

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Time-Tested Truths for Our Times

Gracing Our Friends to Jesus

Study #5

(John 20:30-31; Acts 1:8; Matthew 9:35; Titus 3:14; more...)

Introduction: Double listening...

Many years ago, John Stott¹ wrote that God called Christians to be “double listeners.” Stott meant that we need to listen to the ancient Word AND we need to listen to the modern world.

The ancient Word of God is true, inspired, and life changing. That’s why we give lots of attention to Scripture when we meet up on Sundays. We want to hear it, understand it, live it, apply it, and share it.

It is also critical that we listen to the voices of 2023. That we understand the times.

Or, as pastor and author Tim Keller, who died on May 19 of pancreatic cancer, put it, *“What time is it? What is true about the times in which we live.”*

Double listening equips us with gospel fluency,² which is the ability to speak the ancient Word in language that the modern world can understand.

So, what time is it?

Keller and others tell us that it is not a time of robust church growth in North America. Most churches are plateaued or declining, and many churches have closed down, especially during covid.

The percentages of the American adult population who identify as atheist, agnostic or “none” (no religious affiliation) is increasing.³

The deep secularism of Europe has come to large swaths of America. Our societal institutions are unraveling.

Increasingly, we believe that absolute truth is a myth, and that truth is to be found within, not from above.⁴

Fewer and fewer Americans have a positive impression of evangelicals.⁵ The generations known as Alpha, Z, and Millennial are much more impacted by social media than anything else.⁶

Does all this mean that we are living in a post-Christian society? Or are we living in a pre-Christian society? It’s a question worth asking. I believe the answer is “Yes.”

Those who are in their 30’s and beyond and identify as “nones” are generally post-Christian. They have had some exposure to our faith and have rejected it.

Those who are younger are mostly pre-Christian. They really don’t know much at all about our faith.

³ Both the Protestant and Catholic branches of Christianity are decreasing as a share of the American population.

⁴ According to Keller, we are the first culture that believes that that “truth” is to be found inside and that what is outside is a construct that can be accepted or not. Because of this understanding, it is not believed that moral values are relative, relationships are provisional, authority is suspect, social institutions are at risk. The younger the person, the more likely that these are their thoughts.

⁵ Philip Yancey reports 3% based on research from 2009. It is not likely to have gone up from there in the intervening years.

⁶ Again, quoting Yancey, in *Vanishing Grace*, “57% of all young people spend 4 hours on social media. TV was a very powerful influencer in the 60’s and beyond. It is NOTHING compared to social media today.”

¹ Stott, a long-time British church leader and author, passed away in 2011.

² Thanks to Jeff Vanderstelt, author, pastor, and leader of a church-planting movement called “Soma”, for the phrase “gospel fluency.”

Serving post-Christians in Jesus' Name requires different approaches than serving pre-Christians.

Listening to our world requires processing these changing realities. It means reckoning with the times. It means that our society is less positive toward and less open to Christianity than in times past.

“Double listening” - listening to the ancient Word and to the modern world - reminds us that while the mandates of Jesus are timeless, the way we carry out those assignments may shift.

For the next few minutes, we'll be thinking about inviting our friends into life in Jesus.

I first want to consider the beautiful, simple message about how anyone can receive eternal life with God from God.

Good News!

The “Otherness” of John’s Gospel

The synoptic Gospels

Of the four records we have of Jesus' life, Matthew, Mark, and Luke each include unique stories, speeches, and miracles. They each give details about Jesus and His mission that the others don't.

But there are enough similarities between them that we lump Matthew, Mark, and Luke together and call them “the Synoptic” Gospels. They give us the life of Jesus through a common lens.

The book written by the Apostle John is listed fourth among the Gospel. That's not because his is less - or more - important. It's listed last because it's...different.

John's perspective

John's Gospel is an outlier. John didn't just write another record of Jesus' life. He wrote another kind of record of Jesus' life.

For instance, John includes no parables and nothing like the Sermon on the Mount. He includes some major speeches that Matthew, Mark, and Luke don't. He also includes some miracles and events in Jesus' life that the other three omit.

There is lots of overlap between Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There is much less overlap between those three and John.

And our “Aha!” moment for understanding this difference between John and the others comes when we see the unique purpose for which John wrote his Gospel.

