

Introduction

Colossians 4:5-6 + 1 Peter 3:13-17. (pg 50 – *Lent Guide*). **Pray.**

James. A couple of years ago I had a conversation with a friend of mine that left a lasting imprint on me. For the sake of this story we'll call him James.

Over the course of a couple of years of friendship and a lot of conversations and questions (see last week), I had become pretty familiar with James' story. James grew up in the church, was raised in the teachings of Jesus, but a number of different situations in his life led him to a place of deep questioning and doubt early in his 20s.

- He was wrestling with – what do I believe about this whole Jesus thing and what does that mean for my life?
- After a season of wrestling, James decided to walk away from Jesus altogether.

And I was curious. Here we were, a couple of decades removed, and I wanted to know what had driven James to that point.

- After all, many people wrestle with questions and doubts, and don't abandon their faith.
- Many come out on the other side more in love with Jesus, more eager to live in the reality of His Kingdom.

But not James. James wrestled and left. And so I wanted to know **why**. What happened? Was there a proverbial straw that broke the camel's back of James' faith?

And finally he told me. One day, while living with a host family on the other side of the globe, James had a realization. He described it as his sort of "lightbulb moment" – ***These people I am staying with, and all around me in this foreign country, who have no relationship with the Christian God, seem to be happier and more moral than the majority of the Christians I grew up with back home.***

And according to James, that was it. He left the faith, and 20+ years later has never returned.

Now what I find so heartbreaking about James' story, and why it has stuck with me over the years, is that I don't think James is alone.

Let me explain.

- Many of us are probably well aware of the narrative about the "decline of American Christianity."
 - Church membership has dropped by 20% in the US in the last 20 years.
 - Every generation, starting with baby boomers, is about 6-8% less Christian than the generation prior.

We've heard the stats and we've heard the narrative – society is becoming more and more secular, and more and more accepting of attitudes and behaviors at odds with historically orthodox Christianity. The Bible's teachings on morality are outdated and oppressive and just not up to speed with modern times. So of course less and less people are going to be interested in Jesus and His Church.

"The problem," we could say, "is that the way of Jesus is viewed as too morally demanding for the average American."

And to be sure, sometimes that's the case.

But to view it that way would be to miss this whole other story of what I think is happening. A story like James, where many of our family, friends, and neighbors, and coworkers are leaving the Church (or just never approaching it), not because it is too moral, but because it isn't moral enough.

In the words of cultural critic and theologian **Russell Moore**:

“The problem is not that people think the church’s way of life is too demanding, too morally rigorous, but that they have come to think the church doesn’t believe its own moral teachings [...] We are losing a generation—not because they are secularists, but because they believe we are.”

Or consider the words of writer and columnist Ben Sixmith:

I am not religious, so it is not my place to dictate to Christians what they should and should not believe. Still, if someone has a faith worth following, I feel that their beliefs should make me feel uncomfortable for not doing so. If they share 90 percent of my lifestyle and values, then there is nothing especially inspiring about them. Instead of making me want to become more like them, it looks very much as if they want to become more like me.

Likely without knowing it, Ben is actually hitting on a theme in the teachings of Jesus who said, speaking to His followers, “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.”

So if James’ story is true (which it is), and if Russell Moore and Ben Sixmith and Jesus are right (which I think they are)... **than one of the reasons why many have and will reject the teachings of Jesus, are not because of the teachings, but because of the lack of following his teachings by those who would claim to be his disciples.**

Which means... and here’s what we’ll get into today, is that one of the reasons many may be drawn **TO** the teachings of Jesus is by Christians following them in robust, flourishing, repentant when we fail, counter-cultural ways.

That a huge part of us living on mission is learning to **demonstrate the good news of Jesus through our everyday lives.**

That the way we go about the ordinary, mundanity of our days and weeks...would put Jesus on display.

Colossians 4 + 1 Peter 3

To further consider this idea, turn with me to **Colossians 4**. I want to show you an argument that both Paul and Peter are making in these two passages.

Colossians 4:5-6

5 Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. 6 Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

1 Peter 3:14-16

14 But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, 15 but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect...

Last week, we talked about how a lot of mission is learning how to ask good questions.

- To engage our non-Christian neighbors and friends and coworkers with a loving curiosity – wanting to learn more about where they're coming from, and how they view God, the world, and their lives.
- Looking for opportunities to share the good news of Jesus.

