

Current Challenges

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[0 : 03] Alright. Hey, everybody. Great to be with you all tonight. We are carrying on a series this evening that we started two weeks ago called Gospel Conversations. This is number two of eight total for the remainder of the semester.

I'll pray for us, and then we'll dig in. And then afterwards we'll pray in small groups, as we usually do. So let's pray together. Lord, we give thanks for gathering your people, for gathering us, this community, this family, this Church. And we ask now that you would meet with us and that you would help us to think well and to be affected, to be moved towards being great witnesses to the good news of the gospel.

And we're thinking about that, as you know, Lord, the rest of this semester, and we just long to be people of public faith with gospel opportunities so we can have gospel conversation. And so we ask for you to work, for you to go before us and prepare people's hearts. We ask for you to create opportunities that we got to step into. But, Lord, we come before you now and know that none of this will matter if your Holy Spirit doesn't work in people's lives. And so we ask for that work in our lives to make us bold witnesses, work in the people around us lives to make them receivers of hearing the good news.

So we asked for that heart in Jesus name. Amen. Cool. You all come on in.

Just a couple of things before we really dig in. And that's we're working from two books, Derek and I, as we rotate on the series. Hunter will be involved in that as well. Hope you know that, Hunter, you're involved. And that's Tim Keller's.

[1 : 58] How to Reach the west. Again, it's a very quick little 60 page with not that many words per page. Excellent study on what it means to be to recover evangelism and a missionary movement in the modern Western world. And I can't commend it enough. You can get it for free online.

If you go to Gospel and LIFE.com and put your email in for the newsletter, they'll give it to you for free as a PDF or as an ebook. And in this book that Derek has given out tonight that we got this week, Matt Smithur. He's an American pastor, Reformed Baptist guy. Before you share your faith, five ways to be evangelism ready. Very simple little book, but it's thoughtful and helpful.

So we're taking content from both of those books and then our own thoughts in the Bible, of course, and working through gospel conversations. So last week, Derek talked about the gospel itself and what that is. And we talked about that at City Group. Tonight, I want to take a step back a little bit and think about some of the challenges that we're facing in terms of gospel conversations in the contemporary world, and then also think about a step towards a biblical model for what it means to have a public faith in the 21st century. So let's do that by way of introduction.

It is very true that statistically, most churches in the United Kingdom and in the United States, North America, Canada are struggling numerically, they're struggling. They're getting smaller. And God has blessed Saint Columbus, and there's people always coming in the door. And it's a thriving family of faith. And we've seen people come to faith in our Church in the last few weeks, and you'll hear more about that in the future.

But there's a lot of blessing here. But it is at the same time true to say that the Western Church is also in numerical decline, and that's very true statistically. And again, at the same time, Jesus Christ is King of creation and the gospel is powerful, and the Church will never fail, will never fall. Churches will close their doors always in different places throughout the world, and yet the Church will never go anywhere. It will always be everywhere.

[4 : 21] And that's because God does what he wants and God moves throughout every land. And so there's a lot of reasons to lament today, and there's a lot of reasons to be excited. There are more Christians in China than the United Kingdom today, and there are more Christians on the continent of Africa than the continent of Europe. And that's a reason to be excited and to lament at the same time. And it means that there's so much that's happening across the globe, so much good of how God's moving, and that we have opportunity.

We have huge opportunity. We have huge mission call here in Europe, in the United Kingdom and the Western world in general. We both just by way of introduction, we've got to be honest that we're facing a big challenge that's different than previous generations, and we do it with a huge hope and expectation that's grounded on the power of the gospel and the King of creation, and that he won't let his Church fall or fail. Right. So two things again, let's talk then about a couple of those particular challenges facing the west, and then I want to look at the Bible for a few minutes and talk about biblical model for public faith and begin to get at that.

So first, I'm just going to mention two challenges. These are very broad. There's a lot of subcategories we could talk about underneath these, but these both will be very familiar to everybody here. But the first challenge is just to point out that the culture we live in is post Christian. I mentioned this in a sermon a few weeks ago, but let's talk about it again for just a few minutes.

Post Christian, meaning that it used to be a Christian culture, and now it is a post Christian culture. And so we could talk about Christian cultures and post Christian cultures. We could talk about cultures that are created by other world religions or religious cultures in general. And then there's specificities underneath that. But a Christian culture or a religious culture, a culture that's dominated by world religion at large is going to have a few things that a post Christian culture does not have.

