

This Week at the Creek

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Here's the text from the pastor's Sunday message:

I Love to Tell the Story

1 Corinthians 9:19-27

April 20, 2008

After listening to Chuck Swindoll on the radio, eight-year-old Debbie asked her six-year-old brother David, "Do you know about Jesus?" Expecting a new slant on the old Gospel story, David replied, "No." So big sister continued: "Sit still, 'cause this is real scary." After explaining the Gospel as only an eight-year-old could, she popped the question: "Now David, when you die, do you want to go to heaven to be with Jesus, God, your mommy and daddy and big sister, or do you want to go to the lake of fire with the devil and bank robbers?" David thought a moment, and then said, "I think I want to stay right here."

Officer Tori Matthews of the Southern California Humane Society got an emergency call: a boy's pet iguana had been scared up a tree by a neighbor's dog. It then fell from the tree into a swimming pool, where it sank like a brick. Officer Matthews came with her net. She dived into the pool, emerging seconds later with the pet's limp body. She thought to herself, *Well, you do CPR on a person and a dog, why not an iguana?* So she put her lips to the iguana's. "Now that I look back on it," she told the *Arizona Republic*, "it was a pretty ugly animal to be kissing, but the last thing I wanted to do was tell this little boy that his iguana had died." By the way, the lizard responded to her efforts and made a full recovery!

Tori Matthews didn't see a water-logged reptile; she saw a little boy's beloved pet. We may never see the beauty in some people, but when we realize how much they mean to God, we'll do what we can to keep them from drowning. That's precisely what the apostle Paul did. In this Scripture passage he described in detail how he made every effort to adapt his own behavior so that he could win others to Christ. He even went so far as to deny himself so that he could place a higher regard in their interests. So to persuade the Jews, he readily joined them in observing the requirements and customs of the law. But to evangelize the Gentiles, he was willing to adopt as much of their customs and

culture as he could with truth and sincerity. With those having an oversensitive conscience or with those of low social standing, he built relationships; he identified with all kinds of people.

Paul must have enjoyed sporting events, for in these verses he again referred to the great athletic contests that were a common sight in Corinth, where the Isthmian games were held every two years. The apostle wanted every believer to run the Christian race like a winner committed to the purpose. He explained that if runners who compete for a perishable crown – a laurel wreath – must be trained and disciplined, then how much more should the Christian – whose goal is for others to come to a saving faith in Christ – be trained and disciplined!

This strict discipline of the body, the mind, the heart, and the soul is absolutely essential to the Christian life. Without it, we will never be what God intends for us to be. And if one of your chief aims is to introduce unbelieving friends and family to Christ, I firmly believe you need to build trusting relationships with them before you talk to them about Jesus. Building bridges to others is more of a process – not a project – that requires God-given patience and wisdom. So here's a list of some ways we can begin building evangelistic bridges.

Take advantage of **social** events. Don't exclude yourself from social gatherings because you don't like certain types of people. If they don't know Christ, they're the very ones who need reaching out to! Besides, you'll find that you've got a lot in common to talk about whether it's a passion for movies or the way you worry about your kids or some food you enjoy cooking. The fact of the matter is that you have to be social to build a relationship, and only those you relate to are truly going to listen to what you have to say about how God has worked in your life.

Still, be a good **listener**. All some of us want to do is talk and tell – which indicates that we highly regard ourselves but don't really respect other people! Few things will diminish a Christian's witness like blabbering on without taking a breath. God is calling you to use your ears and eyes. Listen to what's being talked about, for what the other person's needs are, and what you can do to help. This may not even be the time to share the Gospel, but if they find out that you're an accepting listener, they'll be more open to return the favor and listen to your story.

In the same vein, be sensitive to times of heightened spiritual **receptivity**. Certain milestones in a person's life – like the birth of a baby, the death of a loved one, and other events that cause one to think deeply about life and its limitations – can make that person more open to the Gospel than at other times. And learn to be **patient**. Always remember that you're building bridges to real people, not just ratcheting up notches on your belt for Jesus. And don't ever give up on anyone; God sure doesn't, and neither should we.

