

## First expressions, Lasting impressions

I have been thinking about this message for a long time as I have looked at, and thought back over 30 plus years of ministry and people experiences.

These thoughts and observations just won't go away because I see and hear them repeated over and over, so lets think about them so we can learn, change if we need to and in the process we can grow, we can help others grow, and we can also prepare the soil for planting the gospel seed when the opportunity permits which is God's overall plan for humanity. He says in

*2 Peter 3:9 says The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

*Romans 10:14,15 says But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"*

Now you may be saying, this is only for preachers yet you have already been commissioned according to Acts 1:8b which says "and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

So we are called and are to be involved in the lives of others and the question now becomes, have you ever wondered what you sound like to the folks listening to you speak, or witness to them, and a deeper and maybe more telling question is, do you even care?

I try and keep this in mind as I work with people because if I don't, I will soon have no people to work with. I am a careful listener to and observer of people both inside the church and out in the world. Sadly what I often see and hear leaves a lot to be desired when it comes to reaching people for the Lord, for friendships, or helping them grow once they know them. Truth be known I honestly believe that many in the world are not as blunt, thoughtless, and repetitive as some believers are with one another and then we wonder why we do not reach people for the Lord nor have good and consistent church growth or Christian friends

To further set the stage for today's thinking let's look at a couple of passages beginning with Luke 19:10 "For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost." Christ seeks the lost by taking the initiative. Jesus was personally and particularly interested in other people just as we should be. Don't forget, Zaccheus was not seeking Christ; Christ was seeking Zaccheus.

Another passage is of great importance for today's thinking and that is John 4:35 "You know the saying, 'Four months between planting and harvest.' But I say, wake up and look around. The fields are already ripe for harvest. In other words, look up, Lift up your eyes - See the Samaritans coming to hear the gospel. They are white - Grain, when ripe, turns from a green to a yellow or light color, indicating that it is time to reap it.

In the days of Christ, the relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans was greatly strained. The animosity was so great that the Jews bypassed Samaria as they traveled between Galilee and Judea. They willingly went an extra distance through the barren land of Perea on the eastern side of the Jordan just to avoid going through Samaria. Yet Jesus rebuked His disciples for their hostility to the Samaritans. In fact he worked with and for them in several areas.

Today He expects us to work with those who may be Samaritans, people who are antagonistic or cool to the gospel. He does not always expect us necessarily to reap the harvest but He does expect us to at least prepare the seed bed and plant or sow some seed.

This is part of the issue before us. Meeting people who may come to our church and also dealing with those already here. In my thinking, the key to consider when doing this is, What are their lasting impressions of us? Impressions drawn from our first expressions when we open our mouths to speak with them.

So if church is one place for sinners to be sought, found, and helped, and if there is still work to be done then what should we do any time a Samaritan, another sinner, people just like us, enters our doors? The fact is, anytime anyone enters our doors it is for a time of soil preparation for something in their live and also ours in the process. But what about people who come in and run into us?

What are their lasting impressions, from our first expressions in dealing with them? Do these lasting impressions help prepare the soil for later planting of the Gospel message? Sadly, sometimes it does not so what can we do to change the situation? First, let's consider **What we should not do** which is to assume several key points such as

Assuming that they already know the way to Christ, assuming that they are already saved, or assuming they are not afraid to visit our church. We should not assume they are all victorious and without problems in their lives that are, as great or greater, than those in our life. We should not assume that they all have plenty of Christian friends, or that they all are ready for service just because they come to church without being prepared for service. Remember, saved, or being found by the Lord, taught, and encouraged all of which does not happen over night.

The truth is that mankind has utterly lost his way from God and thus the Son of Man came to seek this erring and lost race, to lead them back again to the one they lost and the one who is seeking them. There are people who may even walk through our doors that are needy and who are trapped in the cycle of hopelessness and despair and who may just be looking for the answer that a only a Christian can offer them.

