

Why Don't We Share the Gospel? We Fear Rejection

John 15:18-21; Luke 6:22-23; 2 Timothy 4:1-4; 2 Thessalonians 1:8-10
April 25, 2010

Pastor Walt Walkowski
Jackson, MI

This morning, we are looking at how fear can affect us sharing the Gospel.

Fear often has one of two effects on us. First, it can serve as a powerful motivator. For the last week or so, my daughter invested countless hours in a school project because she feared for her grade. Being in an accident, or having someone close to us be in one, can lead us to fear that happening again, and cause us to make positive changes in, say, the way we drive or our vigilance in using heavy equipment. Just this last week, my neighbor, who repairs farm equipment, told me about a customer of his who couldn't wait for him to show up to clean a piece of equipment. Cleaning the equipment involved raising up a 1,200-pound cylinder, engaging a safety spring, and then reaching an arm under the cylinder—between it, and a very thick piece of steel—to clean out debris. Well, this customer decided not only that he couldn't wait for my neighbor, but that he couldn't take the 10 minutes required to engage the safety spring, and simply wedged a metal rod into the opening to keep the cylinder up. You can guess what happened next. When my neighbor arrived at his customer's farm, the customer was being put into an ambulance. The middle three knuckles on his left hand had all been severely broken. If that were me, I think the fear of having it happen again would lead me to take the extra 10 minutes and attach the safety spring.

Fear can also serve as a de-motivator as well, can't it? Last Wednesday, on my drive into work, two people pulled out right in front of me, one on Parnall and one here on Springport. In both cases, neither driver looked before they pulled out, but when they did, they slammed on the brakes—right in my lane. They sat, staring at me, seemingly incapable of getting out of the way. Fear had caused them to take the “deer in the headlights” approach to the situation. Fears can have an incredibly damaging effect on our lives if we are unable to keep them in check. A fear of failure might keep us from ever trying to do something. A fear of responsibility might keep us from reaching all of our potential or using our God-given talents. A fear of commitment might keep us from deeply meaningful relationships with both God and others. Fears can sometimes paralyze us.

Of course, if you have ever tuned in to quality programming such as the “The Maury Show,” you'd know that people fear things they shouldn't. Guests have expressed fears of things like peaches and cotton balls—and I have to admit, it's kind of funny watching a full-grown man run in terror from a bushel basket of peaches—but imagine having your life dictated entirely by fears like these, so that you couldn't go anywhere you thought a peach or a cotton ball might turn up. I also know these fears may seem very real to the people experiencing them, but to live your life in fear of a peach or cotton ball is, well, ridiculous.

We laugh at situations like the examples from “The Maury Show,” yet the truth is we all fear something we probably shouldn't. No, it probably isn't as extreme as “The Maury Show” examples, but it still keeps us from doing or enjoying something. What's even worse for us is when we face a situation when that fear we probably shouldn't have is pitted against something we should legitimately have fear of or about. An example might be if we feared speaking in front of a group of people, and were

called to testify in a court case about a serious crime we saw committed. Our legitimate concern should be that justice be done; we should fear that our failure to testify might allow a hardened criminal back on the streets. And yet the thought of speaking in front of a judge, jury, attorneys, the defendant, the recorder, the bailiff, and anyone else in the courtroom at the time is the fear that seizes us. The question is, will we let that fear of speaking in public—a fear we probably shouldn't have—keep us from addressing the legitimate fear of letting the criminal go free? It seems absurd to think that someone might actually allow the bad guy to get off just because he or she doesn't like to talk in front of groups, but I have some other, real-life examples that are even bigger head-scratchers.

Like the Canadian woman who feared not having her deceased mother close to her and her sisters, but who also feared paying a large amount of money for professional urn jewelry—special lockets to contain her mother's ashes. Instead, she bought regular lockets and had the funeral home put the ashes in them. Then, during the family's Thanksgiving meal, both she and her sisters started wondering what the dark flecks were that kept appearing in their food. I don't think I need to tell you which fear should have motivated her more.

