

Why Does Sharing the Good News Feel So Bad?

BIG IDEA

Sharing the good news can be as simple as being a good friend.

How could sharing “good news” always end up feeling so bad? I couldn’t figure out the answer. Like you, my life was changed by the love of God and the life of Jesus. And like you, I wanted to obey Jesus’s command to “love your neighbor” and do my part to change the world. Also like you, I wanted my family, friends, and neighbors to experience the love of God.

So I tried loving them by sharing the good news with my words: a verbal witness. That resulted in a series of disasters!

Then I tried a completely different approach. I would share the good news simply by how I lived my life. The result of that seemed to be...well, nothing!

It seemed that however I tried to love others—with my words or through my life—it left either them or me feeling badly. What was I doing wrong? Where was the “good news” in all of this?

All that frustration led me to search for a simple way to share the love of God with those I cared about. Surprisingly (to me), that search



B.L.E.S.S. will make your life better!

The B.L.E.S.S. practices were created as a simple tool to help you bring the love of God to others. Your motivation is to help them know Jesus and experience eternal life, but people are often surprised to find that these practices make their own lives better too! You will discover that a life of praying, listening, sharing meals, serving, and telling stories is the richest life possible. The everyday rhythm of these five practices will not only change others and change you, but also begin to change your whole neighborhood. Those who commit to living out these practices will see the culture around them slowly shift from being just a group of people living in close proximity to each other to a neighborhood of people living in genuine community.

led me back to the Bible and how Jesus did it. I'm still shocked that I missed it for so long. Jesus had a simple, everyday way of sharing the good news that helped His "neighbors" come to know the love of God.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Maybe if I start by telling you what didn't work for me, I can spare you some grief and disappointment.

Loving Others with Just My Words

I was baptized as a Christian at the age of ten, but I really became a Christ-follower late in my teens. And when I said "yes" to Jesus, it was the real deal! I experienced the unconditional grace of God, the hope of Heaven, and newfound purpose for my life. Along with that came a passion to share it all with others. As a young believer I looked for every opportunity to share my faith and my story.

Motivated by the Great Commission to “Go and make disciples” (Matthew 28:19 NIV), I tried street evangelism and—as one does in street evangelism—walked up to complete strangers, attempting to engage them in spiritual conversations. Each time, I would get *that look*. (You know that look—the one we always give crazy people.) Fail!

I was challenged by 1 Peter 3:15 to “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (NIV). So I got trained in how to share my testimony with non-believers. I decided it was a good idea to canvass my neighborhood and tell my story. Almost every time I knocked on the doors of people I didn’t know, I got piercing stares from behind a screen and doors slammed in my face. Fail!

If Billy Graham Can Do It...

When I was in college, I was so passionate about sharing the good news of Jesus with others that I would have actual dreams about it. In those dreams, I would clearly articulate the grace of God, and my friends and loved ones would respond with knowing nods and convicted hearts. And each time before I woke up, my friends had said “yes” to Jesus and asked me to baptize them!

Only in my dreams.

In real life, my roommate Scott and I had just received scholarships to the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism, and Ministry. What better organization than the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association to train us how to share our faith? Receiving a scholarship meant I would get an all-expenses-paid trip to Oklahoma City, where they were hosting crusades at night and training during the day. (I know, not exactly Newport Beach or New York City. But I was a college kid, and they were paying!) On top of that, we also would get excused from three days of classes! So we were all in.

Three days later, Scott and I were on our way back to college totally fired up, ready to change the world. As we drove back on Interstate 44, we were already planning how to apply everything we'd learned. We were eastbound in my rusted-out, cocoa-brown Toyota Corona when we saw a hitchhiker. I told Scott, "Let's pull over and give him a ride." With the two of us in the front seat and our new victim—I mean, "friend"—in the back, we introduced ourselves. We learned our new traveling companion was George.

For the next six hours, we peppered George with everything we had learned over the previous seventy-two hours. George was the first person we had met who was far from God since we were trained by the greatest evangelistic crusade organization in history. By the time we got back to school, George had confided in us that he didn't have a job or a home, but he did want to say "yes" to Jesus.

We were so excited that we called a local pastor, who opened his church and let us baptize George that same day! This was just like in the New Testament!

Now George needed a place to stay and help getting back on his feet. We convinced our resident assistant to let George stay in our dorm, and we got him a one-week meal pass. Scott and I were celebrating this new convert.

