

EXCELLING STILL MORE: EVANGELISM
EPHESIANS 4:2-6

Randy Newman introduces his book *Bringing the Gospel Home: Witnessing to Family Members, Close Friends, and Others Who Know You Well* by writing this:

When I informed a friend I was writing a book on witnessing to family, he told me he had the perfect chapter titles:

Chapter 1: Don't Do It!

Chapter 2: Don't Do It!

Chapter 3: Did You Think I Was Kidding?

Chapter 4: Pray for Somebody Else to Do It

Chapter 5: Review Chapters 1, 2, and 3

He then offered several firsthand stories of how not to witness to family. And he had more from where those came from. Since then, many others have volunteered the same kinds of illustrations. Apparently, horror stories outnumber success stories.... [he continues]

I realize that most Christians are not evangelists. Consequently, for them evangelism is not easy. A problem often arises because many of the people who speak and write about evangelism are evangelists. For them, evangelism is easy. It's as natural as breathing. They can't imagine not witnessing to anyone and everyone who comes their way. They tend to make the rest of us feel guilty.

They say, "I cannot sleep at night unless I have witnessed to at least one soul that day." When I hear that (and I have found I am not alone), I usually think, "I sleep just fine!" Or they tell how they always pray for a witnessing opportunity as soon as they sit down at their seat on an airplane. I pray for there to be an empty seat next to me.

When we're told that witnessing should come naturally, we're set up for failure and frustration. For the vast majority of Christians, evangelism never seems natural and never flows easily. As a result we fall into one of several pits. Either we sound like someone we're not, evangelizing with a different tone of voice than we use for every other topic. Or we wait for it to "feel right" or easy and, when that doesn't happen, we clam up. Or we beat up on ourselves for not being bold enough, smart enough, or quick enough. Thus we tell people "good news" but sound more racked with guilt than liberated by grace.

These are just the potential problems with witnessing to strangers or acquaintances. Witnessing to family members — the ones who have known us the longest, seen us at our worst, and are the least likely to fall for our facades — seems infinitely more daunting. [pp. 13, 21.]

Those words resonated with me, and my guess is that they resonate with you as well.

One of our goals for this year is to stimulate one another to **excel still more** in loving and caring for one another. One of the ways we care for one another is through communicating the gospel in evangelistic opportunities and seeing more people trust in Christ and become part of our church body. So today we want to think about our growing commitment to excellence and communicating the gospel by answering this question:

HOW CAN WE BE MORE EFFECTIVE IN COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL?

I want to answer it with **three words** from Colossians 4 — pray, live, and speak.

As we go through this passage, I want to give you (and me) some practices you can cultivate in order to help yourself in each of these areas, so that you leave today not guilt-ridden but hopeful.

HOW CAN WE BE MORE EFFECTIVE IN COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL?

