

Family Matters...Being the Family of God 4: “Practicing Authentic Faith-Sharing”

Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony. And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom He gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father. Col. 3:12-17

This will be the most difficult of all the practices we'll discuss. Difficult; because it's so personal. We're getting pretty good, already at practicing Radical Hospitality, and even though there is always room for improvement, we've done really well at practicing Extravagant Generosity through the years. Our Passionate Worship continues to grow. But this subject, Practicing Authentic Faith-Sharing...is a personal challenge for most (can I safely say)...all of us!

I want to take the pressure off immediately, today. I want you to know that I grew up, and was mentored to be a Bible thumping, street corner, in-your-face witnessing fool. I was once accused of being so hell-bent on heaven; I was of no earthly good. I'm sad to report, that report was true. I also want to confess, I don't think that approach was very effective back then, and I know it isn't today. It was also uncomfortable. I want to take the pressure off. I want to draw from the scripture we just read, some new “practices” for Authentically Sharing our Faith.

Let me begin with those 6 words: Tenderhearted mercy, Kindness, Humility, Gentleness, Patience...and Love. If we could utilize those words, if we could incorporate those words, if we could live those words, if we could become those words as we share our faith...I believe we'd be blessed, people would be saved, the kingdom would expand, our church would grow, and God would be pleased.

To become those words, however we have to consider these 5 components for the Practice of Authentic Faith Sharing.

1. BE COMMITTED TO THE THEOLOGY OF AUTHENTIC FAITH-SHARING

Yes, it was written long ago that the Messiah would suffer and die and rise from the dead on the third day. It was also written that this message would be proclaimed in the authority of his name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem: 'There is forgiveness of sins for all who repent.' You are witnesses of all these things. Luke 24:47-48

Jesus' final words to his disciples...are really words for us as well. He reminds them that his death and resurrection were part of God's plan. That is the essence of the Message, and '*forgiveness of sins for all who repent*' is the result. The early disciples were witnesses of all these things. Witness has a two-fold definition doesn't it? We are called witnesses, when we observe or experience something. The disciples saw Jesus live, die and rise again. Now they were called to 'witness' to that event; they are expected to share that event with others who haven't seen, or heard.

Well, we who have been saved by the grace of God, who have repented and been forgiven, are likewise charged to share our 'witness' with others who haven't heard or seen.

We must be committed to the base-line Biblical theology that God loves people, even sinful, lost, struggling, hurting, people. And, God uses people just like us, to be the messengers of that message. We can claim shyness, lack of knowledge, absence of gifts, fear of failure, fear of rejection, or fear of offending...but none of those excuses are legitimate in the face of the Theological Reality that God wants us to share the good news we've received with those who have not yet received it.

2. BE COMPASSIONATE TO THE NEEDS OF THE RECEIPIENTS OF AUTHENTIC FAITH-SHARING

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. He said to his disciples, "the harvest is great, but the workers are few. So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send more workers into his fields.

Jesus' response to people was almost always based on his recognition of their need or their expression of their need. Our faith sharing must be need driven. People have all kinds of needs, physical, mental, spiritual, relational, emotional; and our approach to them, might be better served if (like Jesus) we approach them concerning their need.

When the woman at the well questioned Jesus about how he'd get water from the well without a rope, he immediately went into a discussion about the living water. When the blind man cried out to him, he healed his blindness, and sent him away to sin no more. I picked up a hitchhiker once and asked where he was going. He replied; wherever I was. I then pressed him where would he go after that? Then on it went, where that would lead him, until he admitted that, "then I guess I'll be dead." I said, "Where will you go then?" We then spoke (I did most of the talking) about him being an eternal being, and that he could know where he would spend eternity.

I believe that meeting people's needs is great, and that is often just enough, but there are occasions, when the Word must also be declared. Because as hungry as someone might be, they ultimately need to know about God's love for them. Remember John Wesley's words: "What good does it do to send a child well-fed to hell?" Words and deeds often are doubly effective in communicating God's Message.

3. BE CONVINCED OF THE BENEFITS OF AUTHENTIC FAITH-SHARING

You know the saying, 'Four months between planting and harvest.' But I say, wake up and look around. The fields are already ripe for harvest. The harvesters are paid good wages, and the fruit they harvest is people brought to eternal life. What joy awaits both the planter and the harvester alike! You know the saying, 'One plants and another harvests.' And it's true. I sent you to harvest where you didn't plant; others had already done the work, and now you will get to gather the harvest. John 4:36-38

This passage follows Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well. She goes to town and 'witnesses' to her new found faith, and the fact that she has found the Messiah. The crowds rapidly approach the disciples and Jesus, who reminds them that the fields are ripe for harvest.

There are multiply benefits to Authentic Faith Sharing. Let me unpack some of them. Obvious should be the benefit to the recipient; he or she receives salvation, forgiveness, meaning and purpose...plus, according to this scripture; they receive Eternal Life. That's not a bad benefit. Do you see that benefit? And are you convinced it is worth it to share your experience with Jesus so another might find what you found?

