

Cooperative evangelism

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[0 : 00] You can turn in your Bibles, please, to John chapter 15 and verse 26 following. So it's John chapter 15, beginning at verse 26.

Jesus is in conversation with his disciples. He has just been talking back in chapter 14 that he's going to a place where the disciples cannot follow.

But he encourages his disciples for their hearts not to be troubled in any way. The reason why they would be troubled is because the place that Jesus is going to to prepare a place for them is the cross.

And of course, you would be troubled, thinking that the person you have followed for three years is going to die on a cross. And then beyond that, of course, he talks about ultimately where the disciples can come at a later time in eternity.

But during the time in between Jesus goes and Jesus comes again, we have this God-given role to do, which is to tell others about Jesus.

[1 : 33] And this is the context here. And so in verse 26, Jesus says this. I have said these things to you to keep you from falling away.

They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think they're offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father nor me.

But I have said these things to you that when the hour comes, you may remember that I told them to you. I did not say these things to you from the beginning because I was with you.

But now I'm going to him who sent me. And none of you asks me, where are you going? But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart.

Nevertheless, I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away. For if I do not go away, the helper will not come to you. But if I do go, I will send him to you.

[2 : 49] And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment. Concerning sin because they do not believe in me. Concerning righteousness because I go to the Father.

And you will see me no longer. Concerning judgment because the ruler of this age world is judged. I still have many things to say to you. But you cannot bear them now.

When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. For he will not speak on his own authority. But whatever he hears, he will speak. And he will declare to you the things that are to come.

He will glorify me. For he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. Therefore, I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Well, may God bless the reading of his word. And of course, bless our understanding as we come back to it after this next hymn. Thank you. So, John 15, beginning at verse 26 through to chapter 16, verse 15.

[4 : 03] The passage is fairly straightforward in that it is a call to the disciples listening to Jesus of the task that they have been given to be witnesses in the world.

And there is no doubt that evangelism is difficult. But it may not be difficult for the reasons that you might think it first. The difficult task of evangelism is not an impossible one.

Though it can feel like an impossible one at times. The difficulties that come with evangelizing are not always difficulties that come from the world onto the Christian.

But some of the difficulties for why evangelism doesn't happen may actually start with the Christian themselves. And so there's two battles. Here we have been given this God-given task to be witnesses in the world using words to tell the truth so that men, women, boys and girls would be

saved.

And we have to overcome two difficulties. Or at least there are two basic difficulties that come against us. Some from the world and some from our very self.

[5 : 17] And these difficulties have to be overcome in order for that message to go forth. The difficulties that come to us from the world could be anything from not paying attention or to a mild or even a severe opposition to the gospel.

The difficulties that are found in the church could be because believers have lost their conviction of the gospel. That we know it's important.

And if you were asked the question, how important is the gospel? You would be able to come up with all the right answers. But what's missing is not your understanding. What's missing is the conviction of those answers.

The conviction of that truth. And so our senses become dulled. And so the motivation to go forth and tell the gospel kind of disappears.

The evangelism loses its priority. Not because we don't know the gospel. And not because we don't know that the gospel is important. It's actually something far simpler than that.

[6 : 24] And something that we're not always too aware. And that is we're facing a difficulty. And the difficulty is not external in the world as opposition.

But actually internal. Where the church has lost its conviction of the truth of the gospel. As we look at this passage before us, it's clear that God has a plan for the world to be witnessed.

And it's clear that that plan is a cooperative one. That evangelism is cooperative. Not cooperative just between the people in the church.

But God never meant for you to evangelize the gospel alone. And this is what he's telling the disciples. The helper is going to come. And so when you go out and speak of me, you're not doing it alone.

You're never alone when you speak of me. And that could be one of the fears that we might have of speaking about Jesus in the world. That we're doing it all by ourselves.

[7 : 25] But the passage here states that we're never doing it ever by ourselves. The helper has been given to go before us and prepare the work and perhaps even be with us as we speak the gospel.

The apostle Paul prayed for opportunity. And he also prayed for clarity. And even though he would have known that the spirit of God was with him, he still prayed for the opening of doors and for clarity when he would speak.

The helper then helps in a number of different ways. He goes out into the world convicting the world of sin, of righteousness, and the judgment to come.

And all of those things are true. In other words, he's convicting the world of truth. They are elements of truth. But they are all true. Sin is true.

And that it's real. The righteousness is real. It's true. And the judgment that is to come is equally true. It's equally real. And so the spirit is convicting the world of truth.

