

CONVERSATION BEFORE CONVERSION**COLOSSIANS 4:2-6**

I will always remember it as one of my most embarrassing, awkward moments. After graduating from high school, I spent a year in England studying the Bible. The school I attended there made a well-intentioned effort to get all of us students involved in evangelism, witnessing and sharing our faith. I signed up on a team to go to a local university with the intent of striking up spiritual conversations with students. We really had no training. We were just supposed to wander around the campus for a couple of hours and do it somehow. After experiencing no miraculous witnessing opportunities that dropped into my lap, I began to feel miserable, guilty and convicted, so I decided to throw caution to the wind. I saw my evangelistic “prey” sitting by himself reading in a campus coffee shop. I mustered up what little courage I had, walked over to his table and sat down. I can’t really recall my opening line, but it was probably something like, “Hi, may I sit down? Hi, my name is Rick. Can I talk to you?” Somewhere in our very brief conversation I must have mentioned that I wanted to speak with Him about Jesus Christ. Of course, the young man was immediately suspicious and on guard. He looked at me with some hostility and asked, “How can you justify just walking over here and talking to me?” I began to backpedal quickly and explained that it wasn’t my intent to offend him. I asked him, “Would you prefer if I left?” To which, he replied, “Yes!” I left!

Believe me, that is not how to have a spiritual conversation with someone who does not share your faith in Jesus! I violated about every principle of effective witnessing out there! Fortunately, however, I’ve learned some lessons and gotten somewhat better, hopefully, at having spiritual conversations. Today, I want to begin a series of three messages I’m calling “Creating Space for God: Insights on Spiritual Conversations with Not-Yet-Christians.” In fact, my messages and that of our guest speakers from mid-August through mid-November have been or will be about witnessing, sharing our faith and evangelism. What is witnessing? Basically, it’s pointing people to Jesus with our lips and our lives. Why so much emphasis on witnessing? Two reasons. First, the more I read the Bible and understand the heart of God, the more I see how important witnessing should be for the individual follower of Jesus. I’m convinced that it’s the mark of spiritual maturity. It’s more important than Bible knowledge. It’s more important than spiritual fruit – the development of a Christ-like character. It’s more important than discovering and using your spiritual gifts. There is something seriously wrong with your faith if you feel no desire and no responsibility to point outsiders to Jesus. Second, if our church is going to stop its decline and become a turnaround congregation, it will be because many of us in this room renew our commitment to be witnesses. I have to agree with well known pastor and author, Rick Warren, when he said, “The church that doesn’t want to grow is saying to the world, ‘You can go to hell.’”

I want to accomplish two things in today’s message. First, I want all of us to meditate on the simple fact that every child of God is called to have spiritual conversations. We’ll look at a scripture passage that makes that fact very clear. Secondly, I want us to reflect on how to avoid spiritual conversation killers – attitudes and actions that prevent conversations about Jesus from either being effective or happening at all. I want to recommend an excellent book to you that I’ve relied on in preparing today’s message:

“God Space: Where Spiritual Conversations Happen Naturally” by Doug Pollock. Very readable. Very practical. Very helpful. So, let’s get started by looking at our primary Bible passage today. There are many great truths in that passage, but today please observe with me that just like Paul, the great apostle ...

YOU ARE CALLED TO HAVE SPIRITUAL CONVERSATIONS.

Now Paul was all about sharing his faith with others – having spiritual conversations. His dedication to this task is evidenced by the fact that he was in jail for it! But I want you to notice a very clear, simple assumption made by Paul in those verses. Every follower of Jesus is called to engage spiritual outsiders in conversations about God. There it is in black and white: “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” (Col 4:5-6 NIV) God wants us – those who have trusted in Jesus and are now His children – to pay attention to spiritual outsiders because He cares about them. He sent His Son, Jesus, to die on a cross and be raised again to life, so that every person far from God would have the opportunity to enter into an eternal relationship with Him. One way that happens is when you and I initiate spiritual conversations with those who don’t yet share our faith. God is out there creating all sorts of opportunities for us to enter into those spiritual conversations, but we have to walk through those open doors whenever he provides them.

