

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Salt and Light

(Impacting our world for Jesus)

Gospel Coaching

(Selected passages from Acts)

Study #4

Introduction: The coaching I have needed...and that we all need

From my early teen-aged years, I had always wanted to be able to work on cars. I had watched my older next door neighbor work on his car and longed for the day that I would work on my own.

I finally got my driver's license and then my first car and decided right off the bat that I would start to work on my car.

First job? I decided to change out the spark plugs and wires. So, I did. I removed all six of the wires. At the same time. (Big mistake. I should have replaced one wire at a time so that I would have known which wire went from the distributor to which spark plug.)

My neighbor was watching, laughing. Thankfully, he helped me fix my mess.

Over the next several years I mostly floundered at fixing cars but finally made progress in the art of auto repair when I got married.

I gained a wonderful wife in Kathy when I got married.

I also gained a great car repair coach in my father-in-law, Bob Kerr, the most accomplished auto mechanic I've ever known.

I would watch Bob work on his cars and on mine. I listened to him when he made suggestions. I called him when I got stuck and got priceless free advice over the phone.

Because of his coaching I kept a car or two on the road longer than they would have, otherwise.

It took a coach to help me learn what I really wanted to learn.

This morning, we're going to crawl under the hood to get coaching in the art of sharing Jesus' good news from two master evangelists.

First to set the stage.

Preview to the life and times of Philip...

After Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection and after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, it wasn't long before persecution hit Jesus' followers.

Mild opposition turned serious after the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Stephen.¹

It got so bad that the Christians were forced to flee Jerusalem. Luke tells us, **[8:4] those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.**

Among those who were scattered was a leader in the church named Philip, not the Apostle Philip, but another Philip. This Philip was one of the seven leaders of a ministry that served widows in the Jerusalem church. Acts, chapter 8, is all about the exploits of Philip.²

¹ Stephen was one of a group of seven men who served widows in the church in Jerusalem. He preached a powerful sermon - and was then stoned to death for his

bold witness. That stoning sparked a wide-scale persecution against Jesus' followers that resulted in a scattering of the believers from Jerusalem. (Acts 8:4)

² Philip is the only named evangelist in the New Testament. (Acts 21:8)

The first of the two Philip stories tells about his evangelistic ministry in the capitol city of Samaria.

We'll focus on Philip's second evangelistic assignment.

He left ***"the city of Samaria"*** (v. 5) and continued his evangelistic tour. His travel plans took a detour when an angel gave him new instructions: ***[Acts 8:26]... "Get ready and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza."***

Immediately, Philip changed course, passed through Jerusalem, and then went south and west out of Jerusalem on the road to Gaza.

He soon met up with a man who was on his way to his home back in Africa.

Coaching From Philip, the Table-Server (Acts 8:27-40)

Convergence to Conversion (8:27-38)

An eager Ethiopian (8:27-29)

[27]...and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship, [28] and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading Isaiah the prophet.

This man was a high-ranking government official³ of the large territory south of Egypt that stretched far into the continent of Africa.⁴

He was a Gentile by birth and culture. But he was a convert to Judaism (proselyte), what the Jews referred to as a "God-fearer."

He was returning from a time of worship at the temple in Jerusalem, traveling by chariot and was at the front end of a five month long journey back to his home.

The Holy Spirit told Philip to race ahead and ***"join this chariot,"*** which he did. (v. 29)⁵

As he approached, he overheard the man reading from the scroll of Isaiah.⁶

An eager evangelist (8:30-38)

The Ethiopian needed help (vv. 30-31)

Philip asked this man if he understood what he was reading.

The Ethiopian was wise enough to know what he didn't know. He knew that he didn't know what Isaiah was talking about.

[31] And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

Here's what he was reading.

Philip helped (vv. 32-35)

[32] Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this:

***"HE WAS LED LIKE A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER;
AND LIKE A LAMB THAT IS SILENT BEFORE ITS SHEARER,
SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH.***

***[33] "IN HUMILIATION HIS JUSTICE WAS TAKEN AWAY;
WHO WILL DESCRIBE HIS GENERATION?
FOR HIS LIFE IS TAKEN AWAY FROM THE EARTH."***

³ Men who were made eunuchs frequently rose to governmental prominence.

⁴ Ethiopia *then* is not the same thing as Ethiopia *now*. It was probably what is currently central Sudan, and nearly one thousand miles from the Mediterranean.

⁵ Royal chariots used for long-distance travel sat three people, two passengers and a driver. It is likely that there was probably a driver and / or a guard with this man.

⁶ He was reading aloud, the normal method of reading in the ancient world.

This passage (taken from Isaiah 53) is known as one of Isaiah's several "*Servant Passages*."⁷

The Jews believed that these passages described the suffering of either Isaiah himself or those of the nation of Israel.

