

Introduction:

A. *Illus.*: I had a delightful surprise a couple weeks ago. I woke up before 5 and couldn't get back to sleep so I decided to get up and go to Einstein's and work for a couple hours. I got there about 6:15 and who should be there but my old friend, M---. We've been customers there longer than anyone else but we don't see each other very often because he goes to work so early. I asked about his son who has had some tough struggles with addiction. He said he was in a sober community in California. And then he said that his son had become a Christian and was hoping to be baptized. He's reading the Bible and going to church. They're Jewish. I was blown away.

When Mike left A--- sat down by me because he had some questions arising from a historical novel he's been reading that involved church history. He's Jewish, too. We talked about Catholics and Protestants in England in the 1600s. He even asked, "Who was John Calvin?" Good talk.

While we were talking, B-- came in. She's a sweetheart who's recovering from a stroke. She asked what I'd been working on and I talked about preparing for my next sermon series on Ecclesiastes. As we were winding down, she said, "I'd really like to read things you've written," so I promised to bring some things. And she said if her job schedule changes she'd love to visit our church.

While we were still talking my good friend, J---, sat down. I always give her my newspaper. She's also Jewish, and she picked up on the talk about Ecclesiastes, so we talked about that also, and I had a little mini-opportunity to talk about our Christian hope. Four conversations, one on top of the next. None of them forced. Gifts, each of them.

B. Each Sunday this season we're helping you with your Christmas list by showing from the Bible something uniquely Christian that you can give to others this season—or any time. Grace Gifts. Like those conversations—gifts to me and them. Turn to **Col. 4:2-6... Even though most of us are not apostles, we are each divinely positioned to give others a taste for Jesus Christ.** So what do we do to take advantage of our opportunities?

I. PRAY PERSISTENTLY FOR GOD TO OPEN DOORS FOR YOU

A. Paul, who wrote this from prison, is asking to be on their prayer list and he has two specific requests: (1) that God would open doors for him—not necessarily prison doors—but doors of gospel opportunity, and (2) that when the door opened he'd be able to proclaim the gospel clearly. We he speaks of "*the mystery of Christ*" he means what he referred to early in Col 1:27, "*this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*" That's the gospel in a nutshell. *Christ living in you, in response to your faith, is your hope of glory—a new life forever with the Lord.*

B. The first phrase of **v.2**, "*Devote yourselves to prayer,*" is literally, "*Persevere in prayer.*" Don't stop. Keep at it. Years ago we took a survey here about evangelism. The most important thing we discovered was that many of our people wanted to share their faith but just didn't feel they had authentic opportunities. Well, you've come to the right place in the Bible. The secret is our persistent prayer. We pray, again and again, that God would open doors and that, when he does, we'd be ready to put the gospel clearly.

C. Praying persistently sensitizes us to the open doors God gives. I pray often for one of my neighbors in particular. Gradually my prayer has changed from something I know I

ought to do to something I earnestly *want* God to do. And I can assure you, that when God gives us any kind of open door—whether to help somehow or, better yet, to speak of Jesus—we will certainly be eager to do that.

- D. We suggest that each of you have a Guest List. We got that phrase from Jesus’ parable where a Master sent his servants out to invite people to his banquet. Our Guest Lists are people for whom we’re praying persistently that God would open doors for us—or someone—to introduce them to Jesus our Savior.
- E. Does it work? Does it matter if we pray? Can’t we just stay on our toes in the event an opportunity presents itself. No, **we must pray.** Illus.: About 25 years ago the pastor of a church in Phoenix, AZ, asked his members to randomly choose 80 people from the telephone book. He then requested daily prayer for each person for 90 days. At the same time, he asked members to choose another 80 names from the directory, but the second list was simply laid aside and nobody prayed for those people. After 90 days, members called all 160 people on the lists, asking them whether they would allow Christians to visit them to pray for them. What do you think happened?

According to Al VanderGriend of the American Lighthouse movement, “*The amazing result was this: only one person on the list of people who did not receive prayer was prepared to allow Christians to visit, whereas 69 of the 80 people for whom the church members prayed were prepared to allow Christians to visit, and 45 even invited them into their houses, offered coffee and named special prayer requests.*” [Dangerous Intersections, p.125; also in Ills]

Pray persistently for God to open doors for you.

Now look again at **v.5**, “*Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.*” A literal translation of that second phrase is “*redeeming the time.*” As we pray persistently, we...

