1 Thessalonians 2:1-12 *The Neighboring Life Say: Talking About Jesus*

***The Worst Job Ever***When Beth and I were still in college, she needed a part-time job. She didn’t have a car, so she needed something within walking distance of campus. She was a full-time student, so she needed something in the evenings that didn’t interfere with her classes. So she ended up taking what is one of the most hated jobs in America—quite possibly the modern-day equivalent to a tax collector in Jesus’ day—she became a… telemarketer.

Some enterprising individual had opened a call center on the Hill, right outside UNI’s campus. I suppose they figured out that a college campus provided a bunch of people who spoke good English, who needed a little extra cash, and who were free during the supper hour—which is, of course, the time telemarketers are most likely to call.

Now, nobody likes to get a call from a telemarketer. But we should keep in mind that it’s not really the person on the phone’s fault. They’re just people who need a job. And in many cases the products they sell are reasonable, if not absolutely necessary. They don’t know who they are calling until a name pops up on their computer screen. They have no freedom in what they say: in Beth’s day they had a script in a three ring binder that had a tab for nearly every possible response a customer could give. The job is to keep talking and keep the customer on the line as long as possible. The rule of thumb is that the customer has to distinctly say “No” three times before the sales person is allowed to end the call. And, of course, all the sales people are being monitored by supervisors to make certain they stick to the script.

I asked Beth to describe her experience as a telemarketer and her response was: “excruciating.” She called it “self-inflicted misery.” She said the absolute worst phone calls—and she said it happened more often than you might think—were the ones where she would ask for the person whose name was on her screen, only to have the person on the other end of the phone break down in tears because that person had recently died. Needless to say, Beth did not see a future career for herself in phone sales.

Now, contrast that experience with what it is like when you find some new product that you are excited about. Maybe it’s a new TV show that you are binge-watching on a streaming service, maybe it’s a new restaurant that you just love eating at, maybe it’s a new app on your phone that has made your life so much easier. Whatever it is, if it’s a product you really love, then you really love to talk about it. You say to your friends: “I just love this new show, have you thought about watching it?” Or: “Man I love my new car, you should really think about getting one like this.”

You become a natural salesperson for the things you love. You don’t need high-pressure tactics to talk your friends into trying this new thing. You don’t need some script to follow and answer all their objections. You just talk with enthusiasm about the product because it has impacted your life in a positive way and you think it may have the same effect on your friends.

Today, we are talking about telling our neighbors about Jesus. In the four practices of neighboring that we are looking at—Stay, Pray, Play and Say—we’ve come to the final one: Say. Sharing our story of grace with our neighbors. Evangelism. Witnessing. Talking about Jesus.

And this makes a lot of us nervous. A lot of us find the idea of sharing our faith to be intimidating, awkward and hard to do. And that’s because a lot of us have a picture of the high-pressure salesperson in our head when it comes to talking about Jesus. We feel like we need to intrude into our neighbors’ lives, tell them about something they haven’t asked for, answer every objection and close the sale before the conversation ends. We feel like we are going to come off like a telemarketer. And nobody wants to feel like that.

But the truth is: evangelism shouldn’t feel like selling Jesus. We should talk to our friends and neighbors more as satisfied customers than as high pressure salespersons. Jesus has impacted our lives in a positive way. We’re excited about what Jesus is doing in our lives. Talking about him should be as natural as talking about that great movie you saw on Friday night.

***Use Words***Here’s the thing: if we want our neighbors to see Jesus in us, eventually we need to talk about Jesus.

Throughout this series, we’ve talked about being good neighbors. Being people who are present in our neighborhoods, who get to know our neighbors’ names and stories, who pray behind the scenes for our neighbors, and who practice great hospitality. Using Jesus’ description of us as the “salt of the world,” we want to live our lives in a way that makes other people thirsty. We are hopeful that our lives will tell a story, that our actions will be their own witness.

And yet, at some point, if we want our neighbors to know that Jesus makes a difference, we are going to have to talk about Jesus. **John Piper** says it like this:

People will only see Jesus in us if they hear about Him from us. There is no gospel without words.

The story of Jesus in your life is just that: a story. At some point, you need to tell it. If we want people to know that Jesus directs our lives, then we need to say something.

Here’s our key verse for this morning. **1 Thessalonians 2:8:**

Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

Doesn’t that sound like a good verse for this series? Doesn’t that sound like good neighboring?

Love your neighbor as yourself. Develop such a good relationship with your neighbors that you can say that you are sharing your very life with them. And if you are sharing your life with them, won’t it be a delight to also share the gospel of God with them? It will be the most natural thing in the world to talk about Jesus.

