

Evangelism in Relationships

Loving the Lost
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Steps and Missteps

This morning we continue our series on evangelism. So far, we've learned what evangelism is. It's speaking the gospel with the aim to persuade. We've also learned what conversion is. It's a supernatural work of God, where he brings us from death to life. But it also involves a human response. It involves faith and repentance.

So far, we've covered a theology of evangelism. Over the next couple of weeks, we're going to deal more with methodology. Today, we're going to talk about ways you can personally witness. What are the best ways to share the gospel with your friends and family members, your co-workers and neighbors? Next week, we'll consider our corporate witness as a church.

But it's difficult to deal with evangelistic methods in a sermon. Methodology is better dealt with in books and classes. And so, this week we'll list some books on our blog that would be helpful for you. And it's not too late to join the evangelism class during first hour. Another great place to make practical progress in evangelism is in your community groups.

Each week we're encouraging groups to answer the questions: What small steps have you taken this last week in evangelism? And what steps do you wish you had taken? I hope you're discussing these questions in your groups. Community groups are designed to help challenge and encourage one another toward faithfulness in witness. So, if you're not in a group, I'd encourage you to reach out to Jordan Green and find out how you can join one. But regardless of whether or not you're in a group, you can still discuss these questions with other believers.

This week I made some progress in my own evangelism. There was a situation where I had an unbeliever in my office with a problem. Normally, I would've probably just given advice. But because we're focusing on evangelism, instead, I shared the gospel. But I also had some missteps this week. I had workers at my house all week repairing my basement. And there were a couple of opportunities where I could've tried to start a spiritual conversation, but I didn't.

What about you? Where have you taken some steps? And where have you missed some opportunities? This kind of reflection will help you to make progress.

Pluralism and Tolerance

As we dive in today, I want to begin by identifying some basic challenges we face with evangelism in our day. There are many obstacles to evangelism. I don't have time to deal with them all. I want to touch on one that pollutes the cultural air we breathe. The air we breathe is full of pluralism in our day.

What is pluralism?¹ Don Carson says there are three types of pluralism. At the most basic level, it's simply a fact. We live in a very diverse society. There are many different languages, ethnicities, religions, worldviews, etc. But pluralism goes beyond the fact of diversity. In our day, we also value

¹ What follows comes from Will Metzger, *Tell the Truth*.

diversity. So far, so good. These are things that we can affirm as Christians. But there's a third kind of pluralism that makes our evangelism very difficult to take in. Carson calls it philosophical pluralism or relativism. It's an ideology that refuses to allow any single religion or worldview to say it has the corner of the market on truth. It denies absolutes. It says all religions are equally valid.

We live in a day where tolerance is the primary virtue. But again, there are different ways to define tolerance. Tolerance is a very Christian idea, if by it we mean that we allow others to hold views different from ours. And that we show fairness and respect toward those who are different from us. But that's not generally what people mean when they talk of tolerance. Today, tolerance means we must approve all beliefs, opinions, values, lifestyles, etc.

Well how does this cultural air push against our task in evangelism? For one, the Bible denies philosophical pluralism or relativism. Isaiah 45:22 says, "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God; and there is no other."² Or consider Jesus' familiar words: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn. 14:6).

Christianity is the most inclusive religion on earth. Any kind of person, irrespective of race or culture or religion, can be saved and will be saved. But at the same time, it's the most exclusive religion. Christianity says there's only one way to the one and only true God. And that's through the death of his own Son.

This truth pushes against our culture's value of toleration. To evangelize faithfully is to announce we're sinners and Jesus is the only way to be saved. To evangelize faithfully, you're calling people to turn from their sin and to submit to Christ!

In our day, people don't want to be told they're wrong and they need new life. But none of this is new. What's new in our day is that evangelism is seen as evil. The only thing that's wrong in our day is to tell someone else that they're wrong. Carson calls it the intolerance of tolerance.

This is the climate we're called to go into and share the gospel. If you're traveling in a place where there's a different climate than the one you're from, you have to dress appropriately, or you'll freeze or fry. In the same way, the climate of this world is very different from the climate of the Bible. So, how do we dress so we can share the gospel in this climate?