John's Explicitly Evangelistic Focus

John arranged his material about Jesus around seven miracles (he calls them “signs”). Taken together, these miracles paint a picture of Jesus as Someone who offers eternal life to all who believe in Him.⁷

These seven signs are:

1. Turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana. (John 2:1-12)
2. Healing a nobleman's son. (John 4:46-54)
3. Healing a man at the pool of Bethesda. (John 5:1-11)
4. Feeding the five thousand. (John 6:1-15)
5. Walking on water. (John 6:16-21)
6. Healing a man born blind. (John 9:1-12)
7. Raising Lazarus from the dead. (John 11)

In the telling of each of these miracles, Jesus makes it clear that believing in Him is the path to eternal life. Faith in Jesus alone transfers the one who believes from spiritual death to life and from dark to light.

And in case any of us might miss the point, John adds an exclamation mark to the end of his Gospel.

⁷ Jesus made the same point when He was talking with Nicodemus, the renowned rabbi (John 3:1-21), when He was talking with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-38), and when He cried out in Jerusalem during the Feast of Tabernacles for people to come to Him for life. (John 7:37-38)

[John 20:30] So then, many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; [31] but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that by believing you may have life in His name.⁸

There is nothing else anyone must do to obtain eternal life from God than believe in Jesus for that eternal life. If there is something else, anything else besides faith in Jesus, John's book is a colossal failure.⁹

He wrote the book just to tell us how to have eternal life with God, and he said over forty times, "Believe in Jesus."¹⁰

There is nothing else you need to do.

And...you must believe in Jesus. If you don't believe in Jesus, you don't have eternal life.

This is the response God is looking for from people who are far from Him. It's the response of faith.

⁸ John's first letter (1 John) was explicitly written so that those who had believed in Jesus would **know** that they had eternal life. (1 John 5:13)

⁹ I'm not saying by this that the other Gospels aren't suitable for evangelism. I am saying that while God can use truth from all parts of the Bible to lead people to eternal life, John's Gospel is uniquely written to do this. It's the only one of the four accounts we have where the overt, stated purpose is to lead people to embrace Jesus as the Son of God so that they would believe in Him and would have eternal life. Given that, we would expect that John would be very careful to be very clear about what is involved in obtaining eternal life. And we'd be right. He is very careful, and he is very clear: Believe in Jesus.

¹⁰ These that I have highlighted today are just a few of the examples from John's Gospel of the centrality of faith in Jesus for eternal life. Check out these invitations to believe in Jesus: John 1:12-13, 3:18, 36; 5:24; 6:47; 10:37-38, and, of course John 3:16. Plus, there are more than twenty-five other passages in John's book where trust in Jesus is highlighted as EXACTLY what was called for. See 1:47-51; 5:37-38; 5:44-47; 6:63-64; 6:66-69; 7:3-5; 7:30-31; 8:23-24; 8:28-30; 10:25-26; 10:40-42; 11:11-15; 11:40; 12:9-11; 12:35-36; 12:37-46; 13:19; 14:1, 10-12; 14:29; 16:8-11; 16:23-28; 16:29-30; 17:20-21; 19:31-35; 20:24-25; 20:26-29.

He's not looking for us to perform good works to get back on to the positive side of the moral ledger. He's not looking for resolutions to do better next time.

He's looking for faith.

Eternal life is so valuable that we could never afford it. So, it is either out of our reach OR it is given as a gift. And here's the best news you or your family or your friends will ever hear:

[3:16] For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life.

That's good news!

Now, there are a lot of people who don't believe in Jesus. How are we to view, to think about these people?

Jesus obviously loved people who were far from God. Among many people who are far from God, we who know Jesus have developed a reputation - earned or not - for not loving them.

How might we learn to view people who don't believe in Jesus the way Jesus viewed them?

Well, here are three suggestions from the New Testament that are captured in one of Philp Yancey's powerful books, [Vanishing Grace](#), a book I highly recommend.

Grace, Grace, Grace

People Are Thirsty (John 4)

When Jesus started a conversation with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well in the middle of the day, she was surprised that He, a Jewish man, would dare to speak to her.

This was both because Jews and Samaritans famously hated each other AND men didn't initiate conversations with women to whom they weren't related.

Their talk moved from the mutual hatred between their tribes to the proper place of worship.

Jesus drilled down on a far more important issue: The woman's unquenched thirst.

He offered her a lasting solution to that thirst. The living water that He offered would both cleanse her and satisfy her deepest longings. All she had to do was believe in Him.

If we who believe in Jesus are ever tempted to think ill of someone who does not believe in Him, we should try looking at that person as someone who is thirsty.

