

The Resurrected Gospel – Bringing the Message and our Passion for the Good News Back to Life (Part 3 of 4)

Sharing the Gospel

John 3:1-17

Mark Vroegop

"Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.' Jesus answered him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'" (John 3:1-17, ESV)

I hope that you have been joining me in praying this strategic prayer:

Open a door
Open my mouth
Open their heart

It is a simple prayer of faith, believing that God wants to use us to accomplish His mission of reaching the world with the Gospel. It is a risky prayer, in that I know that God will give you opportunities that you would have missed or will open doors that were not even there before.

One of our pastors this week was able to share the Gospel with the dying mother of a staff member. The staff member's mother has had terminal cancer for a while, and she has not previously been receptive to the Gospel. Her heart had been hardened to the Gospel for years, but her impending death created an open door. Even though it was hard for her to speak, her

family heard her say “forgive me for all I have done wrong, Jesus.” They have been praying for this moment for years, and they are hopeful that she has finally received Christ as her Savior. It looks like the Lord opened a door, a pastor opened his mouth, and the Lord opened her heart.

I wonder if you have seen the Lord answer that prayer this week in your life. Remember, if you have a story about a wide open door, we’d love to know about it. You can email our evangelism team at evangelismstory@yourchurch.com. We’d love to rejoice with you over what God is doing.

Apply then Live then Share

Two weeks ago we looked at the importance of applying the Gospel to our lives. The vision for that sermon was simply the fact that the best motivation for evangelism is affection. In other words, you will talk about what you love and what gets you excited. If we are regularly applying the Gospel to our lives, then we will not be able to help ourselves when opportunities come.

Last week we took another step. We moved beyond the motivation of the Gospel to refocusing our vision as to our strategic purpose in the world. In Matthew 5, Jesus said that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. In other words, a personally transforming Gospel was meant to be taken into the world to bring about cultural change. Salt changes the flavor of food and light dispels the darkness. The followers of Jesus are to be change agents in the world. We are to apply the Gospel. We are to live the Gospel. But there’s more.

Getting the motivation and the vision for evangelism right is helpful, but there still comes a point when you have to open your mouth and share the Gospel. The Gospel has to be applied personally, and it has to be lived out practically. But the Good News must be declared. It must be explained. It has to be told.

You have to seize the opportunity to clearly and succinctly share the Gospel.

Seizing the Opportunity

Jesus was a master at taking conversations or questions and seizing the Gospel opportunity. With the woman at the well, He used a common need for water in order to engage her in conversation about spiritual things (John 4). He spent time with tax collectors and sinners in order to engage them in conversation (Matt 9:9-13). He even boldly invited himself over to Zacchaeus’s house when He saw him up in a tree (Luke 19). In each case He engaged the person where the person was, found a common connection, and moved the person toward a spiritual conversation.

John 3 records one such moment, when a religious ruler named Nicodemus came to Jesus at night in order to ask Him some questions. And Jesus used this opportunity to engage his mind and heart regarding the Gospel. Notice what he did:

First, he was able to get Nicodemus thinking. In the first two verses, we learn that Nicodemus came to Jesus looking for answers. Apparently Nicodemus had some issues which were internally troublesome to him. So he sought Jesus out, and yet the very first thing he says is not a question:

"This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.'" (John 3:2, ESV)

But don't miss the fact that there is a question behind the statement. Now I know that Nicodemus was seeking Jesus out and that He was a religious leader, but I have found that most people have unanswered questions in the spiritual realm. Somewhere in their souls, they wonder about things like:

- What happens to a person after he or she dies?
- What is the point of my life?
- Why do I feel guilty about the bad things that I do?
- How can I be forgiven?

I think that people are asking questions like these. And we need to be the kind of people who 1) they would come to if they wanted to talk about this and 2) constantly looking for ways to engage people in spiritual-oriented conversations.

This is what Jesus does. He sees through the initial statement that Nicodemus makes, and He gets Nicodemus thinking by saying the following:

"Jesus answered him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.'" (John 3:3, ESV)

This statement begs for a follow-up. It is a leading statement. There is no way that Nicodemus is going to walk away from this conversation at this point. Jesus' statement has grabbed his attention. His statement about being born again drew him in.

Kevin Harney, in his book *Organic Outreach for Ordinary People*, lists five great questions which can lead to spiritual conversations:

1. What are some of the joys you are experiencing in this season of your life?
2. What challenges and struggles are you facing?
3. What is your personal history when it comes to faith and God?
4. What do you believe about God?
5. What is your perception of Christians?¹

The simple point is that before we can share the Gospel message, we have to facilitate some level of interest or spiritual need in the topic. We have to get people thinking.

