

CrossWay's Vision: Imitating Christ Through Invitation
By Jason Huff
January 16, 2016
Psalm 34:8, John 4:5-19,28-30; John 1:43-51

Friends, our final Scripture reading this morning is from John 1:43-51. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. "The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me." Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip. When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false." "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that." He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

When I was young, I was a homebody, perfectly comfortable spending hours reading or listening to music. My mom had to push me out of the house when neighbor kids stopped by to see if I'd like to come out and do something. My mom would tell me something like: "If you don't ever accept their invitations, eventually they'll stop asking." I'd go reluctantly, but often wind up having a good time. As an introvert, I've had to work both to be an inviter and to accept invitations. But even a boring event or a lousy movie is made better by good company.

But invitations are a strange thing, aren't they? We want to be invited to events; we're disappointed, even offended sometimes, when we don't receive an invitation to something with our good friends or family members. But we don't always like what it is we're invited to be a part of, and we'd rather say no. That plays into our own invitations to our own events: who's most likely to come? Who do we really want to show up? Who will be offended if they aren't invited? It becomes a crazy sort of game. Which is why most nights we wind up watching TV alone rather than doing something with others.

A key to Christianity, however, is invitation. Some religions don't care if you join or not; some religions would like to force you to join. But Christianity invites everyone throughout the world to know God and worship Him, to be saved through the work of Jesus of Nazareth and to know Him as friend, Savior, and Lord.

We've talked a lot about evangelism recently, and we're not diving deep into that well again tonight. But right now, for the next few weeks, we are studying CrossWay's vision statement that guides our church, and you'll find it printed on the front cover of the bulletin each week. Last week, we saw that everything we do as a body of believers at CrossWay is founded upon leading others to a life-changing relationship with Jesus. We also recognized that service to our community is the first way we do that. The second way we lead others towards God is through our invitation to them.

The question might be, “Invite them to what?” That’s a good place to start. We want people to know about Jesus, but to what do we invite them? Church? Fellowship? Meal and a Movie? Bible study? A gathering at someone’s house? All possible. But those invitations are to a place, an event, or an activity. In Scripture, the invitation given over and over again is to meet God Himself. That can happen in all kinds of settings and places, but even if we invite someone to a particular setting, we’re ultimately inviting people to meet God personally.

The first thought I have for us tonight about invitation comes from Psalm 34:8. “Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.” Here’s what that verse is saying: *God’s invitation comes first to us*. What I mean is this – God wants *us* to experience Him personally so that our invitations might have greater appeal. Psalm 34:8 is written to the nation of Israel. In the next verse, David writes, “Fear the LORD, you His saints!”

The Israelites were God’s chosen people. They didn’t need someone to tell them who God was; they were taught the Scriptures from early childhood. They were unique out of all peoples to have the law of God and the prophets of God speaking to them. At times in Israel’s history, God appeared before them in various ways. But there is never a time when they do not need to taste and see that the LORD is good.

Before we can invite others into the presence of the Lord, we have to have met Him ourselves. Many of us have been in the church for a long time, some after an absence; some never left. But the invitation comes to us first. Experience God. Know His presence. Welcome His love. Being in and among the family of God and being a member of the family of God are not always the same thing. Take part. Accept the invitation yourself.

Most of us have done that, but I encourage you tonight to examine your heart and make sure you have experienced God’s love and forgiveness. If you’re just taking it on someone else’s word or if you just come to church but don’t know Him deeply yourself, make the time to talk to me about it, to read your Bible, to pray, and to know Him personally. Once you do, you can make an invitation for someone else to meet God because you can make the introduction.

Don’t just make it a blind faith thing. Don’t just say, “Sure, I believe,” and leave it at that. We’re commanded to “taste and see” that the Lord is good. It’s experiential. God gives us His book so we know how we can experience Him and His presence outside of the book. Scripture is how we know who God is, and He will never stray in any way from how He presents Himself in the Bible. But He is a living being who is real and active in history and in our lives.

I am convinced that many of us don’t ever invite anyone to know about our faith because either we haven’t tasted and seen, or we have tasted of God and not given Him the credit He’s due for what He’s done and how good He is. Because while I might be excited about a new book or movie or game or sporting event that I’ve not yet experienced, I might have the thrill of discovery, it’s nothing like the experience of finding out it was all that you hoped and more. If I can chat for an hour about the latest Marvel superhero movie or a novel, why can’t I talk more about what God has done and is doing in my life?

The encouragement to taste and see isn't a "one and done" kind of thing, either. None of us would go to a fabulous dinner and then say, "Enough of that eating stuff!" The more we taste and see, the more we worship, the more we enter into God's presence, the more likely we are to be able to invite people into the presence of God because we're still experiencing it ourselves. Don't let an experience twenty years ago be the basis of your testimony. God is still working in you now.

Have you asked God what He is up to in your life right now? That can help us know that God is good. We continue to respond to God's invitation because He doesn't invite us merely for a night out. He doesn't invite us only to kneel at the cross once in our lives to try and buy salvation with a prayer. He invites us into an ongoing journey with Him, a conversation with Him, a life with Him, to carry His cross daily and to experience His good pleasure daily. Keep tasting; keep seeing.

Here's my next thought from the Scripture on invitation: *our invitation doesn't need to be an explanation*. No one can explain everything about Christianity – not me, not my pastor friends, not the greatest theologian on the planet. There is simply far too much about God that is a mystery. Even the most competent, capable scholar and evangelist who can easily talk about the gospel and what Jesus has done cannot answer every question that could come up regarding God. It's impossible. And that stops some of us from telling others about faith or encouraging them to become a part of a church.

