

FIRST THINGS, Part 6

First Works: Telling Others

By Rev. Will Nelken

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“Do over!” we hollered as kids when our first effort was unsuccessful. We were claiming another chance. Jesus gave us a “do over” — an opportunity to get it right and give our attention to the things that He deems most important — when He said, “Repent and turn back to me.”

In this series, we have uncovered a *first purpose* that God has given every one of us: to “seek His kingdom and live righteously.” At the very heart of this purpose are the *first commandments*: love God and love your neighbor. All of Scripture supports these “first things.”

You will no doubt remember that this issue is so critical that Jesus, writing to all the churches, said in effect, “You have done many things well and have kept yourself in the truth, but I have this against you: you have left your first love. Repent and turn back to me, and do again the things you did at the first, or I will extinguish your light.” (Revelation 2:4-5)

Our Lord made it vital for us to explore the meaning of “the things you did at first,” based on the two great commandments: loving God and loving other people.

Review and Pop Quiz

Let’s take two minutes to review...

When it comes to loving God, what are the first works that we are to “do again”? I suggested *three works*: communion with Him, celebration of His grace, and commitment to serve Him, founded on *two attitudes* that develop intimacy with God over time: submission to Him and dependence upon Him.

And just who is your neighbor? (Fill in the blanks; answers at the end.) _____¹ whom you could help, especially someone whom others are _____².

When it comes to loving your neighbor, what are the first works that we are to “do again”? According to Luke 6:27-38:

- *Do good.*
- *Bless.*
- *Pray for.*
- *Give to.*
- *Be compassionate.*
- *Do not condemn.*
- *Forgive.*

This is also known as the _____³. In a word: “*Do to others as you would like them to do to you.*” Especially when you are at your worst. The Golden Rule is our guide for loving our neighbors.

You may be only one more act of kindness away from melting your neighbor’s heart!

Telling Is Golden

This final message of the “First Things” series will highlight one other significant deed that reveals our love for our neighbor: telling them about Jesus and the relationship with God that He has brought us.

Consider it from the standpoint of the Golden Rule: If you were alienated from God because of your sins and were uninformed about a way of salvation that was guaranteed, and, as a result, had only a judgment of divine rejection and eternity in Hell to look forward to, would you want someone to talk with you about what Jesus has done for the human race and how your personal trust in Him would gain the forgiveness of all your sins and give you eternal life in God’s loving presence? Of course you would. It’s the loving thing to do. Telling others about Jesus is loving your neighbor.

Jesus said:

John 15:26 I will send you the Advocate—the Spirit of truth. He will come to you from the Father and will testify all about me.²⁷ And you must also testify about me because you have been with me.

The Holy Spirit’s witness of Christ is ultimately bound to your own testimony. When you testify, He testifies, too!

This is why Jesus told His first disciples:

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.

It’s not always easy, which is why we need God’s power. For instance, we must first overcome our own psychological barriers.

Psychological Barriers

If finding Christ is so great, and knowing God’s forgiveness is so freeing, why don’t more Christians tell other people?

A common barrier is one’s own lack of assurance, the sense that I’m not a good enough Christian.

Other hurdles include false perceptions, such as: people don’t need to hear, people don’t want to hear, prayer is sufficient.

Fear of a person’s reaction is another common obstruction. Unwanted reactions may include rejection (not only of the message, but of you), argument (who needs more conflict?), or questions too big for you to answer well.

Effective Measures

What method of telling others actually works?

Elmer Gantry’s grab-‘em-by-the-lapels and get-in-their-face method?

Bill Bright’s “Four Spiritual Laws”?

James Kennedy’s “Evangelism Explosion”?

Billy Graham’s stadium crusades?

All of these methods work *some* of the time, or they could not persist. But *none* of these is the most effective method.

For most people, it is simply conversations with a friend. Friendship is key. If you take the time to show yourself a friend, many barriers will dissolve.

Jesus demonstrated this fact, when he spoke with Nicodemus late one night (John 3), and when He talked with a woman beside a water well (John 4), when He ate with Matthew and his friends (Luke 5), and spent the evening at the home of Zaccheus (Luke 19).

