

Announcing the Good News of the Kingdom (#3)

So far under **Announcing the Good News of the Kingdom** we have discussed the message we are to speak to non-Christians, the verbal evidence we can provide, and the form and manner in which we are to speak. In this third lesson on Announcing the Good News, we will talk about *finding opportunities* to speak.

A lot of us think that the hardest part of sharing the message with non-Christians is finding someone who is willing to listen. I'm convinced that these opportunities to speak the message to others come from a combination of God's work and ours. We clearly have a part in the matter, but so does God. We must not sit back and do nothing nor think it all depends on us. Instead, we must find a balance.

Finding Opportunities to Speak—God's Work

Let's begin with God's part. Jesus highlighted God's work when he said, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working" (John 5:17). Previously we noted many of the things that God does in his mission (See Lesson #3, *God's Work in Growing the Kingdom*, pp. 21ff.). Our specific interest in this section is God's work in giving us opportunities to speak.

In Colossians 4:3 there is a reference to praying "that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ." Clearly, then, God opens doors. The second half of the verse shows that opening a door in this context does not refer to the message being *received* but simply to an opportunity to *proclaim* it (contrast Acts 16:14). Paul believed God would open such a door. That is, Paul believed God would provide opportunities to speak the message.

The word "opportunity" appears in this same context (Colossians 4:5). The Greek word is *kairos*. The word sometimes refers simply to "time," but it can also refer to a special, significant time. That's why it is sometimes translated "opportunity," as in Colossians 4. In this context of the spreading of the message, Paul appears to be saying that we should be alert to significant opportunities God provides us to reach out to non-Christians.

There are three other references to a door opening for the message. They are a report Paul gave on "all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith the Gentiles," a mention that "a great door for effective work has opened to me," and a statement that "I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a

door for me" (Acts 14:27; 1 Corinthians 16:9; 2 Corinthians 2:12). These references seem to include both Paul receiving an opportunity to speak the message and also the people receiving the message favorably. The first and last references specifically say that the Lord is the one who opened the door. The second one is passive in grammatical form which indicates Paul did not open the door but rather it was opened for him, presumably by the Lord.

God's work in his mission is also very prevalent in Acts. In the opening verse Luke describes his "former book" (The Gospel of Luke) as "all that Jesus *began* to do and teach" (Acts 1:1). This implies that the words that follow in his current book (Acts) are what Jesus *continued* to do and teach, through the Spirit and his Apostles. Some have even said that Acts should not be thought of as the Acts of the Apostles but rather as the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

In Acts God sometimes open doors to speak in dramatic, extraordinary ways. On the day of Pentecost, the Lord poured out the Holy Spirit with powerful effect, so that a crowd gathered, wondering what it was all about (Acts 2:1-13). Peter saw the opportunity to proclaim the message and made the most of it (vv. 14ff.). Similarly, while Paul and Barnabas were in prison in Philippi, God sent an earthquake that damaged the prison badly. Instead of seeing an opportunity to escape, Paul saw an opportunity to tell the good news (16:21-34).

On other occasions in Acts God worked in less dramatic ways to bring together open-hearted people with someone who would tell them the good news. In Acts 8, an angel told Philip to take a certain road, and there he saw the Ethiopian Eunuch. The Spirit then told Peter to go join the chariot, which led to an opportunity to proclaim the message (vv. 26-40). In Acts 10 God gave two visions, and the Spirit spoke directly to Peter, to bring him together with Cornelius and his household to speak the word (vv. 1-48). In Acts 16, the Holy Spirit kept Paul from preaching in Asia and then also Bithynia. Then God gave Paul a vision of someone in Macedonia asking for help. Paul's perspective was that, "God had called us to preach the gospel to them" (vv. 6-10). Time and again God brought people together so his message can be spoken and heard.

It may help us understand God's work and trust him to provide opportunities if we remember that He knows everything. This is difficult for us to grasp, of course, but acknowledging it helps us be more vividly aware of his work in his mission. For example, the Lord once spoke to Paul and told him to keep on speaking "because I have many people in this city" (Acts 18:9-11). He knew there were many who would respond to the message. In a slightly different way, the Lord later told Paul, "As you have testified about

me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome" (Acts 23:11). Again, the Lord knew what needed to happen (cf. Acts 28:14, 23ff.). God knows in advance who will accept him. Such people he also predestines to be conformed to the image of his Son, and then he "calls" them through the gospel (Romans 8:28-29; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14). In light of God's omniscience and sovereign work, it makes perfect sense that he would bring together the people who are open to him and those who are willing to speak his message. We need to trust him to do so.

