

1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

**Faith Sharing:** *Focus!*

You're going to Heaven because someone cared enough to tell you about Jesus Christ.

Who have you cared enough to tell? Who are you taking to Heaven with you?

If you just have a vague idea in your mind, taking someone with you is never going to happen. You need to get specific.

I want to talk about faith-sharing with a focus today. One way to focus on witnessing is to write down the names of six people you want to take to Heaven with you. They may be friends, family, or co-workers. But they are people you care about, people you can invite to church, or people with whom you can share the Good News.

George Gallup did a survey that said in America there are 34 million people who said, "I would go to church if somebody invited me." Do you think you might know one of those 34 million people?

The world is far more ready for an invitation than we are ready to invite. So take the first step. How many of you are using the FRAN-Plan prayer plan regularly? I've been talking about this simple way to help you focus on friends and family for more than a couple months. Write down the names of people in each of the quadrants: Friends, Relatives, Acquaintances, and Neighbors. Then pray for those on your plan and ask God to improve the acoustics in their heart so they can hear about the friendship God is crazy for, with them.

When Christians talk about their conversion, about their journey to Jesus Christ, we learn that they often came to discover the love and forgiveness of God during a transition in their lives! People are most open to Christ and to Church during seasons of change in their lives. It can be a good change: a marriage, the birth of a child, a move from one place to another – or it can be a painful change: a time of illness, the death of someone close to them, a divorce, the loss of a job. But disruption in our lives seems to be a natural point at which people are open to a life change!<sup>1</sup>

And so we want to listen and watch for those seasons in life in the people around us.

I have a friend, a small business owner, who asked me to come speak to his employees some time ago. One of their employees had suffered a great tragedy, an agonizing loss, and our friend was very aware that the employee could have a tough transition back to his work place. When we don't know what to say to someone who's suffering ...we can avoid them, causing them to feel very lost and isolated. I was invited to talk to the other employees about the effect of that loss – and how they might find some way to relate to their buddy.

I thought that business leader had tremendous insight into a spiritual predicament. And I call it a spiritual conflict because it deals with our emotions and thoughts that take us beyond our normal setting – to wonder "Why did this happen?" and "What should I do?" and "How can we love better?" Those are spiritual concerns when we talk about thoughts, emotions, or feelings!

Remember the definition for evangelism we've been using this month: Evangelism is anything you do to help another person move closer to a relationship with God or into Christian community! Some of us call that "planting the seeds."

Not only was the business owner answering a need among his employees, but he was sharing faith in a great and mighty God, planting seeds of God's love and counsel and care in a relevant way.

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<sup>1</sup>Resources for this week's message are taken from Martha Grace Reese's book, *"Unbinding Your Heart"*; Chalice Press, 2008.

Faith-sharing can be that real and that simple. We want to pay attention to the needs of others around us, especially those on our prayer plan.

Almost 60% of new members who belong to Spirit-filled Churches first get to that Church because a person invited them, or because they know someone in the Church. People find the hope of a mighty and loving God because *you* pay attention to them!

One woman told about a tough transition time in her life. She talked with six friends about what was going on in her life. She had been so distressed. One Saturday night she decided to try ...a Church. On Sunday morning she walked into a congregation close to her home. She was shocked to find five of the six friends she'd talked to sitting in the sanctuary! Not one of them had suggested that Church might help! She had no idea that any of them were even members of a Church. She didn't know they were Christians!

These five friends either didn't understand the advantages of this faith relationship with God – they didn't understand the power and love God brings into a relationship ...or they didn't know how to talk about it. And as sad as this sounds, that's not unusual!

Several years ago one of our members here joined me to interview a couple of our churches in the Little Kanawha District, collecting information for our District Superintendent. One evening we were meeting with three small churches all together and one of the Churches represented there asked about withdrawing from the United Methodist Church. It was a small congregation of about four families – and they were tired being told what they should be doing in ministry.

They expressed their complaints with something like this: “We're just a small group of friends who enjoy getting together ...and do what we like to do!” The way they described what “they liked to do” was meeting, and worshiping, and praying, and eating. But it was all about them, the group they already had meeting together – it was all focused on those *inside* – and I wanted to ask them “It's not really a Church, is it?” It didn't sound anything like what God would identify as His Church. It was a nice club – but they had no desire to attract others or share their faith, to help the hurting in their community. I rather believe that they had lost their way ...because they demanded that the Church conform to their comfort zone rather than be disciples who conform to the way of God.

Frankly, it can be tempting to “lose our way” from a godly purpose in life. But I found a pretty solid description for spiritual growth recently. How do we know if we're growing spiritually (as a Church or as individuals)?

1. Christians who are growing spiritually have a New Identity! This means that you and I believe that we belong to God and we recognize that we have a new purpose, as children of God! God's love and mercy have come to us in a deep, personal way. We are confident of His love and His desire to accept us and receive us – despite our faults and sins.

We understand God's purpose for us is to help others who are suffering. With this *new identity* as people who belong to God, we are willing to serve Him obediently!