Several of those include one. Most people in a Christian or religious culture believe in sacred order of some sort, right. Most people believe in life after death, and they agree to a broad standard of morality that the Ten Commandments in here, in this land, in the United States and other places used to be a generally 99% agreed upon a way of expressing moral reality. That's not the case any longer. Most people in those cultures believe in life beyond the visible.

[7 : 05] There's something beyond the visible. And so in those cultures, you have a very obvious point of encounter in any gospel conversation, and that's your basic religious groundwork of beliefs that everybody shares, that 90 plus percent of the culture shares together. And today that's not the case. Over 90% of the people aren't going to share many of those religious dots, as they've been called, points of encounter, points of contact, people that study missions and mythology. That's the study of missions and evangelism talk about the point of contact.

Where is the connection between believer, a person who believes in Jesus and a person who doesn't. How do you make a point of contact to get to a gospel conversation? Well, the point of contact used to be religion and spirituality and the moral framework that everybody agreed upon and hope and life after death. But that's changed today. Religion is not the ground of public community any longer of society.

Now that's not to say that people aren't religious because most people still are religious, meaning some type of publicly attested to census check marked box, that they practice some form of religion, that they're not just an atheist. Still, today, less than 15% of everybody in the Western world is an atheist. Right. So most people are religious. It's just that they're also secular.

Okay. So this is very important. To be secular does not mean to be an atheist. Right. What does it mean to be secular?

A secular culture is one where the private life and the public life have been cut off from one another. That's what secular means, right. So in a secular culture, people have this social contract where we all, by osmosis, by just taking in the culture we grew up in, agreed to be radical individuals. So in that world, in a secular culture, it's fine to be a Christian. What's not okay is to try to get somebody else to become a Christian because there's a cutoff between the public and the private.

[9 : 21] Right. What you're allowed to do in your home and in your own family and in your own personal life, what matters to you, that's fine. It's pluralistic. It doesn't matter. That's okay what you believe, but it becomes a problem whenever it, quote, harms another person, whenever it enters into another person's space.

Where your view, your moral view of whatever your religious view causes damage to another person's psychology through trying to convert them. That's a hallmark of secularism where there's been a radical divide between public and private. And so what that does is it creates this mythological realm where the public sector is neutral. Right. And Christians, we have to say that that can never be the case.

There's no such thing as a neutral public space that every person that enters into public space has a viewpoint, has a world view, has a standard by which they judge everything else has a way of viewing morality. Right. And so you could talk about public schools being places that are just neutral. They don't have a standpoint. But that's never the case.

Right. Every classroom has a standpoint. Every space has a standpoint. Right. So there's this, it's called the myth of the neutral, as it's often called in Christian understanding of the secular realm.

What is sacred to people in a secular realm, whereas God's Ten Commandments used to be sacred, what is now sacred in a secular realm? And here's some of the things that are sacred today. Personal freedom is sacred. And when personal freedom is sacred, that means there's a lack of transcendent reality that anybody needs to collectively conform to. Personal freedom is maximized, meaning any type of agreed upon transcendent reality.

[11 : 06] We all need to conform to that's minimized. Right. The second thing that's sacred is that there's a basic conception that most people are good, but a few people are bad. So in the secular world, the secular world looks a lot like the Greek pagan world that Christianity first entered into, because in the Greek pagan world that Christianity first entered into, they had a viewpoint that there was an absolute dichotomy between good and bad, and you could only be one or the other. There are good people and there are evil people and there's a good God and there's an evil God and all that is always fighting.

And that's the same view today. Right. And we can prove it, because if a politician shakes hands, as recently happened, with a religious person that holds to a traditional view of sexual ethics and Twitter finds out what happens to the politician, somebody shout it out, they get canceled, and they have to publicly apologize and resign their post. And what's happened is that the world has said most people are good. But if you get caught in some type of scandal, or if scandal determined by the public's view of morality, or if you have the wrong view on something, it doesn't matter.

It doesn't matter how much your life looks like Mother Teresa's life, you're bad. Right. And that view of humanity is totally opposite to the Christian view. Right. Because the Christian view says that the good and evil divide actually cuts through every person's heart.

You can't separate between good and evil because that's going on in everybody that God by his common Grace, retains moral value, moral goodness, the ability to do good in everybody. But at the same time, everybody's a broken sinner. And so we fully expect people to have scandal, but also the opportunity to change. We fully expect that people are going to get caught, but we also have space to forgive because we know that we're like that, too. But that's not what the secular world breeds.

The secular world breeds that there are good people and bad people, and the bad people have to be publicly condemned forever without the opportunity of forgiveness. Right. So secularity breeds radical individualism that prizes personal freedom, which means the lack of any transcendent norm. Nevertheless, it replaces that transcendent norm with some standard whatever is most popular. And then it uses that standard to judge between the good and the bad people, where 90% of people are good but 10% are bad, and they're the ones that are destroying reality and culture.

