

WHAT DO YOU SAY TO A FRIEND WHO DOESN'T KNOW THE LORD?

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Spread out over the next couple of months, I'm going to present a series of messages on this theme: What do you say to a friend?

I will offer answers to such questions as these:

- What do you say to a friend who doesn't know the Lord?
- What do you say to a friend who is struggling with doubt?
- What do you say to a friend who is experiencing difficulty?
- What do you say to a friend who has fallen into sin?
- What do you say to a friend who has been put off by Christians?

In the spiritual DNA of every person who has been "born again" — who has received new life by trusting Jesus — is a natural longing to help others to know the Lord and to walk with Him faithfully.

But there are many obstacles to that dream:

- Fear of contamination. (I may feel vulnerable to their sin.)
- A sense of personal inadequacy. (They may have questions that I cannot answer.)
- Unresolved doubts of my own. (Their objections may stir my own uncertainties.)
- Cultural pressure to keep it to myself. (My cultural environment makes me feel guilty for promoting my faith.)
- Fear of invading their privacy. (They may reject me as their friend if I get too personal.)

Since you would never even care about this subject if Jesus didn't put you up to it, I expect He has something significant to say to allay our concerns. That's what we will pay particular attention to.

Our question for today is: **What do you say to a friend who doesn't know the Lord?**

Do you have friends who don't know the Lord? You certainly should. How can they believe in Him, if they've never heard about Him? And how else will they hear if there are no Christians in their lives?

At the same time, be cautious to preserve your own faith. If your unbelieving friends are having a deleterious influence on you, pulling you away from following Christ wholeheartedly, you need to back away from them for awhile to get yourself well-grounded in the Bible. That's your only source of the strength that's necessary to resist the devil's charms.

So, what do you say to a friend who doesn't know the Lord?

Final Words

For an answer, let's listen to Jesus' final words to His disciples, from the very end of the Gospel of Matthew.

These are Jesus' "final words." They sum up His heart, His purpose. We should listen to them carefully.

Matthew 28:18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

As we consider these words, I want you to think about a sandwich — two pieces of bread and the stuff in between. Sometimes a sandwich is defined by the bread (a hard roll or pita). Other times a sandwich is defined by the filling (chicken salad or roast beef). This "final words" sandwich is defined by both (like, roast turkey and cheese on rye).

All Authority

The bottom piece of bread — the foundation of this sandwich — is the authority of Jesus Christ.

Jesus begins His instructions by emphasizing that He has all authority "in heaven and on earth." This is significant because it gives **weight to His command**. His words are not to be taken lightly. This is not the Great Suggestion; it is the Great Commission, given to all who follow Jesus. These are the authoritative directives for building the Church and bringing the Kingdom of God to earth. This is God's strategic plan.

Christ's authority also gives **courage to His followers**, because we are following the command of the King of the universe. Every resource is at His disposal. There is nothing He cannot do to assist us in the fulfilling of this strategy.

All Security

The top piece of bread — the capstone of this sandwich — is the abiding presence of Jesus Christ.

Jesus concludes His teaching by reminding us that He will "surely" be with us. This gives **hope** for our journey. We have not been left to navigate this path by ourselves. The Holy Spirit provides the wisdom and the strength that we need.

Jesus' presence also lends **assurance** to our course. The supplies that He offers — wisdom, gifts, miracles — are near at hand, only a prayer away. By His presence He assures our good success, in every generation, right up to the "very end of the age."

The Meat

Jesus' authority and presence do not make a sandwich. They provide the envelope, the packaging. It's the meat in between that makes the sandwich.

And what we find at the heart of this sandwich are these words: "make disciples."

This is why Jesus has revealed His authority. This is why He has promised His presence. It's all about making disciples.

Many years ago, Evangelist Billy Graham made it clear that his job (and ours) is not "making decisions," but making disciples. His own surveys revealed that 90% of those who "made decisions" for Christ at his evangelistic meetings were not following Christ in a church family one year later. As a

result, he undertook a massive program of preparing churches to follow-up and disciple those who made decisions. His best efforts managed to raise the retention rate to 75%, underscoring the time and effort required to make disciples.

How do ordinary followers, like us, “make disciples” of Christ? What does it involve?

Disciple-Making

Jesus’ words tell us two things: Baptizing and teaching.

You can readily recognize that neither of these things usually occur at an evangelistic meeting. Yet this is how you turn decisions into disciples.

And the primary reason these things don’t take place at an evangelistic meeting is because they require personal, individual connection to other believers.

