

## **Salt Life**

### **Part Four: How to share faith with those who don't believe like us Colossians 4.5-6**

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**January 28, 2024**

You've all heard the classic question:

If you were stranded on a deserted island and could only pick one thing to have with you other than water and food, what would it be?

Someone once asked the Christian writer and thinker GK Chesterton that question. His immediate answer was, "Thomas's Guide to Practical Shipbuilding."

Let me reframe the question in a way that applies to our current sermon series and our message today.

If you were to have the chance to share your faith with someone today and you could only pick one thing to have as a resource, what would it be?

For a lot of us, I think that experience might feel a bit like being stranded on a deserted island.

Yikes! What do I say? What do I do? How do I answer the hard questions? What if I say the wrong thing? We'd start lighting signal fires and writing desperate messages in the sand. Help!

Maybe you would answer, I'd pick

- a lightning-fast brain like the one Mark Labberton has
- a seminary degree like the ones Rob Eyman or Brently Jordan have
- a charming outgoing personality like Glenn Balsis and Dulcy Abraham have

When we think about having a conversation about our faith, most of us think in terms of what we're missing.

Here's the tension we often feel when it comes to sharing our faith. On the one hand, there's the command:

**Matthew 28.18-20**

Jesus said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

As followers of Christ, we know we are all called to share our faith and lead others to Christ.

And, on the other hand, most of us don't feel at all capable of fulfilling that command because we feel like we're lacking something necessary to have an effective conversation about our faith.

I don't feel comfortable.  
I don't feel gifted.  
I don't feel equipped.  
So I don't feel inclined.

We can feel like Moses in Exodus 3 and 4 when God asks him to lead his people out of Egypt and he says, “Look, you've got the wrong guy.”

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What would you say if I told you that, if you were to have the chance to share your faith with someone today you wouldn't need to ask for anything else than what you already have? That you already have *everything you need* to share your faith effectively?

Think with me for a minute about you already have.

As people who have given our allegiance to Jesus, what do we already have in our pockets whenever we come into any conversation with a non-Christian?

1. You have a life-changing relationship with Jesus.

- Your relationship with him – you know him, he knows you, you have the daily experience of him present and at work in your life

Paul speaks in Philippians of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord – you have that!

- The difference he has made in your life

Paul tells us in Ephesians that we have every spiritual blessing in Christ

Think of how you are a different person because of the difference he has made in your life: purpose, peace, forgiveness, hope, acceptance, belonging, freedom, fulfillment, a new family, a new life, a life turned out toward others – you have that too!

2. You also have the Holy Spirit, God alive and at work within you

Not only the Spirit working in us to empower you and equip you in our witness

Matthew 10.20 It will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

Luke 12.12 The Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.

But also that same Spirit working in the souls of men and women and children that he has placed around us, individuals who he is bringing alive spiritually and drawing to himself

John 16.8-11 he convicts people of their need for God

John 3.5-6 he brings about in them a new birth

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This morning we come to the last message in our Salt Life sermon series.

We've explored how we love those who disagree with us, how we see those who don't look like us, how we love those who don't like us. Today our focus is on how to share our faith with those who don't believe like us.

The passage we're looking at this morning is Colossians 4.5-6.

Let's explore the passage now.

### **Colossians 4.5-6**

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

Hopping back up the verse 5, let's walk back through the passage and notice a couple of things.

### **Colossians 4.5**

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.

#### *Outsider*

Not the divisive meaning that word has when it's used in our culture today, dividing people into camps, the insider group that knows what they're talking about that you're a part of and that other group of idiots

It literally just says "those who are outside". It just means those who are not Christians – they are outside the faith

So in your interactions with non-Christians we are to . . .

*Be wise in the way you act.*

Notice this. It says not, wise in the way you *talk*, be wise in the way you make your points and frame your arguments, but wise in the way you *act*.