1. Can you think of a time when it was crystal clear to you that God was giving you an opportunity to tell the someone about Christ the King?

Finding Opportunities to Speak—Praying and Being Watchful

God's work to provide opportunities does not mean we just sit back and wait. To be sure, there is a time for waiting (Acts 1:8), but there is also a time for working. Jesus said workers are needed for his harvest field, and the word "workers" definitely indicates there is something for us to do. In light of all we have noted about God's work in his mission, however, the first thing we should do is pray. We have been collecting a list of things we are told to pray about concerning God's mission (it should be in the front pocket of your notebook). I hope you will keep adding to this list and keep praying earnestly about the matters on it.

We should pray for the specific matter of opportunities to speak. We've already seen ample examples that God provides opportunities, so prayer is appropriate. We also referred to Colossians 4:3, which mentions God opening doors for the word to be proclaimed. Now I want to emphasize the other part of the verse which specifically instructs us to pray that he would do so. Surely open doors to speak the good news are among the good things God will give to those who keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking (Matthew 7:7-8).

While we are talking about prayer, I want to highlight two other phrases in the powerful paragraph in Colossians 4:2-6. One is that we are to "be devoted" to prayer (v. 2). Prayer is not a mere formality. It really matters. A subject of the King who is empowered to change the world like Jesus will be truly devoted to prayer (Luke 5:16). How much and how

earnestly we pray for opportunities to speak indicates something about what we truly believe regarding whether God actually gives such opportunities.

The other phrase I want to highlight is “being watchful” (v. 2). If we truly believe God works in his mission and that he answers prayer, we will watch for ways he may do so.

Abraham’s servant is a good example of being watchful. Abraham commissioned him to go back to his own country to get a wife for his son Isaac. The servant prayed for his journey to be successful. He even asked God that when he said a certain thing to a young woman and she responded a certain way, that she would be the one. Then, when the servant saw Rebekah, he said that certain thing to her, and sure enough, she responded as the servant had prayed (Genesis 24:1-20). Then the Bible says, “Without saying a word, the man *watched her* closely to learn whether or not the Lord had made his journey successful” (v. 21). This passage is not about evangelism, of course, but it does have something to say about prayer and watchfulness. We need to develop the practice of watching closely to learn whether the Lord is answering our prayers. It is another way we express our faith that God is working in his mission.

The practice of watchfulness fits in well with the idea that we are full time servants of the Lord, on call 24/7. We cannot compartmentalize our lives so that we allocate certain times for our responsibilities, other times for ourselves, and then only certain particular times for the Lord. Rather, we serve God full time and are always “on call.” The Lord may have a job for us to do at any moment, and we need to be alert and watch for opportunities he may give us. In the course of our day, we may have many things to do, but we need to be watching constantly for what the Lord of our lives may want us to do. If he does not have anything for us at the moment, we go ahead with whatever else we need or planned to do. Conversely, he may interrupt our plans because he has a job for us. Obviously, this will sometimes be difficult to discern or work out in practice, but I do think it is the right perspective.

I’ve noticed at least three kinds of situations in the New Testament that led to opportunities for the spokesmen to tell the message, and I am going to assume these opportunities were God-given, regardless of whether that is stated. Describing these situations may help us watch for them.

One situation that occurred frequently is that a Christian got arrested!! The spokespersons weren’t guilty of a crime—just guilty of speaking about Christ when those in authority didn’t like it. Jesus told his followers their activities in his name would get them arrested but that it would be an

opportunity to tell people about him (Matthew 10:18-20). Sure enough, it did occur multiple times (Acts 4:1-12; 5:27-32; 5:8-7:60; 21:27-22:21; 22:30-23:11; 24:1-27; 25:23-26:32). There is a part of me that feels like a court trial is not a good setting for announcing the message, in their day or ours, and yet it is clear that is exactly what God wanted them to do.

