

Just Walk Across the Room: Lesson 3

Bible Study – The Power of Story

May 12, 2010

What do they think of us Christians?

What do you think would happen if we said to a hundred people who are living far from God, "Do you know any born-again Christians? If so, what are they like ... what are your general impressions of them?" We might get quite an earful, don't you think? What if their perceptions included things like these: "I've come across a few Christians, and the ones I know are ... hmmm, how do I describe them ... they're just so ... **uptight ... narrow ... and rigid.**" Or ... "I went to school with one once ... he was pretty isolated, kept to himself all the time." Or ... "I don't know any of them very well. They hang with their own type ... certainly don't rub shoulders with people like me." Or what about ... "I know a born-again Christian ... what a turnoff she is! I feel judged if I even inhale wrong. She's so self-righteous, haughty ... just absolutely egotistical." Or ... "Christians? Classic simpletons! They're on perpetual crutches. You know what I mean ... they throw their nice little Bible verses at the world's most complex issues. Give me a break!"

Change perceptions now!

Now, please understand, I certainly hope those perceptions aren't out there. But in the event that a few of them are how about you and I figure out a way to stop the bleeding ... to reverse the trends ... **to give the watching world something good to say about Christ-followers!** Guess why. Because God's heart beats for pointing people to faith, remember? And while you and I are here on earth, we get to serve as His vehicle for getting that done! We get to be usable!

My Wish:

Here's what I wish. I wish that whenever I struck up a casual conversation with people and asked them to tell me what they think of the Christ-followers they know, the first thought that would come to mind would be something like, "Hmmm ... Christians? Can't say it's true for them all, but the ones I know are full of integrity ... moral integrity. That's what distinguishes them courage." Or, ... "Christians? The ones I've come across are ridiculously filled with compassion. They're just plain kind to people!" Or ... "Christians? They tell the truth ... they shoot straight with you." Or ... "Christians? They have concern for the poor—no one cares for the poor like Christians do." Or ... "Christians? They're humble people, they're honest ... they have this incredible inner strength." Or ... "Christians? They are radically inclusive of people, regardless of their background, their preferences, their lifestyle choices, you name it. It's amazing!" **Or ... "Christians? They're always taking walks across rooms. Whenever somebody needs a little encouragement or friendship, Christians are the first ones to make the move."**

Good Press?

Good press that's the type of press I wish were out there about us, friends! You know what I also wish? I wish people said ... whenever Christ-followers talk about God, they are so clear! They are so unbelievably pumped up about Him! **And you should just hear them talk about their own faith journeys ... they are always so humble ... so interesting to listen to!** Now, can I ask you something? Is this what you wish for too? I hope your answer is yes. Because that is what we're devoting our time to this week. If you're ready to communicate like a walk-across-the-room person, then today's message is for you! Primarily, we'll seek to answer these two questions: First, how do we talk about God in a way that's full of clarity and passion? And second, how do we convey our personal faith stories in a way that's humble and interesting?

The power of story—and of words—is undeniable throughout the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. Here are some verses that remind us of how supremely useful, how incomparably potent, how supernaturally empowered, words can be: **Ecclesiastes 6:11** says that when used sparsely ... succinctly ... words carry great meaning. **Psalms 119:130** says that words can actually give light. Words can give understanding to those who don't yet understand. **Proverbs 12:18** says that although reckless words pierce like a sword, words from the tongue of the wise can actually bring healing! **Proverbs 17:27** says that when used with restraint, words prove you're a person of knowledge! **Ecclesiastes 9:17** says that words you speak will be heeded when they are spoken quietly! **Proverbs 16:24** says that pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones. Isn't that a great image? **Ecclesiastes 10:12** says that although a fool is consumed by his own lips, the words from a wise man's mouth are ... gracious. **Deuteronomy 32:2** says words can actually descend like dew, like showers on new grass, like abundant rain on tender plants.

Words: Words: Humble words; Healing words; Wise words; Gentle words; Grace-filled words. I wonder, are these the types of words you're known for speaking? If your closest friends or the family members who actually live underneath the same roof as you were polled anonymously about this, would they say that in the course of normal, everyday life, you can be counted on to speak words of encouragement and grace?

What did you last say to anyone this am? Let's take this morning as an example. Think about the very last thing you said before you walked into this room today. Do you remember who you were talking to? Do you remember what you said? **Were the words you spoke life-giving and inspiring and grace-filled?** Or were they, well ... not?

Interesting, isn't it, that God allows such power to inhabit our words? Astounding power, for good or for ill, right? It seems to me that if we could find a way to use words for good in people's lives—if we could be known for being clear and humble and succinct and relevant—then we might just frustrate the heck out of a few of those awful perceptions that exist about Christians.

