

"The Single Greatest Gift"
Matthew 5:13-16
Series: *Just Walk Across the Room*
Sunday, January 13, 2007
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Today is the first in our series based upon Bill Hybels' book, *Just Walk Across the Room*. By studying this book, by talking about it, we are learning about everyone's favorite subject, Evangelism. (Silence) And I hear the thunderous applause.

Yes, indeed. We all have some reaction to the word Evangelism. For some it might be positive. For others, it is going to be negative. To be perfectly honest with you, I have been to seminary. I have been trained in Evangelism. And, still, the word can make me tense up. But, I hope, that if you take part in this study and read the book, it will radically change the way that you look at Evangelism. Because, Evangelism can be as easy as walking across the room. That is something that every one of us can do. It is something that we all have the ability to do and it is important.

We have just come out of the Christmas season. A season of giving, a season in which we, as Christians, celebrate the coming of Jesus, the great gift, God's gift to us. The fact of the matter is this, the greatest gift that we, as Christ followers, can offer to anyone is an introduction to God. An introduction to the God who created us, the God who loves us and the God who has a plan and a purpose for our lives. That is the greatest gift that we have to offer. That is the greatest gift that can be offered, to introduce someone to the God who created them and loves them and has a purpose and plan for their life.

But, how do we do that? The fact of the matter is, in order to introduce someone to the God who created them, in order to introduce someone to the God who loves them, we actually have to be willing to step into the "zone of the unknown." Now, that sounds like a clever little phrase. And it is. But, it is something we are all familiar with. Wherever we go, whatever we are doing, whether we are at church, or work, or a social engagement, or a sporting event, we tend to hang out in our "comfort zone", with those people that we already know, that we already like, that we already feel comfortable with. That is our comfort zone. But, in order to introduce someone to the God we serve, we have to be willing to step out of that comfort zone, to notice someone who is not within that circle of comfort. Someone who may be on the fringe, may be outside our group.

In his book, Bill Hybel's talks about his son's soccer league and how, when he would go to his son's games, there would be a lot of other people from his church whose kids were also in this league. They would tend to hang out together. One day after a game, he noticed that his son's coach was all by himself out on the field cleaning up the equipment, putting the balls away. There was someone outside of his comfort zone. He had been ready to walk off the field with his group of friends when he noticed the coach by himself. For Bill it was just stepping out to help the coach put away the soccer balls. It can be as easy as that.

Now the scripture we just read reminds us that Jesus said we are the salt of the earth. Now salt is a preservative but salt also adds flavor. Perhaps more than that, salt enhances the flavor that already exists. The problem is, that in order for salt to do what salt does, it actually has to come in contact with something. It has to come in contact with the food, otherwise, if it just stays in the salt shaker, it is useless. In the same way, we, as the salt of the earth, in order to add flavor, in order to be in any way effective, we have to come in contact with someone. That is what this whole idea is about. It is making contact, developing relationships. Because we are the salt of the earth.

I had not really thought of it in this context before, but several weeks ago I shared a little bit with you about my history. I grew up in a Christian home, going to church every Sunday, involved in Sunday School and Youth Group. . . all sorts of church activities. Then I went to college where I decided to do other things. Things that I wanted to do. Things that I thought would be fun or enjoyable or bring me a sense of fulfillment. And, I ran from God. Now, occasionally I would go to church but my heart was far from God. When I graduated from college, I was an English major so I knew that I was going to have to go to graduate school and something else, but I was not ready to continue with school. So, I took a year off and strangely enough through the Volunteer in Missions program of the Presbyterian Church, ended up in San Jose, California, working with the homeless. For about a month and a half I lived in a homeless shelter that was run by the ministry I was volunteering for.

That month and a half was a low point in my life, and not just because I was living in a homeless shelter. A number of things happened that just left me at a very low point emotionally. I was thousands of miles away from my family and friends and anybody I had known previously. I knew at that point there was something not right with my life. Something was missing but I was not really sure what it was.

Toward the end of that month, a new guy was hired by the ministry to be one of the overnight staff people at the shelter. Jim Stone. Because I was living at the shelter, in the evening Jim and I had plenty of time to talk after dinner and as the guys were doing whatever evening activity we had planned or as they were getting ready for bed. We had time to just sit and talk. And, that is what we did, we talked. Guy talk. Any sporting event that happened recently or music or where we were from, what we were hoping to do in the future. Just chit chat. But, we developed a relationship. We got to know each other. We became friends.

One day Jim said to me, "I'm a Christian and I'm new in the area and I've been looking around at churches but I haven't found one that I really feel settled in yet. I'm planning to go to this church on Sunday, would you like to come along?" I had nothing else to do on Sunday, so I said, "Sure, why not." As it turned out, there were four of us who went that Sunday.

