

LIVING QUESTIONABLE LIVES

(The 5 habits of highly missional people: BELLS #1 - Intro)

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(Col 4:2-6, 1 Pet 3:15, James 2:18)

Journey to Easter I

- Easter reflection (Jesus' mission): Mark 1:9-15: Jesus' baptism (reflection is at the end of Julian's message)
- Missional habits (Our mission): Part 1: 25 mins: Julian

Introduction

Today we begin our month-long focus on 'The 5 habits of highly missional people', based on a book by Michael Frost, an Australian practical-theologian (and the Bible). I encourage everyone to join in... Sunday services and home groups (leaders to stand). Randal is running a group (stand).

Prayer

Mission context

The context we live in determines the best way to share our faith with others. This is our 'mission context'. I want to look at a couple of very different mission contexts.

Mission context - Bangladesh

2 Most of you know, my family and I lived and worked in Bangladesh from 2002 to 2015. Bangladesh has 165 million people and is Muslim majority: 90% Muslim, 9% Hindu and a few Buddhists and Christians. Religion and faith are taken seriously. A religious worldview and practice pervades society, from the individual up to the government. People show respect for their creator God (Allah), the spiritual realm and life beyond the present. I met only 2 atheists in my whole time there. Secularism meant that all religious communities were equal under the law. All religious festivals were celebrated: Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Christian. Secularism did not mean the removal of religion from public life and a general disdain of religion - as in New Zealand.

Bishwa Ijtema

3 A good example: Each January 3 to 4 million Muslim pilgrims (mostly from within country) gather at the Bishwa Ijtema (World Congregation), on the banks of the Turag river, just north of Dhaka, for several days of religious devotion, teaching and seeking God's (Allah) blessing on the country. This is the largest global Islamic congregation, beating the annual Hajj in Mecca. The Ijtema concludes with Friday mid-day prayers, broadcast live so the 140 million Muslims in country can join in. Just before the final prayer begins on the radio, the whole country stops - every bike, motor bike, car, van, bus, truck (trains and boats?, aeroplanes keep flying). The 6 lane motorway near our apartment completely stops, with everyone praying either in or out of the vehicle. Can you imagine 90% of a nation stopping to seek God's (Allah) blessing. I found the experience a very powerful witness to people's faith and respect for God (Allah). It was nothing like New Zealand.

Mission context - New Zealand

6 Having travelled in many countries, and lived and worked in two others, I would say New Zealand is one of the most secular countries, in terms of removal of religion from public life and a general dismissiveness of religion, particularly Christianity and the church. I love New Zealand, but it's a tough place for mission. Which is harder - a Bangladeshi Muslim switching to Jesus, or a secular Kiwi starting with Jesus? Muslims already believe in and respect God (Allah), while Kiwis are usually disinterested or dismissive. This is our mission context. Where to from here?

Evangelism - 2 approaches

7 The Apostle Paul presents two approaches to evangelism (verbal witness), which help us.

[Col 4:2-6](#): ² Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. ³ And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. ⁴ Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.

⁵ Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. ⁶ Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. (TNIV)

v3-4: Paul is speaking of himself and a few other ‘gifted evangelists’. Paul wants the Colossians to pray for the gifted evangelists to have open doors and clarity in their telling of Jesus and the gospel.

v5-6: Paul is speaking to all the other Colossians who are not ‘gifted evangelists’ but are to be at least ‘evangelistic’ in outlook. Paul wants the Colossians to be wise in how they act towards outsiders (non-Christians), make the most of every opportunity (relationships), and speak with grace (kindness), seasoned with salt (adding flavour) to outsiders. This enables them to give an answer to everyone - who is curious (about their Jesus faith). This is identical to Peter’s instruction:

[1 Pet 3:15b](#): Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. (TNIV)

8 The two-fold evangelistic approach can be summarised as:

Minister type	Priorities	Verbal witness type
Gifted Evangelists (a few)	Looking for opportunities; clarity in the Gospel message	Bold proclamation
Evangelistic Believers (all the rest)	Prayer for others, watchful for opportunities, wise socialising	Gracious answers

It seems there aren’t many gifted evangelists. We’re gifted in different ways. Most of us are to pray, live a just and loving life, show God’s love through word and action... and try to provoke unbelievers to question us about our faith. We’re all to live ‘questionable lives’ creating opportunities for faith discussions - sharing the gospel surprisingly and graciously.

Taking over the Roman Empire

According to Frost, Christians transformed the Roman Empire. The empire had religions based on multiple Greek gods (polytheism), superstitions and worship of the emperor seen as both human and divine.

9 Christianity worshipping only one God threatened the empire. Despite experiencing cruel persecution, Christianity grew at a phenomenal rate. Emperor Constantine (AD 300) adopted Christianity as the state religion due to a vision of Christ. But later, Emperor Julian (AD 350) rejected Christianity, wanting to revive the Roman religions. The church gave him the nick name ‘Julian the Apostate’. However, the Christians

10 remained a great problem for Julian.

