

“Contagious—Part 1”

When you hear the word “contagious” what do you think of? You might think about some kind of illness that you don’t want **[PICTURE: Doctor with needle]**. Our staff and preschool kids and teachers and kids in so many of the schools this past week have gotten some bug. My wife Janet has been sick at home almost all week. Her doctor told her to stay home because what she has is very contagious. We hear about the AIDS epidemic world-wide, particularly in Africa, it’s contagious. Then there’s the scare about the avian flu. Health officials are worried about it mutating to infect humans and we’re so we’re working to develop vaccines.

Maybe your thoughts go in another direction when it comes to the word “contagious.” Maybe you’re thinking about things like discouragement. Talk about something that’s truly infectious! One discouraging person in a group, in a family, on a staff can bring everybody down. Anger can have the same effect. One angry person can contagiously infect dozens of others with their anger. And they can then do the same to dozens more.

There are plenty of negative directions we can go with that word “contagious” but let’s leave that behind and look at positive things that can be contagious. You know, joy is contagious. **[PICTURE: Joyful/laughing person]** When I’m around joyful people, I become more joyful myself. Todd Taylor, or Director of Children’s Ministries is a contagiously joyful person. You just want to be around him.

Laughter is also contagious. There are few things more intoxicating than when you get to laughing in a group of people. Encouragement is also contagious. I love being around encouraging people because I feel encouraged and then I’m ready to encourage someone else. And love is contagious. Jesus said, “Love one another as I have loved you.” He meant to infect us with his love so that we would in turn infect others with his love.

All these things are contagious, they spread from one person to another, to another, but the thing I want us to focus on that can be the most positive contagious force in the world, is our faith in Jesus Christ. You see, faith is caught and passed on, or at least that’s the way it’s meant to be. The Christian faith is not meant to be caught and kept to yourself. We should be ready to share it, we should have a contagious Christianity.

You need to know that you are a part of a church that is really, seriously devoted to reaching people who were outside the church—who were far from God, who are seekers. And I’ve given my life to that—to being a contagious Christian and leading a church that is contagious. So over these next few weeks, we’re going to look at how we can be contagious about our faith in Jesus, no matter where we are in our faith journey. And listen, if you’ve been a Christ-follower for years, or just starting out in your faith journey, or even if you’re just starting to ask questions and search out answers, you can be contagious about Christ.

So we’re going to be looking at ways that we can authentically, practically, and intentionally be contagious. But I want to first look at the question of why? “Why try to share our faith with others? Some people will say, “People will find their own way to God if they want to, won’t they? And we don’t want to be pushy? No body likes a pushy Christian. Isn’t faith a private matter?” Well, the fact is that if we’re going to call ourselves Christ-followers then we care about the people that God cares about.

You all get the same junk mail that Janet and I do every day. I seems like Janet and I are always battling piles of junk mail, so we try our best to go through the mail everyday and throw away the junk so it doesn’t sit around. But I had an interesting experience a while back. We have the ritual standing over the garbage can in the kitchen and the ritual trashing of the junk mail. Janet’s better about this than I am. She’s particularly good at throwing away the electronics catalogs so I don’t drool all over them.

I’m sure you get those postcards every so often **[PICTURE: Missing Children]** with the faces of two missing children on one side and coupons for something on the other. If you’ve seen the kids you’re supposed to call a number. Well, I’m throwing the junk mail away and I see this postcard with two missing kids on it and I pitch it in the garbage. But when I throw it into the garbage can it lands face up so that those two kids are staring up at me from all the trash and coffee grounds and egg shells. I’m looking in my garbage can at two kid’s faces. I ask myself, “Why don’t you care about them? Why don’t you care? They’re missing.” Do you know what I answered? “Because they’re not my kids.” They’re not my kids. But if those kids were my kids, I’d be out there personally putting those little cards in every mailbox I could find anywhere. I’d be searching

high and low. I'd be talking to everybody. I would be on a mission if those were my kids! But they're not my kids, so I throw them in the garbage.

You see, every person who is far from God is one of God's missing kids. And Jesus was on a mission when he came. He said of himself, [SLIDE...] **"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10, NIV)**. His mission was to seek and to save the lost. And he calls me to be on a mission to reach his lost kids, and he calls Saint Paul's to be on a mission to reach lost people. And he calls you to be on a mission to reach his lost kids. There's no nice way to put this: **A church that doesn't care about people who are far from God, isn't really a church. And a Christian who doesn't really care about people who are far from God, isn't really a Christian.** So we care about people who are far from God because God loves them and if God loves them we should to.

