

READY AND AVAILABLE

1 Peter 3:15, 16; Philippians 2:12-16; 2 Timothy 4:1-5; Romans 10:8-15

Wangaratta, 22/6/14

The phone rang a week or so ago, and there was that telltale delay when I answered it. Another telemarketer on the line!

Now I don't know about you, but I have something of a sliding scale of different responses to telemarketers, depending on who they are and what they want from me. I can be a little short with the man from "Telstra" who's found a serious fault in my computer which will "terminate" everything in two hours – if I don't co-operate and allow him to fix it! I do the terminating!

Not far down the scale is the person selling funeral insurance (or wanting to set me up with a "consultant"); closely followed by electricity suppliers and those pushing solar energy. (Do these people ring you up, too?)

This call was a little different. This lady wanted to know if I suffered at all from arthritis, joint pain or back problems. She had something called "cycloid therapy" which just may be the answer to all my aches and pains. I must have been in a good mood that day, because when she asked me my age, I told her! And then she asked my occupation. I guess that's relevant to the kind of problems her revolutionary new treatment could cure. (Do I sound like a skeptic?)

I told her I was a pastor, and she replied that she was a Christian, too. She then proceeded to tell me about the terrible time her church in Queensland was going through. They'd recently appointed a new worship pastor, and the church had split over changes he was pushing through. Her son was involved as a youth leader and was just hanging in there for the sake of the teenagers, but wasn't feeling supported, or fed spiritually. Should he stay; or leave, like so many others? For the next fifteen minutes I listened and tried to encourage and empathise as she poured out her heart. She thanked me profusely at the end of our conversation, and we agreed that cycloid therapy probably wasn't for me!

It wasn't exactly evangelism! This lady was already a Christian. It was an opportunity to support a fellow believer I was "that close" to missing if I'd followed my instincts when I first picked up the phone. (Maybe I should try that with the man from "Telstra"!)

I wonder how many other opportunities, of all different kinds, I've missed because I'm busy, preoccupied, or not prepared at the time.

I have to confess to not being very good at spotting an opportunity, or creating the kind of opportunity that can lead to a discussion about faith. Now I can usually think of the right answer to a question, or a clever way to turn a conversation towards spiritual things... an hour, or a day *after* that conversation has ended! Are some of you like me this morning?

So what I want to share with you today, is something of a reminder to myself that I could brush up on a few things, and be a little better prepared for the opportunities, and the people God wants to send my way. Evangelism has received some bad publicity – there have been some bad practitioners – and we don't want to be cast in their mould, or seen in that light, or follow their unfortunate methods.

But maybe our own perception of evangelism is a bit off! Maybe we've convinced ourselves that people around us just don't want to know about our faith; that evangelism is an imposition or intrusion; that it has to be forced in order for it to be effective.

Perhaps we take too much of the responsibility for evangelism on ourselves; as if God has called us to this task and then left us to do it alone. I want to try and change some of these misperceptions this morning, and see if we can be better prepared to share our stories and our faith with people I'm convinced are more interested to know than we often realise. This morning I want to stay fairly close to our text, and Peter's instructions; and I want to start with

I. Responding to Questions.

Does this put

A. A Different Slant on Evangelism?

Do we find it easier to speak about God and our faith when the other person raises the subject, or asks a question? I know I do. I love to talk about things that are really important to me. I'm not so confident when it feels like I'm trying to push something I know will be good for the other person, but he or she is reluctant.

When was the last time someone asked you to "give the reason for the hope you have?" Peter encourages us to do that in our text. I have to say, the next person who asks me that, will be the first! But I do sometimes get asked questions! You probably do, too. And for each question someone actually puts into words, I reckon there are another ten buzzing around in their heads they're not quite game enough to speak out loud. "Why do you go to church? What do you do there, that gets you out of bed on a Sunday morning? You seem reasonably intelligent! Do you *really* believe a dead man came back to life? How come you don't get drawn into the local gossip like the rest of us? How can you put up with the stuff that comes our way, and still smile at the end of the day? What do you think happens to us when we die?

What stops them asking these questions out loud? Not much, probably, in many cases. Often, I imagine, it's a fear that you and I might get a bit pushy with our beliefs, if they drop their guard, and show some interest; and who knows where that may lead?

Perhaps then, when it comes to telling our stories, and sharing our faith, and answering their questions, the best things we can do happen around what I want to call this morning,

B. Establishing a Context.

If we find it easier, and more effective to share our faith in response to a question, perhaps we should be looking to help our friends speak out the questions buzzing around in their heads.

Most people are watchers of other people. We observe the way they do things. We notice and respond to attitude. Body language, often far more than we realise, accounts for a high percentage of the way we communicate; and what we communicate. A smile, or lack of a smile, establishes the context for the words we speak; and often conveys a message of its own. How can I tell others of the joy of the Lord, if I'm always grumpy? If I tell people "Jesus changed my life," will they be thinking, "Well, you must have been pretty bad before he got to you!"? Think of that person you would love to share your faith with. What sort of context are you establishing with him or her?

Let's get practical with this; and Paul does that, writing to the Philippians. He says, "Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, 'children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation'. Then you will shine like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life."¹ Who says Paul is hard to understand?

What should we do if we want to become children of God, blameless and pure, shining like stars, today, in our generation? *We should do everything without grumbling or arguing!* Paul shows us how to establish a context.

I'm not going to ask you to look back over last week! But I notice David has set us a challenge each week he's spoken through this series. Here's your homework for this week! Do everything without grumbling or arguing; especially in that place where you'd love the opportunity to share your faith. Feel free to tell me next Sunday how you've gone with that! We have a room full of potential stars this morning!