You be the judge: There are two primary areas where effective, efficient words could exponentially improve perceptions about Christ-followers: 1. **The first area revolves around how we talk about God ... explaining who He is and what He has done.** 2. **The second revolves around how we talk about our personal experience with God ... explaining the main thing He's done in our lives.** What it comes down to is "What is

God's story? And, what is your story? And how can we get them both told well? Told so well that your listeners' walk away saying, "**Now that I understood! That I enjoyed! That I crave in my own life!**" That is what we're tackling today!

Last week, we discovered that after you decide to take a walk across a room, it's important to focus on **developing a friendship** instead of saying your piece. It's really important to **discover the other person's story** instead of wedging your own agenda into the conversation. And it's absolutely critical to listen and **discern for the Spirit's guidance** about appropriate next steps you might take to meet a need or two of the person you're talking with. I have a hunch that once you commit yourself to all that it means to becoming a walk-across-the-room person—engaging with people, **living in 3D**, the whole bit—God is going to blow open some doors, spiritually speaking. He is going to **give you an opportunity to say a word for Him or tell someone why you started walking with Him to begin with.**

And in that moment, you will be so glad that you came to Bible Study tonight! In that moment, you will feel your posture relax, your shoulders loosen a little, your sweaty palms dry up ... and you will say, "Oh, man, is that what you want to talk about? What a ball we're about to have if you're willing to go there! I'll make this brief, but basically, here's how I understand this stuff to work ..."

God has a story, a powerful story. And your job—and mine—**is to learn to tell it well.** Let's test your current comfort level for telling it well, okay? What would you say if someone in your current sphere of influence were to come to you today and say this: "You know, Joe (assuming your name is Joe), we've been friends for a long time. And you've been really cool not to force your God-thing on me, even though you probably knew my life would be better if I'd give all that a chance. Well, anyway, things have ... I guess you could say things have gone a little south in my marriage, and my wife and I ... well, we were talking about maybe trying out church ... the God plan, you know. Sort of a last-ditch effort before we call it quits. I just wonder if ... before I dive into anything huge ... I just wonder if you could sort of explain the whole deal to me. What is it about God that so many people are attracted to? Is He really all that necessary in life?" **That, friends, is what we call, in sophisticated theological terms, a wide-open door.**

Friends, if in our little scenario here, your shoulders aren't loosening, your sweaty palms aren't drying up, please know that help is on the way. There's a tried-and-true way of explaining God's story that you might consider committing to memory, if you haven't done so already. It's called "**The Bridge**"—many of you may be familiar with it.

The Bridge is quite simple, really, but it is a powerful way to illustrate precisely what God—and His Son, Jesus Christ—did for humankind. The next time you find yourself in a delicate conversation where the person you're talking to really does want to understand who God is and what He has done, grab a piece of scratch paper, a cocktail napkin or whatever, and ask their permission to sketch out this bridge. It's an image they won't soon forget, I assure you.

Here's how it goes. All right, for starters, we have to establish the reality of two beings: **people and God.** Between people and God is a **great chasm**—a division that exists because of people's propensity to rebel against God's way and go their own way instead. The Bible calls this "**sin.**" The dilemma people face is that we want to get to God but know we can't just

leap over the chasm. So we try exerting human effort, hoping we can get the bridge built. In the end, we realize that all the human effort in the world will never be enough to get us to the other side. But thankfully, God sympathized with our dilemma. And because He loved us so much, He intervened so that we would have a means of getting close to Him. **His solution was to choose his Son, Jesus, to serve as the bridge.** Who came here willingly and obediently died for our sins and opened the opportunity for us to have a personal relationship with Jesus. We are forgiven...and we just have to accept on faith. Jesus is knocking. Let Him in.

If you remember nothing else about the bridge illustration, remember this: Christ came to earth to be our bridge, and whoever makes the decision to cross the bridge will live with God forever. The apostle John put it this way in **John 5:24**, ***“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life”*** (NIV).

Well, to wrap up this idea, keep in mind that you may choose to commit a different illustration to mind, but please land on one, clear explanation of who God is and what He has done, so that when the time comes that someone sitting across from you poses the question, you're 100 percent ready to give a thoughtful answer. Whatever illustration you use, keep in mind the types of words we looked at earlier: **Humble words; Healing words; Wise words; Gentle words; Grace-filled words.**

Let your speech be well-seasoned with these things, friends. **You are not responsible for transforming a human heart ... that is the role of the Holy Spirit.** Your role, when prompted to do so, is to open your mouth and give a tender, thoughtful, clear, and passionate understanding of who God is, of what he's done for each person who ever has or ever will walk the planet. That's all, nothing more, nothing less.

We have a story as well! Let's keep going. Not only does God have a story, which is what we just looked at. **But we have a story as well**, a powerful story. And our job is to learn to tell it well! Do you believe what I just said ... that you have a powerful story to tell? Friends, if you have come into relationship with God through His Son, Jesus Christ then you have a wonderful, redemptive story to tell. Here's why that's true. Regardless how old you were when you came to faith, hopefully you were different before Christ than you are after Christ invaded your world and beautifully wrecked it with things like grace and mercy and love.