1. Pray (vv. 2-4)

- ✓ Pray **DILIGENTLY**
- ✓ Pray for **OPPORTUNITIES**
- ✓ Pray for **WORDS**

2. Live (v. 5)

- ✓ Live the **GOSPEL**
- ✓ Look for **OPPORTUNITIES**

3. Speak (v. 6)

- ✓ Speak **GRACIOUSLY** and **BOLDLY**
- ✓ Speak **DISCERNINGLY**

1. Pray (vv. 2-4)

- Pray **DILIGENTLY** (v. 2). Paul is talking here about faithful praying. What does faithful praying look like?
 - ✓ Faithful praying is persistent — **devote yourselves** means to be continually united to God in prayer. The word **devote** has the idea of being in attendance with someone — you are nearby, living in close proximity, connected to another. And the vb. is present tense, which means this is what we are always doing — we are persistently and habitually with God in prayer.
 - ✓ Faithful praying is **alert** — constantly watching for both needs of people and answers from God. (One of the ways we demonstrate alertness is by saying, “May I pray with you now?”)
 - ✓ Faithful praying is **thankful** — a faithful pray-er recognizes God’s grace in every answer (even “no”)
- Pray for **OPPORTUNITIES** (v. 3) — this is the content of the prayer Paul is exhorting us to pray
 - ✓ Praying for **open doors** implies a couple of truths:
 1. We are dependent on the Lord to create gospel and ministry opportunities
 2. God is moved by our prayers to act (don’t try to figure that one out, just pray).
 3. The image of a **door** implies that we don’t know what is behind it, but we are willing to proceed through it, trusting that what God provides is good.
 - ✓ Note that Paul asks for this prayer for himself — **praying...for us** = Pray for others, too!
 - ✓ When you have gospel opportunities and needs, know that God is behind them, orchestrating His purposes.
- Pray for **WORDS** (v. 4)
 - ✓ The main content of our prayers should be for boldness and wisdom to speak when we have gospel opportunities (**mystery** in Paul’s letters generally refers to the revelation of God’s plan of salvation).
 - ✓ Paul asks for two specific items in relation to his speaking gospel words —
 1. Opportunities to speak the gospel (v. 3) — this also implies boldness when the opportunities arise (cf. **Eph 6:19-20**).
 2. Clarity (**clear**) when speaking the gospel (v. 4). We don’t ever want to distort the gospel. And clarity is our responsibility; we aren’t responsible to save; we are responsible to be clear.
- Is praying for and proclaiming the gospel really that important? Paul says the gospel (the **mystery**) is the very thing for which he was imprisoned. If we’re willing to be imprisoned for it, shouldn’t we also be willing to pray for opportunities to declare it?

- Notice that as Paul talks about the gospel in these verses, he talks more about prayer than the way we live and what we say about the gospel. Prayer is the foundation of the gospel.
 - ✓ God will always accomplish all His purposes for salvation with every person.
 - ✓ But from our perspective, our effectiveness and preparedness is dependent on our prayerfulness.

I'm more motivated to pray when I think of evangelism as something impossible. Jesus told us "no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him . . ." (John 6:44). He also told us, "apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). I put those truths together and see evangelism as something that requires a miracle on both sides of the conversation. For my unsaved relatives to come to Christ, God has to work supernaturally to draw them. For me to say anything that can ring true in their ears, God has to work supernaturally in me. When I remember that, I pray more and rely on my rhetorical skills less....

In his excellent book, *A Praying Life*, Paul Miller makes the case that "prayer = helplessness." He contends, "God wants us to come to him empty-handed, weary, and heavy-laden....We received Jesus because we were weak, and that's how we follow him." He insightfully adds, "Time in prayer makes you even more dependent on God because you don't have as much time to get things done. Every minute spent in prayer is one less minute where you can be doing something 'productive.' So the act of praying means that you have to rely more on God." When we pray for the salvation of our family, we release them to God. We relinquish a prideful belief that their salvation is dependent on us. We admit that perhaps the only thing we can do is pray. Our prayers work in two directions—they pry loose our fingers from the control we thought we had on our relatives and they ask God to work in wooing ways in their hearts. [Newman, *Bringing the Gospel Home*, 141-2.]

- What you can do to help yourself pray for the gospel:
 - ✓ Make a list and pray for specific people and circumstances (don't pray "generally"). Someone has suggested making a 3x5 card with each person's name for whom you are praying and select a verse to pray for them — "For example, if one of your relatives seems controlled by fear, you might pray the verse "perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18) for her." [Newman]
 - ✓ Pray for others' opportunities with the gospel (e.g., SS requests, GBC members' unsaved family...)
 - ✓ Don't stop praying. Persistence develops our patience and reminds us every time we pray that we are dependent on the Lord.

How can we make the most of gospel opportunities? Pray. And then secondly, live...

