

***Irresistible Evangelism: The Iron***  
***By Jason Huff***  
***Matthew 11:16-19, Romans 12:9-18, John 15:9-21***

Our final Scripture reading comes from John 15:9-21. Listen now to God's Word. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit -- fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other. If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me."

Over the last two weeks, we've been talking about evangelism and the game of golf. We established the ground rules of evangelism, and we talked about the first tool in our golf bag, the driver. The driver stands for reaching out to people who are far away from God and meeting them where they live with acts of kindness, following the example of Jesus and the disciples.

Today, we're moving on to the next club – the iron. Every golfer has several irons, each of them designed to get us closer to the hole from on the fairway. All of them are distance clubs. They won't get us as far as the driver, but they are more precise. Knowing which iron to use at the right time is essential to reaching the green, and it changes from person to person. My friend Tom Joseph could wack a 4-iron over 200 yards. Me, if I get 125 yards from it, I'm happy. But if you know how you hit your clubs, you can play a good game.

In terms of evangelism, the irons are the step of cultivating friendships with unbelievers. It's taking the initiative to get to know people outside your current circles and becoming more deeply acquainted with those you already know. In gardening terms, this is the step of watering the seeds that we planted last week. When people are farthest away from God, physical support makes an impact. When they've gotten a little closer to God, we provide emotional and relational support through friendship. Statistically, 90% of all people who become Christians were people who first came to church because a friend invited them to come.

As with everything we do in the name of Jesus Christ, we need support from Scripture. Matthew 11 this morning spelled out the complaint of the religious leaders against Jesus. Jesus was the friend of tax collectors and sinners. He didn't approve of everything they had done. But He hung out with ordinary people who were drawn to Him and desired to know God. He valued friendships even outside the disciples – Mary and Martha and Lazarus, to name just a few.

What's more, in John 15 this morning, He called the disciples His friends. This was unheard of in the ancient world; a teacher was never considered His pupil's friend. Yet Jesus paid no attention. He chose them; He lived with them for three years; He taught them the ways of the Father. They were His friends. By loving one another and following His commands, they remained His friends. Jesus was a friend to many, and He extends an invitation to us to become His companions. Once we become His friends, we make that invitation to others on His behalf.

Now it sounds easy enough; go make some friends and bring them to church. Easy, right? But we all know that's not the case. It's hard to make friends, particularly when people seem different from us. And so we're going to talk about ways that we can learn how to make friendships for Christ that will last and will be a strong witness to Him.

Our passage from Romans gives us some answers to our questions how to cultivate friendships for the Kingdom of God. We're going to look at two of those today. First, *we must set ourselves aside to be a true friend*. In our reading from Romans 12, we heard Paul tell us these things: "Honor one another above yourselves...rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn...do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited." Everything that Paul is telling us points to selflessness. Now true friendship goes both ways; you get to know somebody else and they get to know you. But most worldly friendships occur because we happen to be on parallel paths, not because we want to really know somebody else; maybe we like the same things or have the same hobby or a mutual acquaintance. But being a real friend goes beyond our similarities.

If the driver is all about active kindness, the iron is all about active listening. To honor other people based on their being created in the image of God, we actively listen to them without immediately bringing ourselves into the picture -- judging them or jumping to conclusions. We listen to find out what God is already doing in their lives. We remember that God still works in those who are far away from Him, and we want to continue that work rather than damage it.

Consider this story...a couple of female Campus Crusade for Christ staffers were at a conference about active listening. That night, they went back to their hotel and got in the whirlpool. A couple of teens joined them, and one started talking about a Wiccan gathering she was planning to go to. That immediately set the Christians on edge; they wanted to say, "Don't you know that's wrong?" Wicca is neo-paganism, with magic and rituals and really dark stuff. But instead of immediately condemning her, they said, "You seem really excited about it!" They were reflecting what they had heard back to her...not condoning, not condemning, just listening.

Suddenly, for five minutes she told about the awful things that had happened to her and how the Wiccans had accepted her. She said she'd been so messed up in high school, she'd be in therapy her whole life. One of the staffers reflected: "It's hard for you to imagine a life free of the pain you've experienced." The girl broke down right there, saying she wished she could be born again, using those exact words. They asked her again if that was what she wanted. It was what she wanted more than anything. A deep conversation about Jesus Christ sprang out of that. That young woman was far away from God, but two people just listening and engaging her in conversation without condemning or lecturing her made a radical difference in her life. The Campus Crusade folks still shared the truth with her, but listening to her bridged the gap.

How often do we do that? How often do we go into a relationship just to get to know the other person? My first reaction is to fix things. Broken air conditioner – fix it. Broken foot – fix it. Broken relationship – fix it. But the problem is, I can't fix people. God heals people, not me. I lead and guide folks to God through Scripture, and so can you. But we can't fix people. And there's nothing worse than being told I need to fix something I don't think is broken.

