

*Cultivating Gospel Relationships* – Commitment Sunday

The Evangelism Committee decided a few months back to make the month of January *Cultivating Gospel Relationships* month. This morning is *Commitment Sunday*. This is where we follow-up with the session we had last Sunday night with Marc Backes.

So we are going to talk about *evangelism*. *Evangel* is the Greek word for Gospel or good news. *Evangel-ism* is the process of putting out, distributing, making known, sharing, declaring, proclaiming, the *good news*.

The original idea of *evangelism* and an *evangelist* probably referred to a messenger running back to the village during a time of war to give the report. He stands on a hilltop and yells out to the hearers, “Good news, we’re winning the battle!” That was *evangelism* and the messenger was the *evangelist*.

The New Testament uses for Christians. Jesus designated his disciples as evangelists, and he called all Christians to the task of evangelism. Our good news is the story of the life, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (That’s our Gospel.) The ones we’re announcing that good news to are the ones who are still lost and living in disobedience to and rebellion against God.

We’re going to go through *three misconceptions* (or the three most common errors) that we want to attack this morning in our church: (1) evangelism is the job of Pastor Ryan, (2) I don’t know any lost people, and (3) what those lost people I might possibly know need is a memorized, 3-5 minute presentation of the Gospel in a certain order with a sinners’ prayer at the end.

Misconception number 1: **evangelism is Ryan’s job.**

After Jesus’ resurrection, as he was preparing to ascend into heaven, Jesus spoke to all of his gathered followers saying, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” (Matt. 28:18-20)

The Church has always understood that as our *Great Commission* (where commission means our God given task and authority). This is the church’s *great* task which she has received both directly from her Master, to spend her time on earth carrying out. So yes, it *is* my job, but it’s your job too. It belongs to the church. Maybe we don’t even want to call it a “job” because it’s really a life that God has loved us into. But *us* is the key in this point.

Misconception #2: **I don’t know any lost people.** “Okay, so Jesus has given me a task of making disciples, but here’s the thing: *I just don’t know any lost people!*”

*Actually you do!* You just don’t know that you *know them*. In our mid-Missouri culture, we make ourselves believe that everybody even somewhat close to us in our circle is a Christian. Perhaps it’s because we can’t bear to think of them as cut off from God and going to Hell. Perhaps it’s because

we think it is *mean* to consider that a person is still lost. Perhaps it's just because, if we *did* admit they were lost, we know we should probably do something about that.

It sounds like a nice way of thinking, but the problem is that it doesn't line up with how the Bible teaches us to think. Consider the following passages of Scripture: 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Galatians 5:19-21, Ephesians 5:5.

If we had time, I catalogued *thirteen verses* from 1 John where John says, "You should *know* that if you or someone you know does this or doesn't do that, that that is not a Christian." It would seem then that saying that we don't know any non-Christians is rather naïve and Biblically suspect! The Bible says that they're all over, all around us and even in our lives.

I remember someone *very* close to me standing there while I was talking to their son about the Gospel. Their son was telling me he didn't believe in Jesus, he didn't believe in the Gospel, and that he didn't even believe in God. The whole time this dad kept saying, "Oh yes you do. Stop saying that. Stop talking about this." He wanted to believe *so badly* that he wouldn't even hear it straight from his son's lips.

I have no doubt that this dad thought he was loving his son. But think about why the Bible says in Proverbs 13:24 that "Whoever spares the rod *hates his son*, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him"? Choosing to treat someone how *you* decide instead of how God *instructs you* to treat them and think about them is a sure-fire way to despise someone. Why? Because God's way is good for them. I might think, "Oh spanking my child for rebellion is *bad for him* so I'm not going to do it." But God says it's actually good for them. If I ignore what God says is good for them, I'm despising the child. The same is true for evangelism. If I *ignore* what Scripture says about living in unrepentant sin, and if I ignore what God says about those who walk in the deeds of the flesh, if I just pretend like those people are Christians, I'm rejecting what God says would be good for them. The Gospel is what's best for them, even if it stings more than a spanking. Denying them that is akin to despising them.

There are lost men women and children. Many you know. Many *you don't* know, but how easy would it be for you to know? God has *called us* to know them. God has *called us* to start knowing the lost people and to recognize that they are lost. So after all of that, if someone says to me, "I don't know any lost people". I'm going to say, "Well start *knowing* them because you're surrounded by them."

**Misconception #3: what the lost people in my life need is a Gospel tract presentation, a memorized, 3-5 minute telling of the Gospel in a certain order with a sinners' prayer at the end.**

That sort of presentation certainly has its proper place. But on the whole, we shouldn't associate regular evangelism with those kind of one-time encounters. For one, it doesn't promote genuine conversions or discipleship. Furthermore, if that is what comes to mind when you think *evangelism*, then you're going to always associate evangelism with strangers. Evangelism will be going from door to door in a neighbor handing out tracts. Evangelism will be sitting on a plane with a stranger and telling them the Gospel. Evangelism will be stopping someone on the street as you pass by or helping out a homeless person by telling them the Gospel story. That was the main category that evangelism had in my mind and life for a long time.

