

## **"THE SINGLE GREATEST GIFT"**

Philippians 2:6-8

Wow, am I ever glad you are here today because today, we begin a four-week experience that is going to radically change the way we look at the "E" word: Evangelism. What comes to mind or better yet how do you feel when you hear the "E" word? See, some people don't even want to say the word, so they will use the "E" word. Rest assured I am not going to call anyone forward during this series and have you give a personal demonstration of how to share your faith with someone who doesn't believe in Christ. So you can sit back and relax. And let me just say that the type of evangelism we are going to be talking about is very natural because there is **no formulas, no scripts to memorize, no quizzes or tests**. Are you with me and at least intrigued? Here is what we will learn- **evangelism can be as simple as taking a walk across the room**. And wouldn't you agree we can all take a walk across a room?

Let me ask you this- as followers of Jesus Christ, don't we all want to have an impact, don't we all want to touch the lives of the people we know and love who are living their lives far from God? The author of the book we are studying during the week and the book I am using as a spring-board for this sermon and the 3 that follow is Pastor Bill Hybels, founding and senior pastor of the large Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. And the "just walk across the room" metaphor that serves as the title of his book and the key concept for the book has its roots in a story that is about this very thing. It's a story of a person who was living far from God but then, one day, he had an experience because a Christ-follower actually got up, and did what? Walked across the room.

Bill Hybels was at a luncheon in the Deep South. As he and the other guests walked into the hotel ballroom where the event was to take place and found their seats, they were encouraged to introduce themselves to the others around their table.

Bill was not acquainted with the others at his table but noticed just how diverse the group was in terms of ethnicity, age, and so on. Directly across from him was a tall, African-American gentleman who looked more like a linebacker than a businessman. When he said his name, it was distinctly Muslim. The others introduced themselves and then they began to eat their meal. At one point during the meal, the African-American Muslim caught Bill's eye and mouthed the words, "I love your books!" Here is how Bill Hybels put it: "Reflexively, I swiveled my head around to see if perhaps a bona fide author had approached our table from behind. Finding no one there, I turned back, dumfounded, pointed my finger toward my chest, and mouthed, 'Me?' Grinning, he said, 'Yes! Let's talk after lunch.' Afterward, he waved me over and began fitting the puzzle pieces together. 'I now understand that my comment was probably a little confusing because you assume I'm a Muslim,' he said." Here is the jest of the story. "I have been a Muslim my whole adult life.

Being an African-American Muslim in a southern city—and being in the profession that I am in—it’s not always been easy. As you might imagine, I have some struggles in social settings.” He said, “In the profession I’m in, we have a lot of cocktail parties, and a lot of evening events; and the natural course for me at these parties is that I’m served a drink, I get some hors d’oeuvres, and I try to make business contacts in the room. Inevitably, I wind up standing alone at most parties until enough time has elapsed and I feel like I can gracefully make an exit... and then I subtly leave. The whole dynamic is just something I’ve learned to live with.” The Muslim man continued to tell Bill that one night, when he was at such a party, he found himself with a drink in one hand, a plate of food in the other and standing all by himself as usual. Groups of people were gathered throughout the entire room—talking, laughing, engaging in conversation—but he was there with no one to talk to and nothing to do, only standing there looking out of place.

During the party, the Muslim man noticed a guy standing on the other side of the room who was in the middle of a conversation with people of his own color and his own 'kind.' The guy looked away from his group and saw our Muslim friend standing all alone just ten feet away. He was perplexed that this guy would even care to notice him, but what happened next would utterly shock him. The guy actually excused himself from his conversation, turned away from the group, walked all the way across the room, stuck out his hand to the Muslim man, introduced himself and then asked for the Muslim gentleman's name. From there, the conversation unfolded so smoothly... so naturally. They talked about their mutual profession. They talked about their families. They talked about business in general and sports and all sorts of things. Eventually... the issue of faith came up.

Our African-American friend told Bill that at that point in the conversation, he became a little reticent... he just assumed that there would be an unfavorable reaction when the other guy learned he was a Muslim.

