

A Way Out of Spiritual Lukewarmness

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[0:00] Let's read now from the book of Philemon. You'll find this on page number 1,000 of your church Bible.

! Philemon, page 1,000. Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our beloved fellow worker, and Aphia our sister, and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the shading of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that's in us for the sake of Christ. For I've derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you. Accordingly, though I'm bold enough in Christ to command you to do what's required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you. I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus, I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became an imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me. The name Onesimus actually means the useful one. I'm sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me in order that he might serve me on your behalf due to my imprisonment for the gospel, but I prefer to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion, but of your own accord. For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant, but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you'd receive me. If he's wronged you at all or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand, I will repay it to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you'll do even more than I say. At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I'm hoping that through your prayers I'll be graciously given to you.

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

[3:20] Heavenly Father, bring your ancient and powerful word into the present so that it can be delivered and heard with all the freshness of a new day, with all the immediacy of a friend's embrace through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Of all the diseases from which a Christian may suffer, spiritual lukewarmness is the most destructive. To be apathetic about our faith in Jesus robs us of the joy and the peace God wants us to have and Jesus died to give us. It's an easy spiritual disease to contract. We do nothing to get it, or to be precise, we get it by doing nothing. It's also very common. Every Christian I know has suffered from spiritual lukewarmness at one point in their lives or another. Some of us here today may be suffering from it. It's that sensation that our faith in Jesus doesn't mean as much to us now as it used to mean to us. We're struggling to see the point of being Christians at all, and we have no joy, no strength, or peace. Rather, guilt, dissatisfaction, and weakness. We kind of feel that we're spiritual fraud, so we find it very hard to resist temptation. Spiritual lukewarmness is a terrible disease, and one we want to do everything we can to be rid of. Well, in my experience as a Christian, one of the most effective ways of breaking out of a cycle of spiritual lukewarmness is to share our faith in Jesus. Sharing our faith, or what we call evangelism, is a proven method of restoring our spiritual joy in Christ. When we're at risk of growing cold in our faith, sharing our faith with Jesus, with another Christian, and even more importantly with someone who is not yet a Christian, is one of God's ways of helping us grow as Christians.

When I look back to my student years in Aberdeen, many of my fellow students who professed to be Christians then are now nowhere in the faith. But all of those who are still going as Christians to this day have this in common. They were all active in sharing their faith with non-Christians. It wasn't those who could answer deep theological questions who kept the faith. It was those who devoted themselves to telling their friends the simple truths of Jesus and the gospel.

In Philemon chapter 1, well, there's only one chapter in Philemon, but Philemon 1.6, the Apostle Paul writes, I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that's in us for the sake of Christ. Now, that word sharing can mean different things, but I'm taking it today as referring to the sharing of our faith in evangelism, the proclamation of the gospel of our Lord. According to this verse, the sharing of our faith in Christ results in our receiving the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. In other words, the more we share our faith in Jesus, the more we become aware of all the riches of the gospel at work in us. The more we share our faith, the more we grow in faith, the more we share Jesus, the better we know Jesus. Here is how we can break out of a cycle of spiritual lukewarmness, grow in our faith, and know Jesus better by sharing our faith in Jesus with those who do not yet know him as Lord and Savior. So, in the context and surroundings of our verse here in Philemon 1.6, and by the experience of many Christians, the way sharing our faith breaks us out of that cycle of lukewarmness is through four things. Fellowship, prayer, understanding, and trust. Fellowship, prayer, understanding, and trust. I wonder whether you're feeling spiritually lukewarm today.

[8:04] Let me challenge you to break out of your lukewarmness and experience for yourself the fullness of everything you have as a Christian by sharing your faith with someone who's not yet a Christian.

Fellowship, first of all. Evangelism requires fellowship. In our evangelical tradition, God strengthens us in three ways. The Word of God, prayer, and the sacraments of the church.

These are the so-called means of grace by which God strengthens us with His grace. Sharing the gospel with a non-Christian requires us to invest in all three. The evangelical tradition has been understood as a focus upon individual faith, the fallacy of Jesus and me. As long as I read my Bible, as long as I pray, and as long as I partake of the sacraments, that's how I'm going to grow as a Christian. But this is a misunderstanding of the evangelical and Reformed tradition. The Reformers, more than anyone else, believed in a strong doctrine of the church, that as Christians we belong together in communities of faith and we strengthen, comfort, and hold each other accountable.

