



Bringing the Gospel Home



How to talk to your
friends and family
about Jesus

You would think that sharing your faith with friends and family would be easy, but that's just not the case. Despite being concerned about the eternal destiny of their loved ones, many Christians find that sharing the gospel with them creates a lot of turmoil and anxiety. There's something about witnessing to those closest to you that's challenging.

Why is sharing the gospel with loved ones so tricky?

We put a lot of work into cultivating our relationships, and each one is entirely unique. Some relationships are casual and fun, while others are deep and thoughtful. But every one of them has potential landmines that the gospel seems to expose.

Some people interpret the Christian message as “you're a bad person, and you need Jesus.” This can be a challenge for people who have seen you at your worst. Before you can clarify what the gospel really is, they're already discrediting you because of that dumb thing you did ten years ago (or even yesterday).

And where a stranger might listen respectfully, a family member is more likely to dismiss you with a sarcastic or sharp comment. They might even distance themselves from you in fear of getting sucked into another uncomfortable conversation.

Not peace, but a sword

It's not just you. The gospel naturally introduces challenges into the closest of relationships. Jesus alludes to this difficulty:

“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth.
I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.
For I have come to turn

“a man against his father,
a daughter against her mother,
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—
a man's enemies will be the members of his own household”

(Matthew 10:33–36, New International Version).

By quoting the prophet Micah (vs. 7:6), Jesus identifies the tension that His kingdom introduces into families. Allegiances and priorities shift, adherence to certain longstanding traditions change, and the influence of important family figures and ideas are challenged.

In some parts of the world, Jesus' words aren't figurative. For many in places like the Middle East, accepting the gospel puts people in literal danger for their lives from family members. And while most of us aren't in any physical danger from choosing to follow Jesus, the strain of shifting loyalties is felt in our families and friendships.

The plain truth is that there's a lot at stake in our relationships and it's a challenge to share the message of Jesus in a way that doesn't injure long-term relationships.

A prophet in his hometown

In the sixth chapter of Mark, Jesus takes the disciples back to his old stomping grounds to teach in the synagogue, and it doesn't go over well.

- Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples.
- When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed.
- “Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What’s this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing? Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.
- Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home.” He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. He was amazed at their lack of faith **(Mark 6:1–6)**.

Here we see the skepticism of Jesus’ neighbors. Why are they suspicious of Him? Is it because they find fault in His behavior or teaching? No. On the contrary, they’re amazed at what they see and hear. They’re skeptical because of what they perceive as Jesus’ ordinariness. Prophets don’t come from small towns; they don’t have brothers and sisters.

But the people in Jesus' village are not the only ones who doubted Him. Early in his ministry, even his own family didn't know what to think. Mark says that "When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind'" (Mark 3:21, NIV), and John tells us that "even his own brothers did not believe in him" (John 7:5).

As the old saying goes, "familiarity breeds contempt." If the only perfect person to walk the earth struggled to win the confidence of people who knew Him best, how much harder is it for us? It's probably true that an evangelist is also not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home.

The difficulty you feel in sharing the gospel with your family is completely understandable. But let's look at how you can overcome that apprehension.

Before you get to the gospel

Any farmer will tell you that if you want a good harvest, you can't just go out into a field and start throwing seed around. Cultivating the ground is a must. Before planting starts, the soil needs to be broken up to make it easier for air, nutrients, and water to nourish the seeds that you plant. The same is true with bringing the gospel home.

Praying for your loved ones

As you've probably guessed, prayer is the key to cultivating your loved one's hearts and preparing them to hear the gospel. Jesus tells us that, "no one can come to Me unless the Father who sent me draws them" (John 6:44). For that reason, it's important that we're praying for God's Spirit to draw those close to Him and prepare them to hear Jesus' message. This way, when we share the gospel with them, they're more likely to respond positively.

Find and memorize key verses that encourage you and remind you how to pray for them. These Scriptures will become springboards for your prayers. Here are a few to get you started:

“I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to Me with all their heart”

(Jeremiah 24:7, NIV).

Pray specifically for the people in your life, and ask the Lord to prepare their heart to receive Him. If they used to walk with Him but don't any longer, ask God to draw them back.

