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Sermon

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***Conversations that Connect:
One heart to love with***

Luke 19:1-10

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Revision:

We are up to our third week in a four part mini-series – “Conversations that Connect.” We are learning a conversational approach to evangelism where we ask questions. We have seen this approach:

- creates space for you to listen to others before you speak;
- creates space for you to listen to God before you speak;
- potentially opens an ongoing conversation;
- returns the onus of proof to others, if they have criticised;
- it is non-threatening ;
- and can cause them to re-evaluate their beliefs.

Our first message was “Two ears to listen with” - Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan Woman in John 4, the point being that a meaningful conversation likely begins with us asking a few questions and listening well. Do you remember the idea that a ‘sour note’ in what they say is a potential door for meaningful conversation?

Our second message, last week, was “One spirit to listen with” - Jesus’ brief conversation with Nathanael in John 1, then discussed how we could create an opportunity from that ‘sour note’ through asking questions that help them evaluate their beliefs and consider other ways of seeing things. The three key questions we looked at were...

What do you mean by...?

This seeks to clarify WHAT they believe

What led you to that conclusion?

This seeks to clarify WHY they believe that

Have you considered that...?

This invites them to consider your perspective.

Jesus and Zacchaeus the tax collector.

Now, today –we’re going to look at the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus. This story reminded me of a verse found in Colossians 4:5.

“Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”

Here is Jesus, the most holy man who has ever lived and here is Zacchaeus, a Jew who has compromised everything by partnering with the Romans, collecting taxes for them from the Jews, profiteering along the way. Yet Jesus successfully struck up an open-hearted, two-way conversation with him!

1. Learn to make the opportunity

Jesus could have just walked past Zacchaeus, but didn't. It is only because Jesus interrupted the flow of his day to initiate a conversation with this outcast of a man, that Zacchaeus' life was changed. Many witnessing opportunities will only come about because we have first chosen to slow down to give people time.

2. Try to listen to the Holy Spirit's whispers

It would seem Jesus was prompted by the Holy Spirit to talk with Zacchaeus, and invite Himself to his house. If we want to be effective as witnesses for Jesus, our greatest effectiveness will come from our ability to walk with the Spirit, listening to His promptings, leadings and revelations.

3. Learn to love the unlovable

Zacchaeus was a social reject in his time. Jesus' actions were considered a compromise by the religious leaders. There are people all around us who need love –the lonely, the grieving, the hurt, the disadvantaged, young people and older people, those who are physically or mentally disadvantaged, or emotionally troubled ... they need your smile, your time to say hello, your ear, your touch, your love. Some people are not pleasant to be around (loud, smelly, talk too much, abrasive) but love looks past all this.

When we lived in London, a minister who worked with street people, told us that the worst thing for beggars is to be ignored. It is more important to speak to them than to give money. I tried to take that to heart and make a point of greeting them. One day heading home, I came across an old woman on the steps of the tube station. She had a bottle of beer next to her and looked pretty dirty. I stopped, said hello and then asked if she was alright. It was not a casual question – I wanted to know if she needed food or help. She looked at me slowly then smiled and said, "I'm alright, dear, and how are you?" Her expression held the same concern for me, as I had felt for her. A simple exchange but deeply moving.

Jesus was criticized: "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner' "(v7) ...and we are called to follow Jesus' example.

We are not told any detail of the conversation that followed at Zacchaeus' house, but the end result of Jesus' love, acceptance, encouragement, and their conversation was significant: Zacchaeus –a sinner of sinners to the Jews - REPENTED of his sin. He gave half of his possessions to the poor and promised to return four times anything he had cheated anybody out of.

Jesus didn't come across as one who judged people – yet he had uncompromising beliefs and standards. If we can learn to love and relate to people like Jesus did, we'd find opportunities are not so hard to come by. There are skills we can learn that help.

We have a heart with which to love, to uncover the deeper reasons and open the way for Jesus. We're now going to look at this third type of evangelistic conversation – 'uncovering conversations.'

Uncovering Conversations

People resist Jesus for different reasons. Some reasons are intellectual, some are emotional, and some are spiritual –and it is important that we learn to discern the difference in our conversations. For example: at the end of the video we watched last week an example was given of a lady who said she didn't believe in a God.

Intellectually, it looked as if she were an atheist –and we could therefore try to engage a conversation along those lines: "Have you considered the incredible complexity of life? Do you really think it logical to say that such complex things came about as accidents?"

However, when the question was asked ‘Where did you get that idea from?’, the reply was ‘How can there be a good God when there is so much suffering.’ Sometimes the hindrances are emotional. If we were to address only the intellectual question, we’d have missed the point.

