

*U Pick The Sermon: How Can We Share Jesus Without Being Pushy?*

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*Mark 4:1-9; 2 Corinthians 2:12-17; Acts 17:16-34*

Friends, our final Scripture reading comes from Acts 17:16-34. Listen now to God's holy Word. "While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.

God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone -- an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." At that, Paul left the Council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others."

I had my best experience ever with Comcast last week. A salesman called about upgrading our service. I'd gotten a sales call from them less than two months ago. So before he went into his spiel, I said, "You know what? I know how much Internet we use and what we need. I've investigated it and we're at the right tier at the right price, and we're happy with it." There was complete and utter silence on the other side of the line. I apparently broke his script! Finally, after about fifteen seconds, the guy said, "Well, if you're unwilling to hear what I have to say, you can always check out our information on Comcast.com or call us." And that was that. In my mind, it was the perfect sales call shutdown.

There are honest salesmen; I know several Christians who are salesmen with integrity. But we don't trust salesmen. We think they're selling us something we don't want or need to make a living. When I got my oil changed this week, they wanted to sell me everything from wiper blades to fuel injector cleaning. Every place that changes oil does the same thing. Sad!

But it's telling that clergy – pastors and priests – were once among the most respected individuals in society. Now, polls show we rank at the same level as used-car salesmen. That's how little the average person trusts us. It's not surprising because we're seen the same way.

Even Christians who believe the Bible is true and love Jesus Christ and want to share His love with others as the Bible commands typically think of sharing their faith as selling somebody something. In a culture that thinks poorly of Christians, we need ways to share Jesus without being pushy. That's why the Bible is the perfect resource for us, because the same thing was true in the first century as the church was beginning to grow.

In the first century, Christians faced far more outrage than we do today. Jesus was despised by the religious establishment. He was executed in the most shameful manner possible, a death reserved for criminals that made Him unpalatable to Romans. They scoffed at the claim that Jesus was raised to life afterwards. And Romans were deeply offended that Christians wouldn't acknowledge Caesar as a god. Romans thought Christians were atheists, which they found detestable. Rumors about the Lord's Supper made outsiders think that Christians were cannibals. Combine this with the hatred between Jews and non-Jews, and the church had high hurdles. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Roman empire was Christianized by 300 AD.

They did it in many ways, and tonight we'll take a brief look at a few principles that are wise for us to know today. This isn't a crash course on evangelism or how to win someone to Christ in four easy steps. We're going to take a broader view of what's necessary for us to share Jesus without being pushy and how it may be different than what we've ever thought.

Here's the first step, and it's the biggest one of all: *to share Jesus with others without being pushy requires us to believe that the story of Jesus really is good news.* This step is about us. We're known as "evangelicals." Our church is part of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Many people call themselves evangelicals. But what does that term, *evangelical*, really mean?

It comes from Greek, and its root word is translated in our Bibles as "gospel," which means "good news." An evangelical is one who believes good news and lives according to that good news. An evangelist is someone who teaches and preaches the good news. To be evangelical means you believe that Jesus is good news to be shared.

You don't have to have it in the title of your church or go around calling yourself an evangelical to be one. You simply believe that Jesus died in your place to satisfy the debt against God you could not pay, the debt earned by your disobedience and distrust of Him. Through His death, Jesus offers eternal life to all who would turn to Him in faith and lead a new way of life. We believe that is such good news that it ought to be and needs to be shared.

But do we really think that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is good news? To believe that Jesus is good news is a stretch for many. It puts you on the wrong side of the culture. It means that you will face persecution. In some cases, it's simply name-calling. In parts of the world, it will get you killed. It splits families. It has lost people jobs and incomes. In the modern world, where most of our neighbors lie comfortably from an earthly perspective, it can seem that following Jesus might be more trouble than it's worth.

