

# **I Was Just Wondering...How Do I Talk to My Friends About Faith?**

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Colossians 4:2-6

This morning we continue our “I Was Just Wondering...” sermon series. All the sermons in this series are based on questions and topics suggested by the younger members of this congregation. Today’s question is a question about evangelism, and it’s a question that is being asked by everyone here, and not just the youth. The question is, “How do I talk to other people about faith without driving them away?” “How do I talk to my non-Christian friends about faith without losing their friendship?” That’s a great question. To address it, let’s go to Colossians 4:2-6.

How do I talk to others about faith? We come by this question honestly. You could say that Jesus gave us the question. At the end of Matthew, the last thing he said to his disciples was, “Go make disciples of all nations.” He gave what we call the Great Commission to the church. So, we know we are supposed to share our faith with the world. But we’re not always sure how to do it. We worry that it will be awkward and we will look judgmental.

I still remember when we were much younger and living on College Street in Alger Heights, one of our neighbors was a Jehovah’s Witness. As you know, Jehovah’s Witnesses are aggressive when it comes to sharing their faith. Though we barely knew this neighbor, one day while Linda was planting flowers in our garden he wandered over to her and said, “Hey, how’s it going?” “Good.” “Hey I was just wondering if you ever think about Jesus and salvation.” It was awkward. It was unnatural and uninviting. After Linda explained that we were well-acquainted with Jesus, he wandered away and he rarely if ever approached us again after that.

It’s exchanges like that and the potential for exchanges like that lead to today’s question. We don’t want to be that guy. Fortunately, God doesn’t leave us empty handed. The Bible doesn’t just push us towards sharing our faith with other people, but it gives us some suggestions of how that might work. There are a surprising number of Bible passages in the New Testament that talk about how we should engage our non-Christian neighbors, and none of them are judgmental, none of them are preachy, none of them are condescending. Colossians 4 represents the overall Spirit of these texts. Like us, the Colossians wondered how to interact with outsiders and Paul tells them. “Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”

It’s just 2 verses, but there is a lot here. My sermon will pretty much follow the flow of these verses. Paul starts by saying, “Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders.” Be wise in your approach. Wisdom has a lot of different facets, but with these words Paul is calling us to discernment. When you interact with another person, pay close, loving attention to who they are and what’s going on in their life, and adjust your approach accordingly. When you live with another person, whether that’s a brother or a sister or a roommate in college or maybe a spouse, you get pretty good at reading another person’s moods. You can tell when they are edgy, when they are tired, when they are happy, and you adjust your approach to them based on their moods. If your sister is stressed out because she has an exam that day, that’s probably not the morning to tell her that you’re sick and tired of her using your towel after her shower. That would be unwise. Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders means, pay loving attention to their moods and their situation.

So if we want to be wise in our interactions with outsiders, we must have some idea of their interior state. We would be wise to see that unbelievers have the same religious feelings and religious hungers that we have. As believers we have spiritual hungers, and because we are people of faith, we talk about those things. We live in a community where we have been trained to express these things. We have a vocabulary to describe these feelings. Non-religious people don’t have the community and they don’t have the vocabulary to talk about these things, so they don’t talk about these things. But that doesn’t mean those religious feelings and questions aren’t there. They absolutely are.

You see this is at funerals. I have a unique perspective on this, because I get to do funerals. During a funeral I’m the one at the front, so I can see people’s emotions and reactions. There are always non-Christians

at a Christian funeral. You can tell who they are because they are the ones who don't say the creed and don't sing the hymns. But even if they don't sing, the Non-Christians are deeply engaged at funerals. You can see it on their faces. Because, whether we like it or not, death brings our spiritual questions to the surface.

For all of us, death is a spiritual outrage. Yes, from a biological perspective death is natural and fits into the life cycle of living things. But from a spiritual perspective we all feel the outrage of death. Because life feels everlasting. It doesn't feel temporary. No human being feels like a carbon based biological machine; our consciousness, our sense of being feels so much bigger than that. When you really love someone, when you have moments of deep joy, when you are filled with delight because you see something beautiful, when your heart is stirred by music or by a baby's laugh, what do you feel? You feel transcendent, you feel a largeness of soul, you feel eternity in your heart.

And when you feel that expansive spirit, you think, 'How can this just end?' 'How can this light just go out?!' How can all the energy of a person's hopes and loves and passions just get turned off like a radio?!' When we think about how life actually feels, death makes no sense. The feeling of being alive just doesn't fit with the suddenness of death. At a funeral you can see people struggling with this truth, their spiritual nature, which they keep submerged, suddenly breaches the surface. They are listening. They are wondering, 'What does this ceremony have to say about my questions, my feelings.'

"Be wise in your approach to outsiders," says Paul. When you know that everyone has these spiritual feelings, it gives wisdom for your approach. You know that people are thinking about these things, and when you talk to them about these spiritual matters, you're talking about things that matter to them. When you talk about matters of the soul, you can be sure that they wonder about these things. You can be sure that they are looking for a word to calm the troubled waters that are churning inside of them, and you know that Word.