But he took the risk, and to his surprise, the guy said, 'Well, I'm a Christ-follower, but truth be told, I know almost nothing about Islam. Hey, I wonder if you would do me the courtesy sometime—maybe over breakfast one day—of giving me the Cliff's Notes version of your faith system... you know, why you committed yourself to Islam. Hearing your story would be pretty interesting to me.' The Muslim man almost fainted! Can you imagine his surprise when he saw a Christ-follower in a social setting like that... with such openness and grace? Well, the two men agreed to meet for breakfast the following week, and the conversation that ensued was incredible. The Christian man felt free to ask questions about Islam, and the Muslim man felt free to answer them. That meeting lead to another meeting the following week. And another one after that. And another. For weeks..., these two men got together over cups of coffee so that one Christ-follower could take an interest in a man living far from God. At some point in this series of breakfasts, an interesting thing happened.

The Muslim man realized that this Christian guy had been a good listener all this time... week after week after week. He hadn't judged the Muslim man's life choices. He hadn't wedged his own agenda into their conversations. He just kept showing up with a listening ear and a genuine interest in the Muslim man's life.

Here's the rest of the Muslim man's story, as he told it to Bill at the luncheon that day: "I really didn't remember that much about the Christian faith. I'd been a Christian at some point in my childhood, but the racism in our community had infiltrated my family's church. Eventually, we just left the faith altogether. Doesn't take a genius to know when you're not wanted. But for some reason I was prompted during one of our breakfast meetings to ask him about his beliefs. 'It went on this way for some time as we'd meet to hash through our faith experiences. Sometimes he would ask for a couple of days to find answers to my questions; other times, he knew exactly where I was struggling and seemed to have the perfect words to untangle my

confusion. There finally came a day—I remember being home alone when this happened—that I felt totally and completely compelled to pray to God. I kneeled beside my bed, told God everything I was feeling, and in the end gave my life to Jesus Christ. And in the space of about a week, that single decision changed everything in my world! Every single thing.” And his step of faith had already impacted his family, several of whom had begun making strides towards Christ.”

Isn't that a tremendous story? Friends, the single greatest gift Christ-followers can give to those around them is an introduction to the God who created them, the God who loves them, and the God who has a purpose for their very lives. Friends, this is what the “E” word is all about- always watching for ways to give this single greatest gift to someone living far from God.

The Christ-follower in our story did something we can all do all because he had an openness and willingness to allow God to use him as a

gift-bearer in someone else's life. And because he was open to being used by God, guess what God did? God used him.

There are three points I want to make today as we think about the process of becoming usable to God and I pray you are open to just this-being used up by God. And let's think about the "walk-across-the room" idea and see how it unfolded in the story I shared where we can give "the single greatest gift" to that person we know.

First, **Being willing to enter the Zone of the Unknown**. In Bill's story the man who was the Christ-follower at that social party was standing in a conversational "Circle of Comfort." He was relating to people where it was easy to relate, easy to converse, it was a safe place. You and I both have been there before, right? But he looked up and saw someone standing all alone, a person who just might have needed some encouragement or an ounce of friendship. And the Christ-follower felt and then heard something from the Holy Spirit that went something like this, "Why don't you go over

and extend a hand of friendship to the guy standing all alone on the other side of the room?" So he saw the situation; He felt something; He heard something. And what did he do? He excused himself from the "Circle of Comfort." Did he know what was going to happen once he crossed the room and greeted the stranger? Does he know how the conversation is going to go after he says, "Hello?" But he leaves his "Circle of Comfort" and makes his way across the room and there is no turning back. And he probably prays as he is walking into the "Zone of the Unknown." Ever been there before? It's in that Zone of the Unknown where God can often do His might work, maybe even His best work. And it is in the Zone of the Unknown where the guy in our story simply said, "Hi, my name is.... What's your name?" And the conversation began and it absolutely, literally changed the African-American man's eternity, as well as the eternities of his family members. And by that one faithful Christ-follower taking those few steps across the room, let me ask you, how much kingdom-building impact did

that one stroll across the room make? Tremendous impact. And I wonder if the gates of hell shuddered when he took that first step for, I wonder, if in that moment, the angels in heaven began striking up the heavenly band, with banners being unfurled because the names of that businessman and his family members were written on them and would be waving majestically the moment they crossed the line of faith? Folks, what would happen if we were to take a few steps across the room? Could that encounter enable someone to spend eternity with God, and maybe even some people they know and love?