Not as a salesperson. Not like a telemarketer. But as a satisfied customer who just wants people to know about this great thing in their lives.

So this verse is pretty much our big idea this morning. I’ll put it like this: **Good neighboring is about sharing our lives, and the gospel, with our friends.** As we do life in our neighborhoods we will be on the look-out to say things about Jesus.

This verse is written by Paul, and he’s talking about what happened the first time he visited Thessalonica, a city in Greece. If we pull back from verse 8 and look at the wider context, we will learn 5 things about sharing the gospel with our neighbors.

***Holy Boldness***First, talking about Jesus involves **taking a risk.** There is some holy boldness involved in sharing your faith. Let’s look at the beginning of the passage, **1 Thessalonians 2:1-2:**

You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. **2**We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition.

Let’s back-up a minute and get the background to this story. Paul’s visit to Thessalonica came during his second missionary journey, immediately after his visit to Philippi. Now you may remember that while they were in Philippi, Paul and Silas were arrested. That’s where they held a jailhouse hymn sing and their shackles miraculously fell off. That’s where the jailer and his family were introduced to Jesus Christ.

But, in spite of this good result, the important thing for us to remember is that Paul and Silas were not treated well in Philippi. They were stripped and beaten. They suffered and were insulted. It was becoming increasingly clear to Paul that if he persisted in preaching in the name of Jesus, he was going to face strong opposition. Whether it was from Jews who didn’t want to see people leave the synagogue, idol makers who didn’t want to lose their business, or fortune tellers who didn’t want to lose their slave girl—there were always going to be people who wanted Paul to be quiet.

And that was the case in Thessalonica. Acts 17 tells us that after leaving Philippi Paul went to Thessalonica and preached in the synagogue, And he got results. “Some Jews” and “a large number of God-fearing Greeks” and “not a few prominent women” were persuaded to believe. (Acts 17:4) But at the same time, “the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot.” (Acts 17:5) Eventually, just to keep the peace, Paul and his friends left. But they left a strong church in the city.

So when Paul uses the word “dare” here in verse 2, he means it. It took some courage to talk about Jesus in the face of “strong opposition.”

Our situation is different, we don’t face mobs and potential jail time, and yet it almost always feels risky to talk about our faith. We’ve already mentioned that we don’t want to come off like a telemarketer, trying to push religion on someone who is not interested.

We also don’t want to come off as weird. We don’t want to people to see us like Ned Flanders on *The Simpsons.* The good-hearted neighbor who is always inserting Jesus into awkward situations.

And then, we worry that we might offend. Maybe they had a bad church experience when they were younger. Maybe they are hostile to God.

And we often worry that we’ll say something wrong. That we’ll mis-represent Jesus’ story somehow, or get a question that we don’t know how to answer.

All those risks are real, to some extent; although I think we probably have a tendency to over-exaggerate them in our minds.

But the point here is that even if you do feel like it is taking a risk, follow Paul’s example and show some boldness. Dare to tell the gospel, even if it seems hard.

***Motives Matter***Second, we need to think about **Ultimate vs. Ulterior Motives.** We need to keep our relationships authentic. Look at verses **3 and 4:**

**3**For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. **4**On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel.

The people who were opposing Paul were accusing him of being “up to something.” They were spreading rumors that he was using the gospel to swindle people, to take advantage of them. Some were accusing him of trying to get rich of off Jesus.

And we see that kind of bait and switch in our world today. There are too many stories of high profile pastors with private jets and immoral lifestyles paid for on the backs of the people in their audience.

But there is another kind of bait and switch when it comes to neighboring—one that we’ve talked about throughout the series—and that’s the idea that we get to know our neighbors only so that we can talk about Jesus. Our ultimate motive in neighboring is to see more people in a relationship with Jesus, but that should never be our ulterior motive. That is to say: “The ‘agenda’ we need to drop is the well-meaning tendency to be friends with people for the sole purpose of converting them to our faith.” (Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring*, p. 102)

We’ve been saying it over and over again: it is good to be a good neighbor because Jesus says it is. We don’t love our neighbors to make them Christians, we love them because we are Christians. Starting relationships just so you can push through to a conversation about Jesus smells phony from the start.

Yes we pray for our neighbors. Yes, we look for opportunities to talk about our story of grace. Yes, we would love to invite them into a relationship with Jesus. That’s our ultimate goal. We do that because we have been “entrusted with the gospel.”

