

SERIES: While Going - Week 2

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All of the studies show the same thing, that if a person does not come to Jesus in those early child teen years, the chance of that person coming into a relationship with Christ is dramatically diminished, which would mean strategically as a church, we need to be very aware of the children and the youth that are among us every weekend.

Patti and I both love teenagers, always have. I think always will. I find that age of life to be so exciting, there's so much potential, but it's also such a difficult journey that my heart goes out to these kids. I think sometimes we underestimate how complicated it is to be a teenager these days and how much courage it takes as a teenager to stand for Jesus. My preaching mentor was Haddon Robinson and Haddon Robinson used to say, if I had to pick 10 heroes of the faith, five of them would be teenagers. I'm totally on that page. I get that, but let me tell you, you know what our teenagers don't need? They don't need critics. They have enough of those, and they don't need rock throwers. They have enough of those, and they don't need people rolling their eyes and giving up on them. They have enough of those. You know what they need? They need people that believe in them. They need people that cheerlead them. They need people that will say to them, you know, you matter and you're going to change this world.

I think about my own story and I think about growing up and for whatever reason, there were those adults that believed I mattered. I think of dear Ron Sperling for whatever reason, from the time I was a kid, continually on a regular basis needed to remind me, hey, I believe in you and I think you matter. And he would tell me that over and over and over again. 40 years later, Ron is still at Lincoln Berean and he still says the same thing to me, as recently as two weeks ago. I think of those people that believed in me, Charlie Williams, Jim Walker, Curt Laymen, Byron and Marilyn Anderson. These were adults that for whatever reason, just believed in me, often when I did not believe in myself. And if somebody believed in me and convinced me that I matter, why wouldn't I do that for somebody else? Why wouldn't I pass that on? Think for yourself. Weren't there people in your life at critical times that said, hey, I just want you to know that you matter, and you matter to me? If you were given that gift, why wouldn't you take the time to give that gift to someone else and to say, I want you to know, I think you matter?

But it isn't just the church gathered. We are equipped. We're encouraged, we're built up, but then we scatter. It's the church here. It's the church there. You say, where is there? There is everywhere that isn't here. It's everywhere. The church goes to work. The church goes to school, the church goes to the coffee shop. The church goes to the neighborhood. The church goes everywhere, and we have a responsibility to rightly represent Jesus when we scatter. But we go with the heart of a servant. We go with the heart of Jesus. We're not going to be angry. We're not going to pick a fight. We're not going to have an argument. We're going to serve. We're going to wash feet. We're going to rightly represent Jesus to the community.

Again, it's vitally important to remember this is not a method. It's not a technique. It's not a gimmick. It is rightly representing the heart of Jesus. I would suggest to you that because of where the culture is today, there has perhaps never been a greater opportunity for us as the church. This is why. We have fundamentally changed as a culture. We are now all about ourselves. It is about me. It is about the individual. It's far more about me than it is about us. This is a by-product of determining that I'm going to be my own god. The system requires that I'm selfish. The individual comes first. I will if necessary, disadvantage the community, in order to advantage myself. I think a snapshot of our culture, pun intended, that captures what we've become is the selfie. It is just who we are. Now, think about it, at one time we gathered together, and we had relationships and we enjoyed life together, and there was a sense of community and in the midst of that, perhaps someone would take a picture to capture it. Now I take a picture of myself because that's what matters most to me now.

Think about how we've changed. There was a time, for example, when music was something we did together. Now music is something we use to isolate ourselves from others. Movies used to be something people went to together. Now it's something I watch alone on my device. It used to be that we played games to do something together. The very essence of the game wasn't the game. It was the social, it was being together. But now we play games by ourselves on our devices. We have become an isolated, individualistic culture. And the result of that is we have become a lonely people. Study after study, after study shows, we are becoming more and more lonely.

If that's true and I believe it is, then imagine what it would be like if we as the people of God begin to live counter to that.

