

SERIES Four Chairs of Discipleship  
 SERMON **Unbeliever's Bench (Acts 10.34–43)**  
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 LOCATION Church of Christ at Manor Woods (Rockville, MD)  
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## 1. WALKING THE TALK

Follow-up to last week's "not-Tiger Woods story": Jenn asked me after church, "So, could the guy really play, or did he just look the part?" The answer was simple: the dude could really play. In fact, he mopped the floor with the rest of us. If I remember, he won by eight strokes. But his abilities were not limited to playing. He also knew all of the rules by heart. Something he let the rest of us know throughout the round, whenever he would catch someone having done something against the rules—or when he saw one of us about to break one. He did that for me early on, since it was my first time playing in a real tournament. He stopped me from breaking a rule that would have resulted in a two-stroke penalty. (*Not that it really would have mattered; I knew I was going to wind up in last place*). So yeah: all told, the guy could play.

But he was still human. On the first hole, I out-drove him (*with a lesser club*), which ticked him off big-time. And he wasn't quiet about it. But here, I have to admit my own humanness: that was the only time I out-drove him. In fact, it was my best shot of the entire round. But the biggest evidence of his humanness, and also the point where he lost the respect of the other players, happened near the end of the round. While in a green-side bunker, he swept a small twig in the sand away from his ball with his club, then wiped the sand off his club, before returning to position and hitting his shot. To many people, that doesn't sound like a big deal. But what he did is called "grounding the club in a bunker," which results in a two-stroke penalty. And because I saw it happen, and because I was keeping track of his score throughout the round; and when he tried to tell me he shot two strokes less than he technically did; I had to confront him about it. Anyone want to guess how he took the news?

At first, in front of the other players, he loudly denied it happened and accused me of seeing it wrong. When someone said, "Well, from where I was standing, I couldn't see all of you in the bunker, but Carl was standing right behind you, and I saw him watching," the dude not only tried to change what happened (*i.e., his club only touched the twig and not the sand*) but he also attempted to make me look like I didn't understand the rules and what kinds of penalties were required. And when that didn't work, he approached me personally—at which point I'm thinking I'm about to get a face-full of sand wedge—and begged me to overlook the fault. (*Thus, admitting he had been caught in a lie*). He even tried appealing to my sympathies by laying on this desire and goal of beating his personal best score. And when that didn't work, he goes off again on a loud tirade about how things aren't fair and some rookie chump from a Christian College is keeping him from getting what he wants. (*Even if that means breaking rules to obtain it—rules that he adamantly made sure the rest of us followed without question*). At this point, another player stepped and said: "You know, Tiger would be disappointed with you. He would tell you to fess up, don't do it again, and move on to being a better player."

[connection and intro for the morning]

—PRAY—

## 2. ENCOUNTERING SOMETHING NEW

One of the funnier moments in the NT is when Jesus and Nicodemus have their first chat, as found in Jn 3. Nicodemus, if we recall, was a well-known and well-respected Pharisee. And as a prominent teacher among the Jews, he would know not only the OT, its meaning, and its theology, but also all of the so-called great traditions surrounding it. But while he was a guy who knew his stuff, he was also rather human. Here's what I mean, and why the chat is funny.

Nicodemus acknowledges the uniqueness of Jesus' teaching and that He must be a teacher sent by God. Notice where Nicodemus begins: while Jesus is obviously different, He's still just another (human) teacher. With this acknowledgment made, Jesus seems to pursue His own thing when He says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again<sup>1</sup> he cannot see the kingdom of God" (Jn 3.3, NASB). This is a head-trip for Nicodemus because of the apparent randomness of the comment as well as the oddity of its substance. So, Nicodemus asks: "How can a man [=person] be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" (Jn 3.4, NASB). To which the mothers in the room would say: that better not be Jesus' meaning. Sensing that Nicodemus was struggling a bit with metaphors—proven by the fact that he took Jesus' words way too literally; Jesus opts for a more theological route.

