



EVANGELISM: A GIFT OR A GIVEN?

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1 Peter 3:15

Fourth Message

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What is it about evangelism that makes us queasy? We tense up when we learn that we might be asked to talk about evangelism or do it. Even if we are not sure what evangelism is or what it entails, we seem to have an inner reaction to this word. Now I know that is not true for some of you. You delight in the opportunities that God provides and enter into them with great freedom. But I am talking about many of us – myself especially – as we lose sight of the fact that God is at work. We become tense at the thought of adding yet another “spiritual to do” to an already too long list.

If the subject were showing mercy or being encouraging, we would relax and see what we could learn. But evangelism is in a different category – at least for me. And yet, God has blessed me with numerous opportunities to be present when he has worked the miracle of salvation and changed hearts and lives. Sometimes he has even used my stumbling words as part of his process. What is it about evangelism that causes our initial reaction?

In trying to answer this question for myself, I have observed two obvious factors. The first is that we are unsure of what is actually expected of us in evangelism. We are concerned that we are being encouraged to act like movie preachers in a tent revival. The second factor is that we usually are fearful about what the reaction might be to our attempts at evangelism. We are sure that the situation may turn out badly, with the person rejecting us along with the gospel.

I think that what we are reacting to is not evangelism, but another “ism” — “proselytism.” Proselytism has been described as “a corruption of Christian witness,” which uses “cajolery, bribery, undue pressure, or intimidation, subtly or openly, to bring about seeming conversion.” It has also been defined as “a manner of behaving contrary to the spirit of the Gospel, which makes use of dishonest methods to attract [persons] to a community—for example, by exploiting their ignorance and poverty.”¹

It is proselytism, with its connotations of manipulation and dishonest methods, with which we do not want to be identified. This is not at all what the Bible calls us to in evangelism. J. I. Packer says: “Evangelism is just preaching the gospel... The gospel is, ‘believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for sins and now offers you Himself as your Savior.’”²

In its simplest form the Gospel, the Good News, is: John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” But, we live in Silicon Valley, so we are “efficient.” We want a pat formula, or a series of foolproof, logical propositions. We want to learn a technique, take a seminar or attend a class. (When was the last time you saw a class on “showing mercy”?) We want a sermon entitled: “How To Do Evangelism?” or “Evangelism in Five Easy Steps.” Or, how about a yellow covered book entitled: “Evangelism for Dummies”?

Biblically, as we learned last week, we are called to an “as you go” lifestyle evangelism. In fact, the apostle Peter makes the amazing statement that a wife may influence her husband

for Christ “without a word...”

Today will look at two passages. First, I want to remind you of 1 Corinthians 12:4-6. These verses will provide some background information that we must keep in mind. Here we will see that it is the Lord who provides us the capability and the opportunity to do evangelism, and that he is “responsible” for the results. Then we will discuss 1 Peter 3:15 in detail, as it provides guidance and instruction to us into the nature of the activity of evangelism:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. (1 Pet 3:15, NIV)

God Is At Work (1 Cor 12:4-6)

Let’s begin by looking at God’s role in any activity of spiritual value:

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all (1 Cor 12:4-6, NIV)

Spiritual Gifts

Notice the first clause of this section: “*There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit*” (1 Cor 12:4, NIV). The context of this passage is a discussion of spiritual gifts and their importance to building up the Body of Christ.

When it comes to evangelism we sometimes get “stuck,” thinking that we are not “gifted” for this work. Suppose a friend or family member came to you needing to be encouraged. Can you imagine saying, “I would like to encourage you, but I am just not sure that I have the gift of encouragement? I’m sorry. Oh, I did hear that a man from North Carolina who is known worldwide as an encourage-ist will be coming to the San Jose Arena. I would love to take you. He will be here some time next summer. Do you think that you can hold out until then?” Or, can you imagine that if God puts you into a situation where mercy needs to be shown that you would say, “I would really like to help, and we are talking about spiritual gifts in Sunday School, but I haven’t taken the class in showing mercy yet.”

God provides the spiritual gifts that we need to be able to respond to the spiritual needs and opportunities that are around us. Therefore, I am convinced that God will provide whatever spiritual gifts we need when he places us in a situation that requires those gifts. To say, “I am not gifted for that,” is not an acceptable answer to God’s calling when he has said, “Just ask.” We can be sure that we will have the spiritual gifts that we need when we need them. Count on it!

Spiritual Opportunities

[5] *There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.* (NIV)

[5] *And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord.* (NASB)

This is referring to God-given “spiritual opportunities” to serve or minister, using the gifts that God provides. We are constantly confronted with spiritual opportunities. We do not even notice most of them. Sometimes, we are so self-absorbed that the best we can do is merely recognize that a spiritual opportunity has come and gone: “I should have said something... I should have done something...” Has that ever happened to you? You and I should be praying that God would open our eyes to the spiritual opportunities all around us; they are already there. God calls us to be faithful to what he has already put in place.