They focused heavily upon the one-anothers of the New Testament. Forgive one another, strengthen one another, confess your sins to one another, and so on. Evangelicalism is all about togetherness and one-on-ness. During the Commonwealth Games, the Scottish runner Josh Kerr, some of you perhaps saw this on the telly or in Scottsdale, he romped home to win the mile. All eyes were on him as he won the gold medal. It was a brilliant individual achievement. But what wasn't seen was his team, including a chef, a physiotherapist, a chiropractor, a conditioning expert, together with his regular running coaches. Great victories in the faith are only achieved when Christians work together with one golden mind. And never is this more true than when it comes to sharing our faith in Jesus.

You'll notice from Philemon that although Paul is writing to one person called Philemon, he repeatedly refers to the saints, to the community of the church.

[10:44] To the saints, the community of the church. Traditionally, our idea of the evangelist has been that of one person speaking to another person about the gospel. Perhaps someone standing outside the church giving out tracts or one person having coffee with another person over which that Christian shares the good news. And that's often the way it ends up being the case. But sharing the gospel helps us to grow in our faith because it's a whole church effort. We may have coffee with a non-Christian over which we share the gospel, but we've already asked another Christian in our church to pray for us while we're meeting with that non-Christian. Or we may decide to engage people in conversation about the gospel on the streets or to give out tracts, but we've already asked another Christian in the church to pray for us while we're out and about. Or perhaps we're the ones who are praying while another

Christian we know is sharing her faith. Better still, if we're active in sharing our faith, we can take our prayer requests for the people with whom we're sharing our faith to the prayer meeting of the church.

We're not just one other Christian, but the whole church prays for us and prays for them. If we want to be successful evangelists, we need a team behind us, the whole family of the church.

When it comes to sharing our faith, we can be scared of two things. We can be scared of speaking to a non-Christian about our faith, but we can also be scared of asking another Christian to pray for us while we do so. With God's help, we must overcome both if we want to see conversions and change lives.

Both, with God's help, we can do in order to grow in our faith and break out of that cycle of lukewarmness.

[12:53] If you want to be rid of this horrible disease, resolve to do both, even if you don't feel like it. The second before the first. Ask a Christian you know and trust to pray for you as you share the gospel.

And then secondly, having chosen that non-Christian with whom you want to share the gospel, relying upon God's strength, do it. Fellowship.

Second, prayer. Prayer. We need to pray if we're to evangelize. Paul's reference to sharing our faith comes in the middle of his prayer of thanksgiving for Philemon.

The message is quite clear. Prayer and evangelism belong together. We can't do evangelism without prayer. In whatever evangelism we engage, it is ineffective without prayer.

We tend to pray more when things are tough in life. Something difficult we have to deal with. When we've got it easy in life, we try to do things in our own strength, which tends to lukewarmness.

[14:04] When faced with the daunting task of sharing our faith with a non-Christian, the first thing we need to do is to pray for God's strength. For God to give us courage to overcome our cowardice.

Without prayer, we'll always be empty, blind, naked, and poor. We will always be spiritual cowards.

But we also want to pray for God's guidance to know who we should share the gospel with.

At our recent OM mission week, I was regularly present at the early morning devotions to listen to how those folk prayed. And one morning, one of them prayed these words, Lord Jesus, give us a nudge to those people you want us to speak to.

Lord Jesus, give us a nudge to those people you want us to speak to. We need to let God guide us to those people whose hearts he's working in and who he has prepared to hear the gospel.

And one good way to do this is every morning to pray for God to give you an opportunity to share your faith with a non-Christian. Every morning, pray for God to give you an opportunity that day to share your faith with a non-Christian.

[15:22] God will always answer that prayer because it tends to our good and to his glory. But most importantly, we want to pray for God to work in the hearts of those with whom we share the gospel.

The Bible tells us, and we know from personal experience, that every human being is by nature blind to the gospel. Everyone is dead in transgression and sin.

All have turned away from God. For God to turn a person toward him is a work only he in his sovereign grace can do. Not our arguments, not our words.

It is only by a powerful miracle of grace that blindness may be lifted from a person's heart and that heart softened to God. And that's what we pray for.

And pray we must because only God can do that sovereign work of power. The very need to pray and watching as God answers our prayers is what shakes us out of our lukewarmness.

[16:34] Listen to what I say. The battle for evangelism is won or lost, not in the power of our words, but in the prayers we offer to God.

In our lukewarm state, we complain about our prayerlessness. But when we resolve to share the gospel, we have no option but to pray. Listen to these challenging words from my friend, the English evangelist Richard Carswell, through whom God has brought thousands of non-Christians to a living faith in Christ.

