

BIBLE PASSAGE AND READING FOR FEBRUARY 21, 2024

GOSPEL WITNESS

BIBLE PASSAGE & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

2 Corinthians 5:14-21

14 For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; 15 and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

1. What TRUTHS do I need to BELIEVE about God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), myself, or the world?
2. What SINS do I need to REPENT of doing or seek to avoid?
3. What ACTIONS will I take to OBEY the truths I have observed or learned?

GOSPEL WITNESS

You may recall from our first lesson that Simon's call to follow Jesus included a commission: ". . . from now on you will be catching men" (Luke 5:10). Here, we look at how having the gospel firmly rooted in our hearts actually propels us outward toward others in faithfulness to this commission.

There is an inherent and inevitable centrifugal movement to the gospel. Roland Allen, a twentieth century missionary to China, refers to this quality as a "certain natural instinct:"

"This instinct is admirably expressed in a saying of Archytas of Tarentum quoted by Cicero: If a man "ascended to Heaven and saw the beautiful nature of the world and of the stars, his feeling of wonder, in itself most delightful, would lose its sweetness if he had not someone to whom he could tell it. This is the instinctive force which drives men even at the risk of life itself to impart to others a new-found joy."¹

The "sweetness" and "wonder" of the gospel make it eminently shareable; its very nature demands that it be shared. It is not dutiful obligation. Rather, what will get us to actively and boldly share our faith with others is to more deeply comprehend the depths of the riches we have through the gospel in Christ: the gracious call to discipleship, the wonder of our adoption, our precious union with Christ. And so what we need first, before evangelism training (which we also desperately need!) is to treasure our God and the gospel of Christ more and more. John Piper writes, "Passion for God in worship precedes the offer of God in preaching. You can't commend what you don't cherish."² Do we cherish the gospel of grace? Is it sweet enough to us to share?

For many of us, evangelism conjures up images of soapboxes and street corners. The context for evangelism, however, is actually much more pedestrian: "The network of relationships within which we live is the primary place where evangelism is to take place. This is where every Christian is a witness."³ These pre-existing "networks of relationships" include our families, relatives, neighbors, co-workers, and friends. Understanding evangelism as taking place primarily within these networks ensures that our witness is relational, not programmatic; authentic, and not manipulative.

This pattern of evangelism has been referred to as *oikos* evangelism. *Oikos*, the Greek term for "household," encompassed much more than one's nuclear family. An *oikos* represented the fundamental units of society that consisted of all those within one's sphere of influence: friends, neighbors, associates, and relatives. Thomas Wolf points out that "the early church spread through *oikos* evangelism—evangelizing family members who saw the old sinner become the new saint; sharing with the neighbor who questioned how such a difference had come over his old friend, and reaching the guys in the local trade union or the *oikos* that played tennis together."⁴

Now with just a moment of reflection we can see the attractiveness of *oikos* evangelism. It is not manipulative or dehumanizing because we don't see people as simply targets for evangelism. Rather, it honors the person and the relationship. It listens, loves, and empathizes through their struggle, and even resistance, to believe. It has been said that conversion is not reducible to a single decision but is rather a culmination of a thousand smaller decisions. When we evangelize within the context of our networks of relationships, we don't demand that a decision be made on the spot; we simply walk side-by-side our *oikos* through each of those smaller decisions.

Although there is something organic, attractive, and certainly less anxiety provoking about *oikos* evangelism when compared with other modes, it is actually much more personally demanding:

". . . it is easier to approach a total stranger, develop a conversation in which a "testimony" is given, and then present the gospel. It is far more difficult to live with one's "neighbors" daily and to put words on one's convictions, explaining who one is and why one lives a certain way, called Christian. It is, of course, more "natural" to say the witness in such a way that the gospel surfaces out of the interactions of daily life. Through his relationships, the Christian explains and shares himself."⁵

Darrell Guder explains rightly that oikos evangelism is more challenging, not less, because it demands congruence between your life and your message. You don't pass along a tract; you are the tract. In a very real way, your life is under the microscope. Your decisions, your priorities, your words, and your actions explain to those around you what it means to follow Christ. And therein lies, for them, evidence for the faith. You are to them the apologetic, as a changed and changing life.

