

How do Christians Appropriately Relate to Those Who Aren't?

Pastor Tom
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~Colossians 4:2-6

Daisy Cooper was married to a British soldier named Teddy. They had been posted in India to the 1930's. But when war clouds began to gather on the horizon, they returned home to small town Alberta. They had a young son and Daisy was pregnant with their second. When the war started, Teddy was posted to the Far East in Hong Kong. After giving birth, Daisy wrote to tell Teddy that they had a beautiful little girl to add to their son. But then war broke out in the Far East. Hong Kong fell and Daisy had no word about Teddy.

Soon his pay from the army stopped because they did not know if he still lived. So Daisy realized she needed to provide for her family. But she had never worked outside the home before. She liked to sing and eventually she joined a swing band working her way up to the role of lead singer. She performed with them in many community halls. Now Daisy and her children initially lived with her husband's parents. But she chafed under their scrutiny and negativity about her singing in halls. So she and the kids moved out.

As time went on, the band gained notoriety. In fact, things progressed to the point they even had shows in the big city of Edmonton. But Daisy was torn. The trombone player in the band had his eyes set on her. And the more time she spent with the band, the less time she spent with her children.

The 1989 movie *Bye Bye Blues* tells the story as she continues to sing while wondering about a possible relationship with this trombone player. He finally asks her out and declares that even if her husband were to come back, it would never be the same. But she remains true to Teddy and declares "Yes it would," refusing the trombone player's advances.

One night while they perform before a large crowd in Edmonton, their music is interrupted. A messenger comes on stage and announces the end of the war. The entire hall goes crazy with joy including Daisy. But the trombone player's face drops as he wonders what this might mean for his hopes regarding Daisy. They return home from the performance.

Soon, a telegram arrives at Daisy's home. It announces that her husband Teddy is not only alive but will be home in two days. Suddenly her world is thrown upside down. She had to prepare for the return of her husband whom she had not seen for over 5 years. She has changed and grown. The band had a show to perform the day after his return. What would she do?

Teddy's train arrived late in the evening. Daisy was late getting to the train station. When she arrived the platform had cleared and the train had gone. But she heard a moan from around the corner. There she found her husband smiling yet broken and suffering from years of mistreatment and torture in a Prisoner of War camp. She brought him home and Teddy saw his children for the first time in over 5 years. His boy was unsure of how to respond but eventually gave him a hug. Then he went into his daughter's bedroom. She greeted him with a "hello." Then Daisy told the little girl who this man was. She looked him over and then said, "Would you like to kiss me good night?" He smiled and answered, "Yes, I would very much like to."

That night, Daisy and Teddy slept in the same bed. But she awoke to hear him agonize as nightmares plagued his dreams. The next morning she called her mother in law and sister in law to come over for a surprise. At the same time, the bus for the band drove up expecting her to get on for their next big show. Daisy shook her head and said no. Everyone from the band got off the bus to hug her goodbye, except for the trombone player. He slinked down in his seat under the deadly stare of Daisy's husband. The film closes with the camera focused on Daisy. In the background, the bus drives off to its next gig. Teddy reunites with his mother and sister. The kids cling to her side. And Daisy looks joyful yet confused about how to navigate this relationship with her husband after so much had changed.

You and I go through changes in our relationships with people. Something happens and we have to figure out how to relate to those around us in light of this change. Maybe a loved one experiences a major health challenge that limits what they used to be able to do. We have to adjust how we relate to them and what we do with them in light of this new reality. If you are married or in a relationship, you have to learn how to adjust to the changes that occur in the relationship. You had to adjust to your spouse going from your friend to a boyfriend or girlfriend, to a fiancée, to a spouse to a fellow parent if you have kids. Each one of those changes required adjustment and learning on how to relate to the same person in a different circumstance.

As Christians we face this reality in our relationships with those who aren't. Some of us here today can hardly remember a time when weren't Christians. But we have perhaps experienced the need for adjustment in our relationships when we've grown in our faith or gone deeper. We conclude we can't do something that we used to or go somewhere with friends that we used to go. We have to adjust our relationship.

Some of you came to Christ later in life maybe as a teenager or adult. When that happened, it likely required significant adjustment in how you related to the people around you. You likely started making room for church and gathering with other Christians. Maybe you stopped doing some things you used to do or going to places you used to go or even stopped hanging out with certain people. We continue to face this challenge today.

How do we navigate relationships with people who don't believe in Christ? How do we relate to them especially when we believe their greatest need is God? **How does a Christian interact appropriately with those who aren't?**

That's what we will talk about today as we continue the series of Living with Mission in Mind. We're focusing on growing as Good News Messengers. We learned our motivation for bringing God's good news must start with love – Love for God and Love for our Neighbor. Last week we learned that we must pray for all people; especially those in our lives who don't know Christ because God desires all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.

But how do we even get to talk about the good news? Our text today speaks to this. We will first think about a key principle we must keep in mind that governs our interaction with non-believers. Then I want you to see several guardrails that keep us on the road to appropriately relate to those who don't know Christ. A guardrail is the little fence or rail on the side of the road that helps keep you on the road especially around curves or in tight spaces. I hope you will be encouraged with these guardrails to fully engage with those who don't Christ.