And that was true in the first century too. Christians were under constant persecution. Their property was confiscated and they were charged with treason. They often died horrible deaths believing in what everyone in the first century knew just like they know now: that people don't rise from the dead. If there is no afterlife, if this is all there is, if there are no consequences to living however we want, if we will not be judged, if guilt is a state of mind and there is no punishment beyond death, if TV and toys and games and boats and houses and food and pleasure are the very best we should pursue, then yes, Jesus is not only not good news. He's bad news. He's ridiculous news, in the first century and the twenty-first.

But if the story is true, if there is an afterlife, if God is waiting for us, if He has offered us new life free from sin and guilt and shame, if punishment awaits those who do not turn to Him, if the things of this world are passing fancies and illusions that amount to nothing but eternal rewards await those who seek Him, if those who follow Jesus despite the shame in this life become kings and queens of the next alongside our beloved Christ, if nothing in the universe can match the wonder and joy of knowing Jesus as Savior and Lord and friend, then it is good news that only the hardest-hearted and cruelest among us would not share.

If you are to share Jesus, you have to know this deep in your gut...not just a faith in your head but in your heart. If you have it, you won't worry about being pushy. Pushiness is only necessary if what you're selling isn't worth buying, and you'll know that's not true. You will only worry about being effective. Your concern and mine will be that we share Jesus in such a compelling, winsome way that no one would reject Him because of our flawed presentation.

So with that first step down, we can look at what Scripture tells us about evangelism itself by example. And what it says may surprise us. In our main passage, we see step two: *not being pushy involves knowing and loving your audience enough to speak their language.*

Paul speaks to the Greeks in Athens at the Areopagus in precisely the way they could understand. This was a tough crowd – philosophers known for spending all day every day discussing ideas. Paul knows them well enough to use their own poets and religious beliefs in conversation. His speech might not convince us, but it was effective to them. Some sneered, others wanted more debate, and the number of converts was “few.” But to have any converts among a crowd that debated everything but settled nothing was God's divine grace at work.

Whoever God calls us to reach, we must reach in ways they understand. Would you support a missionary in the Middle East who didn't plan to learn Arabic? No! They would be totally ineffective! But we are missionaries to our own culture. The people we minister to have their own interests and languages. To reach them, we speak their dialect. Whether they are our children or co-workers or neighbors, we've got to love them enough that we “get” them.

Thirty years ago, even those who didn't go to church knew church vocabulary. That's no longer true. We'll talk about the church's vocabulary in a couple of weeks and why it's still important, but we've got to recognize that the Spirit reaches people in their contexts. To reach the gamer, you may have to play some games. To reach the guy into music or micro-brewing, you may have to dive into that a little, enough to understand the mindset.

This can be difficult when cultures collide. My mom taught me not to use bad language, and that's good. But there are people I need to minister to that use foul language, and I have to learn not to be offended by it. Sometimes, people don't use profanity around you until they really trust you! Catha and I have a friend who worked several years to listen to those who are attracted to people of the same sex. She became vulnerable and showed love to people who hold opinions far different from her own without compromising her own. I admire her for that.

Who is God asking you to reach, and what are you doing to know more about who they are as a person? What is God showing you about their lives that relates to God's story, so that you might find the place where their story and the good news meet? Here's a story to think about. A family worked for years to share the gospel with a remote tribe with little success. Then there was a tribal war, and the only way to end the conflict was for one tribe's leader to give his firstborn son to the other tribe's leader to repair the damage done between them. The missionaries were paying attention, and that act gave them the bridge they needed to speak about how God had given His firstborn, His one and only, to bridge the gap to us. It takes time and effort to find those common links, but they are there. Our part simply is to be listening and asking the Spirit to show us where He's already been at work paving the way. If we're listening well, we won't have to push Jesus. He'll already be in our midst.

Our third step tonight: *know that not every question needs a straightforward answer, and not every mystery needs to be solved.* In tonight's second passage, Jesus tells the crowd a parable about how the good news spreads – some reject it, others love the thought of it but fall away, and still more embrace it and it blossoms a hundred-fold. But you didn't hear that explanation; you only got the parable. That's what the crowds heard. Only the disciples were taught the full explanation that the Bible later gives us. That's the funny part: Jesus constantly taught in parables and riddles that confused people as much as they explained for them. Even though the Bible explains most of the parables, a fair number are open to interpretation even today. Jesus' precise meaning remains a mystery.

