

# Bridging the Awkward Divide

Alright, if you've got your bible, you're welcome to turn with me to the passage we just read in 1 Thessalonians 2. We are gonna wrap up our *Neighboring* series this morning by trying to get immensely practical with it all. So far in this series, we've talked about how, according to Jesus, the word "neighbor" means way more than just "the people you live near." For Jesus, it's something much more like "anybody God puts you in proximity to. Anybody God puts you around on a semi-regular basis." And so with that in mind, the first week of the series, we talked about how to begin *getting to know* those people. Starting with their names, and some basic details about their life, how do we regularly make an effort to befriend and get to know the people God puts near us?

And then last week, we talked a little bit about how to get past one of the major *barriers* to neighboring: namely, that most of us feel like we are too *busy* to get to know those people. Most of us often seem to have too much going on to slow down long enough to befriend the people around us. So we talked about how to budget some *margin* into our lives so that we can get to know and love our neighbors. That's what last Sunday was all about.

So today as we close out the series, I want us to sort of complete the circle. Because back in week 1, we made it clear that **the *ultimate purpose of neighboring is to get to tell our neighbors about the hope that is found in Jesus. That's the goal: to get to talk to them about Jesus.*** Now, that *doesn't mean* that if they're *not* interested in Jesus we stop *loving* them and *hanging out* with them—not at all. *And* that's *not* to say that if we love them and they end up not following Jesus, that everything we did for them and with them was *in vain*. But that *is* to say that the goal of neighboring isn't just to become really good *friends* with our neighbors. The goal is to tell them about the *most important thing in our lives*—about Jesus and what he's done for us.

But that begs the question, "how do I go about that, exactly?" Assuming that you're *creating the margin* in your life to neighbor well with people, and assuming your putting forth the effort to get to know those people—if you're doing all that—we're left with the question, "how do I talk to them about Jesus?" And that's where we're headed today. In 1 Thessalonians 2, I think we get at least *three guiding principles* on *how* to go about telling people about Jesus. So I want us to start there, and then I've got a three very practical *tools* to help us get the conversation there. Getting super Baptisty today: two sets of three points. But first, the *principles*.

I think in that passage we just heard read, we see that Paul (the author of 1 Thessalonians) shared the gospel 1) boldly, 2) gently, and 3) relationally. Let's spend a few minutes on each of those.

### **Boldly**

In v. 2, Paul says "...we had **boldness** in our God to declare to you the gospel of God..." They shared the gospel *boldly*. Another way of putting that is that **they didn't try to constantly tip-toe around the gospel**. They weren't so nervous about offending people that they never talked to them about something they might disagree with. They had the *boldness* to realize that they were put there for the purpose of sharing about Jesus, and so they did precisely that.

Sometimes we tend not to be all that bold. For example, when I was living in South Carolina, I would frequent a Starbucks there. (Don't judge me on the Starbucks thing—this was before I knew that *good* coffee existed). And most days I would go to that Starbucks, and there was a barista that took my order. Usually I'd be there in the afternoon lull, so I'd just catch up with him for a while before I gave him my order—it was my attempt at *neighboring*. So this went on for a month or two, and I really felt like we were clicking. But our conversation topics really hadn't approached Jesus or spiritual things at all. But Easter was approaching, and in the South a lot of people attend church on Easter even if they don't follow Jesus, so I figured that was a good, minimally awkward in-road with him, to just ask him one day if he had plans to attend a church on Easter. But I was still nervous he was just gonna be super weirded out by it, so the whole walk over that day I was just praying that the Spirit would breathe on the conversation and make it not horrible. So I walk in the door, and he's standing at the counter, and before I can say anything to *him*, *he says to me*, "hey man, I haven't known how to ask you this, and I don't want this to be weird, but my church is having an Easter service and I'd love to invite you to come." And slides me an invite card to his church. Turns out, this guy was actually on staff at a church, just like I was at the time, and we both had been *neighboring* one another, and both had been terrified to bring up Jesus with the other person. Only in the Bible Belt, right? ~~Also I don't know what that says about me at the time, that I knew this guy for that long and it was never obvious that I might be a Christian. Anyways.~~ So that's a fail for me on *boldness*. And I think a lot of us have experienced some of those same hesitancies.

But to talk about Jesus well with people, we want to be filled with *boldness*. There are examples—not just here in 1 Thessalonians, but all over the Scriptures—of the people of

God asking for *boldness* to declare the good news about Jesus to those around them. And that's what we want too. Second, Paul says we should tell people about Jesus...

