

Check Your Context

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[0 : 06] I'm going to open with prayer. And after I finish praying, if you want to grab a Bible, I've put Bibles on either side because I'm going to reference a few texts tonight, so it could be handy to have that with with you. So let me pray and then we'll get started. Heavenly Father, we love you. We thank you for meeting with us here.

We thank you for the mercy that you've shown us in Jesus Christ. And we pray that through the power of your Holy Spirit, you would help us to share the gospel with our neighbor, to speak about the hope that we found in you to be ready and willing to give an answer for the hope that we have in your son's name. We pray. Amen. So again, if you want to grab a Bible, you're welcome, too. But we'll have the text on the screen as well. So I want to mention a brief story that happened to me a few years ago when I was I used to work in youth Ministry when I was in Jackson. And one retreat that we went on, it was a high school retreat to the beach. And I was given the opportunity to give the last talk of the retreat. And to me, that was an honor.

And so I've been putting a lot of thought into what text I would want to choose. And I chose a text that I thought would communicate the gospel really clearly. And I thought, this is my one chance to tell these kids who I have been with for two years and who I love to make the gospel as clear as I possibly can for them. And so I did it. And I was thrilled by the opportunity.

I loved sharing the gospel. And a few days later, I was having breakfast with some of the students who were on that retreat. And there was a student there who was not a member of our Church, but he had been visiting quite a bit, and I had gotten to know him really well. He was a really bright student. And he said, Hunter, I really appreciated that talk that you gave at the retreat.

[2 : 00] And I had a question. I noticed that you kept talking about the gospel over and over again. You kept speaking about the power of the gospel. And my question is, what is the gospel? He said, you kept talking about it so much, but I never actually quite understood what you meant when you used the words the gospel.

And I wanted to just die inside when he said that. But the good news is that in God's Providence, someone came to me and said, tell me what the gospel is. But I bring that story up because I think that there's a danger that story represents a danger that we can all face, which is that we can be so excited about the gospel and about what Jesus has done for us and we want to share that message and we understand that message for ourselves. But then when we bring that message to someone else, something gets lost in the translation. And you just know sometimes that when you're trying to share the gospel, you've got this fire inside of you, but it's not getting across to the other person. And you don't know why.

Carly and I went to the Van Gogh exhibit this morning, and in the exhibit, there are quotes by Van Gogh all over the exhibit. There was one quote that I thought that stuck with me as I was preparing for this, because I think it speaks to what it feels like when you have something inside of you that you want to share with the world, but you just don't know how to get it out. And Vancouver said this. He said, a great fire Burns within me, but no one stops to warn themselves at it and passerbys only see a wisp of smoke. And so you may have this experience where the gospel feels like a fire inside of you and you want to tell the world about it and you want to tell how powerful it is.

But you know that to the outside world looking at you, sometimes it just looks like a wisp of spoke and you just don't know how to get it out. And tonight's topic is called Check Your Context, which is the title of a chapter in this book that we've been going through called Before You Share Your Faith by Matt Smithhurst. And I'm going to reference that several times. But the point of the chapter is that in order to share the gospel, well, you not only need to know your Bible and the story of the gospel well, you also need to know who the person is that you're talking to. And so the one point that I want to hammer home tonight, and if you hear nothing else, I just hope that you hear this and

that you take it home and just think about it.

[4 : 30] And it's that to communicate the gospel clearly, you have to know your neighbor well. So in gospel conversations, it's not enough to just know your Bible. You also have to know who you're speaking to so that when you speak to them, you can communicate the gospel in words that they can understand. And that's one small part of the larger job of evangelizing, of helping people understand the gospel so that it can change their lives, so that God can be at work in their hearts. And the good news is that we are not the first people well, Cory said this a few weeks ago.

One of the unique challenges for us is that we live in a context where it's not like everyone believes in a God, and you just have to convince them that your God is the right one. We live in a world where people aren't even convinced in anything beyond the material world. So it's not just convincing them that God exists. It's not just convincing them that Jesus died for their sins. It's convincing them in the first place that there's more to this reality than just material.