Take the guy from **Luke 5** who once had leprosy. In The Message paraphrase, the text says that ***“one day in one of the villages there was a man covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus he fell down before him in prayer and said, ‘If you want to, you can cleanse me.’ Jesus put out his hand, touched him, and said, ‘I want to. Be clean.”*** Then and there the guy's skin was smooth, the leprosy gone. Can you imagine what that experience must have been like for that man?

What do you think he told every, single person who would listen from that point forward?! “I was a leper. But then I met Christ! And now I'm healed ... totally and completely healed.” His self-talk was probably fascinating in the hours following Christ's act of healing. “This is unbelievable! Just moments ago, my skin was so angry that it was literally ... erupting. But now look at it! It's clean. It's smooth. It's healed! Everything about me was rotting, moldy, diseased ... but I've been recreated. It's as if I were never sick! This is unreal. Absolutely

unreal! Where did my hopelessness go? My helplessness? They vanished with my sores. They're not here anymore. Jesus fixed all of that. I have hope! I want to live! I finally feel ... whole." I feel alive!

Do you see a before-and-after here? I was sick BUT now I'm well. I was diseased BUT now I'm healthy. I was outcast BUT now I'm accepted. I was defiled ... tainted BUT now I'm good as new. I was tarnished BUT now I'm clean. I was left for dead BUT now I have ... a future. **I was.....but now!**

Who knows which aspect of the former-leper's before-and-after was most compelling to him ... who knows which facet he would have homed in on? He'd have to figure out his story for himself, right? But here's the point: for the vast majority of you sitting in this room, the same pattern is true for you. You also have a before and an after. And that's about all people need to hear right out of the blocks ... what you were like before you came to Christ. What the experience was like of embracing faith in Him. And what you are like after that decision.

Let me just give you a few helpful before-and-afters: "**I was** striving ... **but now** I'm at peace;" "I was self-destructive ... but now I'm healthy;" "Guilty, but now liberated;" "Fear-stricken, but now confident;" "Despairing, but now hopeful!" Your own before-and-after doesn't have to be more complicated than this, friends. It just has to be simple, humble, succinct ... and true.

Simple yes! But you can get derailed. Sounds pretty straightforward, right? I agree ... it should be this easy to tell an effective before-and-after faith story. But if I'm being honest, I have to tell you that it's quite possible for these stories we're talking about to absolutely derail.

- **First**, faith stories derail when a Christ-follower **just won't shut up**. The Christ-follower oversupplies and just slaughters the demand. They go on and on and on ... and even after the listener sends all sorts of warning signals that disinterest and disdain have taken root, the storyteller obliviously keeps chatting away.
- **Second**, faith stories derail when a Christ-follower is **fuzzy about the story's core theme**. They get all tangled up in a dozen story lines and leave their listener frustrated, exhausted, and baffled.
- **Third**, faith stories derail when a Christ-follower **lays out a string of four-syllable Christian-insider words that no one outside the family of faith can understand**.
- **Fourth**—and finally—faith stories derail when ... please hear me on this ... your faith story will derail, blow up, and leave a trail of smoke a mile long **if you play the superiority card**. If you act like you have your act perfectly together and the listener is somehow inferior to you, you're headed for the ditch ... and fast, my friend.

Your turn: Okay, so here's what we're going to do as a class this week: we're going to write our stories down, each and every one of us ... our individual before-and-after faith story. But wait, there's more! If you were sitting here during that last portion of the class thinking, Wow. I wish I had somebody who would read my faith story and tell me if it hits the mark or not! ...

then this is your lucky day! We can share them with another person here in class or a friend at work or a family member.

We may not be able to reverse all of the negative perceptions that are out there about Christians, friends, **but we can certainly do our part to ensure that as far as this congregation is concerned, we have our act together on the story front.**

We can do our part to cause this community to say, **“The Christians over there at New Hope United Methodist Church? They know how to tell God’s story. And to hear them talk about what he’s done in their lives ... it makes me want that type of thing for my own life!”**

First Corinthians 14:9 in the Message paraphrase says, **“If you speak in a way no can one understand, what’s the point of opening your mouth?”** (MSG-The Message Bible). Is that a good reminder, or what? Let’s do the One whose name we bear proud as we work hard to hone and shape and sharpen our before-and-after stories, shall we?

Prepare a written in a clear, succinct, humble, simple manner,—hundred-words-or-less story...your story and have an open heart toward a little constructive criticism.

Stay the course until your story is ready to face the world, and then go tell it confidently as often as God provides opportunity!

Then one Sunday one after another we can come up and share our stories. I wasbut now... I wasbut now. I was....but now... Imagine all 17 of us going across the church telling our stories one Sunday. Let’s do it!