

Welcome

I went to grad school at the University of Missouri, aka Mizzou. Just outside the library at Mizzou you can find Speaker's Circle, which is a space the university has reserved for what they call "unrestricted free speech," which basically means anyone can show up and say whatever they want. About twice a year, a travelling evangelist named Brother Jeb came and set up at Speaker's Circle for a week or so.

He stood in the center of the circle with his King James bible thrust high in one hand and shouted at people. He told anyone and everyone walking by that they were going to hell. He told me on multiple occasions I was headed to the fiery depths. He called women all kinds of horrible names, accusing them of every manner of sin.

The Christian kids on campus tried everything we could think of to get him to stop. Some of us argued with him, lobbing bible verses back and forth at each other. Others tried gentle, kind conversations or even acts of kindness - offering water or food. Nothing curbed his acid tongue.

Brother Jeb's visits to Speaker's Circle were particularly frustrating for Christians because there was a lot we agreed about - we too wanted the people on our campus to know God, to know that God wanted a relationship with them. We believed sin separates us from God and that sin has consequences - both temporal and eternal.

It wasn't Brother Jeb's message, but the way he delivered it - totally devoid of love and care for anyone (even those of us who were ostensibly on his team!). It was that the thing he was saying (You can spend eternity with God) didn't match how he was acting (cruel and judgmental).

Brother Jeb is an extreme example of a tension most of us feel when sharing the Good News about Jesus. Should we do it with words or with our actions?

We shouldn't feel a tension there. God calls us to be a people who shares good news and lives good news. Both our words and our actions are to demonstrate the love of God, and when we seek out that wholeness, we embody Jesus' good news no matter where we are or who's listening.

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. Then last week we saw that truly speaking good news to someone isn't about getting them to believe the right things, but inviting them to trust Jesus, the God who is already at work in their lives.

If you talk about Evangelism very long in Christian circles, there's a strange debate that springs up. Some folks say that sharing the Good News is all about the words you use. The important thing is to get the words in front of people who don't know God. So Brother Jeb lobbed King James bible verses at people with little to no context and no concern for whether they even understood the archaic English. Or, if you've ever been a server, you've probably gotten one of those tips that looked like a \$20 bill but turned out to be a gospel tract. Some missions organizations send missionaries to people groups who don't know Jesus and all they do is preach to them. Because the words are all that matter.

On the other hand, there are folks who love to quote St. Francis of Assisi (the Francis after whom Pope Francis named himself). "Preach the gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words." These people insist that words aren't necessary for telling people the good news about Jesus - our lives should be enough for people to know God loves them. So these Christians tend to be super involved in social justice, faith activists. Because their works are what matter.

Words vs Works.

Here's the funny thing about St. Francis - he never said that quote, as far as we can tell. And it seems unlikely that he would ever have said that because he was known as a preacher. One of the most famous stories about him is that he once stopped on a journey to preach to the birds in a field that they too might know the Good News.

Francis was a man who preached the good news with both words AND work. In this, he was imitating Jesus himself, who also did plenty of preaching AND plenty of serving. In fact, Jesus had some pretty harsh words for religious folks who weren't consistent in word and work.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me to Matthew 23. This teaching is one Jesus gave during his Passion week, after he entered Jerusalem. Jesus has cleansed the Temple, and his action sparked challenges from the religious establishment. They spent a whole day trying to trick and trap him, hoping to turn the crowds against him. But again and again, Jesus turned their traps back on them, making them look foolish in front of the crowds.

It's then he delivers these words we're about to hear next. Jesus is specifically calling out the religious leaders who, when God walks up to them, oppose God to his face. So let's read together how Jesus evaluates them:

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The teachers of religious law and the Pharisees are the official interpreters of the law of Moses. So practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don’t follow their example. For they don’t practice what they teach. They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden.

Jesus points to a disconnect between what they say and how they live. He says, "Follow their teaching, but don't imitate their lives." Wow. Why not?

"Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear robes with extra long tassels. And they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the seats of honor in the synagogues. They love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces, and to be called ‘Rabbi...’

All of the Pharisees' religiosity is about putting on a show. They're more interested in what YOU think about them than what GOD thinks about them. Jesus goes into detail throughout chapter 23, citing example after example of how the Pharisees keep the letter of the law while ignoring the spirit altogether.

Toward the end of his teaching, Jesus uses two powerful metaphors to drive home what a problem this disconnect is:

"What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and self-indulgence! You blind Pharisee! First wash the inside of the cup and the dish, and then the outside will become clean, too.

Can you imagine? Standing at the sink, washing the outside of a dirty glass, then filling it up and taking a drink? Disgusting, because it doesn't matter how clean the outside is, if the inside is dirty, then anything coming out is dirty, too.

The next example Jesus uses is even more dramatic:

“What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people’s bones and all sorts of impurity. Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness. -- Matthew 23:1-7, 25-28

Jesus is not critiquing what the Pharisees are saying (remember, he said to follow their teachings!). And he's not even critiquing their actions, though he's obviously not pleased with them.

What Jesus takes issue with is the disconnect between what they say and how they live, between their words and works. It's a clear sign for Jesus they haven't truly been transformed by God - they're still dead and dirty inside.

God is not interested in either our words or our works. God is interested in all of us, integrated as one whole person. A person whose words and works are aligned. A person who is living out the good news because it flows from a transformed relationship with God.

The words people need to realize that the good news about Jesus isn't a magical spell. You can just throw bible verses at people and expect them to stick. God never intended sharing good news to look like that.

In other words, we don't want to be the kind of people who Jesus looks at and says, "Eh, do what they say, but don't imitate them."

And the works people have to come to grips with the fact that too often, we hid behind "works" as an excuse not to take a risk and actually talk about how Jesus is good news for us and our friends.

In other words, we are good news when we share the good news in both word and work.

I have a group of friends that's largely not Christian - many were raised in the Church and have left faith, others have been atheist for quite a while. Last year, we all decided to watch a documentary called *Religulous* by comedian Bill Mahr (who is one of my least favorite talking heads). The documentary is strongly anti-religious, with the greatest focus being on Christianity. So we ended up with about fifteen people, mostly atheist or agnostic, at my house for the movie.

I smoked a brisket and Amanda and I prepared a little feast, and we all sat down to watch the movie. Afterwards, we discussed how the documentary portrayed religion, and the ins and outs of a life of faith for more than two hours.

I was telling a pastor friend of mine about the night and he stopped me. "You had a house full of atheists who showed up voluntarily to a *pastor's* house to discuss religion? How did you do that?"

I thought about it for a minute. Well, it's because these were all my friends. I had invested a lot of time in loving them, in showing them the good news by my actions. They knew they could trust me because we had established a relationship of mutual trust and affirmation.

Opportunities to talk about the good news of Jesus like those don't come around when we only use words and not works. And of course I could spend a lifetime showing the good news through my works but if I never gave

The writer of Colossians calls us to an integrated life, where the words we speak and the works we do are one.

Whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father. -- Colossians 3:17

The choice between works and words is a false one. God calls us to be a people of both. When we live integrated lives, we become good news in every way to the people we meet.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus demonstrates his love for us in both words and works.

1. When in the last week did I use words to share the Good News with someone?
2. When in the last week did I show the Good News through my actions?
3. How can I share the Good News this week with both?

Assignment + Blessing

If you tend to be a 'words' person, share with your works this week. If you are a 'works' person, try speaking up this week!