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1

THE BURDEN

I was as green as they come, as far as sharing the gospel went. Yet there I was, a young teenager out on the beach, looking for someone to talk to about my new-found faith in Christ. It did not turn out the way I had expected.

I was only two weeks old in my commitment to Christ. I didn't know much about Christian living or the Bible, but I had heard that I should go out and share the gospel with others. So one day I went down to the beach—the same beach where I used to make a point of avoiding any Bible-toting Christians who might try convert me.

Now here I was—a bona fide member of the “Soul Patrol”—out prowling for unbelievers to convert. But I wasn't exactly full of confidence. In fact, my main goal was to find someone who wouldn't argue or get angry at me. I thought if an unbeliever just ignored me or walked away, that would be fine.

Eventually, I spotted a middle-aged lady who looked about the age of my mom. I figured she might be somewhat sympathetic to me.

When I walked up to her, my voice trembled with nervousness. “Uh, excuse me,” I said, fumbling for the right words. “Can I talk to you about something?”

She said, “Sure. What about?”

“Well, about, like, God—and stuff,” I answered. (Remember, I was still a teenager.)

To my amazement, she said, “Go ahead. Sit down. Talk to me.”

I then pulled out a copy of an evangelistic tract I had stuffed in my pocket for a moment like this. I was so new in the faith that I hadn't even memorized the plan of salvation, so I just read through the entire booklet verbatim. The whole time I read, I was shaking like a leaf and thinking, *This isn't going to work. Why am I doing this? This is not going to reach her.*

But the woman continued to patiently listen to what I was saying—rather, reading.

When I got to a part in the booklet that said, “Is there any good reason why you should not accept Jesus Christ right now?” I realized that I should direct this question to the woman. I hesitated. Feeling awkward, I looked up and asked her, “Uh, is there any good reason why you should not accept Jesus Christ right now?”

“No,” she replied.

“Okay,” I said, slightly confused. “Then that would mean that you *do* want to accept Jesus Christ right now?”

With a look of quiet resolve, she answered, “Yes, I would.”

I was shocked. For a moment I didn’t know what to do. I had only planned for failure. Frantically I searched the tract for some kind of prayer in which to lead a person who wanted to invite Christ into his or her life. After what seemed an eternity, I finally found one. In the most reverent tone I could muster, I said, “Let’s bow our heads for a word of prayer.”

Even as she prayed after me, I was still thinking, *This is not going to work.*

After we were done, the woman looked up at me and said, “Something just happened to me!”

And at that moment something happened to me, too: I got a taste of what it was like to be used by God. I knew—even at that point at that young age—that no matter what I did in life, I wanted to continue to share the gospel.

Burdened for Unbelievers

Any effective sharing of one’s faith will always begin with a God-given burden for lost people—those who don’t know Christ. And if some of us today were brutally honest, we would have to say that we don’t have that burden. If we did, quite frankly, I think many of us would do more than we do.

“But I’m not qualified or an expert on theology,” some might protest.

Let me put it this way: Let’s say that you are walking

down the street and hear the screams of a woman. You turn to see what the problem is, and she points to a burning house and hysterically cries that her little baby is inside. You realize that you have only moments before the entire house will be engulfed with flames.

Would you simply walk away, reasoning that it was her child and not yours? Not likely.

Would you try to quiet her down and tell her to wait until the professionals arrive? Possibly, but again, not likely.

Would you risk your own life and try to get into that building and save that child? I would hope so.

A fate even worse than that awaits those who do not know Christ. For them, the fire is not temporary but eternal. Do we honestly care? People can tell if we really do when we talk to them about our faith in Christ. They can sense if we are simply doing it out of duty and our heart is not really in it. I have seen Christians share the gospel in an almost mechanical way. They have their canned statements and answers. They are not really engaged. This will ultimately defeat their own purpose.

You can talk about love all you want. You can cite the various Greek words the Bible uses to describe it. You can even quote numerous passages from Scripture to prove the importance of it. But the best thing you can do is to demonstrate it as you share your faith. To do that effectively, you need a God-given burden.

Burdened to Get Involved

We need to have a burden like Jesus had for the people of Jerusalem. Scripture describes his heartfelt burden as he looked out over Jerusalem one day and wept, saying, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Matthew 23:37).

The apostle Paul echoes that sentiment in Romans 9:2-3: “I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh.”

No wonder Paul had such a powerful and effective ministry. He cared!

Nehemiah is another classic illustration of a man who was genuinely touched with the needs of the lost. As cupbearer to the king of Persia, he was in a position of great power and influence. While possessing this status and prestige, he was also a Jew—one of the many who had been in exile away from Jerusalem.

Nehemiah could have easily kicked back and set up house on easy street. One day his brother came back from a visit to Jerusalem and told Nehemiah about the destruction he had seen. The once proud and erect walls of the city were now simply heaps of charred rubble. Nehemiah recognized that these

walls were a symbol of a people who once stood with God, separated from the pagan nations around them. But now they lay in ruin. This revelation so broke Nehemiah's heart that he wept. Yet after Nehemiah's weeping came working. After his despair came determination.