Listen to these words. Maybe our sowing of the gospel seed is becoming scarce unless fruitful because our prayer meetings have diminished or disappeared. We are to speak of Jesus to society in the power of the Holy Spirit.

This will be effective only if our walk and witness is covered with much prayer, both individually and corporately.

And what he's saying here is our church's prayer meeting is where the battle for our church's evangelism is won or lost.

[17:55] Our church's prayer meeting is where the battle for our church's evangelism is won or lost. Prayer. Prayer. Third thing we need for evangelism.

Understanding. Understanding. One of the symptoms of lukewarmness is that we become unclear about what the good news of the gospel is.

Jesus' criticism of the lukewarm church in Laodicea in the book of Revelation, we saw this in the summer, is that they'd become so self-satisfied they'd forgotten just how much they needed him. Again, his criticism of the church in Ephesus was, which had lost its first love in him, was that they'd forgotten the height from which they'd fallen. Both churches had become unclear about the nature of the gospel.

But we, being dead in our sin, needed the sacrifice of Christ on the cross to make peace with God. To teach a subject, you need to know the subject.

[19:01] Now, it's no use trying to teach something if you're unclear about it. I wouldn't presume to teach modern languages, given that the only language I speak with any level of competency is English, and that's debatable.

To teach the gospel, which is what evangelism is, we must know the subject, and that requires knowledge, understanding. Twice in our passage, Paul refers to faith, our belief in a set of truths we call the gospel.

If we want to break out of a cycle of lukewarmness by sharing the gospel with a non-Christian, by definition, it's going to force us to clarify in our minds what we understand by the gospel.

We're going to need to read the Bible more, to reinforce in our minds the truths which are central to our faith. Those truths which teach us who Jesus is, what Jesus has done to earn our salvation from sin and death.

It's as we're forced back on the Word of God, we begin to learn about, to go back to verse 6, every good thing that's in us for the sake of Christ. We learn about forgiveness, and love, and joy, and peace, and hope, and we have all these in Christ.

[20:21] And this new understanding of how good Christ has been to us deepens our motive for sharing our faith with non-Christians, because we want them to know about the Jesus about whom we're passionate.

You know, we're really quick to tell people about things we enjoy. Catherine and I went out for an amazing Nepali meal on Friday night in the Merchant City, and I want to tell you all about it. How quick are we to tell non-Christians about Jesus?

That's evangelism. But also, the more we understand our faith, the better we become at sharing our faith.

Great teachers are able to take complicated subjects and present them in simple ways. Any idiot can take a simple subject and make it difficult to understand.

It takes wisdom to make a difficult subject easy to understand. Wisdom, yes, understanding of our subject. The more we ourselves understand the gospel, the better we become at presenting it in relevant, direct, and simple ways.

[21:36] Now, there are many Bible-based resources that we can resource you with to help you to present the gospel in a simple way. Two ways to live, Christianity explored, the word one-to-one.

But there's something even more basic that can help you. In the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, or the Holy Communion, God has given us a simple yet powerful presentation of the gospel.

Jesus gave his body and blood on the cross for us to take away all our sins. And as we trust in him, we have salvation and eternal life. The sacrament of the Holy Communion is a theatrical picture of the gospel, designed by God to help us to explain that gospel to non-Christians.

As we eat bread, as we drink wine, we're demonstrating it is by faith in Christ we're saved from our sins. Christ has done it all, and all we need do is to believe.

If we want to teach the gospel to non-Christians, we need to understand it ourselves. As we ourselves go back to gospel basics, by definition, it will break us out of a cycle of spiritual lukewarmness, because it reminds us of how lost we were before Jesus found us, and how by his cross he has saved us, how much we need him, how much we need his grace.

[23:08] The word, the Bible, must be central to our evangelism, because it's the word of God he has promised to bless. So we need fellowship, prayer, and understanding in order to evangelize, but fourthly, trust.

Trust. There are certain times when we're way out of our comfort zones. Sharing the gospel with a non-Christian is one such.

We feel out of our depth that we want to run away. It takes courage to start a conversation. We're afraid of being rejected or afraid of our words coming out all wrong.

We don't know what to say or how to say it. At times like this, we need to trust in God more than ever we've done before, because we're out of our comfort zones, and we're anxious and afraid.

One of my favorite texts in the Bible is in Psalm 56. When I am afraid, I will trust in you.

[24 : 14] When I am afraid, I will trust in you. The antidote to fear in the Christian life is not peace, but trust.