Or how about the Irish politician who opposed more stringent blood alcohol content laws? Even though Ireland had been facing a significant number of accidents due to drunk drivers—certainly a legitimate fear to be dealt with—the politician was instead fearing for all of those nervous Irish drivers out there. He wanted to make sure the nervous drivers could have a drink before hitting the road so that they could relax behind the wheel.

If you think that's hard to believe, try this one: A person—maybe even someone here this morning—failing to share the Gospel with a non-Christian because he or she is afraid of being rejected by that non-Christian. Ouch. That one hits a little too close to home, doesn't it? Yet isn't it true that you and I have not shared the Gospel when there was an opportunity because we were afraid of what the person might think of us?

Like the examples we just heard, the situation of sharing the Gospel with a non-Christian has two fears for us: 1. The fear of rejection by that person. 2. The fear for that person's eternity. Every time we face this situation, we must decide which fear is more important and must be addressed. Though you can probably already guess which one I think is more important, I want to talk about both of these fears this morning.

Let's start with our fear of rejection. More than likely, we've gotten to the point where we think about sharing the Gospel with this person because we have spent time with him or her. We have probably made at least some investment in building a relationship with this person—someone like a classmate, or a person on our softball team. Or, maybe the person is someone we have a vested interest in, like a co-worker or neighbor, who it is good to have a decent relationship with. Whatever the specific case might be, we know that if we share the Gospel with this person, it can dramatically change the dynamic of the relationship with that person, good or bad. It's that "bad" part we're worried about, aren't we? We're afraid that if we share and the person doesn't respond favorably, the relationship could be over. Even worse, it could turn negative. The person might think or say things about us we don't like. It could make the workplace or the softball team an uncomfortable place for us. So, we reason that maybe we shouldn't rock the boat. Plus, we reason that if we simply live a Christian life

before the person, we are sharing the Gospel with them anyway, at least according to St. Francis of Assisi. We all know the famous quote: "Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary." Well, we have multiple problems. First, as far as the most learned scholars of St. Francis of Assisi can tell, he never said that quote. Regardless of whether he did or not, though, it would contradict the Bible, which is what we should be more concerned about. Romans 10:14 says:

¹⁴ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?

Peter adds:

¹⁵ But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. (1 Peter 3:15-16)

As followers of Christ, we are called to tell others the Gospel, the good news about him.

Even more, though, I'm not sure that being rejected by others should be a fear for us. Instead, I think we should expect it. Listen to what Jesus says to his followers in John 15:18-21:

¹⁸ "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. ¹⁹ If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. ²¹ They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me.

In the Book of Luke, Jesus goes as far to say that when people reject us because of him, we are blessed:

²² Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

²³ "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets. (Luke 6:22-23)

We react to this kind of information in one of two ways. One response is to go looking for a fight. Since Jesus said we were going to be rejected, we might as well help those who are going to reject us find us and have a good reason for it while they're at it. A second response is to keep our heads down. If we don't make eye contact, then perhaps no one will present us with a chance to share the Gospel, and then we don't have to, and our lives can remain peaceful. Neither response is correct, though. We shouldn't attempt to turn someone off simply because we were told they would be turned off, nor should we avoid conversation because we're afraid someone might be turned off. There is a middle way, a way that seeks to respond to and even create opportunities for sharing the Gospel with others. It doesn't take the Gospel and shove it down the throat of the listener, but it doesn't shy away from sharing it either.

Back in Colorado, we knew a family whose son was something of an athlete. Now, he wasn't the next LeBron James or Miguel Cabrera by any means, but he enjoyed sports and was fairly good at them. Additionally, his dad enjoyed spending time with him in this way, and would often coach or help coach the teams he was on. But before the son ever signed up for a single Little League or youth basketball team, he and his father made a deal: sports would be a means of sharing the Gospel with others. And they did. Every season, the dad and his son had opportunities to share with kids on the team and parents of the kids. Some of those kids and parents responded favorably. Some did not. How the people responded was not in their control, though; sharing was, and they stayed very faithful to doing it with every team they were part of.