2. Live (v. 5)

- Live the GOSPEL
 - ✓ Paul says in this verse, **Conduct yourselves with wisdom**. That is, live wisely.
 - ✓ The emphasis is on wisdom, not "conduct yourselves" ("live"). This reaffirms what has been spoken throughout the book — 1:9, 28; 2:3; 3:16. We need God's wisdom to live well.

- ✓ What is wise living (in this context)?
 - It is from a knowledge of God's will (1:9), saturated w/ Scripture (3:16), demonstrating worthiness of God (1:10), and is not entrapped by "self-made religion" (2:23).
 - It is living that reflects the change that comes from being saved. And more directly here: it is wise living in relation to unbelievers, reinforcing truth of gospel. E.g., **Tt. 2:9-10**. We become an attraction for the gospel (**2 Cor. 2:14-17**).
- ✓ We might paraphrase the sentence, **conduct yourselves with wisdom** as "live the gospel. Live differently because the gospel has influenced and impacted your life."
 1. Do unbelievers look at your life and say, "He's living wisely, making good choices..."? Do they see us as being hard-working, trustworthy, faithful, kind, and generous?
 2. Is my conduct towards "outsiders" wise — conducive to them wanting to hear the gospel?
 3. Is the Word of God living **richly** within you (**3:16**)? That's a question with gospel implications.
- ✓ An article a few years ago in *U.S. News & World Report* said, "American culture is an enormously powerful force. It will change religion, just as religion will change culture. [Already, evangelicals] are far more shaped by culture than they are capable of shaping it to their own needs." Am I being conformed to the world or transformed to Christ?
- ✓ Is it possible that one reason that others around us are not attracted to the gospel and we are not interested in communicating it is that it isn't significantly changing us? If anyone is going to preach or teach or counsel or disciple, he must not only have a hold of the Word of God, but the Word of God and the gospel must have a hold of him. Both our words (v. 6) and actions should be "salty" — attractive and desirable — to unbelievers, so they say, "I want to know more about Jesus Christ."
- ✓ When you are being changed, you will be an aroma of life to others.

- **Look for OPPORTUNITIES**

- ✓ Not only do we live in a way that demonstrates we love the gospel, but we also take advantage of the opportunities that are given to us.
- ✓ The word **opportunities** here is literally, "time," but it is talking about seasons and circumstances of time and not chronology. In other words, God has given us spheres of influence for particular seasons of our lives. We will not always have them, so take advantage. E.g., **Eph. 5:15-16**.
- What you can do to help yourself live the gospel:
 1. *Be faithful to let the gospel examine your life* and regularly confess sin and rest in forgiveness.
 2. *Look for gospel opportunities around you.* There is absolutely a place for knocking on doors and standing on street corners, but that's not what is in view here. Paul is thinking about ongoing seasons — so if you miss it one day, you'll have another chance the next...
 3. *Be patient.* Conversion to the gospel often is a process and not instantaneous.

"We may need to witness slowly, but we feel the tyranny of the urgent. The luxury of time frees us to progress gradually, but the fleeting nature of time beckons us to press the issue. In all likelihood, we'll see our relatives again...and again...and again. But we wonder if we'll see them in heaven. With some degree of certainty, we assume they'll attend the next reunion. But with far greater certainty, we know they won't live forever.

It's enough to make us cry out for a formula. We long for a surefire evangelistic method to use with every relative in any situation. But there is no formula. I offer no timetables. Instead, let this encourage your heart: The God who calls us to live in time lives outside of time. We feel the burdens of deadlines, but he never does. We grow impatient, while he knows nothing of that weakness.

At the risk of sounding trite, I offer this: Witnessing to family takes wisdom. Knowing when to say more or when to hold back, choosing when to take the long-term approach or when to call for a decision, deciding when to build the case gradually or when to deliver the whole package, all come from walking closely with the Lord, depending upon his Spirit, and praying for wisdom every step of the way. Rest in this: God desires for his gospel to go forth. He longs to see your relatives saved. And he chooses to use imperfect spokespersons to deliver his perfect Word.

