

Start with “Who Is God?”



Great week of ministry at CCC

- Outstanding **REACH Sunday** last weekend; great feedback on those who presented with Pastor Brent
- **TREK (Men's) Ministry Spring** small groups have begun
- Pastor Kyle/Mary Lou McDowell offered some **key discipleship training** for women leadership on Saturday
- More stepping forward to be **BAPTIZED** on Easter (you?)
- “**My New Life in Christ**” class – close to 30 > *Ephesians*
- Great things happening both in **Orbit** (Children's Ministry), and Wed's **Fusion** (MS) & **Fuel** (HS)
- Wonderful reports on how **CCC-ers are investing in relationships** with those brought to Ames by the Spirit from countries around the world

We begin today...



Text questions 515-209-2060

Pastor David prays...

The people of the Hmar tribe of Northeast India were once fierce headhunters known for their vicious slayings. But in 1910, Welsh missionary Watkin Roberts sent the gospel of John to a Hmar chief. The chief invited Roberts to come and explain the Scriptures, and within two generations, the entire Hmar tribe was evangelized.

Soon after, the British government expelled Roberts from India, but his efforts continued to bear fruit. Today the Hmar tribe totals over a million people. Two members of that tribe – Rochung and Mawei Pudaite – are continuing Roberts' gospel work. In 1971, they were convicted by God to give a free copy of the New Testament to all of the families of the world. The Pudaite's founded BIBLES FOR THE WORLD ministries, and to date they have sent 16 million copies of the New Testament in various languages to homes all across the globe.

Cynthia, of Nashville TN, was introduced to moonshine at the age 5, to marijuana at age 6. She was raped by a cousin at age 8, and her father died when she was 9. Angry and afraid, Cynthia left home and began living on the streets.

She had a baby when she was 13, thinking that a child would give her the love she yearned for. “I didn't have anybody to show me the way,” Cynthia remembers. Things continued to decline as she got into drugs. She

had two more children while bouncing in and out of treatment centers. When she finally hit rock bottom, she asked God to either take her life or send her to jail.

She went to jail. In prison, she prayed fervently for a month before she finally found a sense of God. After prison, Cynthia went to Magdalene, a two-year residential community for women with a criminal history of prostitution and drug abuse, founded in 1997 by Rev. Becca Stevens.

For the first time in her life, Cynthia [heard the gospel and] knew the love of Christ in a caring community. "These people didn't know me," she says. "Yet their love was so unconditional."

Months later, Cynthia celebrated her 19th month of being clean, working as the store manager for Thistle Farms (Magdalene's cottage business). *It was unconditional love and care, and the gospel, that made the difference.*ⁱ

Graeme Keith, treasurer of the Billy Graham association and Billy's lifelong friend. He was once on an elevator with Billy Graham when another man recognized the evangelist.

"You're Billy Graham, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes," Graham said.

"Well," the man said, "you are truly a great man."

"No, I'm not a great man," responded the evangelist. "I just have a great message."

As disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, you and I are in possession of the most important information in the world

- Paul reminded Timothy that "the household of God...the church of the living God (you and me!), which is **the pillar and foundation of the truth** (1 Tim 3:15, NLT).
- Jesus commanded those who believe in and follow Him, "Go into all the world and **proclaim the gospel** to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15).
- Martin Luther: "If he has faith, the believer cannot be restrained. He betrays himself. He breaks out. He **confesses and teaches this gospel** to the people at the risk of life itself."
- Leonard Ravenhill: "Many pastors criticize me for taking **the Gospel** so seriously. But do they really think that on Judgment Day, Christ will chastise me, saying, 'Leonard, you took Me too seriously'?"
- Ray Stedman noted, "The resurrection (of Jesus Christ) is not only **the Good News**, it is **the best news** imaginable."ⁱⁱ
- John Stott (great evangelical leader and prolific author): "All around us we see **Christians and churches relaxing their grasp on the gospel, fumbling it**, and in danger of letting it drop from their hands altogether."

We are about to step into once again the Easter season, and like Christmas, Easter more and more tends to get cluttered up with all kinds of things: Easter egg hunts and chocolate bunnies and you name it. But I wonder if we have the courage to ask ourselves something:

Can we ask ourselves whether or not
we are **sharing the gospel** with people?

You see, here's a question that's getting under my skin a bit, "*When's the last time you/I started a conversation with someone who is spiritually lost (or wandering) about God's good news?*"

I think Ray Stedman and John Stott finger our challenge. On the one hand, Stedman is correct: **We in God's family have not only "the Good News, we have the best news imaginable."** In fact, we have the most important good news in the entire world. No message for human beings is more important to their happiness and their future than the Gospel. Our news is better than news about a cure for cancer, or news about cleaning up our environment, or any other news you can bring to the table. The Gospel, and godliness (as Paul reminded Timothy) "holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come." No other message on the planet is like the Gospel.

But John Stott is also correct: **Christians and churches are relaxing their grasp on the gospel.** A lot of us may be fumbling it, perhaps in danger of letting it "drop from our hands altogether."

Look, should you and I want to be obedient to the One we are following, it means we need to sharpen our readiness and eagerness to share the best news imaginable. This morning, let's get a start on this by tackling two key questions.

First, WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

Second, HOW SHOULD WE EXPLAIN WHO GOD IS?
(i.e., the God behind the good news!)