Until—(I think you can see where this is going)—two days later when George stole \$150 from my roommate, hijacked another friend's car, and left town, never to be heard from again.

That was not exactly how it was supposed to work. I bet that never happened to Billy Graham or Cliff Barrows!

But undeterred by George, who in the space of forty-eight hours converted from Christ-follower to car thief, I continued to try every way possible to share the good news with others by using the Four Spiritual Laws, the bridge illustration, Evangelism Explosion, and spiritual conversation starters. I even started something I called the



You can't convert anyone.

If you're hoping to use the B.L.E.S.S. practices to convert someone, I have some bad news for you. Someone else already has that job, and it isn't you! It's the job of the Holy Spirit to convict and to convert (John 16:8-11). It's good that your desires are aligned with God's; He "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). But you can't convert your family member, friend, or coworker. So if you are feeling pressure to say or do something "right" so someone else can find and follow Jesus, the pressure is off! Only the Holy Spirit can do that! Relax and realize that is not your role. But you can join Him in His work and bless the people around you. Just do the blessing and let God do the converting!

"Soul Winners Club." (Too embarrassing to explain.) In short, I tried everything!

Each of those methods was either too complicated, too time-consuming, or just plain relationally awkward. No matter how hard I tried to share my faith, it always turned out to be a "fail!" It just didn't make sense to me that talking about such good news should always end up feeling so bad!

Loving Others with Just My Life

There had to be a better way to love my neighbor than insisting they hear good news whether they wanted to or not. I was ready to make a complete shift and no longer verbally assault others with my Gospel story. From now on I would love my neighbor through how I

lived my life. The words of Saint Francis of Assisi—“Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary use words”—captured my imagination. Or at the very least, those words gave me permission not to accost strangers with the Gospel.

For the next several years, I focused on living like Jesus and just waited for people to come to me with their spiritual questions. I did get a few—and I would help those people. But the only reason that happened was because I was a pastor at the church my brother, Jon, and I had planted. It was my job to live like Jesus and answer spiritual questions.

The church we started grew large, spreading to multiple locations. We saw lots of people discover the love of God and follow Jesus during that time. But what I seldom saw were people in my neighborhood—people I saw every day—coming to know the love of God and following Jesus. I seldom had spiritual conversations with the people who lived where I lived or played where my family and I played.

I knew that something was definitely wrong with that, and I made two discoveries. First, Saint Francis probably never said, “Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary use words.” Second—and more importantly—I discovered that while I pastored a church with thousands, I had almost no spiritual influence in my neighborhood.

We Are All Frustrated!

The frustration of trying to love people, share the truth, and shoulder the weight of feeling badly was debilitating. But I was not alone. To my surprise, I discovered that lots of people feel that way.

And maybe you feel that way too. You probably haven’t made as many awkward approaches as I did. But the more I researched it, the more I discovered that lots of us are frustrated and confused about how to love people in a way that includes sharing the good news of a loving God.

We want to be a light in a dark world, and we want others to experience what we have experienced—but we are so discouraged that we are on the verge of completely giving up on that conviction.

However, we are not the only ones who are frustrated. Our neighbors and friends are equally frustrated with *how* we love them and *how* we talk about the spiritual part of our lives! You might be surprised to learn they are absolutely interested in spirituality—but not in the way we are presenting it to them. Or because of our passivity, they have no idea we have a faith at all! Our neighbors are also confused and frustrated.

Let me give you a quick summary of the latest research that validates why all of us are frustrated.

Confused Christians

Surveys show that as believers, we are really confused about sharing our faith. When practicing Christians were presented with the statement “Part of my faith means being a witness for Jesus,” 96 percent said that they “strongly agreed” or “somewhat agreed.”¹ This was a consistent response across all age groups. When practicing Christians were asked if they agreed with the statement “The best thing that could ever happen to someone is for them to come to know Jesus,” 96 percent agreed. However, 28 percent also believed that “it is wrong to share one’s personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in hopes that they will one day share the same faith”²—and that percentage jumped to 46 with practicing Christians in their twenties and thirties.

Huh? How does that make sense?

It doesn’t! But maybe that’s the point. The data demonstrate just how confused and frustrated believers are about sharing the good news of Jesus! The inner conversation on this topic for many might go something like this: *My faith has made a huge difference for me, and I know*

it could help others... Jesus tells us it's good news, and I should share it... But whenever I try to present the Gospel, I feel like I'm selling a used car or I'm part of a pyramid scheme!... So maybe what I'm hearing from society—that “evangelism is wrong”—is actually right... Perhaps I shouldn't even try doing this! Ever find yourself thinking along these lines?