Of course, finding a way to initiate a conversation about these deep things is the tricky part. But Paul has help for us here too. "Make the most of every opportunity," says Paul, "and make sure your conversation is full of grace." When you engage an outsider, make sure your words and attitudes towards them are understanding, forgiving and loving.

This was such a consistent message in all the New Testament Bible passages I studied this week. They all suggested grace and understanding. It was never angry judgment, it was never confrontation, it was always grace, consideration, gentleness and respect. 1 Thessalonians: 'Lead a quiet life so that you may win the respect of outsiders.' (It matters what other people think of us.) 1 Peter: 'give people reasons for the hope you have but do it with gentleness and respect'. Titus 3: 'be ready to do whatever is good, slander no one, be peaceable and considerate, and always gentle towards everyone.' 1 Corinthians 10: 'Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God.' Put this all together and the approach of evangelism is always personal, always considerate, always gracious, always coming from a place of love.

Here's a true story I heard from a friend. A young person just out of college was living with a random group of young people in a house as a way to defray her rent costs. This person was the only Christian in the house. One day she came into the kitchen to find a new magnet on the fridge. It has a picture of Satan on it and it said, "Welcome to Michigan, Satan." As you can imagine, the young Christian was uncomfortable with the magnet and asked her housemate, 'why did you need to put that up there?' And he said, 'I've always been drawn to Satan, because I heard that he was thrown out of heaven, and when I was younger I always felt like an outcast, so I identify with him.'

Now, you could go different ways with that response. You could get angry and say, "Get rid of that magnet! It's blasphemy!" Or you could make the most of this opportunity and respond with grace. "Oh wow! You felt like an outcast! Tell me about that! That must have been hard." That would be a grace-filled way to start the conversation. That would be a way to make the most of an opportunity.

And who knows, after hearing his story, you could tell him your perspective, that Jesus is the real friend to the outcast. You could tell the story of how Jesus touched the lepers when no one else would go near them. You could tell the story about Jesus eating with the tax collectors and sinners. You could tell them that even though Jesus knew he would suffer for it, Jesus came to this earth to find the outcasts, to find the losers and the sinners, so that he could bring them home.

If you took the conversation in that direction you will be adding some salt to your grace. In that last verse of our passage, Paul asks for both grace and salt. "Let your conversation always be full of grace, seasoned

with salt so that you may know how to answer everyone.” There’s a tension in the way we communicate with outsiders. On the one hand Christians are called to be normal enough that people speak well of us, that we have a good reputation, that we don’t give unnecessary offense; but on the other hand we can’t be so normal that we lose our salt. Our conversations must be gracious, and kind, but they must also be salty.

In the ancient world, salt did two things; it seasoned food and gave it flavor. It also preserved food and kept it from spoiling. The life of a Christian must have the flavor of salt, our life must have the unique flavor of Christ and his gospel. We shouldn’t ‘taste’ like everyone else. We should have a Holy tang. The life of a Christian must preserve like salt. Our words and actions should give life. They should push away darkness despair and shame and guilt; they should create hope and joy and faith and love. In our interactions with outsiders, we should always be gentle and respectful, we should avoid needless offense, but those qualities shouldn’t take away our salt.

I think it was 20 years ago now that I went on a SERVE work trip to Minneapolis, Minnesota with a group of young people from my previous church. We worked in some of the disadvantaged neighborhoods doing yard cleanup, painting and basic house repair. It was hot. As I recall it hit 90 several times during the week. There were about 40 covenant youth volunteering in the city, loving people in the name of Jesus.

Working alongside us were two young people from the community. I think they were apprentices for some local company, but they were the same age as the rest of us. Sometime during the week, I think it was Thursday, they found out that we weren’t getting paid for our work. We were doing this for free! We were doing this because of Jesus. I’ll never forget their reaction. First they looked shocked, and then they started laughing. “Wait, y’all are doing this for free!? Haaah hahaha! Y’all are crazy!” We just smiled and nodded and kept eating our peanut butter sandwiches and slurping our drink boxes.

Those two young men were tasting the salt. Our work had the flavor of Jesus and that was strange to them, strange in a good way. Sure they were laughing during lunchtime, but I am confident that they went home and wondered to themselves about what might make a bunch of young people give so much of themselves to help people so far away from home, without asking anything in return. I’m sure it made them wonder about Jesus. I don’t know if those two young men were changed by their encounter with us. I don’t know if they gave themselves over to Jesus. And I certainly hope they did. But that’s the Spirit’s business.

Which brings me to the last thing I want to say. Conversion is the Spirit’s business, the Spirit’s work. Our job is to witness by word and deed to the fact that in Jesus, the love of God has taken on flesh and blood in this world, the love of God has come into our mess. He laid himself down so that he could fill us and change us and make us new. Our job is to be ‘wise in the way we act toward outsiders, to make the most of all our opportunities, to let our conversation be full of grace and seasoned with salt,’ and then to watch as God, Father Son and Holy Spirit, makes everything new.

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