## Gently

In v. 7, Paul says "...we were **gentle** among you..." Now maybe it sounds like a contradiction to say that they were both "bold" *and* "gentle" at the same time—it's not *actually* a contradiction. You can be *bold* without being *aggressive*. I think part of the reason that "evangelism"—or telling people about Jesus—turns many of us off is because we've mostly just seen people do it *aggressively*. We've seen people yelling at other people about Jesus, or showing up on people's front porch and refusing to let them close the door while they tell them about Jesus, or whatever else it may be. We've seen people talk with others about Jesus really *aggressively* or really *mechanically* or really *unhelpfully*. And we've seen that sort of thing actually turn people *off* to Jesus unnecessarily. And we so badly don't want to be that, that we sometimes respond by just avoiding to do it altogether.

But all those things are examples of being *aggressive*, not being *bold*. Apparently to Paul, there is a way to be *bold*, and yet *gentle* in how we talk to people about Jesus. *Boldness* is when people come away from the conversation going "wow, that person really believes in the stuff they're talking about." *Aggressiveness* is when people come away from the conversation going "I'm a little terrified to talk to that person about anything ever again." Do you see the difference? So we want to be *bold* about the gospel, but we don't necessarily want to be *aggressive* about the gospel. We want to be *gentle*.

## Relationally

Lastly, in v. 8 Paul says "...we were ready to share with you **not only the gospel of God, but also our own selves**..." So Paul and his companions talking to others about Jesus evidently came from a place of relationship and *friendship* with the Thessalonians. They shared not just the gospel, but their *own lives*. This is what we've been talking about throughout this series: that generally, **talking about Jesus with someone is most helpful when it comes from a pre-existing friendship with that person**. This is why things like door-to-door evangelism *can* still work, but generally don't. Because there's no pre-existing *relationship* there.

But at the same time, **building a true friendship with people should eventually lead to also talking to them about Jesus**. When Jesus sent his disciples out, he didn't just tell them to get to know people and be their friend, he told them to "proclaim the good

news” to them. The reality is that **if you really care deeply about a person, you should naturally want to talk to them about the thing that matters most to you in the world—which for followers of Jesus is Jesus and his kingdom.**

**So the solution isn't to *neglect* talking to people about Jesus—the solution is to learn how to do it *well*.** How to do it *boldly, gently, and relationally*, like Paul did. **The solution is to learn *helpful, culturally-appropriate ways to talk about Jesus with people you know.*** So *what does that look like practically?* How do we get past that awkward phase with our neighbors: where we both know each other and we like hanging out to some degree, but we don't really ever talk about Jesus together? How do we bridge that awkward divide?

Well I want to give us three different *tools* to help us bring up Jesus with the people we get to know—with at least *minimal* amounts of awkwardness—how does that sound? I don't think there's a way to eliminate *all* awkwardness from it—but you probably can eliminate *some*. Three *tools*, to help you talk about Jesus, without *being* a tool. When you're in that place where you're getting to know someone God puts around you, you're developing a friendship with them, these are three things that can serve as bridges to talking about Jesus with them. Here we go...

## **Neighboring Tool #1: Your story**

**Your personal story can be one of the most natural ways to talk about who Jesus is and what he's capable of.** I think sometimes, the reason it's awkward when we talk to people about Jesus is because we talk about Jesus like we're a *bad used car salesman*: “Here's who Jesus is, here's how awesome he is, and here's how he'll make your life all better in all these ways if you'll just sign here at the dotted line!” *Some people* might respond well to a person talking like that about Jesus, but most *won't*. That kind of thing generally comes off as gimmicky and contrived. It sounds like you're trying to trick people into *purchasing* Jesus.

So what if we learned to talk about Jesus *less* like a bad used car salesman—less like we're selling a product— and a little more *personally* and *passionately*. What if we talked to people about Jesus more like most people talk about...*Crossfit*. Bear with me here. Indulge me for just a moment on this. Here's what I mean: no one has to force *anybody* who *does* Crossfit, to *talk about* Crossfit. They just *do*, right? Like the minds behind Crossfit aren't somewhere behind the scenes going “we really need to put together some Crossfit tracts, we need to come up with some conversation guides to teach people how

to talk about Crossfit—otherwise nobody is going to know about this thing.” No, people that do Crossfit talk about it *instinctively* because they’re satisfied Crossfitters. **They don’t talk about it like a product—at least not *most* of them *I’ve met*. They talk about it like it’s something they do and they like. They talk about it like it’s something that has made a meaningful difference in their life, and they think it will make a meaningful difference in your life too.** Because the reality is *we naturally talk about the things we love*. Now—whether you personally *enjoy* hearing Crossfitters talk about Crossfit or not is an entirely *different* story—but you’ve got to admit nobody has to *force them to talk about it*. Right?