Baptism in water will not make a person into a believer. Baptism is for those who already have believed that Jesus Christ is the only Savior of the world. It is an essential step in following Jesus.

A new believer cannot “baptize himself.” Although a credentialed minister is not absolutely required (consider the Ethiopian in Acts 8), it is an ordinance of the church, and baptism should be performed in the context of a local family of believers, in order to provide the necessary ongoing support and teaching that Jesus also commanded.

Baptism (like a wedding) is not just a personal experience; it involves a community. Baptism is an initiation into the fellowship of the faith community. Baptism is how believers become belongers, because Christianity is not just about believing, it is largely about belonging.

Believers who don’t find a local church to which they may belong, will not grow well or produce mature spiritual fruit, no matter how much teaching they ingest. That’s why Jesus talks about baptism before He talks about teaching.

The relationships of a local church is where Biblical teaching is put to the test. If it doesn’t work here first, it’s not going to work well “out there.” That’s why Jesus said, *“Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.”* (John 13:35)

Who we are “in here” is what speaks loudest to those outside. Teaching is the way to develop how we function “in here.”

Explaining God’s plan, training people to live by faith (not by sight), and encouraging each other along the way through mutual confession and prayer are all elements of God’s training program. He provides the tests and we help each other to navigate them. This is how we grow in our knowledge of God and our service for Him.

If I am not growing personally, I will not impact the lives of other people for Christ. Some people can live their lives without anyone around them realizing they are Christians. That’s sad. Don’t let that be said of you.

What to Say

So if I am in fellowship with other believers and growing personally, how do I tell a friend about Jesus?

How do I begin a conversation with them about Jesus? Should I just steer a conversation to the subject?

This may still work in some cases, but usually it will not. Because people generally are so starved for real relationships, steering a conversation feels manipulative. If a person feels like she is your “project” instead of your friend, she will be put off by your approach.

It’s usually best to let conversations take a natural flow, but be in a particularly attentive, listening mode. Perk up your spiritual ears, as you pursue getting to know your friend better. Seek to understand how he thinks and feels about the circumstances of his life. And, try to recognize God’s activity in his life.

How do you recognize God’s activity in another person’s life? Pretty much the same way you recognize it in your own life. What’s bugging you? What’s difficult for you? Or, how are things specially “falling into place” for you?

If they readily share things like these, pay close attention to their comments. If necessary, ask questions — not like a nosy news reporter, but like a sincere friend — and listen carefully to the answers.

Sometimes, it’s good to make “identifying statements” that let them know you can relate, or you’re on the same page with them:

- “I really hear what you’re saying.”
- “Oh, that must have hurt.”
- “That’s happened to me, too.”
- “I find that so amazing!”

But, if you find those statements are just ending the conversation, instead of stimulating it further, then ask “exploratory questions” to draw them out more:

- “How does that make you feel?”
- “How have you responded?”
- “Does that happen often to you? If so, what do you suppose that means?”

Such questions search for the personal meaning of life’s experiences. Sometimes, these meanings are avoided, but many times they are simply not noticed. When they are noticed, they stir the deeper part of who we are and reflect our connection to God.

If the conversation is going smoothly and your friend seems to be genuinely opening up to you, the Holy Spirit may prompt you to provide a bridge with a question like, “Do you think God might be at work in that?”

At that critical juncture you must focus on their response. If they seem willing to explore that question with you, wonderful! But tread gently. You have been given access to the tender part of their heart. You must respect that privilege.

If their evaluation of God's involvement does not agree with yours, do not argue the point with them! Just hear it and make a note for reference in future conversations. Your objective here should be simply to open a door, not to close a deal.

When evangelism training focuses on closing the deal, it usually results in only closing the door. That's an unsatisfying experience for everyone.

Aim for multiple conversations. Try to sustain an ongoing dialogue. If your friend seems ready to conclude this conversation, let them — or better yet, help them to do so. By concluding this conversation easily, you are more likely to keep the general subject open for the future.

People take time to process important matters. Allow them time and space to do so.

When you next speak with them, follow the same approach — don't rush to the topic of Jesus — and you may find them even more open than before. Of course, life's circumstances can either help or hinder the process. After opening up with you, something may occur that shuts them down completely for awhile. Don't take it personally. Just be their friend and another opportunity will come. Friends are flexible and can ride the waves of life together.

After Easter, I'll return to this theme to look at the question, "What do you say to a friend who is struggling with doubt?"

In the meantime, work on making friends for Jesus, will you?