

LIVING TRUST

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Acts 1:8 You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

If our God-given objective is to tell others about Jesus, then we must know well the One about whom we speak. Not just the facts, or the history, but the Person.

Jesus Christ is the Savior of the whole world—for *everyone* who believes in Him!

He is also the Judge of the whole earth—both of the living and the dead.

Jesus is not just a “nice guy.” He is terrifyingly great. Apostle John, who knew Jesus and loved Him, and whom Jesus loved, when he saw Jesus in the apocalyptic revelation, fell at His feet, as if dead, he was so stunned by the vision.

Jesus is the Friend of sinners, but He’s not our “buddy.” He’s our “elder brother,” but He’s not our peer.

Jesus Christ is the King of kings. He’s the Lord of lords. He is human, like us, yet He is altogether unlike us. He’s the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last. He’s the Holy and Eternal God.

Fear God

All of this to say, Jesus is to be feared, as well as loved. He is kind, but He is also dangerous. He takes counsel from none of us. He is loving, but He is also demanding.

Who is here today who is *afraid* for at least one friend or relative who is not following the Way of Christ?

I am one, but may I tell you something? That is *not* good motivation for a life-giving conversation! Why? Because your fear initiates the well-known emotional syndrome, known as “fight, or flight, or freeze.”

(Now, don’t change your tune and try to minimize it as mere “concern, worry, or apprehension”—that’s just a word game. Call it what it is: fear.) In the situation before us now, flight or

freeze will prevent or halt a conversation (been tongue-tied?), so all that's left to us, if we persist in moving forward, is fight (argue).

How many have found yourselves sometimes in a verbal argument, when you had intended to be a witness for Christ?

Fear of God is a good motivation in life (it's the beginning of wisdom.), but fear for people is not. Fear for people creates tension, and can lead to panic. Neither tension nor panic contribute to good conversations.

When your son comes to tell you about an amazing stunt he just pulled on his skateboard, while flying around a blind street corner, you may be strongly tempted (by fear) to ground him in his bedroom for a week and burn his board in the charcoal grill, but you would be wrong to do so.

You would have missed the most important news of his story: he *made it!* He was daring. He accomplished a feat. He took a risk. He succeeded in his goal. And you also would have missed a vital occasion for building a stronger bond with your son.

Sure, it was a *stupid* risk, and some parental consequences are in order, but your remarks of reproof will not be heard by him, if they are spoken from fear. That would tell your boy that you don't trust him to take risks and he shouldn't trust himself either. And that's what he will hear *first* and *loudest*.

How should you respond?

FIRST, acknowledge the feat. Be amazed with him. Get on his side of the conversation. Then, ask some revealing questions, like, "How risky was that for you? What could have gone wrong? Do you think that's the wisest way to practice that stunt?" Such questions allow him to continue to reflect and think for himself, *along with you*.

If you don't first take his side (without forgetting yours), he will think (or say), "You never trust me! You think I can't do anything!" That is emotionally accurate, even if it's unreasonable.

Every risk involves some fear, but a calculated risk minimizes the fear factor. I would want to encourage thoughtful risk calculation, and not shut down courageous behavior.

THEN, and only then, when necessary, talk about measured, appropriate punishment or consequences.

It's much the same in terms of telling other people about Jesus Christ, for doubtless, they also have pulled some stupid stunts.

First, get on their side. If you come off as their parent or opponent from the start, there's little hope of a meaningful conversation. If you have no real interest in them as a person, in spite of their misbehavior, they will know it. And who wants to be seen as someone's "project"?

You may not be naturally interested in what interests them, but are you *willing* to become interested, at least enough to understand why they like it and discern what they are seeking to get from it? If not, stop now. Just talk to the Lord about them until He gives you a genuine love for who they are, for who He made them to be.

Second, be sure you are telling them about Jesus, and not just telling them about what appear to you to be their sins. Telling people their sins is not witnessing to them, it's harassing them, it's judging them.

The only people Jesus scolded for their sins were the ultra-religious ones who thought they were doing just fine on their own. In most conversations, the Lord expected people to know what their sins were—He didn't need to specify. When He said, "Go and sin no more," apparently, they already knew what He was speaking about.

Talking About God

It was Jesus who told us to tell people about Him everywhere. I think He was serious about that. And He showed us how to do it (think of the story of the woman at the well in John 4). And He also told us how *not* to do it. The latter is plainly addressed in His Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 7:1 "Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. ² For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged.

³ "And why worry about a speck (small bit of chaff or straw) in your friend's eye when you have (and fail to notice) a log (a building's main beam) in your own? ⁴ How can you think of saying to your friend, 'Let me help you get rid of that speck in your eye,' when you can't see past the log in your own eye? ⁵ Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend's eye.