We certainly don't compromise the truth. Because, as we've seen, only the truth of the gospel is powerful to save. And we don't despair. For we know God will save people from every tribe and tongue. But how can we be all things to all people, so as to save some (1 Cor. 9:22)?

Here's my basic argument: Relationships provide a biblical context for evangelism.

When we have relationships with people, we have an opportunity to dispel some of the beliefs our culture assumes about Christians—that we're bigoted, narrow-minded, and out of touch. There aren't many people today who will give you an audience for the gospel outside of a relationship. And so, we need to learn relational ways to share the gospel.

This morning we're going to look at two ways to do relational evangelism in our day. We're going to talk about conversation and hospitality.

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

Let's begin with conversation.

CONVERSATION

Conversation is a way to share the gospel with the lost. Randy Newman says research indicates there was a time in our culture when people responded to evangelistic methods that used booklets or scripts to share the gospel. But in our day, most people come to faith through natural conversation.³ Is this a biblical concept? Or is this just capitulating to the culture? I think it's a thoroughly biblical concept.

In chapter 4, verse 2, Paul asks the Colossians to pray for him that he would proclaim the gospel with clarity. He's referring to proclamation or to preaching, which is a dominant way the gospel is spoken in the New Testament.

Then in verse 5, he turns to talk to the Colossians about their evangelistic ministry. And he says, "Walk in wisdom toward outsiders." Or as we used to say in Young Life when we were training leaders on relational evangelism, "Walk in wisdom toward those who are without." What Paul's saying is you need to engage unbelievers with wisdom so they might become believers.

He goes on to say, "Make the best use of the time." Literally he says you need to buy time. In other words, the days are short. So there needs to be a sense of urgency. Every minute matters. So, live in such a way to make every moment count.⁴ And how can you live in such a way to make the best use of time? Through conversation.

Look at verse 6. "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." The NIV translates this verse a little differently. It says, "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt." I think this interprets the sense of the verse rightly. The speech spoken of in verse 6 probably refers to conversation.⁵ So Paul is proclaiming the gospel. But he's calling the Colossians to hold conversations with people.

And what should your conversations include? First of all, they should be gracious. He's basically saying, "It's not just what you say. It's how you say it." This is my main problem in life. I'm pretty committed to truth. But I have a lot of room for growth in speaking the truth graciously. Paul's saying we need to watch our tone when we converse with people. We need to be warm. We need to show kindness, as God has been kind to us. We need to show tolerance when we converse with unbelievers.

But Paul doesn't stop there. He also says that our conversation should be seasoned with salt. Our speech needs to be gracious and provocative. We're not just being nice. We're using wisdom in our conversation to try to get to the gospel, and ultimately to persuade people to believe the gospel. Our conversation with unbelievers should be for the purpose of giving an answer to each person of the reason for the hope that's in us (cf. 1 Pt. 3:15).

So, Paul's calling the Colossians to do relational evangelism. An evangelism that's conversational, personal, gracious, but also intentional. The aim is to share the gospel.

³ Randy Newman, *Unlikely Converts*, 143

⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary

⁵ Moo

Application

How do we do this well? Let me offer a couple of applications.

First of all, you have to actually care about other people, if you're going to be gracious to them. You have to respect people enough to listen to them, and then speak to their unique person. We used to say in sales, you can't sell to people if you don't like people. How much more in evangelism? You can't share the love of God with people, if you don't love them. And if you love them, you'll listen to them. You'll have a conversation with them, not just make a presentation to them.

Secondly, you need to become increasingly fluent in the gospel. You need a thick understanding of the gospel to be effective in conversational evangelism. You can give a pre-fab presentation of the gospel with a pretty thin understanding. You simply go through your presentation. But a conversational approach involves using natural conversation as an entry point for the gospel. And this requires fluency.

How do you know if you're fluent in a foreign language? It's not simply when you know the words and can speak them. You know you're fluent in a foreign language when you begin to think in that language. If you're fluent in the gospel, you think with a gospel mind. You see everything in relationship with the gospel.

Then any topic can become a launching pad into the gospel—economics, politics, work, family, sports, you name it. If you're conversing about marriage, for example, the person fluent in the gospel knows many ways the gospel touches on the theme of marriage and can bring the gospel naturally into the conversation.