[8 : 31] And the spirit convicts the Christian of that same truth. And so you can understand that when the church has lost its sense of truth, or at least the conviction of truth, we lose automatically our ability to be a good witness.

Because, not because we don't know the gospel, but because we've actually lost the conviction of the gospel. So what I would like to do this evening is not to concentrate on all the difficulties that are external to the church or internal to the church and go through them one by one.

I just want to focus on one of them. Just one that can be found in the church and can be found in the world. And that is that the church, like the world, okay, some in the church, like the world, have lost their sense of truth.

That truth can actually exist. And that truth can actually be known. Now someone sat here might say, well that's unfair. I know that truth exists. I believe in the truth.

But then when it comes on to certain subjects, there's cloudiness. Suddenly it's not so clear. And so an argument might go something like this.

[9 : 49] Someone in the world will say, well there's no such thing as truth. They've lost their whole complete sense of truth. And here you are trying to proclaim the gospel to them. You're trying to tell someone something that is true.

And they don't actually believe in the very definition that truth can even exist in the first place. You know, there is no such thing as truth. Now, of course, you don't want to be a smart aleck, but it might be worth pointing out to them, or at least asking them, is that true?

And they can either go, no, or yes, indicating that there is a truth. Now, that's not the best way to evangelize, just to appear smart. Because as one missionary once put it, no man can come across as clever and make Jesus wonderful at the same time.

They're incompatible things. You can't do both at the same time. Either you make Jesus wonderful, or you just want to make yourself wonderful. But every now and then, when you're dealing with a difficult person who just wants to be awkward with you, it's not too bad to throw in one of these just along the line to show them that, you know, God's still the smarter one here.

There is truth. But the issue is, is not whether or not there's truth. It's the fact that people have lost the sense of truth. Now, others in the world will say, no, there is truth.

[11:10] And I believe that there is a truth, but I don't think it can be known. I don't think truth can actually be known. And there's plenty of people that I know, and I'm sure you know, that will admit, oh, of course there has to be a truth.

But I'm not quite so sure any of us can know it for certain. And they were the famous words of the late Richard Dawkins. Not Richard Dawkins, sorry, Richard, Peter Hitchens, who passed away. And as he passed away, he's saying these words that we all know to be instinctively real, but at the same time, they're not completely true.

So is it possible to know the truth, know that truth exists, of course, but is it possible to know what that truth is, right? And that, I would say, is equally the case.

But what happens when the church has lost its sense of truth? And that they know things can be true, but then they would want to argue that we don't know if that particular part is true.

[12:17] And the reason I say that is because we live in a world where the church has something like 57,000 different denominations. If the truth was easy to understand, then why don't we have just one?

Okay? So the idea that it's easy to arrive at this truth and to know what the truth is in all circumstances clearly isn't the case.

Because we live in a world where Christians, though all of them will say they believe the truth, are not too sure about what that truth actually is when asked. So what looks like a simple subject actually gets more complicated the further you go down the line.

But at the end of the day, Jesus is calling us to go out into the world, proclaim a gospel which is true, in a world that may have no sense of truth. And we can't do it on our own, and so God gives us a helper.

God gives us the Holy Spirit. And you'll notice here that the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of Truth, verse 26. Helpers, like all helpers, can only be a helper from a position of strength.

[13:28] When God made man and then made the woman, he called the woman Adam's helper. But that wasn't because she was coming from a position of weakness.

She was actually coming from a position of strength. Because if she could do everything that Adam could do, then there's not really a great deal of help. He can do it all by himself. She must have had qualities and strengths that he didn't have in order to be a helper.

She must have been able to have done something that he couldn't do to be given the title of helper. And indeed she did. And in the same way, God is giving the Holy Spirit, and it's fairly plain to all of us, that he's bound to have qualities and strengths that none of us have.

Okay? He has the position of strength. And it's that position of strength and authority. And one of those strengths is that he is able to go into the world and convict the world of sin, righteousness, and the judgment to come.

The Spirit of God is able to do that. We can't do that. We have words that the Spirit of God can use, but we can't actually convict people of sin, and neither should we.

[14:40] God's words should do it, and God's Spirit should do it, but we shouldn't do it as a means of just going forth and doing it. So Jesus is saying here that disciples have to go into this big bad world and proclaim a gospel that the world may not want to hear or even believe is true.

But in order to do that, he says, you're not going to do it alone. I'm going to give you God. I'm going to give you God the Holy Spirit to go with you and to go before you.

