

A 3Lent	4 Habits of Contagious Christians John 4.4-42 by Tim Isbell	Preached 2/27/2005
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Thesis: Contagious Christians 1) pray for God to make their hearts beat like Jesus' heart for unchurched people, 2) spend time with unchurched people, 3) learn share an appropriate verbal witness, and 4) take the initiative to invite people into a next step in their journey with God.

(Bill Hybels' writing/teaching on the 3 Habits of Highly Contagious Christians is my primary source. I think I got from a 3 sermon Willow Creek series where he dealt with one habit in each sermon. The first time I preached these concepts I also did it in 3 messages leading up to a capital campaign to add ministry and a building to the New Life campus. But the sermon below is a rewriting of these 3 sermons into one that fits the scripture for A 3Lent. It could also fit the scripture for A 4Lent. You'll note that I've extended the concept to 4 Habits, essentially breaking Hybels' first Habit into my first 2.)

1st habit: Pray

My story

While working in industry the Lord called me into pastoral ministry. I had a wide variety of lay-ministry experience. However, I began to realize that by the time I was looking for a pastoral assignment I'd be into my 40s and the chances that any healthy church that would invite me to be their pastor was very unlikely. The kind of church that might invite me would be one that was weak. I realized that the one ministry area I lacked any real experience in was the very one that a struggling church would desperately need: personal evangelism.

So I realized that I needed to prepare. I had a habit of using my 30-40 minute daily commute for prayer where, among other things, I prayed for the meetings and projects of the day and week. I began to adjust my praying to focus more on the people in these meetings and working on these projects than the meetings or projects themselves. Over time God changed my heart; I noticed an increasing interest in these people. I found myself asking about an employee's kids, or spouse, or their outside agenda. After a while I noticed people coming to me for advice – usually about career, marriage relations, or raising kids. More and more of their questions seemed to be asking for spiritual answers, so I began tentatively offering myself in to spiritual conversations with employees and co-workers. Amazingly they received this well and kept returning.

Eventually one of my directors asked if I'd coach her on how to go to a church without being embarrassed. Within a day or two she had gathered 8-10 of her employees with

the same interest, and booked a conference room at lunchtime. A year later many of these were Christians.

Also during these last few years in industry I started something called the Village Gate Group. It was a monthly breakfast meeting where I invited Christian technologists and business people to bring unchurched coworkers for a talk on technology or business, packaged in a very light Christian witness.

I certainly do not think I have a gift of evangelism. But when I followed the Lord's lead and asked him to help me in this area, he certainly did.

So if you don't already have a passion for unchurched people, are you willing to pray for it?

Many people pray for healing or a job but these don't come. But I've never heard anyone say "I've prayed persistently for God to give me a passionate heart for unchurched people, but God chose not to give it to me."

Test God on this one; he will change your heart. And you'll love the life it leads to.

So here's the 1st Habit: Pray for 2 things:

1. For God to make your heart beat like Jesus' heart for unchurched people.
2. For the unchurched people already in your life.

2nd Habit: Spend time with unchurched people.

Read or have read, or read/tell John 4.4-42 (A 3Lent)

Most Jews avoided travel through Samaria. Jesus chose it – probably not because it was a short cut but because it meant meeting some people who didn't know God.

Most Jewish males wouldn't even speak with a Jewish woman, let alone a Samaritan woman. To Jesus it was an opportunity for a spiritual conversation.

This woman wasn't even a reputable Samaritan woman! She was an outcast because of her lifestyle of having multiple sexual partners – that's why she was at the well in the middle of the day!

Jesus went to a place where religious people don't go.

He asked a complete stranger for help – a disreputable Samaritan woman!

His behavior surprised her enough that she asked him a question; Jesus turned it into a spiritual conversation.

That conversation changed her entire life.

Did you notice the influence this disreputable woman had on her town?

She just witnessed to her own experience with Jesus and invited the townspeople to come and see Jesus for themselves.

In the gospels Jesus often received of criticism from religious people for spending time with non-religious people.

The gospels are clear about why Jesus did this: He liked these people.

He didn't just love people far from God with a condescending love; he liked them.

Several of his disciples came from this kind of background: Matthew was a tax collector who worked for the Roman "system" and stole from the people! Simon was a zealot (an anti-government revolutionary). What in the world were Simon and Matthew doing in the same traveling group! Peter, Andrew, James and John and others were rough fishermen! Some of the women who traveled along with Jesus were also of low repute.