But this week we find out in these two passages that part of mission is not just questioning peoples' answers, but also answering people's questions.

Sidebar on Apologetics

Now when I say “answering non-Christian’s questions”, your mind may immediately start going to what Christians call the *practice of apologetics*.

If you've never heard of that term before, let me explain.

- Apologetics comes from the Greek term “apologia” – which means a *reasonable defense of the faith*.
 - It's a practice within Christianity where we learn how to answer common questions that others may ask about our faith – how do we defend what it is we claim to believe.
- “Apologia” is actually the word Peter uses in 3:15 when he says “make a *defense*”...make an *apologia*.

Now, just for the record, I think apologetics is very important.

- I know that for some of us, this is the greatest barrier to us having confidence to go share the gospel.
- We are worried about some of the questions we might get in response and unsure we'd be able to answer them.
- Questions like:
 - How can you trust the Bible?
 - How do you explain all the wrongs caused by the church?
 - How can a loving God send good people to hell?
- ****If not knowing the answers to questions like those are a barrier to your confidence in sharing the gospel – let me give you some homework.**
 - citizenscharlotte.com/classes
 - Apologetics 101. It's a class we taught 2 years ago.
 - Watch all of them, at least watch session 2.

Demonstrating the Gospel

However, that's not where I want to focus our attention today. Instead, I want to see what Paul and Peter say are leading to the questions. What is going on that is making people who don't follow Jesus ask questions.

Very simply, it's the way Christians are living.

The way that they are going about their everyday lives as followers of Jesus are causing those around them to ask questions.

- For example, **Colossians 4**. Look at what he says in v5 – **Walk in wisdom...**
 - In the Scriptures, the idea of “wisdom” is not simply knowing a lot of stuff.
 - Wisdom in the Bible is knowing the right thing to do and then actually doing it.
 - Living a life congruent with God's commands and design.
 - So Paul says be wise in how you live. Be intentional in the way you carry yourself and go about your life, even and especially around those who don't yet follow Jesus.
- And then in **1 Peter 3** it says in v15 – **in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy...**

- In Greek and Hebrew thought, the heart wasn't just your emotional or sentimental side.
- The heart, or *kardia*, was the operating center of your entire being.
 - Your thinking, your feeling, your living – everything about you flowed from “the heart”.
- So we might say something like “honor Christ as Lord with everything you've got.” or ...”with every fiber of your being.”

So in both passages, the idea is that how you and I go about our lives is a way to demonstrate to the world the good news of the gospel by living in such a distinct and compelling way, that people would ask questions.

- That our faith in Jesus would actually affect our lives in such a way that we live beautifully and flourishing under God's rule and reign.
- And then, if we do that often enough, and are living in close enough relationships with non-Christians, that will eventually raise questions about why we live that way.
 - People should look at our lives and think “that's different.”
 - That's different from how I think about my life.
 - That's different from how I think about my relationships, my money, my sexuality, my time, my career, my possessions.
 - How I go about my days and how they go about theirs, is just not the same.
 - *I wonder why they do that, made that decision, live that way?*
- And those questions, when they come up, are prime opportunities to give people an answer about the “reason for the hope” that we have...aka to talk with people about Jesus.

Demonstrating the gospel creates opportunities to proclaim the gospel.

Peter even alludes to this right before the passage we read earlier...

1 Peter 2:12 – Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

Or consider the words of **William Lane Craig**, who is a leading teacher and thinker in Christian apologetics...

“More often than not, it is what you are rather than what you say that will bring an unbeliever to Christ. This, then, is the ultimate apologetic. For the ultimate apologetic is: your life.”

In other words – one of the greatest resources you have at your disposal to help others know Jesus is your life and the way that you live it.

Three Ways to Demonstrate the Gospel

Because – our lives preach. But let me take this a step further – how do they preach?

How might we demonstrate the gospel in our lives?

How might our lives be so shaped by the gospel that those around us might be curious to know more?

I think these two passages give us three ways.

1. How we love non-Christians

One of the primary ways we can put the gospel on display is through how we treat those who don't believe the gospel.

Look back at **Col 4:5** – **“Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time.”**

There’s something about how we treat “outsiders” – which is just NT language for those not a part of the people of God – that says something about Jesus. How we treat non-Christians is a way to put the gospel on display.

And just to be honest with you, this bar is SO low right now for us as Christians...

Right now, if people in your life know that you’re a Christian, here’s what they’re likely expecting you to be:

- Condescending
- Self-righteous
- Yelling about politics all of the time
- And generally hateful.