And he, chapter 16, verse 8, he will be the one, when he comes, who will convict the world concerning sin, which is true.

They will convict the world concerning righteousness, which is true, and will convict the world concerning judgment. And the beauty of the judgment one is that people respond differently. Some people respond to the conviction of sin. Some people respond to the conviction of righteousness. Some people respond to the conviction of judgment. You only have to read your Bible to understand that though everybody comes to God through Christ Jesus, not everybody comes to God in the same way.

[15:56] And this is spelled out time and time again. And I think one of my favorite examples of this, or at least one to use, would be Nineveh. You know the story of Nineveh.

Jonah's got a very short message, which he shortens even more when he eventually goes. And he doesn't even give Nineveh opportunity to repent. He just says, 40 days and you've had it.

That's it. Game over. Judgment. And Jonah gets entirely upset at the end because he knows that the judgment is real, but then God doesn't go through with it.

Not because God wouldn't go through with it, but rather because the very message of judgment on Nineveh made everyone in Nineveh repent. It was that very conviction of judgment which made everyone in Nineveh go, I don't want to be judged.

So they repented, you know, in sackcloth and ashes. That there was that national repentance that came across the whole land. And I don't want to think that that's just a thing of the past.

[17:02] There's no reason, absolutely no reason at all for that not to happen here or anywhere else for that matter. And so the Spirit of God is going out into the world, convicting the world of sin, of righteousness, and of the judgment to come.

And people, depending on where they are, depending on how they hear it, depending on whether they believe in truth or not, come across that conviction that they can escape from.

So it must be dealt with. And it's that conviction that the gospel then makes perfect sense in.

Because the gospel is how to escape that judgment. How to escape that coming judgment.

How to be righteous in Christ Jesus. How to be a man or a woman who has no sin, because it's all been dealt with by the Lord Jesus Christ.

The gospel makes perfect sense upon the convicting work of the Spirit. So then, with all that happening before us, as it were, by the work of the Spirit, our role as word proclaimers, gospel proclaimers, using words to transform people's lives or the words of God, is to understand the power of God's truth.

[18:20] And this is where the conviction begins to return for Christians. You need to know deep in your heart that God's words are not to be substituted, because it's only God's words which are true that can set people free.

You need to know that so deeply and so assured of it that you would be wary of using any type of other words, any type of other message to change a person, or to want to see a person changed. It's the truth that sets people free. It's the word of God that sets people free, that gives them freedom. And that freedom, as we saw this morning, is freedom to be faithful to God, but it also includes freedom from error, freedom from believing the wrong things, freedom to believe the right things, freedom to live for God, and have the assurance that what you're now believing, that you didn't believe before, is actually true.

Have the assurance of that truth, because as we know, it's very difficult for a lot of people not to believe that there is a truth, but to actually know what that truth is.

And it's the spirit that brings home that conviction of what is true. I used the illustration this morning, and I think it would be appropriate perhaps to use it now, that when the gospel is going out into the world, it's dealing with people at their level, meaning that it's deeply personal.

[19:57] It's addressing people where they're at, sin, righteousness, and judgment. They're all very personal matters, because they have to stand before God personally. And so the gospel comes to the person, and it goes deep into the person.

It's very intrusive in the areas of the life that it speaks into. But a person can never know, as I said this morning, what they're meant to do in life, unless they know what they're for.

And I use the illustration of a watch, that I don't use my watch to hammer in nails, because I know what a watch is for. I know what a watch is, because I know what a watch is for.

And you can only really know what a person is, once you know what a person is for. And people who are lost, not just lost from God, but lost in their own identity, as to who am I, and what am I meant to be, what am I meant to do, that returns when you, not when you talk about what a person is so much, but rather about what a person is for.

They are not for sin. A person is not meant to sin. A person is not meant to live in sin. A person is meant to be righteous. And they can only be that through the Lord Jesus Christ.

[21 : 19] And a person is not really meant for judgment. They're not meant for that. And the gospel is addressing these deeply personal issues. With your words, by speaking the gospel to them.

The spirit convicts them of those three. And you with the gospel shows how all three are dealt with or changed. Sin is dealt with. Righteousness is accomplished.

Judgment is also finished at the cross for the believer. The gospel is that Jesus has come to seek and to save, to transform the person who is lost in sin and who is not righteous.

And it's only got one thing to look forward to. That is the judgment. So we need to talk about all three. But we need to talk about all three the moment there is a conviction of those.

That's the issue here. One of the things that's important when you look at the truth is that when the church began to grow in the very beginning and the church grew slowly.

