

A Contagious Heart

This morning we observed the Lord's Supper, given to us to celebrate in memory of Jesus' complete sacrifice on the cross. As we prepared to partake of the bread, I read the customary verse used in that part of the Lord's Supper, John 6:58 *This is the bread which came down out of heaven; not as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever.* These are Jesus' words telling people that He is the path to eternal life. You see, Jesus knew what was in store for them if they didn't choose to place their faith and trust in Him. And He was so moved to get them on the road to Heaven that He was signing His own death warrant to profess the truth and persuade them to faith. Jesus had a contagious heart – do you?

Well, it's easy to say, "But, He's JESUS! I can't do that. Even if I wanted to sacrifice my life, it wouldn't save anyone! Ahh, how right you are...almost. Sacrificing your life will not save anyone, but making sacrifices in your life may lead countless people to faith. That is what the Christian life is like when you develop a contagious heart - that is, when you yearn to let God use you to reach others, and you make yourself available to talk about Jesus as opportunities arise and as the Holy Spirit prompts you.

This is the antidote for a dry Christian life. When you're living on the evangelistic edge, that's when your prayer life is at its most fervent, because you're praying to God for help; it's when your Bible study becomes its most intense, because you're not just looking for abstract theological truths, but for wisdom that can help your seeking friend find Christ; it's when your dependence on God is at its greatest, because you know that apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, there's no way you can bring about the conversion of anybody.

This is the real adventure of the Christian life. So how can we live on the evangelistic edge? One way is to think about how Jesus would reach out to others if he physically lived in our house, or went to our school, or worked on our job site. What could we learn from the Master?

Because Jesus would look at his neighbors differently than we often do. He'd see them through heaven's eyes. And if we could see them even a bit like Jesus does, that would not only change us, but the result would radically impact our neighbors.

That's what Dr. Jack Sternberg found. He was a cancer physician from a conservative Jewish background and was very far from God. Listen to what he wrote about an incident that occurred when practicing medicine in Arkansas:

“One woman with terminal breast cancer was in her early thirties, with a husband and young child whom she would soon leave widowed and motherless.

Yet she seemed more concerned about *my spiritual welfare*—in *my* knowing Jesus—than the fact that she was dying. She saw my lostness, my separation from God, as a greater tragedy than her own illness. She trusted this Jesus, then and for eternity. God had allowed illnesses to ravage her, yet she still loved, worshiped, and followed him. She seemed confident about her future and genuinely concerned about mine. That overwhelmed me.”

Dr. Sternberg ended up giving his life to Jesus—and it makes me wonder, “What if I cared that much about my neighbor?” Because, you see, Jesus cares that much for you and me. He saw our lostness, our separation from God, as a greater tragedy than his own brutal execution on the cross. That’s why he was willing to die for us so we can be reconciled with God.

So how would Jesus reach out if he physically lived in my house? I think there are many lessons he would teach us. The first might be this: before talking to his neighbors about their heavenly Father, Jesus would talk to his heavenly Father about his neighbors.

In other words, he would pray, just as some of you prayed for your friends the past two weeks in our classes as you went through session one and two of the *Contagious* course. This kind of prayer was the pattern throughout Jesus’ life—before he embarked on anything of importance, he spent time in prayer. Jesus’

prayers for lost people continued right up until his final breaths on the cross.

“Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”

And if Jesus lived in my house, I know he’d pray consistently, specifically, and fervently for his lost neighbors. The question is, “Are we?” Or have we given up?

Lee Strobel tells about getting ready to baptize a woman during a service at Willow Creek. He said, “Have you received Jesus as your forgiver and leader?” She smiled and said, “Oh, yes, I have!” Then Lee did something unusual: he turned to her husband, who had accompanied her, and asked, “Have *you* received Jesus?” He looked at Lee for a moment and then suddenly burst into tears, weeping and sobbing. He replied, “No, I haven’t, but I want to right now!” So right there, in front of thousands of people, this man repented of his sin and received Christ—and then Lee baptized the two of them together!

Afterward, a woman came running up to Lee in tears, threw her arms around him, and kept sobbing, “Nine years! Nine years! Nine years!”

Lee said, “Who are you? And what do you mean ‘nine years?’”

She said, “That’s my brother who you just led to Christ and baptized. I’ve been praying for that man for nine long years—and I’ve not seen one hint of spiritual interest all that time. But look what God did today!”

Lee said his first thought was, “There’s a woman who’s glad she didn’t stop praying in Year Eight.” But the truth is that some of you have been praying longer than that for a lost friend or neighbor or family member or colleague. And you’ve given up hope. That woman would say to you: Don’t stop. Keep lifting up that person to the Lord.

Now, I’ll admit I don’t know everything about prayer. And I understand that people have free will and can decide for themselves if they want to follow Christ. But I’m just naïve enough to believe James when he says that the prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective.

Let me ask you this: who have you stopped praying for? Who did you once pray for regularly, but lately you’ve given up on? Bring that person’s face to mind—and then use this as an impetus to bring them back before the Lord in prayer.

Second, if Jesus lived in my house, I believe he would assure his neighbors that his door would always be open for questions.