• “And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power,
• together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high
• and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—
• that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God”
• **(Ephesians 3:17–19, NIV).**

Once someone gets a glimpse of God’s love for them, it’s difficult to resist. Pray for God to overwhelm your friends and family with His love for them.

• “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret,
• but worldly sorrow brings death” **(2 Corinthians 7:10, NIV).**

You don’t want to heap condemnation on those closest to you, but a change of heart is a necessity. Pray that they’d experience appropriate godly sorrow that would lead them to repentance.

By familiarizing yourself with verses like these and praying them over your loved ones, you’re working with God to break up the soil of their hearts and make them more receptive to the good news.

The importance of light

After you've begun to cultivate the soil of their hearts with prayer, you need to ensure that any seed you plant receives enough light to grow. Plants convert light into life-giving energy through photosynthesis—and so do people. Jesus is the light of the world (John 8:12), and as we follow Him, we become bearers of His light:

• “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither
• do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand,
• and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine
• before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in
• heaven” **(Matthew 5:14–16)**.

Our good deeds, kindnesses, and service are a light that reveals God's presence and goodness. Our spiritual fruit stimulates others to glorify God. Like prayer, the way we act around our loved ones plays a significant role in their receptiveness to God's goodness.

It's critical that we remember that prayer and good works are cumulative. They don't give a one-to-one return. So you can't expect your brother to change his mind about the gospel because you prayed a couple of times or made him a batch of cookies. If you want an environment suitable for planting the gospel, you need to be willing to make a long-term personal investment.

Stories abound of parents and grandmothers who've spent years consistently praying for God to turn the hearts of wayward children. The great thing about making that level of commitment to prayer is that you benefit as well. As you pray consistently, your heart is softened toward your family. The more you pray, the easier it becomes to love and serve them patiently. As you keep talking to God about your family members, He empowers to you to shine a brighter light.

What you shouldn't expect from loved ones

Before we share our faith with loved ones, we need to weed out some unrealistic expectations. Your discussions aren't always going to end well and your friends and family aren't always going to understand what you're trying to say. Having reasonable expectations helps you accept the difficulties of communicating the gospel without becoming overly discouraged and frustrated.

You can't expect respect

There are many reasons why people might have problems with your faith. It could be that they don't understand Christianity and are turned off by negative portrayals of Christians, or they may just see this as a phase you're going through. It's impractical to expect people to completely embrace your beliefs.

Over time you may find yourself making difficult personal choices that others misinterpret. For instance, it could be that alcohol has been a big part of past family gatherings. Whenever you get together, booze flows freely and people tend to over imbibe. And even though you used to partake with everyone else, you feel convicted to abstain from that part of the festivities. Before you know it, you're on the receiving end of comments like, "Oh, look who thinks they're better than the rest of us."

Comments like these can hurt, especially when you're trying your best to be obedient without being judgmental. Don't take it personally. Your family is trying to process the changes in you, and if you let them do that without getting defensive, it will have a big impact.

Most of your loved ones won't have a problem with your faith, but you should expect contention here and there. That way, when it occurs, you won't be caught off guard. Think of moments like this as a test. When you don't take the bait, you pass. Over time, your reasonable, loving response to sarcastic and negative comments work in the gospel's favor. It's another way of letting your light be seen.

You can't expect an understanding of Christianity

There was a time when you could almost expect American culture to have a base-level understanding of Christianity. It's undeniable that the Bible has had an impact on everything, from our laws to our language. Only a handful of decades ago, you could say "do unto others," and most people could complete this biblical quote. But that's just not the case anymore.

It's likely that you're immersed in a church culture that has its own distinct dialect and social rules. The people at your church might understand what you mean when you use terms like "salvation," "fellowship," and "communion," but that doesn't mean that your loved ones do.

We're often trained to give our testimony (a term a non-Christian probably wouldn't understand) or share the gospel using language that makes sense to other Christians, but isn't entirely clear to people without any biblical background. It's critical that you develop a working knowledge of the gospel that makes you confident that you could explain it to a child.

As Einstein says, "If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough."