This area then involves evangelism and here is where we come in with the soil preparation for planting. When was the last time you talked to someone long enough to let them know that you considered them of value and loved them enough to build a relationship with so you could help prepare the soil for the message of hope and help in Jesus? I think of it as **friendship preparation for personal evangelism** or a form of friendship evangelism

Lets begin thinking our way through with

A. What friendship preparation for personal evangelism does not do

Friendship preparation for personal evangelism does not desire to or plan to replace the bible way of evangelism and salvation. Instead it is knowing, believing, and accepting what God says about mankind. Things such as

1. Who needs salvation. Everyone needs salvation because we have all sinned.

Romans 3:10-12, and 23 *As the Scriptures say, "No one is righteous—not even one. No one is truly wise; no one is seeking God. All have turned away; all have become useless. No one does good, not a single one." ... For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard.*

2. Why we need salvation. Because the consequence or payday for sin is death.

Romans 6:23 *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.* This verse is speaking in a spiritual sense, meaning we are going to die and go to a place of eternal torment. God is life, and therefore His exact opposite is death.

So if we are not saved through grace when we die, we will go to a place as far removed from God, who is life, as possible. Said in a nutshell: Born once die twice, Born twice die once

- Born once die twice (Physical and Spiritual Death separation from God who is life)
- Born twice (Physical and spiritual; rebirth) die once (Physically)

3. How God provides salvation. Through a capable Christ!

Romans 5:8 *But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.*

4. How we receive salvation. By inviting and proclaiming

Romans 10:9-10, and 13 *If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by confessing with your mouth that you are saved ... For "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."*

5. The results of salvation. Peace of mind in a mixed up world.

Romans 5:1 *Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us.* Romans 8:1 *So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus.*

Next lets think about

B. How to respond to the above which has to be a personal thing, above and beyond, just friendship. It is actually the key to being sure your friends go to heaven with you.

If they are our true friend then we to help them understand and

- Admit they are a sinner.
- Understand that as a sinner, they deserve death.
- Believe Jesus Christ died on the cross to save them from sin and death.
- Repent by turning from their old life of sin to a new life in Christ.
- Receive, through faith in Jesus Christ, his free gift of salvation.

Now lets look at

#### C. What friendship preparation for personal evangelism **does do**

Friendship building leads to opportunities to asking these two key questions leading to the biblical form of evangelism.

- Have you come to the place in your spiritual life where you can say you know for certain that if you were to die today you would go to heaven?
- Suppose that you were to die today and stand before God and he were to say to you, "Why should I let you into my heaven?" what would you say?

Now lets look at

#### D. Three elements of friendship

*First, the Christian should demonstrate caring and compassion through a genuine friendship. A friendship that loves the sinner without condoning the sin or participating in it with them*

*Second, the Christian should seek to understand the needs of unchurched friends.*

One reason for poor church attendance, growth, and poor amounts of evangelism is the fact that many Christians do not know many of the unsaved or else they do not care enough about the fact that they are unsaved to build a relationship with them

Sadly we don't even seem to care if we invite them to our church. When was the last time you invited an unsaved friend to come to church with you? Are you building a relationship with them that may open the door for that invitation? I am not trying to make anyone feel guilty for not leading someone to the Lord but what about simply inviting them to come to church with you

*Third, the Christian finds opportunities to share the possibility of faith meeting the felt needs of unchurched friends.*

Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another: What! You too? I thought I was the only one. But this is how I got through it. Can I tell you MY story. All of a sudden you are witnessing. Witnessing is not preaching, it is sharing or telling your life story.

Witnessing is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. Saying, this is where I was (struggling and not sure of heaven if I were to die and not sure of answers for the problems I was facing, this is what I was looking for ( I was looking for answers to life's great questions)

Why am I here? "what is my purpose in life?"

What is life all about? With all the war, pain and trouble in the world, some people think life is not worth living. For some of us, just getting out of bed in the morning is a major struggle.

