

Demonstrating the Gospel

If you've got a bible, go ahead and turn with me to **Colossians 4**. We're going to look at two different passages this morning: Colossians 4 and 1 Peter 3, but we'll start with Colossians. Well, if you follow just about any of the **stats and studies** out there, there's really no denying that the religion in America is struggling right now. As of 2020, only 47% of U.S. adults said they belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque. That might sound like a lot, or not a lot, depending on your background. But that is the *lowest number by far* since people started keeping track of that sort of thing, around 1940 or so.

It represents **not just a decline, but a rapid decline**—down from 68% just twenty years ago. And if you break those numbers down by *generation*, the picture gets even more bleak. Generation X is less affiliated than Baby Boomers, Millennials less than Gen X. And Gen Z is on track to be the least affiliated of anybody. It decreases with each new generation.¹ It's basically the stats on who uses TikTok, but in reverse.

Now, it would be **easy to explain this away** using the same narratives we always have, right? We could insist that as society becomes more and more secular, and more and more accepting of attitudes and behaviors at odds with historically orthodox Christianity, of course less and less people are going to be interested in church. "The problem," we could say, "is that the way of Jesus is viewed as too morally *demanding* for the average American." And to be sure, *sometimes* that's the case.

But to view it that way would be to miss at least a *lot* of what's going on in our society. That's not always the dynamic at play. Sometimes it's actually the exact *opposite*. As Christianity Today contributor **Russell Moore** once put it, he said:

*The problem now is not that people think the church's way of life is too demanding, too morally rigorous, but that they have come to think the church doesn't believe its own moral teachings [...] We are losing a generation—not because they are secularists, but because they believe we are.*²

In quite the twist, many people are leaving the Church (or just never approaching it), not because it is *too* moral, but because it isn't moral *enough*. When there is a new headline every other month about a pastor caught in scandal or a Christian personality outed as a child predator, the problem more and more is the *lack* of moral standards, not the *over-abundance* of them. The problem could be that we look *too much* like the outside world, not that we are *too different* from it.

¹ Stats primarily taken from [here](#).

² <https://www.russellmoore.com/2021/04/15/losing-our-religion/>

If you don't believe me on that, listen to **non-Christian Ben Sixmith**, a contributor to *The Spectator*:

*I am not religious, so it is not my place to dictate to Christians what they should and should not believe. Still, if someone has a faith worth following, I feel that their beliefs should make me feel **uncomfortable** for **not** doing so. If they share **90 percent of my lifestyle and values**, then there is nothing especially **inspiring** about them. Instead of making me want to become more like them, it looks very much as if they want to become more like me.*

Likely without knowing it, Ben there is channeling Jesus of Nazareth who said, speaking to followers of Jesus, “**You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its saltiness, it is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot.**” So it would appear that at least *one thing* we could stand to work on as followers of Jesus isn't relaxing our moral teachings or make them more marketable. It would appear we need to ask ourselves if *we* believe and *follow* them ourselves. And *that's* part of what I want to talk to you about this morning.

We'll **start with Colossians 4**. The book of Colossians, if you're unfamiliar, is actually a *letter* that a guy named Paul writes to a church in the ancient city of Colossae—hence the name of the book. He addresses all *sorts* of topics in the letter as a *whole*. But in *this* section, he's talking specifically about *mission*: how the Christians in Colossae should go about relationships and conversations with those *outside of* the church. People who don't yet follow Jesus. And here's what he says *about* it. Pick it up with me in v. 5. He says:

*[5] Be **wise** in the way you **act** toward **outsiders**; make the most of every opportunity. [6] Let your **conversation** (with them) be always full of **grace**, seasoned with **salt**, so that (notice this language:) you may know how to **answer** everyone.*

Now I want you to **flip over with me to 1 Peter 3**. 1 Peter, if you're not familiar, is *another* letter written to a group of early followers of Jesus. Specifically, it was written to followers of Jesus who were experiencing a lot of suffering and persecution at the time. Peter, the author, is giving them some instruction on how to navigate all that. And in this portion of the book, he's actually going to say something very **similar to what Paul said in Colossians**; he's just going to language it slightly differently. So look at what he says starting in v. 14:

[14] But **even if** you should **suffer** for what is right, you are **blessed**. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.” [15] But in your **hearts revere** Christ as Lord. Always be **prepared to** (this should sound familiar) **give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...**

So if you're new around here, we're nearing the end of a series all about *mission*. We've been talking about how we help those in our lives that don't yet know Jesus, *come* to know him. And **last week**, we talked about how a lot of *mission* is simply asking good *questions*. We said that many of us too quickly jump to arguing with people or reasoning with people about the issues they have with Christianity. When *instead*, it might be helpful for us to ask more *questions*. It might be helpful to spend more time understanding where they're coming from and why they have the hang-ups that they have, *before* we go spouting off an answer to them.

