

## **“Contagious—Part 2”**

We're in a series called “Contagious”. There are a lot of negative connotations to that word, “contagious”, but last week we looked at the positive side. How, if we've chose to be Christ-followers, we're supposed be, Jesus is expecting us to be, contagious about our faith. Last week we looked at one vital habit that we need if we're going to be contagious — that we're going to develop relationships with people far from God. We talked about why that's important—because God sent Jesus to seek and save the lost, that was Jesus' mission and it's supposed to be our mission too. We talked about how we live out this mission—by having a heart like Jesus, feet that take us to people like his feet did, hands that serve people who are far from God and a spine, a backbone because it can be discouraging when you really are trying to be contagious about your faith. Today we're going to talk about another body of Jesus' that we need to have if we're really going to be contagious and care about people who are far from God. Today we're going to talk about our mouths. **[PICTURE: Mouth].**

How do we use our mouths like Jesus did? How we use our mouths to be contagious about our faith? Because if we're going to be contagious we've got to be able to talk about our faith. Living out our faith through our actions is vital, but we also have to talk. Paul says in Romans 10, **[SLIDE...]** **“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?” (Rom 10:13-14, NIV).** How can people believe if they've not heard? We've got to use our mouths.

This is helping another human being actually cross over from death to life. I don't think there's any exhilaration in the whole world quite like the feeling helping another human being find God, help somebody who was lost become found. That's like spiritual adrenaline.

Now some of you have the ability to do this — to share a verbal witness, to explain the gospel. Some of you have the ability to do this with creativity and ease and confidence. Those of you that do, you need to cultivate that gift; you need to develop it, and you need to use it on a regular basis.

But many of you in this room are much more like me. This is not a strong area of natural giftedness for me. It's easier for me to stand up in front of hundreds of people than it is to sit and talk about my faith one on one. Even when I was in seminary I didn't want to talk about my faith. When I met people or was at a party and they asked what I was studying, I told them animal husbandry, because I figured that would shut them up. And I wasn't lying, because I was studying to be a shepherd! I didn't want to talk about my faith because it felt awkward, and I didn't want to be pushy, and I didn't want to risk failing so I didn't do it. But today, I know that if I don't share my faith when I get the chance, I'm letting God down. I'm turning my back on the mission. And the same is true of you.

Part of why I wasn't comfortable talking about my relationship with Christ is because nobody ever taught me how to do that in way that was authentic, that was a natural extension of a friendship. But once I learned, it became a lot easier. So I want to do for you what was never done for me growing up. I want to do for you what wasn't even done for me in three years of seminary. I want to teach you how to use your mouth to make a difference in this world.

I do not want to miss the exhilaration of pointing people towards Jesus. I don't want to miss that, and I don't want you to miss that either, not one of you. So what we talk about today is a very important point. We need to be real clear on this. Saint Paul's will not achieve its mission; you and I as a church body, we will fail to do what God has called us to do, if you don't own this habit that we talk about today, the habit that contagious Christians have had for thousands of years. The stakes are that high.

So I want to get painfully practical. We're going to roll up our sleeves and get real practical here in using our mouths in sharing about Jesus. Four things and the first is the word “initiate.” **[SLIDE: Using my mouth like Jesus: Initiate]** Look for opportunities to steer the conversation towards spiritual topics. Remember that this is assuming that you've already done what we talked about last week and built a good relationship with somebody. So as you naturally talk to them, look for ways to relate things to the spiritual life. Now the single most effective way I know how to do this is to ask questions. Look for opportunities around certain topics. One topic people love to talk about that offers a lot of chances to turn very naturally to spiritual subjects is movies and TV shows.

Any of you remember a movie called "Contact"? It's a sci-fi movie that has a huge faith element in it. About believing in what you cannot see. There's the movie *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*. It's a movie built around the events and character of Jesus. I loved the movie *The Matrix*. It was also built on the theme of Jesus Christ, the one who came to set the prisoners free. Movies like *Bruce Almighty* are great conversation starters. You say, "Hey did you see this movie that came out? I really saw this theme in it. Did that ring a bell with you? How do you come at understanding things like that?"

With all the TV shows about the afterlife and talking to ghosts they can be good conversation starters. "What do you think about what happens after we die? Why do you think there's so much of this stuff on TV today? Where does your basis for understanding these kinds of things come from?"

There are any number of other potential spiritual conversation starters. You may be talking about parenting. You can ask another person, "What kind of spiritual influences do you want your children to have?" People are always real concerned about their kids.

You can use a message topic. For instance, if you were here at church for the last message series on what happens after you die, you might say in a conversation with a friend, "You know, at my church last week, the speaker talked resurrection vs. reincarnation, or heaven and hell. It's been on my mind a lot lately. What do you think about those things?" Just use a topic that you just heard about here at the church.

