

Welcome

Some of my earliest experiences with getting to talk to people about Jesus were in college. I've shared before that I was in a metal band, so as you can imagine, there weren't a lot of venues interested in booking us. Most of the time, we played bars and clubs. We had a pretty strict behavior code - we didn't cuss or drink alcohol or smoke at the venues.

Probably because of that, the barflies figured out pretty quickly that we were Christians. Which usually went over like the proverbial turd in a punch bowl. It turns out that there's not a lot of overlap between the folks who show up at a bar on a Saturday night for a metal show and the folks who show up in the pews on Sunday morning.

The exchanges were pretty predictable. We'd play our set, then clear our gear so the main act of the night could get set up. Then we'd head out to the floor and someone would approach us.

"Are y'all a Christian band?"

Our music had never asked Jesus into its heart, but that's not really what they were asking. They wanted to know if we were Christians, and we were, so we usually just smiled and said, "Yeah."

What happened next often moved toward combative. We got cussed out a few times. Other times people asked us what we thought we were doing in a bar, or if our pastors or professors (since we went to a Christian university) knew we were there.

It would've been easy to be offended. More than a few of those guys were spoiling for a fight, and religion is pretty easy to fight about.

We had to learn quickly how to defuse those situations, and some of the skills I learned in those metal clubs have served me well in the years since. Because conversations about Jesus often get contentious. We meet all kinds of resistance to sharing the Good News.

What do we do when those conversations get a little tense?

Today, let's consider what it means to keep relationship at the heart of our conversations, even when we meet resistance. Let's look at how we avoid insisting on being right about Jesus rather than inviting people to know Jesus.

Message

We're in the Church season of Epiphany, the season that follows Christmas. Epiphany celebrates the God came not just for us, but for the whole world. Appropriately, then, our Epiphany series this year is called Good News for a Change. We're talking about how to talk about Jesus... with anyone. The \$20 word for this is Evangelism, and it's a word with enough baggage to make just about anyone break out in a nervous sweat. Whether you've been preached at or sat through those classes on how to preach at

people, Evangelism conjures to mind that combative, confrontational, in-your-face kind of approach, or maybe just having no idea how to talk about Jesus with people we really care about.

Throughout this series, we're going to explore a lot of the ways we get Evangelism wrong, and why it's a lot more fun than we would've imagined. We began by talking about what the Gospel even is - that it means "Good News". Then we spent some time asking how God is good news - both in our own lives and in the lives of people we care about. Next, we explored how to translate the good news out of our language into the world of the person we're talking to. We spent several weeks working out what it looks like to translate the Good News into the language of those in our lives, and how to avoid insider jargon.

So today, what do we do when we meet resistance? What happens when we do all the things we've been talking about and the person STILL reacts negatively or with hostility?

First, it's entirely possible you can't do anything. Part of being a kind neighbor to someone else is letting them end a conversation they don't want to be in. I've had plenty of experiences talking to someone about Jesus and they decide they're done.

They get to be done. I can't make them listen.

But just because someone reacts with hostility doesn't mean they're checking out of the conversation. And this is where traditional evangelism training equips us with all sorts of conversational judo tactics. They treat these encounters as fights to win. The other person becomes an opponent. Can I anticipate their moves and out-maneuver them?

In contrast, consider what the book of Proverbs tells us a wise response looks like: **A gentle answer deflects anger, but harsh words make tempers flare. -- Proverbs 15:1**

Proverbs says that wisdom is a gentle answer. Gentleness is power under control. Proverbs suggests we not seek out arguments, but stay centered on the relationship. Proverbs says, "When you meet resistance, don't square off for a fight. Instead, press into the relationship."

In his book, Matt Mikalatos offers five questions that help us offer gentle answers rather than harsh words.

Typically when I engage someone about Jesus and get a negative response, it's about Christians - who we are, how we've behaved. So start with a general question:

What's the worst thing Christians have ever done?

There're a handful of responses people throw out to this question - usually the crusades, destructions of Native American cultures or endorsing slavery.

Here's the important bit: it's easy to get defensive when someone brings that up (it's like someone outside your family talking trash on your family). But remember: you're not spoiling for a fight. You're trying to deepen the relationship. So you don't argue. You don't try to offer nuance.

You just agree (which really isn't hard in those scenarios. Christian people did some pretty heinous stuff and it should be easy for us to condemn them.)

