

***Irresistible Evangelism: Teeing Up***  
***By Jason Huff***  
***Isaiah 51:4-8, Acts 10:34-43, 1 Thessalonians 2:1-13***

Our final Scripture reading today is from 1 Thessalonians 2:1-13. Listen now to God's Word. "You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition. For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed -- God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else. As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember, brothers, 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. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory. And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe."

Evangelism has become a dirty word in our culture. In a society where tolerance is the only universal virtue, trying to change another person's point of view on *anything* is a big deal. When it comes to spiritual matters, it's even more so...our culture believes that all roads lead to heaven, so how can you be right and I be wrong? On the other hand, though, the core of our Christianity tells us that Jesus is the only way to know God and living faith in Him is the only way to receive eternal life. Sharing our faith with others is one of the direct commands Jesus gave us. We studied the core values of belief a few weeks ago, and we found that it's both the individual believer's job and the church's job to outreach to the lost and lead them to Christ. How do we reconcile these two irreconcilable ideas? My first thought was to just skip thinking about it at all and go play some golf. Excuse me for a minute, would you? (goes to get clubs)

Don't we all wish our problems would go away that simply? As I learned this summer, your spiritual problems follow you wherever you go...even to the golf range. But the good news is this...it turns out that the game of golf can actually help us in the process of sharing our faith with others around us. Through it, we're going to learn the tools of irresistible evangelism. And for those of you who don't play golf, we're going to use some gardening analogies too. That way, everybody can see that they have the tools to give Jesus' love away to others.

This week, our biggest job is getting onto the course with our bag of clubs and getting teed up ready to play. For you gardeners in the group, this week is like buying the mulch and digging the trowel and the gloves out of the closet. We are preparing ourselves for the task ahead of us. We're going to clear the obstacles out of the way so we can get to work.

I want to set your minds at ease right now that evangelism done right is not difficult and it isn't even all that intimidating. I want to tell you a story to get certain thoughts of evangelism out of your mind. A few of us from the church went to a recent Christian concert at DTE. Just as we were getting through the line to give our tickets to the gatekeeper, a very thin man in his late 60's, I'd guess, comes out of nowhere and starts talking to me about this cube he's got in his hand. He asks if I've seen one before. I said nope, not really wanting to start a conversation because we're about to go in, and I'm not sure if he wants money or a ticket or what. He starts opening it up and showing me all these pictures about the life of Christ and talking about it. "What do you think?" he asked. I said, "That's pretty neat." "No, it's not!" he replied, as if "pretty neat" was an insult. "It's *awesome!* Every child in the world ought to have one of these things. Do you go to church?" I told him I did, and that in fact I was the pastor here. By this time, we're all inside the gate. Out of the blue, his next question is, "Do you immerse people when you baptize?" I said, "No." He said, "Oh. Well, I guess you do what you know until the Spirit teaches you better." Now by this time I was hot. I was loading up my theological cannons and was all ready to fire, KABOOM! But by then he's already ten feet away, bugging some other poor soul about his witnessing cube.

That's why people hate evangelism. I knew what the guy was doing and I'm a fellow believer and *I* hated it. Not only did this guy not know me from Adam, he didn't really care to know me. I wasn't a friend to be made; I was a target, a potential notch on his convert belt. If that kind of witnessing was evangelism, I'd say in the most literal way possible – to hell with it. In my research over a couple of months, I've read the good, the bad, and the ugly on evangelism. I'm going to tell you right now that this is not the way to do it. There is a better way. There's a way we see modeled in the Bible. It's work, sometimes hard work, sometimes painful work, but it's not difficult, it's effective, and it actually glorifies God.

Sharing your faith on a personal level and asking someone if they've made a commitment to Jesus Christ is appropriate...at the right place and the right time. It's one part of our toolbox, but not the only tool. (pulls out club) This is my putter. What happens when you try to use your putter on the tee? You'd be lucky to go twenty yards, right? What happens when you try to harvest your tomatoes in May? You don't get any tomatoes in May *or* August, right? You've got to learn what tools to use at the right time. In golf, there are four major kinds of clubs. There's the drivers, the irons, the wedges, and the putter. On a long par 5, you're going to be using each one along the way. If you're getting a crop of veggies ready, first you've got to plant the seeds. Then you've got to water them. You've got to fertilize them and tend them. Then at the right time, you harvest.