So, we've seen the need to speak the gospel in conversation. And conversations happen best in the context of relationships. Because in relationships, you naturally have conversations with other people.

HOSPITALITY

But what if you don't have many relationships with unbelievers? How can you form relationships for the gospel? One way the Bible offers is hospitality. Hospitality is a way to spend time with the lost. This morning, I want to ask three questions to help us understand how hospitality can be used as a biblical strategy for evangelism: What is biblical hospitality? Why is it important in evangelism? How is hospitality for evangelism modeled in the New Testament?

First, what is biblical hospitality? Hospitality in the Bible is something a little different than what we think of when we think of hospitality in our culture. We generally think of entertaining people, people we already know. But that's not quite what the Bible means by hospitality. In the Bible, hospitality is distinctly for strangers. This is explicit in Hebrews 13:2. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers." But it's implicit in all uses of the word in the Bible.

Josh Jipp (a New Testament professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) says, "Hospitality is creating a space where a stranger can become a friend."⁶ It definitely involves inviting others into our homes. And responding to other people's invitation to be in their homes. And it usually involves food. But the main thing that's unique in biblical hospitality is who we invite and the goal of

⁶ Joshua W. Jipp, *Saved by Faith and Hospitality*, 2

hospitality. It is uniquely for people we don't yet know and it's for the sake of getting to know them. It's a space where strangers can become our friends. And ultimately where they can become friends of God.

Why does this matter? Why is it a biblical strategy for evangelism? It's a strategy for sharing the gospel because it's a way we demonstrate the truths of the gospel. In Christ, God has shown us lavish hospitality. He's welcomed us into his home.

In the Old Testament, Israel was commanded to welcome the stranger in their land, because they had been strangers in the land of Egypt (Lev. 19:33-34). That same truth is seen in the New Testament. Paul says, "Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:12-13, 19).

Do you see? We're called to share the gospel. But we're called to do so in a way that reflects the truths of the gospel. God has shown us hospitality in Christ. That's why we're called to show hospitality toward others.

How is hospitality for evangelism modeled in the New Testament? Paul and Jesus both give us a model.

In Paul's life, the passage that stands out to me is in 1 Corinthians 9 where he says he became all things to all people that by all means he might save some. "To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law...that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law... that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings" (vv. 20-23).

Normally, we don't think of these verses applying to hospitality, but Josh Jipp thinks they do. Why? Well, it comes from the context. Chapters 8-10 are largely about food. What food should a Christian eat, when he's invited to eat with an unbeliever (1 Cor. 10:27; cf. Lk. 10:8)?

In that day, there were protocols for hospitality. A guest was expected to eat the food put before him. And they were to respect the religious and cultural values of the host (true tolerance). But many Jews had scruples with certain foods. Paul's saying he has freedom to eat whatever is put in front of him, in any house. He follows the hospitality protocols of his day so that he might win some of his hosts for Christ.

For Paul a meal in someone's home was the space where strangers could become friends. But not only that. As he made strangers his friends, he was creating a space where these people could become friends of God. It was a context for conversation about the gospel. He wanted to share with them in the blessings he'd received (v. 23).

We see the same thing in Jesus' life. He's constantly spending time with sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes over a meal in a home (Lk 5:27-32; 7:36-39). Why did he do this? Because his mission was to seek and to save the lost.

In the Gospels, it's so clear that Jesus loves the lost. That's what drives all evangelism. It's love for our neighbor that flows out of love for God, which flows out of God's love for us. And love for the lost necessarily leads to spending time with the lost. That's why Paul spent time with the lost. That's why Jesus spent time with the lost.

And that's why we're called to spend time with the lost. Love is very personal. And to have a personal relationship you have to be present in person.

Remember what Paul said to the Thessalonians? "We were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thess. 2:8).

Hospitality is a biblical strategy to share our lives with unbelievers so that we can share the gospel with them. It's a way to spend time with the lost, so that we can get to know them personally, so that we converse with them about the gospel.

Application

How do you do this? I think it's important to say there's no-one-size-fits-all approach. There are many ways to show biblical hospitality. If you want to read a short book, you may try *The Simplest Way to Change the World*, by Dustin Willis and Brandon Clements. It's a book on biblical hospitality as a way of life. They offer literally dozens of different ways to show hospitality to unbelievers, and help on how to move from showing hospitality to sharing the gospel.

