

How to Give Away a Gift

by John Piper

The sermon emphasizes the importance of hope and witnessing, encouraging listeners to be active in sharing their faith and to use practical tools to help them do so.

Scripture: 1 Peter 2:9

Topics: "Evangelism", "Discipleship"

Description

John Piper emphasizes the importance of being ready to share the hope we have in Christ by seeking out reasons for our hope in God's promises. He highlights the active role we should take in initiating conversations about our faith and the joy that comes from sharing the light of Christ with others. Piper delves into the dual purpose of a Christian's life: to find fullness of joy in Christ by trusting His promises and to share those promises with others to lead them to the same joy. He encourages a movement of prayer for God to equip believers for fruitful witnessing and introduces practical tools, like the G.I.F.T. folders, to aid in sharing the gospel effectively.

Transcript

This morning the Word of God instructed us always to be ready to make a case for our hope. And the exciting discovery for me in that text in 1 Peter 3:14,15 was that the way to get ready was to get hopeful. The best way to be ready to give others reasons why we pin our hopes on Christ is to seek out those reasons for ourselves. If we're not sure Christ is trustworthy or that His promises are very exciting, the worse consequence is not that we have no answer for others, but that we ourselves have no reason to be hopeful. But the bright side of that fact is that we can kill two birds with one stone. We can fill our minds with answers for others as we day by day feed our own hope upon the promise of God and His trustworthiness. The main purpose of daily devotions is to strengthen and enliven our hope in Christ. The only way this can happen is if we are seeing reasons in the Word for why we should be hopeful. But if we are daily feeding our faith with reasons from the Word, then we should not be lacking when someone asks, "How come you can have so much hope in life?"

Tonight I want to make three more contributions to the theme of personal witness bearing. First, I want to say that witnessing to our Lord Christ and to His hope-giving work and promises should not be only a passive affair where we wait for others to ask us about our hope; it should also be active. Sometimes we should initiate a conversation about ultimate things. The part of this morning's scripture reading that I did not preach on was 1 Peter 2:9. Let's look at this for a moment. Peter says to the believers, "You are a

chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." This text has two halves. The first describes the great privilege of being God's people, chosen by Him for His own, granted the status of priests who have access to His most holy presence where we find mercy to help in time of need. The second half of the text gives the purpose of our being chosen by God--the reason for being a Christian, namely, to declare to others His wonderful deeds. God sent Christ to die for our sins, to rise again and to give us great hope in order that we might show and tell others about what He did.

I have to admit that I went through some real fuzzy days when I was in college. It always seemed strange to me that the purpose or goal of my conversion should be the conversion of someone else. For then the purpose of his conversion too must be someone else's conversion. And so on until someone stops and says, "Wait a minute! What's the point of a religion whose purpose is only to convert more converters?" I said these were fuzzy days. I wasn't thinking very clearly. And I hadn't become a Christian hedonist yet. What I had failed to do but have learned to do since then is to ask more precise questions. I came to ask: did Christ die for me and call me from the darkness of hopelessness to the light of hope that my joy may be full or did He call me from darkness to light in order that I might lead someone else into the fullness of joy? Of course the answer is probably both. But if that is true then every Christian's life has two purposes: on the one hand to seek the fullness of joy in Christ by trusting promises, and on the other hand, to tell others about those promises so they can have that same joy. But it is very hard to live for two purposes. You can't serve two masters. In order to live for two purposes you have to see how they relate to each other.

And what I discovered is that the second purpose relates ultimately to the first purpose as a means to an end. You can't have fullness of joy in Christ if you never tell anybody about it. Declaring the marvelous deeds of God that have brought light into our life is a means to the full enjoyment of that light.

If you are stumbling around in a dark cave with a group of people and suddenly you see a crack of light and you follow it and it leads you out into the sunshine, you feel a great joy and exhilaration. Now you have two choices. You can go on your way rejoicing in the sunshine. But if you do you know that before long your conscience will slay you and the sunshine will turn grey and you will not have fullness of joy. The other choice you have is to tie a string around a tree and take the other end of it back into the cave in search of the other people lost in the dark. You know what you'd feel like. You might be scratching your hands and bumping your head, but O! you'd feel good! There is something really fulfilling about carrying the string of good news back into the cave. And when you walk out of the cave with somebody the sunshine is doubly bright and the air doubly sweet. And even if you can't find them, or if you find them and for some crazy reason they won't come out, your walking in the light may be somewhat somber but you will know the joy of a clean conscience.