I believe that one of the most powerful prayers that we can pray is for spiritual opportunities: to tell of God’s love, to share the gospel, to be used by God. If you ask God for spiritual opportunities, be sure to fasten your “spiritual seatbelt,” because something is going to happen!

A number of years ago I attended a business meeting in Rome, Italy. During the meeting, and while talking to individuals (the attendees were mainly European), I had numerous opportunities to speak about my faith in Jesus and of the importance of trusting God. I ignored/overlooked/avoided every opportunity! I was not intending to do so, but that was the result. The impact of all those missed opportunities hit me as I got on the plane for my flight back to the U.S. I was saddened by my lack of response to the openings for spiritual conversations that God had arranged. As the jet engines were firing up, all I could do was to pray that God would allow me another opportunity. So I prayed. As I finished praying, I heard the engines shut down. The captain come on the intercom to say that due to air traffic congestion over the Atlantic, we would be held on the ground in Rome for two hours!

As soon as the captain stopped speaking the man sitting next to me asked, “What are you reading?” I had taken out a book titled *A Severe Mercy* to read on the flight home. “It’s a book about a marriage,” I said. “It’s a true story about a couple’s search for faith in God, and about what that faith meant when they eventually faced tragedy and loss.” He then said, “My wife and I have been married about ten years. We have noticed that many of our friends’ marriages are failing. We are beginning to wonder if having faith in God might help us build a lasting marriage.” We talked for the full two hours until the plane took off. I had a chance to answer his questions about a God-centered marriage, to encourage him and to recommend a church in his hometown.

Remember: it is the Lord himself who invites us to participate in this process by creating the spiritual opportunities for us to exercise our spiritual gifts.

Spiritual Results

[6] *There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.* (NIV)

[6] *And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons.* (NASB)

We have seen that God not only provides the gifts (spiritual “capabilities”) that we need in evangelism, and the spiritual opportunities, but now in this verse we learn that he provides the “working” (whatever that is). The NASB translates this as “effects.” This word has a root word that can mean “accomplishments.” We would say: “results.” While we want “results,” this verse says that “results” in spiritual activities are God’s concern.

Packer encourages us: “While we must always remember that it is our responsibility to proclaim salvation, we must never forget that it is God who saves... Our evangelistic work is the instrument that He uses for this purpose, but the power

that saves is not in the instrument: it is in the hand of the One who uses the instrument.”³

This is very important to remember. It should be encouraging, but we can easily become discouraged. We may not see “results” (as defined by us) from our involvement in some other person’s life. That’s all right. Think of coming to the Lord as a process, not an event. If conversion is going from 1–100, God may use you in that person’s life to go from 10–15. You may not see the end of the process.

To summarize this thought: When God is moving someone along on the path from death to life, there is usually far more happening in their life than you can see or even be aware of. Trust God for that. That person’s salvation does not rely solely on your efforts. You can ask God to open your eyes to see the bigger picture. Sometimes you will get a glimpse of him at work. You should pray that other Christians might be in this person’s life.

I had a friend, Frank, who died a number of years ago. Frank was one of the most fun, lively people that you would ever want to meet. He had a sparkle in his eye and a constant, quick wit. When he arrived, you always had the feeling that the party was about to begin.

Frank prided himself on his physical fitness, his black belt in karate and his beautiful girl friends. There was not a lot of space in his life to consider his need for a relationship with God. Then Frank’s health began to fail. He was diagnosed with ALS (Lou Gehrig’s Disease), a disease that progressively impairs muscle function until you can no longer move or breathe. However, your mind remains unaffected until the very end.

As Frank grew worse, he stopped working and stayed in his apartment in Mountain View. I would try to visit him on Saturdays. He was eventually confined to his bed, with constant nursing care. That is when I really got to know Frank. I learned that he had been divorced many years earlier. That was also when he go to know me better as I tried to tell him about the difference that knowing Jesus had made in my life, what it meant to have a relationship with God. I was rather ineffective in communicating the truth of the gospel to him. He had grown up in a formal church environment and was sure that he knew all about “religion.” But we had good discussions, and he was always happy to see me, although as the months passed, it became harder and harder for him to talk.

Frank still had one joy in his life, his daughter. She lived in the East Bay, had recently graduated from High School, and could drive over to visit him. One Saturday when I came to visit, Frank told me that his daughter was in a Bible study and that she had become a believer in Jesus. He did not seem to mind that; he loved her too much. “But,” he said, “when she comes over to visit, I quiz her on everything that she has learned in that Bible Study. I want to be sure that she understands what she believes.”

