

BODY – BUILDING
“Making The Most Of Every Opportunity”

“Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.”

The late John Wimber, founder of the *Vineyard* network of churches, told a story once about being on a flight from Chicago to New York.

I’d been a long day, Wimber says. And, all he looked forward to was a relaxing flight – a chance to unwind for a few hours – before jumping back into the grind again.

Well, shortly after takeoff, Wimber reclined his chair and began absentmindedly looking around the cabin...

Not at anyone in particular – just letting his eyes wander.

Seated across from him, he says, was what appeared to be a middle-aged businessman. Just an ordinary guy – nothing unusual or noteworthy.

But, in the split-second Wimber happened to glance over, he says he saw something that startled him.

Written across the man’s face, he said, he thought he saw the word, “adultery.”

Wimber blinked – rubbed his eyes – and looked again.

But, it was still there! “Adultery.” Clear as day!

Well, he knew what he was seeing wasn’t possible with his own two eyes. And, Wimber quickly realized it must be God’s Spirit communicating with him.

By now, of course, the man had become aware that Wimber was staring at him and snapped, “*What do you want?*”

And, Wimber says just as the man spoke, a woman's name came to mind.

"Does the name Jane mean anything to you?" he asked the man sitting across from him.

The guy's face turned ashen. *"We've got to talk,"* he stammered.

They found a quiet place on the plane. The man eyed Wimber nervously. Of course, the first thing he wanted to know was who told Wimber that name.

"God told me," he said.

"God told you!" he shouted back – shocked at what he'd heard.

"Yes," Wimber answered -- taking a deep breath.

"He also told me to tell you... that unless you turn from this adulterous relationship, He is going to take you life."

Wimber says he braced himself for what he was sure would be an angry -- defensive reaction.

But, as soon as the words were out of his mouth, the man's defensiveness just melted away, and in a choked, desperate voice he asked, *"What should I do?"*

Well, there's more to the story.

But, the point is, with that Wimber had his "opening" and began sharing the Gospel with the man right there on the plane.

They prayed together – the man bursting into one of the most heart-rending prayers of repentance Wimber says he's ever heard.

And, by the time that flight was over, the man had confessed to his wife – and the two had made a new commitment to Jesus Christ.

Well, I don't know about you...

But, my plane flights *are never* that interesting!

Then again, maybe they're not because I'm not always looking for the opportunity to share Jesus Christ as much as I should be.

Does that sound funny coming from a pastor?

Well, it's true! And, I've realized that if I ever want to become a better witness I've got to admit that I'm not always ready to take advantage of all the opportunities God puts before me.

It reminds me of a friend who used to work on Wall Street.

Occasionally he'd have to work late and when he did, his firm would hire a car service to bring him home – so he wouldn't have to take the train late at night.

Well, he'd get in the back of the car – just exhausted from a long day. And, inevitably the driver wanted to chit-chat. Just shoot the breeze.

And, my friend says that so many times he was tempted to say, "*Please just turn on the radio and leave me alone.*"

That's sometimes how we feel – isn't it?

We're tired...

We're stressed...

We live in a "24/7" – "mind-your-own-business" kind of world. And, the last thing we sometimes want is to put ourselves out there...

To make ourselves vulnerable...

To risk rejection and even humiliation...

By talking about God!

Of course, we'll talk about Buckeye Football...

Buckeye Basketball...

We'll talk about our kids...

About our jobs...

About the weather...

But, for some reason, we tend to clam up when it comes to talking about Jesus Christ!

Now, true – some of us are just less “chatty” than others.

I remember when I was a boy, for example -- we'd be riding down the elevator in our New York apartment building and my mother would begin reciting our whole daily itinerary in front of whoever was on the elevator with us.

And, that always embarrassed me!

I didn't want strangers knowing my business – even when I was just a kid.

But, when it comes to Jesus Christ it should be different – shouldn't it?

I mean, most people find it easy talking about someone they love.

I always find it easy talking about Faith because I'm so proud of her and I love her. And, I'll bet it's the same way with you and the people you love!

It's easy because we're sharing about an important relationship in our lives.

But often, we simply haven't trained ourselves to think that way about God...

Or to be on the lookout for the Divine Appointments God sends our way.

But, when it comes to the Spiritual Gift of Evangelism, it's simply about making the most of every opportunity to share the Good News of Jesus Christ...

In other words...

Just telling folks about the most important relationship in our lives!

You see, this is what Philip did.

In fact, he'd been doing it for some time.

Now, you might remember Philip as one of the Seven men specially chosen as Deacons in the 6th chapter of Acts.

Long story short...

The Church's food pantry in Jerusalem had inadvertently been overlooking some of the widows in the community.

And so, to correct this oversight, the Apostles proposed turning this ministry over to seven men known to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.

And, Philip was one of these guys! He was gonna make sure the poor were fed.

But, when persecution broke out against the Church there in Jerusalem, it scattered most of the believers to other parts. And, Philip soon found himself in Samaria – preaching and teaching about Jesus Christ!

And, the Lord really blessed Philip's ministry!

I mean, God REALLY blessed it!

The Scripture says Philip proclaimed Christ and by God's power performed many miracles and healings so that there was "great joy in that city."

But, just at the height of Philip's ministry, an angel of the Lord speaks to him and tells him to leave what he was doing there and begin "hoofing" it down the dusty desert road between Jerusalem and Gaza.

Now, Philip doesn't know "why" he being sent to what's essentially the middle-of-nowhere.

And, he isn't told "why" God's interrupting some very fruitful work in Samaria.