We will be in Paul's letter to the Colossians today from the New Testament. We will start in Colossians 4:2-6 (Page 836). But we will also look at some other passages in this little letter.

Colossians 4:2-6 (ESV)

²Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. ³At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— ⁴that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

⁵Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. ⁶Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

So how do Christians appropriately interact with those who aren't? The answer to this questions starts with this key principle - **Christians must depend on Christ's empowering to interact appropriately with outsiders.** I believe we often need reminders about our complete dependence on Christ to live the Christian life. Otherwise, when we read texts

like Colossians 4:2-6, we think we just do it in our own strength. But we always need to depend on Christ to live as a Christian.

A Christian is someone who has received Christ Jesus as Lord and is reconciled with God because of Jesus' substitutionary sacrifice on the cross. We now live by the power of the Holy Spirit with a whole life commitment to Christ. We must intentionally depend on Christ and ask Him to give us the ability obey God's commands, choose God's ways and treat others the way God commands us to treat them. We must ask Christ to transform our minds so that our behavior will eventually change. So all the commands I am about to share you with can only be fully obeyed with the empowerment of Christ.

With this in mind, let's ask the next question. What guard rails does God provide to teach us how to appropriately relate to non-Christians?

#1 - We must guard our hearts from being captured by humanistic, God-ignoring teaching or belief systems. (2:8-15) Colossians 2:8 – “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.” Notice he warns us to guard against being held captive by all these teachings and forces. A captive is someone who is restricted in movement and awareness of seeing the world. They can't go out of the cell or room where they are kept captive. So they can't see what's really going on. God ignoring teachings kept people captive in their sins and under evil. We need to guard against being taken captive by such teachings. We also need to guard against teachings that deceive. They present themselves as true but really are false. They come from human tradition and the spirits of the world that are not of God.

Now why would we need to consider this when relating to people who aren't Christians? Well everyone has a worldview whether they know it or not. They have a system of belief for how they make sense of the world and live in it. If they're not Christians, their worldview by definition is *not* according to Christ. So it might show up in different ways than can influence us or capture our hearts especially if we really like these friends or want to be accepted by them. But we need to guard against this so we don't buy and believe everything our friends tell us or proclaim. So that's guiderail #1.

#2 - We “put to death” earthly behavior and put on Christ-like behavior (3:17). This comes from Colossians 3:17. But, I'm just going to read 1-5. “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is

seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above not on things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Now verse 5 – “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness which is idolatry.”

So what does this have to do with relating to non-Christians? Well they will most naturally *not* think of things above. They will think of that which is on the earth. They will naturally engage in activities and behavior from the earthly or sinful nature. But we’re commanded not to do that. Instead, we put on Christ-like behavior. So if our non-Christian friend says “let go and get our palms read by a palm reader,” how would we respond? Hopefully, we’d say something like, “No thanks. I don’t believe in that because I don’t want to mess with any spirits or strange stuff. But how about we just go for coffee?”

We need to approach this with great humility. We must not think ourselves superior in anyway. We sin and continue to struggle with sin. But we can’t join in with what everyone else is doing who does not have their mind set on things above.

These first two guiderails to help us navigate relationships with people who aren’t Christians. I would say these two belong together on one side of the road to appropriate relationships with non-believers. But, if we only had these two, what might we be tempted to conclude about such relationships? If we only knew that we were supposed to guard against being held captive by Christ denying worldviews and put to death earthly behavior, we might conclude that there’s not much room for relationship with any non-Christian. Why would we spend time with them if we have to constantly be on guard against their beliefs and put to death behaviors that they might think are good and normal? Sadly, some Christians have concluded this. They have adopted more of a fortress mentality towards those who don’t know Christ. We huddle in the church, or in our Christian group, and protect ourselves from the influence of the world. And never the two shall meet.

But this is an incomplete understanding of God’s teaching regarding relationships with people who don’t know Him. If we only live by these 2 guard rails on one side of the road, we can go off the other side of the road and never get close to a non-Christian. But remember, God desires all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. 1st Tim. 2:4; So with these first two guard rails in mind, how do we actually go about interrelation with people who don’t believe? For this we go back to the passage read earlier. Colossians 4:2

#3 - We continue steadfastly in prayer (4:2). We talked a lot about prayer last week. So I am not going to spend much time on this one today. But note Paul, the same author who wrote our 1st Timothy passage from last week, again emphasizes a significant place for prayer in the life of the Christian. Continue, steadfastly, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. This is a constant, persevering, urgent prayer life sprinkled with thanksgiving. Being watchful implies that we recognize there is danger and that Christ will one day return. So we don't know how much time we have to pray especially for those who don't know Christ. This guardrail ensures constant dependence upon Christ. Steadfast prayer requires Christ to respond.

But next we come to a more specific focus within prayer. **#4 We pray for open doors to declare the mystery of Christ clearly. (4:3-4).** Verse 3. At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word." So Paul asks the Colossian believers to pray for him and Timothy. But he's not here asking for prayer for strength. He asks them to pray for an open door for the word. That's also depending on God in our relationships with non-believers. We don't smash doors into their lives. We ask God to open a door. This is the seeking part of our Living with Mission in Mind focus. We seek open doors to share the word. We can ask God to open doors for one another to speak the word into the lives of those who don't know Christ.