He says (*paraphrased*): "the rebirth of which I speak is not one that can be performed by humans. It can only be done by work of God via the Spirit. Thus, those born only of the flesh will not see the God's kingdom; only those who are spiritually reborn by the work of God will see it. So, your question about re-entering wombs is, you'll have to confess, a bit silly" (cf. Jn 3.5-8). To which Nicodemus responds: "Yeah, dude, you lost me." (cf. Jn 3.9). And so Jesus rightly asks (*paraphrasing again*): "Seriously? Aren't you a prominent Pharisee? Why are you having difficulty?" (Jn 3.10). And then Jesus hits him—and everyone else, for that matter—with a hard truth (*and we'll read this one as it is*): "If I told you<sup>2</sup> earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" (Jn 3.12, NASB). And as we know from the rest of John's Gospel: for better than two years, Nicodemus to wrestle with the more challenging (*yet more meaningful*) heaven-defined teachings of Jesus; and in that wrestling, he moves closer to closer to faith in Jesus.

Here's why I mention that story. It's easy for us to say things that seem clear and routine for us, but they ultimately confuse others. A confusion that often happens when a term, concept, illustration, or image is used in a way that is unfamiliar or seems contrary to common thinking. And, not surprisingly, this happens regularly with churchy-type language. Seriously, strike up a conversation with a random person and start dropping in words like: tithe, fellowship, sanctification, sabbath, or the great word we heard last week from Alex: propitiation (*the Greek word is so much easier to say: ἱλασμός [hilasmos]*). I promise you: it won't take long before the other person starts looking at you like you've got lobsters coming out of your ears. Why? Because this sort of language will be unfamiliar to others, even if it's normal to us.

<sup>1</sup> The Greek phrase, γεννηθῆναι ἀνωθεν (*gennēthē anōthen*) can also mean "born anew" or more specifically, "born from above."

<sup>2</sup> The language for all of the "you" references in this passage are plural.

So, because we don't want to create confusion, we need to make sure we strive to be as clear as possible with our words and meaning.<sup>3</sup> Thus, when we talk about "discipleship" and even "evangelism," which is a necessary component of discipleship, we need to be aware that others might be unfamiliar with the terms or they might even have pre-existing negative perceptions about them. But no matter the case, we need to be prepared to faithfully and reasonably define and represent what such terms mean. And that, of course, means that we in the church need to be clear about the same things—at least for the simple fact that: if we don't understand them, how can we possibly expect to be able to explain them to others? This was part of the reason why we spent last week looking at the big picture of discipleship. Not just in terms of definition but especially in terms of function and expectations.

### 3. REMEMBERING THE FUNDAMENTALS

And a foundational expectation of discipleship has two key parts. First, to ensure that God's people (*true disciples of Jesus*) continuously grow in their new identity, faith, life, devotion and service to Christ by the Holy Spirit. (*Scripture portrays this as moving from milk to solid food, leaving infancy for adulthood, exchanging immaturity for maturity; rejecting a name-only faith and embracing faithful life defined by the One name*). But discipleship is more than just making sure God's people grow in faithful and healthy ways. And that brings us to the second part: discipleship must fulfill the Great Commission's call for all disciples to go out and make disciples of all nations. Thus, a necessary requirement for fulfilling the call to make disciples is for the church to leave the building and engage with others where they are in daily life. Thus, church doesn't stop on Sunday mornings. It's called to continue throughout the week.

In many ways, this summons to take the gospel into the world (*and to be its living testimony*) has been seen as either optional for Christians or even counter-intuitive for the church. For too long, the responsibility and task of spreading the gospel to others was not treated as an expectation for all believers. Instead, it was seen as the exclusive domain of the few super-Christians or the fewer super-pastors. Thus, engaging with others about who Jesus is and what He's done was not accepted (*let alone embraced*) as a necessity for the average member of the church. And for too long, many churches used the *Field of Dreams* approach to ministry: "If you build it, they will come." This amounted to an assumption that said, "If people who aren't believers want to know Jesus and become a part of His church, then they're welcome to come to our building any Sunday and find out." And the knock-on effect of this "the world needs to come to us" mentality was a de-emphasizing and devaluing of the true call of discipleship as well as Christ's intentions for it and those expected to fulfill it.

