



# KNOWING & DOING

C · S · LEWIS INSTITUTE

*A Teaching Quarterly for Discipleship of Heart and Mind*

From the Winter 2014 issue of Knowing & Doing:



## Witnessing to Family Is Like Witnessing to Everyone Else . . . Only More So

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**T**he Jewish community collects stories that highlight their minority identity in a predominantly Gentile world. One memorable tale tells of a young boy who asked his rabbi, “What’s the difference between Jews and other people?” The rabbi replied, “Oh, Jews are just like everyone else . . . only more so.”

I often wonder if witnessing to family is just like witnessing to everyone else . . . only more so. Witnessing takes time. With family, it takes even more time. Witnessing involves the expression of love. With family, that love flows deeper but requires clearer expression. Witnessing encompasses a comprehensive worldview. With family, we have a wider range of common experiences in which to shine the glow of the gospel.

I keep this in mind when people ask me for a nutshell summary of my book *“Bringing The Gospel Home”*. I offer the memorable slogan, “Witnessing to family takes TLC.” I hope they catch my reference to “Tender, Loving Care” but then I tell them I mean something else. “T” stands for time, “L” stands for love, and “C” stands for comprehensiveness. These three were the common denominators I heard in the stories people told me. You need a longer-term perspective when it comes to family. You need a deeper reservoir of love. And you probably need to come in the side door by presenting the gospel as comprehensive in its effects, not just as a ticket into heaven.

But I hope you won’t settle for a nutshell summary. Some topics are far more complex. That is certainly true of the expansive topic of the kingdom of God, of which evangelism is just a part. Jesus offered numerous illustrations and parables to help us grasp the kingdom’s scope. On one occasion, He asked, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it?” (Mark 4:30).<sup>1</sup> He wanted His hearers to realize that no solitary image captures the complexity and enormity of the topic. Surely witnessing to family shares similar complex dynamics.

In Mark 4, Jesus tells three kingdom-illustrating parables that all talk about seed—how seed falls upon different kinds of soils, how some seed grows even without constant human attention, and how some seed has the potential to grow far beyond our imaginations. Some reflection upon these parables can help us sustain the long-term, loving, comprehensive perspective we need as we witness to family members, close friends, and others who know us well.

The first parable encourages us that even though some seed falls on ground that cannot produce a crop, other seed does produce seed:

*And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.” And he said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” (Mark 4:2–9)*

Fortunately for us, Jesus gave us the interpretation we need to understand this parable. When asked to explain it, He said,

*The sower sows the word. And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who heard the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold. (Mark 4:14–20)*

Note that the sower sows the same seed on different soils. You can say the exact same words, gift wrap the exact same books, share the exact same tracts, and doodle the exact same diagram on a napkin, and one relative will not even give you the time of day while another asks you to elaborate.

Some of your relatives may be deceived by the devil so it feels like your words are falling upon deaf ears.

Spiritually speaking, they are. Some respond positively at first, but after time, with the realities of life's inevitable disappointments or pressures from skeptical outsiders, they show their true colors as ones who never really got it. Others show a similar positive response at first, but get sidelined by other things—not the negative ones, like trials or persecutions, but the positive ones, like prosperity, success, pleasure, and positive approval ratings from this world. It's amazing how long those drugs can seem to satisfy.

Ed must have wondered which soil represented his father. Even though Ed's mother was a godly woman who brought her son to church every Sunday, his dad stayed at home and smoked cigarettes, drank alcohol, and watched television. Ed shared two memories of what those Sundays were like: At church, he and his mother sat up in the balcony where they could hide due to the shame of not having the "man of the house" accompany

them. (Such was the culture in parts of our country many years ago.) At home, his father was particularly grumpy on Sundays, more so than during the week.

When Ed was in high school, his mother died, prompting further depression and destructive behavior by his father. So when Ed got the chance to escape and move away to go to college, he did just that, rarely going back home to visit the father he didn't care for or respect. But then Ed came to faith in Christ during graduate school. All those seeds sown in church during his childhood apparently had fallen on good soil. Some seed takes more time to germinate than others. Ed's heart toward his father started softening, prompting him to go home on weekends and visit.

One Saturday night while back home, Ed jotted a note on a piece of cardboard to his father who had already gone to sleep. With little hope of it making any difference, he wrote, "Dad, if you'd like to accompany me to the 11 a.m. service at church tomorrow, wake me a little before 10:00."

To his great surprise, his father did wake him. Ed told me, "It was more out of surprise than delight that I went to church with my father that morning. I still had a long way to go in feeling any fond affection for him." This was one of those churches that offered an invitation for people to receive Christ every week. Every sermon ended with the words, "If you'd like to receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, I want you to slip out of your seat right now and come to the front of the church." Using that same phrase, Ed said to me, "More out of surprise than delight, I saw my father



walk forward and kneel at the railing in the front of the church.” After the service was over, when Ed asked him what prompted him to go forward, his father said, “Chains could not have held me back.”

Perhaps Jesus’ second parable about seed in Mark 4 can help us understand Ed’s father’s story better. Or, more helpful still, maybe this parable will enable you to hold out hope, pray with expectation, and look for signs of growth that may have escaped your notice before now. Jesus said,

*The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come. (Mark 4:26–29)*

Do you note how ordinary this process seems? Commentator James Edwards observes,

*A more banal comparison could not be imagined. The kingdom of God should be likened to something grand and glorious: to shimmering mountain peaks, crimson sunsets, the opulence of potentates, the lusty glory of a gladiator. But Jesus likens it to seeds. The paradox of the gospel—indeed, the scandal of the Incarnation—is disguised in such commonplaces.<sup>2</sup>*

In the daily rhythms of ordinary life, sleeping and rising, night and day, the kingdom of God advances, even if we know not how. Ed wonders how much the weekly rhythm of his mother and his going to church may have spoken volumes to his grumpy father. The seed of the kingdom can break through the hardening forces of alcohol, tobacco, television, and even the affectionless disdain of a son who goes off to college and wants little to do with a father back home.