Remember the last time you were really, really thirsty. You were dehydrated on a hot San Antonio afternoon. That's what's going on in the soul of the person who doesn't know Jesus.

Sure, they have been trying to quench their thirst with waters that don't satisfy. They are drinking from leaking cisterns. But they're thirsty. And you can point them to the One who offers water that will become within them a fountain springing up to eternal life. (John 4:14)

And here's another way to view people who don't believe.

People Are Lost (Luke 15)

Among the most powerful parables Jesus gave - certainly the best known - are the three we find in Luke 15 where He told lost and found stories. A lost sheep, found. A lost coin, found. A lost son, found and rescued.

The sheep wasn't beaten when it was found but was carried home and cherished. The found coin was just as valuable as it had been before it had been lost. The lost and found son was embraced without shame when he was rescued.

Jesus' stories tell us that He wants the lost to be found. And it is a terrifying thing to be lost.

I've been lost in minor ways a few times out in the woods. The worst "lost" story I've been a part of was on one of our trips on the Continental Divide trail in the Weminuche Wilderness of southwestern Colorado.

On Day Three of our trip, our group was traveling north on the CDT. A solo hiker came walking toward us and we stopped on the trail to visit for a moment.

He told us that he was on his way from New Mexico to Montana...but he was walking south.

He had gotten turned around, got disoriented, and was walking back toward New Mexico. It's easy to get lost out there and he was lost.

We didn't make fun of him or rebuke him. We showed him our map. We took out a compass and showed him the way to go. He was grateful beyond words and out hiked us heading north, almost running for joy at having been turned around.

It is no laughing matter to be lost. People who don't know Jesus are lost. They need finding. You can direct them to Jesus who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

And here's one more image that will prompt you and me toward compassion on those who don't believe.

Three Things Everyone Wants to Hear

Yancey writes about a survey that asked a bunch of Americans, "*What are the words you most want to hear?*"

He tells us the top three responses to this survey.

Predictably, the first-place answer was, "*I love you.*" Not surprisingly, the second was, "*I forgive you.*" Unexpectedly, the third place went to, "*Supper's ready.*"

These three words express the deepest longings of the human heart, all of which are fulfilled in Jesus.

We live in a world marked by the brokenness of violence, fractured relationships, misunderstandings, fear and disappointment.

God has broken through to tell us that He loves us, we are forgiven, and the banquet is prepared.

That is good news.

And Jesus has blessed each of us who believe in Him with the assignment to share this good news about eternal life with those who haven't yet received it.

A Gracious Call to Us All to...Evangelism

While He was with His disciples, Jesus often told them to be bold in witness.

But it was a statement He made on a mountaintop just outside Jerusalem, after He had been crucified and resurrected, that gave all His followers marching orders for all time.

[Acts 1:8] "but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."¹¹

Those words of Jesus anticipated the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

On the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit did arrive, and with power. Jesus' followers have been His witnesses ever since, and in various ways.

Evangelism By Proclamation and Opportunity

¹¹ The setting for these words is the end of a forty-day period of post-resurrection appearances. He was speaking to the eleven remaining faithful apostles, and perhaps, to others. The words were both command ("Do my witnessing!") and promise ("You ARE My witnesses").

Large scale proclamation

Simon Peter, only weeks after having denied Jesus three times before a servant girl, stood up and proclaimed Jesus before thousands.

The Apostle Paul preached his heart out to large and small crowds of Jews and Greeks on missionary journeys.

And for two thousand years, Billy Graham and his kin have spoken to crowds of people to bring many to faith in Jesus.

Then there are times when opportunity knocks. We open the door and tell some ONE about Jesus.

When opportunity knocks

Like the time when Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, the Jewish rabbi, under cover of night.

Or when Philip met a man from Ethiopia returning from worship in Jerusalem. Philip joined the man in his chariot and explained Isaiah 53 to him. That man believed, was saved, and was baptized at an oasis in the desert.

Or the time when Paul, under house arrest in Rome, was chained to two soldiers at all times and used the opportunity to tell the soldiers about Jesus.¹²

Today, any of us might be presented with opportunities to lovingly speak about Jesus to people we happen to encounter.

Some of us may be more gifted in doing this than others and some may do it more naturally than others.

¹² The soldiers were members of the elite Praetorian Guard and Paul wrote that his ***[Philippians 1:13]...imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole Praetorian Guard and to everyone else...***

But if we keep our eyes open and our hearts open, “chance” encounters can provide open doors for any of us to share Jesus with strangers whether on a bus, in a plane, or on a grocery store aisle.