Bill Hybels writes the following, "The day Christ-followers like you and me stop taking walks across rooms in this manner, the day we stay glued to our Circles of Comfort, refuse to make the walk, refuse to enter the Zone of the Unknown... the day Christ-followers like you and me stop doing that sort of stuff, it is lights out for the kingdom of God here on earth. It is the beginning of the end of redemptive history. It's the slow defeat of the

church—the bride of Christ. It’s the end of the dream of Christ that people on earth would come to know him.” Folks, one of the top priorities of the Holy Spirit in each of our lives is to turn every single person here—every single Christ-follower—into a walk-across-the-room kind of person.

Everyone. So it takes us moving out of our Circle of Comfort and into the Zone of the Unknown and knowing that the Holy Spirit will guide us.

Second. **Listen for the Spirit’s promptings**. Friends, if we are going to be effective in the Zone of the Unknown, we have to be led by the Holy Spirit and listen to the Spirit’s promptings every step of the way. But let me say there will be times that there are obvious fruits and times that it seems like you should have stayed on your side of the room. And yet that might not mean that it the Holy Spirit was not in the act and didn’t want you to take the walk. Sometimes we will just never know. And sometimes when you think it is the time to make a move and things just don’t open up that way. Here is the key- if we are to be walk-across-the-room people that

means we walk when the Spirit nudges us to walk and we stay put when the Spirit says not to walk. See, it really is up to the Holy Spirit and it is out of our control. And friends, that's what makes this Christian life so adventuresome and what keeps us on the edge of the excitement. All I know is that Jesus said in Matthew 5:13 & 14 that we are to be salt and light in a darken world. And think of it this way- I can be the strongest, most savory form of salt in the world, and the brightest and best light in all the world but it will not mean a hill of beans' if I don't get up close to some people who need to be affected.

And I would bet that there are those out in the congregation today who are pushing back against what I am saying and I might be so bold as to say I can see it in some of your faces where you are saying, "that is for the super spiritual people who got this faith stuff and Jesus all worked out and that leaves me out. I am not a Biblical scholar, I haven't been trained, and," well, you fill in the blank. And guess what, I understand and I've been

there. But here is what can happen when you are in tune with Jesus, when you have an open and willing spirit that is prompted by His Spirit, and here is what can happen- You will find yourself standing in a Circle of Comfort and by the Spirit's power, you are listening to the conversation and you will see someone the Holy Spirit wants you to see. And you will feel the nudging and you will hear the Spirit's whisper and you will ask, "Is there someone you want me to go and talk to?" And you will begin the walk across the room and let go and let God do the leading.

And this leads to the final point today- **Just Walk**. Our passage from Philippians 2 told us that at a specific time in history, Jesus walked all the way across the cosmos and reached out his redemptive hand to people like me and you. And because He took that one walk, you and me, humankind was given the opportunity to be saved and secured in the family of God forever. But they have to be told about this one whose name is Jesus Christ.

Where is God asking you to walk? Somehow I believe He says to all of His followers, "I am going to ask you to walk across the street; walk across the restaurant; walk across the office to the person's desk; walk across the cafeteria or the locker room. I am going to ask you to walk, leave whatever Circle of Comfort you are in and take the walk, enter the unknown—and something really exciting is going to happen. Just do it. Just walk." Think of it this way- Jesus "just walked" for you and for me. For everyone. **Who walked across the room for you**- a parent, a teacher, a neighbor, a classmate, a co-worker; who walked across the room for you? Call them or write them a note today thanking them. And then join me the next three weeks as I encourage us all to walk across the room. Amen.

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Introduction: **The "E" word, "Evangelism" can be as simple as taking a walk across the room**

As followers of Jesus Christ, don't we all want to... touch the lives of people we know and love who are living their lives far from God?

Bill Hybels at a luncheon in the Deep South...

The single greatest gift Christ-followers can give to those around them is an introduction to the God who created them, loves them, and who has a purpose for their very lives

Three points as we think about the process of becoming usable to God

First, **being willing to enter the \_\_\_\_\_ of the \_\_\_\_\_**

Standing in a conversational "Circle of Comfort" and leaving it

Second, **listen for the Spirit's \_\_\_\_\_**

Matthew 5:13-14: being salt and light

And third, **just \_\_\_\_\_**

Philippians 2

Conclusion: Who walked across the room for you? \_\_\_\_\_

Call them or write them and thank them. And join me the next three weeks as we "walk across the room"