And the good news for us as we consider how to speak about the gospel to the world around us is we're not the first people who have faced this challenge. And what I want to look at tonight is the way that Paul in the New Testament faced this challenge of bringing the gospel to different contexts and telling it to the world in a way that they can understand. And I want to begin by looking at one Corinthians, chapter nine.

And this is a passage that you're probably familiar with. And this passage speaks to the lengths to which Paul goes to spread the good news of the gospel.

So Paul says, for though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews, I became as a Jew in order to win the Jews to those under the law, I became as one under the law, though not being myself under the law, that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law, I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law to the weak, I became weak that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, but by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel that I may share with them in its blessing.

[7 : 04] What you have in this passage, and we won't spend time looking at the passage specifically. But what you have is Paul's giving a principle for evangelism. Tom, if you could just pull up the last slide there in the second half of verse 22 where Paul says, I had become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. And this is a principle that has Paul's talking partly about the customs that he's willing to engage in with the groups that he's with. So it's more than just about communication, but it does include the way that Paul speaks about the gospel to the different cultures that he interacts with.

I say that as a fact, not just because I infer it from this passage, but because when you look in the Book of Acts at the way that Paul shares the gospel, you see that the way that he communicates the gospel, the message is the same, but the way that he communicates it is different based on the different groups that he speaks to. And we're going to see that in just a moment. But the word that we used today to describe the second half of this first where Paul says, I have become all things to all people is the word contextualization. And it's a word that's become popular in Christian circles in the past few decades. But it's a word that describes something that Christians have been doing for centuries.

And I'll give you a definition of it. But first, I'll define it by showing you how all of us contextualize the gospel all of the time in really helpful ways sometimes. So, for instance, on Sunday nights when Derek or Corey gets up here and they do the children's devotion, they probably have a way that they think about the gospel themselves. But when those children come up, their language changes and it looks different than the language they might use in the pulpit. And the content is the same. But they have to consciously think when you talk to a child about the gospel, you have to consciously think, what words do I need to use to communicate to this eight year old what it means that Jesus died for them? It's probably not helpful to tell them that Jesus, he provides the expiation and the propitiation for their sins, even though those words are true and are really helpful. But it may be enough to tell those children like Jesus, he paid the penalty for your sins and talk about what that means. Let's contextualization. The Bible that you have in your hands is a work of contextualization where Christians over the centuries take the original Greek in the Hebrew text, and they translate them into languages of other cultures so that you can come to your Bible and you can see the word of God and you can make sense of it in a language that you know.

So people have taken time and hours and months and years to give you the word of God in words that you understand. That's an act of contextualization. And the question isn't whether as Christians, we need to contextualize the gospel. The fact is, all of us contextualize the gospel. The question is whether we're doing it well.

[10 : 14] When you speak the gospel to someone else, you're automatically putting it in language that you understand often. But it might not be language that the other person understands. So my natural propensity when I tell other people about Jesus is to speak from the position of someone who is an American, who is universally educated, who is middle class, who was raised in the language of Christianity based on where I come from in the United States.

So when I communicate the gospel, those are all the assumptions that I have, that when I use the word sin, I assume that everyone else knows what I mean because I was raised in a culture where we use the word sin all the time. And the further I get away from people like that, people like me, the more effort I have to put into thinking. Is my communication of the gospel making sense to this person? A really great example that's used in the book that Smithurst uses is he talks about when he was a missionary, and Matt is from Virginia in the States, and he went to India and he asked so I'm not sure they went to India. He went somewhere over in the east, and he asked someone, who do you think Jesus is?

And they very matter of faculty said Jesus is an American God. And that told him that if he had just gone up and just spoken the gospel to this person, it would have either not made sense or it would have been misinterpreted because their understanding of the world was so different from the way that Matt was raised that he realized that he has to step back several layers and do a lot of groundwork before he can get to the place where they understand what he means rightly when he says that Jesus died for their sins.

