

Evangelism for Everyone

Loving the Lost
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The Importance of Maps

My wife and I have a newborn, so we stayed around here for the holidays, but I'm sure many of you were on the road in the past few weeks. I bet it feels good to be home. Traveling during the holidays is always stressful, but I've found that road trips go a lot better if there's a navigator who's holding the map (usually a cell phone these days) and directing us. Of course, that only works if the navigator actually looks at the map.

Some of our staff members know where I'm going with this. A bunch of us rode together in a van up to the theology conference in Chicago last year. Our very own Pastor Jordan Green was our navigator, though he wasn't really worthy of the title. He was up there riding shotgun all right. He had his GPS out all right. But he wasn't paying attention to it. He used it mainly to inform us where to turn after we had already missed the turn. So that's just a warning for you all. Don't let Jordan be navigator. We learned that lesson the hard way.

The trip goes better if the person setting direction has a map. But only if he actually looks at it. And that applies to more than just road trips. That's something I've learned from our lead pastor, Josh, and admire about him. The guy setting the direction of this church has a map (our Ministry Map) and he's constantly referring to it to make sure we're on course. The Ministry Map is simply our philosophy of ministry. It's an attempt, based on Scripture, to lay out what God has called us to do as a church and how he's called us to do it. It helps us to stay oriented in the right direction in a world where there are lots of directions we could go. Rather than just turn here because everyone else is doing it, or because the scenery over there looks nice, we refer to the map.

That's why we take the first few weeks of each year to focus on some aspect of the Ministry Map in our services. This year, we're talking about loving the lost—specifically, loving the lost through evangelism.

I'm aware that that's not a topic everyone gets excited about. Your pastor telling you to evangelize is a bit like your dentist telling you to floss. You know you really should do it. You intend to do it. Sometimes you even do it! For a while. But then for one reason or another it gets put on the backburner until the dentist or the pastor comes along and makes you feel guilty about it.

Now, some degree of guilt is unavoidable when we know God is calling us to do more than we currently are. But let me assure you that his grace abounds. He doesn't love you any less. And you're not alone. I have room for growth. We all have room for growth when it comes to evangelism. There's perhaps no area where we go off course more easily than evangelism. Our passion for evangelism seems to grow cold faster than anything else. There are plenty of reasons for that, but I think the main one is simply that it's hard. It's a lot harder than flossing, but it's also a lot more important.

So it's my hope and prayer that these next four weeks will offer a reset. A chance to start fresh. What better time than the beginning of a new decade? I think you'll find that this sermon series, as well as the evangelism class going on now, offers some paradigm shifts in the way we think about

evangelism. But you'll also find that much of what we say is not new. Sometimes what we need isn't more ideas but simply encouragement, renewed vision, a word from a friend to stoke the fire and fan the flames until we burn with love for God and love for the lost.

We can't say everything we need to about evangelism, and certainly not in one sermon. So each of these sermons is a part of the whole. They emphasize different things. Take any one of them by themselves, and you get an incomplete picture of evangelism.

Today I simply want to lay the foundation for how we think about evangelism. I'll be answering two simple questions about evangelism: What is it, and who does it? And I also want to stoke the fires a bit along the way.

EVANGELISM: WHAT IS IT?

First, what is it? Before we say anything more about evangelism, we'd better make sure we're talking about the same thing. So what exactly is evangelism? I would define it as "speaking the gospel with the aim to persuade."¹ That definition is drawn mostly from a little, red book called *Evangelism* by Mack Stiles, who I believe preached here a number of years ago. It's pretty simple, right? Speaking the gospel with the aim to persuade. You might prefer a different verb: communicating the gospel, sharing the gospel, proclaiming the gospel, preaching the gospel. But all of these have one thing in common: they're speaking verbs. Evangelism requires speaking. I suppose writing or texting would work too. But it involves communication from one person to another. It involves words. And not just any words. There's certain content that has to be communicated for us to be doing evangelism. Evangelism is speaking the gospel.

There are some people who think we can evangelize simply by living according to Christian principles and loving others. They say things like, "Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary." There's a grain of truth to that. We Christians ought to live in a way that embodies the gospel and gives it credibility. But if someone is to believe the gospel, words are always necessary.

Romans 10:14 makes that clear: "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?"² The gospel must be heard in order to be believed. Which means we need to speak it.