Non-Christians Know What They Want

According to Gallup, 87 percent of Americans say they believe in God.³ How significant is that? Think about your ten closest friends and neighbors. This stat indicates that on average, eight or nine of them believe there is a God. I'm not suggesting they are religious or that they are churchgoers. They probably aren't. I'm also not so naïve as to think that believing in a god means they have a relationship with Jesus. Most do not! The point is that most of the people around you already believe in a god, and they just need someone they trust to help them find their way back to the One True God. Discovering the best way to do that is why I wrote this book and why it will be helpful to you.

Before I get to the how-tos, here is some more good news: More than one in four non-Christians would say they are curious about Christianity and what it could mean for their lives.⁴ And when you present this question to young adults in their twenties and thirties, the percentage of those who are curious about Jesus and faith jumps from 26 percent to 36 percent. This is great news! Not only do the vast majority of your friends and neighbors believe in God, but somewhere between one-fourth and one-third are currently searching and interested to learn more about Jesus.

And here is the kicker: 79 percent of unchurched people⁵ agreed with the following statement: “I don't mind talking to a friend about their faith if they really value it.” So within friendship, the vast majority of people are willing to talk about spiritual things.

So where do we go from here? Great question!

What Your Neighbors Want Most

In an eye-opening study, Barna Group⁶ asked your friends and neighbors what they value in a person with whom they would talk about spiritual matters. Here are the top three qualities, in order.

- 1. Listen without judgment.** Listening is one of the purest acts of love! What our neighbors want is for someone to lean in and just listen. They want someone who will assume the best. They desire to have another person absorb their questions and stories—not so you can come to a verdict, but so they can process their feelings and experiences in relationship.

The sad news is that two-thirds of the people surveyed said they had no one in their life who would listen to them without judgment. None. This reflects the sad truth that Christians are known more for talking than listening.

As I reflect on many of my attempts to share the good news, the focus was always about what I would say. I did most of the talking. And if I did ask a question, it was not so I could actually listen, but so I could maneuver the conversation to give me a chance to respond with my answers. My intentions were good, but in retrospect I often did way too much talking, and I prejudged what other people needed.

Here is some very encouraging news based on the research: Listening without judgment is something we are all capable of doing. It's love. It's grace. It's being a real friend.

- 2. Allow them to draw their own conclusions.** Your friends and neighbors are not projects; they are people.

They are looking for someone who will “not force a conclusion” on them but will trust them to have their own spiritual journey.

When I think about my failed attempts, I think my heart was in a good place, but my strategies were awful. If I was approaching a stranger on the street or using a canned approach to the Gospel with a friend, I knew the outcome I wanted. I wanted them to say “yes” to Jesus. Good intention; poor tactic.

This is where both God and our friends want us to get out of the way. If the Gospel is true and someone is sincerely searching for truth, it will prove itself. We need to trust God to do His part and trust those around us to journey just like we did.

Our friends want us to love, listen, and interact with them, but let God draw them in. Jesus didn’t coerce or trick people into saying “yes” or a sinner’s prayer. He trusted them, and He loved them (much more on this later). Be a friend to your neighbors and trust God to do the rest.

- 3. Confidence in sharing your own perspective.** After you have listened to your friend—once you have given them space to come to their own conclusions—it’s then and only then that the people around us are interested in our confidently “sharing our own perspective.” They want to know our stories and hear our experiences. But they also want to know that it is real, genuine, and that we’re coming from a place of confident conviction.

I call it “paying the relational rent.” Once you have invested enough in the relationship by listening to them and loving them no matter what they ultimately decide, you will have a permanent place in their life. You’ll be able to speak with confidence about the difference the love of God and the life of Jesus have made for you.

Earning the right to tell your story and not just waylay someone with truth is very important. When we delve deeper into the research, we see that when our friends are presented with the open-ended statement “*I’d be more interested in learning about Christianity if...*”, they complete it by saying:

“...*if Christianity had better evidence to support it.*”

or “...*if I had an eye-opening spiritual experience myself.*”⁷

Your story is the best evidence you can offer anyone! Your story cannot be irrelevant. If you have a strong relationship with the person you’re sharing with, your story will be seen as empirical evidence. You cannot have an “eye-opening spiritual experience” for them, but you can share the difference the grace of God has made in your past, present, and future!

People Are Looking for Friends!