He could have rationalized his way out of personally doing anything by saying, "I'm no priest or prophet. Let them take care of it! Besides, if I speak up, I may jeopardize my coveted position with the king. What good would that do?"

But Nehemiah realized that he, a layman, could make a difference. So he prayed, and he obtained permission from the king to go and personally assess the damage. After Nehemiah did that, he drafted a plan and acted upon it (Nehemiah 1–2).

It's not enough to only plan. It's not even enough to only pray. We have to move when God tells us to move. When Moses was on the shore of the Red Sea with the Egyptian army in hot pursuit, the Lord said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the people to get moving!" (Exodus 14:15, NLT).

There is a time to pray and a time to move—a time to sow and a time to reap. But it all starts with a God-given burden for lost people. Alexander McClaren said, "You tell me the depth of a Christian's compassion, and I will tell you the measure of his usefulness." To quote the great British pastor C. H. Spurgeon,

“Winners of souls must first be weepers of souls.”
This is essential to effectively sharing your faith.

Gripped with Urgency

I would suggest the reason many Christians have never led another person to Christ is that we have never really asked a person that pivotal question: “Would you like to accept Jesus Christ into your life as your personal Savior?” We chicken out at the last minute. *What if they say no?* we may wonder. Our real fear might actually be, *What if they say yes?*

If they do say yes—and I believe that if you are actively sharing your faith, you will eventually get such an answer—it will be one of the greatest joys you will ever know this side of heaven. Just think—a person’s eternal destiny has changed! A person who had been on his way to hell is now going to heaven. A person who was empty and lonely is now fulfilled and complete—all because you took the time to share the gospel message.

Yet, so many of us give up too easily. We may ask our unbelieving friends, “Do you want to come to church with me?”

“No,” they flatly reply.

“Okay, never mind,” you say, dropping the subject and perhaps feeling slightly relieved.

How can we give up so easily? Do we really believe what we claim to believe? Are we convinced of the reality of a heaven and a hell? Do we actually accept that

the wages of sin really are death? If so, how can we be so casual about telling others?

Many years ago in England, a criminal named Charles Peace was arrested. He was a burglar, a forger, and he was guilty of double murder. He was condemned to death for his crimes. As he was making his way to the gallows on the day of his execution, a chaplain walked by his side. This minister was simply “going through the motions,” speaking coldly of the importance of faith and belief. In the course of his oft-repeated speech, the minister mentioned the power of Jesus Christ to save from sin.

Suddenly the criminal spun around, looked the chaplain in the eye, and exclaimed, “Do you believe that? Do you really believe that? If I believed that, I would willingly crawl across England on broken glass to tell men it was true.” If we really believe what we are sharing, we should be gripped with the urgency of the message.

I want to encourage you and help you to see that God can indeed use you to bring others into his kingdom.

Sharing, Not Converting

Without question, conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44). Paul also reminds us, “Neither he who plants nor he

who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor” (1 Corinthians 3:7-8, NIV).

There is nothing you or I can do to make a person convert. I’ve heard Billy Graham tell the story of a very inebriated man who happened to be on the same flight as the famed evangelist. Hearing Billy was on board, this drunken man demanded to speak with him. The flight attendants tried to keep the man in his seat, but he would not be satisfied until he had spoken with Billy himself. Hearing about this, Billy got out of his seat and greeted the man.

The drunken man said, “Billy, I’m glad to meet you! I’m one of your converts!”

Billy thought to himself, *He must be one of my converts. He certainly isn’t one of the Lord’s.*

Only God can bring about a true conversion. Sometimes we get to a certain place in our gospel presentation where we may feel compelled to apply a little pressure. We want to close the deal—possibly before it is ready to happen. Remember, our job is to clearly and accurately present the gospel message, leaving the results to God. As Sergeant Friday of the classic TV program *Dragnet* used to say, “Just the facts, ma’am.” Of course, you must be ready to “pull in the net” if the person is ready. If that individual is not at that point, however, leave the timing to God.

Used by God

Statistics tell us that 95 percent of all Christians have never led another person to Christ. Are you in that massive percentage? Or are you in that “elite few” who have had the privilege of helping a person pass from darkness to light?

I believe that God can and will use you to lead others to himself. I do not think that bringing others to Christ is only the work of a select few. Granted, some have been specifically called to be evangelists. That is a gift that comes from God, and it is not limited to those who may hold evangelistic crusades (though it obviously includes them). It is a calling that I have personally seen in the lives of those who are in their seventies as well as those who are still very young. These individuals simply have a special way of freely sharing the gospel with astounding results.

But don't let that discourage you. For although biblical principles will enable you to more effectively tell others about Jesus Christ, you must first understand that there is both a right and wrong way to share the gospel. Second, you will learn that certain essentials need to be in place for the gospel to be the gospel.