I can’t think of a single incident in the Bible where Jesus slam-dunked anyone who came to him with a sincere question. Let’s take John the Baptist as an example. If anyone knew the identity of Jesus as being the unique Son of God, it was John the Baptist. John the Baptist once pointed to Jesus and said, “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” John baptized Jesus and saw

the heavens open up and heard the voice of the Father say of Jesus: “You are my son, with whom I am well-pleased.” John once said boldly and firmly about Jesus: “I have seen and testify that this is the Son of God.”

But then John gets thrown in jail. What happens when tough times come? Often doubts begin to creep in. So John sends a couple of his disciples to track down Jesus and ask him if he’s the One they were expecting or are they to look for someone else?

So how does Jesus react? Does he criticize John for daring to raise a question? No, he tells the followers of John in Luke 7:22: “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.” In other words, go back and tell John about the evidence you’ve seen with your own eyes that convinces you of my deity.

Now, does this poison how Jesus looks at John? On the contrary, it was after that incident when Jesus declared: “I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John!”

It’s okay to ask questions. And we, as Christians, need to be ready to help our friends get answers. We’re commanded in 1 Peter 3:15: “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.”

Because when we're not ready to help our friends with their questions, what happens? We shy away. Yet so often people have just a few questions that are sticking points in their spiritual journey.

Third, if Jesus lived in my house, he wouldn't just *share* his faith; he'd *show* his faith.

In other words, talk is cheap. Jesus didn't just say he loved the world; he showed his love by being a servant. He served the blind by restoring their sight, he served the lepers by restoring their health, and in the ultimate act of servanthood, he gave his life to pay for the sins of the world.

And when we serve others as Jesus would, when we sacrifice for others as Jesus did, and as we put our love into action in tangible ways as Jesus modeled, this opens otherwise impervious hearts to the gospel.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:16 (TNIV): "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." The Greek word for "good" doesn't merely refer to good as opposed to bad; it also has the connotation of "attractive."

So Jesus is telling us: "Serve other people in an attractive way that causes their eyes to look heavenward toward the God who motivates you, against the grain of our **me-first** culture, to sacrificially serve them."

When we serve the very real and tangible needs of other people, inevitably this opens up opportunities to talk to them about their very real spiritual needs that they may not even realize they have. People are more open to the gospel when we show them that we care rather than just say that we care.

So what if we all sort of got our “compassion radars” scanning our neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces—searching for ways we can reach out to help people in need? Who knows how many spiritual conversations would result?

Finally, if Jesus lived in my house, he would be authentic in the way he related to his neighbors.

Jesus wouldn't just communicate the gospel; he would live it out in front of his neighbors. There would be a consistency between his beliefs and his behavior, and between his character and his creed. And the question is: is the same true of us?

If you're a Christian, then you know your neighbors have their “hypocrisy radar” scanning your lives 24/7. What are they looking for? False piety. A holier-than-thou attitude. Hypocrisy. Saying one thing but doing another. What are they picking up on their radar screens? Because here's the truth: few things can repel a person from God as efficiently as an inauthentic Christian.

The story is told of a young nurse named Maggie. She had grown up in a professed “Christian home” where she was abused and then been shuttled about

through the foster care system as a teenager. As she was seeking Christ as an adult, she wrote this poem to the Christians who were witnessing to her. Listen to the words of this young nurse. Imagine she's saying them directly to you:

*Do you know,
do you understand
that you represent Jesus to me?*

*Do you know,
do you understand
that when you treat me with gentleness,
it raises the question in my mind
that maybe he is gentle, too.
Maybe he isn't someone
who laughs when I am hurt.*

*Do you know,
do you understand
that when you listen to my questions
and you don't laugh,
that I think, "What if Jesus is interested in me too?"*

*Do you know,
do you understand*

*that when I hear you talk honestly
about arguments and conflict and scars from your past
that I think, “Maybe I am just a regular person
instead of a bad, no-good little girl who deserves abuse.”
If you care, then I think maybe he cares —
and then there’s this flame of hope that burns inside of me
and for a while I am afraid to breathe
because it might go out.
Do you know,
do you understand
that your words are his words?
That your face is his face
to someone like me?
Please—be who you say you are!
Please, God, don’t let this be another trick.
Please let this be real this time. Please.
Do you know,
do you understand
that you represent Jesus to me?*

It can be devastating when you first hear that poem, because you think of all the times you have been too busy or too preoccupied to be like Jesus would be if he lived in your neighborhood. It's convicting.

We don't have to have degrees in theology to reach out to the Maggies in our lives. We just need to have contagious hearts. Ones that long to be used, and that lead us to do what we can do for others—what Jesus would do. We can pray for people who are far from God. We can dialog with our seeking friends and help point them toward the truth of Christ. We can find ways to serve others so that the door might be opened to spiritual conversations. And we can simply be authentic about who we are—sinners saved by grace.

Before we end, let me urge you to be sure to be here next week, as we take the next step in “Developing a Contagious Faith,” and talk about how we can build and deepen what we'll call “Contagious Relationships” with the Maggies of our lives. And be thinking and praying about who you'll invite for the final weekend of this series, on [date]. It'll be an outreach weekend designed especially for the friends and family you'll bring.

Let's close in prayer ...