There is a lot more to this story, but my point is this: even though it may seem that you are the only voice for God in a person’s life, you can count on God to be at work in many ways. And at times you will be blessed with a glimpse of his care for someone about whom you also care.

The rest of the story? Let me just say that when I get to heaven, Frank is one of the first people that I will want to look up. I am sure that he is there.

When we are most discouraged we should remember that prayer is a vital element in this process. Pray for spiritual opportunities. Pray for other Christians. Pray to be useful to God. I believe that it was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said, “It is

more important to talk to God about people than it is to talk to people about God.”

Two Reminders:

1. Live with a Mystery

When it comes to a discussion of evangelism, we always need to recognize the existence of a mystery here and to let God be wiser than we are. The Bible teaches that people are responsible for their actions – and the sovereign Lordship of God over those actions. We need to let the two truths live side by side as they do in the scriptures. As Packer reminds us, “The belief that God is sovereign in grace does not affect the responsibility of the sinner for (their) reaction to the gospel. Whatever we may believe about election, the fact remains that a (person) who rejects Christ thereby becomes the cause of (their) own condemnation.”⁴

2. Expect a Reaction

It is good to be reminded at this point that there will always be a reaction to the gospel (the good news of God’s love and salvation for unworthy people). Paul says that the gospel (the “Good News”) is a “fragrance”: for some of “life” and for some of “death.” This means that the good news *will* provoke a reaction. The gospel may be offensive to some (we should not be) but the gospel message may be:

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? (2 Cor 2:14-16, NIV)

A month ago, my wife Yvonne and I were in Jerusalem. As we walked down Ben Yahuda Street one evening, we saw that a crowd had gathered, and we stopped to see what was happening. Some young people, American high school students, as it turned out, were performing a street drama, a pantomime with music. The crowd seemed to enjoy the music. As the drama unfolded it became clear that this play was about Jesus. Suddenly, a man burst from among the onlookers, shouting in Hebrew, saying something like, “Jesus is an infidel!” At first I thought that the man was a plant, part of the drama, but it was quickly apparent that he was serious. He shouted until another person in the crowd became bold enough to start pushing and hitting the high school students. The students went into a defensive huddle as the pushing and shoving continued. A policeman quickly arrived to stop the disturbance.

As we left I could hear bystanders talking about the incident. A young American standing near me said: “They came all the way to Israel to do that? They must be some kind of cult.” Others, Israelis, I believe, said: “Let them be. Why can’t they perform their play?” The good news of Christ still causes a very real reaction.

From the passage at which we have just looked (1 Cor 12:4-6) we learn that God is at work in this process. He provides everything that is needed. We have been set free from our concerns about results! You are called to just show up to be the person God has made you to be.

Our Instructions (1 Pet 3:15)

“But,” you ask, “what is it that I am supposed to *do* when I show up?” We still want to know, “What does God expect of me?” God does not leave us without an answer to that question:

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to

give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect (1 Pet 3:15).

Consider studying this in reverse order, i.e. from the bottom up, taking each phrase in turn.

1) *But do this with gentleness and respect*

The context of this verse is that you are being slandered. And yet, we are called, even commanded, to be gentle and respectful. How often is my attitude quite the opposite! I start thinking dark thoughts about “throwing pearls before swine.” Still, gentleness and respect are to characterize our response. It is often difficult to find examples of “gentleness and respect” in the current public arena, when religious people attempt to change the hearts and attitudes of those around. Our best example is Jesus himself who said: “I am meek and lowly in heart.”

We have no right to be arrogant about the gospel. As C. S. Lewis, writing about evangelism to a friend, has said: “...the seriousness with which the other party takes my words always raises the doubt whether I have taken them seriously enough myself. By writing the things I write, you see, one especially qualifies for being hereafter ‘condemned out of one’s own mouth.’ Think of me as a fellow-patient in the same hospital who, having been admitted a little earlier, could give some advice.”⁵

2) *to give the reason for the hope that you have*

“Hope” is a weak word in current usage. Our world says, “What do you mean, you ‘hope’? What is it that you really know?” The New Testament word translated as hope means “confident expectation.” Do you have that kind of “hope,” that “confident expectation” that Jesus will do what he promised? and that his actions make it possible for you to be put into a right relationship with God? If not, start right here in your relationship with God. Do not go any further.

3) *to everyone who asks you*

This is amazing! Remember that the context of this verse is that you are being slandered. Somehow when we are being reviled, those who are slandering us (and God) will see something in our reaction that will lead them to “ask.”