Jesus didn't just accept these people; he sought them out.

And they sought him out. Apparently people sensed grace in Jesus, not the judgment so common among religious people.

And this is Jesus' assignment for you and me today: seek out unchurched people.

Spiritual growth always leads a passionate heart and concern for unchurched people. If you don't find this in your heart; pray for God to put it there.

So, here is the 2nd Habit of Highly Contagious Christians in a nutshell ...

We have Jesus' permission to

- Go places where religious people don't normally go – places where unchurched people do go.
- Talk with people that religious people often don't talk to.
- Ask unchurched people for help - like Jesus asked the Samaritan woman for a drink.
- When the time is right, tell these people what God is doing in our life. Just give God the credit he deserves.

We have this permission IFF (if and only if) we are praying and asking God to make our heart beat like Jesus' heart towards unchurched people.

Because unless our heart is like Jesus' heart are harmful to unchurched people!

3rd Habit: Learn to share a verbal witness

Airplane story

A pastor named Jeffery Kotter was on a plane one time, dressed in blue jeans and a T-shirt. A business guy sat down next to him and started explaining his job. He was in the figure salon business with a national organization, and very proud of his work.

Kotter writes, I nodded approvingly as this man talked and I thought, "Impressive, he's proud of his work and accomplishments."

Looking askance at my clothing, this businessman asked the inevitable question, "And

what do you do?"

"It's interesting that we have similar business interests," I said. "You are in the body changing business. I am in the personality changing business. We apply basic, theocratic principles to accomplish indigenous personality modification." He was hooked, but I knew he'd never admit it. Pride is powerful.

"You know, I've heard about that," he said hesitantly, "but do you have an office here in the city?"

"Oh yes, we have many offices. We have offices up and down the state. In fact, we're national. We have at least one office in every state, including Alaska and Hawaii."

He had this puzzled look on his face. He was searching his mind to identify this huge company he must have read or heard about, maybe in the Wall Street Journal.

"As a matter of fact," I said, "we've gone international. And management has a plan to put at least one office in every country of the world by the end of this business era." I paused. "Do you have that in your business?"

"Well no, not yet. But you mentioned management. How do they make it work?"

"It's a family concern. There's a Father and his Son, and they run everything."

"That must take a lot of capital," he said, skeptically.

"You mean money? Yeah, I suppose so. No one knows just how much it takes. But we never worry because there's never a shortage. The boss always seems to have enough. He's a very creative guy. And the money is, well, just there. In fact, those of us in the organization have a saying about our boss. 'He owns the cattle on a thousand hills.'"

"Oh, he's into ranching too?" asked my captive friend.

"No, it's just a saying we use to indicate his wealth."

My friend sat back in his seat musing over our conversation. "What about with you?" he asked.

"The employees? They are something to see. They have a Spirit that pervades the organization. It works like this: The Father and Son love each other so much that their love filters down through the organization so that we find ourselves loving one another, too. I know this sounds old-fashioned in a world like ours, but I know people in the organization who are willing to die for me. Do you have that in your business?"

I was almost shouting now. People were starting to shift noticeably in their seats.

"Not yet," he said. Quickly changing strategies, he asked, "But do you have good benefits?"

"They're substantial. I have complete life insurance, fire insurance, and all the basics. You might not believe this, but it's true. I have holdings in a mansion that's being built for me right now for my retirement. Do you have that in your business?"

"Not yet," he answered, wistfully.

The light was dawning, and then Kotter goes on to write about a very significant spiritual conversation that continued between a Christ-follower and a seeker.

Great story. About 1 in 14 Christians have gift of evangelism like Jeffery Kotter.

If you have; develop it. Use it often. Your church needs you to run as far with that gift as

God enables you.

But Jeffery's style is extraordinary. If most of us try this way we'll embarrass ourselves and the God we serve.

The other 13 of us need a style that uses much more ordinary practices.

We're like the Samaritan woman.

She had lots of life's baggage. She was not a theologian. But after an encounter with Jesus something happened deep in her heart. So when she returns to her town, people notice a difference in her, a new hope. Apparently they asked her about hope and she simply told them about her experience with Jesus at the well.

She doesn't proclaim any more than her experience. Then she invites the people to come meet Jesus for themselves.

She was a WITNESS, not an evangelist.

We need to understand the distinction between the

- Gifting of some Christians to be evangelists, and the
- Calling of all Christians to be witnesses.