The third parable may be the most encouraging of all. Jesus told us the kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade (Mark 4:31–32).

Here, Jesus offers a more illustrative way of saying what the parable of the soils told numerically, that some seed will bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold. What starts out as just a phone conversation, an e-mailed question, a mention of “I’ll be praying for you,” a gift of a book or DVD, or a note scribbled on a piece of cardboard, can bring about a widespread harvest beyond all dreams.

As Ed packed up to return to graduate school, he suggested that his father might want to call the pastor of the church and see what he recommended for growth in his newfound faith. Never would Ed have expected the program of discipleship the pastor laid out for this now sixty-year-old babe in Christ.

“Do you read the daily newspaper?” the pastor asked Ed’s father. He replied that he did—every day.

“I want you to look up the listings of all the people who had babies or announced their marriages. Send them a note of congratulations along with one of these tracts.” He handed him a stack of tracts and sent him on his way. That



started the daily writing of notes to dozens of new parents and brides and grooms. It also inspired him to start writing tracts of his own.

At age sixty-six, Ed's father married a godly Christian woman, sold his house, bought an RV, and travelled all over the country with his new bride, distributing thousands (that's not an exaggeration!) of tracts he had written. For eighteen more years, he lived as a fearless evangelist, sharing his story and praying that his words would fall upon soil where "chains could not hold people back" from believing and, ultimately, bearing fruit a hundredfold.

My highest priority in writing *Bringing The Gospel Home* was to encourage hope for Christians as they witness to their families. One final story girds me up as I pray for, extend love to, and search for words to say to those I know and love who still don't know the Savior.

For two whole years during World War II, the Nazis surrounded the city of Leningrad (now known by its former name, St. Petersburg). They pummeled it with shells, trying to crush the spirit of the people who lived there. Of great concern to the citizens was the preservation of the masterpieces in the Hermitage museum. Before the siege took place, curators and volunteers packed up thousands of paintings and sculptures and shipped them east to be hidden in the rural countryside far from the urban museum. But they left the frames and pedestals where they were, in anticipation of someday reuniting them with the paintings and statues they once held.

To provide constant protection of the building, many of the staff of the museum, along with their families, moved into its basement. Together with Russian soldiers, they swept up broken glass, boarded up holes in walls, and removed snow that had come through holes in the roof, hoping to protect the beautiful parquet floors.

As a way of saying thank you to the soldiers, the staff of the museum conducted tours of the building—even though the artwork wasn't there. Photographs depict knowledgeable curators standing before clusters of soldiers, pointing to empty picture frames and vacant pedestals. You can almost hear their voices describing beautiful works of art they had come to love and longingly miss. From memory, they would point out brushstrokes, marble contours, and the creative genius of the likes of Renoir, da Vinci, Monet, and Michelangelo.

The staff did this from the dual vantage points of happy memory and hopeful anticipation. They remembered what once was and looked forward to what they hoped would someday be again.<sup>3</sup>

We experience a similar duality as we live at this moment in salvation history. We remember what the world once was before the first man and woman's rebellion, and we anticipate what will someday be, after the return of Christ. We recall a creation before the fall, mostly through Scripture but also through an internal sense of how things ought to be. And we anticipate a consummation after the second coming, mostly through Scripture but also with a confidence assured by Jesus' resurrection.

In between these two bookends of biblical history is the world we live in, full of reminders of beauty and evidence of corruption. We see people who display goodness, love, and the image of God along with sin, rebellion, and brokenness. Some of those people live with us, grew up with us, look a lot like us, and celebrate holidays with us. When we share the gospel with them, we point them to the God who created everything and the Savior who will make all things new.

In a sense, witnessing to family members, close friends, and others who know us well fits into our waiting for the second coming. It's like the Hermitage staff waiting for the artwork to be restored . . . only more so. ■■

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It is right and inevitable that we should be much concerned about the salvation of those we love. But we must be careful not to expect or demand that their salvation should conform to some ready-made pattern of our own.

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*C.S. Lewis*

## Notes

1. All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version.
2. James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 142.
3. I first read about this story in Max De Pree, *Leading without Power: Finding Hope in Serving Community* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 188. You can read much more about it in *Sergei Varshavsky, The Ordeal of the Hermitage* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986).



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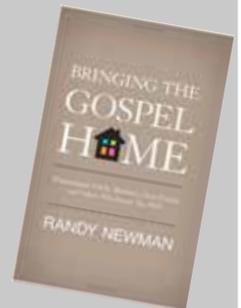
## RECOMMENDED READING

Randy Newman, *Bringing the Gospel Home: Witnessing to Family Members, Close Friends, and Other Who Know You Well* (Crossway, 2011)

Jesus is off limits for a lot of families and friends—or at least that's how it appears sometimes. Why does sharing the good news with a stranger often feel less frightening than telling those you love most?

For the vast majority of Christians, evangelism does not come naturally. We find ourselves sounding like someone we're not or beating ourselves up for not being bold enough, smart enough, or quick enough.

Randy Newman understands the complexity and consequences of this all-important task.



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