They wouldn't have imagined that Isaiah was writing about the Messiah, because the Jews couldn't wrap their minds around the thought of a Messiah who suffered.

This Ethiopian was wrestling with the text. He didn't "get it."

A request for insight (v. 34)

[34] The eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?"

Philip, being a lifelong Jew, would have known a lot about the prophets. So, he would have been familiar with this passage in Isaiah.

And Philip was a recent convert to faith in Jesus. He had heard the apostles' teaching in Jerusalem. He knew about the life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

And as Philip listened to the words the Ethiopian was reading, he understood - maybe now for the first time - that the Person Isaiah described here wasn't Isaiah or the nation of Israel.

Telling the best story ever (v. 35)

[35] Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.

Here we have the essence of an evangelistic encounter: Someone who needs to hear about Jesus meets someone who is passionate to tell about Jesus. Evangelism is a powerful convergence.

I would have loved to have been in the back seat of that chariot, listening to Philip explain Isaiah 53.

Did he march through the whole chapter, showing every place where the life of Jesus paralleled the words of the prophet? Probably.

Did he cherry-pick from other Old Testament Scriptures that spoke of the ministry of the Messiah? Probably.

I'm sure that Philip told the Ethiopian what had happened in Jerusalem and throughout Israel during Jesus' three-year ministry, and then of His death and resurrection.

Well, after they had traveled and talked for some time, what Philip had been telling the Ethiopian was resonating. He believed what Philip had to say about Jesus.

Welcoming Well (8:36-39)

The response of faith (vv. 36)

[36] As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?"

Philip must have told the man about baptism.

He probably told about all those in Jerusalem who had believed in Jesus and were AND how all of those who had just recently believed in Jesus in Samaria had been baptized.

It was perfectly fitting for this man to point to some water they were passing and to request baptism. He believed in Jesus, so he asked.

But what an odd way to frame the question. Not, "*I want to be baptized*" or "*Baptize me now!*" but "***What prevents me from being baptized?***"

⁷ Isaiah's "*servant passages*" are found in chapters 42, 49, 50, and 52:13--53:12.

Well, remember. He wasn't quite a Jew. He was a Gentile convert, and there were restrictions on how fully a convert could participate in Judaism.

And he was a eunuch. Being a eunuch, there were limits as to how fully he could participate in all things Jewish.

He posed the question as he asked it because he wanted to know if he - a Gentile eunuch - could really be immersed in life in Jesus.

"Will I be accepted? Will there be limits on my participation in this faith, too? Philip, you've told me that baptism symbolizes full inclusion in life in Jesus. Am I welcomed? Am I really 'in'?"

There was no hesitation on Philip's part.

Immersed into life in Christ (v. 38)

[38] And he ordered that the chariot stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him.

By that baptism, Philip fully welcomed into life in Jesus a man who wasn't fully welcomed anywhere else.

Coach Philip has two lessons for us who want to learn about sharing the good news of Jesus.

First, keep your heart, ears, eyes, and mind open for that convergence between you (someone who has a burning desire to share Jesus) and someone who has not yet believed in Jesus.

When that convergence happens, boldly, lovingly walk through the door to tell them the best news they'll ever hear.

Second, when they respond with faith in the Jesus you have presented, welcome them into life in Jesus.

Once someone has believed, there are no conditions left to be met and there is no probationary period for full inclusion.

Welcome her with open arms. Accept him as warmly as God accepted you.

Give the new believer no reason to doubt that they are "in." Lead them to baptism, the act that symbolizes full immersion in Jesus and in His church.⁸

Now we turn to the other coach we're consulting today for lessons in evangelism: Coach Paul.⁹

The Apostle Paul will first help us as we see him in action, sharing Jesus' good news with audiences that were mostly receptive.

Coaching From Paul, the Late-to-the-Game Apostle (from Acts)

Tips for Evangelizing the Receptive (Acts 13, 16, 17)

In Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13)

While on a journey through Asia Minor, Paul and his friend, Barnabas, came to the city of Pisidian Antioch.

There, they visited the Jewish synagogue on a Sabbath day. The Jews in the synagogue warmly welcomed them and even invited them to present a message from Scripture.

⁸ We can also learn something about evangelism from Simon Peter. His most famous evangelistic presentation was to a whole group of Gentiles in the home of a Roman centurion named Cornelius. (Acts 10) In so many ways that story parallels what we have seen from Philip as there was (1) convergence between Simon Peter and Cornelius; (2) the telling of the story to people who had not heard; (3) a faith-

inspired turning to Jesus; (4) welcome into life in Christ and into the church by way of baptism.

⁹ All the other apostles had known Jesus while He was alive. They saw His miracles, heard His teachings, and experienced Him, up close and personal, during His earthly ministry. Paul was the only apostle who only met Jesus AFTER His crucifixion and resurrection. He was late to the game.