Let's just take a minute to reflect on how amazing that is. God gives us a part to play in his process of saving people. He doesn't need to use human messengers to deliver his gospel. But he chooses to use us. Every time. Think about what a privilege that is. I've given you sort of the dry definition of evangelism. But we could also define it as "speaking a life-saving message from God to those who are perishing" or "saying the words that God uses to bring life out of death." That's a massive privilege. But we don't do the saving; we just do the speaking.

So we now have a simple test to distinguish between something that is evangelism and something that isn't evangelism: Does it communicate the gospel with words? There are lots of good things that we can do and perhaps should do that aren't evangelism because they fail this test.

¹ J. Mack Stiles, *Evangelism: How the Whole Church Speaks of Jesus*, p. 27

² Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

What if I shovel my elderly neighbor's driveway when it snows? That's a kind thing to do, but it's not evangelism. But what if they know I'm a Christian? Still not evangelism. What about bringing food and clothing to the homeless? Good. Do that. But it's not evangelism. But what if I tell them I'm from the church? Still not evangelism. Evangelism is more than just doing good while identifying as a Christian. It means speaking the gospel.

There's one more part to our definition of evangelism. If evangelism is speaking the gospel with the aim to persuade then it must include words, those words must include the gospel, and we must aim to persuade people. Our goal is for people who don't currently follow Christ to become Christ-followers. The goal is conversion. When we evangelize, we don't simply tell people what we believe; we do it so that they might believe as well. We make the claim that the gospel isn't just true for us but for everyone.

What is the gospel?

Which means we'd better define the gospel as well. We'd better be on the same page about what we're persuading people of. So what is the gospel? Gospel means "good news." It's the good news of what God has done in Christ to save sinners and reconcile all things to himself. In other words, it's the main message and storyline of the Bible, which finds its culmination in Christ.

One way to understand the gospel is with a four-point outline such as the one in our Ministry Map. We call it God-Man-Christ-Response, and it's a simple summary of the gospel that's proclaimed throughout the New Testament. It goes something like this:

God—There is one true God who created everything that exists and who is perfect in every way. Perfectly loving. Perfectly just. Perfectly holy.

Man—As in, mankind. Humanity. God created us, he loves us, and he made us to live in relationship with him. But every one of us has rejected our Maker. We've sinned against him rather than loving and worshiping him. And because God is perfectly just, he cannot allow sin to go unpunished. We all deserve his judgment, which will result in eternal death and suffering apart from God's presence.

Christ—God sent his own Son to live the perfect life we failed to live and to die the death that our sins deserve, enabling us to be forgiven, counted righteous, and have a restored relationship with God. After dying on the cross, Christ rose from the dead. Those who are in Christ will share in that resurrection and experience eternal life with him.

Response—Christ has earned this amazing salvation for us. We do nothing to earn it ourselves. We simply respond with repentance and faith. Repentance means turning from our sins and submitting to Christ as our Lord. Faith means believing this good news and trusting in Christ alone to save us.

That's the gospel in a nutshell. God-Man-Christ-Response is not the only way to explain the gospel. It's certainly not everything there is to say about the gospel. But this sort of framework is useful for a couple reasons. For one, it helps us to remember what to say when we're sharing the gospel. It also keeps us from leaving out any essential elements of the gospel.

It's not that we have to use a four-point outline, you could have six points or eight points. And it's not that we have to touch on all four points in one conversation. But if there's part of this outline that you consistently leave out, there's a good chance you're not truly speaking the gospel. You can use different metaphors and images to explain the gospel, Scripture certainly does. But you need to

say something about who God is and how we're meant to relate to him, why things aren't the way they're supposed to be for mankind, what Christ has done to change that, and how people should respond in order to benefit from Christ's work.

I'm not saying anything about how you should share the gospel, simply the elements that will be present if you do share the gospel. If we leave out just one key aspect of the gospel, the whole thing is distorted; it's no gospel at all. The point that's most often short-changed is the second one. We sometimes try to proclaim the good news without telling the bad news about mankind. Our problem is not just that we're imperfect or broken, we're rebels against our Creator. We don't just make mistakes, we sin. We set ourselves up as gods rather than worshiping the one true God. So we don't just need a leg-up from God; we need to be saved from his wrath against sin. We need the forgiveness we don't deserve and the righteousness we don't possess.

If man isn't under God's wrath because of sin, then God isn't holy, Christ's death wasn't necessary, and our response is optional (there are plenty of other religions that can help you to clean up your act a bit). If we distort one part of the gospel, the good news turns out to be not that good after all. But the gospel is the best news there is. Evangelism is speaking that good news so that sinners might turn to Christ and be saved. There is no evangelism without the gospel.