Here in a minute, I'm going to invite Dave and Fay Netherton to come up and share some ways they've shown hospitality over the years. They may provide some ideas for you. But their ways of doing it are different from what we've done in our family and may be different from what you should do.

Maggie and I regularly invite our neighbors over. And they always say how much they appreciate time together, getting to know the neighbors. We have people over on the Fourth of July holiday for pancakes. We have people over for soup on Halloween. Maggie does May Day baskets every year. We invite new neighbors over for dinner.

But the main way we've shown hospitality is by bringing children in need of care into our home. This isn't for everyone, but it's something that's made the most sense for us.

What will you do? Who could you invite over in the next month to show hospitality with the goal of eventually sharing the gospel?

Netherton Testimony:

Our convictions on hospitality have come mostly from two sources:

1. *The hospitality we received when we moved here, by Dave and Debbie Miller, Ray and Kulsum Dorsett, the Foosbees, the Noltes, Richard and Myrna Long, Dan and Susan Wilson and so many others.*
2. *The Crown Ministries Week 2 verse is 1 Chronicles 29:11 "Everything in the heavens and earth is yours O Lord and this is your kingdom." God owns it all and we are stewards of what he has entrusted to us.*

When our first son was one we were asked to be a host family for AIA baseball players who were in town for the summer to play in the NBC Tournament. These were college players who were learning to integrate evangelism and walking with God into their everyday lives. After that summer we were hooked! Over the years we hosted many players and our boys saw them having quiet times, sharing the gospel, and having a ton of fun! It had quite an impact on our family.

One summer we hosted a pitcher from California named Rich. It became apparent Rich was not a believer. He was a Physics major and just couldn't reconcile science and faith. We spent many hours loving him, sharing and answering questions. Two weeks after Rich returned to California he let us know he had surrendered his life to Christ.

Then there was the high school exchange student we hosted who was from Eastern Europe. He had a very tough personality, was quite resistant to the gospel, and wasn't interested in connecting with us. This situation however exposed our selfishness and pushed us outside our comfort zone. We learned perseverance and genuineness. It was HARD but GOOD. Even though we didn't see any progress in the student's interest in spiritual things, God used it to grow us in Christlikeness.

We would often invite international students to our home for holiday meals and it became an expectation of our kids each year. Once we invited two Indian students, and after confirming time and location (we're two miles from campus) we awaited their arrival. And waited. And waited. After an hour we called and left a message, and then enjoyed our meal. Later that evening one of the students called back and said they were confused by our message, that they had a wonderful time at our house. Later it became clear they had gone to our neighbor's house by mistake but were still welcomed into their family!

A few years ago Curt Romig asked if we would be willing to host a student in our home. He had recently become a believer and wanted to live with a Christian family. We agreed, and over the next two years K lived life with us. He saw what it meant to be a Christian husband and father. We wrestled with how to honor his father and mother after they rejected him for his faith. And we worked through what the gospel meant in real life. We were also challenged as he introduced us to his many Muslim friends. He would invite his soccer teammates to the house for hot drinks and cookies, even late at night. Through ISI and several young adults here at First Free, our international hospitality grew, and we learned so much. For example, be sure to wear good socks when visiting their homes as you are expected to remove your shoes. And always say "YES" to a meal—their food is amazing!

Over the past four years we have become very close to one Muslim couple. One day the husband asked me about the homeless situation in Wichita. I told him our small group served dinner at the Union Rescue Mission and he was welcome to join us. He said "sure!" So for the past two years he has helped serve with us, while hearing and seeing the gospel in action. He and his wife even attended the Rescue Mission's annual banquet!

In summary:

- 1. Be available. It takes time to develop relationships. Do things together, share meals, ask for help with projects, have fun, honor their customs if necessary.*
- 2. Be prepared to have gospel conversations when there is an opening. Share what God is teaching you from his work day by day. Share God-sightings, where you have seen God at work*
- 3. Be real. Don't be afraid to show an authentic walk with God through the joys and struggles of life.*
- 4. Start small and simple. And enjoy!*