[22 : 23] Okay, you have the day of Pentecost where you have a lot of people turning to Christ. But after that, the church grew relatively slowly. You know, up to the year perhaps 80, 100.

You had a few thousand believers. But not hundreds of thousands. Okay, you had a few thousand believers. And the church grew up in a context of incredible idolatry everywhere.

Doesn't matter where you went, there were temples to gods here, there, and everywhere. And you could join any kind of group that you wanted. If you wanted a god to deal with your marriage, you could go and join that cultic group.

If you wanted a god to deal with finances, you could go and join that cultic group. If you wanted a god to deal with perhaps, you know, a number of other issues. There were plenty of idolatries to attach yourself to for the particular reasons that you have.

And these Christians, understanding that there is only one true God, recognized that the truth was not to agree to disagree.

[23 : 34] That as these early Christians grew up through that kind of environment, they knew that the gospel was not to stop at, let's agree to disagree. You have your God and I have mine.

You can go your way and I can go mine. And yet, the church, of late, it seems, seems to have shifted in that position where we think that to agree to disagree is somehow acceptable.

Or is somehow honorable. Or is at least some kind of version of the truth or understanding of it. It's not. There is, that Jesus is not on the shelf with a bunch of idols and you just take your pick.

Jesus, Jesus owns the shelf. Jesus owns all of it. And yet, it does seem as if Christianity is just taking up shelf space along with every other cult and idol that's around.

But the early church knew that the truth would be lost if they had the attitude of, let's agree to disagree. The whole point of the gospel is spelled all the way through the book of Acts that Jesus is Lord is that the reason we debate, the reason we talk, the reason we are to hear the gospel is so that we come to the right position.

[24 : 58] It's so that we arrive at the place where we acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord. So the idea of these early Christians even considering an attitude of let's agree to disagree, okay, the color of the bathroom door, fine.

But on matters of truth that affect people, then suddenly that's not quite much of an easy one where you can say, well, it doesn't matter.

If you get the color of the bathroom door wrong, there's no consequence. It doesn't matter. Okay, if someone says it's blue and the other one says it's light blue, okay, it doesn't matter. The door still shuts, it still locks when you're inside.

But when it concerns judgment and where a person is at the end of their life, that's not something you can agree to disagree on because it leaves the person not in a position before God where they ought to be.

So as we consider the message and the method, we understand that the two go together. Okay, I want you to know that, that the message and the method go together.

[26 : 09] We simply are postmen. We simply deliver what God has delivered. We simply say what God has said. We don't have to make anything up, but it would help if we knew the gospel well

enough to be able to start wherever the person wants to start.

Okay, now sometimes the reason the gospel doesn't come across to people is because it starts at a place where the person is so far away from that, you have to do a lot more ground work even before you get to them.

You have to talk about things like truth and love and what those things actually mean. Okay, but at the same time, the gospel, because it's true, speaks into all of those areas.

So the limitation is normally how well do we know it? Do we understand that the gospel speaks into every area of every person's life? And if the answer is of course yes, then we're able to speak to any person at any time on anything.

But if our gospel is simply that narrow part which is true of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, which is the very thing you ought to be saying, then you've got to remember that Jesus spent three and a half years with the disciples talking about his life, death, and resurrection and they didn't get it.

[27 : 29] And we're expecting people out in the world today to get it on first conversation. Peter, after three years with Jesus, still didn't get the fact that Jesus had to die on the cross.

Could not understand that that had to happen. And we somehow think that the gospel is a prepackaged message that can be just taken out into the world and it's just, yeah, people have got it.

When you read scripture, I don't think we see many people that get the gospel immediately. Yeah, there's a few. You know, the eunuch that Philip spoke to, okay, what's to stop me from being baptized?

Okay, he read the scriptures and got it immediately. But there are some people that don't get that. You take Paul at the Areopagus, he speaks, and some men afterwards come up to him and says, I'd like to hear you, I'd like to hear you again on this.

I'd like to perhaps have a conversation, I'd like to sit down and listen to you speak once more. In other words, they heard everything that was true, they heard everything that we've heard in reading it, but they wanted to hear more.

[28 : 38] And so the gospel message cannot come across like an answer phone message, where it doesn't matter who phones up, you still get the same message. And yet too often, the gospel message comes across exactly like an answer phone message.

It doesn't matter who it is that's inquiring, they just get the same message from the same point. And that doesn't mean that the message is wrong, but you know that you get an answer phone message, and your person makes the same voice, they get the same voice, the same message, but your concerns may be entirely different, entirely different.