A second situation described in the New Testament that led to opportunities to speak is when non-Christians asked the Christians questions or invited them to share their views. Peter instructs us specifically to be ready to give an account of the reason for the hope we have, if anyone asks (1 Peter 3:15). People did ask, and the early Christians were ready indeed. The Ethiopian eunuch asked Philip a specific question about the Bible, and Philip easily found a way to begin with that very Scripture and tell him the good news about Jesus (Acts 8:34-35). The Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas directly, "What must I do to be saved?"—a wide open opportunity (Acts 16:29). On two other occasions, instead of asking a specific question, non-Christians gave the Christians an open ended invitation to share their message. Once it was in a synagogue and once in a meeting of Greek philosophers (Acts 13:15; 17:19). These were golden opportunities to tell about Christ, and I believe they came from God. Notice, in reference to 1 Peter 3:15, none of these people asked specifically, "Could you give me an account of the reason for the hope you have?" And yet in sense that is what they were asking. No one has ever asked me that directly either, but I believe they have in essence. For example, the statement, "You seem like you're handling this difficult situation really well" may imply the question of "How do you handle the hardships of life?"

A third kind of opportunity we see in the New Testament comes as a result of Christians **R**eflecting the kingdom in their lives and deeds. A great example is when Peter healed the man at the Temple who couldn't walk. This astonished the people who saw it, and they were thinking Peter and John had done the remarkable deed by their own power or godliness. When the onlookers ran up to Peter and John, the apostles saw the opportunity presented by the deed and they told the good news. Notice that the immediate question on the people's minds was how the man was healed. Peter answered this, but not merely at the surface level. Instead, he told the ultimate reason for the healing, which is the death, resurrection and identity of Jesus (Acts 3:1-26).

Reflecting the Kingdom may lead to opportunities for us to **A**nnounce the Kingdom as well, and we need to be alert and watch for them. In order to follow Peter's example in answering questions about good things we have done, we need to make sure we don't put on a false humility and downplay what our deeds. Rather, we need to learn to account for what we have done

by telling the *ultimate* reason—that God attested to Jesus through miracles, people rejected him as their King, but then God raised him from the dead, showing he is in fact the King! We do all we do because we are subjects of the King!

So there is a connection between doing good deeds and getting opportunities to speak. As mentioned before, however, we need to be careful not to make efforts to **R**eflect the Kingdom conditional on people being willing to listen to the message of the Kingdom. Conditional good deeds do not have the same quality or effect as those done freely. Like Jesus, we have high hopes and pray that people will see that something significant is going on in the deeds we do, which leads us to watch for any opportunities. We do not, however, make our deeds conditional on their willingness to listen to the message (Luke 17:11-19).

Looking back at these three most common kinds of situations that led to opportunities, it doesn't seem to me that "arrest opportunities" will be very common in the United States. I think perhaps more of us may get opportunities by people asking questions, especially if we are alert to indirect questions or statements that have an implicit question. **R**eflecting the Kingdom in our lives and deeds seems to me to be the one most likely to lead to opportunities today. Obviously, though, we should practice watchfulness for any opportunity and not limit ourselves to these three possibilities.

2. How do you feel about your devotion to praying specifically that God will open a door for you to speak? How do you feel about your watchfulness to see if he is doing so? Whatever your answers, take a few minutes right now to talk to God about this.

3. Can you think of other kinds of situations that occur today that might lead to opportunities for you to speak the message?

4. Can you think of things people have said or asked that may have been indirect questions about Christ and so have been an opportunity to speak? (NOTE: learning to recognize these even after the fact is a first step toward recognizing them as they are happening.)

5. If a person comments on a good deed you have done or mentions that you seem to be different in some way, are you more likely to feel self-conscious and downplay what they said or talk about the reason why? If someone compliments you for something you know is a part of your Christian character (like your concern for people, your encouraging speech, etc.), how could you respond in a way that briefly “tells the story” of Christ?

Finding Opportunities to Speak—Probing

So far we have noticed that God gives opportunities to speak, and we are called to pray and watch for them. But there’s more. Scripture shows that the first spokesmen *actively sought* opportunities to speak. Sometimes this is stated generally, in terms of people going somewhere to speak or intending to speak. That is, they went where they were going with the purpose of telling the news. For example, Paul went to Troas for the purpose of the gospel of Christ, and sure enough, the Lord opened a door for him (2 Corinthians 2:12). Likewise, Paul did not receive the Macedonian call while he was sitting on his couch vegging out to YouTube. Rather, he had sought to preach the word in Asia and Bithynia but was prevented from doing so. No opportunity was given. Then the Macedonian call came. He received it after seeking opportunities elsewhere (Acts 16:6-10).