But there's an even more practical reason why we should be contagious about our faith. It changes our neighborhoods; it changes our city; and it changes our world. You see, we worry and complain about crime, about violence, about gangs and drugs, about all that kind of stuff. And it's real. Two weeks ago one member of our church who owns a business had a break-in. One night a handful of young people stole a car, rammed it through the side of his building and tried to rob the place. They didn't get much, but they did a lot of damage. Oh, and the car they stole happened to have been from another church member who owns a car dealership. I think they've caught a few of them, but the best way to change violence, drugs, crime, and vandalism is to introduce people to the God who made them, the God who has a real plan for them, the God who can save them. In other words, the practical side of getting contagious about the faith, is that you will have fewer worries about violence and crime. Every person who is reached for Christ, is one less person who is going to try to break into your house, or steal your car, or deal drugs to your kids. That's not the primary reason for being contagious, but you have to admit, it's a pretty good reason! We are to care about the people God cares about, and God cares deeply about those who are far from him.

Our primary purpose as a church is to lead people to an active faith in Jesus Christ. That's why we exist. But the problem is that we don't always know how to do that in authentic, loving, genuine ways. So I want us to train in some skills that will help us be contagious, skills that will become engrained in us, second nature to us, and make an impact in our world.

Now today, we're going to look at the first habit of highly contagious Christians. This first habit is [SLIDE: **"Highly contagious Christians develop significant relationships with people who are far from God."**] I want to start by asking you: How does influence work in human lives? For instance, imagine a total stranger calls you out of the blue, and says, "You need to refinance your house, and I'm the guy to do it with." How many of you would likely sign up right on the spot? Or suppose somebody you've never met walks up to you and says, "I know the person you should spend the rest of your life with — my cousin. And I've set up a blind date for the two of you this Friday, the day he gets out on parole. You can trust me. He's the one for you." Are you likely to go ahead?

When it comes to what matters to us — our finances, our relational lives, our futures — we don't usually put ourselves in the hands of total strangers. We listen to people. We build relationships then we gradually trust one another. Friends influence friends. And if this is true in general, and I think it is, it's especially true when it comes to the ultimate issue in life: people's spiritual destiny. If people are going to be reached for Christ, for the most part they will not be reached by strangers. They won't be reached by televangelists. They won't be reached by the radio. They'll be reached, primarily, through friends.

Now, there's a real important pattern in the New Testament that I want for us to be clear on. So take a look now at Acts 16:14. I want you to notice one word in particular that occurs here. [SLIDE...] **"One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. 'If you consider me a believer of the Lord,' she said, 'come and stay at my house.' And she persuaded us" (Acts 16:14-15, NIV)**.

This pattern happens over and over again in scripture. And the word that keeps occurring over and over in scripture is the word 'household.' The gospel keeps spreading through households. Now, the household in the New Testament was not quite the same thing as in our day. We tend to think just of parents and their children. In the first century, the word for household was the word *oikos*, and it had a broader

meaning. It would include immediate family, but it also would include extended family members. It would include servants. It would include people connected to each other by economic ties, vocational ties, what we would call in our day "networks" — circles of people with whom you work, play, live, relate, do business. **And that's how the gospel spread.**

The kingdom spreads now the same way that it has spread for 2,000 years. When one Christ follower gets so convinced that the life Jesus offers really is **the life**, then he or she gets contagious, and a whole *oikos* — a whole network — the whole web of relationships gets touched one life at a time.

That's how it's been happening for 2,000 years, from the Book of Acts right to our day. And here's a key concept: Christians should never isolate themselves from non-Christians. How can we be contagious if we isolate ourselves? **[SLIDE...] We are to be in the world, but not of the world.** Our model for this should be Jesus himself. He was pure righteousness. And at the same time, Jesus was a magnet for people who were far from God. He loved them. He didn't just love them because it was his job to love them. He liked them. He liked being with them. He sought them out, and they sought him out. And that was his plan for his followers. It's just about this simple. So God's plan for his church is that it be people who have the character of Jesus and who, therefore, love the people that Jesus died for. And the first step is learning to develop relationships with unchurched people — people who are far from God.

