

The Ripple Effect
Week 1: Pray First, Listen Well
Colossians 4:2-6

Oreo illustration.

Here's the point, if you mess with the middle, it stops being what it was meant to be. You either end up with something that no one wants, or something that seems like a good substitute, but isn't the real thing.

And, hard transition alert, for many of us, that's what we've done with evangelism. We've taken what God has put in the center and replaced it with something, or someone, else. Look at our first text with me. **Acts 1:6...(READ)**

Jesus has been crucified, buried, and resurrected. He's been with them for 40 days and they're all wondering what's next. And so they ask him, "Jesus, we're all here together, we're ready for what's next. Is it time for you to take over? To bring people to yourself, restore power to Israel, and fix this world?" They're all expecting Jesus to do something FOR them. Something big and powerful and immediate. Instead, Jesus replies...**(Acts 1:7)**

They want Jesus to give them a timeline for what he was going to do and when he was going to do it. But instead of a timeline, Jesus gives them a mission...**(Acts 1:8)**

Notice, Jesus doesn't say, "Guys, here's what I'm going to do FOR you and when you can expect it." Instead, he says, "Here's what YOU are going to do through me." Just like God gave Adam and Eve the responsibility of continuing the creation and care He started in Genesis 1 and 2, Jesus gives US the responsibility of building His Kingdom in this world.

Jesus says, "YOU **(Ripple image)** are at the center of my strategy. YOU are central to my plan for reaching the world." The mission and ministry that Jesus started, he's now giving to ordinary people like the disciples, like you and me, to continue. Those of us who are followers of Jesus, we have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to live on mission and help others know, love, and follow Jesus. We are God's cream filling in the Oreo of reaching this world for Christ and sharing the Good News we've received with others.

But, like these Oreos, we want to change the filling. We want to change the center of Jesus' strategy and put something, or someone, else in the middle of it. And so, we might take us out and put in **the Church**. We rely on the ministry and events and programs of the church to be the witness of Jesus and we hope that, if people just come to church, they'll find and follow Him. **(Preacher, Extroverts, Theologians)**

But that's not what we see in Acts 1:8. Jesus doesn't entrust His mission of reaching the world to institutions, or programs, or "professionals." Jesus entrusts His mission into the

hands of His people. People like you and me. And so, **The ripple effect of God's Kingdom starts with YOU.**

You are central to it. It doesn't continue without you. You are the pebble that God is casting into your home, your apartment complex, your dorm, your neighborhood. He wants to use you to reach people for Christ where you live and work and play.

And, when we think about these places, I imagine all of us have someone in our life who is close to us, but far from God. A neighbor, a friend, a co-worker. Maybe there's another parent on your child's team that you've just struck up a friendship with while watching games or waiting at practice. They are close to you, but living far from God.

And you may have a heart for them to come to faith in Jesus. To find the hope and peace and new identity that you've found in Him. To find a community where they can belong. You desire that for them because you care for them, but you don't know what to do. You're not sure HOW to be Jesus' witness to them.

This morning, I want to introduce you to an acronym that I've found super helpful over the last year when it comes to this. We're using it as an outline for this series and you'll hear about it more. The acronym is **B.L.E.S.S. (show image)** and this is what it means...Begin with prayer, Listen, Eat together (got to love an evangelism strategy that includes food!), Serve, and Share your story. (say these with me...)

This is a simple way for us to bless our friends and neighbors and co-works who don't know Jesus. To be a spiritual influencer in their life. And today, we're going to briefly look at the first two...**(B.L. image).**

This is where relational evangelism begins. Not with pressure, but with prayer. It's not about a script to read. It's about giving our attention to the person we love. And the Apostle Paul gives us a picture of this posture in our text today. **Colossians 4:2-6...(READ)**

Once again, Paul is in prison for preaching the Gospel. But even in chains, his concern is for reaching more people for Christ. And for those of us who have that same desire, Paul gives us an example to follow. He says, "Devote yourselves to prayer... Pray for us too, that God may open a door for our message... Be wise in how you act... Let your conversation be full of grace..."

In other words, pray first and listen well so you can speak wisely. Relational evangelism is fueled by prayer and built on listening. And so, if we want our lives and our faith to create a ripple effect in the lives of others, we begin with prayer.

In fact, every great move of God starts with prayer. If we want the people in our lives that we love and care for to come to faith in Jesus, it will require a move of God in their heart. We can't manufacture that. We can't make it happen. The heart is Holy Spirit territory, so we

have to start by praying for God to move in their life. In other words, **Relational evangelism starts with talking to God about people before we talk to people about God.** It starts with talking to God about the people in your life who are close to you, but far from Him.