"You're right. Those actions were unconscionable. No one should ever have done those things."

In agreeing you're doing a few things. First, you're taking their objections seriously. You're showing you're listening to them. Second, you're telling the truth. You're establishing that you're not playing party politics or defending your people no matter what. And you're building some common ground.

The next question is, "What's the worst thing a Christian has ever done to you?"

This one is harder, and more painful. Depending on how well you know this person, or how open they are to sharing, you may not get much here, or you may hear some incredibly painful stories.

I have heard stories of abusers who were pastors or church leaders, whom the church supported instead of believing the person I'm talking to. Others who were kicked out of their churches when they came out or asked questions. People shunned by their families or abandoned by spouses or partners in the name of Jesus.

Again, a lot of us have an impulse to try to minimize that pain, to explain the behavior of those people. Stop. Don't do that. Remember you're not trying to win a fight. You're trying to build a relationship, to connect with that person.

So demonstrate some empathy. When I hear those stories, I say something like, "I'm so sorry that happened to you," or "I'm so sorry they did that to you. No one deserves to be treated like that."

This is important: don't rush past this. These are where the emotions can be difficult, painful. Our tendency is to try to skip through these messy, painful emotions to get onto less messy stuff, but that's not how we build relationships. So honor your friend's pain. Stay with them in it as long as they want to share about it or process it with you.

Then you're ready for the next question: What is the core of Jesus' teachings?

This one is a pretty easy question, and pretty much everyone you meet already knows the answer. They'll usually brighten up a bit and say, "Love." Now, is that a simple answer? Sure. Is there more to it than that? Well, yeah. But it's also correct. The core of Jesus' teaching is that God loves us and wants a relationship with us. That's the good news.

So when your friend says this, you can just affirm it. If they want to look at the Bible, you can point them to Mark 12 (or just quote it for them):

Jesus replied, “The most important commandment is this: ‘Listen, O Israel! The LORD our God is the one and only LORD. And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’ The second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these.” -- Mark 12:29-31

Or you could take them to John's gospel where Jesus says:

I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.” -- John 13:34-35

The next question is critical, and it applies to the crusaders or the slavers or those churches and families who shun. You can ask, "So were those Christians following the core teachings of Jesus?"

And the answer is No, they're not. What you're helping your friend do is flip the situation around in their head.

What they think is, "Christians do bad things because Christianity is bad." And what you've helped them see - based on things they already know - is "Christians do bad things, but when they do, they're ignoring the teachings of Jesus." You're helping them to see that no, Christians aren't always good. We do bad things. But that's not the same things as Jesus, who loves them and wants a relationship with them.

If they're tracking with you, this is the point where it's probably safe to extend an invitation to them: do you want to know more?

Friends, this is what a gentle answer looks like. It's an answer that insists that what matters most is not whether convince them I'm right, but that insists what matters most is our relationship.

I get to talk with a lot of people about Jesus, and a lot of them are not Jesus followers. Never once in my experience has winning an argument led someone to Jesus; in fact, it often results in no more conversations with that person. In other words, I sacrificed relationship for rightness.

But if relationship is the heart of Jesus' good news, then relationship has to be the heart of *sharing* that good news too.

So when I get to talk to someone about Jesus, I follow this pattern Matt laid out for us. I listen. I ask questions. I work to cut through all the noise we generate as Christians to get to the heart: Jesus wants a relationship with us.

I have to bite my tongue and listen. Listen to stories of secret shame and broken families and exiles and abuse and more. And friends, it's not a burden to share the good news of Jesus at that point. To help them connect the dots they already know: that the people who did that to them were not living out Jesus' teachings, that Jesus loves them without condition or limit, and that Jesus wants to be in relationship with them.

When we quit pitting a need to be right against the good of our relationships, we gain the privilege of sharing Jesus' good news. God enables us to serve as agents of healing the hurt others have caused.

What could be better news than that?

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] A meal is a relationship. Jesus invites us to share a meal with him.

1. When have I encountered hostility toward Jesus or my faith recently?
2. How could I have engaged that hostility with a focus on the relationship?
3. Where might I encounter resistance to Jesus' good news in the next week?
4. How can I remain focused on the relationships rather than being right?

Assignment + Blessing

Pray for those in your life who've shown hostility toward Jesus' good news. Ask for a chance to engage them.