Again, the context is not when you are being honored, or named *Time Magazine’s* Person of the Year. How easy it is for us to build a fantasy of success that will give us a platform to speak! We do expect to be asked about our beliefs after we have received some great honor or achieved wealth or power. But the Bible says that God delights in using us in our weakness. Paul makes this very clear:

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. (1 Cor 1:26,27)

Why? Paul gives the reason: “*Let him who boasts boast in the Lord*” (1 Cor 1:31).

The apostle makes an even stronger statement later:

But he [Jesus] said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor 12:9-10)

Are you “weak” from the world’s point of view? Remember that you are “strong” as a child of God.

So here in 1 Peter 3:15 we find a key to evangelism. Somehow during this process people will “ask you” to witness to them. That will be a result of the way that they have seen you live your life. While you are being slandered, they will notice that you have a “hope” that is worth asking about. And it is to those people that we are to be ready to give an answer. And ask they will, in many ways.

Not only as individuals, but also as a group, Christians can act in a way that reflects the reality of Jesus Christ in a manner that is visible to the world around us. Os Guinness, a Christian writer and founder of The Trinity Forum, recounts the following:

At a Trinity Forum session two years ago, a man introduced himself by saying: “I am here as a Hindu seeker after Jesus. I was raised in India as a Hindu and am now living in a predominantly Buddhist country. I have been deeply influenced by the teachings and values of Christians around the world.” He went on to tell how seeing the response of Christians to the Kobe earthquake had a profound effect on him. He observed that, “Christian volunteer organizations, both Japanese and foreign, defied all the odds to reach those in need. Despite the obstacles in their way, they were singular in their purpose and were the first to carry out their mission. This had a deep effect on me. My own path became much clearer.”

And so, this man came to the seminar all the way from Japan, seeking truth and asking questions.

People will ask.

4) *Always be prepared to give an answer*

Are we ready to make an answer, a defense, literally, an “apologia”? The Greek scholar Ken Wuest translates this word as: “logical explanation.”

What do you believe? Why do you believe it?

First, we have to know “What” we believe. But then, to obey this verse, we should have a good idea of “Why” we believe it. This is difficult for many people to articulate, even for those who attend church regularly. You know that you do believe, and what it is that you believe, but it is hard to express it clearly, that is, to give a “logical explanation.” Take the time to grow in this area.

Do not overlook your own story, aspects of your life that are true only because you have become a follower of Jesus Christ. These are a testimony to God’s grace and truth. You know what these are.

5) *But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord (sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts)*

Start (and end) here! We end where we started: setting apart Jesus as Lord. Without that our words and our lives will not consistently reflect the love of Jesus in a way that will cause people to “ask” about our “hope.”

I want to make two observations about what we have learned this morning.

First: Evangelism as a solely human activity cannot possibly succeed. Humans are by nature in rebellion against God – and the evil one is determined to assist with that rebellion. This is what Jesus meant when he said, in Mark 10:25: “*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich*

man to enter the kingdom of God.”

Think about it: Real camel! Real needle! For years, theologians have been trying to find a way to get that camel through the eye of that needle. But what if Jesus really meant a camel and a needle? Even the disciples could figure this out. They asked, “*Who then can be saved?*” That is: “Like, if this really totally rich guy can’t get into heaven, like, what will happen to us ordinary people?” The Bible says that “*Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.’*” (Mark 10:27).

The answer is that without God, no one can be saved. Mission impossible!

Second: We are called to be faithful, not successful. Remember that God is in charge of “Results.” Spiritual opportunities are presented to us. Are we faithful in responding to them? The reward for faithfulness is more opportunities to be faithful. That is the point of the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. There the Master commends the servants with the statement: “*Well done, good and faithful servant.*” He says faithful, not successful or profitable. Spiritual successes are in God’s hands.

So, here is the “Bottom Line”:

God is at work calling people to himself. In Isaiah, he says:

“I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, ‘Here am I, here am I.’ All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people” (Isa 65:1-2).

The God of the Bible is a “seeking” God. It is his nature and character. In the New Testament, Jesus says: “*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost*” (Luke 19:10).

God invites us to be part of this process and instructs us in our role. “Show up.” Enter into life around you. “Be present.” “Be real.” “Give an answer when asked.” Remembering Packer’s words, “...the power that saves is not in the instrument: it is in the hand of the One who uses the instrument.”⁶

May we be “useful instruments” in the Master’s hands!

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1. J. Luxmoore, “New Myths for Old,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 36:1-2 (Winter-Spring 1999) 43-65.
2. J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (InterVarsity Press, 1961) 41, 69.
3. Packer, 105.
4. Packer.
5. Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy* (San Francisco: Harper & Collins, 1977) 134.
6. Packer, 27.