And when discipleship is de-emphasized and devalued through definitions that water down, distort, or even subvert it's intended nature, or when churches focus more on their buildings, programs, creating experiences, and/or catering to their existing membership; it's no wonder that they struggle to have meaningful dialogue with others who need the gospel, and why

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<sup>3</sup> And this is often necessary in our culture today, given that some terms or concepts have been saddled with negative opinions and even seen or portrayed as representing something oppressive. Not because they are in fact oppressive or negative terms, but because others want them to be, so that they can be easily dismissed or shamed into silence. For example: Christianity itself (especially as its found and practiced in the US) is a primary focus of unashamed shaming in Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell, and Pat Griffin's book, *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (Routledge, 2007). Not only is the critique of Christianity performed with weak, subjective argumentation, obvious double-standards, and a particular, pre-existing philosophical and ideological framework (namely, the highly prejudicial form of Critical Theory and Intersectionality that comes out of Gramscian-Marxism), but the book also offers an example for how to teach a class or seminar on (effectively) shaming Christianity as a social danger and source of intolerant religious oppression (see 255–83).

such churches are often perceived as irrelevant. As Christian author and speaker, Nona Jones rightly points out: “If you stake your existence to a physical location alone, you will not only find yourself no longer viable, but you will also miss out on the vast sea of people who still need Jesus but won’t look for him in a building down the street. While Jesus told us to become fishers of people, many churches have settled for being keepers of the aquarium.”<sup>4</sup> And she goes on to say: in that scenario, “no one wins. Especially not the kingdom.”

And that reveals a more basic problem involved with the über-trained-reserved, optional-focus, and *Field of Dreams* mindset. It’s completely contrary to what we see in Scripture and even throughout the early centuries of the church. Generally speaking, Jesus Himself engages with the people of the cities He visited—and quite often in settings that were less than formal or physically confined. But as specifically seen in the book of Acts, and especially in the life of Paul, the gospel is taken, declared, and lived out where people are on a daily basis. It’s taken to the marketplaces, the schools, the townhalls, or wherever people happened to be gathered for whatever reason. Those are the places where the gospel goes and where discipleship truly begins. Where a faithful disciple-maker goes not only to proclaim the truths of the gospel (*what we call evangelism*) but also to be a living testimony of what the gospel reveals about new life in Christ, so that others might know, believe, and be changed.

#### **4. ENGAGING OTHER PLACES AND PEOPLE**

That is essentially what we’re dealing with when it comes to the “first chair” of discipleship. A “chair” that’s been given the imagery of a park bench. And the reason for this imagery is simple. Benches are public and available for anyone to use—either for taking a break, enjoying a snack or cup of coffee, having a chat with a friend, enjoying the scenery, or even people-watching. But one thing that will be relevant for us as we consider how to engage with others, is that park benches are non-committal. People can sit and leave whenever they like, no strings attached. And it’s that freedom of movement and even non-commitment that, in many ways, illustrates the lives of so many people in our world. They’re either constantly planting themselves down in places, but never in a secure way, or they’re looking for places where they don’t have to plant themselves long-term. An uncertainty and transience that are the polar opposite of what the truth of gospel the provides for life.

Thus, these are the ones who deserve our attention and compassionate response. Now, we might find ourselves asking: “Well, how do we know that the person sitting on the bench is an unbeliever? Isn’t it possible that they are a fellow Christian?” Yes, in real life, that’s certainly a possibility and therefore a good question. But we’re speaking in analogies or with illustrations to help us understand how to do things in real-time. Even so the question remains: how do we know the person is an unbeliever? Because quite frankly: unless they’re wearing a t-shirt that clearly identifies them, unbelievers look like everyone else. So how can we know? What gives them away? Part of the answer is: we identify them by being engaged in conversation, and carefully listening for the kinds of things they say or the kind of logic they use regarding life and its meaning. And to speak broadly, the things said can be divided into two categories.