2. Christians who are growing spiritually practice a New Devotion! There is a new, fresh desire in the hearts of growing Christians to spend time with the Father, praying, learning, worshiping – sharing our lives with the One who created us for a purpose!

3. Christians who are growing spiritually discover a New Mind! The growing Christian is finding new ideas and new thoughts inspiring them, and they are finding ways to forgive and to love and accept others, regardless of their past. Those who are growing in Christ are finding that

pride and revenge and envy are a real hindrance to the relationships the Lord wants them to build. Are you identifying with forgiveness and reconciliation in your relationships?

4. Christians who are growing spiritually are finding ways to Share Their Faith! When you find a believer who's had a genuine "born again" experience – you find someone who's focused and eager to share the good news!

But the first description of a growing Christian – a New Identity – may be the most important one as you embark in a full, rich relationship with Jesus Christ: Do *you identify yourself* as a believer; as one who belongs to God? I like how the Bible describes the born again believer as one who belongs to Christ: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me!" (Philippians 2:20) Yes! I belong to Jesus because He lives in me! OR – He lives in me ...because I belong to Him!

I want to read our Bible lesson from out of Paul's simple greeting to a young Church. We find the subtle description of their spiritual growth. Here's a group of believers who have been challenged to live so differently from the way they used to live! Paul describes the new identity they have taken on.

READING 1 Thessalonians 1:2-10

<sup>2</sup> We always thank God for all of you as we remember you in our prayers. <sup>3</sup> In the presence of our God and Father, we never forget that your faith is active, your love is working hard, and your confidence in our Lord Jesus Christ is enduring. <sup>4</sup> Brothers and sisters, we never forget this because we know that God loves you and has chosen you. <sup>5</sup> We know this because the Good News we brought came to you not only with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with complete certainty. In the same way you know what kind of people we were while we were with you and the good things we did for you.

<sup>6</sup> You imitated us and the Lord. In spite of a lot of suffering, you welcomed God's word with the kind of joy that the Holy Spirit gives. <sup>7</sup> This way, you became a model for all the believers in the province of Macedonia and Greece. <sup>8</sup> From you the Lord's word has spread out not only through the province of Macedonia and Greece but also to people everywhere who have heard about your faith in God. We don't need to say a thing about it. <sup>9</sup> They talk about how you welcomed us when we arrived. They even report how you turned away from false gods to serve the real, living God <sup>10</sup> and to wait for His Son to come from heaven. His Son is Jesus, whom He brought back to life. Jesus is the one who rescues us from God's coming anger.

- New Identity: **...you turned away from false gods to serve the real, living God** (vs. 9)
- Devotional Life: **In spite of a lot of suffering, you welcomed God's word with the kind of joy that the Holy Spirit gives.** (vs. 6)
- New Mind: **...your faith is active, your love is working hard, and your confidence in our Lord Jesus Christ is enduring.** (vs. 3)
- Faith-Sharing: **From you the Lord's word has spread** (vs. 8)

Do you have this new identity? Do you identify yourself as a child of God?

Now there's all kinds of things with which we identify. There are lots of ways you identify yourself. We say that I am a father, a mother, a wife or a husband. We describe ourselves by the work we do. We identify as a fan with sports teams. We may label ourselves as a "Ford" man or a Dodge Truck driver. We tag ourselves as a Patriot! A loyal, law-abiding citizen from the

greatest country in the world! Some of us identify with hunting and fishing, as a runner or swimmer, a liar or honest. Some are students, some are cancer survivors, and some are computer nerds. We think of ourselves as independent, as spontaneous, as one who is organized. Some are members of the band or members of the country club.

How long does it take to recall ...that you're a Christian? A child of God? An adopted son or daughter to the Creator and Provider of the universe? How long does it take to identify a love in your heart – for Jesus Christ?

You know, there's nothing wrong with being a Christian member of the band! There's nothing wrong with being a Christian Republican or a Christian Democrat. In fact, the world needs Christian coaches and teachers and ...architects or airline pilots. God wants to put His children in places that influence public policy, that can influence workers on the assembly line, or the mood of a High School classroom. God has called us to think differently about driving on the interstate and investing our money and setting the table with an extra plate for ...Who will it be this week? I believe God intends for us to look at friends, relatives, acquaintances, and neighbors differently; to look at those around us in the way He sees them, eager to love them, to offer hope and help as we get to know them over a cup of coffee or an ice cream cone.

Do you belong to Jesus? Really belong?

INVITATION: I find myself repenting ...again. Because God makes me aware of those places in my life where I've left Him behind. Through repentance, I find a new chance to love and serve Him more faithfully. Is God calling you to repent, too? Have you lost your way on the journey with Jesus, and is the Spirit of God nudging you to start again? Have you lost that godly identity ...and replaced it with a very narrow, selfish perspective that turns everything in onto yourself?

This is a day for confession. Let's admit to God that we intend to live better and to invest more time or energy into our *relationship* with Him.