Look for opportunities to plant spiritual **seeds** – partly because you can't develop deep relationships with everybody. Initially, you may feel comfortable

giving a non-believer a book about the faith. Christian literature can go where you can't go, can speak when you can't speak, and can share the Gospel faithfully and clearly time after time whenever the reader is ready to pick it up.

But also look for opportunities to serve. Through those small acts of kindness toward others, you'll gain numerous opportunities to explain why you did what you did or why you are who you are. Besides, there's nothing like a good deed to help relationships start off on the right foot! So serve with your time. Volunteer at a hospital or with Good Samaritans or Helping Hands or the library or be a coach for a kids sports team. Serve with your talent. Help an elderly neighbor or a single mom with home or car repairs or do minor alterations for another person or make a meal to share with someone in need. Serve with your treasure – not just your money, but also your possessions. Offer your second car to someone whose car is in the shop, give extra furniture to some newlyweds, buy tickets for someone to a Christian concert, or take a coworker to dinner and then to a special service here at the church.

All in all, watch how you walk, because the best way to tell the story is to live the story! Your example of a Christian life will do more to tell the Gospel than all the words in any book. You can't live as if you don't know the Lord and then expect people to listen when you tell them how much He means to you. For your actions will speak louder than your words.

That's what Doug Nichols found out in his efforts at evangelism in India. While serving with Operation Mobilization in India back in 1967, tuberculosis forced him into a sanitarium for several months. He didn't yet speak the language, but he still tried to give Christian literature written in their language to the patients, doctors, and nurses. Everyone politely refused. He sensed many weren't happy about a rich American (to them, all Americans are rich) being in a free, government-run sanitarium. They didn't know he was as broke as they were!

The first few nights Doug woke around 2 a.m. coughing. One morning during his coughing spell, he noticed one of the older and sicker patients across the aisle trying to get out of bed. The old man sat up on the edge of the bed and tried to stand, but in weakness fell back into bed exhausted. Doug heard him crying softly. The next morning Doug realized what the old man had been trying to do. He'd been trying to get up and walk to the bathroom! The stench in the ward was awful! Other patients yelled insults at the old man. Angry nurses moved him roughly from side to side as they cleaned up the mess. The old man curled up into a ball and wept.

The next night Doug again woke up coughing and noticed the same old man sit up and try to stand. Again he fell back whimpering. Now Doug doesn't like bad smells and he didn't want to get involved, but he got out of bed anyway and went over to the old man. When he touched his shoulder, his eyes opened wide with fear. Doug smiled, put his arms under him, and picked him up. He was very light due to the advanced TB. Doug carried him to the bathroom – a

filthy, small room with a hole in the floor. He stood behind him with his arms under his armpits as he did his business, then Doug carried him back to his bed and laid him down. The old man kissed him on the cheek, smiled, and said something Doug didn't understand.

The next morning another patient woke Doug and handed him a steaming cup of tea – and motioned with his hands that he wanted a tract. As the sun rose, other patients indicated that they also wanted one of the booklets Doug had tried to distribute before. Throughout the day a few doctors and nurses asked for literature. Over the next few days, several put their trust in Christ as Savior. What did it take to reach all these people with the Gospel? It wasn't healthcare; it wasn't the ability to speak their language; it wasn't a persuasively profound argument; it wasn't really even the tracts. It was simply helping an old man make a trip to the bathroom.

Just make sure the Holy Spirit is in constant supply in your life. He'll provide you, if you're open to them, both the opportunities and the people with whom to share the love and mercy and grace of God. And then, make friends! In today's world it's extremely rare for people to devote themselves to Christ through a spontaneous or even casual acquaintance. Those who need God are seeking someone to get involved in their lives, someone who will allow them to see into their lives, someone to be their friend. May we do as did the apostle Paul: "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some."

Let us pray: Lord, help us both to live and to tell the story of Christ and His glory, of Christ and His love! Some still have never heard the message of salvation from Your Word. So may it truly become the theme of our living. In Jesus' name.

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