Begin with vulnerability

Resistance to your faith isn't always about what you believe. Sometimes it's more complicated. On some level, sharing the gospel communicates to your family that you believe that you know something about the world that they do not. This doesn't always sit well.

One of the reasons that a prophet doesn't receive honor "among his relatives and in his own home" is that families struggle with the idea that this child they raised or sibling they've grown up with thinks that they know the secret of the universe—and therefore assumes that they're better than everyone else. It's a hard pill to swallow.

That's why it's critical that you don't talk down to people. When you're sensitive to their feelings and insecurities, the truth becomes more palatable. By sharing your heart in a way that makes you open and transparent, the people in your life are more apt to listen. Instead of laying out a hidden truth that they need to accept, it's helpful for you to explain why the gospel resonates so deeply with you.

Again, this comes back to letting your light shine. When the gospel is demonstrated in your actions, it's easier for people to recognize in your conversation. Your vulnerability becomes a lubricant that cuts down on the friction that comes from sharing the gospel.

Invitations still matter

At the beginning of John's gospel, we see Andrew and another fellow following Jesus. The Lord turns around and asks them what they're looking for. They respond by asking Him where He is staying. Jesus invites them to "come and see" (John 1:36–39).

This seemed to be Jesus' modus operandi. He didn't present the truth to people as a precursor to accepting them; He issued an open invitation in the form of a hearty "Follow me!" Over time, they instinctively responded to Christ's message.

In *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, George G. Hunter III contrasts St. Patrick's model of evangelism to the Celts with the traditional Roman model. We tend to be more familiar with using the Roman model, which is laid out in these three steps:

1. Presentation
2. Decision
3. Assimilation or fellowship

Patrick practiced a model in Ireland that looked like this:

1. Fellowship
2. Ministry and conversations
3. Belief and invitation to commitment

By giving people the opportunity to belong before they believed, potential Christian converts experienced Christianity without a lot of stress and pressure. They could watch the effect it had and ask questions. Over time, the Celts just found themselves believing the same thing that their new community believed.

This model echoes the experience that a lot of post-modern Christian converts experience:

1. They are introduced to Christianity through a friend or family member.
2. They begin to ask questions.
3. They are invited to a church, small group, or ministry.
4. They discover that they believe the gospel to be true and respond with a commitment and baptism.

The drive to belong is a powerful one, and that's what makes invitations so vital. A 2014 LifeWay Research survey found that 67 percent of Americans say that an invitation from a family member would be very or somewhat effective to get them to visit a church. And when an invitation leads to an opportunity to be welcomed into a community, people find themselves sticking around.

Asking your loved ones to attend a church, small group, or service project with you doesn't negate your responsibility to share the gospel with them, but it can supercharge it. And it provides a helpful alternative to laying out abstract truths that they must simply accept or reject before they can belong. By inviting them to join you on your journey, they're given more opportunities to see and respond to the truth.

Understanding your audience

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us” **(2 Corinthians 5:18–20, NIV)**.

Paul tells us that we’re Christ’s ambassadors. We’re citizens of another kingdom living in a foreign host country working to reconcile these two powers. As is the case with real-life ambassadors, we get better at our job the more we understand the politics of our host country. As we learn what drives and motivates them, we can make more persuasive petitions on behalf of our true King.

As a friend and family member, you have a leg up on any other evangelist. You understand the people closest to you in ways that they cannot. You understand what makes them tick. You know what worries them. You’ve walked with them through their darkest and most celebratory moments.

This knowledge enables you to talk with them about Jesus in ways that resonate. You’re not exploiting your knowledge of them. You’re speaking to their deepest needs and desires. The great thing is that you don’t have to rely on a stock gospel presentations. You can communicate in a ways that speak to specific questions, anxieties, and aspirations.

Learning to have real conversations

The conversations we normally have with the people closest to us are fascinating. Discussions with friends and family tend to be practical and a little shallow, silly and fun-loving, or deep and philosophical. But we often shy away from the kind of dialogue that leaves us exposed.

But facilitating these kinds of conversations is a skill we can develop. Instead of thinking of yourself as an insurance agent who just wants to close a deal, think of it as your job to create a tapestry of meaningful conversations that allow everyone to be vulnerable and discuss significant issues.