But while we should work to become better explainers of God's good work through Jesus, our role is not to explain God. God has explained as much of Himself as we are going to understand in Scripture, and while we can make it easier to comprehend, easier to digest, arrange it in such a way as to make it simpler, ultimately God has to be the one that makes faith happen in a person's heart and mind and life. Our job is invitation, not explanation.

Let's look at the two invitations we see in John's gospel. The first is from Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well. She meets Jesus, who knows all about her but yet does not condemn her. She is so stunned by the exchange that she runs into town and tells everyone, "Come see the man who has told me everything I have ever done. Could He be the Christ?"

There's hyperbole, of course, but Jesus did lay out the general course of her life without having ever met her in person before. She doesn't even have the answer to her question yet – she's still asking, "Is this guy the Christ we've been waiting for so long?" She's got plenty of questions on her own. This guy is a Jew, too, not a Samaritan, and there's a long-standing feud between their peoples. She can't explain who He is.

But she is so amazed, so moved, so utterly gobsmacked by her encounter with Jesus that she has to let everyone know who He is so they can meet Him too. At the end of Jesus' time with them, they do believe that He is the long-awaited Savior...all because one woman shunned by her own society invited them to meet this Jew, this foreigner, at the well.

Then we have Philip and Nathanael. Jesus invites Philip to follow Him. Then Philip in turn invites Nathanael. Philip says what he knows about Jesus – “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote.” He doesn’t go so far as to call Him Savior or the Son of God; Philip tells Nathanael what he knows, what he’s convinced of – these is the prophet we should listen to that Moses told us about.

And Nathanael objects! “Nazareth! Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nathanael’s unconvinced; who does this Jesus think He is? A Nazarene? I can just imagine Nathanael’s thoughts as a Jew wanting to be right with God: Jesus couldn’t have been trained by the best rabbis; He didn’t spend all His time worshipping in the temple courts; He probably had dealings with those accursed Gentiles all the time living up on the border of Israel like He did. How could this guy be the one we’ve been waiting all these centuries for?

And Philip doesn’t say a word. He gives absolutely no defense of Jesus. He just tells Nathanael, “Come and see.” It’s not until Nathanael meets Jesus that he comes to recognize just who He is – and he does it quickly! All it takes is Jesus mentioning something that was only between Nathanael and God. Nathanael isn’t a fool; he understands right away, and is one of the first to acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God. But that doesn’t happen until he encounters Jesus for himself. That’s what it takes for him to recognize Jesus is the one he’s been waiting for.

Jesus doesn’t need to be defended or explained. That’s not to say that we don’t explain Scripture or defend the truth. It’s just that it’s all there in the Bible already. It is not in our power to convert anyone. We want to make the truth available for them and easy to understand so that they recognize the clear choice between following Jesus and following their own path. But our invitation doesn’t require any of that. We simply say what we know about Jesus. The Holy Spirit works through that invitation to draw people to Himself.

That leads into our third thought: *our obedience to Christ is in the inviting, not their accepting*. I reject invitations for all sorts of things. Right now, Saturday nights are a no-go for us; pretty soon, it will be Sunday afternoons. We’ve been invited to be a part of basketball, baseball, golf, and karate leagues, but we can only do so much. We have to balance what we can manage to do as a family, as well as to put our priority on you, our church family. We understand that we can’t accept every invitation.

The same is true when you invite someone to meet Jesus, particularly through a church event or gathering. We’ve invited lots of people over time to Meal and a Movie Night. Many have come. Many haven’t. We’re not offended at their choices. And we’re not offended if our Meal and a Movie Night invitation to come and worship with us is ignored. Our role is simply to be obedient to invite others to meet God as we can.

God draws people to Himself. Unless God is actively calling someone, they won't respond. God's very self is offensive to people who are not drawn to Him. Both Nathanael and the woman at the well put up a fight, and they are ones that God is calling! Countless others don't respond. Jesus isn't welcomed in His hometown. The masses stop following Him when He tells them that He will give them Himself rather than more loaves and fish to eat. The rich young ruler that Jesus met left rather than give up his wealth. The people who were supposedly closest to God were the ones who not only rejected Jesus' invitation but killed Him.

Yet Jesus did not fail in any way. He made it possible for all who would turn from sin and come to Him to enter the Kingdom of God. And He keeps inviting. In Revelation 3, He says, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." He keeps inviting us to know Him better.

And so, finally, *keep inviting others*. You never know when someone will respond. In Matthew 21, Jesus tells a parable about a man who owns a vineyard, and he tells his two sons kindly, "Go work in the vineyard today." One says, "I won't," but he eventually changes his mind and does. The other says, "I will, sir," but he never shows up. Jesus asks His hearers, "Which one actually did what his father wanted?" Of course, it was the one who actually showed up to work.

We really don't know who will show up in the vineyard, who will answer the call, who will say, "I'm coming," but never make it. But we keep the invitation out there. That first invitation may be rejected, but as we keep asking, minds may change. And we get to rejoice when someone does respond. There is nothing like seeing someone become a Christ-follower because of our invitation.

As we prepare to move to Sunday afternoons in February, I encourage you to prayerfully consider who you might invite. We don't have the perfect church; we don't have a lot of special things to offer. We do offer the opportunity to get to know the Lord Jesus Christ. If God is working to draw them to Himself through you and through CrossWay, that's enough. May we keep answering God's invitation in our own lives to spend more time in His company, and may we invite others into the beautiful mystery of His presence.