My thinking about the connection in evangelism between what I say and how I live, the relative importance of the message and the messenger, has shifted significantly over time.

My first experience of sharing faith was as an atheist when others tried to share theirs with me, and so often it was insensitively pushed into the conversation.

Then when I was first a Christian I said, "That's fine for your to share your faith, but that's not for me."

1. Then I concluded that it was something I was called to do, and that the message was what was important. So I memorized a thorough gospel presentation, and then I would try to slip it into the conversation somewhere, making sure it includes all the important points, with all the subtlety of emptying a dump truck in your family room.

It's possible to have too much of a good thing.



Then I realized that the messenger was not only important to the message being heard, but was actually part of the message. We claim him as our father. We claim he has made a difference. So you are telling the other person what your Father is like by the way you act as his children, the way you treat them, the way you respond to them.

I finally began to learn the right amount and the right approach.



It isn't just about what we say. It's about how we say it. Paul says, "Be wise."

James asks in James 3.13 asks:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life,  
by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom

Not surprisingly, there is a remarkable amount of unity in the Bible's description of what it looks like to walk with wisdom as a follower of Jesus in our interactions with others:

### **Galatians 5.22-23**

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,  
faithfulness, gentleness and the inner mastery of the Spirit

### **Colossians 3.12-15**

Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

### **James 3.13-18**

The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving,  
considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

Paul goes on.

*Make the most of every opportunity.* Or take full advantage of those God-given moments when you sense the Spirit is working.

According to the New Testament, these are the ways we might be called upon to speak as followers of Christ

**Acts 1.8:** describe our experience of Jesus

**Acts 5.42:** share the good news about Jesus

**I Peter 3.15:** give a reason for our faith in Jesus

God calls us to make the most of an opportunity by being ready to share our experience of Jesus, or share the good news about Jesus, and or share why we believe in Jesus. God does the rest.

The best way to take full advantage of an opportunity is to be prepared for it ahead of time, right?

When you stop and think about it, with each of these ways of speaking about our faith, there are things we can do to be prepared ahead of time.

For example, the best way to be ready to witness to our experience of Jesus is to think ahead of time about several different ways we have experienced him and how he has made a difference in our lives, so when the conversation goes that way we are ready to tell about our experience in a succinct and interesting way. The world may not be interested in what the Bible says, but it will be always be interested in our experience.

Last week I was on a plane coming back from denominational meetings. I was sitting next to a thirty-something woman named Melissa. I had introduced myself when we sat down and had spent a good half hour practicing curiosity about her life, just asking her questions and then following those up with more.

I had learned in my conversation with her that she had no interest in God but was passionately interested in her work. And at one point she shared that she felt really lucky because of the amazing way things happened for her to have ended up in the company where she was now.

Praying in the moment, I thought of a story from my own life that brought work and God together.

So I said, "Don't you love those mysterious inexplicable moments when things happen in your life and you have a sense that there's someone outside of your life who is reaching in and making your life go well?"

Then I said, "Can I share an experience I had? I'm sensitive to the fact that you're kind of a captive audience. I don't want you to feel cornered." "Oh, no, please. I'd like to hear." I told her about how, because of my sense that God was leading me into ministry, I was asked to leave P&G and then was able to step right into an open role at my local church.

I finished and she said, "That's amazing. Thank you so much for sharing that."

The best way to be ready to *share the good news* is to think through ahead of time how we would explain who Jesus is and why he came. It can be helpful to have a simple outline memorized. It turns out you already have one. Just use our church's logo and our statements of identity and calling.

"The New Testament teaches that Jesus is the King. God created us to live under his loving rule, to become his people and to live our lives for his kingdom and his glory. That's why we exist.

"All of us want to be kings and queens of our own small kingdoms. But that will never go well for us. He calls us to stop ruling our own lives and place ourselves under His loving rule. When we do, it makes all the difference. Now our lives are filled with his purposes for us. In response to his sacrificial love for us, we are called to live a life of love too – loving him, loving one another, and loving this world in his name."

