



from the desk of . . .
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Sharing The Gospel - 2

LET'S TALK

John 3:1-18

I really look forward going to the (X) Starbucks out in Bartlett. Over the years I've probably gone in 5,280 times, (maybe that's a slight exaggeration), & I've always, every single time, no matter how busy they are, been greeted cheerfully & made to feel important.

Even though they must be prepared to make over 87,000 drink combinations, (isn't that amazing?), they always take time to pleasantly converse with me.

Jesus wants His followers to be like Starbucks employees. Jesus wants His followers to be brimming over with excitement, & eager to talk about something infinitely more important than coffee/chai.

He wants us to open our mouths, & point people in the direction of a relationship with God. (X)
He wants us to be ready tell people about Him. (1 Peter 3:15)

We're in week 2 of a 3-part series called, "Sharing The Gospel." We're talking about:
open doors, & open mouths, & open hearts.

Last week we looked at what it means to have an open door ... an opportunity to have a God conversation. And we discovered ways to create those opportunities in our daily lives.

This morning we're going to talk about open mouths ... how to become bolder & more articulate so as to take full advantage of the open doors.

And our role model again is going to be Jesus.

When we talked about open doors we looked at Jesus' encounter with a man named Zacchaeus.

Today, as we talk about open mouths, we're going to focus on His conversation with Nicodemus.

Now let me give you some background before we go to our Scripture lesson. Nicodemus was a Pharisee.

Pharisees were one of 3 ruling religious groups. The Pharisees were known for their expertise in the Scriptures. They were diligent students of God's Word.

Now Nicodemus arranges to meet Jesus one evening.

He comes under the cover of darkness.

Most Bible scholars feel that he did this in order to protect his reputation. He didn't want anybody to see him. Nicodemus was supposed to be a guy with spiritual answers ... not a guy with spiritual questions.

We need to keep that in mind as we look at our friends & family members.

Because it's so easy to assume that if people go to Church, or were Baptized, or are religious in their orientation ... that they're not spiritually lost.

But the fact of the matter is ... they may be a "Nicodemus" in our life. They may be "religious" people who need us to "open our mouth" & explain how a person begins a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

So, listen now to *Good News*, as recorded by John, to you who have come this morning to worship. Within your hearing comes the Word of the Lord ...

(video ... #4 begin at 20:00 & end at 22:50)

There was a Jewish leader named Nicodemus, who belonged to the party of the Pharisees. One night he went to Jesus and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent by God. No one could perform the miracles you are doing unless God were with him."

Jesus answered, "I am telling you the truth: no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again."

"How can a grown man be born again?" Nicodemus asked. "He certainly cannot enter his mother's womb and be born a second time!"

"I am telling you the truth," replied Jesus, "that no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. A person is born physically of human parents, but is born spiritually of the Spirit.

Do not be surprised because I tell you that you must all be born again. The wind blows wherever it wishes; you hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. It is like that with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

"How can this be?" asked Nicodemus.

Jesus answered, "You are a great teacher in Israel, and you don't know this? I am telling you the truth: we speak of what we know and report what we have seen, yet none of you is willing to accept our message. You do not believe me when I tell you about the things of this world; how will you ever believe me, then, when I tell you about the things of heaven? And no one has ever gone up to heaven except the Son of Man, who came down from heaven."

As Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the desert, in the same way the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its savior.

Those who believe in the Son are not judged; but those who do not believe have already been judged, because they have not believed in God's only Son. (John 3:1-18)

May the Lord grant that we may engage in contemplating the mysteries of His Heavenly wisdom with really increasing devotion, to His glory and to our edification. Amen

I want to show you 4 aspects of what it means to have an open mouth like Jesus. Here's the 1st one ... **jump right in**. Isn't that what Jesus does here?

One summer, a long time ago, I worked as a lifeguard, & it was interesting watching people get into the water. There are 3 different ways to do it.

Some people would walk up to the edge of the pool, stick their toe in ... & decide the water was too cold. Others would get in the water ... but very, very gradually. Still others would ... jump right in.

