

Colossians 4:2-6

SI: My Bible calls these verses we are about to read, “Further Instructions.” This is typical of Paul’s letters.

He gets near the end and starts piling things on—one more thing, one more.

He doesn’t explain them in detail.

In these verses, he mentions at least three big things—
we’re going to focus on one of them

INTRO: Put your hand on your heart. Feel your heart beat.

Every time your heart beats twice, an unsaved person dies and goes to hell.

By the time this sermon is finished, 900 people will die in their sins. .

And when you get in your bed tonight, safe in the arms of Jesus,

know that over 40,000 souls have this day have entered a Christ-less eternity.

What are you going to do about it?

Are you sharing your faith every day? Are you witnessing about Jesus?

All around you people are dying and going to hell, hell, hell.

I heard that sermon when I was about 12 years old.

My parents had sent me to a little Christian school connected to a local church.

There was a visiting evangelist who preached in our chapel—

and that was his message. I remember it to this day.

It made me feel so bad that when I got home I walked to the park, Spring Park in Tuscumbia, and I tried to witness to a total stranger sitting on a bench.

Turns out he was a believer already. But I couldn't work up the guts to do it again.

So I went home feeling guilty. Too bad that man was already a Christian,

I couldn't even say I planted a Gospel seed.

I would guess that a good number of you here grew up in churches

or in a Christian tradition that approached evangelism and witnessing in the way I've just described.

Heaven is real. Hell is real. The Bible says so. We believe it.

Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven.

But how can they believe unless they have heard?

And how can they hear unless someone tells them?

Eternal souls are at stake.

So whether it's the waitress at the restaurant, or the passenger on the airplane—

if you don't make the most of the opportunity, get them talking about spiritual things, steer the conversation to Jesus Christ, challenge them with questions—maybe even get person to pray a prayer, that person may well be lost.

It's hard to argue with the logic of that approach.

And we have all heard stories, true stories, of a word spoken by a total stranger

that went down deep in someone's soul and took root and led to salvation.

My friend Charlie Baldini, in a park in Brooklyn.

A stranger gave him and his friends Gospel tracts. They mocked him.

But later Charlie read his and became a Christian and a pastor.

In spite of the logic and the true stories,

I would venture to say that most of you who grew up with that approach to evangelism have a visceral reaction against it today.

You probably had flashbacks when I started my sermon.

Even though many of you came from church backgrounds like

I've described, there are also many of you who didn't.

The subject of evangelism is not something that you have ever thought about much or were challenged about.

Right or wrong, you've never felt guilty for not doing it.

But still the question won't go away:

What is our responsibility when it comes to sharing our faith?

What does the Lord want us to do?

And, thinking about Colossians, how do we bring the power of the new self, the new life, to bear on this sphere of life?

All of us have friends or family who don't know the Lord.

We want them to have faith in Christ and sense we have some role to play.

All of us think it is wonderful when we hear someone tell how became a Christian.

I've baptized very few adult converts in our church over the years.

There should be more. Again, what would Lord have us do?

Someone once told me about how her pastor preached a sermon series

on biblical child-rearing, but it was hard to take him seriously, because he didn't address the elephant in the room—

his own children were hellions.

Well, I'm here to admit to you today, that I'm a pathetic example when it comes to witnessing and evangelism.

This is truly a passage I would like to have skipped.

But I hope you listen anyway because I'm trying to listen—

I'm preaching this to myself and it is God's word to us as a church.

Two questions:

1. Why don't we share our faith more?
2. How can we share our faith more?

MP#1 Why don't we share our faith more?

I'm going to give four reasons—

one legitimate reason we need to think through in extended detail,
and briefly, four illegitimate reasons we need to work hard to overcome.

1. The legitimate reason is that most American-style evangelism is creepy.

My friend Charles is someone I admire evangelistically.

He has always been serious about it
both in his personal life and in his pastoral leadership.

Charles calls evangelism “the creepiest subject in church life.”

What he means is that lots of evangelistic approaches feel manipulative and artificial. They feel like the worst sort of sales pitch, the kind where you feel cornered and just want to get away. We all hate being treated that way.

A friend of mine and his wife moved to a small town.

They were lonely but they met another young couple who said:

Why don't y'all come over Friday night and we'll put some burgers on the grill.
After they had eaten and were all sitting around, the young couple who invited them over said: We want to tell you about a fantastic opportunity—Amway.

My friends felt manipulated. Couldn't get away fast enough.

On Saturday the doorbell rings and it's a couple of Jehovah's Witnesses.

How do you feel? Happy? No, you feel cornered.

Jesus said: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

But American evangelical Christians have been taught that if you are really going to be a faithful witness, you ignore the Golden Rule and buttonhole people with conversations about Jesus that come out of the blue and have form of sales pitch. Many of you who grew up being taught that approach never felt right about it, but you couldn't put your finger on the reason. It violates the Golden Rule.

