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Sharing Your Faith: One on One

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

Let's face it, for some of us, when it comes to what we call "witnessing" some of the images of an "evangelism linebacker" come to mind! There are people like that; people who try to share the good news but seem to make more enemies than friends, which is the last thing we want to do. So, as a result, sometimes we've gone to the other extreme. I've talked to people who have come to the Lord after many years and said something like this: "I lived next door to a Christian for years, and he never made an effort to share Christ with me, or even to talk to me." Paul Harvey said it well. He said, "Too many Christians are no longer fishers of men but keepers of the aquarium."

When it comes to sharing our faith, we have to be careful how we communicate with people. On the one hand, we can't afford to be pushy and insensitive. On the other hand, we don't want to be apathetic because so much is at stake.

This morning I want us to look at a man who was neither pushy or apathetic. His name is Philip. This is not the Philip that Jesus chose as one of his twelve Apostles. This Philip was a layman, not a professional. He is found only on the pages of the book of Acts. We've already met Philip in Acts 6. He was introduced to us not as an evangelist but as one who was chosen to oversee the distribution of food to needy widows.

I. Philip shares the gospel with Samaritans.

The bulk of Philip's story is found in Acts 8. Here is where we see him earn his reputation as an evangelist. Chapter 8 is a turning point in the book of Acts because the gospel is now being preached outside of Jerusalem. A great persecution arose against the believers there. As a result, Christians were forced for the first time to leave Jerusalem and were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. One of those Christians was Philip. Philip and many others seemed to understand that God was orchestrating these events for the greater purpose of spreading the gospel. In v.4 it says **"they went about preaching the word."** These people didn't plan an evangelistic campaign. They didn't plan any of this. They were forced out of Jerusalem under some difficult circumstances. Yet they didn't become discouraged or

cowardly; they trusted that God was still in charge and used it as an opportunity to share the gospel. Philip in particular went to Samaria and began preaching. And he was a pioneer in this. Samaritans and Jews hated each other! But Philip was one of the few at this point who had caught on that the gospel was for everybody. He had tremendous success in Samaria and many came to Christ. Luke says as a result of their faith in Christ there was great joy there.

But one of the things we've yet to see is what this would look like for someone in a one on one situation. Up until now, all the evangelism in the book of Acts has been preaching to large groups where hundreds, even thousands, come to Christ. But that's not how the majority of us will share our faith. Most of us will do it one on one, in coffee shops and homes and classrooms. That's why the story we're looking at this morning is so important. Luke narrows the focus and we get to see Philip in action with just one person.

II. Philip shares the gospel with an Ethiopian.

A. Philip was obedient: Listen to what happens. **"But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, 'Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a desert road.)** (Acts 8:26). This is great! There's a revival going on in Samaria but an angel comes to Philip and tells him to head in the opposite direction. Gaza is 60 miles south of Samaria and the road to Gaza went all the way to North Africa. Luke wants us to know how crazy this must have seemed because he adds that this was a desert road. In other words, it's very unlikely that anybody would be on that road. But Philip did just as he was told.

Here we see something of the sensitivity and obedience to the Holy Spirit that's needed in sharing our faith. How easy it would have been for Philip to be so caught up in the excitement and electricity of that Samaritan revival where God was so clearly at work, that he wasn't sensitive to a new direction. But he was alert and ready. Even though God didn't tell him why he should go down that road he went without a struggle. We might think, "If an angel came to me I would go, too." But I'm not so sure it was all that clear to Philip. He could

have tried to explain it away. He could have found some excuse for not going.

How can we learn to develop a sensitivity to even the tiniest whisper of the Holy Spirit? One of the things is we have to learn to lay down our plans and our preconceived notions of how God works and where we should be. God may even move us away from where all the action seems to be. Sometimes God may tell us to do something that seems absolutely crazy to us. After my sophomore year of college I quit playing football. But before my senior year the Lord whispered in my ear and said, "I want you to go back out for football. I want you to be my witness on that team." To do that didn't make a lot of sense from a football standpoint. But I did it, and I saw many of my teammates open their heart to Christ.

B. Philip took the initiative and asked a question: So Philip obeys the Lord and look who he runs into. **"So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship, and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah"** (vv.27–28). Philip sees this African man riding in a chariot. Once again, we see God's heart for the whole world. This was an important man. He was the treasurer for the queen mother of Ethiopia. He had success, prestige, power and wealth, but something was missing from his life. This man was also a eunuch as most men were who worked in those positions because no one wanted him fooling around with the Queen. If you don't know what a eunuch is you can look it up in the dictionary! What's fascinating is that this man was probably Jewish in that he had come to Jerusalem to worship, yet Deut. 23:1 says eunuchs were banned from worshipping in the temple. You might say he was a seeker. There are a lot of people like that out there today. They're seeking, but they're not sure what for. God cares about them and he'll put us into their path.

