

The Conversations that Connect series
Jesus talked with people, with an ear open to the Spirit
One heart to love with Luke 19:1-10

I want you to be inspired this morning as Christ-followers with the love of God stirring your heart, to grow in your desire to boldly initiate questions in your daily conversations, because you're convinced of God's love for all people and Jesus' desire to seek and save the lost. Such love in our hearts motivates us to witness.

We are up to our third week now in a four part series. To revise our conversational approach, whereby we ask questions we see it:

- creates space for you to *listen to others* before you speak;
- creates space for you to *listen to God* before you speak;
- potentially opens an *ongoing conversation*;
- returns the *onus of proof* to others, if they have criticised;
- is *non-threatening*; and finally,
- can *cause them to re-evaluate* their beliefs-Pretty useful stuff

Our first message was *Two ears to listen with* - Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan Woman in John 4, the point being that a meaningful conversation likely begins with us asking a few questions and listening well. Any 'sour note' we identify becomes a potential door for meaningful conversation.

Our second message was *One spirit to listen with* - Jesus' brief conversation with Nathanael in John 1, then discussed how we could create an opportunity from that 'sour note' through asking questions that help people to evaluate their beliefs and consider other ways of seeing things. 3 key questions we looked at were:

- Question 1: What do you mean by...? (Which seeks to clarify **WHAT** they believe)
- Question 2: What led you to that conclusion? (This seeks to clarify **WHY** they believe that)
- Question 3: Have you considered that...? (This seeks to redirect to or to illuminate a different way of thinking)

How is it going with these questions? Has anyone had any interesting conversations this week or last week? [me...]

Now, today – we're going to look at the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus the tax collector...

Scripture Reading: Luke 19:1-10

The story of Jesus and Zacchaeus relates well to what the apostle Paul wrote in **Colossians 4:5-6** *Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.*

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.

For, here is Jesus, the most holy man who has every lived and here is Zacchaeus, a Jew who has compromised everything by partnering with the Roman Oppressors who occupied the land, working for them to collect taxes from the Jews, and profiteering along the way. As the chief tax collector in what was a prosperous region at the time - no wonder he had grown rich! Yet Jesus successfully struck up an open-hearted, two-way conversation with perhaps Jericho's most despised resident that teaches us to:

1. Learn to make the opportunity:

Jesus could have just walked past Zacchaeus v.5, but didn't. It is only because Jesus interrupted the flow of his day to initiate a conversation with this outcast of a man, that Zacchaeus' life was changed. Many witnessing opportunities will only come about because we have first chosen to slow down to give people time.

2. Try to listen to the Holy Spirit's whispers

It would seem Jesus was prompted by the Holy Spirit to talk with Zacchaeus, and invite Himself to his house v.5. With regards to Jesus knowing Zacchaeus' name, it is possible Zacchaeus was so well known, that Jesus may already have known his name, but if not then it was a word of knowledge revealed by the Holy Spirit. If we want to be effective as witnesses for Jesus, our effectiveness will be enhanced when we choose to walk with God's Spirit, listening to His promptings, leadings and revelations.

3. Learn to love the unlovable

Zacchaeus was a social and religious reject in his time. So Jesus' actions were considered a compromise by the religious leaders. There are people all around us who need love – the lonely, the grieving, the hurt, the disadvantaged, young people and older people, those who are physically or mentally disadvantaged, or emotionally troubled... they need your smile, your time to say hi, your ear, your touch, your love. Some people are not pleasant to be around because they are loud, smelly, talk too much, abrasive. But, Love looks past all this!

Jesus was criticized: *"He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner' "* (v7) ...and we are called to follow Jesus' example.

We are not told about the contents of the conversation that went on at Zacchaeus' house, but the end results of Jesus' love, acceptance, encouragements, and their conversation was significant. Zacchaeus – a sinner of sinners to the Jews - REPENTED of his sin vv8-10.

He voluntarily gave half of his possessions to the poor and then promised to return four-fold anything he had cheated anybody out of. Four times was the rate required for full repayment under the Old Testament Law in the case of theft (Exodus 22:1).