As long as we think about evangelism as giving a stranger a short presentation of all the facts and calling them to pray a prayer after us, then there's always going to be one glaring hole in our evangelism. What about everybody I know, what about all of the *non-strangers* in my life? And what about all of the fake, shallow conversions that lead people to think they're Christians when they're really not? That's more dangerous than knowing that you're not a Christian.

Instead of thinking about evangelism like that, we want to begin to think about evangelism primarily as using my example, my service, and my words within an established relationship with a lost person to speak the Gospel. We'll break that down into two parts now.

**So first of all: we said evangelism is within an established relationship with a lost person. So evangelism thrives within relationships.**

Can you believe that this Christmas, my brother and I were having a Gospel conversation and for the first time in my life, I shared with my only full brother in the flesh my testimony and conversion story? I've told people in apartment buildings and homeless people and church people and random people walking in the park, but I hadn't told my own brother. What do you think my story meant to someone who met me for thirty seconds? What do you think it meant for my brother of 24 years to hear his brother say that Jesus Christ seriously, absolutely, changed every single thing about him all by grace, all for free, all for God's glory. You think that meant anything to him?

That's why we called this month *Cultivating Gospel Relationships*. Relationships are so important to advancing God's Kingdom. Let's examine why that's so.

When God created Adam, he had a plan and a purpose for man. He had a function that he created Adam to fulfill. But after Adam was made, God said a few unfamiliar words, "It is not good." It is not good that man should be alone. There were two reasons it wasn't good that Adam be the only human. (1) Adam could more fully image and reflect God in relationship with another man. Because God is Three in relationship as One, Adam more fully reflects that when he is in relationship with another. And (2) Adam could not carry out and fulfill God's plan and purpose for man on his own. Not in the sense that it would just be too much workload for Adam, but in the sense that he just wasn't complete. What he needed was a companion, a helper. God's purposes for man would be carried out when man is in relationship with another like him.

Have you ever considered that instead of Jesus giving the Great Commission to his disciples, he could have done a million different things. All that's left now is for the message to get out and spread. He could write the Gospel in the clouds, send down the rivers, blast it through a celestial boom box, or he could have given pigeons the supernatural ability to speak.

Instead, he called men and women to go to other *men and women* and to make disciples out of them. He called humans to go and make relationships with *new humans* in order to advance the Gospel of God's Kingdom. He called them to make new evangelistic relationships, new *Gospel-relationships* with others. That's how his Kingdom would spread over the globe.

Isn't that why Jesus called his Church the salt and light of the earth? Those two things effect change *only when they're in* contact or relationship with the thing they are changing. Salt is useless if it's not touching your food and your mouth. So the Church is *useless* in this world apart from a certain

*relationship* with those in the world. Isn't it amazing that Jesus prayed to the Father just before he was crucified in John 17, "I do not ask that you take them *out of the world*." Apparently he intended for us to continue in this world. Not to be like this world, but to be *in it*, relating to it, knowing it, moving into lives of people of this world so that we can be light, be salt, and make disciples.

Evangelism apart from relationship doesn't really make sense, and it should be the exception, not the norm. Stranger evangelism is good, but it shouldn't be the first thing we think of. I'm asking you to think of something else *first* because that's not the primary way God intended to advance his Kingdom. How many people do you think are converted, influenced, or greatly transformed by a stranger?

God created us as interpersonal beings, meaning he created us and fashioned us to have relationships with one another. Human beings *thrive* in relationships and community, not apart from them. The way that we influence and help and love and change and grow one another is not through chance, stranger encounters but through committed, long-term relationships. Who can deny that?

So there's the first part of how we should think about evangelism. We should think about it in terms of long-term relationships with the lost, in terms of moving into a community and building new relationships and strengthening existing relationships with the lost people all around us and in our lives. Now the second part.

**Using my example, my service, and my words within this new friendship to speak the Gospel.**

Instead of just, out of the blue, unloading the Gospel on someone, wouldn't it be better to put the Gospel and Gospel truth *clearly* in all of our interaction with this lost friend?

The best way to illustrate the method here is by thinking about the relationship between parent and child. (Obviously our relationship with lost adults will be different but the idea will be the same.)

Parents are the best evangelist their child is ever going to have. Some of them come here once a week and hear their teachers present them the Gospel. Now these are coming from a person your child doesn't know, doesn't trust, doesn't see often, and doesn't know *why* he or she should believe them.