Now the reason I mention that is because that's how we approach conversations about God. Some of us never get in the "water". We take a pass. We sit it out. Others of us approach a God conversation so gradually we almost never get "wet."

So, I want us all to see this morning, from the example of Jesus ... we need to jump right in.

Look how Nicodemus opens the conversation with flattery. He begins by calling Jesus, "Rabbi," which was a title of respect. (In fact, that was Nicodemus' title. He was a rabbi ... so he's treating Jesus as a colleague.)

And then he acknowledges that Jesus must have come from God; that God must be behind His ministry.

Finally, he compliments Jesus on His miracles.

In light of all that flattery it's interesting what the 1st words out of Jesus' mouth are. "Thanks, Nick, it's nice of you to say all that wonderful stuff about me."

No ... Jesus doesn't even acknowledge the flattery. He cuts right to the chase. "I am telling you the truth: no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again." That's jumping right in ... that's a cannonball!

Now here's what we can learn from that.

- Don't allow people's flattery tempt you to go quiet about God.

The more we listen to people say nice things about us, the less inclined we are to take the risk of their disapproval by bringing God into the conversation.

So, when you hear praise, redirect it to the One who truly deserves the credit. (James 1:17) Make it an introduction to a God conversation. When your neighbor compliments you about something, respond ... "thank you. You know, just this morning I was praying about _____, so, if it was a blessing to you ... credit goes to God."

Do you see how that works?

Don't let flattery make you quiet about God.

- Use a good opening line to launch a spiritual conversation.

Here's Jesus' opening line ... "No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again." ... How do I know that's a good opening line? ... Because it generates conversation. Listen to Nicodemus' response.

"How can a grown man be born again? He certainly cannot enter his mother's womb & be born a 2nd time!"
And the conversation is off & running.

Now Jesus wasn't using the expression, "born again," in a literal sense. He was using it figuratively.

And Bible scholars tell us that the reason that Nicodemus chose to misinterpret it as something taking place physically ...

"I'm an old guy; how can I get back in my mother's womb"
... is because he didn't like what Jesus was hinting at.

Jesus was telling Nicodemus that he'd have to go back to square "1" spiritually ... & start all over again. All the religious brownie points that he had accumulated were worth nothing in terms of his getting into Heaven.

So, having a good opening line will enable us to begin spiritual conversations. And Jesus was a master at this.

Walking along the shore of Lake Galilee, (X) He notices some men fishing & He says to them, "Come with me, & I will teach you to catch people." (Matthew 4:19)

That's an intriguing thought for a group of fishermen.

He's sitting alongside a well, (X) & He gets a cup of water from a lady. Jesus looks at her & says ...

"If you only knew who I am you'd ask for some living water, & then you'd never thirst again." (John 4:10,14)

And the conversation takes off.

Now we're never going to be as good as Jesus was with these opening lines ... but we can move in that direction. I had 2 conversations in less than an hour on Tuesday morning at the Rec Center. I was in the locker room & a guy asked me what was on my agenda for the day. I said, "I'm on my way to help a shut-in with some things she needs done." He looked at me ... "You're going to Heaven!" ... My response ... "Yeah, I know.

Jesus loves me & He's made that possible."

10 minutes later, I'm going to my car. A fellow's walking toward me. I say, "wow, what a beautiful day!" He responds, "any day on this side of the grass is beautiful." To which I say ... "& do you know what?"

It's going to be more beautiful
on the other side of the grass!"

Both of those innocent comments gave me the opportunity to begin God-conversations.

So, use a good launching line to get into a conversation about spiritual things.

A 2nd thing we learn from Jesus ...
Trust The Holy Spirit.

Jesus jumped right in with an opening line about being born again. He then tells Nicodemus that being born again is the equivalent of "being born of water & the Spirit." Okay, what does that mean?

The 2nd part is easy. The Spirit is God's Spirit. The way to spiritual rebirth is through something that God does in our life. (X) It's not something we can do to ourselves. It's just like physical birth.

You were there when you were physically born ... but ...
I guarantee you did nothing to help.