Watch how Philip approaches this man. **"Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go up and join this chariot.' Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, 'Do you understand what you are reading?'"** (vv.29–30). Once again, we see Philip's sensitivity as the Spirit tells him to join the chariot. Notice how he takes the initiative. That had to be hard. Imagine initiating a conversation with a foreign dignitary. Initiation is always the hardest part for me. But notice he does so without being offensive

or putting the man down. He starts right where the man is at; he hears him reading a familiar passage of Scripture and asks him a question about it, "Do you understand what you're reading?" Questions are a great way to take the initiative. You start where people are at. Here's some examples:

"Say, I notice you're reading the paper there. Do you have any idea what's gone wrong with the world these days?"

"I'm always fascinated by people's heroes. Who in your opinion was the greatest person who ever lived?"

"What do you think about that plane crash? How do you handle the possibility of something like that?"

Questions can be a great way to start, but the most important thing to remember is to be yourself, be sincere, and be sensitive to where that person is at. Start with some common ground that you might have and then gently try to move it deeper. And then really listen to where they're coming from. One of the things we're going to see is how Philip took this man's questions seriously. He understood that sharing your faith is not confrontation but communication. We don't need to do all the talking. I once was trained in evangelism that we shouldn't answer people's questions because they'll try to get us off the subject. They said we needed to just plow ahead with our presentation of the gospel. But that just alienates people. It makes them think that this is some kind of sales pitch, not a heart felt conversation. By the way, if you don't know the answer to a question, tell them. If they're not ready to make a decision, try to leave the door open for more conversation at another time. Don't force it. Witnessing is not like putting square pegs in round holes. If this man had responded to Philip by saying, "What do you care if I understand or not?", I don't think Philip would have pushed it. But, as we'll see, it was clear that the door was open.

I can remember a number of years ago Lynn and I were traveling through Europe with backpacks. We met up with an Australian couple in Switzerland who we hit it off with and so we decided to travel together for awhile. Back in those days Lynn and I had a great deal of zeal but very little tact. We began to share the Lord with them and got into some good conversations. It's clear they weren't believers and at some point we decided we needed to try to close the deal. Well, they got offended, and then we got offended that they were offended. It was clear that they weren't ready but we kept pushing until they practically had to tell us to shut up! The next morning we woke to find that our traveling companions were long gone! Now sometimes that can't be avoided, but sometimes the problem is us.

Evangelism is a little bit like fishing. It's not easy to catch a fish. What you have to do is try to think like a fish.

You have to pick the time of day when they'll most likely be biting. You have to choose the right bait. You're not going to catch a bass with salmon eggs. You have to be very patient and if one thing doesn't work, try something else. Sometimes you can do everything right, but they just aren't biting. When that's the case, you just have to enjoy the scenery and go home.

C. Philip saw the Spirit had prepared the man:

After Philip asks if he understands what he's reading, listen to what the man says. **"And he said, 'Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this: 'HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER; AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT, SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH. IN HUMILIATION HIS JUDGMENT WAS TAKEN AWAY; WHO WILL RELATE HIS GENERATION? FOR HIS LIFE IS REMOVED FROM THE EARTH.'** The eunuch answered Philip and said, **'Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?'"** (vv.31–34). This is what you would call a fruit ripe for the picking! Notice he says he needs someone to "guide" him which is an indictment on the Scribes and Pharisees who were called guides. It's clear he was disappointed with his visit to the Temple. Notice he's reading from a passage in Isaiah which is all about Jesus and his suffering on the cross. And then he invites Philip up into his chariot to help him understand what this is all about.

Do you know what this is all about? This is all about the Holy Spirit preparing individuals to hear the gospel. I'll tell you, this is great news! It takes all the pressure off of us. Whether or not a person comes to Christ ultimately is up to God, not us. Our job is to look for people whom God has already prepared.

I heard a story about former Secretary of State Jim Baker. Part of his job was to deal with the then Secretary of the former USSR, Eduard Sheverdnadze. Baker liked Sheverdnadze. As soon as Baker became a Christian, he said the first thing that came to his mind was winning him to Christ. Baker has a ranch in Wyoming, and after a diplomatic event in 1989 he invited Sheverdnadze to his ranch. At dinner Baker presented him with a pair of Western cowboy boots. Then Sheverdnadze presented Baker with a gift of his own. It was an enameled picture of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. He said to Baker, "You see, Mr. Secretary, even we Communists are changing our minds about spiritual things." Later, the two went fishing and Baker shared his faith with him. Soon Sheverdnadze opened his heart to Christ. You see, God had prepared that man's heart and when God does that all we have to do is show up!