Sherry Turkle in her thought-provoking book "Alone Together" talks about the fact that we gather with people. So, we're here, but at the same time we'd like to be there. And so, we're here, but we're also there. And so, we're never really fully-present anywhere anymore. We can't stand to be alone together, alone any more. So, when we're alone, we want to be together with somebody there. So we're constantly texting and posting and trying to figure out a way to stay connected because we can't be alone. She makes the case, if we don't learn to be alone, then we'll only continue to be more lonely. In order to compensate, now we have this false sense of community that comes through technology. So we've convinced ourselves that nobody cares, nobody listens. So, we artificially think somebody is listening when we post, and I have lots of friends and when we tweet and we Twitter and whatever else we do, we're convincing ourselves artificially that somebody's listening, somebody out there cares. But the reality is nobody's listening and nobody out there cares.

If that's true and I believe it is, then imagine what it would be like if we as the people of God begin to live counter to that. We live in a culture that doesn't like conversation anymore, because conversation is messy, and it happens in real time and you can't control it. We don't do conversation. So, we text because you can control it. You can edit it, you can manage it, you can do it on your own time. But what if we changed that and began to think in terms of relationship? What if we began to think in terms of conversation? What if we began to think of real relationships with real human beings? And what if most of the people in our world are actually very lonely, and we entered into their world with the heart of Jesus and said I want you to know you matter? And I'd like to get to know you, and I'd like to ask you a bunch of questions, and I'd like to know your hopes and your dreams. I'd like to know what you think and what you feel. And rather than going into it, looking for a place where we can make a presentation, we're

actually listening and caring and entering into that relationship, finding the point in that person's life where Jesus intersects in a meaningful way, in order to have a conversation about the Jesus that has so changed our lives. It's not complicated. It's just about genuinely caring and pursuing people and valuing people. I'll guarantee you, ask 20 questions and before you're done, the conversation will turn to something spiritual. People are hungry for that which matters. It's not a gimmick. It's not a method. It's just representing the heart of Jesus.

I want to close this morning with a story that frankly I would rather not tell. I've been surprised this week, how much emotion for me is still in this story. How much pain is still there. When Patti and I moved to California, we went to California for me to go to seminary. Talbot Seminary is on the campus of Biola University. We lived two or three blocks from the school and probably half of the people in the apartment complex were Christians, were either Biola students or Talbot students. And so fairly quickly we got to know the Christians and we began to gather, and we began to do things and we began to learn from the Christians that had lived there longer than us, about everybody else in the building. And we learned particularly about a couple to avoid. Their names were Don and Sandy.

Don was an ex-Marine. He was a big burly guy, looked like life had been hard for him and he wasn't much for conversation. On one occasion, I saw Don crash out of his apartment door with a shotgun in hand, run into the parking lot, because somebody in the parking lot had tried to grab his wife. On one occasion, I saw Don coming up the stairs to go to his apartment and one of the Christian students stopping him and beginning to give him a presentation of the Gospel. Don got a few minutes into it and literally physically flung this guy to the side, offered some expletives and went on his way, and there was no question Don and Sandy were people to avoid.

But then something happened. Don and Sandy had a baby and Sandy had virtually no understanding of what to do with this baby. Both had grown up in difficult circumstances. She had no model and she was terrified. Patti and I didn't have kids yet, but Patti had grown up around children her whole life. It was as natural as breathing to her. So, through that, somehow Patti made a connection with Sandy and it became a stronger and stronger connection. When I would come home from school, if I couldn't find Patti in the apartment, I always knew where she was. I would wander across the courtyard. She was always at Don and Sandy's. So, I began to spend time at Don and Sandy's. And little by little we began to know them, and they were warm. They were friendly, they were loving, they were caring. They were nothing like this picture that had been painted regarding who they were.

As we began to spend more and more time with them, and frankly, we moved farther and farther out of the Christian crowd, and more and more with Don and Sandy, they began to tell us stories of how deeply wounded they had been because of the Christians. How they had been rejected, how they had been turned away, how they had been made fun of, how they have been deeply, deeply hurt by these people who had rejected them. And as Patti and I were listening to them, they never said it by name, but we couldn't escape the fact that the people that they were talking about included us.