To go about our lives, in our network of relationships, does not however absolve us of the responsibility to verbally articulate "the reason for the hope" that is in us (1 Pet. 3:15, NIV). Our manner of life still needs to be explained. Guder continues: "This observable difference in the very nature of Christians' lives and behavior calls for an explanation. To live without fear in a fearful world is not 'normal' and demands a reason. To be able to forgive and really have it make a difference in one's relationships is revolutionary behavior. To make one's decisions and judgments on the basis of criteria other than self-interest is so threatening a difference that the world must know how this can be."⁶

Our daily interactions with others then does not equal evangelism; these interactions simply provide the context and make the sharing credible, because as we have implied, we don't simply educate someone into following Christ. The gospel however does consist of historical events and propositional truths. And while those truths are enfolded and made tangible to them through relationships, the truths must still be shared:

- *that we are created by God to worship Him (creation);
- *that instead we consistently desire to live apart from God, being the final authority for our lives (sin);
- *that we thus stand under God's just punishment (judgment);
- *that God in his love and mercy did not leave us to remain under His judgment (grace) but instead became man through the person of Jesus Christ (incarnation), to live the life that we are incapable of living and to bear the judgment on our behalf through his death on a cross (atonement);
- *that Jesus rose from the grave (resurrection) to give sinners new life, so we can begin to live by his Spirit as God had purposed from the beginning (sanctification), as beloved children (adoption), under the loving authority of Christ (discipleship), if only we would believe that that is true (repentance and faith).

Penn Jillette, an avowed atheist and half of the famous comic-illusionist act Penn and Teller, had this to say upon reflecting on an encounter he had with a polite man who shared his faith with him:

"I've always said that I don't respect people who don't proselytize. I don't respect that at all. If you believe that there's a heaven and hell, and people could be going to hell, or not getting eternal life or whatever, and you think that, well, it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward . . . 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? I mean, if I believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that a truck was coming at you, and you didn't believe it, and that truck was bearing down on you, there is a certain point where I tackle you. And this is more important than that."⁷

Penn Jillette gets it. Ultimately, evangelism is an act of love. It is an expression of love and gratitude to our Savior that flows naturally from the gospel being rooted in our hearts, and it is also an act of love to those within our networks of relationships. J. I. Packer writes: "If we ourselves have known anything of the love of Christ for us, and if our hearts have felt any measure of gratitude for the grace that has saved us from death and hell, then this attitude of compassion and care for our spiritually needy fellow-men ought to come naturally and spontaneously to us. It was in connection with aggressive evangelism that Paul declared that 'the love of Christ constraineth us.'"⁸ That's Paul's way of saying that the love of Christ in us compels us to go and share. It is not the guilt-inducing "should" or "have to," but the inevitable outworking of the work of grace in us. (see reverse for discussion questions)

Notes:

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| 1. Roland Allen, <i>The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church</i> , 12. | 4. Thomas A. Wolf, "Oikos Evangelism: The Biblical Pattern." | 7. Quoted from Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, <i>The Trellis and the Vine</i> , 53. |
| 2. John Piper, <i>Let the Nations Be Glad</i> , 11. | 5. Darrell Guder, <i>Be My Witnesses</i> , 147. | 8. J. I. Packer, <i>Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God</i> , 76-77. |
| 3. Darrell Guder, <i>Be My Witnesses</i> , 147. | 6. <i>Ibid.</i> , 160. | 9. J. Mack Stiles, <i>Speaking of Jesus</i> , 40. |

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the reading that was particularly challenging or helpful for you?
2. How do you feel when you think about sharing your faith with others? Anxious? Apathetic? Defeated? Excited? Did anything from the reading or the Bible study speak to this?
3. What heart attitudes hinder you from sharing your faith with others?
4. What are you being called to believe with respect to “gospel witness” / evangelism?