And the best way to be ready to *give a reason for our faith* is to do a little homework from time to time. Maybe you could commit to reading or listening to something once a year to help you express *why* you believe what you believe.

Several non-Christians have expressed to me recently that they have been surprised and disappointed when they've asked Christians questions about their faith and those Christians weren't able to articulate even a little bit about why they believe, for example, that the Bible is trustworthy or that the Christian faith is the one true faith. I think that's a reasonable desire on their part.

As you think about equipping yourself to give the reason for your faith, I'd highly recommend the writings of Paul Copan, who came and spoke at Covenant several years ago. His books and articles and podcasts are great resources, like these two books *When God Goes to Starbucks* and *True for You But Not For Me*. First one up here after the service gets their pick.

Speaking of making the most of the opportunity, I just want to remind you about the opportunity called Conversations about Christianity. Also, our upcoming sermon series, starting next Sunday, would be a great opportunity to take a next step with your neighbors.

So Paul says,

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.

Then he goes on. And now we come to a dimension of faith sharing that doesn't have anything to do with our words.

### **Colossians 4.6**

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

*Let your conversation be always full of grace.*

The root idea of grace is the idea of a *gift*. Something given out of our own generosity rather than because the other person is worthy of it in some way.

Grace does the opposite direction from justice. Justice gives what it gets. It gives what is deserved. An eye for an eye. Grace gives what it doesn't get. It gives what is undeserved.

So if they're rude, be kind. If they're evil, be good. If they're stingy, be generous. If they're impatient, be patient. If they're immoral, choose not to be judgmental.

Notice that little word *always*. *Let your conversation be always full of grace.*

This connects with what we said last week. It is so easy to love *when*. To love *if*. To love *because*. To love *unless*. To love *until*.

Paul calls us to be people of grace *always*.

Then Paul goes on and gives us a parallel phrase.

*Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt.*

Seasoned with salt. What is the metaphor of salt getting at?

In **Matthew 5.13** Jesus says

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

As you've probably heard often, salt was used as a preservative in the ancient world. With no refrigerators, salt was the only thing they had besides cooking that could stop or slow the spread of rot in fish and meat.

But from everything I've been able to tell, that wasn't the only, and it wasn't even the most important, way salt that was understood as a metaphor in the ancient world.

The main thing salt expressed as a symbol wasn't preserving or seasoning. It was *welcoming*.

That idea is captured in several traditional proverbs from the Middle East.

I have eaten someone's salt.  
There is salt between us.



We have tasted the salt.  
By salt we are one.

Those all capture the idea that we have been welcomed into someone's life and heart and we have begun to forge a friendship with them.

That's why salt was often used to formalize a covenant agreement in the ancient Middle East. You see that in Leviticus 2.13, Numbers 18.19, and II Chronicles 13.5, where it speaks of the salt of the covenant.

Hospitality was a prized virtue among the desert dwelling people of the Middle East. Sharing a meal with a stranger was considered a universal obligation.

You might offer them a place at your table and you might loan them your stable and your bed. But *to share your salt* – that meant putting the most valuable thing you owned on the table and inviting this stranger to help himself.

Salt is a picture of going out of your way to move toward someone and forge a friendship with them, to welcome them in a way that takes strangers and makes them friends and takes friends and makes them family.

According to Jesus, that peaceable, gracious, intentional friendship-making posture is supposed to characterize how we relate to others within the church family.

In **Mark 9.50**, Jesus says to those of us who are in the church:

Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.

And according to Paul, in this verse, that same peaceable, gracious, intentional friendship-making posture is to mark how we relate to those outside the faith as well.

Let me stay with this a moment longer.

If my primary way of thinking about my core calling in a non-Christian world is that I am called to stop the spread of corruption, how will I relate to non-Christians?

