



First Baptist Pulpit

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Up Close and Personal

Luke 5:27-32

Where do you go when you have a problem? Whom do you turn to when you need help or advice on some issue of great importance in your life? Or, for that matter, whom do you talk to when you want an opinion on what kind of new car or MP3 player, or vacuum cleaner to buy? (ANSWERS?) PEOPLE YOU TRUST.

Now let's look at the flipside. How do you feel when a stranger tries to talk to you about personal matters? Do you relish the thought of interacting with people you don't know about the deeper issues in your life?

Suppose you're spending some leisure time with your family on a Saturday morning, when suddenly your privacy is interrupted by a knock at the door. There stand two religious people who want to tell you how you can become part of God's organization?

Let me guess: You get all fired up and think, "Wow, a chance to talk to some articulate people about such an interesting and important topic!" Right?

I seriously doubt it. If you're like most of us, your first response is, "Oh no! I'm not in any mood to talk to people off the street about topics that are so important— not to mention the fact that they're probably trained to argue with everything I say!" Can I get a witness?

Now, if you, a Christian who's committed to spreading God's love and truth to others, feel that way when it comes to talking to strangers about spiritual matters, just think how your irreligious friends must feel in similar situations! They're likely

horrified by the thought of talking to someone they don't know about their private lives.

As people in our culture have gotten further and further from their Christian roots and heritage, they've gotten less and less comfortable talking to anyone—especially people they don't know, about matters of faith. It's no wonder that so many of the more impersonal approaches to spreading the faith aren't very successful in our culture.

How much attention do you pay to all the *addressed-to-Occupant* junk mail that crowds your box every day? It's probably safe to assume that gospel leaflets, tracts, direct mail from churches, and ads in the Yellow Pages or in the church section of the local newspaper don't get much attention either. I certainly don't hear many testimonies these days from people who've been reached by these impersonal approaches. Every once in a while, yes.

Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not denying that God sometimes uses these techniques to touch people with truth. I'm just saying that as people get more and more immune to impersonal methods, the less they work.

The fact is, we all naturally gravitate toward people we already know and trust. Friends listen to friends. They confide in friends. They let friends influence them. So if we're going to impact our world for Christ, the most effective approach will be through friendships with those who need to be reached. We'll have to get up close and personal to them so they can see that we genuinely care about them as individuals, and that we have their best interests in mind. Over time, that will earn their trust and respect.

There is a statistic that 80% of the people we know would come to church if they were invited. However I'm convinced this is only true if we have taken the time to establish a true friendship with them.

That's why the formula we're unpacking is so important. It was built on Jesus' declaration that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Looking at the first of those, we established two reasons why He used the salt metaphor. The first was that salt must have **high potency** (HP) to

produce its intended effect. Jesus said salt that has lost its savor is worthless. That's why last week was devoted to developing several of the characteristics that Christians need to have in order to be highly potent.

But the most powerful salt in the world has no impact when left in the shaker. And the most authentic, compassionate, and sacrificial Christians on the planet will not influence irreligious people until they make contact with them. That's why this message will key in on the second element of the formula: **CP**, which stands for **close proximity**.

THE CART BEFORE THE HORSE

But let's be honest. The whole enterprise of developing friendships of integrity with unchurched people takes significant amounts of time and effort, not to mention some occasional discomfort. (And if this is what it takes, sadly some (many) Christians aren't willing to make the effort - "people can just go to hell" - that's effectively what they are saying.)

And, we reason, "There are too many people who need to be reached for us to spend a lot of time getting to know just one of them!"

So our temptation may be to short-circuit the process and just issue a spiritual challenge to the person. The problem is that often ends up being a wrong turn that derails the person's spiritual progress.

Mark Mittleberg learned this lesson the hard way. It happened when his church was putting on a week-long presentation that combined contemporary music and drama to communicate Christianity to people who don't normally go to church.

He had bought four tickets for the Friday night performance, and along with his wife, Heidi, had invited another couple. But that couple cancelled at the last minute. Now it was the day of the event, and they were holding two extra tickets with no one to bring.

As Mark turned into his driveway, he saw the young couple who lived next door walking on the sidewalk in front of his house. They weren't married, had shown no inclination toward spiritual interests, and he only knew them by their first names. Still, he figured, why not give it a shot?

"Hey, Scott!" he called out. "I was wondering if you two are busy tonight. You see, I've got these extra tickets to a really great concert at our church." And then he asked if they would like to go.

Now, if you think along the lines I do, you're probably admiring the confidence Mark showed in forthrightly explaining this opportunity and inviting a couple he'd barely even met. It was the kind of thing a lot of us think about doing but find it hard to get up the courage. The only problem, as he found out, was that it was probably too bold

and too quick. It risked the possibility of scaring them away not only from this, but also from future chances for interaction.