The bridge of real friendship is best built by serving — presence, listening, caring — consistently.

Circumstances that soften and open hearts toward God are sometimes the miracles of life, like the birth of a child, and other times the tragedies of life, like the loss of a loved one. If you are alert to such moments in the lives of people around you, you may partner with God to bring His presence into the situation.

Presence is sometimes the greatest gift you can offer. When faced with a serious tragedy or trauma, words often seem hollow. It is a mistake to say, “I understand how you feel,” for you certainly do not. “Let me make you a cup of tea” would be a more helpful contribution. Your presence may be a comfort, as you share their grief and bewilderment. Presence is equally significant when sharing the joys of life. It has been said that the presence of a friend “halves our sorrows and doubles our joys.”

Listening is also a tremendous gift, and a part of being “present” with someone. Listen carefully and absorb the feelings that are being expressed. Commentary is often unnecessary, other than reflecting back what you have heard. Your attentiveness communicates love.

Caring, of course, is the most powerful and tangible expression of friendship. Offering simple help, whenever appropriate. Consider how God thinks of the littlest, yet significant, things in your life to show His watchful care, and do the same.

And, once built, it is important to maintain that friendship-bridge. Keep your conversation friendly; don’t let it become an argument. It’s fine to speak of God in close and friendly terms, but don’t wander into areas of doctrine in the early stages. Remember, you are working *with* the Holy Spirit to touch a person’s heart, not simply persuade their mind.

These are conversations, not preaching. The primary difference is dialogue — responsive speaking. The best sermons will try to imagine your reactions and questions and address them. But since they are offered to a crowd, inevitably some elements that strike home with others will totally miss you. A conversation that begins with listening, can speak directly to a person’s expressed or revealed needs and avoid those subjects that appear to be a “sore spot.”

Don’t try to accomplish everything at once; you are not selling life insurance, so “closing the deal” is *not* the main thing.

Multiple conversations are usually necessary to let in sufficient spiritual light to change a person’s heart. Turning to follow Christ is really changing one’s life-pursuit; it’s not like changing one’s t-shirt.

People need time:

- to think
- to question
- to discover
- to see your Christian love

Therefore, loving others enough to tell them about Jesus is a commitment *over time* — to show them, as well as tell them, what it means to be a follower of Jesus in a variety of life situations.

If they only see you when you're "on top of the world," they are likely to think one of three things (all of which are unattractive):

- You are unusually blessed and they cannot relate
- You are disconnected from the real world
- You are a pretentious fake
- You are a hypocrite, hiding your real self from them

Life is complex and fuzzy. Insecurity levels are high. Trust is generally low. There are more shades to the truth than there used to be. So, don't be in a rush. But, be faithful to tell your neighbors about God's purpose for sending His Son. You do it because you represent the Lord and it's the loving thing to do, and leave the eventual results with God.

It's not about attending a church meeting (although church should be a place where it is safe to explore Christianity without fear of judgment or undue pressure); it's about a new way of living one's life, with new goals and new values and new friends.

Your aim should not be to make converts; Jesus said we should "make disciples" (Matthew 28:19). Many times, this has been misunderstood, yet there's a huge difference.

My friend, Abraham Thomas, whose brother pastors a large congregation in India, reported to me that Western evangelists love to hold crusades in India for media coverage. Thousands upon thousands will lift their hands when the invitation to trust in Christ is given and pray with the evangelists to receive Christ, and that results in strong financial support from Christians in America.

But church attendance does not change as a result of these events. Why? Because Hindus believe there are millions of gods and are willing to call on any that may help them. But they are not converted to a singular allegiance to Jesus Christ. This only takes place through one-on-one discipleship.

Discipleship is simply a Biblical term for showing your friends *how* to let Jesus be Master of your life, and telling them *why* it is important. It's the process of breaking down old habits and replacing them with Jesus' ways. Or, in a word, it is learning to love God with your whole being and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Answers to pop quiz:

1. ANYONE 2. IGNORING 3. GOLDEN RULE