EVANGELISM: WHO DOES IT?

We know what evangelism is, but who's supposed to do it? Here at First Free we believe that every Christian is called to evangelize. Evangelism is for everyone. Every believer should speak the gospel with the aim to persuade.

There's no one passage in Scripture that specifically states that, but it is the logical conclusion of what Scripture does say about evangelism. I'd like to demonstrate that with the rest of our time this morning. My contention is that every Christian is called to evangelize because evangelism is a mark of growing Christian maturity. A maturing disciple is an evangelizing disciple. That's because evangelism reveals something about our hearts. It shows something about what we love. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks, or doesn't speak.

A couple years ago, our January sermon series was called Marked by Love. It focused on a section of our Ministry Map called the Marks of a Maturing Disciple. These marks are an attempt to describe what a disciple of Jesus Christ is like, and they're divided into three kinds of love: love for God, love for one another in the church, and love for the lost. Evangelism is an expression of at least two of these loves. So first we'll look at how evangelism comes from love for God, then how it comes from love for the lost.

Love for God: Evangelism was commanded by Christ.

First, love for God. Evangelism is an expression of love for God because it was commanded by God. Jesus says in John 14:15, "If you love me (*Jesus*), you will keep my commandments." Love for God results in obedience to God. And when it comes to evangelism, we have a direct commandment from the Lord. We can see this in Matthew 28:18-20, which is often called the Great Commission. If you've been around here a while, you've probably read this passage a hundred times. That's because this passage is central to who we are as a church. This is where we get our marching orders from the Lord. It says, "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the

name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

This is the task given to the church. Simply put, the church exists to make disciples of Jesus Christ. And that entails a couple things, according to this passage. The first one is baptizing them. In other words, it involves making new disciples, speaking the gospel to unbelievers so that they repent and believe in the Lord Jesus and mark that by being baptized. So the Great Commission that Jesus gave to the church necessitates evangelism. If we’re going to baptize people, then they need to come to believe the gospel. And that happens when we speak it to them.

Now, some have argued that Jesus is only speaking to his apostles in Matthew 28. They’re the ones who had to make disciples. We’re off the hook. But that makes little sense when we consider the second aspect of making disciples that Jesus mentions here: “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” The apostles were tasked with teaching their disciples to obey the same commandments that Jesus gave them. At the very least, that includes the commandment he just gave them to go make disciples and baptize them! So it makes little difference whether this commission was for the apostles or for the church as a whole. The result is the same. The kind of disciples Jesus wants made are the kind who themselves make disciples. That’s part of what it means to be a mature Christian, because it’s part of what it means to obey Christ. And that’s what we see in the early church, as recorded in the book of Acts. It wasn’t just the apostles who became witnesses to the risen Christ, it was the whole church. Thank God, because otherwise the church would have lasted one generation and we wouldn’t be believers today.

So the only true disciple is one who makes disciples, because that’s what God commands. Those who love God obey his commandments. This speaks to where our motivation for evangelism comes from. We share the gospel out of obedience to God, and we obey him because we love him. But where does our love come from? First John 4:19 says “we love because he first loved us.” We don’t obey God slavishly or grudgingly but joyfully. We love in response to God’s love for us in Christ. We share the gospel because we love God with a heart set free by the gospel. God’s grace is always prior to our love and obedience, and it’s the source of our love and obedience.

Our church’s mission statement is based on Matthew 28 and captures this truth: “We exist to make disciples of Jesus Christ who glorify God as the grace of the gospel grows deep in God’s people and goes wide to all peoples.” We exist to make disciples. That means the gospel needs to go wide through our evangelism. But it will only go wide through us when it grows deep in us, when God’s love for us in Christ causes us to love God above all else.

Love for the Lost: Evangelism imitates Christ.

We’ve seen that evangelism is an expression of love for God. That’s one of our marks of a maturing disciple. But evangelism is also an expression of love for the lost—those who don’t know Christ. In this way, evangelism isn’t just a way we obey Christ. It’s also a way we imitate Christ. Evangelism is for every believer because every believer is called to be like Jesus.