Scott glanced shyly at his girlfriend for a moment and then looked at the ground. Somewhat awkwardly he finally said, "Um . . . thanks anyway, but I don't think we'll go this time . . . but, well, if you'd ever like to get together in the backyard for a barbecue, let us know."

It's so important that we make investments in friendship in order to gain the person's trust and respect, as well as to earn the right to talk to them about spiritual issues,

Interestingly, Mark did follow up later with Scott. After a few weeks he called him and suggested that the four of them see a movie and then go for dessert afterwards. When the night came, Mark and Heidi decided that they would not bring up topics related to church or Christianity. They knew they'd already gone too fast, and they determined to "barbecue" several times with the couple. But to their surprise, that same night in the restaurant, Scott himself asked some questions of a spiritual nature.

Out of that experience came a maxim Mark has been teaching ever since: the "Barbecue-First Principle." It embodies what I'm saying today. We're wise to try to first establish relationships and then later, in the context of that relationship, open up the conversation to spiritual issues. And as this story illustrates, in many cases this doesn't have to be a long wait. A lot of people are looking for a trusted confidant with whom they can discuss such important matters.

I. BIBLICAL EXAMPLES

Jesus

To reinforce what I'm saying, let's look at the inspiring example of the life of Jesus. It's amazing how often we overlook the fact that He spent the majority of His time with those outside the religious establishment. In fact, most of His encounters with the religious people involved challenging their attitudes and illustrating to them how much lost people matter to God.

He associated with tax collectors, who extorted large amounts of money from the downtrodden people around them. In [Luke 5](#) Jesus accepted an invitation to Matthew's party filled with people of questionable character.

He expressed compassion to prostitutes.

Jesus intentionally rubbed shoulders with the lowest of low of His day because they mattered to

Him and He wanted to lead them into the family of God.

When you let these truths soak in, it's natural to recoil a bit and say "How could Jesus do that? What could possibly motivate the sinless Son of God to associate with such unsavory individuals? Didn't He understand how corrupt they were?"

- Fishermen
- Demon possessed people
- Gentiles
- Children

Paul

Another role model is Paul. He said in 1 Corinthians 9:22-23, *"I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings."* He cared enough to inconvenience and stretch Himself in order to make contact with people and influence them toward Christ. His real challenge comes, however, in the next verse where He tells us likewise to *"Run in such a way as to get the prize."*

II. BARRIERS TO BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

1. Biblical Issues

Some of us were raised repeatedly hearing verses that stressed, *"Friendship with the world is hatred toward God,"* and *"not of the world,"* and *"Come out from among them and be separate."* If these verses were integral to your Christian upbringing, the very idea of befriending irreligious people probably sounds questionable and maybe even unbiblical.

Let's deal with this idea briefly by looking a little closer at the Bible passages themselves.

First, James 4:4 does say that we are not to be friends with this world. But it's clear from other passages, such as 1 John 2:15-17, that the word *"world"* is not referring to the people themselves, but to the sin and evil that people in the world commit. In other words, we must follow Christ's command to love others without falling into the sin of loving or participating in the bad things they do. As James 1:27 puts it, we need to keep ourselves *"from being polluted by the world."*

Similarly John 17:14, where Jesus says that we are not of this world, is sometimes interpreted that we should not associate with people outside God's family. But verses 15-18 demonstrate the opposite: *"My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. . . . As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world."* And why was Jesus sent into the world? According to His own confession, it was *"to seek and to save what was lost"* (Luke 19:10).

And what about the admonition to *"come out from them . . . and be separate"*? This comes from 2 Corinthians 6:17, where Paul is concluding his warning to believers to avoid situations where they are *"yoked"* with unbelievers (v.14). This clearly does not refer to everyday friendships, but to more formal alliances, like marriage or a business partnership, which often prove to be spiritually harmful to the Christian. In fact, Paul said in his earlier letter to the same church that ordinary interaction with non-Christians is all right and even necessary (1 Cor. 5:9-10).

We can conclude by reminding ourselves that Jesus was accused by His enemies of being a *"friend of tax collectors and sinners"* (Luke 7:34). Though this was meant to be a derogatory term, Jesus never denied it. Instead, He seemed to take it as a compliment.

2. Spiritual Danger

So we've seen that the idea of getting up close to irreligious people for spiritual purposes is a biblical pattern modeled by Jesus and Paul. **But what about the risks associated with being around those who are actively rebelling against God?** And what did Paul have in mind in 1 Corinthians 15:33 when he said, *"Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character'"?*

First the verse. When read in context, it becomes clear that Paul was specifically warning against accepting religious teachers who deny the resurrection of Christ (see vv. 12, 29). He was, saying, "Don't let their skepticism on this issue lead you astray. The fact that Jesus literally rose from the dead is central and indispensable to the Christian faith."