⁶ "Don't waste what is holy on people who are unholy. Don't throw your pearls to pigs! They will trample the pearls, then turn and attack you.

Here, Jesus gave two reasons for *not* speaking what we know.

1. The standards we apply to others, God applies to us.

Matthew 7:2 You will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged.

This is a restatement of the Golden Rule: Treat others the way you would like to be treated. If you've thought that was supposed to guarantee how other people would respond to you when you are nice to them, I'm sure you've discovered by now, that's incorrect. Loving deeds do not always earn loving responses.

What it does guarantee is how *GOD* will respond to your treatment of others. So, if you want God to treat you lovingly, kindly, mercifully, make sure that's the way you treat other people. When you're done measuring it out to others, God just picks up your own measuring instrument, to measure His goodness back to you.

If you measure out mercy by the thimbleful, God will measure it back to you with a thimble. If, instead, you choose to use a gallon jug or a wheelbarrow or a dump truck, God will use the same for you. Such a deal!

The second reason for *not* speaking what we know to people is this:

2. People without the Spirit of God cannot and do not appreciate the things of God.

1 Corinthians 2:14 *The unbeliever (literally, the person who does not yet have the Spirit) does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him. And he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.*

If a person has not yet experienced the new birth from the Spirit of God, they lack the capacity to understand the things of God, even though you use common words to describe God and His ways. They may know the meaning of your words, yet be unable to grasp the structure of your thoughts.

Last week, I spoke to you about addressing hot topics, and briefly tried to encourage you to be unafraid to engage people in such conversations.

Some questions and comments that I received later revealed that I had done a poor job of explaining this. Some wondered how (others simply objected) to initiate a conversation with people about their sinful behaviors. Well, *THAT* was not my aim.

What kind of person takes someone aside to accuse them of their sins? A Christian? Generally, no! Unless you're responsible for the person's activities, like their parent or boss, that would *not* be a loving thing to do; it would be intrusive and judgmental—the very thing Jesus told us *not* to do.

I do not suggest that there is *never* a time to talk about sins, but as Apostle James suggested, that topic is best initiated by the sinner herself as a confession, instead of an accusation. “*Confess your sins one to each other, and pray for each other, so that you may be healed*” (James 5:16).

Conversion is a wonderful thing! I am so grateful to God for my own conversion at age 21. My life has never been the same since that blessed event! I have family and friends whom I want to see converted like that. You do, too.

But I ask you, *from what* do you want them to be converted? Your answer to that question makes a big difference in how you approach them, and usually in the way they respond.

Do you want to convert:

- their thinking on a (hot) topic?
- them from their sinful behavior?
- them to faith in Jesus Christ?

If unconverted people (not yet born again) cannot understand the things of God (1 Corinthians 2:14), then trying to force or persuade changes to their reasoning or behavior from the outside is useless.

Changes in reasoning arise from within. They cannot be forced. “A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.” You can win an argument and lose a friend.

Changes in behavior result from a change in conscience—from within. Compliance does not necessarily mean agreement. And mere compliance is not true obedience. Genuine obedience is a surrender of resistance and an agreement about the best course of action.

Jesus did not give us the power of His Spirit so that we could convert people’s thinking on a (hot) topic. Nor did He give us the Holy Spirit so that we could convert people from their sinful behaviors. Those are inappropriate goals, putting the cart before the horse, at least, if not missing the mark entirely.

In fact, Jesus specifically said that the Holy Spirit would convict (convince) people of their sins (John 16:8). He may choose to use you in some way, but He doesn’t need your help to do it.

Those hopes of yours—changes in thinking and behavior—are the *fruit* of relationship with Jesus Christ. Apart from that relationship, any changes are just band-aids, and haven’t yet reached the heart.

Then, that must be our goal: to persuade others of the reality and the richness of Christ and the Life He offers, based upon our own experience of the same, and introduce them to the only One who can convert their souls *and* their destiny.

If Jesus is enough for you, then He can be enough for someone else. And to the degree that you believe that He is enough for you, to that degree you can be bold *and* effective in sharing your faith with others.

Your primary aim should just be to *start* conversations. Don't get fixated on the *goal* of the conversation. Aim, instead, to start one and keep it going as long possible. The Holy Spirit will use it from there.

Don't let fear dictate your relationships or conversations. Regardless of the challenge of the topics, don't freeze them out. Don't flee from them. Don't fight with them. Let love be your guide, instead. Love *Jesus* first. Then, let His love help you to love others.

Remember the song the psalmist sang, and sing it to yourself over and over: "*Whenever I am afraid, I will put my trust in You*" (Psalm 56:3). Whenever.

Don't think out of fear. Don't speak out of fear. Don't live out of fear. Don't love out of fear. Instead, put your trust in Jesus Christ. Live out of trust in Him instead.