You'll find that the most significant challenge is starting conversations like this. You don't want people to feel like you're forcing these themes into unrelated topics or that you're using these discussions as an opportunity to push an agenda. This dialogue should feel natural and comfortable. It should be light instead of contentious.

You should expect your friends and family to have different opinions. And while it's good to disagree (and maybe even debate), monitor the tone of the conversation and shut it down if it gets heated. You want to encourage deep, personal connection, and you can't do that if they feel unsafe.

Here are some broad topics that people often think about, along with some questions that can get people to open up:

Death

- “What do you think would be the best/worst way to die?”
- “What do you think happens after you die?”

Morality

- “How do we know what’s right or wrong?”
- “Do you think there is anything that is inherently wrong in all cultures?”
- “Don’t you think it’s weird that all children seem to have an innate sense of fairness?”

Religion

- “Do you think, overall, that religion contributes to or detracts from becoming a good person?”
- “Overall, do you think religion makes society better off or worse off?”
- “Are you more or less likely to trust someone if they’re religious?”

Human Nature

- “Do you think people are inherently good or inherently bad?”
- “What makes one person better or worse than another?”

Happiness

- “Why do we all assume we deserve good experiences?”
- “What is the key to happiness?”

Remember: the goal isn’t to get people to agree with your take on these questions. It’s to create an environment where people feel comfortable sharing their opinions. The more you demonstrate a willingness to listen and engage other people’s thoughts, the more open they’ll become to yours.

Becoming courageous

Eventually, you'll need to have the “have you considered giving your life to Jesus?” conversation. It's not an easy one to have. And if they're not receptive, you'll probably need to wait a while before you can have it again (unless they bring it up themselves).

First of all, it takes a lot of boldness to initiate that conversation—but that's OK. You don't have to be brave all the time; you just need to be brave at the right time! We see that in Peter.

Before His crucifixion, Jesus predicted that the disciples would scatter. And in typical fashion, Peter promised that he'd stay loyal, even if everyone else scattered. Needless to say, that's not what happened. As Jesus predicts, Peter ended up denying Him three times before the rooster crowed (Mark 14:27–31, 66–72).

After His resurrection, Jesus restores Peter (John 21:15–17). And when the Holy Spirit is poured out at Pentecost in Acts 2, Peter becomes a different guy. This impetuous disciple that denied Jesus when confronted by a servant girl ended up preaching out in Jerusalem for everyone to see—and over 3,000 people chose to follow Jesus.

There are two important things we can take away from this. The first is that Peter was brave when it counted, and his courage resulted in a massive harvest. The second thing we need to recognize is that the same Spirit who empowered Peter empowers us. This is good news because we're ultimately not responsible for our “success.” It's the Spirit that changes people's hearts. All we have to “do” is make ourselves available to be used.

It's not all on you

Be careful not to assume sole responsibility for the spiritual state of your loved ones. Yes, you should pray for them, love them like Jesus, and facilitate open conversations with them. But you're not entirely accountable for their hearts.

No matter how much you long to see them reconciled to their creator, Jesus longs for it more. So pray that God surrounds them with Christians, and know that you might be planting seeds that someone else is eventually going to come along and harvest.

God truly likes your family

We talk about the love of God a lot, but do you ever wonder if God likes you? We kind of act like He feels a sense of begrudging obligation to us because He created us. But we don't often talk as though He genuinely likes us. Why is that? Part of the reason is that's how we tend to feel about our friends and family. We love them and feel a sense of responsibility for them, but let's be honest; there are times where we just don't like them very much.

Everything changes when we realize that God's love for us isn't contractual and stingy. He genuinely likes us. In fact, Scripture tells us that he delights in us (Psalm 35:27), and he rejoices over us with singing (Zephaniah 3:17). He feels the same about our families.

One of the best things we can do for our families is to pray that God empowers us to demonstrate His esteem and fondness for them. It is truly transformative for our friends and family to experience God's delight through us, and there's no better way to prepare them to understand the incredible lengths God was willing to go to be reconciled to them.