

B.L.E.S.S. Part Three – “Serve and Story”

Pastor Jarrett Stephens

We are finishing up our *B.L.E.S.S.* series today and I want to thank all of you who are participating in this “BLESS challenge”. We are asking everyone to think of the people in your circle of influence that don’t know Jesus in a personal way – could be neighbors, coworkers, friends at school –and we are asking you to consider BLESSing them with the hope of your continued blessing in their life, they will come to know Jesus – B.L.E.S.S.

B – Begin with prayer! This is where it starts. If you missed the first week of this series, go back and listen to it. We gave you several ways that you could pray specifically for the people God has put around you. And as an act of faith, we had you write the names of people you are praying for on the floor of the lobby of our worship center. We’ll have that available again today.

It was awesome to walk around and see so many names of people that you are praying for and asking Jesus to save. Remember this is what it’s all about for us! Seeing people far from God be brought into a relationship with him - This IS our mission!

It’s why God has put us on that street...in that neighborhood...at that office...in the cubicle right next to that person...playing that sport with that teammate...we have a responsibility AND obligation to be a witness to them, and it begins with simply praying for them.

Last week, we covered the “L and E”, which stands for “Listen and Eat”. If we want to grow from being casual acquaintances to genuine friends with people where they really want to hear what we have to say, the best way to do it is to listen to them and have a meal with them.

We looked at the life of Jesus and saw how he did this...so many barriers are broken and bridges are built over a table where good food and conversation takes place.

Now, if you are already doing this, please send us your stories! We set up an email account – stories@cfbc.org. We’d love to hear how God is answering your prayers and how it is going as you BLESS people.

This week, we cover the final two letters in the BLESS acronym and it will serve as the title of today’s message: **Serve and Story**

Let me simply begin by saying this: You are never more like Jesus than when you are serving.

Illus. WWJD – Do you remember the bracelets we used to wear that had WWJD on them? What would Jesus do? The phrase was taken from Charles Sheldon’s classic, *In His Steps*. The book deals with some believers living in the same city who decided to ask this question before they made any decision no matter how major or minor that decision might be - “What would Jesus do?”

It's a great story and it really inspired me as a teenager reading the book. Well, if you ask this question, WWJD, I assure you something he would always do is SERVE – this was the life of Jesus.

The second verse I ever memorized was **Mark 10:45** – “**For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.**”

This was a consistent teaching of Jesus...those that follow him should be take the posture of a servant. The disciples were arguing about who was the greatest one day, and Jesus took them aside in:

Matt. 20:25-27 – “**But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶ It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave.”**

The call of a Christian is a call to serve. Paul writing the church in Philippi:

Phil. 2:5-7 – “**Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.”**

Jesus...the greatest man to ever live was the greatest servant to ever live – just think about that! The highest of the high – God in the flesh – came to this earth as a servant...amazing!

Perhaps the greatest illustration and most beautiful picture of Jesus being a servant is found in John 13. The night that he would be betrayed and arrested, he takes his disciples to an upper room to share a meal with them and do you remember what he does?

John 13:1-5 – “**Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ² During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, ⁴ rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. ⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him...”**

As you have probably heard, in the times of the Bible foot-washing was reserved for the servant of the house...it certainly wasn't the leader in the home's responsibility.

And in the first century where people didn't have Johnstons and Murphey's...they weren't wearing HOKAS or NIKES...they had sandals. So, you can imagine how dirty their feet were! I don't think pedicures had been invented yet!

This is a nasty job...it's not something you'd sign up for. And yet, Jesus takes the towel and basin and washes their feet. And listen to what he tells them after he is done.

John 13:12-15 – “When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you understand what I have done to you? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.”

The washing of feet symbolized service...and Jesus says, “we should do for others, just as he has done for us.” There is something that happens when we serve others. If we really want to impact those who are far away from the Lord and make a difference in their life, I’m telling you, serving them is a MAJOR way to do this. Let me tell you why.

1. Serving others helps lower guards

When you serve someone with no strings attached, it lowers people guards. It’s natural to put walls up. And when you are developing friendships with people, more often than not there is not an immediate trust...it takes time.

People have to get to know us and feel comfortable with us before we can expect them to open up and talk about something as personal as their spiritual life and beliefs. Serving can fast forward the process of developing a genuine friendship and help build a bridge of trust.

Just try it...with those that you are praying for, ask the Lord how you can serve them and watch how over time serving them will help lower their guard and strengthen the friendship and they will be more and more open to spiritual conversation – some of them even bringing it up!

It takes time and consistency for this to happen though!

Illus. Friday Fort Hood (SHOW PICS) – Chris Smartt, 800 soldiers – takes time and being a part of their lives. B having coffee, etc.

2. Serving others helps soften hearts

I was given a definition years ago of successful evangelism years ago and I like it. It was simply this: **Successful evangelism is sowing seed and cultivating soil.**

See, if you grew up in church, and you grew up in a SBC church like me, I was taught that successful evangelism was when someone prayed to receive Christ...that was success! And that was the ONLY thing that was success!

If you didn’t verbally share your faith, you weren’t being obedient...that person that worked at the gas station, they needed Jesus and if you didn’t tell them, their blood was on your hands!

Probably wasn’t meant to be like this, but that was kind of the guilt you felt...for me, it led to awkward conversations, passing out weird tracts (and I’m NOT against passing out tracts – map of house growing up)...but the deal was successful evangelism is when people prayed to receive Jesus. Anything less either wasn’t considered evangelism or wasn’t successful.