But **this week we find out**, based on what we just read, that part of mission is *also*, *evidently*, about *answering* people's questions. Right? It used that exact language in both of the passages we just read. That *does indeed matter* when it comes to mission. **But what I want you to see today is that these questions—the questions Colossians and 1 Peter are talking about—are a specific type of questions. They're not so much ideological, as they are practical.**

Some people have used these passages—the ones we just read—to insist that Christians need to educate themselves in **apologetics**: giving rational answers and defenses for core tenets of the Christian faith. This has prompted all sorts of books on apologetics to be written over the years. If you're a little bit older in the room, books like *More Than a Carpenter* or *The Case for Christ*. If you're *younger*, books like Tim Keller's *Reason for God*. All these books that walk through logical and philosophical defenses for believing what we believe.

And I think **apologetics definitely have their place**. It can be really helpful to provide rationale for why you believe what you believe, and how it is a reasonable thing to believe the claims of the bible. But as important as it is, I will say that that sort of thing doesn't seem to be the *main* point being made in these passages we just read. In Colossians 4 and in 1 Peter 3, it seems like the “answers” that we are to give are to slightly different *kinds* of questions than that. **They're not answers about the age of the Earth, or about the historicity of Jesus, or the trustworthiness of the bible.** They're not questions like *that*.

The answers being discussed in these passages are answers about the way that we live as followers of Jesus. For example, Colossians 4 started off by saying "...be wise in the way you act towards outsiders." That word *act* is the Greek word *peripateó*. And it means most literally, to "walk." It was an expression that described how you conducted the entirety of your life. When Paul says "be wise in the way you act," what he means is "be wise in how you live." Be intentional in the way you carry yourself and go about your life, even and especially around those who don't yet follow Jesus.

And then in 1 Peter, it says that we should "revere" Christ as Lord "in our hearts." Now when it says "in our hearts," it doesn't mean in the emotional, sentimental side of us. In Greek and Hebrew thought, the heart was the affective center of your entire being: your thinking, your feeling, your living—everything about you. You and I might say something like "honor Christ as Lord with everything you've got," or "...with every fiber of your being." That's the idea Peter is getting across here. With everything you and I can muster, we are to honor Jesus as Lord with every aspect of how we live.

So in both passages, the thinking is that we allow our lives to demonstrate the effects of the gospel. We should let it shape the way that we live. And then, if we do that often enough, that will eventually raise questions in the people around us about why we live that way. People will look at our lives and think "that's different." "That's different from how I think about my life. That's different from how I think about my relationships, my money, my sexuality, my time, my possessions. That is different—I wonder why that is." And often, they will ask questions about it.

And these New Testament authors are saying that those questions, when they come up, are prime opportunities to give people an answer about the "reason for the hope" that we have. In other words, to talk with people about Jesus. So the questions here aren't necessarily questions about the beliefs that we hold, or from the intellectual basis for those beliefs. They are questions about the types of lives that we lead. One of the greatest resources you have at your disposal to help others discover Jesus is your life. And the way that you live it.

And I think that's important to point out because I don't know that we always act as if that's true. I don't know that we often treat our lives as the incredible resource that they are to demonstrate the gospel. Generally, when we think about mission or evangelism within the Church, we end up thinking primarily about the things that we say. We tend to think about our words. But I wonder if sometimes, the reason our efforts at evangelism come across stale and impotent is because we are trying to do something with our words alone, that God meant for us to do with our words and our lives. We're trying to explain something that was meant to be embodied...and

then explained. The gospel is meant to be spoken, yes—but it's also meant to be demonstrated.