Okay, so as ridiculous as it might seem, *import* that thinking into the way you talk about Jesus with people. **What if our conversations with people about Jesus sounded more like *that*, rather than like we’re trying to sell them a Jesus product?** I think sometimes we sometimes operate as if people need us to *sell them* on Jesus, when what they probably need most is for us to *describe* what following Jesus *looks and feels like* and why we think it’s worth it. Does that make sense? And *that* is why your personal story is such a powerful way to talk about Jesus with somebody.

Paul actually does this regularly in his letters, in a number of places. Let me show you just one of them. This is from Paul’s first letter to Timothy, chapter 1. Here’s what he says:

*I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that **he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.***

So **Paul just unpacked a lot of the key components of the gospel—of the good news of Jesus—but he *did it all within the context* of his own personal story.** Did you see that? It’s almost hard to discern in that passage where the gospel *stops* and his own story *starts*, because the way he presents them, they’re so intertwined with one another. He talks about his background, who he was before Jesus—Paul was overseeing

the murder of Christians—and then he goes on to talk about how God showed him mercy, how God poured out his grace on him. And then he wraps it up with the most wonderfully self-deprecating gospel statement: he says, in essence, “you know—I think God saved me so that he could show the world that *nobody* is beyond saving!” He shares the good news of Jesus, but he does it via his own personal story. And it’s not just here that he does it: he does something similar in Philippians, in Galatians, and several other places too. **This is one of the most powerful ways to tell people about Jesus—in the context of your own story.**

But maybe you hear that and think to yourself, “okay, but I don’t have a crazy story like Paul does. My story is a lot more boring than that. My story is that I don’t remember ever *not* believing in Jesus, and I *still* believe in Jesus.” First, *praise God* for a boring story. I’m praying like crazy that *both* of my kids have boring stories. But second, that doesn’t mean you can’t share with people about Jesus via your story.

Because **your story has way more to it than just your conversion to following Jesus.** It also includes what God is *currently* doing in your relationship with him. It includes what he is *currently teaching* you. So even if your conversion story isn’t all that extreme, what are the things that God is healing you from *now*? What are the things he’s rescuing you from, giving you freedom from *now*? That can be just as relevant as your story of *conversion*. Saying things like “I used to think that the point of life was to make as much money as possible to make my life as comfortable as possible. Now God is showing me that money is actually a resource to love and serve people with, and here’s how...” Saying “I used to believe that all my worth was in my job and my career, and now God is showing me that my worth isn’t in that at all, but rather in who I am in Jesus...” Those are great *in-roads* to talk to people about who Jesus is and what he’s capable of, even if you don’t have a crazy intense conversion story to go with it.

Okay, moving on. The next thing you’ll need to neighbor well is...

## **Tool for Neighboring #2: Your community**

This one will be a little quicker, just because we try to talk about this one a lot around here. But **one of the most powerful ways to start conversations about Jesus with people is for them to see how we and other followers of Jesus *interact with each other*.** This idea is all over specifically *John’s* writings in the New Testament:

- **John 13:35:** *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*
- **1 John 3:14:** *We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other.*
- **1 John 4:12:** *No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*

**You see this? One of the most powerful ways for people to see who Jesus is, and to prompt questions from them about Jesus—is is through them seeing how we love one another. By getting a glimpse into the life of our community.** Time and time again, I have seen God draw people to himself simply by giving them a window to observe God’s people love one another.

I’ll give you just one example of this playing out recently. A lot of you guys know that Jeff—our other pastor—and his wife Callie just went through a turbulent time in regards adopting their son Luke. They adopted him, the birth mom changed her mind and took him back, and then changed her mind *again*, fully surrendered her rights, and they got Luke back. But when the adoption *first fell through*, it was obviously really difficult. And a lot of us knew that it would just be really hard for them to have to walk by Luke’s room in their house with all the baby stuff in it, but without a baby there. So some of us rented a storage unit here in Knoxville, and while Jeff and Callie were out of town, we loaded all the baby’s stuff into the storage unit to get it out of their house. When we did that, we met a woman at the front desk of the storage facility who asked about what we were doing, so we ended up telling her the whole story of what was happening with the adoption. Then, when they actually got Luke *back*, we went and loaded everything back *out* of the storage unit, and lo and behold, the same woman was working the front desk that day. Well, after we got done, she came up to us with tears streaming down her face, and said “I have never seen a group of people love one another like I’ve witnessed you guys love this couple. You said you were a part of a church? What church do y’all go to? I want to come.”