[13 : 58] So we could say a lot more than this, but I need to move on. So here's what I want to ask. This is a hard question, so I won't ask anybody to answer it tonight because it's difficult. But this is the question that bridge. This is the question of this whole series.

Right. And this is the details we've got to unpack going forward as we talk together about this. And this is all of our homework. Derek last week looked at the book of Peter, and Peter tells us to always be ready to give an answer for why we have the hope of Jesus Christ in us. And here's the question.

How do you evangelize and persuade people who lack any sense of sin that see themselves on the good side of humanity, who don't have any view of transcendence or any religious framework whatsoever? That's the question that we face. How do you make a point of contact with that person to have a meaningful conversation about the gospel of Jesus in a secular culture, a culture where religion has been privatized entirely? All right, that's the first issue. The second issue is this.

We don't have time for more. So that's what I'm doing, too, for me to get to the Bible stuff as well, is the digital culture. The digital culture. Okay, so we live in a post Christian culture and we live in a digital culture. And that's a big issue.

It's a big contextual reality we've got to wrestle with right now. A 2019 study says that the average person in the Western world. So Europe and North America spends four to 5 hours a day online. Now, that seems quite low to me. And that was also 2019.

[15 : 49] My guess is that now it's five to seven in 2022, but it was four to five in 2019. The average Westerner. Okay, I do want to ask this question for real, actually, see if anybody has quick reflections on it. If that's the case, if the average human being today in Scotland, in the United Kingdom, and in America spending 5 hours online every day, how does that level of digital technological life impact religion, do you think, impact the religious lives of people or the possibility of religion? What are the some things, anything that that could do to religion, to the possibility of faith, you think?

I know this is also a hard question, a tricky question, but anything the simplest idea, perhaps distracting. Okay. Highly distracting, right? Yes. Excellent.

Yeah, absolutely right. I mean, that radical amount of disembodiment from real embodied relationship changes the landscape of relationship at a magnitude that's probably incomprehensible.

Yes. So you're interacting in a space that is highly argumentative. Right. Highly pluralistic. You're encountering contrary ideas all the time, and you're doing that as a radical individual, meaning that you go into social media to image yourself to the world.

And that image is thin, not thick. It's constructed. It's not that people in that the medium is the message. Right. And so in a medium like social media, where you're imaging yourself to the world, it's very likely that you become willing to change that image of yourself based on interaction, based on how you think you're being perceived.

[18 : 15] Right. So I think it creates a fast mutability permeability to your own personal character and what you are and what you think you are. You'll change it. You'll shift it very quickly in that public space. Right.

So change and belief, I think, is quite easy in that scenario.

This is not just an issue for non Christians, by the way. Right. And one of the very important things to say, Carl Trueman points this out in his book *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, that we all need to understand in the Church, that we are these people. We are on the Internet this much.

We live in a post Christian world. We're modern people. And so we can never underestimate the amount that the culture is always influencing us as well at the very same time. Right. One of the examples of this that hit me this week was I was in a meeting with a group of pastors all across Edinburgh, and they were getting together to very informally discuss Church planting.

And there's a lot of different denominations Church planting. And it's all great. It's really exciting. And 99% of it was very encouraging. But it came to one man and we were all taking turns sharing what our churches were up to.

[19 : 39] And he said the question was, where are you thinking next? Where are you trying to send somebody? Where do you want to take some of your people and go take the gospel to a different what area so we don't all just bump into each other? Well, he said we're thinking we have shifted. We no longer want to do necessarily physical Church plants.

We want to think of the digital space as a physical space. And so most of our Church planning from here on out is going to be exclusively online. And nobody had the guts to say what they were thinking. But that's exactly the framework of what such digital immersion can do. It can even shift the perspective of the Christian Church.

To think that disembodiment can also be a form of embodiment. It would be to not heed the command of Jesus Christ together in person. Right. It can do all sorts of things. Trying to disciple, witness disciple people who live a seven day life online, including me, means something very different today than previous generations.

Call to disciple. All right, we've got to move on if we're going to talk for just a minute about Luke twelve. And there's no easy answers to this, but the question that is before us that we're working through in this series is that question I presented to you, how do we evangelize in the midst of this culture? All I want to do now, this is the question we have six more times to try to address is start to pick up on that by looking at how the Bible talks to us about our relationship to the outside world. And I think the best way to talk about the way Keller talks about that in his book is to say that we've got to be people committed to public faith, to a faith that is public in the midst of a secular realm that tries to force it to be private.