Some people walk around with a heart that is very callous towards God. Their heart is hardened towards Him because of something they've been through or the worldview they adhere to. We begin by praying for God to melt that heart of stone in the same way He did in some of us.

But, I think most people in our life, their heart isn't hardened towards God, it's just indifferent. They don't really think about Him. So, most of the times, when I'm praying for the people in my life who are close to me, but far from God, I'm praying that something will happen to awaken their heart to Him. To shake them out of the spiritual slumber they're in. And also praying that, when that happens, I can help them move towards Jesus.

Relational evangelism doesn't start with talking to people about God. It starts with talking to God about the people we love and care for in those unseen, quiet places. Prayer prepares our hearts. It prepares their heart to receive the Gospel and our hearts to share it.

Relational evangelism is also about listening. Paul says in **verse 5...(READ vs. 5-6)**

I think, too often, we forget that there are two parts to a conversation. Talking and listening. We spend a lot of time talking in our society, but we don't always do a great job listening. Which, I know is ironic for me to say since my only relationship with many of you is me talking and you listening!

The point is, everybody wants to be heard, but there aren't a lot of people who just want to listen. But when it comes to being a spiritual influencer in someone's life, listening is one of the most important skills we can develop because it communicates love in a way that words sometimes can't.

In his book, *Caring Enough to Be Heard*, David Augsburger writes, **"Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are almost indistinguishable."** Listening to someone communicates love and value. It builds trust. We think that talking is the most important part about evangelism, and yes, there's a time for that, but if Jesus showed us anything about loving people into the Kingdom of God, it's the importance of asking good questions and listening.

In other words, if you want to love someone well, close this (mouth) and open these (ears). Listen. Be curious. Don't just wander your way into spiritual conversations, *wonder* your way into them by asking curious questions and listening.

You are at the center of God's plan for reaching people for Christ. Jesus is sending you out to create a ripple effect in your home and neighborhood. Where you live and work and play.

On the Church Pulse Assessment we did back in January, one of the things we noticed is that we do a good job telling you this, but we don't do a great job telling you *how* to do this. One of the questions was, "My church wants me to share my faith." We scored pretty high on that. But another questions was, "My church equips me to share my faith." And we scored a little lower on that one.

What I took from that is that we've raised the bar of expectation for you to share your faith, but we have met that expectation with preparation. We want to do better and we're creating some strategies for how to do that. To help us, we actually want to dive into this a little deeper so we can see the best ways we can equip you to share your faith.

So, we want to invite you to take a quick assessment just on this **(Assessment Slide)**. So, everyone go ahead and pull out your phones. This will take 30 seconds. It's super quick and easy. (Print copy for those who need it.)

We'd love for everyone to take this. Even if you don't care about this topic. Even if you're not a follower of Jesus. You're just here exploring faith or because someone invited you, or bribed you, to come today. We want everyone to take this assessment with us.

Take Assessment

You are at the center of God's plan for reaching people for Christ. Jesus is sending you out to create a ripple effect in your home and neighborhood. Where you live and work and play.

Maybe today, you're realizing that you've put something, or someone, else in the center. You just want the church, or the staff, or the "gifted people" to do it. But Jesus didn't say, "**They** will be my witnesses." He said, "**YOU** will be my witnesses."

And the beautiful part of it is that He doesn't expect you to do this alone. He empowers you with His Holy Spirit. He doesn't ask you to be a preacher or a professional. He just asks you to be present. To pray. To listen. To care deeply for the people He's already placed in your life who are close to you, but far from Him.

Invitation

But, maybe you're here today and you're not even sure where **you** stand with Jesus, let alone anyone else in your life. And if that's you, I just want you to know that Jesus didn't come to recruit you for a mission, He came to rescue you with love. He lived the life you couldn't live and died the death we all deserved. But God raised Jesus from the grave and offers you forgiveness, freedom, and a brand-new start.

If you've never stepped into a relationship with Him, you can do that today. You don't have to have it all figured out. You just need to invite Him to show you the way.

Communion

All morning, I've said that we are at the center of God's plan to reach people for Christ, but at the center of our message is Jesus.

Jesus gave His body and poured out His blood so that we could be restored to God and sent into the world with the good news of His love and grace and mercy. As we share in communion today, we remember that we don't witness to earn God's grace. We witness to others because we've received it and we want them to receive it, too.

So, as you take communion this morning, praise God for His grace and mercy in your life and pray to be ready to give it away to others this week.