People will reject us because we have believed the Gospel and placed our trust in Jesus. If people hated him—which they did—then they are going to hate us, too. Fearing it will not change it. And trying to be popular, or to constantly appease people, will only make the situation worse because we end up watering down the Gospel. In fact, if we aren't making any waves at all, we might want to consider the directive Paul gave to Timothy:

¹ In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: ² Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. ³ For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴ They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. (2 Timothy 4:1-4)

This is going to sound like a Yogi Berra-ism, but I still believe it's true: People like to hear what they like to hear. The question for us is: Are we the ones scratching the itch that Paul talks about? Are we purposely avoiding sharing the Gospel because we know it might not be popular and we fear being rejected? Or are we the ones providing the truth that our nonChristian friends, neighbors and loved ones need to hear?

This leads us to the second fear, the fear I believe is the one we should be most concerned about: a nonChristian's eternity. You want to talk about unpopular? There are few topics more unpopular than hell that I can think of, and yet we need to be always cognizant that hell is the future that awaits all of those we know who have not believed the Gospel and trusted in Christ. But it's not just the next life for these people we should be concerned about, but this one as well.

If you'll remember, last week we talked about what the Bible says we are without the Gospel: walking dead people (Ephesians 2:1-2). Without trusting Jesus for our salvation, we are empty and unable to do anything good. If you know any nonChristians well—and I'm sure many of you do—you get to see the emptiness up-close and personal: the constant chasing after things and experiences in order to fill the God-shaped hole in their lives; the selfishness and self-centeredness; the brokenness, in both relationships and in individuals.

Friends, nonChristians aren't a nameless mass of humanity, they are people—real people—who we know and love and who we know God loves as well. They are our brothers and sisters. They are our

parents. They are our children. They are people we grew up with or went to school with. They are people who taught us, coached us, helped us, or cut us a break. They are people who we have gone through life with.

I think sometimes of the stories Carey Collins has told me about some of the students that have passed through his classes, and how seeing them live without Christ breaks his heart. I think of some of the hurts and difficulties John Rockey has reported seeing in the nonChristians he's been privileged to serve through his work, and how it deeply troubles him. I think about the first married couple Sara and I were friends with after we were married—people who still have not believed the Gospel—and how their lives have been torn apart by unfaithfulness and divorce. I still remember the day I got the news: I sat in my office and cried. All of these lives, empty and broken, will stay that way until they believe the Gospel.

And if that's not bad enough, after persisting in this empty life here and now, our friends, loved ones, neighbors and co-workers who do not believe the Gospel and trust in Christ will have hell to look forward to. Listen to what Paul wrote to the Thessalonians:

⁸ He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power ¹⁰ on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you. (2 Thessalonians 1:8-10)

I don't know if you can—I shudder at the initial thought of it—but try to imagine for a moment what it would be like to be shut out of the presence of God and endure the punishment of everlasting destruction. Imagine existing in a place of unending pain and misery, with no hope of escape.

Is it possible that when we fear rejection of others for sharing the Gospel with them, that we might be fearing the wrong thing? Is it possible that the forever our nonChristian friends and loved ones are facing is more terrible than anything they might say back to us? Is it possible that a person's eternity is worth the risk of our relationship with that person?

We need to fear for others, not ourselves. I know that it hurts to be rejected, especially by someone we really care about; I've been there myself. But we shouldn't fear something Jesus has made very clear we should expect. Instead, we should fear for those who don't know Christ, and who have little idea of awaits them. They need to hear the Gospel; we need to share it with them.

Paraphrasing D.T. Niles, sharing the Gospel "is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread." Share some bread with someone this week.