##### **a. General Claims**

The first has to do with rather generalized claims or concepts. In a few cases, the claims are bold, blanket statements against the church, the idea of faith or belief, or even the existence

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<sup>4</sup> N. Jones, *From Social Media to Social Ministry* (Zondervan, 2020), 85.

of a supreme divine being (*“the old bearded tyrant in the sky,”* as God is sometimes called). In other cases, the claims will be open or flat-out rejections of things that Christians hold dear—e.g., objective truth, Jesus as the only way, morality, church fellowship, or even one’s final destiny. And in some cases, there will be less bravado in the claims and people will (*at least*) accept the notion of a personal spirituality, but nothing more—especially when the “more” involves a commitment. Often expressed with the mantra: *“I’m spiritual but not religious.”*

We also need to keep in mind that, these sorts of claims might not come out immediately in our early conversations with non-believers. Though, don’t rule out that possibility. When I was in high school, I worked as a cook in an Italian restaurant, and the guy who trained me let me know right up front that he was an atheist and had no desire to talk about God. I knew right then and there that I would have to be creative (*and definitely patient*) in how we could talk about God without talking about God. But again, this sort of openness doesn’t happen all the time. In fact, it may take several conversations to hear these general claims of resistance, and it might even take a bit of discernment to catch them. They’re not always directly spoken. In some cases, they’re covered with a veneer of smooth and innocent-sounding views of life.

### ***b. Specific Claims***

The second category deals with the more specific kinds of claims—i.e., they’re not cryptic or hidden in some sort of sub-text. For example: *“All religions are basically the same,”* or *“No religion is better than another,”* or *“All roads eventually lead to God,”* or *“God is whatever we say he/she/it is,”* or *“Science has proven the non-existence of God,”* or the classic one: *“faith and religion are just crutches for the weak.”* (*Notice where the mindset begins: Christianity’s just like every other belief system. Our lives in Christ need to show the difference*). Now, it’s safe to say: if we’re having an early conversation with someone and we hear them say any of these types of claims, we’re not going to wonder, *“Are we talking with a non-believer or a fellow Christian?”* (*Although, sadly, and going on evidence from a recent survey: there are indications that fellow Christians today believe along the same lines as unbelievers. But that’s a different story for a different day*). The point is this: if and when we hear any of this, we need to keep some things in mind.

First: people are often merely parroting what they’ve heard others say. Second, the criticisms are typically believed to have some sort of defeating power—i.e., *“If you want to shut up a Christian, here is what you need to say.”* Third, very few people have taken the time to test the validity of the claims or criticisms. And that leads to the final thing: it’s hardly ever realized that the claims or criticisms are not only ill-founded or carefully misrepresenting the facts, but also are not new. In fact, they’re rather ancient.<sup>5</sup> For example: the 1st/2nd century statesman and governor, Pliny the Younger (61–113 AD) warned Emperor Trajan about Christians. He said they were not only superstitious in their beliefs and weird in their religious practices, but also a danger to the stability of Roman society. Why? Because they believe in one God, live by a different moral code, and will not endorse Rome’s totalitarian control or worship the resident in charge. And the 2nd century philosopher and physician, Galen (130–99 AD) criticized Christians not only for holding faith as superior to reason and science, but also for pursuing a life of morality and justice that does not reflect the culture’s morality and justice—i.e., *“they don’t live and believe like us, therefore they’re bad and need to be ill-treated.”*

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<sup>5</sup> For more examples, see R.L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (Yale University Press, 1984).