All of these tools apply to different parts of each person's life. We have physical needs – food and drink and clothing and shelter, and work is closely linked to them. We have emotional and relational needs – I need friends and family and people I can be close to. We have directional needs – I need to know what paths to follow. And we have spiritual needs – I need to know if there is a God out there and if He loves me or even likes me or expects anything of me. As Christians, we believe that God provides all of those things, and many of them He provides through us, through believers who act as His ambassadors and who've been given the tools to help. Over the next few weeks, we're going to see how we can use these tools so that we might see that every single one of us can help someone who's far from God come into His Kingdom.

Today's passage tells us a lot about how Paul witnessed to the church in Thessaloniki. It gives us the basic ground rules for play. Just like when you tee up on a course, if you're going to play well, you've got to know where the water hazards are and what's considered out of bounds. When you garden, you need to know the ground where you're planting before you start. Paul states the ground rules that showed why his ministry to the church was legitimate. And the first ground rule is this: *no lying allowed*. This seems so obvious, but there are two ways that lying is often used by people who are trying to evangelize. The first one is trying to deceive people into having a discussion with you about spiritual things. One book I read which will go nameless encouraged readers to go out to a mall and tell people that you're doing a survey on religious beliefs as a way to start a conversation. You ask them what they think and then you show them why what they're thinking is wrong and go from there. It can work to start a conversation. *But it's wrong!* It's a lie. The same guy would go up to somebody with a tract, with a little pamphlet about some spiritual concept and say to a random person, "Did you get one of these?" Well, of course they didn't! The answer is always "no" because he'd not given them one. It may not be a lie, but it's still deceptive. Paul says directly, "For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you." Real evangelism doesn't use trickery to start a conversation.

There's another side to this ground rule, a trap that we're much more likely to fall into – the twin lies of cheap grace and the wonderful life. These lies go together, and they may work in the short term and get people to make a commitment to Christ; a lot of really big churches teach them. But they eat away at a person's faith when they are proven false. The lie of cheap grace says that you can do anything you want and have anything you want just so long as at some point in your life, you say a prayer and give your life to Jesus...you can have forgiveness without repentance and confession and discipleship. The lie of the wonderful life says that if you give your life to Jesus, you will have a great life right now; everything bad will go away and you'll be happy. Sometimes we want to believe these lies because they would make life a whole lot simpler. We'd like them to be true because it would make our job of sharing the gospel a hundred times easier. But discipleship, following Jesus with real faith, is hard work that requires us to give every part of our lives over to Him. We have to confess our sins to God and turn away from them. And doing that gives us no promises of an easy life. If anything, the Christian life is more difficult – Jesus wasn't joking when He said that we'd have to take up our own crosses daily to follow Him. The deeper reality is that suffering and pain and sacrifice is a part of the true Christian life – but there's also a joy unspeakable of knowing that we are forgiven and set free from sin, and knowing that we will spend eternity with the One who made us and loves us with an unfathomable love. When we evangelize, we aren't going to lie. Period.

Here's the second ground rule we learn from Paul: *we don't do it to further our bottom line*. In our passage, Paul says, "You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed." He goes on to comment, "Surely you remember, brothers, 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." This doesn't mean that Paul never earned a living from his work or never received support from other believers while he was sharing the gospel. It means that he never taught the gospel expecting payment for doing so. This was standard in the ancient world; philosophers and rabbis were paid for their teaching. Paul didn't do this. He was a tentmaker, and he worked so that he could show those he taught that he wasn't doing it for their money.

The way that we evangelize must always have at its root the love of God and not the potential for money for the congregation. I know in these difficult financial times it can be hard to hear, but when we reach out to the lost, we should never see them as a potential giver, only as a potential follower of Jesus Christ. If there's one thing the average American unbeliever thinks about the church as a whole, it's that the church wants their money. There are a lot of people, sadly, who think that the whole religion thing is about money and power, and in some circumstances they are right. Paul knew that and made certain that it was never an issue. We have to make sure it is never an issue too.

I say this up front because the tools we're going to learn about evangelism over the next four weeks aren't made to take people right from a conversation outside the church building to a seat inside it. Some of the techniques we are going to explore aren't worried about what church people wind up in at all. Other techniques, you'll see that they take time and effort and require a long-term commitment on our part to another person well before they even think of walking in the front door. We are going to be honest and transparent enough with people that if they really don't fit in here well for whatever reason, we are going to work to find them a church home where they do fit. It's because the state of a person's soul is what matters to us, not the state of their wallet.