Frost says the Christians devoted themselves to sacrificial acts of kindness - loving their enemies, forgiving their persecutors, caring for the poor and feeding the hungry. Living under harsh Roman rule, they lived differently, they lived ‘questionable lives’ provoking curiosity in the Jesus message. Emperor Julian feared their influence over the empire. He called them ‘atheists’ because they didn’t believe in pagan gods. He

11 called their religion a sickness. Julian wrote to his officials:

“We must pay special attention and find a cure (for the Christian sickness). When the poor are neglected by the pagan priests, the impious Galileans (Christians) devote themselves to philanthropy (helping the poor). They gain popularity by doing this. Just as children are attracted by cake and then get captured and

sold as slaves... by the same method, the Galileans (Christians) begin with their love-feast or hospitality, leading many people into atheism (Christianity).”

Concerned Christians’ hospitality and philanthropy were winning too many people, he wrote again:

12

“Why can’t we see that it is Christians’ benevolence to strangers, care for graves and their pretended holiness that have done most to increase atheism (Christianity)? We ought to practice all of those virtues. It’s disgraceful that the impious Galileans (Christians) support both their own poor and ours as well. Everyone can see this.”

So, Julian decided to out-love the Christians, by getting his officials and pagan priesthood to set up food distribution and hostels for poor travellers. According to Frost, the new social program failed. He couldn’t motivate his officials and priests to care that much for the poor. He didn’t understand that Christians were motivated by God’s grace. Their message, that God loved the world, was strange to the Romans, whose pagan gods cared little for humankind. Christians spoke of and demonstrated God’s mercy. They fed the poor, welcomed other ethnicities and cared for slaves. They were a surprising alternative society, curious to a Roman. Our challenge, in 21st century secular Dunedin, is to live questionable lives, causing others to ask us questions.

13 What kind of life will provoke questions?

In my experience, the more kind or gracious or counter-cultural a person is (words and actions), the more others will be curious. Similarly, Frost says that unpredictable, surprising or shocking communication has the greatest impact. Jesus’ parables were like this. He drew listeners in with familiar events, such as sowing seed, but then shocked them, provoking joy, anger and questions.

A question: Has anyone ever asked questions about your life, leading to faith discussions? Living a good middle-class life in the suburbs, keeping the lawn and garden tidy and car clean, playing sport, watching TV, listening to music and driving to work... is a good life... but it’s not exactly intriguing. It probably won’t generate much curiosity from others. It’s just too normal.

In my life - living in St Kilda, doing engineering (past), mowing lawns, driving to and fro etc, has not generated any ‘big’ questions from others. On the other hand - going to Bible college, living and working in Bangladesh and Cambodia, church involvement, working with refugees, doing university development studies... have generated lots of ‘big’ questions leading to discussions of beliefs, values and Jesus. Frost says ‘somehow, we need to become a godly, intriguing, socially adventurous, joyous presence in the lives of others’. The 5 habits will help us. See video.

 **Vid 0 - The 5 Habits - BELLS - Intro - 4m 53s**

A new set of habits

14

Frost says: To be missional is a set of habits! Putting it another way, the habits help reinforce our mission. Jesus and the New Testament writers saw a very powerful connection between faith and action... spirituality and lifestyle - impossible to separate. James says:

[James 2:18: Show me your faith without action, and I will show you my faith by my actions.](#)

How do we establish new habits... how do we change our collective culture? We’ve been taught that... ‘right thinking’ leads to ‘right action’ (cognitive behaviour therapy), but this is only partly true. Despite knowing better: some people stay up too late; some people procrastinate; some people are often late? We get a lot of head knowledge in church (intellectual stimulus is good), but it doesn’t always lead to more mission and reaching out. In the video, Frost said that ‘right theology’ (ortho-doxy) doesn’t always lead to ‘right practice’ (ortho-praxis).

15

Is there another way to change? The Greek philosopher Aristotle (BC 350) said, “We are what we repeatedly do.” Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung (AD 1900) said, “You are what you do, not what you say you’ll do.” In the video, Frost said... ‘right action’ can lead to ‘right thinking’, and ‘right practice’ can lead to ‘right theology’. This is the opposite way around from before. Christianity is not just a ‘system of belief’ (it is that) but it’s ‘also a way of life’. Faith is expressed to others through a series of habits (words and actions). This is hugely overlooked in discipleship. In churches we have statements of ‘faith and belief’, but no statements of ‘values, behaviour, actions and habits’! We need to foster habits that will both (i) shape our own faith and beliefs, and (ii) and surprise and challenge others to ask us the big question ‘why?’ The 5 habits will help us.

The 5 Habits

16

Let’s call these ‘missional habits’ - signposts pointing to God and his kingdom.

Frost’s 5 habits (BELLS) are...