When I first arrived in Michigan, I went to a retreat that I was required to attend as a new pastor. There was a well-meaning man there in his late 20s who offered to be my mentor. He was confident he could steer me properly through my ministry career. This guy had known me all of five minutes! He didn't know if I had a mentor. He didn't know what ministry experience I'd had. The offer was incredibly presumptuous. To his credit, he was offering me friendship, something I wanted. But that friendship was being offered on *his* terms, based on *his* conjecture of what I needed and wanted in a friendship that was completely without any basis in reality. He believed I needed a fix I didn't see I needed, at least not from him.

I know he meant well. But it illustrates a big problem with building spiritual friendships, and that's impatience. As pastor John Ortberg puts it, we suffer from "spiritual attention deficit disorder." Often we have goals for a friendship we want to accomplish quickly, especially if we see something to fix in the other person. That impatience can show in our attitudes and the non-verbal queues we give. It can lead the other person to shut down.

When we are patient, we set ourselves aside to listen to the other person. We show genuine compassion by being present with them. Paul teaches in Romans 1 that every human being knows at a deep, maybe even unconscious level that God exists and they need to be reconciled to that God. We can eventually steer people to God, but they need to realize the problem before we present a solution. What you provide in friendship is safety – a safe person to discuss spiritual realities with. God is already doing the work of convincing them of the truth. We are there to give form and substance to that truth, pointing them to Scripture, helping them realize the desire for God that the Holy Spirit is manifesting in their hearts, and showing grace.

Remember how I said that you have a lot of irons in your bag to use at the right time? In the same way, active listening involves a variety of skills that reflect the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Peace – being a calming presence when you listen. Kindness – showing your thanks that someone is willing to share with you. Patience and self-control – letting the other person share without having to interject yourself into their story. Faithfulness – being able to assure them that you will remain a friend no matter what they say. These skills don't come easily; they come with practice, and they come with reliance on the Holy Spirit. But if you are willing to set yourself aside to really listen, they will begin to grow as you actively listen as the Spirit leads.

Our readings from today also point us to the second part of cultivating godly friendships: *we set aside ourselves to listen, but we hold fast to Christ and His teaching*. As Paul writes in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." Because Christ lives in me, I am called to act on His behalf in the lives around me. In today's passages, we see two parallel messages. The first is to live in peace and harmony with one another without conceit or pride. The other is to live as Christ lived.

Romans this morning says, “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good...never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.” In our reading from John, Jesus said, “You are my friends if you do what I command...if you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love.” These passages clearly show our first allegiance is always to following God.

When we look at Jesus’ life, we see something extraordinary in His relationships with other people. He kept company with worldly people – fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes, the formerly demon possessed. The Pharisees criticized Him for it. But a strange thing happened. Rather than Him becoming like the company He kept, they became like Him. They were transformed and left their old lives behind. They encountered Jesus and were never the same.

The Christian who creates friendships with worldly people will find they have worldly habits and behaviors. No surprise! The difference is, we don’t engage in those behaviors to try to make them our friends; instead, we reflect Christ to them in our actions. All of us remember the desperate desire we had as teens to be accepted, to fit in, and some of us did really stupid things to be accepted. Christian friendship is the other end of the spectrum from that. We aren’t looking to create friendships for our own sake, for our own need to be loved. When we are friends with God, we know we have all the love and acceptance we could ever want or need, and we know that other believers are our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. We build friendships with those outside the Kingdom of God to shine God’s light into their lives and to invite them in.

Not all these friendships go well. Someone who wants to justify themselves may ask you to condone their actions or to join them. We don’t condemn them for their choices, but neither do we affirm them. Being salt and light to those around us means taking a stand and saying no to sin. Sometimes this will mean that people will see you as “that weird Christian guy” or the “church lady.” But your willingness to go against the grain and represent Christ to them may lead to further conversations where you explain why you have the hope you have in Jesus.

In his book *The Holiness of God*, theologian R.C. Sproul tells about a famous pro golfer who was invited to play a round with Gerald Ford, Jack Nicklaus, and Billy Graham. He was in awe. But when another pro asked him how it went afterwards, he stormed off to the driving range swearing and saying, “I don’t need Billy Graham stuffing religion down my throat.” He swatted a whole bucket of balls in a rage. After he’d finished, his friend asked, “Was Billy a bit rough on you out there?” Kind of embarrassed, he said, “No, he didn’t mention religion even once. I just had a bad day.” Billy Graham is so well known as a preacher and evangelist that just his presence had an effect on that golfer. None of us is Billy Graham, but when people know that you are a faithful Christian and will not compromise Him, it will make a difference. Sometimes it may result in anger; other times in teasing or ridicule. But you will be positioned to make a difference in your friends’ lives for the Kingdom of God.

Jesus extends the hand of not only forgiveness but friendship to us. For those of us who believe, we have the joyous privilege of extending that hand of friendship to a lost and hurting world. I encourage you to think on this thought this week – who can I befriend this week so that they might know the love of the Lord who saved me?