When we're sharing the gospel with a non-Christian and we feel afraid, the best thing we can do is to intentionally trust in God, to trust Him to provide the right opportunity with the right person, to give us the right words at the right time, to know when to listen, to know when to speak.

Evangelism exercises the spiritual muscles of trust in God to do His work, His way with us, and with that person with whom we're sharing our faith.

Faith in Paul's writings isn't merely a body of truth. It's our own personal belief in that truth. We rely upon Christ for our salvation, but we also rely upon Him to save others through us.

And that intentional act of trusting God when we're sharing our faith breaks us out of the cycle of lukewarmness. When we see God helping us, when we see God doing something through us, it strengthens us and brings life to our dead hearts.

[25 : 36] No one I've ever met who has engaged in personal evangelism has been spiritually the worst for it. As I said in my introduction, in general, those who stay the course in the Christian life to the end are those who are active in personally sharing their faith with non-Christians.

Now, in my experience, and call me an Eeyore if you like, vanishingly few conversations we have with non-Christians will result in them coming to faith there and then.

We need to realize that in the hands of a sovereign God, we are links in a chain which over the course of many years and many conversations with other Christians will lead that person to come into faith in Jesus.

Perhaps the sharing of our faith with that person is the first link in the chain. They scoff at us and reject us. But a week later, a colleague in their workplace shares the gospel with them.

And a year later, another Christian. And a decade later, another Christian. And then another Christian. Until 20 years after that first conversation we had with them, they come to faith in Jesus.

[26 : 53] A seed grows guys slowly and the seed of the gospel grows guys slowly. But it's vital that that seed is first planted and we, by sharing the gospel, are sowing that seed which over the course of many decades will lead to them believing in Jesus for themselves.

And you know, when we see someone with whom we have shared the gospel coming to a living faith in Christ, it builds us up in our faith. It restores our joy.

It accelerates our growth as Christians. It's like spiritual baby bio. And it breaks us out of that destructive cycle of spiritual lukewarmness.

It all sounds so simple, but it's very far from easy. But you know, the more you do it, the easier it becomes and the more passionate you become about doing it.

We become more aware of opportunities than we ever have before. So a few weeks ago, I was returning tin cans to a recycling centre at Little.

[28 : 08] You get 5p for every tin can you recycle. And the lady standing at the next recycling docket said to me, recycling cans is such a good idea.

It's not often you get something for nothing in this life. What an opportunity. I said to her, I'm a Christian and I want to tell you about how you can get the most important things in life for nothing. And they followed a brief conversation about the gospel before we went to our separate ways. Now, I don't know if that's going to lead anywhere, but at least it was a link in a chain which in years to come may hopefully lead her to coming to faith in Jesus.

And I can pray for her and you can too. Her name is Maria. Breaking out of a cycle of lukewarmness is simple. It's not easy.

Sharing our faith in Jesus is, in my experience, a surefire way to spiritual health, vigor, and growth.

[29 : 22] Over time, as you watch God working through you, evangelism stops being something you do, something you must do. It becomes more of a lifestyle.

And at that point, when you're daily dependent upon God and looking outward rather than inward, your problem with spiritual lukewarmness will become a memory, distant memory, not a reality. The Lord Jesus Christ will become more important to you and more precious to you than He was before. And the gospel becomes something in which you do not just believe, but something you live, something you breathe.

And at that point, you're right in the sweet spot of Christian growth. forgetting ourselves for a moment and your fear and your cowardice and your anxiety about sharing the gospel. Think of those who trust in God for salvation through your witness. They'll spend eternity in heaven because you left your comfort zone and told them about Jesus.

[30:33] because you introduced them to the Jesus who changed your life. He changed our lives. He can change theirs also.

To Him, came Jesus. With the glory of our lives now and forever. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Word and Your challenge.

And we are amazed that You call us to cooperate with You in the great work of winning the world for Christ. We ask, Lord, that You would help us to share fellowship with one another in this most important matter of asking for prayer as we share the gospel or praying for someone who is sharing the gospel.

We pray that You would help us to depend upon You in prayer, to devote ourselves to prayer because we know that unless You open the eyes of the blind, these eyes shall say blind forever. We pray that You would give us knowledge and understanding of the gospel in Your Word. There is only one gospel. There is only one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus who gave Himself as the ransom price for our sins.

[31:50] and we pray, Lord, that You would help us to trust in You, to trust in You to give us opportunities to share the gospel and to trust in You to see Your Spirit at work in those with whom we share that gospel.

We want to see the name of Jesus lifted high over Glasgow and so we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.