Now, I want to say that there are some people who are great giving pitches.

Feel natural and non-manipulative. If that's you. Fantastic. Use by all means.
But you aren't obligated to ask your waitress if she knows the Lord.

You are obligated to be polite to her, not complain, and leave a generous tip.
You aren't obligated to give a Gospel presentation to a fellow airplane passenger,
but you are obligated to leave him alone if he indicates that with body language.
And this doesn't mean Christians don't say hard things,
or tell people things they don't want to hear.

The cross will always be an offense to the unbelieving mind.

But there is a proper context for most of our evangelism and witnessing.

What is that context?

Besides the general instruction of the Great Commission, you will not find a single verse in the New Testament that explicitly tells you to share your faith with your friends and neighbors, challenge with Gospel.

There is no verse that says anything like:

“Tell your unsaved friends about Jesus and urge them to believe that they might be saved.”

But the New Testament does give us one very explicit command. It's in verse 6:

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt,
so that you may know how to answer everyone.

Does that ring any bells? Look at the front of the bulletin. 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. (Next line says) But do this with gentleness and respect.

The emphasis on answering suggests that much of the ordinary Christian's evangelism is responsive. It is to be in response to things others say and do.

Dick Lucas put it this way:

It is obvious what strain this removes from conscientious Christians. The pressure to raise certain topics and reach certain people can make it difficult to live or talk normally. In any case, we go to the office to work, not to evangelize. But by being ready and willing to respond the way is opened to a more serene, and successful, approach to each day's opportunities. It opens the way, too, for a greater dependence on God's leading as well as for a more relevant and sensitive witness, suited to each individual. And remember, when the outsider has chosen the time and the place and the subject, how wonderfully free is the Christian to 'open his mouth' and tell 'the good news of Jesus'.

But this matter of answering implies that unbelievers are asking you questions.

So, here's the real crux. Why doesn't that happen to you more often?

This is where we really need to be hard on ourselves.

Not that I didn't give a full-blown Gospel presentation to the stranger on plane. But why am I not close enough to unbelievers and talking to them so much about life that they ask me questions?

Not to put too fine a point on it but, why don't I have unbelieving friends?

The only way questions will happen is if you know them.

If you regularly talk and build a level of trust and intimacy.

And in the context of two human beings talking about real life in God's world—not a sales pitch—he asks you questions and you answer.

Now, that brings us to the four illegitimate reasons for not sharing our faith.

1. Worldliness.

When you hear worldliness, you think of someone getting drunk in a bar.

But the worldliness that mostly keeps Christians from friendships with unbelievers takes the form of busyness.

Weekend activities, kids' sports and extra curricular things, church activities—

Who has time for another relationship? Barely have time for friends already have. But these are lifestyle choices. If they prevent us from ever sitting down with unbelievers, eating with them, or reading book reading so can talk about it—we need to ask ourselves if we are idolizing a lifestyle and need to repent.

2. Self-righteousness.

We don't spend time with unbelievers because we don't have anything in common.

That's our excuse. Birds of a feather and all that.

But it's a poor excuse and a subtle denial of the Gospel.

Because the Gospel tells us first of all that we are all sinful rebels.

The only real difference between us and unbelievers is God's mercy.

We can stand in judgment of their lifestyle choices, but we would do the same. As men and women, saved or unsaved, we live in the same fallen world.

We suffer from many of the same hardships and share the same joys.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep—says Paul.

3. Lack of love, lack of pity.

Even though there were several things about the heartbeat sermon that could be legitimately criticized—one element it stressed is the need for pity.

Pity for the unbeliever—he is without life and without God in the world.

He is blinded by unbelief and willingly running toward hell.

If our hearts weren't so cold, we would be much more willing to extend friendliness and conversation to unbelievers in the hopes God might use us to rescue them.

So we need to repent of our cold hearts.

4. Fear.

We've all felt it. Being worried what people will think about us.

Getting close to an unbeliever doesn't feel safe like getting close to Christian. And it's not safe. Read a story recently of a Christian asked her opinion about a moral matter in a private conversation with a co-worker. She answered.

Her co-worker repeated her answer in office, and the Christian woman got fired.

Jesus told us to reckon on the possibility the world will hate as it did him.

But fear of any kind a sin issue for us, faced honestly and repented.

Those are the negatives, brings us to the positive question:

MP#2 How can we share our faith more?

Four things we can all do—I'll cover them quickly.

1. Pray.

“Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.”

Lord, give me an unbelieving friend.

Someone I can get to know and spend some time with
and have some good conversations that lead to questions.

Make this a serious and persistent matter of prayer.

Pray for the friends you already have.

With prayer comes watchfulness for opportunities.

Paul says:

“And pray for us too, that God may open a door for our message,
so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ.”

It's not just that missionaries need our prayers—praying for them changes us.