In addition to these general statements, we also read about some specific ways people sought opportunities to speak. One very common way Paul sought opportunities was by going to the synagogues (Acts 17:2; see also 9:20; 13:15; 14:1). He also went to the marketplaces, because that’s where people hung out in the first century (Acts 17:17). He went to a place where he thought people might be gathered for prayer (Acts 16:13), and

later he found and engaged some sort of disciples in conversation (19:1-7). He also set up daily discussions in a lecture hall (19:8-10). In Rome, he welcomed people who came to see him and proclaimed the Kingdom and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ (28:30). All these were specific ways of initiating the possibility of getting to speak.

So the spokespersons not only prayed and watched for opportunities that God might give them, they also initiated the possibility of speaking. They don't seem to have forced themselves on others, though, and certainly they did not trick or manipulate them (1 Thessalonians 2:3-6; 2 Corinthians 4:2). Perhaps the word "probe" is a good modern word to describe what we see them doing in Scripture. A doctor may probe a part of the human body with his or her hands or an instrument (called a probe) to see if anything significant is present. In Sci-Fi movies, starships send a "probe" out into space to see what is there. Similarly, we may "probe" for opportunities to see whether God will give us an opportunity to speak.

The way I have done this most commonly is to ask a question like, Do you ever read the Bible? Or, Do you go to church? Or, Do you ever think about spiritual matters? A friend of mine does something similar when at a restaurant. He'll tell the waiter or waitress that we're going to be praying before our meal and asks if they have anything going on that they'd like us to pray about.

I haven't tried this yet, but I noticed recently that there are a couple of "introductory" statements in the messages in Acts that might also serve well as "probing statements." For example, Peter introduced his message to the crowd that gathered after the healing in Acts 3 by saying that God "has glorified his servant Jesus" (v. 13). Later he introduced his message to Cornelius' household by referring to the word God sent Israel as "the good news of peace through Jesus Christ who is Lord of all" (Acts 10:36). I'm wondering if those introductory, theme statements might also make good probing statements to see if there is spiritual interest.

Personally, I am more likely to probe people's interest if there is some reason for thinking they may have some. For example, if they are visiting church! Or if they refer to a spiritual matter, even remotely. I may also ask a question or comment about something I see or hear a person say. This morning I was at a coffee shop and saw a little table that had a New Testament on it so I asked the owners what it was for. If a person wears a tee shirt with words related to Christ or faith or meaning in life, I may probe a little. Often these people turn out to be Christians but surprisingly some of them are not. Or if I have a relationship with someone and know something about their thoughts and perspectives, I may probe some.

This may be obvious but it's worth pointing out that the most likely setting for probing people's spiritual interest is in a conversation. We noted above (pp. 79-80) that conversations are a good setting for sharing the message, and probing people's spiritual interest seems to fit there well also.

So, it is clear that God gives opportunities for us to speak his message, and we need to pray for these. But we also need to practice watchfulness and actively probe people and situations to see if there may be an opportunity.

Sometimes I wonder why we don't seem to get nearly as many opportunities to speak as Jesus or the Apostles did. I believe the Gospels and Acts are unique in some ways. Though I'm convinced we, too, can **R**eflect the kingdom in our deeds, the miracles Jesus and his first followers did are uniquely remarkable and powerful. In addition, one could also argue that God spent 2000 years preparing people for the "fullness of times" when Jesus came and the gospel was first proclaimed so that the response it received was truly extraordinary.

Other factors, such as our gifts, desire, and faithfulness, may also account for some of the difference. Clearly we all have different gifts and some will be more gifted as evangelists than others. And if we don't really desire to talk to people about Christ, I'm sure why God would lead them to us. Finally, there is some suggestion in Scripture that God is more likely to use people who live truly godly lives (Acts 11:24; 1 Thessalonians 2:10; 2 Timothy 2:14-21, especially v. 21; Titus 2:7-8). I don't want to overemphasize this because none of us lives a totally godly life, and Scripture is clear that God can and does use weak, sinful people for his purposes also (Luke 5:8-10; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5). Still, the verses just above indicate that God may be more inclined to use us if we are earnestly striving to please him all the time.

What's Next?

If God's work, our prayers, and our probing lead to an opportunity to speak, then by all means proclaim the news! All we've been doing these last three lessons was designed to prepare us for this. We want to speak the right message (pp. 72, 80) as an announcement or telling news (pp. 75-78) and do so clearly and earnestly (pp. 78-79). We may need to review some of those sections from time to time to keep them clear in our minds.

