas Eve -- where we don't have a traditional sermon and the scripture readings serve as the sermon -- what I've done and what I encourage other readers to do, is to read the passage as many times as they are able to in the course of a day. Read it out loud. Try different emphases of words. Read in front of the mirror so you know how you look when you're reading. Read in front of other family members or friends.

Look at other translations, so you have a broader feel for the passage. Ask yourself inductive study questions that will make you dig deeper into the text. Read notes or commentaries for background information. And, most importantly, ask God to prepare the hearts of those who listen, so people hear what they need to hear.

- **How many times do you practice reading the passage aloud?**

I don't think you can read it aloud too much. If scripture has a more prominent place in the service -- if you practice it fifty times over the course of a week -- I really don't think that's too much.

- **What about on a regular Sunday?**

It depends on how much lead time someone's been given. If you have a couple of days before hand, it's not too much to have read through it ten times each day -- obviously, more if you want to speak it without a script. I don't want to be legalistic about number of times because each person's process is different. Let your preparation be a thoughtful, prayerful priority and a grace-filled endeavor. There are many times when I'm unable to recruit a reader and the task falls to me last minute. I'm not crazy about reading with very little prep time, but sometimes that's the reality of life. As I said earlier, though, the more time we can give to the recitation of God's word, the more blessed we get.

- **I would say your voice is a gift from God. What do you think?**

Well, first of all, thanks for that affirmation. I have a hard time hearing my voice on a recording because it sounds so different from how I hear it in my head. (On a recording, it sounds higher in pitch.) Sometimes I don't like it. But, as a result of doing Scripture Echo recordings, I'm getting used to hearing my voice, and I'm not minding it as much.

- **What is reading a Scripture Echo like for you?**

What I love the most about a Scripture Echo is working with other people collaboratively. I thoroughly enjoy being on a team and being focused on God's word -- essentially, worshipping together.

Also, I like the nature of focusing on less text. It's different from a lengthier passage or a narrative story. We get to soak in the words and phrases about God or what God is saying, and our thinking is realigned according to His truth. We get to ponder deeply what we are saying and, as a result, we are refreshed. We are renewed. We receive hope.

What we're trying to provide for the listener is happening for us as well. And that's a great gift to me.

Find out more about Rila Yang Hackett at www.ScriptureEcho.com/Rila. Rila can be reached at hacketts6@juno.com, or via Scripture Echo, at info@ScriptureEcho.com.

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