But that doesn’t mean we drop our friendship as soon as it becomes clear that there is no interest in Jesus. Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon write:

The difference between ulterior and ultimate motives involves much more than semantics, and the bait-and-switch paradigm for evangelism is probably ingrained into our thinking more deeply than we realize. Most believers want the people they know to have an authentic relationship with Jesus. But if our friends choose not to enter into that relationship, we should still desire to be friends with them. Obviously we shouldn’t cut someone loose because he or she isn’t interested in Jesus. (p. 103)

***Speak Truth***Third, talking about Jesus means we should seek to **please God and not people.** We need to speak the truth. **Verses 4-6:**

We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. **5**You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. **6**We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority.

One of the things that the Apostle Paul was clear about throughout his ministry is that there was only one opinion about him that really mattered: and that was God’s opinion. Paul did what he did because God had called him to it, and he was really only concerned about pleasing God. He had a strength of conviction that allowed him to carry on in spite of danger, opposition, or attacks on his character. He knew the truth, and he wasn’t about to waiver from it.

In the same way, when we begin to have spiritual conversations with people, we need to stick to the truth of what we know about God. It can be tempting when talking with someone to be agreeable with their ideas—even when their ideas are wrong.

So, for example, you might be talking with someone who says: “I just really believe all religions end up at the same place. I don’t think people should have to pick one faith over another.” And, because you want to be a nice person, you might just agree and move the conversation to another subject.

But, in fact, that statement does NOT line up with the Bible, and it is actually a great opportunity to pursue further conversation about who Jesus is and what Jesus claimed. A great follow-up to a statement like that would be to say: “That’s interesting you would say that, because Jesus claimed to be the only way to the Father. How does that fit in with the view of religion you described?”

Now, I’m not saying you have to be a jerk about it. Standing up for the truth doesn’t mean we have to be rude, mean, or caustic. You’re goal is to have a spiritual conversation. To try to understand what your neighbor believes and share a little of what you believe. If you are talking about a sinful situation in a neighbor’s life, we need to avoid the temptation of saying: “It’s no big deal, everybody does it.” But we should still speak to them with love and concern and compassion.

The point here is that we should seek to please God. His is the opinion that matters most.

***As a Mother***Fourth, talking about Jesus comes from a **heart of care**. We share the gospel because we love people. **Verses 7 and 8:**

**7**Instead, we were like young children among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, **8**so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

One of the charges against Paul was that he was using his position of power as an apostle to bully people into following Jesus. Again, the claim was that he was taking advantage of people.

But for an answer, Paul appeals directly to the Thessalonians’ own memory of his time with them. He wasn’t a boss, he was more like the mother of a nursing child. He wasn’t taking advantage of the Thessalonians, he loved them. He opened his life to them. In fact, the original language could better be translated as he “bared his very soul” to them.

This idea ties closely to our second point about motives. Paul’s motivation in sharing Jesus was not earthly gain or prestige or reputation, it was love. He loved the Thessalonians. He loved people. And so he wanted them to know Jesus.

Love needs to be our motivation as well. Here’s what we believe as Christians:

We believe that every person is an ever living, never dying soul that is destined to spend eternity in either heaven or hell. And we believe that, left to our own devices, all of us are going to end up in hell; because a ticket into heaven is something we could never afford or earn on our own. But we believe that Jesus has paid the price for us to go to heaven, and that it is free for anybody who will turn to Him and take it. And so, if we love people, we should absolutely want them to get this free gift from Jesus.

More than that, we believe that Jesus is our creator and is the ruler over our universe. In a sense, He wrote the owner’s manual for what human life should look like. And so, not only do we believe that He is the key to the next life, we also believe that He holds the answers to this life. That is to say, nobody knows better what a truly abundant life is than Jesus. So we believe the way to experience true joy and live a life of meaning and purpose is to live a life in relationship with Him.

So, again, if we believe these things to be true, and if we have experienced them for ourselves, then if we love people shouldn’t it be our desire to have them believe and experience these things as well? Talking about Jesus should always come from a heart of care. We share about Jesus because we love people.

***Righteous and Blameless***Then, fifth, talking about Jesus requires **lives of integrity**. We should not undercut the message of Jesus by the way we live. **Verses 9-12:**

**9**Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. **10**You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. **11**For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children,**12**encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

Paul backed up his message by the way he lived. He didn’t create a financial burden for the Thessalonians. He conducted himself with holiness and righteousness. He left them with no reason to blame him for anything.

We need to keep in mind that nothing short circuits our witness to Jesus like dishonest and deceitful lives. If you’re trying to tell your neighbor about Jesus, but you never return tools when you borrow them, you undermine your credibility. If you’re trying to tell your neighbors about Jesus, but you’re always yelling at their kids to get off of your lawn, you are not presenting a very effective witness. If you’re trying to tell your neighbor about Jesus, but they can’t trust you, they aren’t going to see much reason to follow Him.

