

Learning Evangelism from Jesus

by Jerram Barrs

Jesus said, “*For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.*”

~John 12:49-50

As we think about Jesus meeting with people, this means that in every encounter he had, he did exactly what the Father wanted him to do. His actions, his attitude of heart, his words and the manner in which he expressed them were always precisely what the Father desired of him. How different we are! So often in our encounters with people we are reluctant to put ourselves out; we have self-centered and judgmental attitudes of heart; our actions do not always show love; our words are inadequate or confusing, too many, too few, problematic in all kinds of ways. We need to learn at Jesus’ feet, and make it our daily longing that we might *do as the Father wishes us to do and speak only the words the Father wishes us to speak*. We can ask the Lord to help us in this, that our lives in the world, as well as our actions, words, and attitudes of heart, may be as he desires for us. In addition, **we can look at how Jesus related to people and the words he spoke and seek to learn some lessons for our own encounters with people as we go about our daily lives—for in Jesus’ life and words we learn what pleases the Father.**

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Week One: The Christian's Calling to the World

What is the Christian's calling with regard to the unbelieving world?

Jesus prayed, *"I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me."* (John 17:14–23)

1. THE FATHER'S LOVE FOR THE WORLD

Jesus came down from heaven, not of his own accord but because in his love for the world, the Father sent him.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.
(John 3:16–17)

He was given a mission by the Father—to live life of perfect obedience under the law and then to offer himself as an acceptable sacrifice for the life of the world, to everyone who believe in him. None of this was necessary for God or for God's glory—it as from first to last of love—in it planning by the Father, in its accomplishment by the Son, in its application to sinners by the Spirit.

2. SENT INTO THE WORLD BY JESUS

Just heard, just as the Father sent the Son into this sin-sick world, our Lord and Master Jesus has sent his followers—us—out into the world. We are never to retreat from the world into some monastic-life Christian enclave. Dick Keyes—tribal Christianity resembles the musk ox. As he describes it, such retreat is a manifestation of worldliness—finding confidence, safety, and strength in isolation. Jesus didn't live as a monk, he didn't retire from the world to sit on a pillar in the desert. He lived among, ate and drank with those who didn't know him and didn't share his deepest beliefs.

3. THE HOSTILITY OF THE WORLD

Still, in a way, the lure of isolationism is understandable. No one likes to live among anger, opposition, and persecution. As Jesus told us, *“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.”* (John 15:18) We should expect that to be opposed and hated, for there are many in the world who do not honor God and don’t keep quiet about it. We cherish and honor things the world despises, and, as we should, we hate the things that God hates. And of course, Satan is always at work to keep people satisfied with anything other than the worship of God alone.

4. IN, BUT NOT OF, THE WORLD

If, as Keyes says, some groups of Christians are musk oxen, then others are what he call Christian Chameleons. They adapt quite well to the world’s standards and loves. He says, *“The Christian chameleon disregards, rejects, or gradually loses interest in the... ideas and ethics that rub against the culture.”* This is particularly true with things that the world is intolerant of. There’s a pretty long list of these things. It may surprise you that less than 100 years ago, divorce was forbidden by almost every Christian denomination. The Anglican Lambeth Conference of 1930 **acknowledged the reality of broken marriages and allowed for divorce**, though not condoning remarriage within the church for those whose former partner was still living. That’s when the dominos throughout the church began to fall concerning marriage.

Our call is always to be in, but not of the world; always to be pursuing holiness.

5. DEMONSTRATING THE TRINITY’S LOVE

And accompanying and flowing from that pursuit of holiness is that we are always to be seeking to demonstrate the intra-Trinitarian perfect love. We’ve talked about that before—the Father loves and delights in the Son, the Son loves and delights in the Father; the Spirit is the bond of love within the Trinity—a love that is eternal—it never began and it will never end. And that reality of love—for the same Spirit that binds the Trinity together in love has been poured into our hearts from the Father in Jesus Christ our Lord—that reality of love in our life will be one of the most powerful means by which unbelievers will see the beauty of Christ. This is particularly true within the Body of Christ—*The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.* (John 17:22-23) In the face of our manifest inability to be perfectly one with the whole body of Christ, some people say that Jesus is talking about the invisible church—the whole body of true believers everywhere and always. But that makes no sense to me. How can an invisible church manifest God’s love *so that the world may know* anything at all.