On the other hand, you are with them every single day. You're with them when they succeed and sin. You love them by providing for them, by protecting them, by bandaging their scrapes, by making their supper, by snuggling with them as they go to bed, by gentling waking them in the morning for school, by teaching them about the farm, the cows, the fence, the car, the stove, history, everything. Now perhaps you are a parent who just never really talks about the Gospel, except perhaps when they ask a particular Jesus question. Or, perhaps you're a parent who every so often musters up the courage to have a serious, sit-down conversation with your child to tell them they need to be saved and baptized, etc.

One of the reasons my generation has had the worst retention rate in the church is because we grew up never hearing about the Gospel outside of church. We didn't see it talked about at the dinner table, rejoiced in at the bed side, counseled in our distresses, hoped in our family struggles. That's the difference between a *Gospel* relationship and just a relationship that occasionally throws in the Gospel.

A Gospel *relationship* (a relationship where the Gospel is always visible and talked about) would be so different. What if you *used your relationship* you have with your child to speak the Gospel into their life every single day? What if you had a *Gospel-relationship* with your son or your daughter, meaning, you always put the Gospel at the center of what you're doing, and saying, and teaching. What if you used life as a teaching moment for the Gospel?

What if, instead of telling them, "You can get straight A's because you can do everything you set your mind to," you told them what God's Word says about working hard and doing everything to the best of our abilities for his glory? What if you told your son about God strengthening us to do his will? What if, when your daughter comes home crying because a boy called her ugly you tell her about the definition of beauty from God's Word and how we don't need other people's approval because God approves us if we are in Jesus Christ.

That's a Gospel relationship, and that's God's primary design for the spread of the Gospel. That's God's design for spreading the Gospel from parent to child. It's also God's design for spreading the Gospel from church to community. Obviously it will be a bit different when you're talking to adults but the concept is the same. You look for and seize every opportunity to point your friend to their need for Jesus or their hope in Jesus. Every time you get to encourage them, every time they complain about their lives circumstances, every time they're sick and in the hospital, every time they talk about politics, every time they whine about their sports team, the Gospel meets us in those situations and *changes* us. Seize those moments to point your friend, or your child whichever the case may be, toward Jesus.

*Love people enough* to make a relationship with them *like this*. That means that we take the relationships we already have, the friendships we already have and *move them in that direction*. It also means that we see people around us who are lost and just purposefully move into their life. We become friends them in order to have *this kind of relationship with them*. That is how God intends to see this world redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.

Imagine two scenarios:

**One:** every member of HHBC committed to present ten Gospel-tracts and presentations to ten strangers around the church over the next calendar year. We might see some fruit of that, maybe a visitor or two. But probably the biggest fruit would be in us just having to publicly own up to the Gospel!

**Two:** each one of us committed to move into just one new lost person's life this year, to establish a relationship, to strengthen that into a friendship, to *serve them* when they need serving, to go out of our way to love them, and to tell them the message of the Gospel in a hundred different ways every single week (just like we want to do for our children). Even from a purely earthly perspective, we would be fifty times more effective.

Do you remember Marc's Styrofoam cup analogy Sunday night? He told us to think about evangelism kind of like carrying a \$.02 styrofoam cup around with us 24/7, and evangelism is trying to *sell* that cup (so the cup is like Jesus and the Gospel).

It's pretty hard to walk up to someone you've never met, and in three to five minutes convince them that they need to buy this cup for themselves. And oh yeah, all it's going to cost them is their whole life.

But what if in 2009, I commit to build this relationship with this certain person? I commit to carry this cup around 24/7, and every time a conversation comes up about water, I say, "Oh yeah, you know, water is great, and can I just tell you, the water that comes out of this cup that I carry around, O my goodness, you've never tasted any water so fresh, so crisp, so sweet, so satisfying as this!" And when someone asks me what I like to eat, or where I shop for groceries, or why I carry a cup around, I'm always telling people a little bit about this glorious cup, how wonderful it is, how precious it is to me, how it has changed my life, and how this cup met my needs, my sorrows, my hopes, and my ambitions. I'm always exalting the value of this cup until, one day it appears to my new friend as not just a \$.02 useless cup, but now as the most valuable, joyful thing in all the world.

If we had chosen a particular theme verse for this month, I think it should have been 1 Corinthians 2:1-2. "And I, when I came to you brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech and wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

It's not that you need to get out and become philosophers for Jesus tomorrow, making profound, stupendous defenses of the Gospel. Just be like Paul. Just get out into the community, make relationships, make friends where you commit in your heart, by God's grace, to know *nothing* except Christ and him crucified.

God might be pleased to change a whole community as we begin to make life-long relationships where the Gospel is at the center. That's how God created us to live and to thrive and that's how he called us to advance his Gospel. That's how we're going to serve the progress of the Gospel here. May God will give the growth.

*Preached by:*  
*Ryan Haider*  
*Hickory Hill Baptist Church*  
*January 11, 2009*