At the end of verse 3, he defines the word he wants to share – to declare the mystery of Christ. He refers to this mystery in Colossians 1:26-27. There he talks about making the word of God fully known, "the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

So the mystery is Christ. It likely refers to various aspects of the gospel message. They didn't really expect God to save using a suffering servant. Jesus became king by becoming a servant obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. So back in Colossians 4:4, Paul asks them to pray for an open door to be able to proclaim this mystery about Christ to those who don't know him. That's what we pray for – an open door to proclaim this amazing plan of God's love to save people. He also asks at the end of verse 4 for clarity in proclaiming. That's a great thing to pray for as well. Again we depend on God. Pray for an open door. Pray to declare the mystery of Christ clearly.

Then verse 5 brings us to Guardrail **#5 - We live wisely toward outsiders (4:5).** "Walk in wisdom towards outsiders." What does that mean? Well he's likely referring to God's wisdom. So we need to live in that way towards outsiders. The

way we live can strengthen the appeal of the gospel or weaken it. If we proclaim the good news and then live foolishly, our friend might conclude that the good news doesn't help much in life. But if we are growing in God's wisdom as we seek the things above, our living can strength our message. One way to obtain this wisdom is to spend time in Proverbs. Or spend time in Jesus' teaching in the Gospels. There we find much wisdom on how to live life God's way. Choosing to live this way may limit obstacles put in the unbeliever's path to coming to Christ.

Then guardrail #6 - **We snatch up opportunities with outsiders (4:5)**. The end of verse 5 says "Make the best use of time." The word translated "make the best use" meant "to buy up or buy out." It seems that Paul is says when you have an opportunity to go deeper with an unbeliever about Christ, grab it. Snap it up like you would a bargain that you discover by accident. You know how that sometimes happens in a grocery store or Wal Mart. You're going along with your cart and you turn the corner to discover an amazing price on something you really need or like. Though you didn't plan to buy that item that day, you immediately snatch them up. In the same way, when we have an open door of opportunity with a non-believer jump through. Make the time. Inconvenience yourself for them.

Finally, Guardrail #7 - **We speak with grace and excitement about Christ in our answers towards outsiders (4:6)**. "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer each person." Notice this speech starts with a question. Knowing how to answer each person implies that outsiders will ask Christians about their new life.

So when they ask, what must we keep in mind when we answer? First, our speech must be gracious. It's not an opportunity to condemn them or tell them how long we've been waiting for them to ask us about all the wrong decisions they've made. Nor must we answer out of annoyance at their ignorance. We answer graciously and appreciatively that they might want to hear more from us.

But then there's that phrase "seasoned with salt." What does it mean to season our speech with salt? Well it doesn't mean that we put salt on our tongue before we talk. Salt adds some flavor to bland food. I think this might be what the author meant here. When we're asked about Christ and our walk with Him, we better not answer with boredom or in a boring way. Why would any non-Christian consider Christ if he/she saw their Christian friend bored with Christ? Why would anyone listen to the good news if they asked us about to explain the life of the Christian and we answered "oh it means you have to give up all fun and spend a lot of time at church?"

For Paul to write this, he must have observed some Christians boring their listeners with what they shared. Boring speech happens when the speaker is unaware of his/her listeners. Or they have not taken the time to think about their audience and whether or not they will understand the words used or connect with the illustrations shared. Boring speakers dump information and think they're job is done. But I was taught "you haven't taught until the student has learned – or at least until students who have some measure of engagement and willingness have learned. An appropriate Christian response will, of course, communicate the content of the gospel, but it will also be done in a manner that will make the gospel attractive.

So now we have these guard rails or pieces on either side of the road of a good relationship with a non-Christian. On one side guard against false teaching and put to death what's in our earthly nature. On the other side, pray for open doors to declare the mystery of Christ with clarity; walk in wisdom, make the most of opportunities, let speech be gracious and seasoned with salt. I hope that you see the good news in these commands. We don't have to stumble through trying to interact with people who aren't Christians without guiderails. We don't have to go it alone. Christ empowers us. God opens doors for the sharing of the mystery of Christ. God empowers His people speak clearly about Christ. God will grant us wisdom and opportunities to interact if only we will ask for His empowering.

Maybe you have been sitting there today listening and God has spoken to you. Maybe He has revealed that you actually aren't a Christian. You have heard all these ways to interact with people who aren't Christians and you realize that's you. But maybe God has also worked on your heart to bring you to Himself. Last week we learned that God desires all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth including you. Jesus gave himself up as a ransom for you. So will you receive the good news into your life? Will you turn from life apart from Him, confess your sins and receive Christ as your Savior and Lord?

Maybe as Christians, we need to confess our lack of enthusiasm about our faith. For the Christian, will we take up this call to interact appropriately with those who don't know Christ? Which guardrails need strengthening in your life? Let's ask for Christ's empowerment to do that now.