30 years war—deism and atheism.

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:35)

6. PRAYING FOR THE WORLD

Calvin called prayer the chief act of faith, because in prayer we're admitting to God that we can't do things ourself. We lack strength, or understanding or wisdom—or all three, and more besides. To pray is to submit in faith to the one who works wonders. Jesus prayed continually; every moment of his life was lived in believing dependance on God. And the same Spirit who was at work in Jesus and his life of faith is at work in us. So we strive to pray as Jesus prayed. We pray for ourselves, we pray for faithfulness to God and in the calling to which he has called us; we pray for faithfulness to his word; we pray for the lost—that they would come to faith; we pray for the world to recognize Jesus through our lives, by our love that bears witness to Christ in us. We imitate Christ, for if the sinless Son of God had to pray, how much more do we?

7. THE PROBLEM OF CONFORMITY

We talked about how groups of Christians—denominations, congregations—can become conformed to the world—Christian Chameleons—but so can individuals. So we always have to be on guard against conformity—being of the world—in our values, style of living. Francis Schaeffer talked about the dangers of personal peace and affluence without regard for others. But on the other hand, the world around us demands empathy for others... Empathy is not compassion, or rather it is concrete compassion made abstract; a good (self-affirming) feeling without requiring any concrete action to help anyone.

8. THE PROBLEM OF RETREAT AND SEPARATION

And just as individual Christians can become Chameleons, we can live with a sort of musk ox ethos in a particularly noxious way. Rather than simply retreating from the world into a holy huddle, Christians can easily adopt a negative and superior attitude toward our neighbors in the world. That's moralism, pure and simple; what the Scribes and Pharisees did. We ask ourselves why can't they just live nice moral lives. But honestly, why shouldn't a sinner live like a sinner? Why should we expect them to live a life pleasing to God—a life marked by true Christian love that flows from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith when they know nothing of those things? Why would we be surprised by a life that doesn't reflect our deepest beliefs and commitments, or one that's characterized by sinful actions, disinterest in the gospel, or even hostility? We mustn't build walls of separation; Jesus never did.

9. IMITATING JESUS IN THE WORLD

And as I've already said, it's Jesus we're called to imitate in this mission—to give ourselves to understanding the culture around us, to stop condemning the lost people around us but, like Jesus, find ways to treat them the way we would want to be treated—with love, compassion, service, respect. I can't say this strongly enough. We must see our neighbors in the world as concrete people, not abstract souls to be saved. God doesn't love humanity, he loves people; he knows us by name. We'll see that in every encounter Jesus has, he respects the person he's talking with. There's no canned presentation, but one fit to the need at hand.

10. JESUS' MORAL PERFECTION

But even as I say that we have to imitate Jesus, I understand we can't—and shouldn't try to—imitate Jesus in every way. Our mission in the world flows from his, but obviously it isn't exactly the same. So what should we pursue?

- See how in the Gospel accounts God's moral perfection shines most humanly from him into the world—how he lives a true human life that fully conformed to the enfleshed image and likeness of God.
- Hear how he is committed to speaking only the words the Father wants him to say
- Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest from the Gospel accounts the principles how to govern our relationships with others.

11. JESUS' ETERNAL GLORY

And be sure of our convictions about Jesus and his eternal glory—

- that he is the one by and for whom all things were made
- that he is the one who holds all things together and
- that he something of this glory in the things that he has made
- that he is the Eternal Word of the Father made flesh: God of God, Light of Light, giving light to those in darkness.
- that, in sharing the story of Jesus, we are sharing the story of the God-man; our stand-in before the Father, who took what was ours and in exchange gives us what is his
- that he will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, and restore all things to the way they ought to be.

12. THE GREATEST EVANGELIST

Jesus is the greatest evangelist who ever lived. He always lived in a way that was pleasing to the Father. In his life he made the truth about God beautiful—in his words and especially in his actions—his treatment of the poor, humble, lost and miserable who came to him. And while we cannot imitate him perfectly, we rest in that great exchange I mentioned—he is the power behind our efforts. Christ takes our sad, broken, incomplete efforts and he perfects them in some mysterious way that makes them his powerful word that results in salvation for everyone who believes. He was, and remains, the great evangelist.

13. THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

The regulative principle in general...

“It is my deep conviction that our evangelism both in theory and in practice ought to be shaped by the teaching of Scripture and the example that Scripture sets before us.”

14. LEARNING EVANGELISM FROM JESUS

Our goal is very simple—to learn from Jesus as he reached out to those he came into this world to save.

Next Week: John 7:53-8:11—Caught in the Act

Learning Evangelism from Jesus: An Example

One day, as I was about to have a swim, I saw an elderly gentleman walking slowly, pensively, along the shore. I greeted him as I went into the sea. When I came out, he was just returning and came to ask me who I was and where I had come from. I told him I was from Scotland, a Presbyterian minister on a lecturing-preaching tour of the States. His face lit up and he said, “How astonishing that I should meet you just now!” Then he poured out his story.

After 45 years of happy married life, his wife was now dying of cancer. She had had serious surgery. “I’ve been walking up and down the streets of Newport Beach at night, desperate, because I do not know how to face the future without my wife—and without faith,” he added. Then he said, “My father was a Presbyterian minister, and I was brought up in a godly home. But I have drifted away from the church. When you spoke to me, I was remembering how my father was a man of prayer and had wonderful faith when my mother died. I wish I had that faith. I have been walking up and down this beach trying to pray, but I can’t.”

What did I say to him? Did I tell him how to find faith and how to pray—throw him back on himself? No I did not. I said, “May I say to you what I am sure your father would have said to you? In Jesus Christ we have someone who knows all about this. He has been through it all—through suffering and death and separation—and he will carry you both through it into resurrection life. He has heard your cry for faith and is answering.” I continued, “You have been walking up and down this beach, wanting to pray, trying to pray, but not knowing how to pray. In Jesus Christ we have someone who is praying for you. He has heard your groans and is interceding for you and with you and in you.” Then I took him to Luke 22:31, where Jesus says to Peter in the hour of his temptation (see also v. 40), *Simon, Simon, Satan has desired to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail...* In spite of this, Peter denied his Lord. Jesus was taken away to be crucified. But the risen Lord came back to him and said, *Simon, do you love me?* And Peter said, *Lord, you know I love you* (John 21:1ff). He was upheld, even in his denial of Christ by the intercession of Christ. I also took my friend to some verses in Romans 8:26ff, where Paul says, *The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.* I said, “None of us knows how to pray, but the Spirit knows all about us. He knows all about you and is interpreting your desires and groans and your longing to know how to pray. He is interceding for you and leading you to the Father.” Then I quoted the following verses in the chapter: *Who is he who condemns? Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is interceding for us—therefore nothing shall separate us from the love of God—not even death!* I prayed with him there on the beach.

The next day he came looking for me and said, “I have been telling my wife what you told me! Tell me more!” The third day he came again: “Do me a favor! Come and speak to my wife!” “Of course,” I said. He took me to her bedside. There she was, a frail, dying woman. What did I talk to them about? I spoke about the Trinity! I did not use that word. But I spoke to them about the loving God, our Father who has given us Christ and the Spirit to draw us to himself in prayer, and about Jesus Christ who died for us that we might be forgiven, receive the gift of sonship, and be led by the Spirit into eternal life. I spoke about Christ, our great high priest, touched with a feeling of our infirmities, interceding for us, opening our hearts by the Spirit. I prayed with them both. A few weeks later, he wrote to me to tell me that his wife had passed on—“safe in the arms of Jesus.”

It seems to me that [in evangelism] our first task is not to throw people back on themselves with exhortations and instructions as to what to do and how to do it, but to direct people to the gospel of grace—to Jesus Christ...

James B. Torrance,
Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace

Week Two: Caught in the Act

Learning from Jesus: Lessons for Evangelism

8⁵³ They went each to his own house, ¹ but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. ² Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. ³ The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst ⁴ they said to him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?” ⁶ This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷ And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸ And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. ¹⁰ Jesus stood up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” ¹¹ She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.” (John 7:53-8:11)

1. NO CONDEMNATION OF UNBELIEVERS

No condemnation is from our point of view in this present age.