So I want to walk us through what it's like to be like Jesus with people who are far from God. Let's just walk through some characteristics of him using different parts of the body. The first one, the most important one, is the heart. **[PICTURE: Heart]** Does my heart care about what God's heart cares about?

I believe the biggest issue when it comes to being contagious is the heart issue. I want to ask you to do a real honest heart check. What is most important to you who are Christ-followers already? Your personal comfort, your wants being catered to, being able to sit in your same seat each week...or to seek and save the lost? Way too often, after people have been Christians for a while, they can start to be annoyed by people who are not, maybe because their language is different, or the behavior isn't what it should be, or their habits aren't that of a mature Christian. I hate to point out the obvious, but what would you expect?! Listen, people who have not connected to Christ yet, are not going to act like Christians! So don't get bent out of shape when people who are far from God don't act like Christians! You make room for them, so that they can make room for Christ in their lives. That's what Paul meant when he wrote, **[SLIDE...] "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22).**

I believe the most important problem when it comes to contagious Christianity is the heart problem. And do you know who has a heart problem? I do. Not all the time. I think of some of the people that I invited to the Christmas Eve services and others that I've invited to Alpha and other things. But sometimes, the truth is my heart gets cold. Sometimes I find it easier to stay in my own little orbit and not take risks, not exert the effort or the energy that's involved in getting to know somebody far from God. Sometimes I just focus on my own convenience and my own comfort. Sometimes, I'm the one with the heart problem.

And maybe some of you are too. So maybe some of you need to pray about this today. God is in the heart transplant business. That's one of the great promises in Scripture. God says, **[SLIDE...] "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26, NIV).** God will take away your heart of stone, and replace it with a heart of flesh, a heart that's warm and soft and beats fast for what God's heart beats. Maybe you need to confess today and ask God for a new heart. That's the starting place. And you know, God loves it when his people pray that prayer: "Lord give me a heart for people who are far from you." God will answer that prayer. God will give you a heart like Jesus' heart. And for some of us, that's what we need.

But it's not just about the heart, it's about the feet **[PICTURE: Feet]**. The question here is, "Do my feet take me where Jesus' feet took him?" Where did Jesus' feet take him? They took him to people far from God all the time. His feet took him to parties at tax collector's houses, to dinners attended by prostitutes, to the country of Samaria where a respectable religious leader would never go, to lepers and 10,000 pagans — to every kind of people. And Jesus' feet got him into serious trouble.

Did you know that Jesus was called the friend of sinners? And that's not a lovely little title. The prostitutes that he was with—they really did sell their bodies for sex, lowering the moral standards of a nation.

The tax collectors that Jesus hung out with really were corrupt traitors who sold out their own people for some money.

Jesus was the friend of sinners. His feet took him to them, and Jesus loved them. And the religious leaders hated Jesus' feet. They didn't understand his feet, but God loved his feet. There is this wonderful verse in Romans 10:15, **[SLIDE...]** **"How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Rom 10:15, NIV)**. Jesus' feet were so beautiful to people far from God that one day a woman who thought she was lost beyond hope fell at those feet. She bathed Jesus' feet with her tears, and she dried them with her hair because those feet brought Jesus to her.

You and I have got to have feet like Jesus' feet. It's important to fellowship with other Christians, but we've got to agree to get out of the holy huddle regularly. Now let me say this. For most of us, this does not mean so much that you have to start going to new places. For most of us, this means that we need to start forming relationships in circles where you already find yourself. You do this in a way that fits your world.

For example, when you just do ordinary, every day things like getting a haircut. Talk to that person, get to know him or her. If you have kids in sports talk to the other parents that are around. You can find out a lot about the spiritual condition of somebody's heart just by watching how they respond when their kid plays soccer. Cultivate friendships and strike up meaningful conversations about family and parenting by just caring for people while your doing what you'd be doing anyway.

Another thing that most all of us do is eat. One of the things that you can do is just go to the same restaurant and cultivate a relationship with somebody that works there. Get to know them. Start to pray for them. Maybe it's joining a health club; maybe it's having the neighbors over for dinner. It'll look different for everybody, but it really is possible. You really can have feet like Jesus' feet. You can have feet that take you to where people are far from God because they're all over the place.