Taking opportunities with people we don’t know is as valid an expression of evangelism as proclamation.

There is a third way, though, that while less visible, is just as biblical. It involves sharing Jesus with friends.

Evangelism By Relationship

Guess who’s going to dinner? (1 Corinthians 10)

When Paul wrote his first letter to the church at Corinth, he gave a lot of correction and a lot of instruction.¹³

One topic he tackled was the question, “*What should I, a Christian eat when I am invited to the home of someone who doesn’t believe in Jesus?*” (See 1 Corinthians 10:23-30)

In dealing with this question, Paul develops the themes of weaker and stronger brothers, stumbling blocks, conscience, and Christian liberty.

He told the Corinthian Christians that they could freely eat anything that was put before them, asking no questions about whether the meat they were served had been sacrificed to pagan idols.

What I want to note here is Paul’s assumption that Christians in Corinth would be having social interaction with neighbors who didn’t believe in Jesus. They would get together over meals.

Christians would be sustaining friendships with people who were not a part of the church.¹⁴

¹³ Paul addressed immorality, lawsuits, misuse of spiritual gifts, and more.

¹⁴ Think with me about the growth of the early church in Jerusalem. We read that *[47] the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved*. How did this happen? Well, clearly, it all started with Peter’s blockbuster of

And, as it was then, so it is now.

From the first century forward, Christians have spread the faith from friend to friend, from co-worker to co-worker, from neighbor to neighbor, from classmate to classmate.

Today

We find all three of these varieties of evangelism - proclamation, opportunity, relational - on display in the New Testament. All three are perfectly biblical.

But here I am going to attempt the magic trick of going out on a limb and stepping on toes at the same time.

I’m suggesting that given the times in which we live, the method of spreading the good news of Jesus with those with whom we have relationship is the most fitting.

Of course, God can and still does use large-scale proclamation and random opportunity evangelism.

But there is a naturalness about sharing Jesus with our friends and family that has - I think - ALWAYS been God’s main means of spreading the message and is my method of choice in 2023.¹⁵

This is you...

a sermon at Pentecost. But it likely didn’t continue growing as a result of great sermons to great crowds. Rather, those who had been saved by grace through faith in Christ went around sharing the good news of Jesus with those in their circle of influence.

¹⁵ As we seek to share Jesus with our friends and neighbors, it can help to understand the doubts that are currently keeping people from believing. Here are findings from Barna’s latest *Spiritually Open* research (05/23). “We offered a long list of options to people who don’t currently practice a faith and asked, ‘*Do any of the following cause you to doubt Christian beliefs? Select all that apply.*’ Here are the top five responses: (1). The hypocrisy of religious people. (42%); (2). Science. (31%); (3). Human suffering. (30%); (4). One religion can’t have all the answers. (29%); (5). Conflict in the world. (24%)”

- ...connecting with someone at a personal level, meeting up for a meal or coffee to talk about life.
- ...listening as they tell you their story and being real about your own life.
- ...not pretending to know all the answers.
- ...speaking to your friend's thirst and to their lostness.
- ...telling your friend what Jesus means to you, inviting them to a Bible study or to a party, introducing them to your community.
- ...promising them God's love and forgiveness, promising them a banquet.

Jesus did this. Not always. But He did lead the way by being friendly and by making friends with people who were far from God. People made fun of Him for it, too.

Following our Leader (Luke 7:34)

He knew what people were saying about Him. People in polite, Jewish society said, **[Luke 7:34] "The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a heavy drinker, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'"**

He wasn't a glutton, and He wasn't a heavy drinker. But He was definitely a friend to the outsider.

Jesus loved people who were far from God.

He loved the morally upright who thought they had no need for the grace He offered - and He told them the truth.

He loved those who had lost hope of ever knowing God - and He told them that God really did love them and that He wanted them to come to His banquet!

Jesus formed close friendships with people who wouldn't have been caught dead in synagogue / church. He wants us to do the same.

God has given us the privilege of sharing Jesus with others. We are called to do this. We get to do this.

Now, as we wrap up, I'm going to highlight one more item, focusing on a loving tool that God often uses to open doors for the good news.

The first One we see using this tool is...Jesus.

Lovingly Meeting Needs in Jesus' Name

Jesus - Doing Good (Matthew 9:35)

[Matthew 9:35] Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness.