Jesus teaches us not to condemn those who live in disobedience to God’s law—no matter how heinous their life may be. This is following Jesus’ own example:

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:17)

If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. (John 12:47)

If Jesus had come to judge, who on earth could have stood?

This is why Jesus didn’t condemn the woman, for to condemn her would have undermined the very purpose for which the Father had sent him.

If Jesus didn’t condemn sinners, how much less have we the right—the authority—to do so. And yet...

The Apostle Paul applies this example to all believers—indeed, so far from judging the unbelievers of this world—we are to cultivate relationships:

*I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. **For what***

have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? (1 Corinthians 5:9-12)

You'll notice that our relationship with those who are in the church is somewhat different—but even there, as laid out especially in Matthew 18, we do not have personal authority to judge sinners; that belongs to the church, which as Presbyterians we interpret as the elders—the local Session of the church.

Thus, as Jerram says, criticizing, judging, condemning non-Christians for their way of living undercuts the very purpose of the Gospel and the work of Christ. This is one of the lessons from Jesus in this passage.

2. SEEING OUR OWN SIN

Last Sunday, I ended the sermon by urging us all to consider that we are all by nature lost and condemned before God, whatever our sin may be. That's just the way it is—all children deserving of God's wrath, as Paul says. Only the grace of God in Jesus Christ has brought us out of death and into life. Well—that's the second lesson Jesus teaches us in this passage—before we condemn anyone, we have to consider our own heart and life. It won't do to think, well, I never did that....! Jesus confronts us all when he says:

Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her. (John 8:7)

How would anyone of react if there we heard, Tonight on CNN, the sinful life of...?

So, in Matthew 7, Jesus reminds us—teaches us—commands us:

Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. (Matthew 7:3-5)

It all sort of boils down to the 5th beatitude, don't you think: *Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. (Matthew 5:7)*. And there's James' riff on this in his letter: *For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. (James 2:12)*

If I want God to be merciful to me, then I must be eager to show mercy to others. It's as simple as that.

3. MERCY AND LOVE

And Jerram goes on with this theme, reminding us that we're not to separate ourselves from sinners, but to follow Jesus' example of welcoming them and treating them with love and mercy. We're to emulate our Father in heaven, who as Jesus said, *is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. We are to be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:35b-36)*

Jerram's example of the unmarried, cohabitating couple—Just as Jesus was not compromised by the presence of those who were disobedient to his word, neither shall we be compromised by associations with those who do not know the Lord.

4. CALLING TO OBEDIENCE

Our calling is to obedience—to love sinners with that godly self-generated love that I talked about a few weeks ago. It may be that you'll find unbelievers who are rather easy to associate with; others may be, in themselves and their actions, repellant. Still, we are to love. And this love—this true godly love is where the stark difference between us and the world comes to the fore—for if we are to love those who do not love the Lord, we have to give them the call to faith and discipleship. It is not love to confirm people in their lostness. But—even when we give the call, we are to do it without condemnation, just as Jesus did with the woman caught in adultery—just as you'll hear him do it again in his conversation with the woman of Samaria.

5. MAKING THE GOSPEL ATTRACTIVE

Above all, Jerram says, the example of Jesus calls us to make the Gospel of God our Savior lovely and attractive in our life and our words:

Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. (Colossians 4:5-6)

Denis Haack's essay...

We are to introduce people to Jesus by the gracious beauty of our lives.

Study Questions for Chapter 2: Caught in the Act

1. What in your life would you hate to have exposed for public humiliation? This is a question to answer on your own, just between you and the Lord.
2. Are there particular sins in the lives of others that you have exposed for condemnation or even for the public humiliation of the sinner?
3. Are there unbelievers, maybe in your own family or workplace, to whom you need to apologize for the way you have criticized or judged them in the past.
4. What are the sins that preachers most often tend to parade for the church's condemnation?
5. Are there particular kinds of sinners from whom you have desired to separate yourself?
6. Why do we all find it so much easier to see the sins of others and to criticize them, rather than to see our own sins and to criticize ourselves.
7. Are there examples in your life/ministry where you have shown the kind of mercy to a sinner that Jesus shows to this woman?