### **c. Why It Matters**

Here's what all of that matters. Whenever we engage with the non-believer, and whenever we hear these sorts of criticism (*and others like them*): we need to be sensitive to why and how such things are being used, and to be gracious in our response to the one who uses them. This means: we need to be ready and willing to hear such things and allow them to roll off our backs, so that we can focus on what truly matters: the other person. And when we do that, we can begin to discern the reality that, occasionally, critics of Christianity will sometimes say such things just to see how we react. They're said as a test. And how we react will determine how the rest of the conversation—and ultimately the relationship—will progress. And so if we get our knickers in a twist and lash out because someone says, “**faith and religion are just crutches for the weak,**” or “**Christianity is nothing more than the privileged few trying to instill fear by wielding their self-given power to oppress the many,**” then we will have little chance of not only disproving such claims but also making a case for the truth of the gospel message.

But if we respond kindly and gently push back against the claim or criticism (*and not the person*), and if we get them to examine it honestly and reasonably, we'll have a better chance for having the opportunity to have deeper, more meaningful, and life-changing discussions. The point where we can introduce the truths about God, us as His greatest creation, made in His image, made to be in an unbroken relationship with Him, but because of sin we broke that relationship and turned our backs on Him as our creator and pursued our own desires to be our own gods and lords; as well as the truths that such a life results in eternal separation from God, and that the only way to be truly freed from the prison of sin and its influence over our lives is through His divine intervention—His saving-rescue; the very thing He has definitively done for us in Christ Jesus—the true and only God-incarnate Savior, Lord, and King; and that by believing in Him, repenting of our sinfulness, giving Him our lives, and allowing the Holy Spirit to recreate us so that we are remade into His image; we can have the assurance that the separation has been removed and our reunion with God for eternity is real.

## **5. DISCERNING THE HIDDEN NEEDS**

But until we can have that part of the conversation, we need to make sure we are doing what we can to help the person move past the superficial and get to the heart of the matter. And in doing that, we are able to discern the underlying needs of the individual who might be using critical claims to mask or conceal the true state of their inner-selves. And that means: in our conversations with others, we not only need to hear what they openly say but also need to listen for and be able to speak to the “hidden” needs that might be locked within them. So what are the “hidden” needs? While the specifics will vary from person to person, and those can only be known through conversations, there are at least four rather basic needs that unbelievers have when it comes to engaging with believers.

### **a. True, Patient, and Attentive Relationships**

The first basic need is a want for true, patient, and attentive relationship. Unbelievers need to know that they're not isolated, unapproachable, or unnoticed. While there are moments in our lives when we want to be alone, by ourselves, or just there; that want is not the true desire or hope for the whole of life. But that truth isn't always realized—especially in the moments when life makes us feel, isolated, unapproachable, or unnoticed. In those moments, we would love for someone to see us, come and sit with us, and chat. And if we're aware of how we might appear to others in such moments, and if we've prayerfully and faithfully sought after

God's guidance and ability to discern the needs of individuals, we will be better equipped to notice when people are in such states and need someone to come alongside them. And this applies not just to our interactions with non-believers, but also with fellow-believers.

But to stay on focus: unbelievers need to know that their interactions with believers are more than just a salvation sales-pitch. That's how things used to be done. Find a person on a plane or Metro, strike up a conversation with the usual, brief niceties, and then go for the throat: "So, if you were to die today, would you go to heaven or hell?" And while that used to work, it's no longer the norm. That approach no longer yields meaningful (*lasting*) results. In fact, given the changes in our cultural climate, that approach is essentially a sure-fire way to lose an evangelistic opportunity. There are many reasons—both cultural and theological—why this is the case, and we simply do not have the time to discuss them. But what can be said is that, because of this situation, we need to reconsider our evangelistic approach. Not the content of the gospel, but how we go about discussing it. Or to quote from pastor-theologian, Graham Tomlin, "in a changing cultural setting, we need to start in a different place if we are to proclaim and demonstrate the gospel."<sup>6</sup>

And that different place is a purposeful and intentional engagement with unbelievers on a relational level. They need to know that the believer is truly interested in who they are, their background, their struggles, their passions, and who will stick it out with them no matter what. They also need to know it's okay for things to get a little messy from time to time, and that we won't freak out when they do. To be fair: that kind of interaction often requires a level of time commitment that's not often associated with evangelism. But that kind of commitment is not only rewarding (*for both people*) but also necessary.