It is a very sobering thing to sit face to face with people you now care about and listen to the damage you have done to the cause of Christ. And I felt so ashamed. I felt a deep pain and I began to wonder what had happened to me? What had happened to my heart? At what time in my spiritual journey did I forget that I was nothing more than a sinner saved by grace? At what point did I become this arrogant self-righteous hypocrite that was doing so much damage in the name of Christ? It was a very painful time of looking in the mirror and trying to figure out where

I had lost my way. By the time Patti and I moved away from California, Don and Sandy had become our dearest friends. Sadly, we never saw Don and Sandy come to Christ. We can only hope that maybe we repaired some of the damage that we had done to them. Don and Sandy's little girl that started this whole relationship was named Ashley. When Patti and I had our first daughter, we very intentionally named her Ashley, in order that we would never forget the lesson that we learned from that painful chapter in our lives.

It is a sobering mission to take the love and the compassion of Jesus into the streets. May we rightly represent Jesus to the world around us.

Cara: Bryan, thanks for sharing part of your own story with your neighbors and what you learned from that. It's very easy to forget that we're just sinners saved by grace, isn't it?

Bryan: It absolutely is.

Cara: What are some practical things that we can do to view the people around us like Jesus would view them?

Bryan: Yeah, so that's a great question. I think most of the research shows, the longer we are Christians, the more we isolate ourselves from unbelievers. So, one of the things I always assess is do I actually have non-Christian friends? And I don't mean just non-Christians that I can name, I mean actual friendships. Are they in my home? Are we doing things together? Are we doing life together? If not, I mean stop and think about that. We're avoiding the very people that God has called us to reach.

Bryan: I think also getting involved in our church and community, where I'm in the trenches, I'm in the mess, I'm seeing the need. You know, for me as a pastor, it's really easy to isolate from all that and kind of hibernate among Christians. And I have to make a real effort to get in the mess, in the trenches and remind myself of the mess, the pain, the struggle that's out there.

Bryan: But I'm going to add one more to that that people wouldn't think about. I think one of the main purposes of Communion, is to remind us of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, to keep us from self-righteousness. So when Paul writes in First Corinthians 11, he talks about examining ourselves. And I think many churches, I kind of grew up with this in the fundamentalist movement, interpret that as before I take Communion, I need to examine myself and make sure that there's no sin there. So, I'm going to reword it. Here's what we're saying. I'm going to examine myself to make sure that I performed well enough to be worthy of Communion. You can hear it in that language. That's not it. [Right] At what point did we go back to a works-based merit system with God? The problem with the Corinthians is they were self-righteous. That comes up all through the book.

Bryan: The problem in chapter 11 is they had this love-feast - kind of a potluck - before Communion, and they were mistreating one another. The haves were mistreating the have-nots. And basically it's a value system that defines the world, but shouldn't define us as people of grace. We all equally need a Savior. It's the great leveler of the playing field. But these people had forgot that; this self-righteousness had settled in. So, when Paul's saying, examine yourself, what he's really saying is, don't ever forget that you're a broken body, that you need the broken body and the shed blood of Jesus in order to stand right before a holy God. And if they

remembered that, they wouldn't be treating one another the way they were treating one another in the love feast. So, I think Communion is part of what God has put into the rhythm of church life, so I don't ever forget I'm a sinner saved by grace. [Right.] [So true.]

Cara: So you stated in your message that because, where the culture is today, there has perhaps never been a greater opportunity for us as a church. Can you elaborate on that?

Bryan: Yeah, I think that's absolutely true. I think there's so much fear. There's so much anxiety, there's so much conflict, there's so much division, there's so much tension. I think the secular worldview more and more is prevailing and the secular worldview has no answer for any of that. So it's only getting worse. You add to that social media, people are more lonely, they're more discouraged and more hopeless. So it's like what an opportunity to step into all that, and to love people and to care and to listen, to step into people's loneliness and despair. I think a lot of people pay a significant amount of money every week just to tell someone their problems because no one will listen. It's like, what if we did that? What if we ran contrary to the culture and just loved and cared and listened? I think *the fields are white for harvest* because I think the pain is so high right now. [Right].