If you're talking to someone that reads a lot, you might ask them, "What book have you read that most influenced you and why?" And almost always, at least in my experience, after talking a little bit, they'll ask back to me, "What book has most influenced you?" That's a great opportunity to talk about the Bible and why it's important to you.

Sometimes you're talking with somebody who's in a crisis. People will often open up to the gospel in a time of crisis. And then you might ask them, "Do you have anything by way of spiritual support in your life?"

You might be talking about hobbies with somebody, and you could include church activities when you're just talking about hobbies. "On weekends I do gourmet cooking and I'm a comfort specialist." And they'll probably want to know about that "comfort specialist" thing, or whatever area of church service that you're involved in.

Maybe marriage or relationships will be a bridge topic. For instance, if you share struggles that you and the other person have had in marriages, you might say, "My wife and I had a hard time communicating. Let me tell you what we really found out." And then talk about a time when you found help through the church, through God's community.

Or if you're single, you might say, "I found a great place to develop significant friendships." And somebody who is single is probably going to be curious about that.

People talk about business a lot. Maybe the most common question that folks ask each other is, "What do you do?" One response to that has just a little more of a risk factor, but it can get you into a spiritual conversation. Say, "Well, I have one job that I get paid for, and I have one job at my church that I do for free. Which one would you like to hear about?" Then you have an opportunity, if they choose number two, to talk about the way that you serve God, serve the Body.

Holidays offer an opportunity to get into spiritual conversations. At Christmastime you might ask somebody, "What do you really think about Christmas? Do you really think that baby born in a manger was really God?" Or with Easter coming up in a couple of months, "What do you think about Easter? Do you think there really was someone that came back from the dead?"

You can be creative with this stuff. The main thing that I want to say on this initiating business is that you open yourself to the guidance of the Holy Spirit to be praying about this a lot. Listen for promptings. Allow the Spirit to whisper to you because the Spirit really will guide you. And when that happens, you obey and take the risk, knowing that you're working side-by-side with God himself.

We initiate and then we discern. **[SLIDE: "Discern"]** Discern what the other person's level of interest is. Think of this in terms of the law as supply and demand. What's the level of interest this other person is showing in spiritual things? Then I need to adjust the supply — how much I say — to fit the level of demand that that seeking person has.

Here's why this is important: Sometimes people get so fired up about sharing their faith that they violate this law, the law of supply and demand. They start talking longer and faster and giving more information than the listener wants, just dumping a lot of stuff. And this can actually set the whole process back. You've got to discern the level of interest, and if it's low, back off.

Let me get painfully clear on this. Read the cues. If you're talking and the other person's eyes are glazing over and their pupils get fixed and dilated; if you find that you have grabbed their arm with your hand, and you're physically keeping them from walking away while you're talking, that could be a clue that their interest might be flagging. If the level of demand there is not high yet, that's okay. But on the other hand, sometimes the other person is really interested. On those occasions, keep providing opportunities for discussion. Keep putting more fuel on the fire, answer questions. And when you leave someone who's interest level is high, say, "The next time we get together, let's talk about some other area about spiritual life." So then when you get together again, you pick it up where you left off. But when you are talking about your faith discern the other person's interest level and adjust accordingly.

Okay, so that's initiate and discern. And then the next part of this habit is to explain **[SLIDE: "Explain"]**. Sometimes there will come a moment when the other person is ready to hear the gospel. And when that moment comes you've got to be ready. In 1 Peter 3:15, the writer says, **[SLIDE...]** **"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15, NIV).** Be prepared always.

This is important stuff! So I want to spend a few moments doing some preparation stuff. I want to ask you right now to take out a pen and your Study Guide and write this down. You can do what you want with it later but write this down because you might need to use it sometime soon. It's important that we do this because what we're preparing for is a holy moment that will come in your life some point.

So let's say you've been getting to know somebody that's far from God, praying for them, and there comes a moment when their heart opens up a little bit. A heart that's been full of sin and closed to God is open to hear the gospel. Maybe you're sitting in a restaurant. Maybe you're talking over a back fence. Maybe you're having a cup of coffee in your living room. You think about the drama of this moment. Someone who was bound for hell that the evil one wants desperately to keep from God, their heart opens up a little bit, and they want to hear the gospel. That's a holy moment. Only God does that to the human heart.

But you've got to be prepared. Ken Blanchard, is a major leader in the business world, he writes a lot about leadership. When he's with people, he asks himself the question, "Do I love them enough to tell them the very best I know?" Do I love this person enough to tell him or her the very best I know? When you're with a seeking person keep that question in your mind. Do I love this person enough to tell them the very best I know? Because this story, this gospel story, is the very best that you know. This is the stuff that opens the eyes of the blind. This is the story that sets prisoners free, and heals the brokenhearted, and leads people out of the darkness of depression, and empowers the powerless! This is the most powerful information in the universe and it's important to know how to share it.