Love can help us find the words to say:

Sometimes we feel scared we won’t know what to say. Be encouraged that love not only helps us overcome this fear, it gives us words to say. When our conversations are flowing from love, words often come naturally – and it gets easier with practice.

Clever answers are not always the best ones:

Clever answers too easily put down the hearer. If the objection is because of hurt, an intellectual answer will not satisfy the pain. If they have adopted a position of disinterested observation it is difficult to argue them into belief, however love may break through the hard shell.

Love can give us words to say. When love is our motive – we are in synch with God because that is his essential nature. We do what *we can do* by showing interest and therefore love. We also pray for help and our prayers will engage his Holy Spirit to do what only *he can do*.

What was the end result of Jesus’ love shown to Zacchaeus?

Jesus gave Zacchaeus time, and didn’t judge him. At the conclusion Jesus confirmed that salvation had come to Zacchaeus’ house, and then stated His own purpose – “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

Our sincere efforts to share the gospel will only be effective in as much as we also sincerely learn to live out of love.

Let’s consider some examples of emotionally loaded statements/questions

Example 1: ‘I don’t want to be a Christian because the Church is full of hypocrites’

There are a lot of people who have been turned off Christianity by the bad example of someone who claimed to follow Jesus. What is the sour note and truth to consider?

- The merits of a product are not determined by the merits of the product’s representative so while taking offense may be understandable, it is not logical to be angry at God for a human’s bad behaviour.(be angry at the human!)
- Christianity is the greatest cause of good on earth, and also has the clearest and highest standard of moral teaching in the world – so attacking it is rather unfair.

Starting questions (in the manner we’ve discussed in the previous messages):

1. What do you mean “hypocrite”?

2. Isn’t it true that none of us live up to our ideals?

- Have you never done anything contrary to your belief?
- We’ve all fallen short of our own expectations of ourselves, haven’t we? We’re all guilty of being hypocrites in some way, if we’re honest.

However, let’s imagine their feelings on this are strong at this point. What is needed now is a question that sees to uncover the deeper issues:

3. ‘Why is this so important to you?’ (a variant of “What led you to that conclusion?”)

- ‘You seem to feel strongly on this –why is that?’
- I’m sorry to hear that -what happened? (at which point they may share their story, maybe having been wronged by a Christian earlier in life).

4. Only then (having shown empathy first) might we return to their stated question with approaches like:

- I’m so sorry that happened. To be fair, can you see how God could be separate to that?

- I'm so sorry that happened. I can assure you from what the Bible says that they will be called to account for that by God. But the important question is where you or I stand before God. I mean, we've all done things wrong. Who is without fault?

Example 2: How can a loving God send people to hell?

Some note and truth to consider:

1. It's an issue of God's goodness and justice, not His love.
2. God loves us, and wants us all in heaven, so much that He gave His own Son!
3. If they don't believe in hell the real topic to discuss is whether they believe the Bible –or even in God.

Possible questions if we sensed there was some emotion in their question:

1. Why do you ask that? (Instead of a what or where question, ask a why question)

[Remember: The conversation expanders of what, where, when, why and how. Make them your best friends!]

-This is an uncovering question. It could be that a loved one just passed away, and they are concerned. We'd want to be sensitive to that. Asking the question helps us be aware.

To answer the original question we could ask...

2. If you were God, would you let everyone into heaven? Rapists included?
3. If not, where do you draw the line? What is the standard...?

-Through these two questions we've clarified already that it's not a love issue but a justice issue. They are now already seeing God less as the 'bad guy'

I think a good response regarding any person who has passed away is to say that 'I can't tell you where any person has gone –only God knows that.'

Occasionally you will meet someone who doesn't want to become a Christian because they want to go to the same place they believe their late husband or wife went to –or their friends who have passed on. A good question, in such circumstances, is to ask them, if they had passed away, wherever they were, would they want their loved ones to think about God so as to secure the best eternal outcome?

In summary

Sometimes people are resistant for emotional or spiritual reasons, for the conversation to continue meaningfully, uncovering questions are needed:

- Why do you ask that?
- You seem to feel strongly on this, why?
- Why do you say that? Do you really believe that or did you say that because you want to close this conversation?

Whatever the scenario, we seek to understand what they are really saying –which sometimes is exactly what their words say –and sometimes is the opposite. E.g. How are you? Fine! (Yet they just had the worst day of their life).

Jesus reached out to Zacchaeus:

- He had an EAR to the spirit;
- He had a MIND that had grown in understanding;
- He had a HEART that loved.

He showed love to a social outcast. They engaged in a conversation and Zacchaeus was completely changed as a result!

Challenge:

Will you step out of your comfort zone to reach out in conversation this week?

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