We're not surprised that Paul stepped up to the mic to speak.¹⁰ Here is the general flow of his sermon.

He started off telling some Jewish history that everyone in the synagogue on that day would have known.

He told about Abraham and Moses and about Israel's slavery in Egypt. Paul mentioned the period of the judges, and Saul, the first Jewish king.

Then, he focused on King David, who foresaw that one of his own descendants would be the nation's - and the world's - Savior.

At that, Paul moved from ancient history to current events and told his audience that the Savior David had foreseen had a name: Jesus!

Then, he told those who were in the synagogue the story of Jesus' life, and about how Jesus was condemned by the Jewish rulers, was crucified by the Romans - and that He rose from the dead.¹¹

He wrapped up his sermon with this: ***[Acts 13:38] "Therefore let it be known to you, brothers, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, [39] and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses."***

Paul told the story of Jesus and invited his hearers to believe. Simply believe in Jesus and receive freedom in Jesus.

A lot of the Jews happily received that message on that day.

In fact, they ***"begged"*** Paul to come back the next Sabbath and tell them more. Many of the Jews and the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas. (13:42-43)

¹⁰ If this was a normally constructed synagogue, Paul would have stepped on to a raised platform to stand behind a podium (called a *bema*) to present the message that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah for whom these Jews had been waiting.

Paul simply told Jesus' story. Great coaching. Thanks, Paul. Now let's watch Paul in another evangelism moment. This one took place on another missions trip, and it happened in the city of Philippi.

We saw this "moment" a couple of Sundays ago, but I want us to see it again, now, to get some more coaching.

In Philippi (Acts 16)

Remember that Paul and his friend, Silas, had been arrested in Philippi for preaching Jesus and for delivering a slave girl from demonic oppression.

They were beaten by the authorities and were then thrown into the depths of the Philippian jail.

The jailer was instructed to ***"guard [Paul and Silas] securely,"*** so he ***"threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks."*** (vv. 23, 24)

In the middle of the night, the jailer was awakened by an earthquake. He rushed to the jail to see if the prisoners had escaped.

Figuring that they had escaped, he was about to take his own life.¹² But Paul called out to him, ***[28] "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!"***

And sure enough, even though the doors to the prison were opened wide and all the prisoners' chains were unfastened, no one had escaped.

They were all sitting there, listening to Paul and Silas as they sang hymns of praise to God.

¹¹ Paul reminded them that David had understood that the coming Savior (his own Descendant) would not undergo corruption. He wouldn't stay in the grave.

¹² This would no doubt have been better than to allow Rome to do whatever it was that they would do if he had allowed the prisoners to escape.

The jailer, hearing Paul and Silas sing and seeing the prisoners sitting there, took in the scene before him, and asked, **[30] “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”**

That question assumes that the jailer knew that Paul and Silas were **“proclaiming...a way of salvation.”**¹³ Plus, he knew that they had been arrested for preaching Jesus.

And he knew that they were exhibiting a calmness and a contentedness that made no sense, given the beating, arrest, imprisonment, and earthquake!

So, he asked them how he could have whatever **“salvation”** they had and were proclaiming to others.

And I think that we have to assume that the jailer understood what Paul was saying and who Jesus was when Paul gave his short, sweet response: **[31] “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”**

That scene in a Philippian jail provides a beautiful picture of a very receptive man who was hungry to have whatever it was that Paul and Barnabas had and who was told exactly how to receive it: **Believe in the Lord Jesus.**¹⁴

Then, we turn to another passage, also on the second missionary journey, where people were, again, very receptive, in the city of Thessalonica.

In Thessalonica (Acts 17)

There, they followed Paul’s custom of going to the Jews in a city, first, and went to the Thessalonian synagogue, again, on a Sabbath.

They went there for three consecutive sabbaths, and Luke tells us that Paul, **[Acts 17:2...reasoned with them from the Scriptures,**

[3] explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer (meaning, **“to die”**) **and rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.”**

The time in Thessalonica was very fruitful.

Some of the Jews were **“persuaded”** and starting hanging with Paul and Silas.

Plus **“a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a significant number of the leading women”** were also **“persuaded.”** (Acts 17:4)

This is different than what happened in Pisidian Antioch (where Paul preached a sermon) or in Philippi (where Paul gave the jailer a one-liner urging faith in Jesus).

Here in Thessalonica, there was discussion. Picture lively conversations. Think of debates.

Imagine the passage of time where people have space to think about the arguments they’ve heard. Imagine all the **“evidence”** Paul brought to the table from Scripture, week after week, to **“persuade”** his listeners that Jesus is the Christ.

Coach Paul’s interactions with receptive people were varied.