That’s what people are expecting you to be. Do you realize how low that bar is?! If you can somehow manage to be a humble, kind, friendly person to people half of the time – you will likely exceed all expectations that most people have for you. I mean I don’t know about you, but to me, that feels somewhat achievable. I don’t think it has ever been easier to stand out and be different.

I think about my friend Peter I shared about last week – “When we met, I thought we weren’t going to be friends because you’re a pastor. But you’re actually nice to me.”

- It’s like – that’s it. That’s the bar. I was nice to you?
- So just being a kind person is a way to put Jesus on display?

But how about taking it one step farther – what about love? What about sacrifice? What about service?

- What about offering babysitting or starting a meal train for the new parents across the street who need a break?
- What about texting your coworker who you know had a big presentation, to let them know you’re praying for them and are here if they want to practice or talk about it?
- What about taking time to ask questions and hear what’s going on in your friend’s life?
- What about sacrificial generosity to a neighbor in need?

We can put the gospel on display through simple acts of sacrificial love.

Now, do we stand up for what we believe in? Yes, absolutely.

Are we unapologetic about God’s design for flourishing and what that means for our lives? Of course.

Kindness does not = total affirmation.

But, even as Paul says in Col 4:6 – our speech being gracious, seasoned with salt – how we treat, serve, love, talk to non-Christians in our lives has a powerful way of putting the gospel on display.

2. How we face suffering

1 Peter is a letter written to a persecuted suffering church – having their lives and livelihoods threatened because of their belief in Jesus. And Peter is writing to encourage them – even when you suffer, do not be afraid, do not shrink back, hold fast to God.

And then what can come of this – **always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.**

- People asking you – *“What kind of hope do you have that you face suffering like this?”*

It's worth asking – would people see how you suffer and be curious why you have so much hope?

Or do you suffer like the world? Do you, in the words of 1 Thess 4 – “Mourn as the world mourns.”

- Cynical, bitter, angry.
- Or do you mourn with hope? Grieving, yes. But bringing that grief before God with trust.

Suffering well. Suffering with hope in front of your non-Christian friends can be an incredible witness and demonstration of the good news of Jesus.

Miscarraige. Lindsay, my wife, was a beautiful example of this this past fall. When we walked through the suffering of our miscarriage, and the pain of that loss, one of the things Lindsay kept saying during the whole time of mourning and grief and lament was – “It feels like God has been holding onto me, when I couldn’t hold on to him.”

And when the Lord started giving us some healing, one of the things she was set on was letting this suffering not be wasted. And so she wrote down some of her prayers from that season, and sent it to many of our friends, including our friends who don’t know Jesus.

And to be honest with you, I was nervous. I’m the opposite of an over-sharer. I’m a never-sharer. We’ve been working on it a lot, God has been faithfully growing me. But it was such an encouragement to see how set she was on – how God carries us through suffering, and us suffering well by the power of the Spirit – is going to put the gospel on display, both to our Christian friends and our non-Christian friends.

Now for you, it may not look like it did for us, but it’s worth asking – *What does how you suffer say about Jesus to the watching world? Would people see how you walk through suffering and be curious why you have so much hope?*

And there’s two parts of this:

First, do you let any non-Christians into your suffering?

- When your coworker walks by, and asks genuinely – “How are you?” – How do you respond?
 - “Fine.” “Living the dream *deep sigh*.”
 - Do you share about the real stuff going on in your life?

But second, do you suffer well and with hope?

- Meaning – if you are honest with them about how you’re doing, does your experience of suffering just sound like everyone else?
 - Gripping about work, marriage, kids.
 - Without hope? Without joy?
 - Without Godward trust.
 - Without proper lament – bringing our grief and pain to the Lord, and trusting not in some fixed circumstance or soon to be resolution but in God Himself as our portion?

Suffering with hope puts the gospel on display.

3. How we strive for holiness

1 Peter 3:16 says it this way, I really like the NLT version – **Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ.**

What a good life you live, because you belong to Christ.

That is holiness. I belong to Christ, so therefore I live for Him. I do not live as the world lives. I do what King Jesus commands me to do, and I do not do what King Jesus commands me not to do.

The base definition of holiness is to be “**set apart** or **distinct** from the world, and for God.”