Makes us more aware of the need around us.

Raises our sights to the progress of the Kingdom of God.

You could take home bulletin and use for personal or family devotions.

2. Don't worry about your weaknesses.

Paul says: “I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly.”

We can romanticize Paul's imprisonment for the Gospel, but it was humiliating. Paul could have easily had the feeling that he didn't have any standing to speak because of the position he was in. Waited till in a position of honor. But didn't. You shouldn't worry about your weaknesses, personality flaws, mistakes, even besetting sins. Those things shouldn't keep you from getting to know unbelievers and talking to them.

If the Holy Spirit working in hearts, your weakness will actually magnify Christ.

3. Speak with grace.

“Let your conversation be always full of grace.” Be gracious.

Don't condemn the immoral or foolish lifestyle of your unbelieving friends.

Paul says elsewhere:

“What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church?

Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside.”

That's a relief. You don't need to feel like you are being unfaithful or condoning sin if you don't let unbelievers know what they are doing is wrong.

The good news is that Christ loves sinners.

A conversation full of grace means that you are quick to point out your own sins and rebellion and hard heart and how the Lord has forgiven you.

Think how unusual that kind of conversation is.

The natural man always justifies himself.

I may have done some bad things, but deep down I'm a good person.

When a Christian says: No, deep down I'm a bad person, but Jesus has forgiven—that's a conversation seasoned with salt.

4. Answer questions.

You may have noticed that I didn't mention lack of evangelism training as one of the reasons we don't witness more, and I didn't list taking an evangelism training class as one of the things we need to witness more.

I took Evangelism Explosion and was taught by D. James Kennedy himself.

It was great. I'm glad I did it. It's been helpful to me at times.

But it doesn't take an evangelism class to invite someone over for supper.

And unbelievers rarely ask you questions straight out of an evangelism manual.

One of the only times I've actually done what I've described here—

gotten to know an unbeliever well and spent lots of time talking was several years ago when a couple in our neighborhood inserted themselves into our lives.

We didn't pursue them, they pursued us and would drop in at inconvenient times.

Questions they asked us were things like:

He cheated on me, what should I do?

She cheated on me, what should I do?

I'm cheating, what should I do?

How should I treat his ex? Do you think we should get married?

I've been on a week-long drug bender and wrecked the car, what do I do next?

They would listen intently to our great advice and then do the opposite.

We would gently tell them about Christ and urge them to repent and believe

They would listen and ignore that too, but kept coming to us with questions.

Here's my point. You don't know what people will ask.

It might be personal questions, counseling type questions.

It might be philosophical questions. If God is good, why is there evil?

It might be cultural/moral questions. What about abortion?

You can always say: Let me think about it. Talk to Christian friends, me, read.

Formulate an answer and go back to them.

All of you are thoughtful Christians, you can all answer questions.

Is there a picture emerging for you out of all of this?

Of course we have to be open to opportunities with strangers.

If the waitress seems frazzled and you ask her if she is ok

and she says her life is tough—tell her Jesus loves her—and leave her a good tip.

If the passenger in the airplane asks about you about yourself,

by all means tell him you are a Christian. There are divine appointments.

But the ordinary witnessing that the Lord expects of us is that we arrange our lives and priorities and prayers so that we get to know unbelievers, spend time with them, talk to them about work and sports and kids and vacations and home repair projects and politics and cars and trust the Lord to guide the conversations.

And when they ask us questions, we answer graciously and truthfully,

and take advantage of the door they have opened to speak of Christ.

There's a movie called *The Big Kahuna*, with Kevin Spacey and Danny DeVito.

They play two experienced salesmen. They sell industrial lubricants.

They're been around the block.

They are at a sales convention with another salesman from their company.

He's a young man, wet behind the ears, and he's an evangelical Christian.

He's very earnest, always trying to witness to people.

The Big Kahuna is the president of a large company they are trying to sell to.

This young salesman's witnessing costs them the sale.

Danny DeVito takes this young man aside and he says:

“There's something I want to say to you, and I want you to listen very closely, because it's very important . . . You preaching Jesus is no different than Larry or anybody else preaching lubricants. It doesn't matter whether you are selling Jesus or Buddha or civil rights or how to make money in real estate with no money down. That doesn't make you a human being, it makes you a marketing rep. If you want to talk to somebody honestly, as a human being, ask him about his kids, find out what his dreams are, just to find out—for no other reason. Because as soon as you lay your hands on a conversation to steer it, it's not a conversation any more, it's a pitch. And you're not a human being, you're a marketing rep.”

That's Hollywood talking. And we need to listen. The Lord Jesus once said:

“For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of light.”

Let's repent of what we need to repent of—our worldliness, self-righteousness, lovelessness and fear that keep us from people—and let's pray for open doors, to get to know unbelievers, trusting God to guide conversations.