One of the greatest mistakes we can make about sharing our faith is thinking that people really don't want to hear about Jesus. Some people don't, but Jesus told us, "Open your eyes, the fields are white for harvest." There are all kinds of people who are dying to get some answers or some help. Our job isn't to talk someone into being a Christian who doesn't want to be; but we can look for people God has already prepared. It's his work and we just get to go along for the ride.

D. Philip preached Christ to him: So this man asks Philip to explain who this passage is talking about. Look what Philip does in v.35. **"Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him."** From the Scripture he preaches Christ to him. Isn't that great! Our message is incredibly simple and simply incredible. It's what the Bible says about Jesus. You don't have to be a theologian to tell people about Jesus. Our job is not to tell people about the church or about angels or about abortion or about right wing politics or even about how to live a clean life. Our job is simply to tell them about Jesus. Tell them about his birth and his life and his teaching and his miracles and his death for sinners and his resurrection and offer of eternal life. Focus on the Savior.

I heard a story about a pastor in Houston who invited an evangelist to his church for a series of meetings. For the first three nights the evangelist preached hard hitting messages about the evils of communism. Each night he gave an invitation for people to receive Christ, but no one came forward. Finally, the evangelist said, "I can't understand why people aren't responding to the message." The pastor looked at him and said, "What do you expect them to do? Come down and join the FBI?"

You see, our message is not social issues but the person of Jesus Christ. If we closed down every abortion clinic and every adult book store in the country, people without Christ would still be headed for Hell. The only way to make a difference for eternity is to help people enter into a relationship with Christ. That's our mission.

E. Philip led him to faith in Christ: And that's what convinced this Ethiopian to believe Philip's message. Look what happens next. **"As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, 'Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?' [And Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' And he answered and said, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.'] And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went**

down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing.” (vv.36–39). The man believed and was baptized and went away rejoicing. Just as with the Samaritans—they believed and were baptized and there was “great rejoicing.” That’s what we want—to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ, visibly expressed in the act of baptism and resulting in a kind of inner joy that can’t be matched by the world.

Now the Lord has a witness in Africa. Africa was Christian way before North America or Europe ever was. Aren’t you glad that Philip was obedient to the Spirit’s leading? You never know how the Lord will use what seems to be the smallest decisions we make.

The next thing you know, Philip is snatched away by the Spirit. Don’t ask me to explain that. It doesn’t happen anywhere else in the New Testament and I know of no one besides Captain Kirk who has had this experience! But sometimes the Spirit works in ways that we can’t explain and the best thing to do is let it be and not try to explain it.

F. Philip continued to share Christ: Look what happens next. **“But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea”** (v.40). Philip lands about 20 miles north in Azotus. There are no divine directives here, no angels, but Philip continues to share Christ as he moves north and finally settles in Caesarea. After this we hear nothing of Philip for about 20 years. The Apostle Paul is passing through Caesarea on his way to Jerusalem. Guess whose house he stays at? Listen to Acts 21:8–9. **“On the next day we left and came to Caesarea, and entering the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, we stayed with him. Now this man had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses.”**

Isn’t that great? The same Paul who had forced Philip to leave Jerusalem is now staying at Philip’s house! By now Philip had four unmarried prophesying daughters. Can you imagine living with four unmarried prophesying daughters? I have two prophesying daughters and a prophesying wife and that’s plenty! But Philip had settled down and had a family. He had earned a nickname too. They called him “the evangelist.” Notice he had used his gift of evangelism right in his own home. He led his daughters to Christ and they became prophets in the early church.

CONCLUSION

And that’s the end of Philip’s story. Why do you think we have a Philip on the pages of Scripture? I believe it’s because we need a reminder that sharing our faith is as basic to the Christian life as breathing and eating. It doesn’t always take a Peter or a Paul or a Billy Graham to be effective in spreading the good news about Jesus. God wants to use people like Philip, too. People like you and me. Ordinary people who just happen to know why we’re on earth rather than in heaven. You and I will be no better prepared for heaven when we are 85 than the day we trusted Christ as Savior. So why do you think God left you here? Jesus put it this way, “YOU are the salt of the earth; YOU are the light of the world.” Philip’s life isn’t meant to be a guilt trip for us. We can all feel guilty about evangelism. Philip’s life is simply meant to be an invitation. An invitation to be a part of the Father’s purpose to draw men and women to himself...not through confrontation but through communication.