Spiritual conversations have a divine purpose. They create a spiritual space for God to do His work in the life of a person He is drawing to Himself. Every child of God is called to engage outsiders in conversations about God. I’ve learned over the years that many followers of Jesus who sincerely love Jesus and will be in Heaven have become part of a silent majority of Christians who keep their faith to themselves. They’ve convinced themselves that witnessing means just living a godly life before non-Christians. True, your lifestyle, your outward behavior, your actions should – by all means – point people to Jesus. But, at some point in time, an actual conversation with an outsider has to take place if he or she is ever to come to faith in Jesus. No one has ever come to saving faith in Jesus by a godly example alone. At some point in time, essential information has to be shared, received, believed and acted upon. That happens through actual conversations between a believer and a not-yet-believer.

The need to have these spiritual conversations and to know how to enter into them is more important now than it has ever been. I was very much impressed by this comment from pastor and author, Brian McLaren. “Much of our evangelism here in the United States was developed in a context of Christendom, in which just about everybody knew the basic information of Christianity and was favorably disposed to it. Evangelism got people to act on what they already knew and, in a sense, already passively believed. You could call people to commitment relatively quickly. You could also use pretty forceful persuasive techniques. In dealing with [*most people today*], you’re dealing with people who do not know the basics of Christianity. If anything, they have a negative idea of what Christianity is. So it makes no sense to them if you come on too strong and quickly ask for a commitment. We should count conversations rather than

conversions, not because I don't believe in conversions, but because I don't think we'll get many conversions if we keep emphasizing them." Interesting....

All the more reason, then, that you and I should – as Paul emphasizes - pursue clear conversations with those who don't share our faith. Paul says here, "Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should." (Col 4:4 NIV) Paul was born and bred an ethnic Jew. He was a Jewish religious scholar before he became a follower of Jesus. His world was Jewish ideas, paradigms and language. And yet God called him to share his faith in Jesus with non-Jews primarily. Paul had to figure out how to talk about Jesus and a relationship with God in ways that Gentiles would understand. In our country, you can no longer assume that a person has even the most basic knowledge about Christianity. As a result, having spiritual conversations today can be very stretching. Can you explain your faith in Jesus without using "Christianese"? Can you talk with someone about Jesus without using words like "saved", "born again," "redeemed" or "lost"? Even how you define the word "spiritual" is up for grabs!

Some years ago now I had lunch with a spiritual outsider. His wife attended the church I pastored at the time, but he was about as far from God as someone can get. During the conversation I used the word "gospel" to refer to some aspect of the message about Jesus. He thought I was referring to gospel singing groups because that was the only place he had ever heard that word used. Why would he conclude anything else? I realized I had been guilty of lapsing into "Christianese." I wasn't clear.

You can well understand, then, why Paul tells you and me to pursue wise conversations. "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity." (Col. 4:5 NIV) Why is wisdom needed? I can think of a few reasons. One, the Christian faith is easily misunderstood. We have a spiritual enemy called the devil who is all about confusing outsiders about God's truth. The Bible says, "Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don't understand this message" (2 Cor 4:4 NLT) Two, Christians can be our own worst enemy. When you act in an ungodly way, when you lack integrity, when you display judgmental, harsh attitudes towards others, you actually push outsiders away from Jesus. Wisdom recognizes that the reputation of the Christian faith is tied to the personal conduct of Christians. How you conduct yourself as a follower of Jesus has an immense impact upon those who aren't followers of Jesus in terms of what they think about Christianity, generally, and even what they think of Jesus, specifically.

Three, wisdom recognizes that no one witnessing approach, no one evangelistic program, no one method of sharing your faith works for everyone. Paul says here, "... so that you may know how to answer everyone." (Col 4:6 NIV) That suggests that he understood that people are unique. Our spiritual conversations with outsiders need to be flexible, creative and kind of custom-designed depending on the needs of the person with whom we are conversing. I love the approach I learned through a program called Evangelism Explosion. Some of you may have learned a different presentation through

Campus Crusade for Christ. Almost any approach can be valuable. No one approach is effective for every person on the planet. Wisdom takes that fact into account.

Perhaps most important of all is Paul's encouragement to pursue grace-filled conversations. "Let your conversation be always filled with grace, seasoned with salt..." (Col 4:6 NIV) That's how God creates space for Himself through spiritual conversations. When we follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, we help Him create low risk, high grace places for lost people to pursue their need for God. Here's a sad fact about American evangelical Christianity. By in large, we've allowed ourselves to be defined by what we are against rather than what we are for. We are against abortion. We are against homosexuality. We are against evolution. We are against Hollywood. We are against preserving the environment. We are against liberals. I'm not saying we should become wishy-washy about what God calls sin, but we can come across as judgmental, negative and critical. Somehow we have to rediscover how to offer grace-filled acceptance to people far from God without offering approval of their behavior.