*That’s* the type of thing that these passages in John and 1 John are talking about. **The way we love and interact with one another has this uncanny ability to open people up to the gospel and who God is.** So in light of that, I would argue **one of the best questions to ask when getting to know someone who doesn’t follow Jesus yet is this: how soon can I get them around my community? How soon can I get them a glimpse into how we love one another?** Practically, this is why we encourage our LifeGroups to let people who aren’t yet followers of Jesus come around their LifeGroups.

This is why we encourage all of our LifeGroups to have what we call “rhythms”—which are basically just hanging out in public environments out and about in our city: coffee shops, restaurants, pubs, parks, playgrounds, the food truck park. We want our LifeGroups to do that because **those are non-threatening environments for people who don’t yet follow Jesus, to see how we as followers of Jesus love and interact with one another.** Because we know that our community is one of the most powerful tools we have to help people see the implications of the gospel.

### **Tool for Neighboring #3: Your prayers**

Another great way to kickstart a conversation about Jesus is via *prayer*. So obviously, the *whole neighboring process* should be *saturated* in prayer. Prayer for the person you’re building with, prayer for the conversations you’re having with them—we should be praying about all of that. But specifically *here*, **I’m talking about asking the people you’re building relationships with how you can pray for them.** You might be surprised at how positively people respond to someone offering to pray for them. Even people that want *nothing* to do with God sometimes are *very open* to being prayed for. And sometimes, you get to know a person really well through asking them that. Often, they’ll share more with you in that context than they might would have otherwise. ~~If you remember our neighboring chart from week 1, you often get to know some ‘Section C’ stuff about them.~~ So it might be worth just, the next time you’re hanging out with that person, asking “hey I wanted to ask you, is there anything I could be praying for you about?”

Now, some clarifications on how to go about this. First, **you may want to wait until you know them at least a little before you offer to pray for them.** If you meet somebody once, talk to them for five minutes and ask at the end how you can pray for them, that’s often going to make people super uncomfortable. So maybe wait until you’ve built at least a little bit of a friendship before you ask. Second, **you don’t necessarily have to pray for them right there in that moment.** In fact, I’ve found often it’s best *not* to do that. You might just want to say “yeah, I’d love to pray for that.” And then spend some time praying about it, and maybe follow up with them a week or two later, ask them “hey I’ve been praying for that thing we talked about—how did it go?” Or, “how’s that thing going you asked me to pray for?” And just letting God guide the process.

I’ll tell you one more story of how God used this when I was living in South Carolina. Apparently I only neighbored consistently in South Carolina—not so much here. Idk. But I had this literal neighbor, this lady that lived in the house a few doors down from me. And



she just sat on her front porch most afternoons and evenings. So I would go running in our neighborhood sometimes—*another thing* that I've now progressed past—and I would see her out there on her porch and stop to talk to her for a bit. And so one day I asked her if there was anything I could be praying for her about while I was running. She told me a little bit about her divorce that had been finalized a little over a year ago and how difficult it was, how she didn't even know where to start finding a job and going back to work because she hadn't been an active part of the workforce in decades. So I said I would pray for that, and I did.

Well, long story short, she ended up moving out of the house near us, and I didn't see her for a while. But then one day I was at the grocery store, and she happened to be there. So I stopped and talked to her for a bit. Turns out things had gotten a lot *worse* for her: she couldn't afford the house on our street after everything so she was renting a place somewhere else in town, she had then gotten evicted from *that* place, she had just been diagnosed with cancer, all kinds of awful stuff. And right in the middle of telling me all this, tears welling up in her eyes, she randomly said "you know that time you asked if you could pray for me? Did God tell you to tell *me* anything when you did that?" And I was so caught off guard by it. It had been I think six months or more, so I didn't think she remembered that, I honestly didn't remember if he had or not.

So I said "you know I honestly don't remember, but I do know that right now he would want to tell you that he loves you, he wants to be with you in the midst of all of this, and that he hasn't given up on you even with everything going on." So then we *both* started crying, and she gave me a hug. I asked her if I could help with anything, she said no, and to be honest I never saw her again. So I don't know where she's at with everything today: that might be the last conversation she ever had with *anybody* about Jesus, or, she might be a faithful follower of Jesus somewhere. I have no idea. But I know the Spirit used that one moment that I randomly asked her if I could pray for her, to open a door for me to tell her about who God is over six months later. So all that to say, you might be surprised at how God uses something as simple as an offer to pray for someone—what he uses that to accomplish.