It wasn't until someone shared this definition with me and share with me the parable of the sower and the seed that helped me see what successful evangelism really is.

Look with me at **Matt. 13:1-9** – “**That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. ⁴**

And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, ⁶ but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.⁹ He who has ears, let him hear.”

Now, this is one of the only parables Jesus actually translates...and look at his translation in (v. 18-23).

Matt. 13:18-23 – “**Hear then the parable of the sower: ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. ²³ As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”**

So, you have the sower sowing seed. The seed represents the word...the gospel. The sower is Jesus in his time, and now is me and you. We are the ones responsible for sowing the word of God in people's lives and we are to sow the seed as far and as wide as possible – this is successful evangelism.

But that's not all...a farmer does not just sow seed, he also cultivates soil, which in this parable represents the heart of man.

- Shallow soil – people who don't understand the word, and Satan comes and snatches it away (prayer so important in sharing the gospel).
- Rocky soil – this represents people who the word is sown in their life, but due to a heartache or tragedy or pain or persecution it doesn't take root...
- Thorny soil – this is the heart that receives the word but it's choked out by life's worries and riches and pleasures and never produces anything...

- Fertile soil – this heart takes the seed and it produces fruit.

One seed – the gospel...four different types of soil representing the hearts of men.

Successful evangelism is sowing seed and cultivating soil. It's looking at people and realizing they are not in the same place...and check this: the single best way to cultivate the hearts of people so that their heart becomes fertile is to serve them.

So, when you sow seed (whether or not someone receives Christ or not) and when you serve people in the name of Jesus (whether or not they receive him or not) – THAT is successful evangelism precisely BECAUSE you are planting, cultivating and watering so that the seed has the best chance to take root in their heart and produce fruit – that's successful evangelism!

Listen, there are so many reasons why people are far from God. Some didn't grow up with any spiritual upbringing. Some have had a horrible experience with the church or with Christians. Some grew up in a different faith and don't see a need to change...so many reasons people are far from God - there are what I call "stages to lostness".

Illus. Whiteboard – (unaware, receptive, relationship, church, commitment 1-10)

The chances of that person coming to know Christ in a single conversation are slim to none...it happens, but it doesn't happen often! Those airplane conversion stories NEVER happen with me...and trust me, I've tried!

Illus. Coke Zero

More often than not, when sharing Jesus, it takes time for someone to commit their life to him. If they do pray to receive Christ right away, it's probably because people have gone before you in cultivating their heart and sowing seed (3 hearings, 7 touches).

Paul put it like this to the church in Corinth. **1 Cor. 3:5-9 – “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.”**

Serving others helps cultivate the hearts of people. It lowers guards...it softens hearts...and then thirdly:

3. Serving others helps create conversations

When you begin serving others with no strings attached...when you are loving people because you are simply living out WWJD, I promise you it will open up and create conversations, you've never dreamed of having.

Illus. Next week – Missions Sunday – Rob Wilton of Vintage Church in Pittsburgh. I love our CF Connect and all the church plants we support.

I'll never forget the first time I was introduced to church planting. I was introduced to a church planter in Boston and he wanted me to bring a group of our young singles up to Boston to help serve the community he was planting a church in.

Illus. Granola bar church – Hope Fellowship – planted in 2003, since then have planted 7 other churches with a number of granddaughter churches!

Illus. Roscoe Lilly – Starpoint Church in Albany, New York – incredible story! All started with servant evangelism – cleaning toilets! “Why are you doing this?!”

Serving people lowers guards, softens hearts and creates conversations. It fast tracks acquaintances to genuine friendships, and it prepares you and the person you are serving for the final “S” in the BLESS acronym and that is “Story”.

We begin in prayer. We listen and eat. We serve them, and then when God opens the door and we sense it's the right time, we share Jesus with that person, and the easiest way to do it is through sharing our story.

It's our testimony. And the power of your testimony is that no one can deny it...it's your story!

We share what our life was like before Jesus. How we met Jesus. And then we share what our life has been like since meeting Jesus.

For some of you it was dramatic...it's like right under Paul being blinded by Jesus on the Damascus Road. For others, like me, it wasn't as dramatic – I was 11 at a summer preteen camp with my church.

Regardless of what your story is, it's just that, it's your story and I promise you if you will serve others the way Jesus would, people will give you an opportunity to share it...they'll ask you:

- Why are you so different?
- How can you have so much peace?
- What is it that makes you the way you are?

And when asked, you walk through the open door! Yes, you will be nervous, but the Spirit of God is with you!

Remember, it's the message of the gospel that saves – faith in Jesus death, burial and resurrection, NOT in your presentation or the specifics of your story. The power is in the message of the gospel.

And I want to end today in just showing you a simple way you can share the gospel using your story...this is the predominant way we are teaching our church these days to have a conversation about spiritual matters.

We call it Three Circles...it's designed to happen over a meal or coffee...in the context of relationship...friendship. Actually an app designed called: **LIFE ON MISSION**

Illus. Whiteboard 3 Circles

What would happen Champion Forest, if we get serious about BLESSing those in circle of influence that don't know Jesus?

I hope that this won't be simply a three-week series that we preach and move on from...but instead, it becomes a daily rhythm of our life. With those far away from God. We:

Begin in prayer.

Listen and eat.

Serve and Share our story/God's story, the gospel with them.

Let's pray together.

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