Will you pull up the Keller quote, Tom So Tim Keller in his book Center Church provides a really great definition of contextualization, and it's a definition that you can take and think. Are these thoughts in my mind when I share the gospel with my neighbor? So Keller says contextualization is giving people the Bible's answers to questions about life that people in their particular time and place are asking in language and forms they can comprehend and through appeals and arguments with force they can feel even if they reject them. Now, that's a weighty. That's a big definition. But you see, I've highlighted all the main points. So you start with the fact that you have a message, the message of the scriptures that you're trying to communicate. And part of contextualization is using the scriptures to communicate the gospel in a way that answers the questions that the people around you are asking. You use language and forms that they can understand. So, for instance, well, for instance, when I kept talking about the gospel over and over again, I thought, everyone knows what the gospel, that word, the gospel means.

[13 : 32] And he didn't. And so I needed to use a different way of describing that or I needed to define that term before I could use it. And then finally, through using appeals and arguments with force, they can feel. So it's not only communicating the message, but are you communicating the message in a way that the person that's listening to you can say, not only do I understand you, but I understand why this matters so much to you, even if, as he says at the end, even if they reject your message. So contextualization doesn't mean that inevitably, if you communicate the gospel correctly, people will believe that's a work of the Holy Spirit.

But you can get to the point where you can describe the gospel to someone to the point where they could say it back to you. And you can at least say, even if you reject this gospel. You've told me that you understand it correctly and you understand why it means something to me.

Another way of putting this, that's all getting to my main point tonight that I want to say it again is that to communicate the gospel clearly, you have to know your neighbor well. So all those last points require knowing your neighbor well for you to communicate the gospel clearly. All right. Now, what I want to do for just a moment is to look at the way that we see Paul contextualizing the gospel. And he does it twice in one chapter in Acts 17.

So if you go to Acts chapter 17, verses two and four, and I love that it's in one chapter so that you can't say, well, this is the way that Paul evangelized at one point in his life, and then he changed the way that he evangelized later in his life. This is the same scene essentially within a few months or weeks of each other. So this first scene is Paul going to Jews and trying to explain the gospel to them. And it says, and Paul went in, as was his custom. And on three Sabbath days, he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer

and to rise from the dead.

And saying, this Jesus, whom I proclaimed to you, is the Christ. And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. So if you've got your Bible right there, the passage continues, right. But I just want to point out how Paul is contextualizing the gospel here. He's speaking to Jews, obviously, and Paul was raised as a Jew.

[15 : 59] So this is the environment which would have been the easiest for him to communicate the gospel. It may not have been the easiest environment to communicate the gospel in, but he at least understood conceptually how to communicate this message. And the way that he does it is he finds a point of common ground. He speaks to them in a language they know, which is the language of the Old Testament. And he tells them, you have been looking for this person called the Christ.

You've been looking for the Christ.

And his argument is the person that you have been looking for in your scriptures is Jesus. And he explains to them through their scriptures how the Old Testament actually proves that what happened to Jesus needed to happen. And it proved that he was the Messiah. And what I want you to notice is how he finds a point of common contact. So he's speaking to them in language that they understand, with themes and concepts that they understand.

But then there's a subversiveness to his message too. So once he's speaking to them on common ground, he uses that common ground to actually challenge their assumptions and to challenge the way they see the world. So he says, you're right to be searching for the Messiah. You're right that there is a Messiah who will come and redeem us. What you're missing is that he has come and that it is Jesus Christ.

So, you see, he finds this common ground, speaks to them in a way they can understand, but then challenges them through that common ground and shows them how Christianity is the answer to what they're looking for.

[17 : 41] All right, now, I want to look at this second part of chapter 17. So the first part was in Thessalonica at a synagogue. Now we go to the later part in chapter 17, where Paul goes to the Areopagus, which is one of the most famous speeches that Paul gives. And this time, instead of speaking to Jews, Paul is speaking to Athenians. He's speaking to Greeks.