#	Habit	Activity & Goal (Frost)	Value
1	<u>B</u> less others	I will bless three people this week, at least one of whom is not a member of our church.	Generous
2	<u>E</u> at together	I will eat with three people this week, at least one of whom is not a member of our church.	Hospitable
3	<u>L</u> earn Jesus	I will spend at least one period of the week learning Jesus.	Christlike
4	<u>L</u> isten to the Spirit	I will spend at least one period of the week listening for the Spirit’s voice.	Spirit-led
5	<u>S</u> ent by God	I will journal throughout the week all the ways I alerted others to the universal reign of God through Christ.	Missional

Three of the habits have an outward focus (Bless, Eat, Sent) pushing us out into the lives of not-yet Christians, inviting curiosity. Two of the habits have an inward focus (Learn, Listen) re-energizing and re-connecting us with Jesus, to avoid burn out. Frost has a goal for each habit, but you and I will set our own goals, in the weeks ahead, according to our personality and situation.

Each habit expresses a value in the life of the person doing the habit. If you bless people, you’re going to be generous. If you eat with others, you’ll develop hospitality. If you’re learning Jesus, you’ll become more Christlike. If you listen to the Holy Spirit, you’ll become more Spirit-led. And if you’ll allow yourself to be sent and used by God in the lives of others, you’ll be missional. However, just like beliefs... values are only words, unless worked out through actions and habits.

17

Conclusion / Homework

I would like you to consider and discuss with others this week (home groups / Mitre 10):

- Do you live a ‘questionable life’ that provokes curiosity in others about your Christian faith?
- What’s one thing you could do to live a ‘questionable life’?

18

- Next week we’ll explore Habit #1: Bless others (Generous).

- Sat 10 Mar: Contemporary Apologetics workshop: Mark Powell - Pastor & former Warehouse CEO. Fliers inserted in church newsletters.

Prayer

Over the next 5 weeks leading to Palm Sunday we're going to be talking about Jesus then and Jesus now. We're going to take a Bible passage and consider one or at most two truths from it and then consider each of the five habits of highly missional people.

Reading: Mark 1:1, 9-15

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God....

9 At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. 10 Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11 And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'

12 At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, 13 and he was in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

14 After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 15 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.'

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, if it wasn't for you telling us, we'd avoid the truth about ourselves. We have good intentions, but we fail to live up to them. We want to be courageous and faithful, but when the going gets rough and our faith is put on the line, we're not so sure. We have a storehouse of hidden desires, doubtful intentions, and hurtful thoughts. We thank you that you didn't leave us alone with these desires, intentions and thoughts. You came to us, you stood in solidarity with us, you were tempted and you suffered as we are and do. All this you did for us, thank you Jesus! Amen.

Mark's account of Jesus' baptism is used by him as part of introducing who Jesus is. Throughout his days, Jesus is criticized for fraternizing with sinners. Is this any way for a Messiah to behave? In fact, there are those who contend that Jesus was crucified in great part because of his boundary-breaking outreach and invitations to sinners.

John the Baptist's charge is to baptize people to wash away their sins. John is depicted as someone whose message is essentially, 'Be sorry for your sins! Get washed! The Messiah is coming!'

Jesus, as God's Son, is presented as the sinless one, someone who though fully human is also innocent of the human tendency to disobey and rebel against God.

He's fully obedient and at one with God. So what's Jesus doing presenting himself for baptism if it's to wash away sin? It doesn't make sense.

When in the early Christian community baptism was instituted, the church faced a problem. Even after baptism, the baptized still sinned; it seemed incredible that those who'd been adopted into God's family, those who'd been forgiven all their sins, still continued to sin – we know from experience that they weren't too different to us. In a number of places in Paul's letters he struggles with the question - how can it be that those who have received such a gift from God, signified in baptism, still 'remain in their sin? I love his great line, **'What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?'** (Romans 7:24). For me that's biographical.

This was part of the reason for the creation in the church of the season of Lent. This season of sorrow and regret gave an opportunity for Jesus' followers to deal with the perplexing problem of post-baptismal sin. In a sense, the entire 40 days of Lent is an opportunity for each of us to remember what we promised when we were baptised. That's why we took the opportunity on Wednesday night to begin such a journey.

Sin is the thing that alienates us from our creator God who continually cares for us and reaches out to us. God wants the best for each of us. And how do we respond? We respond by going our way, thinking of ourselves and in a host of other ways attempting to be gods to ourselves.

And what does God do in response to this? He sends Jesus, the perfect one and he begins by experiencing baptism reserved for sinners. Even John the Baptist was befuddled by the appearance of Jesus at the riverbank as the other gospels tell us.

It may be that Mark means us to see the baptism of Jesus as a foreshadowing of all Jesus did; God's Son yes, but not acting as we might expect God's Son to act. Standing in the Jordan, Jesus stands in solidarity with the sinners he comes to save. He won't save us from on high, merely reaching down to us. He'll get in the water with us. He'll stand shoulder to shoulder with us. He'll save us by becoming one of us. Not necessarily one of us in the sense that he's a sinner like us, but rather one with us in the sense that he loves and saves sinners.

He wades into the water with us. He risks not only the swirling currents that surround us but he risks saving us, he risks saving people like us. He gets into the water with us. In his baptism, he shows the lengths that he will go in order to save us, knowing that this story will end not in the refreshing water of a life-giving river but on a death-dealing hill called Calvary.

As the hymn writer put it: **'Oh help me understand it, help me to take it in, what it meant to you, the holy one, to take away my sin.'**