### ***b. Authentic and Unafraid Conversations***

That leads us to the second need: we need to be ready to have authentic and unafraid conversations. I say this because unbelievers—especially in today's cultural, and even with the younger generation—are more drawn to authenticity than a beautiful yet superficial facade (*or slick salesmanship*). To be fair: this doesn't mean that the superficially beautiful in daily life and experience don't contribute to why and when people do certain things. Instead, it's stressing the reality that if the superficially beautiful is nothing but a means to an end, and if the end is uglier than (*or inconsistent with*) what's promised; the whole thing is often rejected, and people move on to other things. Things that are authentic and true-to-their-word.

Now, apply this to evangelism: unbelievers can often see right through a salvation sales-pitch. They can easily spot mere outward displays of piety—the kinds of things that even Jesus rejects (cf. Mt 6.1–7). And they can usually tell when generosity or random acts of kindness are being forced or when they're being done for less than genuine reasons. So, when it comes to engaging with other people—especially non-believers—they need to know and see that the one making a case for Christianity, and thus trying to show them that it's true and that it brings a life that's radically different from what the world offers, is not only gracious (*especially in the face of rejection*) but also a model of one trying to carrying out the Christian life they are proclaiming in an authentic way. And at the same time: unbelievers want (*and deserve*) honesty when we Christians have slip-ups or failures when they happen. Claiming

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<sup>6</sup> G. Tomlin, *The Provocative Church* (SPCK, 2008), 57.

perfection for ourselves but then proving imperfection in what we do only leads to imperfect perceptions of the One who is perfect and proves Himself to be perfect in all things.

### **c. Responses and Clarity**

The third need is seeking responses and clarity. Unbelievers—either due to preconceptions or observations from their park bench perspective—will have a lot of questions about life, faith, religion, and even Christianity. And more times than not, one of two things wind up being the case—if not both. First, the questions are prompted by honest curiosity. Meaning: they're not asking to be a nuisance or to bait us into a trap. They truly want to know, and we need to be ready to respond accordingly. At the same time, we need to show them that we are unafraid of criticism or accusations—whether from them or elsewhere—and that we truly welcome the exchange of ideas, as long as those ideas are allowed to be tested.

And that brings us to the second thing: the questions tend to come from cultural perceptions about Christianity. Unless we've been under a rock for generations, we know that modern culture tends to give Christianity a bad name, and this often causes people to resist accepting the Christian message. Or to borrow from pastor, Jim Putnam: **“many people reject Jesus because of what they think Jesus said rather than because of what he actually said.”**<sup>7</sup> And it might be easy for us (*especially those of who like to embrace our inner-cynic*) to think: **“This tendency is always the case, and people have no desire to change their perceptions.”** But strangely enough, there are many unbelievers who want to know if there is any truth to such perceptions, or how Christians will respond to such things. Whatever the case, these kinds of questions need answers. They cannot be dismissed or belittled. And if we are not in a place to answer them, we need to be ready either to find out (*i.e., educate ourselves*) or be willing to say so and offer suggestions for where to find clarity.

### **d. Living Example of a Lived Testimony**

The final need is admittedly a challenging one for believers, but it's necessary for unbelievers. And that is: the need for a living example of a lived testimony. They need to see a lived talk, because a lived talk is far more persuasive than just talk—especially talk that has no real desire to walk. We see something like this in the ministry of Jesus, When He called His first disciples, He simply found them, called them, and said, **“Come and follow Me.”** And just so that we're clear: this following was not once a week, for a couple of hours only on synagogue-days. Instead, their following was a daily presence with Jesus. And in that daily following, they saw and heard about the gospel of God's kingdom breaking into the world, bringing about salvation, which resulted in true and lasting change in their lives.