That Sunday changed the course of my life. That Sunday put me back on the path of faith, brought me back to God. Now, notice, Jim did not quote me any scripture. He did not have any grand theological arguments. He did not spend a lot of time in Bible study with me. He just sat with me, we talked, we became friends and when an opportunity arose, he asked the question, "Would you like to come with me to church on Sunday?" Because of that question, because he took the initiative, my life was changed. That is what we are talking about. It is just taking the time to notice someone else, to spend time with them, to take interest in them, to begin a relationship.

How do we know when to do this? Well, a lot of it is based on the prompting of the Holy Spirit. A little nudge from the Holy Spirit saying look over there, look there is somebody sitting alone, maybe you should just introduce yourself. Sometimes, it is very subtle. Sometimes it is not so subtle. Somebody comes up to you and begins asking you about your faith. It is just a little nudging. But, we have to be willing to pay attention to that nudging.

I know for me, reading Bill's story about the soccer coach, I thought of going to my daughter's softball games and how, very often at the end of the game, I am in a rush. I am ready to go. I am telling Devyn to throw her stuff in the bag, let's get in the car, we are out of here. But, who knows what opportunities I have missed by wanting to rush along with the rest of my evening.

Being willing to be open to God's Spirit, being willing to respond when we feel that little nudge, why would we want to do this? Why would we want to be open? The Word tells us that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Now, think about that for a minute. While we

were still sinners, while we were engaged in running from God, while we were engaged in behaviors that were wrecking our lives, doing things which were displeasing to God, in the midst of that, Christ died for us.

You might think about it a different way. If we were perfect, if we had it all together, if we had a great relationship with God and always responded when he called and lived good lives and loved everybody we came contact with and did all the things that we ought to do, Jesus would not have had to come and die. Jesus came because of our sin. He knew every sin that we would ever commit and he died to pay the penalty for them all. We do not have to clean ourselves up in order to come to God, God knows all what we have done and all that we will do. He knows that we cannot clean ourselves up and that is why Jesus came.

That is the message that we have to get out there, to let people know that they do not have to get themselves right before they walk through our doors. They do not have to clean themselves up before they come to God. That is the whole purpose of needing a Savior. We cannot do it ourselves. In order to get that word out, we have to make contact. We have to walk across the room and introduce ourselves. It may take time. We may build a relationship for weeks or months or years before we can even get them inside the door of a church, before we are comfortable sharing a little bit of our faith. We may invite them to church and get rejected. But, that is okay. Continue to build the relationship. Back off of the church invitation but continue to build the relationship.

At some point, they are going to hit some sort of obstacle in their life and very often, when people hit crisis, they begin to realize that all the people that they usually hang out with, all the people that they would normally go to are pretty much in the same situation they are in, have the same perspective that they have and it is just not helpful. But, then, they might remember you and the fact that you seem to see things a little differently. You have something they do not have. You may find that they come to you and say, "I know that you invited me to church a while ago and I really was not into it then, but now things are going on in my life and could you tell me a little bit about what this whole church thing is about?" It is about building relationships. About stepping out of our comfort zone to walk across the room and introduce ourselves.

In Phillipians 2:6-8 it says this about Jesus, "*who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!*" What that is really saying is that Jesus, who you might say was in the greatest comfort zone you could imagine. He was part of the trinity, in the kingdom of God, in the throne room of God, in perfect communion with the Father and the Spirit, His circle of comfort. At the prompting of the father, he looked out of his comfort zone and he saw us outside the kingdom of God and he stepped out. He took the longest walk across the room going from God to human flesh so he might reach out his hand and say, "Hi, my name is Jesus," that he might show us the God who loves us. What he asks us to do is the same thing, to step out of our comfort zone, walk across the room and say hello. That is all it takes. It is just a little walk.

Now, I want you to think for a moment about how you came into the kingdom of God. Was there somebody who helped you along the way? Was there somebody who gave you a hand of friendship, led you along the way? When you came in, you should have received a postcard. I want you to think about that person who had an affect on you, that person who reached out to you and helped you along the road to God's kingdom. Sometime this week, I would like you to take this post card and write them a little note thanking them for the affect they had on your life. Thanking them for being sensitive to that nudging of the Holy Spirit and encouraging them to keep following God, to keep striving to be a 'walk across the room' Christian. Now if for any reason you are no longer in contact with that person, if you can think of

someone else that you know of that represents this kind of 'walk across the room' Christianity. Someone who seems to always be open to the nudging of the Holy Spirit and open to starting new relationships with people outside of their comfort zone and write them a note of encouragement and send this post card to them. While you are doing that, I would encourage you to pray for them. To pray that God would continue to work in their lives, that his spirit would be evident in their lives. And, pray for yourself, as well, that you, too, might be open to God's nudgings, that you might be open to being available for God to use you and just walk across the room. Amen.