Does that mean that money doesn't matter? Of course not! But what it means is that we who are already believers are the ones tasked with providing for the needs of the congregation. We have to believe that God is faithful to His word and will provide for those of us who are already here, those who are the foundation of this church, with enough to sustain its ministries. Faith and trust have to be exercised; otherwise, how do you know they are even there? We must exercise our faith that God will give us the funds to outreach and to grow through those who are already committed to Him and His work at Church of the Covenant. God may surprise us all. But it's a ground rule: we as a church do not exist for ourselves but for others, and we will reach out and show love whether or not we see a dime from anyone we touch with the good news.

Here's the last ground rule from our passage today: *faithful evangelism comes from a deep commitment to risk live life together with those whom God has entrusted to us.* In our passage, Paul says it this way: "We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us." He says that he and his friends treated the Thessalonians gently "like a mother caring for her little children" and like a father who encourages and comforts his own children while urging them "to live lives worthy of God." This was not a job for Paul, and it went well beyond the bonds of even everyday friendship. Paul and his companions committed their lives to the pursuit of seeing the Thessalonians enter the Kingdom of God.

They were simply following the example set by Jesus himself, who spent three full years with His disciples, nurturing them, teaching them, even rebuking them when necessary. And let's be honest – after three full years, when He was arrested and crucified, they all left him. They still had doubts even after the resurrection. It wasn't until the Holy Spirit came upon them that they really finally understood and followed Him fully. Jesus sacrificed everything that was by rights His as the Son of God so that He could save us – and not only that, He sacrificed earthly comforts to minister to the sick and to preach to the lost.

As C.S. Lewis put it, “If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don’t recommend Christianity.” The tools of evangelism we are going to learn are actually going to be pretty comfortable to use – they won’t be all that intimidating, and we won’t be embarrassed to use them. You won’t have to start up a strained conversation with a stranger. But it’s going to take an investment of your time and your self that hasn’t necessarily been asked of you before. To befriend people and really get personal with them takes hard work – not difficult work, necessarily, but hard work that requires pouring yourself into others. Modeling the Christian life isn’t something we are supposed to do anonymously; nobody out in the world knows that your peace or your joy or your kindness comes from Christ unless you’re in a relationship with them. For them to know, it requires relationship. *All* the tools we’re going to learn are going to be ways to help those outside of God’s Kingdom build a relationship with Him, and that’s going to mean building relationships with us.

It also means being open to risk. I don’t mean daredevil risk or rash stupidity. I mean emotional risk. There will be some people who will tell you they aren’t interested, no matter how nice or friendly or unthreatening you are. They may be others who you build relationships with that will stretch your comfort zones, who may not look like you or act like you or are from another generation from you, with different attitudes and ways of thinking. Jesus appeals to people who are hurting, but hurting people can be difficult to deal with, especially when in their pain they lash out. To model Christ to them, you may find yourself on a path of suffering. This isn’t to scare you; it’s to be honest. Living life transparently and openly with other people can be hard.

So why do it? Why risk? We could ask the same of a lot of other things that we do. Why get married? There’s a lot of risk there, but there’s great reward with great risk. Four guys from Liverpool risked making a go of a band before their different personalities erupted and they split up less than eight years after they started recording – they were the Beatles. Martin Luther risked tacking up his concerns about the wayward theology of the church of his day on the Wittenberg door and started the Reformation. Every day, we take risks, little risks we don’t even think about. This risk, the risk of really living out the Christian faith, building relationships and sharing of ourselves so that others might know the salvation of Jesus, is a real one. But it’s one that has eternal rewards. What will your legacy on earth be? Will it be just having kept Christ to yourself, or will there be a crowd of hundreds or thousands to greet you in heaven to thank you for sharing Christ with others? Will Jesus be ashamed of your witness on earth, or will He say, “Well done, good and faithful servant”? That’s a choice each one of us has to make.

Next week, we’ll start looking at specific ways to reach out. But my challenge to you this week is to pray. Pray boldly. Pray that God would open your heart up to people around you in your neighborhood and the places you go. Pray that He would give you His heart for people. Pray that He would give you the courage to risk in order to bring others to Christ. And if you’ve never felt the need to share your faith with someone else because you yourself haven’t made a personal commitment to Christ, I encourage you...do it today. Pray that God would take away anything that’s getting between you and Him so that He might use you as His witness to the little corner of the world He has given to you to reach for Him. When we do that, I believe God will spark a fire in us that will not be quenched until we have done His will and shared Him with our world.