In fact, you may have been downright stubborn on the way out. And the same is true with our spiritual rebirth. It has nothing to do with us ... it's God's Spirit.

Okay, what about the 1st $\frac{1}{2}$ of the statement ...
the water part?

Bible scholars tell us that this is a reference to our physical birth. The fluid we "swim" in prior to being born. (And some of you Moms probably have stories about when your water broke.) So, we have to be **physically** born, & we have to be **spiritually** reborn.

If we've been "born again" it's because The Holy Spirit has been active in our life. (1 Corinthians 12:3) It's The Holy Spirit's job to convince us that we need a Savior.

If He didn't do that we'd be so prideful
we'd never admit our need for Christ.

Why am I talking about The Holy Spirit in a message
about opening our mouth & sharing the Good News?

We can be confident as we share Christ with others
because we know that behind our meager & faltering
efforts God's Spirit is at work. That's His job. Keep
that in mind when you're hesitant to open your mouth &
take a conversation in a spiritual direction because you're
fearful that you might say the wrong thing.

We don't have to worry about saying something
incorrectly or offensive. (That's the Evil One putting
those thoughts in our minds.) For Heaven's sakes, look at
all the "offensive" things that Jesus said to Nicodemus ...

- "You're a religious leader & you don't understand
this."
- "You haven't understood me when I've talked to you
about earthly things, how do you expect to get it
when I tell you about Heavenly things?"

I wonder how Nicodemus responded to all this? ...
John doesn't tell us how the conversation ended up; was
there was any heart change in him? ... Yes, there was!

Twice later, John tells us that Nicodemus had
become an advocate for Jesus. (John 7:50;19:39) He'd become
a follower. So, The Holy Spirit obviously did His work.

So, don't worry about saying the wrong thing;
 don't worry that you won't know the right thing to say.
 In fact, Jesus encourages us in this.

(X) "Do not worry about what you are going to say or how you will say it; when the time comes, you will be given what you will say. For the words you will speak will not be yours; they will come from the Spirit of your Father speaking through you." (Matthew 10:19-20)

So, trust The Holy Spirit in these conversations.

#3 ... talk about **Jesus & the cross**.

This needs to be the end goal of any spiritual conversation we have with people. We may not get there every time, but this is the destination that we're traveling toward. This is what spiritually lost people need to understand in order to connect with God.

And let me say that it's not enough just to mention prayer in a conversation, or Church, or angels, or even God. Those are all good openers. And we may have many conversations along those lines before we get to Jesus & the cross. But that's the goal we must strive for.

"No one has ever gone up to heaven except the Son of Man, who came down from heaven.' (X) As Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the desert, in the same way the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

(X) "Son of Man" is Jesus' favorite designation of Himself. Some suggest that this is a reference to His humanity. "Hey, I'm just one of the guys."

But that's not what Jesus is indicating.

"Son of Man" was a prophetic title that the O.T. prophet, Daniel, used when speaking about the coming Messiah.

(Daniel 7:13-14)

And then Jesus arrives on the scene 100's of years later & refers to Himself as the "Son of Man." And just in case we don't get it, Jesus says "the Son of Man, who came down from heaven." Here's another reference to His deity. We need to underscore that because there are people out there who think Jesus was simply a wonderful moral teacher ... but that's it.

Jesus is not just some "go-to" guy we turn to when we're in trouble; or worse yet, one of several ways to God. We need to help people understand that Jesus is the ultimate Ruler of the universe, before who every knee will bow one day, (Philippians 2:10-11); because if they don't recognize that, they won't understand why refusing Jesus results in such dire consequences.

Now in addition to staking out His identity, Jesus also talks about His cross. He refers to a story from the O.T., & if you're not familiar with it, then you're probably wondering, "What's He talking about?" ...

The story comes from the 21st chapter of Numbers.

God is punishing His people for a very serious offense ... complaining. God's people are grumbling against Him, & the Lord doesn't take that lightly.

And finally, when He's had enough, He sends a plague of snakes into their camp & people are being bitten & are dying. So, they go to Moses & say ...