1/14 of us are gifted as evangelists.

13/14 of us are called to be witnesses.

Our assignment: live in the light Christ offers, and share a verbal WITNESS appropriate in the moment.

Simply tell others what God has done in our life, or what we've seen him do in the lives of others.

No need for eloquence, cleverness, drama - these just get in the way.

We all have a story to tell: the story of God's dealings with us. God gives us this story precisely SO THAT we'll share it with others.

We all need to be able to live out 1 Peter 3.15

As we live lives of ordinary practices, occasionally the Spirit of Jesus opens a door for a short explanation of his Good News. And we want to learn how to do this -very briefly, very clearly, very humbly.

Here's an example... *(That morning I used the Bridge Metaphor. You can use whatever one you think best for your congregation.)*

So here's the 3rd Habit: When God opens the door, share a verbal witness of the impact of Jesus in our life.

4th habit: Invite people to the next step.

Imagine the phone rings at dinner time

Total stranger, "You need to refinance your house, and I'm the person to do it. When can we get together and talk about it?"

"That's a very nice offer, but no thank you. And ... please remove my name from your calling list."

Or someone you never met walks up to you, "I know just the person for you to spend the rest of your life with – my cousin. I set up a blind date for the two of you this Friday, the day he gets out on parole. Trust me; he's the one."

"Thank you for thinking about my future, but I'm not available on Friday to meet your cousin... or any other day."

When things are important to us – our finances, relational lives, futures – we don't put ourselves in the hands of total strangers. We listen to people we know, and trust. Friends influence friends. Acquaintances influence acquaintances.

If people are going to become Christ followers, it usually isn't through televangelists, radio preachers, and the media. It usually takes some sort of relationship with a person they know who also is in relationship with Jesus.

Some dying churches suffer from...

Lack of vision/mission, theological drift, organizational breakdown, financial limitations.

But one of the most deadly illnesses for a church is when its people lose their passion to build relationships with unchurched people and invite them to take steps toward knowing Jesus personally.

Christian faith has always been "invitation driven."

Read John 1.40-51 (B 2Epiphany)

Before the ministry of Jesus, an outsider had to take the initiative to come into God's family.

Jesus changed that; he deliberately invited people into the Kingdom! And taught his followers to do the same. This has been a trademark of Christian faith for 2000 years.

However, inviting people to take the next step with God does not mean just inviting them to church. But sooner or later it does because the introduction to Christian community is part of a person's journey to faith – ALWAYS. Life in a worshipping community is as fundamental to Christian faith as receiving forgiveness from sin, accepting Christ as our personal savior, getting baptized, and so on.

In order for me to live an ordinary life of the quality that God can use to invite people into his family – I must be part of a team.

- One that encourages me.
- That teaches me how to live out Ordinary Practices.
- That provides opportunities for me to bring people into Christian community.
- That provides experiences that stimulate friends in their spiritual journey.
- I am not enough by myself to bring my unchurched friends into Christian faith. I'm just not. My heart beats for people away from God but I'm just not enough. I need teammates who will share the adventure with me.

So good churches create inviting opportunities, and sooner or later one of these will be the appropriate next step for someone in our network of FRANs (Friends, Relatives, Associates, Neighbors).

Barna data: 25% of Americans say that they'd attend church if a friend invited them.

Here are 5 principles of inviting people.

1. Never say "no" for anyone.

Every person in my network may not sense a need for a relationship with Christ right now, but I am completely convinced that every single person in my network desperately needs a relationship with Christ. And sooner or later the Holy Spirit will help them realize this. When this happens I know my placed is to be somewhere nearby to invite them forward.

2. Put myself in the shoes of the person I invite.

For some of us this is easy; for others we are too consumed with our own worldview.

3. Offer food/snack/coffee before or after the event.

Something special happens when we share a table with people.

4. Inviting is a process, not a one-time event.

A proper invitation, even when declined, is a very effective outreach.

That's it, 4 Habits of contagious Christians:

1. Pray for God to grow our own hearts and for unchurched people.
2. Spend time with unchurched people.
3. Learn to share a verbal witness.
4. Invite people to take the next step towards God.

Is this lifestyle worth it?

Absolutely. Nothing is more fulfilling than when our friend receives baptism, when he/she begins offering themselves to God in ministry, when they begin inviting their friends to "come and see" Jesus.

That's as good as it gets.

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