My posture is likely to be *oppositional*. I'm likely to see myself in a different moral category from them, and elevate myself above them, and to judge them, and to pull back from them, and to push them away.

But if my primary way of thinking about my core calling in a non-Christian world is to turn strangers into friends and friends into family, then my posture is more likely to be *invitational*. I'm likely to see myself in the same category as them, every bit as spiritually needy as they are, every bit as in need of grace, and to move toward them and draw them in toward me – just as Christ did with me.

On the plane down to Orlando last week I sat next to two women. After listening to them speak critically of several of their friends' weight and cooking and choice of husbands, I introduced myself and asked about their trip. They said they were heading down to spend a week together with friends in Florida. We talked for quite a bit about their plans.

Then they asked me what I was going to do in Orlando, I told them I was a pastor, and I'd be together with a bunch of other pastors.

I was trying to think about how to possibly open a door into a spiritual conversation with them, so I said we were meeting to share ideas about how to make our churches more effective, especially with so many people who have walked away from the church and so many others who find the church so irrelevant, in a world that has become so divisive and at odds and where so many people are hostile to the church.

One of them, a woman named Pat, swung her fist through the air, and said, "They need Jesus!" I could just feel the judgment in the comment and I felt the air go out of me.

So I said something like, "We all do, don't we? Even those of us who already know him? It is just so easy to think we're in some different category from others, but we aren't. I desperately need him every day."

She leaned back in her seat and her eyes opened a bit, and the smile sort of slid off her face. She looked over at her friend. Then she looked back at me.

Uh-oh, I thought.

Then she said, "I want to go to his church."

Paul says,

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

That is: **relate to those outside the faith in a way that turns strangers into friends and friends into family.**

Which is exactly what Jesus did. Which is why those who framed their relationship with the surrounding culture in oppositional terms had such a hard time with him.

Matthew 9.10-11

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "**Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?**"

Matthew 11.19

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, '**Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners."** But wisdom is proved right by her actions.

Luke 15.1-2

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and teachers of the law muttered, "**This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.**"

Luke 7.36-39

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to have dinner with him, so Jesus went to his home and sat down to eat. When a certain immoral woman from that city heard he was eating there, she brought a beautiful alabaster jar filled with expensive perfume. . . . She kept kissing his feet and putting perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "**If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. She's a sinner!**"

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, *so that you may know how to answer everyone.*

One resource said this could be translated: "so that you may know how to take up the conversation." I love that.

And what a great prayer to pray. "Spirit, how would you have me take up this conversation?"

When I was a kid we had a pair of lamps in our living room that had prisms hanging in a circle around the light bulb. I used to love removing one of those prisms and carrying it over into the sunlight and watching the colors scatter all across the room.



As I was preparing this message, it occurred to me that that's how the New Testament thinks about our role as witnesses.

### **Philippians 2.15-16**

Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation."  
*Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life.*

Our sharing our faith isn't a matter of our constructing a brilliant argument that convinces people they should come into the kingdom.

When we share our faith, God just puts us between himself and someone else, and then he lets his light shine through us. My job is just to stand between him and other people and let his light shine through.

What has God been saying to you this morning? What is your yes to him?

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As we come to our closing prayer and song, let me shift metaphors from light shining to singing a song.

In the book called *The Comfort of Crows*, Margaret Renkl writes a piece called "Praise Song for the Praise Song of a Song Sparrow in Winter" (23)

He came from somewhere north of here, and I did not expect him to stay. There has never been a song sparrow in this yard during our time here, but this one song sparrow has taken up residence. He sings from within the pine tree next to the driveway. He sings from the middle of the power line above the road. He sings from inside a holly bush at one end of the pollinator garden. All day long he sings and sings. It is a loud, piercing song that shudders his full body, a song that lifts straight through the clouds and far beyond the sky. All this long winter long, the song sparrow in his pine tree pulpit has been teaching me that one exuberant, unceasing song can change everything.

What is your response to God's invitation this morning?