But it's not just our hearts and it's not just our feet, it's also about our hands. **[PICTURE: Hands]** Jesus' hands were constantly extended in service to people who didn't yet know his Father. In Mark 1, there's a wonderful story where a leper approaches Jesus, and the man asks to be made clean. Now, the law was real strict about lepers. They couldn't have any contact with non-lepers. They had to cry out, "Unclean!" They had to stay outside of the village. If they even touched somebody's house, it was supposed to be torn down because it was considered to be unclean.

Nobody could come within 10 feet of a leper. But this leper comes up to Jesus and says, "Would you make me clean?" And Jesus doesn't turn away. Jesus reaches out his hand and touches this man who had not been touched for who knows how many years? Not by his children, not by his spouse. Jesus could have just said a word, but instead he reached out with his hand and touched the man and said, "Be clean."

And not only was Jesus **not** infected by this guy's leprosy, it was the other way around. Jesus was so full of life and health that he infected the leper with his life. Jesus was more contagious with the life of the kingdom than the leper was with his disease. And you know if the Spirit of God lives inside you, you're like that.

Listen, we need to have an appropriate fear of sin, but sin is not nearly as contagious as the life that Jesus brings. Jesus just kept extending his hand — healing lepers, washing feet, clasping his hands in prayer, right to the very end of his life when he took a nail in each hand for the sake of every sinner that ever lived.

So take a look at your hands. How often are they extended to service to someone who's far from God? Maybe you have a neighbor that you could do an errand for. Maybe there's somebody at work that feels discouraged, and these hands could write him a note, touch their heart. Maybe there's a lonely person in your world that needs to be reached out to. Are your hands doing what Jesus' hands would do? Are they. We're contagious through our hands.

Okay, I've got a heart. I want to have feet like Jesus' feet. I want to do what His hands are doing. There's one last way in which I need to be like Jesus; I need his spine. **[PICTURE: Spine]** I need his backbone to be persistent because it's not an easy thing that we do.

In one of the stories Jesus told about the growth of the kingdom, he said in Matthew 13, "It's like a sower who goes out and sows seeds. Some of the seed falls on real hard ground, on the path, and gets eaten by birds. Some of it falls on real shallow soil where there's rock underneath it, and nothing much happens. Some of it falls on real cluttered soil and it tries to grow, but it gets choked out—no fruit."

And you think by this time the sower might give up. But the sower doesn't give up. He just keeps sowing, and sooner or later some of it falls on good soil. "And when that happens," Jesus says, "watch out." Now, I want to tell you that I'm so proud to be a part of a church that sows the way this church sows. You're inviting people. You are willing to make room for others. You are doing your job.

I'm so proud that you sow the way you sow. But I also know what happens sometimes. I know for some of you, you work, you pray, you ask, you get somebody to come, but then results don't happen the way that you hoped. Maybe they're resistant to coming back. Maybe it feels like the door to their heart is not opened one inch wider, and you're tempted to get discouraged.

Maybe it's somebody you really love, and you're tempted to think, "I must have done something wrong or said something wrong. Or I didn't pray enough. Or God just didn't come through like he's supposed to." Here's the deal from Jesus' story. Your job is to sow the seed. Your job is **not** to make growth happen, that's God's job. Your job is to just keep sowing seed and never, ever give up. Jesus was sowing seeds even as he hung on the cross. He was crucified between two criminals. One mocked him, the other saw him for who he was and said, "Jesus, will you remember me?" And Jesus sows one more seed. Jesus says, "This day, you'll be with me in Paradise."

He's hanging on a cross, and he finds some good soil on the cross next to him. With his last breath, he throws one more seed. He just couldn't stop sowing. He's just very stubborn, this sower, so don't you get discouraged. You just expect that there's going to be failure. You're going to spread a lot of seed on a lot of bad soil. Don't beat yourself up for it. Just expect it. But you don't quit sowing seed because maybe the next one is the one that's going to take root.

So here's the deal. We need Jesus' heart, and we need his feet. We need his hands. We need his spine. We're called to be contagious. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I want to ask you to just take a minute or so and pray. And whichever one of those you have a need for in your life, right now — maybe it's his heart, feet, hands, spine — whatever it is that you need, you ask him for it right at the outset of this adventure together. And I'm going to ask you to pray right now. Just take about a minute, right now, and ask God for whatever it is that you need. Then I'll close us in prayer. Now let's stand in closing prayer.

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