So we **hinted at this** all the way back in **week 1** of the series, when we defined the word *mission*. We said that *mission* has two components to it. Do you remember what they were? Mission is *articulating* the gospel, yes. But it's **also demonstrating** the gospel. Both of those pieces are important. Because it's us *demonstrating* the gospel that shows people we're not just blowing smoke when we talk about this stuff. **It communicates to people around us that Christianity is not just a set of intellectual beliefs to agree with, but a way of life to be practiced.** And if Peter and Paul knew what they were talking about—and I'm gonna say they did, because it's the bible—it is **actually demonstrating the gospel that often creates opportunities to articulate the gospel.**

There's a **quote that gets batted around** among Christians sometimes that goes something like this: "preach the gospel always, and when necessary, use words." Raise your hand if you've heard that before? Yeah. Okay, so we don't actually know where the quote comes from. It often gets attributed to a guy named St. Francis of Assisi, but all indicators are that he didn't actually say it.

But **some people love** that quote, and **some people hate it**. The people that *hate* it argue that it misrepresents the gospel. Because if the gospel is *news*, that means it has to be *spoken*. And I think that's a really good point. I mean, it's not as if you can just mow your neighbor's grass every week for a year, and one day they're gonna see you doing it and go, "you know what? I think, based on the way they're cutting that grass, I'm beginning to *think* that Jesus of Nazareth *might just be* the king of the world, and I think I should give my life to him." That's not how it works, right? **At some point, if you want someone to know the good news of Jesus, you will have to actually talk to them about it.**

But at the **same time, I think I get the point** that the quote is trying to make. They were simply trying to call our attention to the fact that **the gospel isn't only something that is spoken**. It's also something that is *demonstrated*. Something that is *embodied*. That is *represented* in how we *live* and how we *speak* and how we treat others. I love how Paul alludes to this in *another* one of his letters to the church in Thessaloniki. He says this:

*For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our **gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction.** You know how we (what's that next word?) **lived among you for your sake.**³*

³ 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5

So **evidently the gospel came** to the Thessalonian Christians not just in *words*, but in other ways as well. And at least *part* of that was due to the Thessalonians observing the way that Paul and his companions *lived among* them. The way that they *lived embodied* the gospel.

Peter actually makes it even clearer in the previous chapter of his letter, before the passage we just read, in **1 Peter 2**. He says this:

Live such good lives among the pagans (which in context, just means “those who don’t know Jesus), *that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*⁴

In other words, a **central component** to people on the outside coming to know and worship God is by observing the “good deeds” of followers of Jesus: how they *live*. **Martin Luther**, the famous Reformer, famously summed it up this way:

*God doesn’t need your good works, but your neighbor does.*⁵

And then the book of **Hebrews** states the *inverse* of all of this. *It* says:

Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy (to be different, distinct in how you live. Because...) without holiness no one will see the Lord.

How many people? *No one*. In other words, **the way that we live is so important** to mission that *without* us living *holy, distinct* lives, Hebrews says *no one* will actually come to see who God is at all. Those are *strong words*. But **this is how central our lives are to how the gospel gets communicated to our world. The gospel isn’t just something to be spoken, it is something to be evidenced in the way we live.**

Now, I want us to pause right here and just **take a deep breath**. Can you do that? Here’s why I asked to do that. Because I know for a lot of us, as we hear all this, we can almost feel this *tension* building in our chest. This feels like it is putting a lot of pressure onto us. So I want you to hear me say this, loud and clear, and I want you to look at me when I say it: **saying we need to live differently, does not mean that we have to live perfectly.** Those aren’t the same thing. There are plenty of ways to live *distinctively*, without living *perfectly*. And there are plenty of ways to be *imperfect*, and still be *different*.

⁴ 1 Peter 2:12

⁵ Wingrin, *Luther on Vocation*, p. 10.

So I had a friend in college named Zack. Zack's life was, by most measures, a total mess. And the only reason I feel comfortable saying that about him is because that is *literally* how Zack described his own life. He would literally introduce himself to *most people* by saying, "my name is Zack, and I love Jesus—but I'm a mess." So some of Zack's story is that he had been addicted to alcohol, adderall and a few other substances for several years prior to coming to know Jesus.