Central to Peter's teaching in our text is

II. The Hope Within Us.

It's around this inner hope that touches every aspect of our lives, that Peter suggests others will ask us their questions. Hope then is the central ingredient as we establish the context that will make it easier for them to ask. Hope makes Christians

A. Noticeably Different.

or at least it should.

I can understand something of the pessimism that pervades our news service, and the opinion pieces in the papers, and the doom and gloom we often hear in conversations around us, from a godless perspective: The economy is in a mess, politics is awful, global warming is destroying our environment, crime is rampant and public morality is on a steep decline.

Do we have

¹ Philippians 2:14-16a

B. A “Yes, But...” Response

to bring to these conversations? I find Job’s response to the absolute calamity that overtook him to be quite inspiring: “Though he slay me,” Job said, “*yet will I hope in him!*”² That’s real hope! That isn’t wishful thinking or denial. It’s confidence in a God who is greater than our circumstances, who is able to sustain us through the very worst of this life, and ultimately transport us safely through life’s last great challenge into his presence for eternity. Paul tells us three great factors remain and will remain with us always: faith, hope and love.³ He nominates love as the greatest of these; but faith and hope rank right up there with love. “Hope does not disappoint us,” Paul writes, “because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.”⁴

Being a Christian makes us different. It changes our priorities. It changes our attitude and outlook on life. It changes our behaviour and the way we relate to others around us. If others haven’t noticed, then perhaps it’s time to sit down with God, and ask him to speed up the process, and agree that we’ll co-operate with the changes he wants to make.

He wants us to shine like stars! He knows when people notice, they’ll start to ask questions. Peter encourages us then to be

III. Always Prepared.

How would you answer if a friend or work colleague asked what makes you different; or some other faith-related question along the lines Peter refers to? Would you know how to answer? Or would it catch you unprepared? If we believe evangelism is principally God’s responsibility, before it becomes ours, could God be reluctant to send people to us with their questions, if he knows we’ll botch our answers?

If I hadn’t already set homework for you this week, I’d suggest you consider writing out your story about how God changed your life. If going a whole week without grumbling or arguing seems a bit much, why not try to imagine someone you know asking the kind of question we’ve been considering, and then write out your response, in 500 words or less.

A. Plan Your Answer.

Try to anticipate the question the friend you would love to speak to is most likely to ask, in the context you’re establishing. How will you respond? Even if the question is a bit different when it comes, thinking through the kind of things you want to say, (and the things you decide are better to avoid) will help you respond more naturally. Remember, even though it’s your

² Job 13:15

³ See 1 Corinthians 13:13

⁴ See Romans 5:5

story and your response, this is a dialogue, not a lecture. How will your response encourage your friend to take the discussion further? Make sure you plan to listen – really listen – to your friend’s point of view. He or she will be prepared to listen to you, if you show the courtesy of taking their point of view seriously.

Will you use Scripture as you seek to answer your friend’s questions? There are pros and cons to quoting the Bible in this setting, largely directed by your friend’s understanding and attitude. If you do, which verses will you use and where? Think it through. Plan ahead. Be prepared; you never know when God will open up an opportunity. He’s more likely to do that when we’re prepared.

We’ve been focusing on our text this morning; but we should also note the words before and after it. As the start of our preparations, Peter reminds us to

B. Set Apart Christ as Lord.

Other translations say “revere, or reverence Christ as Lord in your heart.”⁵ If Jesus isn’t Lord of your life and mine, then we aren’t qualified to introduce him to others. I don’t say that lightly this morning. Jesus came to save us; and he offers his salvation as a free gift. It comes to us through relationship; and while we love to refer to Jesus as our friend, which he is, our role is a subordinate one. He is Lord; we are his loyal, grateful servants. It’s his agenda; that’s why we’re keen to be involved in evangelism in the first place. If we honour and worship Jesus as Lord in our hearts, then talking about him with our friends becomes easier.

We should always be prepared with an answer for everyone who asks for the reason we have the hope they’ve noticed. Peter goes on to say, “But do this with

IV. Gentleness and Respect.”⁶

People sometimes forget this. Peter doesn’t say, “Do this with authority and enthusiasm.” Or with conviction and power. And there is a place for all these things. But never at the expense of gentleness and respect. An attitude and approach centred around gentleness and respect is

A. The Key that Opens the Door.

Simply ask yourself how you like to be treated; especially when someone approaches with a new idea, or a change to consider. Have you ever met an arrogant, or self-assertive Christian? How did you respond? I cringe at times when I hear Christians describe how they challenged someone’s unbelief, or perceived heresy; especially those who sometimes knock on our doors

⁵ 1 Peter 3:15a

⁶ 1 Peter 3:15b

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trying to convince us to switch to their brand of religion. We should always be ready with an answer. We should always be gentle and respectful.

I love the fact our Bible gives us this instruction. And I love that it comes to us through Peter. Did he recall a time when a young servant-girl asked a question which caught him unprepared with an appropriate answer? Did he recall his language at that time, and other times, when his own responses would never have been called gentle, or respectful. What a godly, wise old man Peter has grown to be, under the Holy Spirit's influence.

In following his teaching in this, we can be

B. A Reflection of the One We Represent.

Follow Jesus and his story through the gospels. See and hear him in action; always calm and confident; confronting at times, when the situation required it; never brash, or arrogant. John records Jesus' words in his Revelation: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." Always the gentleman, the gentle, respectful person he expects his followers to be. What a privilege to know and represent him.

What a privilege to be entrusted with a role to play in the work of his kingdom. Maybe there is a place for you and me in evangelism. Maybe God can even use us, and our experiences and stories, to help lead someone into his kingdom. Are we ready, prepared and available?