And all that takes time." [Newman, 155-6.]

4. *Give thanks* (one day a week??; remember **v. 2b**) for where your unbelieving family members are right now. And look for common activities and interests that you can cultivate (travel, music, sports, hobbies, books...) that will give you a long-term context to naturally share the gospel. "In most cases, they're going to be in your life for a long time. It would be nice for them to know you're interested in something besides Jesus." [Newman]
5. *Examine your heart*: "what is my attitude toward unbelievers? Am I angry and hostile or am I compassionate and gracious? Is my attitude providing a platform to speak or enticing them to resist?"

3. **Speak** (v. 6)

- This verse is often interpreted to be about speech in general; it may be *applied* that way, but it specifically refers to speech in context of speaking redemption truth with unbelievers. Two observations:
 - **Speak GRACIOUSLY and BOLDLY**
 - ✓ Our words should be **grace**-filled — pleasant, attractive, truthful, loving & winsome (**Eph. 4:15, 29ff**).
 - Because the message of the gospel is grace (Acts 20:24); our words should be as gracious as the message of the gospel. Being gracious, they will also be "**salty**." That is, they should make people thirsty for the truth of the gospel. They should entice them to want to hear more.
 - This was the example of Christ (**Lk. 4:22**) — yes, Jesus was bold (Jn. 2 — He cleaned out the Temple!), but in general His sharp words of condemnation were for those who were pretending to be followers of God while He spoke with great patience and gentleness to those who did not know about God. We tend to reverse that practice.

- ✓ Note that speaking graciously doesn't mean that we don't speak boldly when given the opportunity. We don't apologize or back away from the gospel. We have all had experiences where we know we should have said something and didn't. Tim Challies related one of those — a long-time friend was dying and he visited him in the hospital and didn't talk about Christ:

I said my good-byes, promised to visit again soon, and walked out of the room, feeling the weight of that Bible in my coat pocket. I hadn't ever taken it out. I hadn't steered the conversation to the state of Mike's soul. The opportunity had been lost. I resolved to go back very soon and to do better this time.

Just a few weeks later I stood at the back of a crowded church, a church where the gospel had not been preached for many, many years, and heard Mike's family say their farewells. They remembered him as a loving husband, a proud father, a loyal son, a mischievous brother. They laughed and cried, they celebrated his life and mourned his death. His little girls sat there, knowing that daddy was gone, but not yet understanding the finality of death. It was the first funeral I had ever been to for a peer—not an elderly man or woman who died old and full of years, but a friend in the prime of life.

I stood back there silent and ashamed and knowing that death is final and yet not final. I knew what everyone else there denied—that Mike was dead but alive. His body had died and was already returning to the dust. But his soul was alive and well. Or not well. Probably not well. As far as I know, Mike never turned to the Lord. He never saw the depth of his sin and his need for a Savior. And in the fear of my sin, the fear of what one man would think of me, I missed the opportunity to tell him about the One who offered him life even in death.

All these years later I am still ashamed. I know I've been forgiven even for this sin, but still I wish that I had done what was right, that in that one great opportunity I had offered hope and offered life. I wish... [Challies; 1/20/12.]

- **Speak DISCERNINGLY**

- ✓ Paul closes this section by saying, ***so that you will know how you should respond to each person***. That is, each person and each circumstance is different. Be wise and discerning about what each moment and situation needs.
- ✓ There are times to stop giving the gospel (e.g., Mt. 7:6; 13:10ff). And there are times to continue speaking the gospel and there are times to stop and wait for another day (e.g., in general, if they say "no," then stop; if they are on the deathbed, keep going).
- ✓ This takes knowing the person to whom you are speaking as well: For instance,

Padma's father was a Hindu priest who responded to his daughter's salvation testimony by yelling, "If you ever walk into a church again, I will kill myself." I don't know if I recommend Padma's response as a universal prescription for all who may find themselves in this kind of situation, but her reply was, "Oh, no you won't. Stop being so dramatic." [Randy Newman, Locations 540-543.]