So let me walk you through one way to explain Jesus. And I'm asking that you please, please write this down. And it's real simple. It just goes like this. Somebody wants to know why Jesus matters, or you're talking to someone who wants to know how you become a Christian, be ready with this little graphic. Say, "Here's the story of the human race. There is a God, he is alive, and he created you and he created me. He loves you, and he loves me. And he wants to be in a relationship with us. That's the good news.

"But the bad news is that every one of us has sinned. And you know about that. You know that you lie sometimes, and you do selfish things sometimes. God is without sin. God is perfect, and he intends for his world to be a perfect place. So sin has created this chasm between God and us. We are separated from God by our sin.

"And we cannot make our way back to God on our own. People try to do that sometimes. They think, 'Well, maybe if I go to church enough I'll earn my way to him. Or maybe if I give God enough money or do enough good deeds.' But the fact is that God is holy and I can't be holy. I can't be perfect, and neither can you. And all of our efforts fall short, and the **really** bad news is the Bible says that the results, the wages, the natural

outcome of our sin is death — spiritual and physical death — separation from God in hell through all eternity. This is real serious. And if we were left to our own devices, this is where we would end up — you and me.

"But God couldn't stand for the world to end up that way, so God made another way. God made a kind of bridge for us to get to him, and that bridge is the cross. When Jesus died on the cross, he was dying the death that you and I should have. He was paying the moral debt that you can't pay, and I can't pay either. So our forgiveness would come not by our earning it, but as a free gift of God. That's what grace is."

And then say, "Now it's a real good thing for you to understand this, but understanding is not enough. Because right now, you're still on this side of the chasm, and you must make a choice. You have to choose to walk across that bridge and to be with God. The way that you do that is by saying to God sorry, thank you and please. 'I'm sorry for the things I've done wrong in my life and I turn my back on those things right now. Thank you Jesus for dying for me on the cross. And please, come and live in me and be the leader of my life' You can say that prayer right now, and you can know that you are made right with God and be with him forever."

Okay, now it's just as simple as that. But here's the deal, you need to practice this. You need to practice because it's very important that when that holy moment comes, you're ready for it, that you're able to do this. It's not enough to sit here and hear it and recognize it. You have to be able to do it. So here's how. First you practice for yourself. Take some of your quiet time this week, some of your prayer time, and practice this little drawing. Then practice on somebody who already knows Christ so they can tell you how you're doing. Then, practice some more. So that when a holy moment comes, when a divine appointment pops up, you're ready to explain.

And don't wait to practice this some other time--practice this sometime today. Today. During lunch with your family or a friend or by yourself. While you sit and watch the game this afternoon, or during the Olympics. Take the time to practice, today. I challenge you! Christ is counting on you! Do you love people who are far from God enough to give them your very best? Practice.

There are also other ways to explain the gospel. There are a number of them listed in the book "Becoming a Contagious Christian," which you can get through our bookstore next week or any other Christian bookstore, or on line. Find what works best for you. But whatever you need to do to be ready when that holy moment comes, you do it, so you can explain the gospel in a way that's real clear. You initiate spiritual discussions; you discern the person's level of interest. When that holy moment comes and they're ready, you be prepared to explain the gospel.

Then sometimes people will reach a point where they understand. They've thought and they've researched as they need to, and it's time to make a decision. Then you need to **[SLIDE: "Ask"]** ask. Sometimes you need to be the one to ask another human being if they're ready to make a commitment to God now, if they're ready to cross that bridge.

A man in our church, Kenny Neal, has recently had a spiritual awakening and God has been using him and his mouth to help people meet Jesus Christ. I want you to hear from him an experience he had recently...**[VIDEO: Kenny Neal]**. I wanted you to hear from Kenny so that you know that real people can do this. The problem is that so few do. But we can change that. You can change that, and in the process, people who are far from God begin a new life. Often people just need someone who will give them the opportunity. And often nobody asks people. Well, that can be you. You can say, "Are you ready now to receive Christ as the forgiver and leader of your life? And you can do that through three words. Sorry, thank you and please. You pray a simple prayer that they can repeat in their own words: 'I'm sorry for the things I've done wrong in my life and I turn my back on those things right now. Thank you Jesus for dying for me on the cross. And please, come and live in me and be the leader of my life.'"

Initiate, discern, explain, ask. And let me let you in on a little secret. It doesn't take a lot of faith. It just takes a little faith. But if you put a little faith in a big God, you're going to get big results. **It is not the size of your faith that matters, it is the size of your God.** So you take a little faith and say, "God I believe you're going to work in my friend's life and you're going to bring him to you" and you keep believing and believing. Christ is counting on you 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.

Now I want to ask for you to pray for two people who are far from God right now. You know a few folks. I challenge you to pick two who are far from God. You pray for them right now with every ounce of fervor and ask God to bring them to himself, and then we'll close in prayer. So would you pray right now?

*I thank Rev. John Ortberg, Sr. Pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, for his inspiration and resources for this message.*