One way to do just that is to engage in caring, one to one conversations with outsiders every time God gives us the opportunity to do so. What did Paul mean there when he said our conversation should be "seasoned with salt"? Now, in our culture, "salty" words can be a way of referring to profane words. Obviously, that's not what Paul means here. Salt was a preservative in his day. It also enhances the flavor of food. Paul is suggesting that grace-filled words are full of good natured humor, full of joy, full of encouragement, full of compassion, full of wisdom. He's saying that Christians can learn how to use words to draw outsiders to them rather than pushing them away. By the same token, grace-filled conversations with Jesus' followers draw people to Jesus ultimately. OK, so if some of your attitudes and actions can prevent conversations about Jesus from either being effective or happening at all, then...

HOW TO AVOID SPIRITUAL CONVERSATION KILLERS

You and I need to face an uncomfortable fact. Your biggest obstacle might well be you! First, you should admit your own unbelief and evasion. Meaning what? Do you really believe the people in your Monday through Saturday world want to talk about spiritual things? If you don't, you should know that your unbelief contradicts the Bible which says, "...He has planted eternity in the human heart..." (Ecc 3:11 NLT) God has put in the heart of every human being a drive to know Him and to be known by Him. True, many rebel against that God-given desire, but that doesn't mean it's not there! By evasion, I mean the tendency most of us have to look for an excuse not to initiate spiritual conversations with spiritual outsiders. "Oh, because I'm not perfect, I'm afraid I'll be called a hypocrite... Oh, I don't know the Bible as well as I should, so I'm afraid of looking dumb or uninformed." You can find many excuses to avoid and evade spiritual conversations. You will never find one valid reason, however. What's the answer? Confess your unbelief to God – not really believing that lost people want to talk about spiritual things – and repent of it. Ask for His forgiveness. Then, ask God to give you new opportunities and begin walking through the doors He will open for you.

Second, realize that many outsiders have a negative opinion of Christianity. I spent some time with another book this week in preparation for today: “Unchristian” by David Kinnaman who works for the Barna Group – a Christian research company. A very insightful and uncomfortable book. Kinnaman makes the case that our culture – and particularly people under the age of 30 – have a largely negative opinion of Christians and Christianity. He quotes one, young spiritual outsider as kind of a summation of the prevailing attitude. “Most people I meet assume that *Christian* means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, antigay, anti-choice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders; they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live peacefully with anyone who doesn’t believe what they believe.”

Is that opinion fair or accurate? Of course not! But that’s not the issue. As the saying goes, perception is reality for many people. So, what’s the answer? As Paul says there in Colossians 4, let’s be wise and clear when we approach spiritual conversations with spiritual outsiders. That suggests at least two things to me. First, let’s start with genuine compassion in those conversations instead of confrontation about what’s wrong with an outsider’s thinking or lifestyle. Two, conversations will likely precede invitations. We have to move beyond just inviting spiritual outsiders to church. Church is an unknown, irrelevant, sometimes scary, alien place for many people in today’s culture. Think about it! What would compel someone with little or no exposure to the Christian faith to give up whatever he likes to do on a Sunday morning, get cleaned up, sing songs to somebody she can’t see, listen to someone speak for 30-45 minutes about someone who lived more than 2000 years ago and get invited to help pay for the experience with something called an offering? A spiritual conversation – probably several spiritual conversations over a period of time – will likely have to precede any visit to this or any other church by a spiritual outsider. Be wise. Be patient. It may well take some time.

Third, let’s learn how to avoid controlling the conversation. I like how Doug Pollock puts it: “Spiritual conversations should be our ultimate motive not our ulterior motive.” Of course, you want to get a conversation with a spiritual outsider moving towards Jesus. Of course, you want to share the message about how he or she can have their sins forgiven and receive the gift of eternal life. But be very careful of manipulating or forcing the conversation to go in that direction, because it may well be the last spiritual conversation you have with that person. If you give someone the impression that your conversation with him or her has an agenda that must be fulfilled or else, it will create awkwardness that usually shuts down conversation. So, what’s the answer? On the one hand, you want to initiate spiritual conversations. On the other hand, you don’t want to come on too strong. Here’s two simple suggestions. First, learn how to ask good questions and then listen to the answers. Spiritual conversations are not about you – what you believe, how you came to faith, what you think about God. Focus on that spiritual outsider – what does he or she believe and why? Is it working for him or her? Two, if an opportunity does present itself to share your faith in Jesus in a clear, unmistakable way – and that is our desire – ask for permission before you do.