- What you can do to help yourself speak the gospel:
 1. *Learn the gospel.* If you are fumbling for words, you will tend to be unclear. Learn the basics of the gospel in a few short words (grace – man – God – Christ – faith – hope). Eph. 2; Rom. 3-6. Tracts.
 2. *Cultivate your own daily joy in the gospel.* One of the reasons that we are reticent to speak is that we somehow view ourselves as being worthy of being saved and we see the unbelievers around us as being unworthy of salvation. You might just spend some time thinking about your own condition prior to salvation (Romans 3 is a good starting point): “My sin is so bad that nothing short of the death of the Son of God could pay for it, and that’s exactly what I have.” [Newman]
 3. *Ask questions* (including asking permission to tell them). Declarations may make them defensive. Have conversation to build relationship; don’t tempt them to feel like they are a gospel project.
 4. *Study them to see where they are spiritually.* If they aren’t interested in spiritual things, giving them the gospel will be like giving an iPhone to a newborn baby — no category or use for it. Wait. And engage them in other “pre-gospel” conversations instead:
 - What are you reading? Why is that book (or movie or song) meaningful to you?
 - Do you ever think about spiritual things?
 - What kinds of things do you do in your free time? Why is that an interest to you?
 - If you had to sum up your philosophy of life in a couple of sentences, what would you say?
 - Consider other ways to “salt” your conversation with the gospel:

We can become adept at making our speech gracious and seasoned with salt if we imagine likely interactions with relatives, inserting contrasting ideas of what we should not say (or should just wait to say later) with what we should. For example:

The prompt: Your uncle makes a disparaging remark about marriage.

Don’t say: “Well, the Bible says marriage is a reflection of Christ’s love for the church. Maybe you should consider that sometime.”

Instead, try grace and salt: “It sure does have its challenges. But it also has some great blessings, don’t you think?” ...

The prompt: Your father whines about “how the world is going to hell in a handbasket.”

Don’t say: “It sure is. In fact, Jesus said it’s only going to get worse. Are you ready?”

Instead, try grace and salt: “There sure are a lot of upsetting things going on. But there are a lot of good things happening too. That’s what always amazes me. People are capable of the worst and the best. Do you ever wonder about that?”

The prompt: Your sister says, “My neighbor is disgustingly rich. But she’s miserable. You’d think all that money would buy her some happiness.”

Don’t say: “It never can. That’s why the Bible says, ‘the love of money is the root of all sorts of evil.’”

Instead, try grace and salt: “That’s really sad, isn’t it? Why do you think money disappoints so much?”

This approach assumes you don’t need to dump the whole message on people with one fell swoop. The luxury of time can free us to pursue evangelism gradually. [Newman, 160-1.]

CONCLUSION: Most of us are not gifted in evangelism and it is difficult for us. And that means that just like people don't lose weight, read their Bibles, faithfully pay their bills, or go to work by accident, so we don't share the gospel by accident. It takes prayer, wise living, and words to communicate the gospel — and all those things take planning. We are growing in those skills as a church — we want to excel still more.

- This is what it means (in part) to shepherd God's people. Before one can be made mature in Christ, He must first trust in Christ. Being committed to shepherding and loving God's people in this church means being committed to reach the unbelieving with the gospel of Christ to bring them into this church.
- How do we excel still more in loving others into our church body through evangelism?
 - ✓ Pray diligently for opportunities, boldness and words for the unbelieving.
 - ✓ Live what He desires for those who believe.
 - ✓ Speak the truth of what He's given (with gracious, appropriate, well-timed words).

As we pursue greater excellence in evangelism, let's see what God will do in bringing people to Christ through our gospel conversations.

BENEDICTION: Ephesians 3:20-21