And because they were constantly with a living example of a lived testimony, the disciples quickly realized that such a message, such an in-breaking, and such a transformative act of God was not to be limited to a select few (*i.e., disciples*). Instead, it's something that needs to be and must be offered to the whole world (*i.e., those who do not yet believe and are not disciples*). Especially since this divine offer is superior to everything else the world offers as the way to obtain a good, happy life and maybe even become divine ourselves. Moreover, when compared to what God provides, all of those other offers amount to nothing more than talk. Empty words and unfulfilled promises. But the offer of God is one where the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Infinitely deep words and eternally fulfilled promises. And

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<sup>7</sup> J. Putnam, *Real-Life Discipleship* (NavPress, 2010), 82.



so, as reflections of this new life given by God in Christ, we must approach the unbeliever with the attitude of: **“Come and see what this Christianity thing is all about.”** We’re essentially inviting them to experience what life looks like when it’s shaped by God’s ways in Christ.

As a result, we are admittedly opening ourselves up to being watched and scrutinized by the world. Jesus said as much when He told the disciples: **“Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and say all kinds of evil things about you falsely on account of Me”** (Mt 5.11), or (*slightly paraphrased*): **“The world’s going to hate you because it hates Me and because you belong to Me, not the world”** (cf. Jn 15.18–19). But the strongest testimonies against this treatment is a life that does not fear scrutiny and does not waiver or crumble under the weight of worldly criticism or ridicule. To borrow from the early church father, Tertullian: the faithfulness of the believer, especially in the face of certain death, is a seed that enables the church to grow—even in the lives of unbelievers.<sup>8</sup> However, it must be said here: in this invitation and in this investigation, we are not calling unbelievers to ourselves and to become like us. We are calling them to Christ and to be remade by Him so as to become like Him. The only One who provides salvation, forgiveness, renewal, holiness, and eternal life.

## 5. PREPARING TO SIT

That brings us to the final detail: how do we, as Christ’s representatives prepare ourselves to sit with unbelievers on the bench? How do we start meaningful and authentic relationships with them? And how do we ensure that, in those relationships, we are living testimonies of the saving work of God, and thus prompt honest curiosity? Let me give you three rather broad tips on how to approach the unbeliever on the bench. How you fill out the details is not only up to you and God, but also based on the person with whom you are talking.

### a. Prayerfully

First and foremost: we must approach the task of evangelism prayerfully. We need to make sure we are doing God’s work for God’s glory. It cannot be about seeing how many people we can evangelize. And so we pray before we engage in evangelism because we desire to make sure our motives are pure and all that we do will bring honor to God’s name alone. Moreover, we need prayer because we might not know how to discern an unbeliever sitting on the bench, or how to go about engaging them. Or it might be that some of us have friends or acquaintances that are non-believers, but we don’t know how to approach or when. In these moments, prayer is a tremendous help. We must go to God and ask Him to lead us to the right people and at the right times. But it must be said that we need to be ready or even surprised by those God might send out way. It can happen, and discernment will reveal it.

One final thought on the need for prayer. As we seek God’s guidance and leading on where we need to go and to whom we should engage, we need to pray for God’s work in preparing that individual’s mind and heart to wrestle with the truths of the gospel. It’s a way of saying: **“Lord, I know that salvation is ultimately guaranteed by you and you alone, and I know that you have given me the responsibility of proclaiming that hope; so, I ask You to go before me**

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<sup>8</sup> Specifically, Tertullian says: “Torture us, rack us, condemn us, crush us; your cruelty only proves our innocence. That is why God suffers us to suffer all this. Yes, but lately, when you condemned a Christian girl to the pander rather than the panther, you admitted that we count an injury to our chastity more awful than any penalty, than any death. But nothing whatever is accomplished by your cruelties, each more exquisite than the last. It is the bait that wins men for our school. We multiply whenever we are mown down by you; the blood of Christians is seed. Many among you preach the endurance of pain and of death—such as Cicero in his *Tusculans*, Seneca in his *Fortuita*, Diogenes, Pyrrho, Callinicus. And yet their words never find so many disciples as the Christians win, who teach by deeds.” (*Apology* 50.12–14).

and be with me as I carry out Your calling upon my life.” I encourage you to take some time this week and pray something like that, as you think about those in your daily life who need to hear and see the life-changing message of the gospel.