And when it came to deflecting questions, Jesus was a master. Many times, He refuses to answer the question He's been asked, instead taking the opportunity to launch into other related issues. When the Pharisees ask Jesus why His disciples eat with unwashed hands, breaking their tradition, He asks them why they break the commandments of God to keep their traditions. When a Pharisee asks Jesus who is his neighbor, Jesus gives us the story of the Good Samaritan, showing us how a good neighbor acts, not who our neighbors are.

Sometimes when we do not share Jesus straightforwardly, it is not out of cowardice. In our main passage, when Paul is speaking to the Areopagus, he never once mentions Jesus' name, though Paul is clearly speaking about Him. In the same way, we can talk about Jesus in ways that are more important than the questions being asked.

This week, I was really proud of Catha, so I'm going to brag on her a bit. She was pulled aside by someone with an agenda who asked what our denomination had said about same-sex marriage at General Assembly last week. Catha said, "I don't know exactly what they said, but we believe that Jesus loves sinners, and I'm one of them, and so is everyone else. We also believe Jesus wants to move us past our sin." The question was not answered, but the woman was surprised at the love she was shown. Not every question needs a straightforward answer because the question being asked isn't always the real question at all.

And mystery is not a curse but a draw. I try to preach so everyone understands me, but I don't try to dumb it down. When we have newcomers, I want them to hear the fullness of God's message. There's no point in watering it down. Christianity takes time to comprehend – the greatest minds have yet to fathom all that God has taught us. If God is working in someone's heart, some mystery is good. In Christ Jesus, God has revealed a huge mystery – the mystery of salvation. But why does it work the way it does? How God is three and one, Triune as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Why God has spared sinners who have rebelled against Him? It's OK for those to remain beautiful mysteries, to be loved and shared but not totally explained.

Last step tonight: *it's easy not be pushy when you know that you are responsible for sharing the good news, but not for its acceptance.* In 2 Corinthians, Paul says God goes before us, leading in triumphal procession. God is going before us, doing the work of preparing hearts for the good news! The parade of God's Kingdom is already underway. We are a part of the parade, not its organizer or leader. But Paul also teaches that we are the aroma of Christ to God and to our listeners. To some, we will be the fragrance of new life; to others, the stench of death. When we share Christ effectively with people, some will believe in Him and love Him and what He has done for them. And others will ridicule Him, malign Him, or simply ignore Him.

We don't have to be pushy because our job is to be the fragrance. All our logic, all the good arguments we can make for Scripture and Jesus, all our winsomeness, are part of spreading the aroma. We want it to be a sweet smell; we don't want to foul it up with our own sin or prejudices or problems. If we are pushy, if pushiness means being dismissive of another person, being disrespectful of them, or denying their own volition in the process of belief, that messes up the scent of salvation. We want to portray Jesus accurately and convincingly.

But others make up their own minds for or against Christ. There's no need to demand an immediate decision from someone. Often, people lie to get the pressure off. When I worked in hospice, a patient's uncle was rejoicing because the patient decided to accept the Lord. The man shared with me later that his uncle wouldn't let him have his ice cream if he refused. This man who had less than a week to live was placed in a no-win situation that harmed his spiritual growth. If we present the truth in full, our listeners will know that their soul depends on their eventual decision. We cannot rush the Holy Spirit's work beyond that. Nor is it our job. We do not decide how the aroma smells; we are only called to be a fragrant witness to Jesus.

It is my hope that we will talk about sharing Jesus more in the fall as part of our Bible study and our life together as a church. For now, think on these things. Be praying how God might use you to share your faith. Be open to where the Spirit leads. And know that Jesus loves you. In His love, you can bring life to others who desperately need Him.