So when Peter says that God chose us for His own in order to proclaim the wonderful deeds of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light, he is simply spelling out the way He can be most glorified and the way we can experience fullness of joy in His sunshine. As Jesus said, we will experience more blessedness if we give instead of merely receiving. Freely you have received, freely give (Acts 20:35; Matthew 10:8).

That's the first thing I wanted to add to this morning's message--don't let your witness to Christ be merely passive, also take the initiative at times to speak about Him to neighbors and associates and strangers, for in doing so you will increase your joy in the very promise you share.

The second thing I want to add is this. Almost every sermon I've ever heard about personal witnessing has made me feel guilty that I wasn't doing more of it. And in case you're like me I want to try to say four things that may help. First, there are varieties of gifts in the body of Christ, as the Holy Spirit sees fit to work. Therefore, don't assume that you should be a carbon copy of anyone else. Be yourself as God wants you to become. Second, recognize that you are not alone in this feeling. Almost all of us want to be better witnesses than we are. We all struggle with missed opportunities and ineptness in conversation. You're not alone. Third, remember it is not my desire to create guilt. Guilt tends to make us hopeless and resigned. I want to create hope and experimentation. Fourth, probably the most helpful thing anybody ever told me about becoming a good witness is this: be honest with God about how you feel and then ask Him earnestly to take you where you are and give you some opportunities for witness that you can handle at this stage and grow by. Very few changes happen overnight in the Christian life. Most of us grow slowly and by fits and starts. But even that will only happen if we are earnestly praying that it will.

When I came to this church I knew that I was not gifted in evangelism and personal witnessing. I have never been very good at turning a conversation with an unbeliever into a serious spiritual discussion of his condition before God. I suppose I could content myself under the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit and say that He has called me to be a pastor-teacher not an evangelist. But I am a dyed-in-the-wool hedonist. I want to be as happy as I can possibly be in this life and in the life to come. And now I have seen in the Word and tasted in experience that there is a joy to be had out there in telling others about why I have hope in Christ, and I want that joy. So unless the Lord makes it very clear to me that I must, I am not going to accept my lack of giftedness in evangelism. I have been praying and will go right on praying and ask you to pray with me that God will give me the gift to win people to Christ, one-to-one and through my preaching.

So the second thing I want to say is this: I think I know a little about where most of you are in the fears and frustrations and guilt about personal witnessing. And what I'd like to see happen is a movement of prayer--everyone of us asking God to take us where we are and move us a little closer to a natural, happy and fruitful witnessing lifestyle. Please include me in your prayers.

Now that leaves one other thing I want to say, or better to show. Would the ushers please give out the G.I.F.T. folders. What you are going to receive is a four page folder which I wrote and had printed for my own use and I hope for the use of all our members, as one practical help in the outreach of our church for Christ into that dark cave. We'll look at it together in detail when you all get one, but let me sum up three things that it tries to do.

First, one of the great needs in many witnessing settings is the ability to state the gospel in one clear sentence, to get it out on the table so that people can see it and talk about it. So I tried to put the gospel into one sentence. Second, the Bible has a unique power, partly because it's inspired by God and partly because it is still revered by many people in our culture who never read it. So I've tried to assemble some passages which give the Biblical foundation of the promises of the gospel. If we feed on these ourselves and memorize them for our own peace and purposefulness and hope, we will be well equipped not only to make a case for our hope, but to do it in the very words of Scripture. And finally, I tried to put all this in the context of a local church. The folder is not so much a tract, but a witness to the faith of a specific group of people - Bethlehem Baptist Church. The gospel is always an invitation to community as well as to Christ.

Here is what the folder looks like. They are available for your use. Pick them up in the church office. (Not included.)

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