Let's begin with...WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

There are few places where it is more simply stated than in the Gospel of John chapter 3:16-17

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

This is the gospel as Jesus himself explained it to Nicodemus, one of the Jewish pharisees. His explanation contains 4 simple Gospel (or "good news") truths:

#1 God intentionally loved all people in the world

#2 God in love did not send His Son to condemn,
but gave Him to rescue all people in the world

John 3:14-15 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, **so must the Son of Man be lifted up**, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. (cf. Numbers 21)

#3 To be rescued, a person can believe in God's Son

#4 Believing in God's Son results in having eternal life;
not believing results in perishing

And, of course, those 4 truths lead to a simple question: ***Have you, or will you, believe in God's Son?*** Specifically, that God gave His Son to die in your place, as your substitute, to satisfy the death penalty for your sin. Have you, or will you, choose to believe that "Yes, God's Son, Jesus the Christ, died in my place, for my sins. In love, God had His Son do that for me. I believe in that. I trust in that."

Mike Silva once illustrated this opportunity like this:

Gift cards often come with expiration dates. A card can be worth \$100 on day, and then the next day you might as well throw it in the garbage. You've missed the opportunity to spend it!

God's gift of forgiveness is like a gift card that is more valuable than anything we can imagine. He paid for it with his Son's life. God holds that priceless gift card out to us, waiting for us to take it. If we don't accept it and use it, however, it is of no value to us. A gift card is only plastic unless it is redeemed. Don't wait to claim God's gift before it is too late.ⁱⁱⁱ

HOW SHALL WE PRESENT GOD?

I'd like to suggest that we present God (or explain who God is) the way Jesus did. John tells us something fascinating – John 1:18 "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known." No one made the true God any more clear and understandable than did God the Son, Jesus, who came from the Father's side and returned to Him.

So what did God the Son make clear about Who God is? Over and over and over again, the predominant picture Jesus displayed in his teaching and his life was that God is a **FATHER**.

#1 Jesus spoke of God as a perfect, generous FATHER

Matthew 5:43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' **44** But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, **45** so that **you may be sons of your Father** who is in heaven. For He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. **46** For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? **47** And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? **48** You therefore must be perfect, as **your heavenly Father** is perfect.

#2 Jesus spoke of God as a patient, seeking FATHER

Luke 15 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ “What **man of you**, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

⁸ “Or **what woman**, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? ⁹ And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

¹¹ And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to ^[a] one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’” ²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

#3 Jesus spoke of God as a listening, responsive FATHER

Matthew 6:5-6 “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Matthew 7:7-10 “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

#4 Jesus spoke of God as a preparing-us-for-an-unimaginable-future FATHER

John 14:1-3 “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

Matthew 13:43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

Matthew 25:33-34 And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

Paul quoted from Isaiah when he told the Corinthians

1 Corinthians 2:9

As it is written, “What no **eye has seen**, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God **has** prepared for those who love him”

WRAPPING UP

Here’s the truth – some of those with whom God is calling you to share the gospel have no idea God is like this. Their background, their experiences with their own fathers, their exposure to who-knows-what has likely skewed who and what they may think God is like.

So as we start this journey to sharpen our eagerness to start a conversation and share the gospel, begin here:

#1 **Pray and care for them** before you ever talk with them. Ask the Holy Spirit to prepare and pave the way

#2 As you “start the conversation,” **listen more, talk less**. Find out where they’ve come from, what has shaped and influenced their outlook. Refuse to judge; learn and discern.

#3 When the Spirit opens the door, **show them the true God the Father**. A generous, perfect Father. A listening, responsive Father. A patiently, seeking Father.

A Father who longs to prepare each one of us for an unimaginable future.

In *The Whisper Test*, Mary Ann Bird writes:

I grew up knowing I was different, and I hated it. I was born with a cleft palate, and when I started school, my classmates made it clear to me how I looked to others: a little girl with a misshapen lip, a crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and garbled speech.

When classmates asked, “What happened to your lip?” I’d tell them I’d fallen and cut it on a piece of glass. Somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident than to have been born different. I was convinced that no one outside my family could love me.

There was, however, a teacher in second grade that we all adored—Mrs. Leonard by name. She was short, round, happy—a sparkling lady.

Annually, we had a hearing test...

Mrs. Leonard gave the test to everyone in the class, and finally it was my turn. I knew from past years that as we stood against the door and covered one ear, the teacher sitting at her desk would whisper something, and we would have to repeat it back—things like “The sky is blue” or “Do you have new shoes?”

I waited there for those words that God must have put in her mouth, those seven words that changed my life. Mrs. Leonard said, in a whisper, “I wish you were my little girl.”

God says that to every person, no matter how we may have been deformed by sin. “I wish you were my son.” Or “I wish that you were my daughter.”^{iv}

Share the Gospel...start a conversation. Begin by practicing how you would explain John 3:16-17. Memorize it, and the 4 parts of the good news.

Then, pray that the Holy Spirit will prepare the way with someone you know that has no idea that God is a Father who is whispering from not too far away, “I wish you were my daughter. I wish you were my son.”

Copyright 2019 © David A. Staff
All rights reserved

ⁱ From Jane Lampman, “Where Women Build New Lives,” *Christian Science Monitor* (April 6, 2006) in *1001 Illustrations That Connect*, pp.336-337.

ⁱⁱ Rowell, Edward K., ed., *Quotes and Idea Starters for Preaching and Teaching from Leadership Journal*, p. 72.

ⁱⁱⁱ from *Would You Like Fries with That?* (Word, 2005).

^{iv} Craig Brian Larson & Leadership Journal, *750 Engaging Illustrations for preachers, teachers, & writers* (Baker Books, 2002), 275.