Once we have proclaimed the message in summary form, we will need to continue the conversation and go into more detail or explanation of various parts of it. Their questions and reactions will help us see which parts

we need to delve into more. We may also want to ask them some questions or just simply restate some things. We should continue the conversation then and also be ready to get together multiple times. God works through the gospel we speak (Romans 1:16; 1 Thessalonians 2:13) and also helps us as we speak (Matthew 10:19-20; 1 Peter 1:12), so praying silently during these conversations is very appropriate.

We'll talk more in the next lesson about what kinds of responses we should expect people to make when we announce the good news of the King and Kingdom to them.

Wrap-Up and Applications

One way to summarize what I am doing now in regard to **A**nnouncing the good news of the Kingdom is:

1. **Prepare** (1 Peter 3:15)
 - a. Ponder the message personally so that it changes my life—my thinking, feelings, speaking, and deeds. This produces things we've read in Scripture such as living in hope, having a clear conscience, being wise in the way I act toward outsiders, making sure my speech is always full of grace and seasoned with salt. *I want to practice what I preach.*
 - b. Ponder the message personally so that I see its importance and develop earnestness and focus in regard to it. *I want to proclaim the message in an appropriate manner* whenever I get an opportunity.
 - c. Ponder the message personally so that I understand it well. *I want to proclaim it clearly.*
2. **Pray** (Matthew 9:37-38; Colossians 4:2-6)
 - a. For workers
 - b. For opportunities to Reflect the Kingdom
 - c. For opportunities to Announce the Kingdom
 - d. That I might proclaim it clearly, that God would open people's hearts, convict them, save them, give them new life.
3. **Practice watchfulness** for any opportunity to SHARE the kingdom (Colossians 4:2)
4. **Probe** people and situations (Gospels, Acts)
5. **Proclaim** Christ when the opportunity is given (Gospels, Acts)

Most of my preparation and prayer (#s 1 & 2) is done in advance, at home, on an ongoing basis. This is a way of heeding Peter's exhortation to "always be prepared" (1 Peter 3:15). Over the years I have sometimes gotten stuck and stagnated in the preparation phase. It's easy to confuse preparing for doing. It's also easy to convince ourselves that "I'm not ready yet." Jesus showed us that some preparation is indeed needed (Matthew 10), but I now realize we cannot be fully prepared before we begin. We learn by doing, so we'll never be truly prepared before we actually begin reaching out to others. What's more, I am certain that the twelve were not fully "ready" before Jesus sent them out. So we must not get stuck in the preparation phase.

Instead, we go out in Jesus' name, practicing watchfulness, probing and ready to proclaim (#s 3-5 above). For the most part, I do these things when I am out of the house, whether for the specific purpose of doing them or because an opportunity to do them arises in the course of the day. All three of them are a part of the "A" in SHAREing the kingdom. It may help to remind ourselves to practice watchfulness, probe people's interest, and proclaim the King as a part of our mission briefing when we leave the house.

Application (#1). Add to your daily **prayers** an earnest request that God would open a door for you to speak his message and that you will be able to speak it clearly. Be devoted to this prayer.

Application (#2). Consciously **practice watchfulness** for opportunities that God may be giving you in answer to your prayers. This is most likely to happen when you are out of the house, so be sure to give yourself a "mission briefing" before you go out that includes being ready to SHARE in whatever way God gives you. It seems to me that we are most likely to get opportunities to speak when we are in conversations with people we already know, so be especially alert and watchful during those times.

Application (#3). Think now about some “**probing**” statements or questions (p. 88) you might be comfortable to make. If you are in a situation and believe God may be giving you an opportunity to speak, say something to probe the person’s heart and interest. Don’t pressure yourself to force something if you don’t really think God is giving you an opportunity.

Application (#4). Pray and decide now that if you do in fact get an opportunity to speak, you will **tell** the story of Jesus and **proclaim** that he is the King (review p. 72 or possibly an update of it inserted at p. 80).

Application (#5). Set aside a couple times to reflect on your day and your encounters or conversations with people. In the space below each of the applications above, jot down some reflections. Did you see and make the most of some opportunities? Did you miss some opportunities? How did you feel about what happened? What would you do differently? Do you need to prepare more in some area?