But notice, there is also a benefit to the 'planter and the harvester'. As the mob encroached on Jesus and the disciples, he reminded them that they had not planted the seeds in these folks lives, but they were about to enjoy the harvest. To each, the planter of seeds, and the harvester of crops...joy is a real and tangible benefit.

We must also be convinced that there is benefit to the kingdom, and even to our church at the Authentic Sharing of our Faith. We have been enlisted to join God in the marvelous ministry of reconciliation, and the benefit of that is growth in the kingdom of God. Authentic Faith Sharing sometimes also grows our church. We benefit from new believers joining our ranks, and bringing with them, the people from their circles of influence. I'll make this promise to each of you; new believer, long-term member, some still seeking to discover this faith as a personal reality. If you will invite your family and friends who don't know Jesus, I'll do my best to not embarrass them or you, as we together try to figure out how to be faithful followers of Jesus.

4. BE CASUAL TOWARD THE FRIENDS WITH WHOM YOU AUTHENTICALLY SHARE YOUR FAITH

For God wanted them to know that the riches and glory of Christ are for you Gentiles, too. And this is the secret: Christ lives in you. This gives you assurance of sharing the glory. So we tell others about Christ, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all the wisdom God has given us. (The Message translates this verse):

We teach in a spirit of profound common sense so that we can bring each person to maturity. To be mature is to be basic. Christ! No more, no less. Col. 1:27

The best evangelism is relational. We can go hear Josh McDowell tonight, and there will be many who will respond to the call for commitment, all of which is fine. But I believe the best and most effective evangelism is when a friend shares with a friend about what Jesus means to them. Someone once defined Evangelism as “One beggar showing another beggar where to find bread.” I like that.

I’m not opposed to mass evangelism, or crusades or campaigns, or even concentrated emphasis on Revival, or Camp Meeting...all I’m saying, is that most of us want someone else to be the evangelists, and God want us to be the evangelists.

When I say casual, I don’t mean careless, I mean natural, relational, honest, authentic. Authentic is the key word in this ‘practice’. There is so much hypocrisy and phariseeism in the church of Jesus’ day, and today; that the world naturally stands at a distance. The only way to break down the barriers of resistance is to be yourself, and be real, as you not only share your faith, but as you live your faith. To not only share your victories in Jesus, but your failures in faithfulness. People will appreciate and be able to relate to your honest humanness.

St. Francis of Assisi said it best: “Preach always, and if necessary use words.” Living our faith before our family and friends is the best testimony we can give; but there will come a time, a point of crisis, or a celebration of joy, when we must ‘say a good word for Jesus.’ Having built a good relationship with neighbor, colleague, family or friend, might be the only prerequisite for effective...Authentic Faith Sharing!

5. BE CONSISTENT IN THE PRACTICE OF AUTHENTIC FAITH-SHARING

Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Col. 3:12

Live wisely among those who are not believers, and make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone. Col. 4:5-6

I borrow these words from our beginning text, because of their power. I know that there will never be a time when you will be more scared to “Authentically Share your Faith”...than right now! So get that first scary one over with...soon! Don’t ever discount that even a kind word or a smile, or a generous tip, or a gentle hug or a firm handshake might be used by God to touch someone’s life, and open the door for them to meet Jesus. Don’t ever discount that you are worthy to be a messenger for God. If God has touched your life...pay it forward. Don’t ever stop practicing this discipline, be consistent in your living, and watch God bring hurting people to your path.

And can we end on this note: Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so others will want what you have, so others will seek what makes you tick, so others will come to love Jesus, the way you’ve come to love Jesus. Think about the ways you speak to others of your church, and remember that people will not only make a judgment about your church or me when you speak negatively...they’ll make a judgment about God!

I know this is a tough practice. I vow to struggle with you to Share my Faith... Authentically. *And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father.*

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Action Steps:

1. Continue to pray for the 3 people you began with in week one when we discussed Radical Hospitality. But now, begin to envision how you might strike up a conversation with them, which might lead to you saying a good word for Jesus, or sharing more of your faith with them.
2. Practice sharing your faith with a family member or trusted friend who already knows Jesus. Help each other 'talk through' some of the sticky parts of your 'witness'.
3. Monitor and evaluate your conversation, especially as it concerns your church, your pastor, your faith; to see if it is gracious and attractive.
4. As God leads...Authentically Share your Faith with someone that God will bring into your pathway.

Study Guide:

1. Share with the group any experiences you've had sharing your faith.
2. Discuss the 5 components, which of them were most helpful, which are the most difficult for you to understand/practice?
3. Which of the scripture texts did you find most meaningful/helpful and why?
4. Share about someone in your life you feel God might be leading you to Authentically Share Faith with.
5. Pray for each other that you will have the strength, boldness and honesty to begin this practice...this week!