And the passage lists a number of different groups that he's talking to here. Epicureans, Stoics, philosophers. These are spiritual people, poets. And I don't think I'm going to read the whole passage, but I think if I read just the beginning, you'll get a sense of what he does here is different from the way that he talks to the Jews. So Paul stands up in the area, Areopagus.

They've made a place for him to do this. Paul standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said Men of Athens. I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I pass along and observe the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription to the unknown God. What therefore you worship as unknown.

This I proclaim to you the God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and Earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything, since he himself gives all mankind life and breath and everything. I'll stop there just for the sake of time. But what he does here is totally different. He doesn't go to these people and say, I have found the Christ, because the word Christ is a Jewish term, and it's a Jewish concept. And I'm sure that the longer he is with them, he would explain to them the Old Testament Scriptures and explain to them the significance of Christ.

But what he does is he begins by speaking with themes and concepts that they understand. He points to the statue they have to the unknown God. And again, he speaks to them on this common ground, things that they understand, concepts they understand. If you look later in this passage, he actually quotes Greek authors. So he uses authors they're familiar with.

[19 : 51] But just like he did with the Jews, he begins with this common ground. But then there's this subversive element where he uses what they know and then talks about how Jesus Christ and God, the God that he has found in Jesus, is actually the fulfillment of what they have been looking for but have missed. So there's this beauty to the fact that you could say he's accommodating his message to the people that he's talking to, but he's accommodating insofar as he can confront them with the gospel in the way that they can understand it. He quotes thinkers like Epictetus and Erastus. So you've got these two scenes and just think about if Paul had gone into the Jewish synagogue and had quoted Greek philosophers to prove his point, he would have been laughed out

of the synagogue or much worse than that.

And if he had gone to the Greeks and had begun by saying, I have found the one that's predicted in the Old Testament, he would have also been mocked because those concepts would have made sense to neither group. So he begins talking in languages in a language they understand, but then confronts them with the reality of the gospel through that.

So to put it another way, before Paul communicates the gospel, what you see in these passages is that he understands his neighbor well.

That doesn't mean that people necessarily agree with Paul. And when you read both these stories, in both stories, they end with people rejecting Paul for the message that he's just given them. But you also find people that agree with him. And when we share the gospel with our neighbor, it is possible for us to over contextualize the gospel where we just come to them and we say basically give them a gospel that's palatable to them, where we essentially give them a gospel that they would say, sure, I agree with that. But we can also under contextualize the gospel where we use concepts and terms in trying to explain it to them, but it just goes right over their head, and they never even have a chance to wrestle with what we've said to them.

Okay, so we've seen how Paul contextualizes the gospel. And I want to close for just a few moments with this. How do you take some of those big themes, this idea that we need to communicate the gospel in ways that the people around us can understand, and to do that way is to know these people. What does it look like for us to know our neighbor well enough to be able to communicate the gospel in a way that they can understand, not in a way that makes them a Christian, but in a way that we can make them at least understand our faith so that they can know what they're rejecting if they reject it? And I want to give a few simple thoughts to consider, and I hope that these are things that when you hear, you think, well, of course, that's the case.

[22 : 57] But the difficulty is sometimes we can be so focused on sharing the gospel that we forget who's actually in front of us. And it's almost like a hot potato that we just want to get out of our hands. Let me just say it. And we don't think, how can I best communicate this to this person? So four ideas briefly.

Number one, listen the person that you want to share the gospel with, listen to their story.

One of the questions that I find easy is just to ask someone when I talk to them, did you grow up in Church? And a lot of times this is easier for me because religion naturally comes up, because people will ask me, what do you do? And I can say, Well, I study theology or I mentioned in Ministry. And then I can say, well, did you grow up in Church? And usually with that question, I find they'll not only tell me whether they grew up in Church, but they'll tell me why they don't go to Church.