If I had to summarize what the research and my experience told me about what those around us are looking for, I could do it in one word: friend!

The research confirms it. What else would you call someone who listens without judgment, offers you wise counsel but helps you make your own decision, and loves you no matter what? That’s a friend!

Friend /frend/ (noun)—a person whom one knows and with whom one has a bond of mutual affection....⁸

It’s that simple. It’s also that challenging. People are looking for you to be a friend. They are looking for a friend who will live the good news, be good news, and then share the good news in the form of their own story. In that order! Wow! It was that simple “Aha!” that brought me back to the Bible and opened my eyes to see that this is exactly how Jesus did it.

“Friend of Sinners”

Do you know what Jesus’s nickname was? It was “Friend” (Matthew 11:16–19 NIV). More specifically, “Friend of Sinners.”

Who gave Jesus that nickname? Religious leaders who watched how He lived His life and didn’t like it. But apparently Jesus liked it so much that He kept it!

It was easy for “Friend of Sinners” to stick because everywhere Jesus went, He befriended people and was a blessing to them. His entire life and ministry were a rhythm of befriending and blessing. Jesus blessed every person and every place He encountered.

For example, He met two brothers, Peter and Andrew, a couple of working-class fishermen. For the next three years, they were the best of friends, and Jesus blessed them by teaching them, showing them miracles, and giving them a mission for their lives. In a much briefer encounter, Jesus shocked Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, with His offer of friendship. The two shared the blessing of a meal and conversation, and Zacchaeus left a changed man.

In fact, as word spread far and wide about how Jesus blessed people, one of His friends, Mark, described what happened: “*People were bringing children to Jesus so that he would...bless them.... Then he hugged the children and blessed them*” (Mark 10:13, 16 CEV). Jesus proved that when you are a good friend who blesses people, you don’t have to sell them anything or trick them into doing anything. Instead, they come to you!

Jesus’s mission was to “*seek and save the lost*” (Luke 19:10 NIV), but His simple strategy was friendship and blessing.

The more I look at Jesus, the more I realize how I got it so wrong: I made the good news complicated when it should have simply come from my heart.

I tried to manipulate something that was meant to fit into everyday life.

I made something relationally awkward that was meant to be a blessing stemming from friendship.

And I tried to make something happen that only God could do.

And there were times when I was passive while God was at work.

A rhythm of friendship and blessing was how Jesus loved people and proclaimed the good news. *Could that work for me? Could that work for the people in my church? Could I have overlooked something so very obvious and simple?* The more questions I asked, the greater my conviction grew that it could definitely work for me and for you.

A Simple, Everyday Way

So here is how I would like to help you in the following pages of this book...

I want to help you understand how to love your neighbor the way that Jesus did.

I want to help you avoid making the good news complicated when it should simply come from your heart.

I also want to spare you from relationally awkward conversations, because the Gospel was meant to be shared in routine exchanges between friends and neighbors.

I want to give you five simple ways you can bless people within the rhythm of everyday life!

Lastly, I want to make sure that you understand what God's responsibility is and what your responsibility is. I don't want you to try to be God or for you to expect God to do something He's asked *you* to do.

I believe wholeheartedly that very soon the people you love and the neighbors who live around you will come to know the love of God and follow Jesus because you have been a blessing to them.

It's really that simple. I promise!

In the next chapter, I'll tell you how an email from a stranger confirmed all this for me. It convinced me that this simple rhythm of friendship and blessing was not only Jesus's strategy for loving others and changing the world, but was actually God's plan—from the first pages of Genesis.

B.L.E.S.S. Discussion Questions

OPEN: How did you first learn about the love of Jesus and choose to follow Him?

DIG: What is your greatest fear or frustration when it comes to loving people and sharing the good news of Jesus with those around you?

Read Matthew 28:19, Acts 1:8, and 1 Peter 3:15. What is your gut-level, first reaction to these scriptures? In what ways are you motivated or demotivated by these scriptures?

What are you hoping to learn or gain from reading this book?

Think about the three qualities people said they want in someone with whom they would discuss spiritual matters. How well do you exhibit these qualities to your friends and neighbors who don't know Jesus? What steps can you take to grow in these areas?

Jesus’s nickname was “friend of sinners” (Matthew 11:16-19 NIV). What changes might you need to make in order to be known as a friend of sinners?

REFLECT: Who are some of the people around you that you would love to impact with the love of Jesus?

Pray for the people you hope to B.L.E.S.S.
