The Core of Evangelism Lesson 6

Discernment in Evangelism

1. Wise stewardship of the message and of time

Before or after learning how to share the gospel effectively, it is necessary to understand that evangelism also requires discernment. Many believers think that faithfulness means dwelling indefinitely on a conversation, answering every objection, and staying in every debate until the other person is convinced. However, Jesus taught that the evangelist must learn to recognize when a person is willing to listen and when they have decided to hold on to their own convictions.

Some time ago I was talking with a co-worker, a believing man, who told me with full conviction that he did not eat pork because God had forbidden it. I asked him if he would be willing to hear me out if I showed him from the Bible that eating pork was not a sin. He said he would. So I opened the Scriptures and showed him the words God spoke to Peter in a vision: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat... What God has cleansed you must not call common" (Acts 10:13, 15). After reading the text, he simply replied, "I don't think that's right."

At that moment I realized the problem had never been the pork. The problem was authority. When a tradition, a custom, or a personal conviction carries more weight than God's Word, the conversation stops being about the meaning of Scripture and becomes about who has the final say. This same principle shows up constantly in matters related to forgiveness, grace, baptism, discipleship, and many other biblical topics. Resistance is not always resistance to evidence; often it is resistance to the conclusions the evidence demands.

For this reason Jesus said, "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces" (Matthew 7:6). These words are not a license to despise anyone. They are an instruction on the wise stewardship of spiritual resources. The time, energy, and opportunities God grants the evangelist are valuable and should be invested wisely.

The Christian's calling is not to convince everyone. Our calling is to present the truth with love, clarity, and faithfulness. The growth belongs to God.

When a person repeatedly shows that they do not recognize the authority of Scripture, there comes a point where continuing the discussion stops bearing fruit. In those cases, it is better to sow the seed, commend the situation to the Lord, and keep moving toward other doors God may be opening.

Paul exhorted believers to "be wise in the way you act toward outsiders" and to "make the most of every opportunity" (Colossians 4:5). Part of that wisdom is recognizing the difference between someone who sincerely seeks the truth and someone who simply wants to defend a position they've already decided on. The first listens, asks, and weighs the evidence. The second argues, deflects, and rejects any answer that challenges their assumptions.

The mature evangelist learns to sow with love, to withdraw in peace, and to trust that God is the one who opens eyes. Our time is one of the most valuable resources the Lord has entrusted to us. Stewarding it well is also part of faithful evangelism.

2. The same discernment in the lives of Jesus and Paul

A practical experience is a good example. But this isn't just a common-sense principle — it's a pattern that appears again and again in the lives of Jesus and Paul.

A rich young ruler comes to Jesus with a sincere question about eternal life, but when he hears what is asked of him, he goes away sad, unable to let go of his wealth (Matthew 19:16-22). Jesus doesn't run after him. He doesn't soften the demand or negotiate the terms to keep him. He lets him go, because the problem wasn't a lack of information but a lack of willingness.

Something similar happens with Paul at the Areopagus in Athens. He preaches clearly before the Greek philosophers, and the response splits: some sneer, while others politely say, "We want to hear you again on this subject" (Acts 17:32-34). Paul doesn't insist or stay to argue with those who mock him. He goes on his way, leaving the seed sown wherever he found open ears.

And there's a third gesture, more physical and deliberate: in more than one city, when resistance becomes total, Paul shakes the dust from his feet or his garments as a testimony against those who reject the message, and moves on to another door (Acts 13:51; 18:6). It's a physical way of saying what this lesson has already said: "I let go of this, and I move forward."

Three different situations, but the same wisdom: recognizing that the moment to sow and the moment to withdraw are not failures — they're part of the same calling. Having this biblical pattern alongside personal experience gives us greater confidence to walk away from conversations that always seem to circle the same axis, without carrying the guilt of feeling we "should have said something more."

3. Guides to Remember

1. Not everyone is ready to receive the truth, and it's not your job to convince them. Your job is to sow. God is the one who gives the growth.
2. Don't wear yourself out arguing with someone who doesn't accept your basic premise. If Scripture isn't an authority for them, no verse will move them.
3. Don't withhold the Word. Say it once, with love and clarity. And then let it go.
4. Don't confuse stubbornness with a hunger for truth. The one who seeks, asks. The one who only wants to be right, argues.
5. There are people who are not willing to submit to Scripture as a whole. Pray for them. But don't spend more time than necessary.

Pray for wisdom.

Our time is our greatest treasure.

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