Now you have to do that in thoughtful ways to be sure we're going to talk about that. But it's got to be a public faith. And one of the models that Jesus gives us, Jesus gives us a direct picture of what public faith looks like in Luke chapter twelve in a little bit of a surprising way versus 42 to 48. So if you have a Bible, you can look at it with me or phone, I'm going to read it. You can just listen as well.

[22 : 01] It's quite easy to understand. Luke 1242 to 48 and the Lord said, he tells a parable, Jesus tells a parable who then is the faithful and wise manager whom his master will set over his household to give them their portion of food at the proper time. Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all of his possessions. But if that servant says to himself, My master is delayed in coming, and he begins to beat the male and female servants and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him at an hour when he does not know, and he will cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful and that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will will receive a severe beating.

But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given of him, much will be required. And from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more the old translation in verse 42 of the word manager was the word steward. And it's been switched to manager fairly recently. So it used to always say the household steward, who will be a faithful one, steward.

When we think about stewarding, most of the time, we think about money and we think about Church giving some days and things like that with stewardship. But the reason for that is because this word manager or steward is the Greek word for economy. It's literally the word economy, economy. And that's because all economy. The word economy originally meant was how a particular household runs its personal household.

And then when you take all these different households and you put them all together and you get a society, then you talk about the economy, how all the households are trading goods with one another and things like that, and then that becomes what we think of as the economy today. But this is literally the word, the noun form of he's, the household economist, whatever you want to say economist, I guess makes more sense. He's the household economist. And what is that? The servant of the father of the house, the patriarch, the owner of the house.

Well, obviously in this parable, the owner of the house is God Jesus Christ, and he has put in charge of the house a faithful and wise manager, an economist, one who is to run the house. Now, very important that the ESB I just read from translates all the words they're a servant. It's very literally the word slave in Greek. And the reason they translated a servant is because it's trying to differentiate our mental picture of slavery, chattel slavery, slavery of the last 500 years from the type of slavery that was happening here. They're very different.

[25 : 06] We don't have time to get into that. However, I do think the New Testament advocates for the end of this form of slavery, just like all slavery. And also we have to say that when slavery is being talked about in the New Testament, there are huge differences from American shadow slavery or British or whatever, any type of slavery in the past several hundred years, for one. What's probably happening here is that a person would more often put themselves into a situation of slavery. They wouldn't be captured and sold.

They would become a slave voluntarily and they would be paid usually had a contract, and that up to a certain time they would have their freedom. And they did that to supply food for their family, although there were, of course, abuses at times. That's what's happening here. What would happen is a household would have some business. Right.

And the father, the manager, the patriarch, would then take one of his slaves, his servants, and say, you are the CEO, you're the one that's got to run it. And that is the economist, the economist. He is the one who is in charge of all the household. And so he's the authoritative slave in the household estate. He'd have been paid, he could purchase his freedom, all that sort of stuff.

But the reason for that is because just like any business, there's an owner and then there's typically a CEO. That's exactly the same thing. But within a household, it's an early form of this. But also every owner needed some type of mediator to have a better relationship with the people that worked for him. I found this to be the case so often.

I used to be in the youth Ministry back in the day and back in the day that's not that long ago, a few years ago in youth Ministry. And one of the things I found was that parents would come and talk about issues facing their 14, 15, 16 year old. Right. Lots of issues, as we all know. And what would happen is the 15 year old would never heed the parents advice.

[27 : 15] And then my job, in the eyes of the parents, was to do what was to be the economist, the mediator, the manager, the one who took the wisdom of the household and brought it to the 15 year old. And then hopefully there would be a change, same thing situation. You've got a guy who's running the household, but he's also the relationship manager. He's making sure everybody is okay, that the owner understands the people, all those sorts of things. Right now, understand this, that this man is wholly accountable to the master.

He's a slave. And yet the master has said, I give you authority over the household, manage it, steward it, take the good that I own and get busy and make more, make a profit. Right now, Jesus takes this and says, this is exactly the image of the Christian that every single Christian is. The economist is a person who God has said by way of the gospel, you are a slave of Christ. That's the language we get from Paul.

You're a total submissive servant to Jesus, and you've been made the steward of God's household, meaning God has actually set every Christian up as one of these to manage the resources of God and to steward them. Right now, this echoes, actually, I think, Genesis 12 to 28, when God makes humanity and says, take Dominion over the world, be my steward of creation. Well, because of sin and through the gospel, the cultural mandate of Genesis one, be a steward of creation has not only become be a steward of creation, but it's always become a steward of the household of God's gospel itself. It's extended for the Christian. The cultural mandate has.