And so too it is with the gospel. The gospel is wide enough, it is beautiful enough, it is broad enough to be able to start anywhere, and to be able to start with a person is in their inquiry or their questions.

And then you can get to the Jesus life, death, and resurrections. You don't always have to start with that answer phone message part in order to say it properly.

And so what Paul understands through the book of Acts is you see this very thing happening. He wrestles with people, he's talking things out about truth and life and what matters.

[29 : 54] And of course, even the Areopagus, he doesn't even mention the name of Jesus. He doesn't even mention the name of Jesus. But of course he's leading to that and he understands that these men want to know more.

So I think one of the encouragements we get when it comes to the gospel is not simply to have a narrow answer phone message, the same message for anyone who inquires, but it's to know it well enough to understand which part to start with for that particular person.

And that's part of witnessing. That's the method and the message. So as we close, I want you to think about the conviction of truth returning.

if you have lost the sense of truth, that there is such a thing as truth, or that truth can actually be known, which is what I'm claiming here, that the spirit of truth enters into the world because truth can be known, that the gospels are given the gospel which is true because that truth can be known. And therefore the issue is not whether or not there is such a thing as truth, the issue is whether or not that truth can be known. And my argument or the scripture argument would be, I firmly believe, yes it can be known.

[31 : 15] It takes the spirit, but it can be known. So here's the exhortation as we wrap this up. There is tremendous comfort in that as you speak the gospel to whoever, at whatever point they're at, however long it takes you to get to, Jesus lived, died, and rose for you.

And that is a point that you have to get to. There is tremendous encouragement that you're never going to do it alone, even if you are alone. God the spirit is with you.

God the spirit has even gone before you. The opportunity has been prepared. It's like God is there in the very midst of that happening. Now that should be tremendous encouragement.

The fact that I'm being called to go out and do something that's reasonably difficult, or even quite difficult, but I'm not alone in doing it. But on the other hand, there's also great challenge here.

And the challenge is the truth can be known. And Jesus is Lord. It's one of those non-negotiables. He has risen from the dead. The spirit goes out into the world, convicting the world of sin, righteousness, and the judgment of God.

[32 : 30] God. And you can start with that if you like, and it's all true. But you've got to remember that not every canvas, as it were, accepts the paint that you put onto it in the same way.

And people are not all the same. People need to hear lots of things. They have lots of questions that they might want to answer. And knowing the gospel well enough simply addresses those issues.

But one thing that we should not do is this. The proverb says, or a proverb says in the book of Proverbs, that the tender mercies of the wicked are evil. The tender mercies of the wicked are evil. And what that means is this. That if you, as a Christian, substitute God's ways for the world's ways, then in the end, what you're doing is not loving them, but actually something quite evil. people. The tender mercies of the wicked is that they're sweet nothings. They are comfort momentary, temporarily.

[33 : 38] They are the type of things that will keep people together, keep good friendships together. But in the end, they're not the truth that sets people free. In the end, they're actually evil because they've not really loved the person, because they've not told that person what will actually set them free from the judgment to come.

The tender mercies of the wicked are evil. And it's very, very easy to want to protect friendships and relationships and all of these things, to then almost automatically begin substituting the clear words of scripture for words of your own that could almost end up sounding like, let's agree to disagree. Let's agree to disagree. And I would want to say that that is more reflective of the tender mercy of the wicked, because in the end, the person's not truly been loved.

In the end, the person is going to have to face the judgment. So sometimes it's much better to say, I agree that we disagree, but I cannot agree to disagree.

disagree. Okay, I agree that we disagree, and that your understanding of the truth and my understanding of the truth is entirely different. I can agree that we disagree, but as a Christian, I cannot agree to disagree, because I'm bound by God for you to know and hear the truth, but I can't make you believe it.

[35 : 13] Of course I can. And so we want to be careful with the words that we use, and we want to make sure that those words are consistent with the way God does it, not the way we would want to do it, because we want to love people.

We don't want to love them in a way where in the end, we're not actually loving them. We're not actually doing anything that can set them free. We need to tell them the truth.

So the call to proclaim the gospel, which is what Jesus is giving us here, is a call to remember that we're to speak the truth, and to remember that we speak the truth with a helper, God.

The call to proclaim the gospel is simply a call to be truth tellers. The call to proclaim the gospel is simply a call to be truth tellers in a world that he's actually lost the sense of truth.

Amen.