So...is your life **distinct**? Or, let me ask it this way – **Does your life make sense to the non-Christians around you?**

If your non-Christian neighbor or friend looked at your life and compared it to theirs, would they see any difference besides what you do from 9:30am-11am on Sunday mornings or 7pm-9pm on Wednesday nights? Is that the only way you're different – 4 hours out of your 168 each week?

Our striving for holiness, for a Godly and Godward life, puts the gospel on display.

In a sense – the invitation is to live “winsomely weird”. Weird in a good way, weird in the best way. Weird in a “I want to be holy and set apart for God, sort of way.”

Would you be willing to be a little bit weird for the gospel?

- What would it look like if your discernment around **cussing** was not “well the Bible doesn't explicitly say it's wrong,” or “who gets to decide what 4-letter words count.”
 - And instead we thought – “man, I wonder what a vocabulary free of what my culture thinks is a ‘bad word’ would say to those around me? Like, hey Tim doesn't cuss. That's kind of strange right? I wonder why that is.”
- What if the justification around watching certain **movies** was not “well I skip over ‘those parts’ and it's really a great critique of modern culture and after all it won an Oscar.”
 - And instead we thought – “I wonder what telling my neighbor I saw that movie might say to them about Jesus.”
- What if the conversation around **moving in together before marriage** was not “well the Bible doesn't explicitly say it's wrong.” or “Well, we're not sleeping together.”
 - And instead we thought – “I wonder what *not* moving in with my boyfriend or girlfriend might say to all of my non-Christian friends about the Jesus I worship.”
- **Or fill in the blank with whatever...**
 - **Generosity** – You rearranging your budget to sacrifice for the kingdom of God – to give to this church, to have excess to give to those around you when needs arise – that can put the gospel on display.
 - You want an easy entry into gospel conversation – “We can't afford that because a big part of our budget is set aside for generosity to our church.”
 - You want to blow somebody's mind – You trust a religious organization with money in 2024? Crazy! Winsomely weird.
 - **Community** – You reorienting other parts of your life (even BIG parts like your career or your housing situation) to be close to other Christians you're trying to follow Jesus together with. How winsomely weird is that in the loneliness epidemic of our age.
 - Just this week, I had a conversation with a member of our church who made a career decision that actually cost him 10s of thousands of dollars. But he said no because it required him to travel a lot and was getting in the way of his walk with Jesus and ability to invest in his church family.

- THAT'S BEAUTIFUL! And winsomely weird. What an opportunity to put the reality of the gospel on display.

We are called to be holy. Set apart for the Lord. Because, as the author of Hebrews says...

Hebrews 12:14 – Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

How many people? No one. In other words, the way that we live is so important to mission that without us living holy, distinct lives, Hebrews says no one will actually come to see who God is at all.

Demonstrating the gospel:

- How we love non-Christians
- How we face suffering
- How we strive for holiness

Three Quick Clarifiers

Three quick clarifiers then I'll close.

Clarifier #1 is that we're talking about distinctiveness, not perfection. God expects us to strive for holiness, and the good news of the gospel is that Jesus was holy for us. So that might mean that you follow Jesus well, and your neighbor sees the gospel through that. But it also might mean that sometimes your neighbor sees the gospel on display, not through how you lived, but how you repented when you failed to live as God has called you to live.

You can be distinct both in your striving for holiness, and your desperation for Jesus and His grace when you fail.

Clarifier #2 is that all of this whole idea assumes that you have friendships with people that don't follow Jesus. Like actual friendships. That you are living life closely enough with them for them to pick up on things in your life that are different. Right? Like if the most you ever talk to any non-believers is a disgruntled "morning" on your way into the office, chances are they aren't going to be able to notice areas in your life that are different from theirs. This whole idea from Colossians and 1 Peter assumes that you've taken the time and the effort to build friendships with people in your life who don't follow Jesus. So if you're not there yet, maybe start there.

Clarifier #3 is that even though the hope is that people see the way we live and ask questions, that's not the primary reason we live differently. The core reason we live differently is because Jesus is worth living differently. He's worth it. He is Lord. Jesus has demonstrated that he is infinitely worthy of anything we have to give up, anything we have to grow into, anything we have to sacrifice to become who he made us to be. The Old Testament makes it clear: we should be holy and distinct, because God is holy and distinct. Whatever it takes, whatever it costs, whatever it means, God is infinitely worth it because of who he is and what he's done for us. Everything we do is a response to that. And the hope is that along the way, that prompts some questions non-believers.

Practice Guide

Distinctiveness Inventory.

Pray.