What Paul shows us is that evangelistic moments can happen over the course of a long discourse, in a moment of time, or over weeks - or months or years - of on-going, patient reasoned discussion to **“persuade”** the unpersuaded.

Paul would tell us, today, sow the good seed of the message in every way you can, every chance you get.

¹³ That was what the demon-possessed slave girl had said. (Acts 16:17)

¹⁴ If nothing else, this is proof positive that evangelistic presentations need not be long. (I wonder if the same could apply to sermons...?)

Tell your friends the stories of Jesus. Don't rush anything. Be willing to take time. Keep the conversations going. You never know when the seed will sprout.

Keep sowing seed and nurture friendships where there are meaty conversations about life, God, and eternity.

So, Coach Paul has shown us some of the ways in which he interacted with mostly receptive people and crowds.

As we wrap up, he has another tip for whenever we talk to others about Jesus, and especially when the listeners are resistant.

Before we do that, let's briefly listen to Paul's conversion story.

A Tip for Evangelizing the Resistant (Acts 9... and 22, 25)

Background: Reviewing Paul's story (Acts 9)

Before he was a Christian, Paul (aka Saul of Tarsus) was a fierce enemy of the Jesus movement.

And, after the stoning of Stephen, Saul / Paul ***[Acts 8:3] began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and he would drag away men and women and put them in prison.***

Saul expanded his reach and, with the permission of the High Priest made his way to Damascus to arrest Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem to stand trial - and hopefully bring them to the same end as Stephen.

As he and his companions neared Damascus, the Jesus he was persecuting interrupted Saul's trip and his life.

[Acts 9:3] Now as he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him...

Then, after the light, a Voice.

Saul fell to the ground and heard the Voice asking, ***[4]...“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”***

Never in his wildest dreams would Saul have intended to persecute God. Saul would have been devastated by this question. The Voice's response changed everything.

[5] And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” And He said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting” - and just like that, Saul's world was undone.

He had been perfectly wrong about Jesus.

Jesus was the Messiah. He was the Son of God, just like His followers had been saying. And what the arguments of Stephen had not done, a flash of light and a simple word had done.

Saul of Tarsus, chief persecutor of Jesus' church, believed in Jesus, was saved, and became the Apostle Paul.

Now, jump with me twenty-four years into the future where we meet a much older Paul.

When he was testifying before the Jewish rulers (Acts 22)

In Acts 21 we read that Paul had gone to Jerusalem. He was seized by some Jews who were intent on killing him for following and preaching Jesus. (21:31)

Paul was rescued from the mob by Roman soldiers who didn't want anybody lynched on their watch.

They had brought Paul as far as the stairs leading to the soldiers' barracks, when Paul saw that the crowds of Jews were following, still screaming, still intent on killing him.

Paul turned to the commanding officer and begged that he be allowed to speak to these Jews. The officer allowed it.

Listen to Paul's opening words:

[22:4] I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons, [5]...From them I also received letters to the brothers, and started off for Damascus in order to bring even those who were there to Jerusalem as prisoners to be punished.

[6] “But it happened that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus at about noon, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me, [7] and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ [8] And I answered, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said to me, ‘I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.’”¹⁵

From there, Paul went on to tell his audience the story of Jesus. But notice that he led with his own story. He gave his testimony, his personal experience.

And one final story from Acts, chapter 26 where Paul was facing another tough crowd.

When he was testifying before King Agrippa (Acts 26)

This time he was speaking to King Agrippa (ruler of all of northern Palestine and no friend to Christians), all of the king's military officers, and the leading men of the city.

After polite opening remarks, Paul led with this:

[Acts 26:12] “...as I was journeying to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, [13] at midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who were journeying with me. [14] And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew dialect, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’”

[15] And I said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.’”

Paul told his own story before he told Jesus' story.

Conclusion:

Over four Sundays, we have focused on how we can be the saltiest salt and the brightest lights for Jesus possible by:
 (1) not complaining, but by leading a contented, grateful life in Jesus. (Philippians 2)
 (2) developing genuine, loving, redemptive friendships with people who don't yet believe in Jesus. (1 Corinthians 5, 10)
 (3) submitting to our government AND giving primary allegiance to Jesus. (Romans 13)

TODAY, Coach Philip has shown us how important it is to share Jesus' gospel at the convergence of a meeting with an eager person who is seeking God AND to welcome them into life in Jesus when they believe.

Coach Paul has shown us the importance of telling - boldly, faithfully, truly - the story of Jesus AND of telling our own coming-to-Jesus story every chance we have!

¹⁵ The testimony continued with Paul recounting the rest of the story of his three days of blindness, the laying on of hands by Ananias, God's commission of him to go to the Gentiles, and his baptism. (vv. 9-16)