The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. When he saw crowds of people in need of a savior, he had compassion on them. And in the ultimate act of love and mercy, he went to the cross to die the death that should’ve been ours. He freely gave of himself to bring salvation to people who deserved just the opposite. He gave us a perfect picture of love. Romans 5:8 says, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Christian maturity means not only loving God but also loving like God. Loving like that. He so loved the world that he gave his only Son. What are you willing to give so that your neighbor might not perish but have eternal life? Because evangelism, like all of Christian discipleship, will likely cost you something. At the very least, it'll cost you the time and effort that it takes to explain the gospel to someone. It may also cost you your reputation. It'll out you as one of those intolerant people who thinks there's only one way to God. And it will certainly cost you your comfort, because there's a good chance you'll be rejected. But disciples of Jesus are called to lay down their lives for others. In doing so, we show that our love for the lost outweighs our love for ourselves. We display something of the love of Christ, something of the gospel, in the self-sacrificial way we proclaim the gospel.

When we stay silent, we do just the opposite. There's a popular quote about evangelism that makes this point. It's striking because it comes from an outspoken atheist, Penn Jillette, of the magicians Penn and Teller. He says, "I've always said, you know, that I don't respect people who don't proselytize. I don't respect that at all... How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?"³

Even an atheist understands this point. If the gospel really is true, if the good news is really this good, then how can we keep it to ourselves? What we might lose pales in comparison to what our hearers might gain. If you have truly received the grace of the gospel, then that grace doesn't stop with you. The gospel does not meet a dead end in your heart. Instead it meets a fork in the road, a channel that branches out to those around you. Those who have received grace don't keep it to themselves. They tell others how they can receive it as well.

A Love Story

I hope I've convinced you (if you weren't convinced already) that evangelism is for everyone, everyone who loves God and loves the lost. I'm sure there are more objections out there. Those who want to excuse themselves from evangelizing can find plenty of reasons to do so. But they remind me of a certain lawyer in Luke chapter 10 who came to Jesus seeking to justify himself. This is not a passage about evangelism, but it is a passage about love.

Luke 10:25-29

²⁵And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" ²⁷And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." ²⁸And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."

²⁹But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Do you see what the lawyer is doing here? He's looking for a loophole, a reason that he's excused from the clear commandments of God. People who want a religious loophole can usually find one. It's a bit like people who think they don't need to evangelize because they're not gifted in it. Well I might not be gifted in generosity, but that doesn't get me off the hook for giving to the church. Some of us aren't gifted in singing, but that shouldn't stop us. We're called to do all sorts of things that we're not gifted in. There are plenty of arguments why we don't need to share the gospel, and none of them hold water, unless you're looking for a loophole.

³ Quoted in Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine: The Ministry Mind-shift that Changes Everything*, Kindle Edition, location 649.

I doubt that most of you are. But even if we wouldn't give any formal objections to evangelism, don't we sometimes lawyer our way out of loving our neighbor? It's easy to find reasons why we don't need to share the gospel, or at least not with this person, not in this place, not today. It's easy to justify ourselves and avoid stepping beyond what's comfortable. You don't need a law degree to do it. So Jesus' response to the lawyer in Luke 10 might be exactly what we need to hear as well. When the man asked who his neighbor was, Jesus told him a parable. Let's read starting in verse 30.

Luke 10:30-37

³⁰Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" ³⁷He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."

Who is my neighbor? Whom should I love as myself? If you truly love God and love like God, your neighbor is whoever is in need of mercy. So I ask you, whose need could be greater than someone who will die in their sins unless they hear the gospel and believe? What could show greater compassion than speaking the gospel with the aim to persuade? Evangelism is the ultimate mercy ministry.

Some of us were too young to remember it, but we were once in need of that kind of mercy. Scripture says that each of us was once in an even worse predicament than this man on the road to Jericho. Ephesians 2 says we were dead in our trespasses and sins. This man was half dead; we were utterly dead. Spiritually lifeless. By the time some Christian—some good Samaritan—came along and found us, there was no breath in us, no pulse to be found, nothing but dry bones. But this Christian showed mercy. She could have passed by. After all, she had places to be. She could have stayed silent. After all, you might look silly telling a dead person how to find life. She could have given any number of excuses to justify walking by on the other side. But she spoke the gospel, and by the grace of God you came alive. If that's your story, I believe Jesus has one thing to say to you: You go and do likewise.

If you're a Christ-follower today, then you know that the mercy of God can bring life out of death, it can make dry bones come alive. And it travels on the lips of the dead made alive. The lost who were found. The blind who now see. Would you speak to someone else as you were once spoken to? Would you show mercy? Would you love your neighbor as yourself? That's what evangelism is all about.