### ***b. Patiently***

Second, and as it’s been stressed several times already, we must learn to approach the evangelistic task patiently. This means we have to realize (*and be okay with the fact*) that conversations with unbelievers might take longer than an airplane or Metro ride. Part of this is because, as we’ve mentioned, unbelievers are savvy to the traditional approach of a salvation sales pitch, and they typically do not want anything to do with that. Thus, to be effective, beneficial, and worthwhile, we need to be willing to enter the conversation and be ready for the long haul—if that’s what it takes.

Another key part of this need for patience is because: there is going to be some shock to the system as truths come out and misconceptions exposed for what they are. As we mentioned earlier, there are going to be loads of criticisms and accusations and even insults hurled at Christianity and the church, and many of these things are going to be based on either parroted ideas or simple untruths. And as we talk with the unbeliever, and lovingly reveal the flaws in such ideas, not everyone we meet is going to say, “Ah well, that makes perfect sense. Where can I sign up for this Jesus thing?” Most will either fight back or need time to process. And we must extend them the courtesy of being patient with them as they do so.

### ***c. Prepared***

Finally, and building on the patience bit: we realize that, before we engage in the task of evangelism, we need to be prepared. And there are two sides to this. First: we need to be grounded in our own faith. Do we know the reality of our own salvation, and does that reality help shape who we are, what we do, and how we live the new life in Christ? Do we know where we are in our faith journeys? Are we new in the walk with God, and need to move on to the next steps? To get off the easy milk and dive into the challenging meat. Or are we farther along that path, but still realizing there is more to discover. Or are we somewhere in between? Whatever the case may be, are we secure in the knowledge that we belong to God and not even the powers of evil and death will triumph over us?

The second side to being prepared is: we need to know the Bible well enough not only to navigate our way through the overall message but also to defend it against false claims. We now live in a culture where Bible-literacy is quite low in the church and where those who are skeptical of or even in opposition to Christianity know the general contents of the Bible better than most nominal believers. That might sound harsh, but it’s sadly true. Thus, skeptics, critics, and even those from other religions (*including the small handful who claim to be Christian*) are able to go after “young believers” and spout off a bunch of passages or proof-texts that seem to contradict the dearly held beliefs of those “young believers.” The net result is that opponents feel vindicated in their perception of Christianity, and the “young believer” is left wondering if his or her faith is even worth keeping. This echoes the expressed truth: “If you can’t give a ‘why’ to your faith, you won’t be able to give a ‘why not’ to your doubts.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Instagram post from “Stand to Reason” (20-Sep-2022).

Only a faith established on the firm foundation of God's revealed word (*both written and incarnate*) will be able stand resolute in the face of opposition or threats to subvert the truth of Christianity. Jesus, Paul, Peter, and even Jude gave this heads-up, and its relevance has not lost value or necessity since it was declared. All four of these guys call upon true disciples to be sufficiently equipped with God's truth; not just for defense, but also for showing others how they too can begin to have a life built on the solid and unshakeable foundation that is Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. And when I say "sufficiently equipped," I'm not suggesting all Christians need to get a PhD in theology or biblical studies (*even though all the cool kids have one....and typically crippling debt to go with it*). What I am saying is that we have an expected responsibility to become educated in the basic tenets of our faith and doctrine, and have a decent grasp on how to present such things to those who might (*and will*) question us.

*[segue to close]*