II. BRING CONSISTENT WISDOM TO OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OUTSIDERS

- A. Paul was an itinerant preacher, moving from one city to another to proclaim the gospel. We’re not. We stay put, surrounded by the same people. Our approach to outsiders is different than an apostle like Paul. One writer looked at this passage and called our approach “**responsive evangelism.**” I like that. Responsive evangelism. [Dick Lucas] We know instinctively that, when it comes to these people we see often, there’s a risk of sharing our faith in such a way that these folks turn us off. We don’t want to burn our bridges. One take it one step at a time. So the counsel Paul gives us, in tandem with our persistent praying, is “*walking in wisdom*” in these relationships.
- B. Wisdom takes into account what a person is like—their personality, their back-story, our connection with them. Wisdom gives us a sense of what God might be up to in their lives, maybe unnoticed by them. Wisdom gives us a sense of opportunity sometimes and restraint other times.

Wisdom, of course, requires that we *think* about these people around us. **No one can be wise without *thinking!***

And the best time to think about them is when you’re praying. As you are alone with God you reflect on the sorrow of one friend, or the kindness of a co-worker, or the special interest a person has. I thought about all the elementary school age kids around our house and prayed that God would give me a way of connecting. Now, in summer, I always sit on my front porch to read rather than

the back deck, and sometimes they come to talk to me. And in a couple weeks we're all going "Christmas singing" again, with hot chocolate and cookies afterward for them and their parents. That wise idea came from praying.

- C. There's a danger that a lot of us face: delay. Hesitation. Procrastination. So the poke in our ribs is that other phrase in **v.5**, which is "*redeeming the time,*" or "*making the most of every opportunity.*" This isn't a separate step. It is part of walking in wisdom. Time's a'wastin'. **Time we spend with outsiders which *isn't* directed by wisdom is time wasted.** Opportunities lost, never to be presented in quite the same way again.
- D. Our Grace Gifts emphasis is a way to redeem the time, to make the most of the Christmas season opportunity. We're encouraging you to pray that God would give you a way to give some kind of grace to some of the outsiders around you. Among the people on my Guest List are several of the staff at Einstein's. I've decided I'm going to write them each a personal note, thinking as wisely as I can about what qualities I appreciate, and then some money to each because I don't do the tip jar thing. At another place I go, I've made friends with David, who I often seen picking up trash in the parking lot. We try to talk but there's a language barrier so I'm going to write a note to him about what I appreciate and get some help translating it. Pray for the wisdom to find something just right for those you know.
- E. But the point here is to redeem the time. Have something to show for the days, for the opportunities, God has given you with these folks around us, not just at this season, but all the time. Wisdom keeps an eye on the time. So, **bring consistent wisdom to your relationships with outsiders.**

Finally, look again at **v.6**, “*Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*” We don’t seek opportunities to preach (as Paul would do) but to simply talk; to converse, to respond to the things they say and ask, especially when it relates to our hope in Christ.

Responsive evangelism.

III. ALWAYS CONVERSE WITH GRACE AND A DASH OF SALT

- A. **1 Pet. 3:15** says much the same thing: “*But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience...*” The words, “*with gentleness and respect,*” is another way of saying *with grace*. Illus.: You know, some languages, when you hear them, are more musical than others. I’m partial to Swedish or Scottish, but you probably have yours. Even if you don’t know what’s being said, you like to hear the accent. **Grace is like God’s own accent brought to speech.** Gentleness and respect, with words that never sully your conscience so that later you regret what you said or how you said it.
- B. Then there’s this curious phrase, “*seasoned with salt.*” I like this idea. I was trying to think how it is I do this and I decided I have **three salty C’s: curiosity, kindness and kidding**. I ask questions. I look for chances to affirm and bless. And I kid around with folks. Those are my salty C’s: curiosity, kindness and kidding.

Illus.: I was reading an article that Amit is putting in next week’s *Village Vine*. In it Londa Mauriello shared this: “*My biggest opportunities to share occur at my work. While some of my coworkers are Jewish, none are religious. Our clients are often angry and frustrated, so I’ve*

been caught saying, 'Breathe in Jesus, breathe out the Devil' as a fun way of de-stressing. Now, all my coworkers are saying it. Once, after a particularly bad interaction, a coworker said, 'I would breathe in Jesus, but Jesus isn't enough.' I replied, 'Oh, but Jesus is always enough.'" **Just a dash of salt to give them a taste for Jesus.**

- C. All this, says v.6, "so that you may know how to answer everyone." In the blur of conversation, we often feel like we *don't* know how to answer people. What do we say when they are under terrible pressure? Or when they're not getting along with their spouse, or co-workers, or fellow-students? What do we say when they rage about religion or government or management? There are so many times when I'm not sure what to say and I often think of what Jesus told his disciples about when they would be hauled into court, in **Matt 10:19-20**, "*But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.*" I trust that Jesus will do the same for us when we're given a gospel opportunity and need to make the most of the opportunity.

Conclusion

What to give those tough names on your list this Christmas? Let's review: **Even though most of us are not apostles or evangelists, we are each divinely positioned to give others a taste for Jesus Christ.** Pray persistently for open doors. Bring consistent wisdom to our relationships with outsiders. Always converse with grace and a dash of salt.