What will happen to me when I die? Is there any hope for me? Is there help for me? I wish there was someone in this world that cared about me

And we can say **Yes, Let me tell you about him.** This is the avenue to evangelism and church growth by conversion and not just growth by fish changing fishbowls because the water in their old one got muddy

Now lets think about some of

E. The Christian's hindrances to friendship and communication and finally evangelism

1. In our initial speaking to a visitor.

Upon meeting a visitor if all we ever want to do is talk about ourselves, our family, our needs, our likes, our dislikes, our plans, our views etc. we will chase away most people from us and we will end up staying in our lonely world thinking only about us. When that

happens, we also close any doors to future possibilities for evangelism or even friendships.

2. Secondly in our ongoing relationship with a visitor, if they can get past their first impressions of us although many can't. **Remember**, Our first response to a visitor, leaves a lasting impression. In this case someone might overlook it once or twice but before long it discourages the relationship possibility and with that relationship ended, there goes any more chance for life changing conversation because selfish people are not achievers in the people department of life.

Lets move along and look at

F. Tools for effective soil preparation, communication, friendships, relationship evangelism, and church growth

1. Put on a happy face

If you smile often and have an upbeat attitude, Christians or even non Christians will be drawn to you. And with that, there may be the chance for relationships and thus possible evangelism opportunities.

2. Stay positive in the church. No individual or even church on this earth is perfect. Do not always find mistakes in others. Negativity kills attempts at soil preparation, friendships, relationships and evangelism opportunities

3. Work hard to develop good **listening skills** because they are the key to communication, soil preparation, friendships, relationship evangelism, and church growth. When believers really listen to others, **saved or lost**, they are demonstrating that they care about others' opinions, feelings, values, and their forever. Disciplined listening embodies unselfish love and compassion at a practical level. It also helps uncover the felt needs of nonbelievers and paves the way for appropriate verbal witness even to those usually resistant to "religion."

4. See church visitors and regular church folks as needy people instead of possible notches or ways of getting things done for you. Jesus came to serve and if we serve instead of being served we will have a more wonderful life and better relationship evangelism possibilities. Service is a good soil preparation practice. When was the last time you talked to someone **or served** them just to find out something about them instead of telling them something about you?

## 5. Be Yourself, Be at Ease

If you are feeling uncomfortable and on edge, this can make the other person ill at ease and that's a sure way to create the wrong impression. If you are calm and confident, so the other person will feel more at ease, and so have a solid foundation for making that first impression a good one. If you are not comfortable with many people you will not have many chances to prepare soil for planting the gospel seed and sadly you will miss out on joy of service.

6. Know what you believe so you can be ready when God opens the door for you to share.

7. Listen to other's points of view not just give our own. It is all right to have an opinion but our opinion is not law just because it is ours.

8. Present yourself appropriately. Don't brag, Don't be a whiner.

Almost every church has a chronic complainer, and you'll notice they tend to be the least popular person in the flock. If you constantly whine about this and that, your negativity will push others away from you and you'll risk being known as the "resident monster". Monsters do not do evangelism, relationships, and friendships very well.

Well as we wrap it up I believe we see our first response to others usually **really does leave a lasting impression on the hearer** and it will affect all other communication after that. Communication intended to build relationship and friendships and for the possibility of presenting the Gospel.

So in a nutshell if the first impression we leave on another person is one of being judgmental, complaining, being or sounding selfish, speaking roughly without concern for the feeling of others, and having a hang dog look on us the results will probably be these things: No friends, No evangelism, no joy, and no fruit.

One final question: Would you be your friend, or if you were unsaved, would you listen to your testimony and the way of salvation if you spoke as others may hear you? In other words does someone's first impression of you wither through their eye or ears leave a good impression or a bad one?

But know one thing for certain, it will leave one. Trust me, It will!!!!