We need to live lives in concert with the truth we profess.

***Advice from Bill Hybels***So, good neighboring is about sharing our lives, and the gospel, with our friends. We don’t have to be high pressure salespeople. We just need to talk about Jesus as satisfied customers: People who have had our lives changed by Jesus who want our friends to have the same opportunity. Take a risk. Remember that motives matter. Seek to please God, not people. Share out of a genuine love for people. And live lives of integrity.

Finally, because I want these messages to be practical; and because I want us to do more than just talk about being good neighbors but to actually go out there and do some of these things we have talked about; let me direct your attention to the blue neighboring challenge cards on your seats. Hopefully you can take this card home and find a way to put it into practice.

And let me close by talking a little about Bill Hybels. Bill is the pastor of Willow Creek Church and he has the spiritual gift of evangelism. He can go up to just about anybody and start a spiritual conversation and make it seem as natural and winsome as can be.

I was looking at his book, *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, this week. It’s almost 25 years old. And it gives some advice on how to **take a conversation in a spiritual direction.** Reading it again, I thought how easy it sounds. Bill makes it look easy. I know it’s not always that easy, but I know it’s not as hard as we make it either. He gives three suggestions:

**The Direct Method.** This is just what it sounds like. Instead of waiting for a conversation to move towards spiritual topics, you bring them up. Hybels says: “You straightforwardly raise a spiritual topic and then see if the person is interested in talking about it. While you don’t force anyone to discuss matters of faith, you do open wide the doorway to doing so.” (138)

Sample questions he suggests are:

* I’m curious, do you ever think about spiritual matters?
* Who, in your opinion, was Jesus Christ?
* What’s your spiritual background? Were you taught a particular religious perspective as you grew up?
* Do you ever wonder what happens to us when we die?
* What do you think a real Christian is?
* Where are you heading in your spiritual journey?

**The Indirect Method.** This is playing off of whatever subject you happen to be talking about it and connecting it to matters of faith. Hybels gives this example:

Those in the marketplace commonly ask each other, “How’s your year going?” But rather than give a standard reply, why not answer with something like this? “Well, financially, okay; family-wise, pretty well; and spiritually, things are great. Which one do you want to talk about?”

They may be ready to talk on a deeper level, or they may respond by saying, “Well, let’s go back to the financial part…” That’s okay; at least you’ve planted some seeds for future conversations. (141)

Again, the goal is not to be the weird neighbor who inserts Jesus into every conversation. But, if you are on the lookout for them, opportunities do come to move conversations towards matters of faith.

**The Invitational Method**. Finally,there’s the invitational method. Be on the lookout for opportunities to invite friends to faith related activities. Whether it is something low key like Trunk or Treat or the Youth Auction, something unique and showy like the Christian concert at the fair, or something like a Sunday Morning or Holiday church service, invitations can be an opportunity to talk further about matters of faith whether your invitation is accepted or not.

And, while we’re here, let me mention that the goal is not to get your neighbors to leave one church and come to ours. If your neighbors are involved in another church besides Hope, praise God for that. That’s a win for the kingdom, there is no need to be inviting them here. But if you come to find out your neighbors used to attend a church, or maybe their names are on a membership roll somewhere but they’re not sure anybody there would recognize them, or if you find out they’ve become frustrated with their church and find it difficult to muster up the energy to participate—then that might just be the perfect opportunity to invite them to Hope and the chance to experience church a little differently.

At any rate, conversations like that are great for talking more deeply about what Jesus means to you.

I’ll give Bill Hybels the last word:

Each day we have conversations with people that provide us with the chance to raise topics of faith, but most of us aren’t prepared for them. When others ask us how we’re doing, most of us give a standard, safe response.

We’ve got to be willing to go out on a limb and say the unexpected. It’s one thing to see the split-second opportunity but quite another to seize it. I don’t know any way around it—it’s going to take some courage to get the ball rolling and actually initiate spiritual conversations. Christianity that’s really contagious takes some guts.

So next time someone asks you what you’ve got going on the weekend or what you’re planning to do next summer, you’ve got a choice to make. Do you abort the adventure before it starts by merely talking about weeding the garden or visiting the relatives in Oklahoma? Or will you take a deep breath and give God a chance to really use you as you describe the critically important topic you are learning about at church, or the exciting weekend you’re planning with the kids in the youth group?

There are two doors you can go through. One is safe, familiar, and uneventful. The other is risky, uncharted and full of spiritual potential. Which door will you choose?