Jesus didn't come across as one who judged people and yet he had uncompromising beliefs and standards. If we can learn to love and related to people like Jesus did, we'd find opportunities are not so hard to come by. There are skills we can learn that help. Let us remember from: **[Midway Summary]**

- Week 1 We have two ears to *hear* what people are saying
- Week 2 We have a 'spirit' to hear what God is saying, to *illuminate* new ways of thinking
- Week 3 We have a heart with which to love, to *uncover* the deeper reasons and open the way for Jesus. We're now going to look at this third type of evangelistic conversation – **'uncovering conversations.'**

APPLICATION - UNCOVERING CONVERSATIONS

People resist Jesus for different reasons. Some reasons are intellectual, some are emotional, and some are spiritual, and, it is important that we learn to discern the difference in our conversations.

For instance, if the hindrances are emotional and we try to address them with only intellectual questions, then we will not get very far because we've missed the point. In order to help the process we are to employ 'love for the person' as our chief motivation to help guide us.

How love can help us find the words to say:

Sometimes we feel scared we won't know what to say. I'd like to encourage you that love not only helps us overcome this fear, it gives us words to say.

When our conversations are flowing from love, words often come naturally and practice makes perfect. Love can give us words to say. When love is the motive God is released through us because, in that moment, our hearts come into sync with God's!

The end result of Jesus' love shown to Zacchaeus

Consider what happened. Jesus gave Zacchaeus time, and didn't judge him. At the conclusion Jesus confirmed that salvation had come to Zacchaeus ' house, and then stated His own purpose - *For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.*" Our sincere efforts to share the gospel will only be effective in as much as we also sincerely learn to live out of love.

Let's consider an example of an emotionally loaded statement

'I don't want to be a Christian because the Church is full of hypocrites'.

Yes, there are a lot of people who have been turned off Christianity by the bad example of someone who claimed to follow Jesus, so...

What is the sour note / the Truth to consider here?

As with merchandise, the merits of a product are not determined by the merits of the products representative. So while taking offense may be understandable, it is not logical to be angry at God for another humans' bad behaviour. You should be angry - at the human!

And as far as Christianity is concerned it is the greatest cause of good on earth, and also has the clearest and highest standard of moral teaching in the world – so attacking it is rather unfair.

So, here are our Starting questions: What do you mean hypocrite? Isn't it true that none of us live up to our ideals?

Have you never done anything contrary to your belief?
We've all fallen short of our own expectations of ourselves,
haven't we?

We're all guilty of being hypocrites in some way, if we're honest.

HOWEVER let's imagine their feelings on this are strong at this point. So what is needed now is a question that seeks to UNCOVER the deeper issues: 'Why is this so important to you?'

- You seem to feel strongly on this – why is this?'

- I'm sorry to hear that - what happened? At which point they may share their story, maybe having been wronged or upset by the poor witness of a Christian earlier in life.

Only then having shown empathy first might we return to their stated question, 'I don't want to be a Christian because the Church is full of hypocrites', which we could answer with the likes of:

- "I'm so sorry that happened. To be fair, can you see how God could be separate to that?" OR
- "I'm so sorry that happened. I can assure you from what the Bible says that such a person will be called to account for what they have said or done, or omitted to do by God. Just as we each will. So I think the important question is where you or I stand before God. I mean, we've all done things wrong. Who is without fault when no one is perfect?"

In Summary: Sometimes people are resistant for emotional or spiritual reasons - For the conversation to continue meaningfully, covering questions are needed

- Why do you ask that?
- You seem to feel strongly on this, why?
- Why do you say that, do you really believe that or did you say that because you want to close this conversation?

Whatever the scenario, we seek to understand what they are really saying which sometimes is exactly what their words say, and sometimes is the opposite to.

i.e. How are you? "Fine", is the reply yet they just had the worst day of their life. So, let us learn from when...

Jesus reached out to Zacchaeus, That when he did

- He had an EAR to the spirit
- He had a MIND that had grown in understanding
- He had a HEART that loved

He showed love to a social outcast. They engaged in a conversation and Zacchaeus was completely changed as a result!

CHALLENGE: Who can you step out of your comfort zone to reach out to in conversation this week?

The Material contained in this sermon was made available from Hope Project Media NZ who note that Credits for the overall direction of this series go to Dr Norm Geisler & Dr David Geisler, from their book 'Conversational Evangelism' (see mEEKNESSandtruth.org). We have partnered with Dr David in a couple of things, & have summarised (with permission) a number of points from his Conversational Evangelism material among the content of the three chapters in Dave Mann's book, 'Because we care' that address this topic area. This book can be purchased at bigbookpublishing.co.nz.