Second, He pointed Nicodemus to spiritual realities beyond himself. Jesus' statement about being born again prompted an honest question from Nicodemus about what Jesus really meant. And Jesus' response was to point Nicodemus to the greatness and the mysteriousness of God's work in salvation:

¹ Kevin Harney, *Organic Outreach for Ordinary People*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 2009), 191-192.

"Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'" (John 3:5–8, ESV)

John Piper says the following about what Jesus is saying here:

What matters is not merely affirming the supernatural in Jesus but experiencing the supernatural in yourself. The new birth is supernatural, not natural. It cannot be accounted by things that are already found in this world . . . So Nicodemus, Jesus says, what happens in the new birth is not merely affirming the supernatural in me, but experiencing the supernatural in yourself. You must be born again. And not in any metaphorical natural way, but in a supernatural way. God the Holy Spirit must come upon you and bring new life into existence.²

It is remarkable and something we have to note. Jesus essentially tells Nicodemus that there is no hope in himself. Nicodemus needs something he cannot achieve on his own. He needs to be born again.

In the first week of our series, we talked about not being ashamed of the Gospel, and I want to encourage you to compassionately and lovingly, yet boldly, help point people beyond themselves. I think somewhere in people's hearts, they know that they need divine intervention. Point people to spiritual realities beyond themselves.

Third, He called him to believe. After Nicodemus expresses his shock about the things that Jesus is saying (vs 8), Jesus invites him to put his faith in Him. He even uses an Old Testament contextual metaphor that would have been familiar to Nicodemus:

"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:14–17, ESV)

The goal of spiritually-oriented conversations is to call people to believe. This is the essence of what Christianity is, the reason for which Christ died, and the heart of the Good News – "that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16b).

Jesus grabbed Nicodemus' interest, pointed him to spiritual realities beyond himself, and called him to believe. He seized the opportunity for a spiritual conversation. And that is what I'd like to invite you to consider with me today: seizing the opportunity to turn conversations into spiritual subjects. Be the kind of person who people would think to go to if they have a spiritual question or need. Ask appropriate but heart-probing, thought-provoking questions. And when the opportunity comes, be clear with the Gospel. Keep it simple. But make it clear.

² <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/what-happens-in-the-new-birth-part-1>

Make the Gospel Clear

As you heard in Dale's testimony and you see on the cards that we've distributed this morning, we would like to empower you in sharing the Gospel by summarizing the Gospel with five key words. Now there are a number of ways to share the Gospel. There are the Four Spiritual Laws, the Bridge Illustration, Steps to Peace with God, and the Romans Road. All of these have some great strengths, and I would recommend them to you.

This is just another tool and one that I hope will give you confidence in being able to quickly and clearly share the Gospel. There are five key words: sin, grace, cross, faith, and repentance. Let me briefly explain them to you.

Sin: Personal rebellion against God your Creator that causes guilt before Him

Any Gospel presentation has to start here. We have to begin with the fundamental problem with the world and people. This is critically important, because if people are not shown their need, then nothing else about the Gospel makes sense.

The Bible is very clear when it comes to problem of sin. Romans 3:23 says, "... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." This verse teaches that what you need to communicate is that every single person has violated the law and commandment of God. Most people know that they have committed sins. The most common objection I hear is that they are not as bad as others. But the point still remains that if God is the creator, if He is holy, and if we have broken His law, then there is a problem. You've probably heard me say it this way: "God is holy; you are not. And that's a problem – an eternal problem."

The reason we feel guilt over things we have done is because of the presence of a holy God, a righteous standard, and a lack of personal obedience. But sin is a bigger problem than just the things that we do. The Bible tells us that the heart is the real issue and that it is deceitful above all things (Jeremiah 17:9). So the issue with sin is our desire to run our own lives, and the result is external and heart-based rebellion against God. Sin is the problem that the Gospel addresses.

Grace: A free and undeserved gift given at the cost of someone for the joy of the recipient

The next word is one which is probably familiar to most people. They probably know the song "Amazing Grace," and they may even have some kind of definition of what grace means. However, the biblical definition relates specifically to the way that a holy God has treated sinful humans.

Grace is simply unmerited favor or undeserved kindness. A good and familiar verse is John 3:16, where we hear about God's love and the gift of His son:

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16, ESV)

So the bad news about our sin is eclipsed with the beauty of God's undeserved kindness. It was the love of God that motivated Him to offer the grace of salvation through His son. And the beauty of grace is the fact that this offer of redemption is completely undeserved and infinitely costly to God and that it creates eternal joy for the one who receives it.