Finally, let’s avoid disrespect and a judgmental attitude. I appreciate what Christian leader and author Ravi Zacharias says, “We must find the back door to people’s hearts

because the front door is heavily guarded.” People are carrying a lot of wounds and a lot of hurt around with them these days. They’re guarded and easily offended. Nobody intends to be disrespectful, but we can convey it unintentionally. One way is by being overly combative. Nobody was ever argued into the Kingdom of God. Nobody ever trusted in Jesus because someone else showed him or her how idiotic or foolish his or her spiritual ideas were at that moment. Another way we can show disrespect is being quick to speak and slow to listen. We turn spiritual conversations into being all about us rather than all about that spiritual outsider. How we need to put into practice the divine wisdom of James 1:19: “Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry.” (NLT) That’s great wisdom for any conversation, but especially spiritual conversations with spiritual outsiders. Finally, be careful of the all too human tendency to pass judgment and condemn people as being unworthy of salvation. We easily forget that we’re all unworthy of salvation! Let the Holy Spirit convict a spiritual outsider of his or her sinful lifestyle choices. Again, I appreciate Doug Pollock’s wise advice, “Acceptance does not mean endorsement. When we confuse the two, we destroy the very space God wants to work in.”

Harvey was on a flight to Zurich, Switzerland and was seated next to a woman from India named Badhra. Early in the flight, Harvey discovered that she was living and working in the US as a doctor and was traveling back to India to visit family. As they continued to talk, Harvey asked Badhra if she was of the Hindu faith. She said, “No, I am a Jainist, which is similar.” Harvey responded, “That’s very interesting. I haven’t heard about Jainism. Would you mind telling me about your faith?” As she described Jainism, Harvey asked clarifying questions to better understand her faith. Then, Harvey said, “I’ve found that most faiths have some hope attached to them to motivate people’s involvement. Tell me: what does the Jainist hope in?” Badhra paused and then answered, “There is no hope in Jainism.” Knowing that he had 10 more hours on the plane next to Badhra, Harvey chose to say nothing about Christianity – yet. He prayed waited and gave Badhra space. After awhile their meals came and they chatted some more. Later, Badhra turned to Harvey and asked him, “Am I right in assuming that you are a Christian?” Harvey replied, “Yes, I am.” “Oh,” she said, “I’ve always wanted to know what it means to be a Christian. Would you mind telling me?” Harvey didn’t hesitate to share the gospel with her. Along the way he wisely emphasized the hope Christians have because of Jesus. Badhra listened, asked questions and thanked Harvey profusely when he’d finished.

Later on this same flight, Badhra began talking to the man on the other side of her. Akmed was from Iran. Suddenly she turned to Harvey and said, “I have just been talking to Akmed and I think you would enjoy our conversation. Akmed is a Muslim and I have told him that you are a Christian and I am a Jainist. He would like to hear more about Christianity. Would you mind telling him what you told me?” Harvey said he’d be happy to do just that, but he suggested an alternative. “How about if I listen while you tell Akmed what you heard me say and I’ll add or correct anything after you’ve finished?” Afterwards she asked Harvey, “How did I do?” Harvey assured her that she had presented the gospel perfectly. This led to a stimulating three way spiritual conversation that lasted several hours. No, neither Badhra nor Akmed made a decision

to become a Christian during the flight. But Harvey was certain that both of them now understood the gospel and the differences between Christianity and their own religions by the time they landed in Zurich.

So what will it take to move you and me towards having spiritual conversations with spiritual outsiders? What will it mean to live into what Paul says there in Colossians 4 – “to make the most of every opportunity”? I think it boils down to asking the Lord sincerely to give us a new perspective and a new attitude. Part of that means the willingness to learn from failure. Folks, I’ve shared with you today some of my spiritual conversation failures. If you are serious about wanting God to use you through spiritual conversations, please understand you will fail at times. But, again, some sage advice from Doug Pollock as I close: “The good news is that failure is usually never fatal or final; it’s just an opportunity to begin again more intelligently.”