And this is it all over again in the New Testament. Now, what does this mean?

Let me say this, sorry. Matthew 25, 26 says a little bit more. I'm just going to list it for you really quickly because we're running out of time and we get the same warning here in this passage. But Matthew 25, Jesus says, the wicked manager of Stewart same word, buries his treasure in a field and sits on it. And when the master comes home, what does the master say?

[29 : 37] He says, You've been wicked and you've got the same thing happening with the steward here saying, don't bury the household resources I've given you. Don't fail to go do something and take risks and try to build the household profits more and more and more. In other words, it's saying that the person who is a Christian, who's been called to be a steward of God's house can never go into maintenance mode. You can't bury the resources God's given you. You've got to have public faith.

That's what Jesus is saying here. And so what are the resources? What are the resources? Turn just very quickly to one Corinthians nine if you have a Bible, 16 and 17, one Corinthians 9:16 and 17.

If I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting, for necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel. So Paul tells us that one of the resources, the key resource of the steward of God's household is the gospel itself. That's the first great resource that we've been given. We're on an unconditional obligation to steward the gospel of God.

If you flip back just a couple of pages, one Corinthians four one, this is how one should regard us, Paul's telling you, this is how you should think of me as a slave of Christ. Here it is and steward economist of the mystery of God. So Paul takes Jesus vision here that a steward is both the slave and the manager of God's house resources and picks it up in one Corinthians four one, and says, Church, here's how you got to think about my job. I am the slave of Christ and the steward of the mystery of God. He uses the exact same language in its language for every Christian.

And it's that we're unconditionally servants of Jesus and at the same time been given resource authority to go steward the resource. And the resource is the gospel. The resource, secondly, is good works that point people to God as Father in heaven. Matthew five, Salt and light. And there's a third resource.

[31 : 51] And the third resource is the gift that you've been given by the Holy Spirit. And we can't talk about those gifts tonight, but they show up in one Corinthians twelve, Romans, twelve, Ephesians four, one Peter four, that every single one of us, if you're a believer tonight, has a gift by the Holy Spirit. You've got the gospel, you've got the potential of good works as a witness, and you've got a gift from the Holy Spirit. And Jesus says you're a steward of that resource. You're to make it public, and you can't go into maintenance mode, you can't bury it, you can't sit on it.

He calls that wicked. And so the call tonight is that we would embrace the call to be stewards of the household of faith, to be public people, public Christians in the midst of a secular and privatized world. All right, so let's just close with this. In the midst of challenges, these challenges we talked about tonight, we're going to speak more and more about them in the coming weeks. What does missionary engagement in this culture look like for a person committed to public faith?

That's the question. And so the challenge tonight is to go forth and think about that and to pray about that and to ask what is public faith, stewarding the gospel good works and my gifting, my personal gifting, whatever that may be. And you've got to work at understanding that from the Holy Spirit. What does it look like in the little world that God has put me to steward those resources? And it will be different for each of us in different ways, depending on whether we're retired or whether we're at work every day or in University every day or wherever it may be.

It'll be different. But at the same time, it'll all face the challenges of post Christianity and the digital culture, among others. Right. The question to leave you with, am I? Are you stewarding the resources you've been given and named as a steward by God in your life?

That's the challenge of this parable that Jesus leaves us with. Where do I need to change? Where do we need to repent? Where do we need to also remember that God's Grace is so good for us as unfaithful stewards so much often. And also we can step forward and change as well.

[34 : 11] All right. So that's what we've got to be thinking about carrying on in this series. Let's pray together. Father, we've been left with a challenge. The challenge of Jesus is parable in front of these disciples.

We all feel our lack of faithfulness and stewarding our lives as public Christians and opportunities we've missed, places we've not extended, the love of good works, the places we've not sought, gospel conversation, the places where we've not used, the gifts that you've given us, we squandered them. We've not been generous, though you've caught us to generosity. We've not been merciful. They've caught us to mercy. We've not spoken and taught that you've called us to teach.

So whatever it might be, Lord, yet we come and bow before you because you're the God who sent Jesus. You're the God of mercy. And so we plead your mercy and great confidence that we're forgiven. As far as the east is from the west for our lack of faithfulness. We give thanks that Jesus was faithful even when we can't be as the true steward of your household, as the great manager, as the one who became slave to sin for us, so that we might carry his yoke and not the burden of sin any longer.

And so we stand on that gospel and we move forward. So we asked Lord today that you would continue to shape us, rework us that the Holy Spirit would be among us and we ask us in Jesus name Amen.