More broadly, there seems to be a *general principle* implied here. Namely, *when we associate*

with someone who believes something other than the true gospel message, we need to make certain we're the one who's influence is prevailing.

Another way of putting this is that we need to be on the offense rather than the defense. We need to be ready to bring God's truth to bear on an situation in which we find ourselves.

This means that when we sense that we're being negatively influenced by the ideas and actions of the other person, it's time to back away, at least for a while. It's critical that we remain the dominant influence in moral and spiritual matters. In many situations, this is not as difficult as it might sound. When we approach friendships with a purpose—to contagiously influence people for Christ, we'll be more likely to persevere in upholding what is morally right and true.

3. Risking Your Reputation

"But if I start spending personal time in public places with irreligious non-Christians," you might say, "what will the people in my church think?" That's a valid concern and unlike the first two barriers, I can't say it's unfounded. Some of the Christians you know will probably misunderstand your efforts to relate to irreligious people.

But you're in good company, though, because Jesus not only risked His reputation with the religious community, He ruined it! In Luke 7:34 we read that they accused Jesus of being a glutton and a drunkard. While He was clearly neither, the fact that these people thought He was tells us a lot about the kinds of individuals with whom He spent time.

In Matthew 9:12-13, Jesus said that He associated with sinners because they are like sick people who need a doctor.

4. Personal Discomfort

Let's face it. It's easier to hang with people that we know and like and share the same values that we do. (I see it in the foyer all the time - people hanging with people that they know - hardly noticing the other people around them.)

Let's just admit it: It's hard to go back into close proximity with the kinds of people we used to run with. Their language makes us uncomfortable, their humor is off-color and embarrassing, and their values and activities leave us wondering if the

spiritual gap is just too wide to bridge. You may have only recently escaped that environment. So your natural reaction may be, "And now you're telling me to go back into it?"

My answer to that question is, "yes" and "no." We certainly don't want to go back to *stay* in that environment. But we do need to *visit it* for the sake of the people who still live there, who God loves, and who we've got to care about. But yes, it will feel awkward at times.

Bill Hybels relates the following personal story:

My hobby is sailboat racing. My crew is made up of nine guys, and they're not the kind of group you'd likely encounter at the Sunday school picnic.

Sailing protocol requires the boat owners and crews to gather at the yacht club after each regatta to verify the race results, settle any protests, and to receive the prizes for first, second, and third place.

I'll give you three guesses what everyone does while the race committee is doing it's work. You're right: they consume alcoholic beverages in massive quantities. I can't tell you how many times I've stood in a circle of eight to ten inebriated sailors as they argued endlessly about who had the best spinnaker launch or the best windward leg.

I find myself thinking, "What am I doing here? The voices are loud, the language is foul, the egos are out of control. Why am I here?" And often the gentle whisper of the Holy Spirit says to me, "*You're building bridges. You're establishing trust. You're laying the groundwork for conversations that might happen a year from now. You're doing the kind of thing that Jesus did.*"

The kinds and levels of discomfort we'll encounter in building relationships with unbelievers will vary, but God will help us face them and honor our efforts in the process. And it'll all be worth it.

III. MAKING IT PERSONAL

Can I suggest that you do something that will take this discussion out of the theoretical and into the practical? Today, or sometime this week, write down the names of three people whose lives you'd like to impact spiritually. These should be individuals within your sphere of influence who you feel you have some chance of eventually talking with about Christ.

Making this "Impact List" will help you move away from hoping to someday, somehow reach some nameless, faceless seekers, and into specific action aimed at helping three people you know and care about.

Ask God for guidance in choosing the names. And you need to keep talking to Him about them,

asking the Holy Spirit to open them up to the love and truth of Christ. Also, pray that God will help you express unconditional love and no-strings-attached friendship, as well as give you wisdom on how to approach them and what to say about Him.

You see, "We need to talk to God about people, then talk to people about God." Remember that the Holy Spirit wants to be your unseen partner in reaching your friends, family members, coworkers, and neighbors with Christ's life-giving gospel message. It's important to turn to Him for wisdom and power every step along the way.

And what's exciting is that when you're part of a strategic friendship, you'll see your faith deepening, your relational world expanding, and your reliance on God growing. And it can really be fun.

Let me end with a word of encouragement and warning. You can't be a contagious Christian without getting close enough to other people to let them catch the disease. This is where the whole enterprise is won or lost, at the actual point of contact. As I said earlier, friends listen to real friends. So become one. If we don't start there, it's all over before we begin.

Next, we're going to talk about ways to clearly communicate the content of your faith, but it's important to recognize now that no amount of preparation will do you any good if you haven't made contact.