As we look through the Gospels, we watch as Jesus was moved with compassion to heal, to feed, to lead.

He did this all the time, with people from every background, in every circumstance. Jesus used His power to help people.

Jesus' commitment to meeting human need impacted Simon Peter so much that when he was describing Jesus to a group of Gentiles in the home of Cornelius (a Roman centurion), he summed up the Lord's career with this:

[Acts 10:38] You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.

Jesus "***went about doing good***" because He loved and cared for people who were in trouble. His love would eventually prompt Him to give Himself on the cross for our sins.

The good He did for people in need of physical and mental and emotional restoration often opened their hearts to receive the greater spiritual work of restoration He had come to earth to do.

Today, you and I can imitate Jesus by loving service. Having received mercy from Jesus, we pour it out on others. We love others because He showered us with love.

And sometimes, when we meet needs in His Name, we will be opening doors to grace our friends to Jesus.

Jesus' Church - Doing Good (Titus 3:14)

This is how Paul put it in his letter to his friend, Titus.

[Titus 3:14] Our people must also learn to engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that they will not be unproductive.

So, meeting needs in Jesus' Name is...productive.

Kenya

Earlier this hour, we watched a video produced by Crossway International that showed grateful widows rejoicing over food they received that allowed them to survive a devastating drought in Kenya.

Lots of churches like Northwest and people like us met these widows' needs in Jesus' Name.

This act of giving was *very* productive.

It produced full bellies for the widows and their dependents. Our gift produced thankful hearts in women who were facing the real threat of starvation. The money we gave to buy the food they needed produced praise to God and a growing faith in God.

And if, in the years to come, you ever have a chance to visit the widows' villages that received the food we sent, you will know that the gift produced friendship.

Those widows will never forget that your generosity brought them through the drought of 2022-23. When you meet them - here or there - they will hug you and kiss you, thank you and bless you for being their friend.

That's one example of meeting needs in Jesus' Name, productively. Here's another.

Kingdom Investment Initiative

God has given our church a tremendous stewardship. We sold some property behind the church a few years ago, and in the years since have used the treasure of those Land Sale Proceeds (LSP) for a lot of good purposes.

Currently, the Elders are inviting you to participate in what we are calling a **Kingdom Investment Initiative**.

We have done this before. Here is how it works.

You can form a group consisting of multiple family units who are currently attending Northwest. This could be an existing group, like a Care Group or an ABF, or a group formed solely to take advantage of the Kingdom Investment Initiative.

Get this group together to pray, brainstorm, and discuss how you would like to use Land Sale Proceeds funds in the range of \$1,000-\$10,000 to meet needs in Jesus Name.

Your project could involve sending a gift to a Gospel ministry overseas or locally. Or it could involve meeting needs in Jesus' Name here in San Antonio in a more "hands on" manner. The LSP funds could be "seed money" to start a ministry that is on your heart.

You have between now and the end of July to submit a proposal to the Land Sale Proceeds Outreach Team.

It is my fervent hope and prayer that many of you will take advantage of this opportunity to ***"engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs"*** in Jesus' Name.

God may well use your group's efforts to "produce" grateful hearts, praise to God, growing faith, and even friendships.

(Please pick up a copy of the sheet with all the details of the Kingdom Investment Initiative in the lobby today. And feel free to contact any member of the LSP Outreach Team - Manuel Abarca, Todd Havekost, Nicole Johnson, me - if you have questions.)

And, of course, there are countless other ways to *“engage in good deeds to meet pressing needs”* all around us.

Taking advantage of these open doors with family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers gives us the chance to show others the love we’ve received from Jesus.

And they might just open doors for us to share the indescribable gift of Jesus’ salvation.

Conclusion:

Among my favorites of Jesus’ parables is the one we call “The Parable of the Unrighteous Manager.” (Luke 16) Jesus told this story to His disciples. It’s about a dishonest manager who had been fired for squandering his boss’ wealth.

After he was fired, the dishonest manager went to his former boss’ debtors and dishonestly reduced their indebtedness.

Of course, this move destroyed some of the boss’ wealth. But, in the parable, Jesus has the rich man praising the dishonest manager because he had made friends for himself by his use of money.

Jesus then told His disciples, ***[Luke 16:9] “And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it is all gone, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings.”***

In other words, as we meet our friends’ needs in Jesus’ Name - by our use of time, talent, or treasure - our friends will see God’s love in our love, will place their faith in the Jesus they have seen in us, and will welcome us when we get to heaven.

How very productive!