And truth be told, that's the goal with *all* of this. Just **using the simplest, most ordinary things, and praying that God uses them and makes them effective.** *That's* what we're after. And I'll be honest—chances are as we do that, at least some of it is going to fall flat—it's just not gonna go well. Chances are, some of it is going to be tense and awkward and clunky. That is all very possible, even probable. But I think that's where we have to remember God isn't *asking* for it to be perfect. We're not responsible for perfectly

and flawlessly telling people about Jesus. **If people coming to know Jesus were dependent on how talented we were at telling them, Christianity would've gone extinct a long, long time ago.** None of us are expert “evangelists”—your pastors here included.

And *even if we were*, that isn't what makes it all successful. What makes it successful is the Holy Spirit *igniting the hearts* of the people we build relationships with. So why don't we take every bit of the pressure that we have put on our shoulders to magically turn people into followers of Jesus, and give that responsibility right back to Jesus where it's been all along. And then let's just, with everything we've got, be faithful to what he's called us to. Let's use the opportunities he's given us to do what we can. To plant a little seed here, to plant a little seed there, and trust that God will give the growth.

And even if we try to do that and it goes *horribly*—let's say you talk to somebody about Jesus this week, and it just crashes and burns before your eyes. The person you're talking to just immediately walls off to you and just assumes you're some sort of backwoods, bible-thumping fundamentalist, and they go tell every single one of their friends and your friends that you're weird and awkward and that they should all avoid you entirely. Now, let's be real—the likelihood of it all playing out like that is *extremely* low, right? But *even if it does*—even if the *worst* happens—you know what? You're in good company. Jesus said “if they hate me, they will hate you also.”<sup>1</sup> He said “blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.”<sup>2</sup> Even if you are *hated*, you are excluded, you are ridiculed for the sake of the kingdom, you're in good company. And **if the worst case scenario is that we get to identify more closely with Jesus, we're in pretty good shape.**

So I'll just end with this. There's this guy that a lot of you may have heard of named Penn Jillette. He is one half of the famous magician duo Penn & Teller—some of you might know who that is, some of you may not. But the point is that Penn is an atheist, and a rather outspoken one. But there's a video of him on YouTube<sup>3</sup> where he talks about an interaction he had with a Christian one time. And here's what he says about this guy trying to tell him about Jesus, which Penn refers to as “proselytizing.” Take a look:

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<sup>1</sup> John 15:18, among other places.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 6:22-23

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6md638smQd8>

*I've always said, I don't respect people who **don't proselytize**. I don't respect that at all. If you believe there is a heaven and hell, and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life or whatever, and you think it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it **socially awkward**? How much do you have to **hate somebody to not proselytize**? How much do you have to **hate someone to believe everlasting life is possible and not tell them that**?*

He's got a point, does he not? I mean for all of our hesitations and objections to talking with people about Jesus, we probably should be honest about what we're *actually* saying and believing when we refuse to have those conversations. At some point, **if we refuse to ever tell people about Jesus simply because it's socially awkward, what we're really saying is that we love what they think of us, more than we love them.**

So listen—I think it can be really *wise* to talk about Jesus in natural, organic, gentle, understanding ways. I think it's *wise* to not just vomit a sermon onto people where we lecture them about Jesus and pressure them to make a decision. I'm all for being wiser and culturally aware in how we do all of that. But *that being said*, if we get so caught up in being culturally and socially acceptable that we never talk to them about *the most important thing in the universe*, that's a *problem*—is it not? Because **what we're saying there is that we care more about what they think of us than we do about them knowing what's best for them.**

And at the end of the day, that's what neighboring *is*, right? It's *loving other people as we would want to be loved*. And for us as followers of Jesus, that means explaining to them the best news in the universe—that God has made a way for them to be reconciled to him through his son Jesus. And that he's done that by dying on a cross and coming back from the dead. And that through that, life abundant is possible for them, just like it was possible for us. At some point, we should at least *bring stuff like that up*. And if Penn Jillette's quote has any validity to it, we might just be pleasantly surprised sometimes at how they respond to it when we do.

So in light of all that, let's get after it fam. Let's know our neighbors, let's love our neighbors, and let's share with our neighbors about Jesus. Through our stories, through our community, and through our prayers.

Let's *pray* together this morning.