And even though he had been sober for a year or so by the time I knew him, he still dealt with a lot of residual effects of his addictions. One was that he had a really quick temper. It took very little for him to cuss somebody out if they frustrated him. Like even random people that he didn't know—that's how bad it was. But for years of his life, if he was frustrated, he would just go home later and use to numb his frustration. Now that he wasn't doing that anymore, it came out in other ways, like having a quick temper.

But here's the thing: Zack knew that about himself. And he knew it wasn't okay. So Zack had a habit, where anytime he would lose his temper with someone, he would go back and sincerely apologize to them for doing it. Like a genuine, self-effacing apology. And I do mean he had a habit of doing this. As in, I don't think there was a single time that Zack lost his temper with someone once he was a follower of Jesus, and didn't go back and apologize to them afterwards. To the point where sometimes, it was quite awkward.

One time he was on a trip, and he stopped along the way to get some coffee at a Starbucks. And they were taking too long with his order, and he just lost it on one of the baristas. Just throwing out f-bombs like they were free. So he finally gets his coffee, gets in his car, drives ten miles down the interstate, and realizes what had happened. So he gets off at the next exit, turns around, drives ten miles back to that Starbucks, and then waits in line just to apologize to the barista for losing his temper towards her. I know that he did this because I was on the trip with him. It was the most amazingly awkward thing I've ever seen. She didn't know what to do. I mean it had been thirty minutes or so at this point.

But that's just who Zack was. He loved Jesus, but he was a mess. But here's the thing: I kid you not, Zack ended up having more conversations with people about Jesus because of his habit of apologizing about losing his temper, than probably half of the Christians I know of. Because he was noticeably different. Zack wasn't perfect—not by any stretch of the imagination—but he was different. So different, in fact, that it led to a lot of opportunities for him to talk to people about Jesus.

So listen: **when I say** that we should live *distinct, different* kinds of lives, I *need* you to know that I'm not talking about being *perfect*. I don't expect that, and *God* doesn't expect that either. That's one thing the cross of Jesus was all about: **Jesus was perfect for us**—we don't need to be perfect. He lived perfectly—we don't need to live perfectly. But we are called to live *differently*. Like *Zack*. Like millions of other followers of Jesus who have lived imperfect, yet distinct lives down throughout history. Not *perfect*, but *different*.

And if you don't believe me on that, **just read through this book**. Have you met some of the people *God* uses to represent him in this **book**? Have you read any of the stories about *David*? Like I'll tell you right now: if *David* from the Old Testament applies for a job at City Church, we're not even giving that guy an *interview*. Right? He doesn't even make it into the first round. That dude was shady as all get out. Have you read about *Moses*? *Moses* literally killed a guy with his bare hands before *God* called him into ministry. Have you read about *Rahab*? The *prostitute* who lied to protect *God's* people? *Paul*? How about *Noah*? *Noah* was one of the most righteous people *God* could find on the earth at one point, so *God* puts him and his family on a boat to get them through the flood, and then one of the first things *Noah* does after he gets *off* the boat is gets wasted and passes out naked in a tent. Went straight rural Kentucky on 'em.

Listen: **if there's one thing this book screams at us, from beginning to end, it's that God has no expectation that his people will be perfect**. I don't know where we ever got that idea. *But* he does invite his people to be *different*. He thinks you and I, with all of our failures and flaws and sins, can be a refreshing kind of *different* to the world around us. He thinks we can be his representatives to a world that desperately needs it. How amazing, right?

And I'll **just add this** in case it takes any additional pressure off. I don't know that it has **ever been easier to stand out** as a follower of Jesus. Like right now, if people in your life know that you're a Christian, here's what they're likely expecting you to be: condescending, self-righteous, yelling about politics all of the time, and hateful towards every person who lives a lifestyle that you disapprove of. That's what people are *expecting* you to be. Do you realize how *low* that bar is?! If you can somehow manage to be a humble, kind, friendly person to people *half of the time*—you will likely *exceed* all expectations that most people have for you. I mean I don't know about you, but to me, that feels somewhat achievable. I don't think it has ever been easier to stand out and be different.

But **all this to say: here's my question** for you. Very simple, very straightforward: are you, as a follower of Jesus, *different*? Are you *distinct*? Not *perfect*, mind you, but *different*? Like, if your life was in a line-up with four other people in your stage of life who don't

know Jesus, would anything about it *stand out* from them? If a coworker or a classmate or a friend who doesn't follow Jesus just observed your life for a year, would anything about it seem *noticeably different* from their life? Would anything stand out to them?