They'll give me more than I asked for. But listen to their story. Ask them who they think Jesus is. I think what Thomas said on Sunday night was so true that his impression was that most people in a city like this, like the idea of Jesus, they just don't like the idea of him being a God. They had this idea of a middle of Jesus, and that's at least a point of contact where that's something that you could move on and say, you seem interested in Jesus and you find him a compelling figure and push that further.

[24 : 32] Does the person you're speaking to believe in God at all? These are kind of questions. Just listen to them. Let them tell you about what they believe. And oftentimes that will dictate how you begin speaking about the hope of the gospel.

So the first thing, listen to their story. Number two, in your own mind before you speak to them or having considered what they've said, consider the unique hope that Jesus offers to the way they see the world. So one example that Smith Hurst gives to this is he talked about two young women at his Church that he knew and they had been trying to evangelize their neighbor and tell them about Jesus. And it was clear that he liked Jesus, but he wanted nothing to do with religion or God. And what became evident was that he had been through a lot of difficult times in his life and he had lost both a father and a stepfather in really terrible ways.

And that was why he could not believe in God, because of that question of suffering in this world. And the way that they tried to approach that is that they tried to walk alongside him and show him how they themselves were familiar with suffering in this life. I suffer too, just so you know. But they sympathize with him and they showed them that they knew what it was like to suffer as well. But more than that, in a way, they subverted his worldview.

So he was thinking, because of the suffering I've seen in this world, there can't be a God. And so what they tried to communicate to him was God is the only hope that we can have in the midst of

suffering.

We need a God in a world where there is the kind of suffering that you've experienced.

[26 : 34] Smithson's quote, CS Lewis CS Lewis said that human history is the long, terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy. And if you believe that's true, and it's good to be reminded of this when we think about evangelism, that this is not just some gimmick we're trying to sell. But if you actually believe that Jesus Christ is the true source of happiness in this life, then it's helpful. When you think about your neighbor and you think about who they are and the things they love and the hopes they have and the fears they have in this life, think to yourself what impact he has on those hopes and fears. So if they fear some kind of insecurity, financial insecurity, what does Jesus Christ have to say to that?

And how can he offer hope in the midst of terrible anxiety? And that could be through talking about how you've dealt with anxiety and how the gospel has given you hope in the midst of that final two things. Quickly, second to last one, watch your language. So always be aware of the words that you're using and whether those words actually make sense to the person you're talking to. So even if you say part of the gospel is that God loves you, what you mean when you say God loves you may be different from what they understand when they hear you say God loves you, so they may hear you say, God doesn't care how you live your life.

He just loves you for who you are and wants you to be happy and do whatever you want to in this life. That could be what they hear when you say God loves you. So watch your language and then lastly, respond to what you hear. So a quote that I heard in the discussions about Ukraine and Russia is that no plan survives contact with the enemy. No plan survives contact with the enemy. And the point is you can make all the plans that you want to about how you would like to share the gospel with someone. But then when you're actually with them, you have to be willing to respond to what they say and to the questions they have and to what they want to talk about. And I don't want you to think from that quote that I'm calling the person you want to evangelize the enemy. But in my conversations with people, it never goes the way that I want it to when I try to share the gospel. But sometimes they raise questions that I would have never even thought about.

And that gives me a new opportunity to share the gospel. In a way that I could have never predicted.

[29 : 10] Okay, so for the sake of time, I'll close with two thoughts. Number one, as you think about contextualizing the gospel so that it's sensible to other people, remember to contextualize the gospel for yourself and remind yourself why the gospel is good news to you and how does it actually fulfill the deepest hopes and desires of your heart? And then lastly remember and take heart in the fact that we are not here to make other people Christians, that's the Holy Spirit's work, but God allows us to be a tool in that. So take hope in the fact that when you share the gospel with other people, the God of the Universe is living and active and he is prepared to work through your weak words. Let me pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for your gospel and I pray that you would help us when we are weak. Give us wisdom and teach us to take advantage of every moment that we can to speak about the hope that we found in you. And we ask all this in your son's name. Amen.