"Tell God we're sorry. Ask Him to take the snakes away."

So, Moses prays, & God tells him to make a bronze snake & put it up on a pole where everybody can see it.

(X) And as the people look at the snake, in faith ...
they will be healed. (Numbers 21:9)

Jesus says, in the same way the Son of Man, speaking of Himself, will be lifted up. He's talking about the cross ... & all who look to Him in faith, all who put their trust in Him, can be "healed" of their sins, forgiven.

They don't need to die eternally. They can live forever.

Now, this is where we need to ultimately bring our conversations about God. We need to be telling people to look to Jesus. He's the only One who can forgive our sins ... & Jesus did that by dying on the cross. (1 Peter 2:24)

Let me give you a couple of helpful tips to use if you do to get the conversation around to Jesus.

Tip #1 ... use verses from Scripture as often as possible. Our words aren't powerful enough to take people across the line ... only God's Word is.

For those of you who are thinking ...

"I don't know *God's Word* well enough to do this."

(X) Out on the information table is a little pamphlet with 4 steps to a relationship with *God*.

It has diagrams & helpful *Scripture* passages.

I carry this when I go visiting. I keep one in the glove compartment of our car. I have it close because I never know when a spiritual conversation is going to get around to *Jesus & the cross*. So, I say ... "Hey, rather than me trying to explain this, here's a little pamphlet that sums up what the *Bible* says about *Jesus*. May I share it with you?" And we go through a page at a time.

I'm a Pastor, & I know plenty of *Scripture* verses, but I've still found this to be a tremendously helpful tool.

The 2nd tip is this. When you talk about *Jesus & the cross*, talk about it in terms of what it means to you, use the 1st person pronoun.

"I came to the place in my life where I recognized that I do things that *God* just shakes His head over, & it kept me at arm's length from Him. And one day I realized that *Jesus* died on the cross to pay the penalty for my sin. And if I put my trust in Him I could be forgiven & live eternally. And so that's what I did."

Tell your story in 1st person pronoun terms.

That takes all the preachiness out of it.

Now at the end you'll still want to turn to your friend & ask ... "Have you ever done this yourself?"

Which brings us to the 4th & final point of what we can learn from Jesus ... **spell out the consequences.**

Listen to the closing verses again;

I think they're fairly self-explanatory.

It begins with the most familiar verse in all of Scripture. (X) "For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. (But we mustn't stop there.) For God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its savior.

Those who believe in the Son are not judged; (so far Good News, but now we turn the corner), but those who do not believe have already been judged, because they have not believed in God's only Son."

If we really care about people, then we'll be honest with them about the consequences with what they do with Jesus Christ.

Let's start with the negative consequences.

Those who do not believe are condemned ... because they refuse God's Savior. (Luke 12:8-9)

Now when we share the Good News about Jesus with people, there's a chance that they'll respond ...

"You know, I'm just not interested in religion."

Or, "I'm really happy that you found something that works for you, but I'm not into that."

Or, "I'm a Muslim, I'm a Buddhist, I'm a _____."

So, end of conversation. ... Well, not quite. With all the kindness that you can muster, with all the love that God puts in your heart ... you need to say one more thing.

"I really hope that someday you'll change your approach to Jesus. Because Jesus Himself said, (we can hide behind Jesus here, this isn't something we've made up), those who reject Him stand condemned before God. (John 12:48) Because ultimately, when we stand before God, somebody has got to pay for our sin. And it's either going to be Jesus ... because we've put our hope & trust in Him as the Savior who paid the debt we owe ... or it's going to be you. And I don't want it to be you."

Now the flipside to that is that it's wonderful to be able to proclaim the Good News. "If you put your faith & trust in Christ, if you surrender your life to Him, then you can experience forgiveness & eternal life."

This is such incredibly Good News! And I honestly hope you've done this with someone ... because it's an awesome experience, & it starts by opening our mouth, jumping right in, & starting a conversation about God.

Please, this week, as you move through your life, look for opportunities to do that ... & see where God takes you.

MARANA THA