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

Cross: Jesus died on the cross for our sin and in our place so we can be forgiven

The third word is *cross*, which is not just about the physical crucifixion. It is really more about substitutionary atonement. But you have to explain this concept without using overly technical and theological words that could be confusing or hard to understand.

If you have already established the problem of sin and the concept of grace, this fits perfectly. Basically, the meaning here is that God makes a way for our sins to be forgiven through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. God's remedy to our sinful condition is to provide payment for our crimes through the death of Jesus on the cross.

"And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross." (Colossians 2:13–14, ESV)

Forgiveness is possible because God poured out our punishment on Jesus. He took our place. He took our penalty. He took our judgment. The miracle of the cross is the fact that God provided a sacrifice in His own son in order to save sinful people. Jesus died on the cross for our sin and in our place so we can be forgiven.

The beauty of the Gospel is the divine exchange that takes place between a person and Jesus Christ. God pours out the judgment we deserve on Christ and simultaneously grants to us the righteousness earned by Jesus. Jesus absorbs the wrath and God applies Christ's righteousness to our spiritual account.

The cross makes divine exchange possible.

Faith: Personal belief and trust in Jesus Christ as the only Savior who takes our sins and gives us new life in him

Sin. Grace. Cross. Those are the first three words. The fourth is faith. This is where the reality of Christ's death on the cross is personally embraced. It is not enough to know about the cross; a person has to put his or her faith in the cross.

Faith, belief, and trust are words that all essentially mean the same thing. The idea is that you are putting your hope in what God has promised that He will do. You are trusting in what the Bible says about your sin, the cross, and forgiveness through the death of Jesus. Faith is putting your trust in God, knowing that you cannot save yourself.

The apostle Paul summarized this for us in Ephesians 2.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8–9, ESV)

It means that a person comes to believe what Romans 10:9-10 says.

" . . . because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." (Romans 10:9–10, ESV)

A person is saved by faith.

Repentance: Despairing over the insufficiency of yourself and in brokenness over your sin turning to God for rescue

The last word is really important. Faith and repentance are two sides of the same coin. Repentance is what happens when true faith comes. It is a vital part of the work of grace in our hearts, and it involves a radical reorientation of the mind and will.

To repent means that you have changed your mind. About what? Basically, about everything! You change your mind about who God is, who you are, what is really important, and who you are going to obey. It means that there is a new master in the house and that a person has transferred his or her allegiance over to Christ.

Early in Jesus' ministry He called people to repent (see Matt 4:17). And the expansion of the church's mission after Jesus' death involved the preaching of repentance. Peter's sermon in Acts 3:19 records the following charge:

"Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out," (Acts 3:19, ESV)

I love the definition of repentance that is on the card this morning: "Despairing over the insufficiency of yourself, and in brokenness over your sin, turning to God for rescue." Repentance means that there is a new person inside of you and that the trajectory of your life is going to be different for the rest of your life.

Sin. Grace. Cross. Faith. Repentance. These five words serve as a great summary of the Gospel message. They are the basics of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and they are the essence of the Good News. If God answers your prayer of opening a door, take the moment and explain those important five words: sin, grace, cross, faith and repentance.

Sharing Your Story

Finally, let me encourage you about the power of sharing your own story. Engaging in spiritual conversations is a great place to start. Knowing the five words and being ready to share them is a great summary of the Gospel. Along with that, there is something really powerful about your personal story. This is especially true in a culture that values spirituality and so-called tolerance. People might connect with your story and be moved by it in a powerful way.

About fifteen years ago I was trained in the Navigators 2:7 discipleship material, and a part of that training involved writing out the story of how I came to faith in Christ. Honestly, it seemed a bit

tedious at first, and it was a bit awkward when I shared it with a total stranger, who then critiqued it. But it was a helpful exercise to crystalize my testimony so that I could share it in just a few minutes.

So here are two assignments for you:

- 1) On the back of the card are some blanks for you to fill out regarding the people for whom you are praying for an opportunity to share Christ. Your assignment is to ask the Lord for an opportunity to start a spiritual conversation, share the five words, or share the story of how you came to faith in Christ.
- 2) The second assignment is to take an hour this week and write out, on one page, your testimony. Who were you before Christ? How did you come to Christ? What difference has Jesus made? Then take that testimony to your small group and share it. Let people who love you give you feedback on how to make it even better.

And then pray for God to . . .

Open a door
Open my mouth
Open their heart

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com