Would anything be **different about how** you use your **words**, from the average person that doesn't follow Jesus? Would anything be different about your **relationships** with other people, how you handle conflict and tension with them? Would anything be distinct about the way you handle your **money**? About what kind of house you live in, what kind of car you drive, about where the bulk of your money goes? Would anything be *distinct* about the way you approach **sex** and sexuality? Would anything be *different* about the way you spend your **time**—the things you give your effort and attention to? Would anything be different about the way you approach your **singleness**, or your **marriage**, or your **parenting**? You fill in the blank. I'm just asking you to answer honestly: if a person compared your life, to the life of someone like you who doesn't follow Jesus, would there be any noticeable *differences* for them to pick up on?

And please hear my heart here: I'm **not saying this to shame** or to condemn or to give you more ammo to beat yourself up over. God knows none of us need that. *All of us* are at different stages in our journey with Jesus. We're all at various points in our spiritual maturity. We probably all have *some* areas where we're doing *well*, and others where we're not doing well at all. I recognize and acknowledge *all* of that.

But if we've been following Jesus long at all, there should at least be *some* things that we can point to and go "my life is different *here* because of Jesus." "My life is different *there* because of Jesus' work in my life." "My life is *distinct there* because Jesus has radically *transformed* me by his grace." And according to 1 Peter and Colossians, those are the types of things that eventually invite *questions* from people in your life that don't yet follow Jesus.

So let me just give **two last clarifiers** here and then we'll wrap things up. **First, this whole idea assumes** that you have friendships with people that don't follow Jesus. Like *actual friendships*. That you are living life *closely* enough with them for them to pick up on things in your life that are different. Right? Like if the most you ever *talk* to any non-believers is a disgruntled "morning" on your way into the office, chances are they aren't going to be able to notice areas in your life that are different from theirs. This whole idea from Colossians and 1 Peter *assumes* that you've taken the time and the effort to build friendships with people in your life who don't follow Jesus. So if you're not *there* yet, maybe start *there*. That's clarifier #1.

And then *second*, I want to be very clear that **even though the hope** is that people see the way we live and ask questions, that's not the *primary reason* we live differently. Right? The *core reason* we live differently is because Jesus is worth living differently. He's worth it. He is *Lord*. Jesus has demonstrated that he is infinitely worthy of anything we have to give up, anything we have to grow into, anything we have to sacrifice to become who he made us to be. The Old Testament makes it clear: we should be holy and distinct, *because God* is holy and distinct. Whatever it takes, whatever it costs, whatever it means, God is infinitely worth it because of who he is and what he's done for us. Everything we do is a response to that. And the hope is that along the way, that prompts some questions.

So **our practice for this week** is simply called a *Distinctiveness Inventory*. And it's precisely what it sounds like. It's an opportunity to take an *inventory* of your life, and ask the question, *how distinctive am I here? What are the primary differences between the way I go about this area of my life, and the way the average non-Christian would go about this area of their life?* And as you do that, where there *are* substantial differences *present*, *celebrate* that. Thank God and his work via the Spirit to make you different and distinct in that area of your life. And where there's *not* a ton of difference there yet, spend some time thinking through what repentance could look like in that area, to *become* more and more distinct as a result.

That's what we're working through this week. **Now let me say this. I think this week particularly would be a good week to work through the practice with your LifeGroup.** Or with a few people from your LifeGroup. If you've allowed them to get to know you much, they're probably going to be really helpful in speaking into all this. They can help you identify some ways you may need to *grow* in distinctiveness that you could be blind to. *And they can encourage you in some ways you're distinct that you might think you're failing in.* So for a couple different reasons, I'd encourage you to work through at least some of this inventory with people from your LifeGroup.

But one way or another, spend some time working through this distinctiveness inventory as a way to evaluate where you're at, what the Spirit has done in your life, and where you can pursue growth and distinctiveness in the future. And in the meantime, let's pray that God uses the way we live to prompt questions from people around us. Next week, we're going to finally talk about how we *articulate* the gospel. But first, let's not forget that *demonstrating* the gospel is just as important.

Let's pray together.