All Philip knows is that he's gotten his marching orders and he obeys immediately...

And, it isn't long before he realizes that God may have set up a Divine Appointment for him with a very unlikely candidate.

The Scripture says:

So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet.

Now, right off the bat, this scene raises several questions...

We're told, for example, that this Ethiopian eunuch was returning from Jerusalem where he'd gone up to worship.

But, the fact that he was a foreigner...

And, also a eunuch...

Made it highly unlikely he would have been welcomed in Jerusalem in any meaningful way!

You see, even though this guy was, what they called in those days a “*God-fearer*” – someone who wasn’t Jewish but followed the God of Israel...

The Law was very strict about who was welcome and who wasn’t welcome at the Temple courts.

Gentiles, for instance, could only go as far as the outer court.

Eunuchs weren’t permitted in at all!

So, no matter how devout this man might have been...

And, apparently he was pretty devout...

The Law was clear that no one who’d been emasculated in any way could ever enter the assembly of the LORD (Deut. 23:1)...

Which seemed kind of unfair since most eunuchs in the ancient world weren’t that way by choice.

But, the net result is all the same.

This guy was excluded!

He was cut off!

He was considered an oddity...

Outside the covenant promises of God!

But, the amazing thing is that even though he knows all this, he makes the long pilgrimage to Jerusalem anyway – a place he was neither welcomed nor wanted.

Now, it’s about this point that Philip begins to sense where his Divine Appointment might be that day.

Prompted by the Spirit, he runs over to the chariot where he finds this eunuch reading from the Book of Isaiah.

And, what Philip does next is particularly instructive for us when it comes to evangelism.

You see, Philip doesn't immediately shove a Bible pamphlet under his nose...

He doesn't start quoting the 4 Spiritual Laws...

And, he doesn't ask the eunuch if he died tonight would he know where he'd spend eternity.

Philip simply listens!

He listens to what the man is reading and simply starts from where this guy is at!

You know, one of the reasons I wonder if we're not more comfortable with this whole idea of evangelism is because we often don't know where to start.

It reminds me of a woman who was giving a children's sermon one day in church and asked the kids, what she thought was a very simple question.

"Children," she said, "I'm going to describe something and I want you to raise your hand when you know what it is."

"This thing lives in trees," she said.

"It eats nuts..."

"It's gray..."

"And has a long bushy tail."

Well, none of the kids raised their hands, which the woman couldn't understand. So, she added...

“It jumps from branch to branch. It chatters and flips its tail when it's excited. And, it stores nuts for the winter.”

Again, none of the kids said a word. They just stared at her blankly.

Finally, one little boy raised his hand.

The woman breathed a sigh of relief and called on him.

“Well,” the little boy said, “I know the answer must be Jesus... but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me.”

Well, for a lot of folks evangelism is just like that! Like trying to force a square peg into a round hole.

We often jump ahead to the “answer” even before the people we're with have asked the “question”.

But, Philip doesn't do that!

He begins right where the man is.

He listens patiently.

And, when the eunuch finally asks Who the Scriptures are talking about – Philip sees his “opening” and starting from that very passage begins sharing with the man the good news of Jesus Christ!

In sports there's a term called, “Letting the game come to you.”

What this means is that instead of trying to force things – you know, like heaving up a three-point shot in basketball way beyond the arc...

Or trying to thread a pass beyond several defenders in the end zone...

Or swinging from your heels intent on hitting the ball outta the park no matter where it's pitched...

Instead of doing that -- "Letting the game come to you" -- is simply relaxing and taking what's given to you and going from there.

Going with the flow!

And, I can tell you from experience, the most success I've ever had in any sport is when I didn't try to "force" things, but simply did my thing in the natural flow of the game.

Well, in a sense, this is what Philip does.

You see, when he hears this guy reading from Isaiah 53 – the portrait of the Suffering Messiah – One who'd been cut off without justice and left without lineage or descendants – Philip understands this is exactly the eunuch's experience himself.

He knows this is Someone this Ethiopian can really identify with!

So, that's where Philip starts! He starts where the reality of this guy's pain intersects with the Hope of God's Promise in Jesus Christ!

Now, the Ethiopian's story is a sermon in of itself, of course.

But, for now, let's just say that after being excluded all his life, he finds the Gospel's for him too!

He realizes Jesus is for him and he confirms his faith the first chance he gets with Baptism – becoming, later -- tradition says – the first missionary to Africa!

But, our focus today in this series on Spiritual Gifts is really about how God uses Philip.

You see, Philip's a case study in how God can use you – if you're willing!

I mean, think about it!

Philip's a godly man -- well-respected in the church community. But, let's face it – he basically starts out running a soup-kitchen making sure old ladies get enough to eat!

Not unimportant – for sure!

But, not exactly glamorous either!

But, when his circumstances change and God puts him in places he never thought he'd be -- he makes the most of his opportunities and begins telling everyone he knows about Jesus.

And, just when that's going well, God uproots him again and sends him on a strange little journey to help change one man's life!

But, Philip never complains! He never argues about how much more effective he'd be or how many more souls he might win if God just let him stay put...

He simply says, *"Okay, God!"*

"Wherever you want me to go, I'll go!"

"And, whatever you want me to do, I'll do!"

And, he does!

He uses the opportunities God puts in front of him to tell others about Jesus!

I'm convinced God puts opportunities in front of us all the time.

In fact, I'm not just convinced. I know it for a fact because Jesus says so!

Jesus says: *"The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few"* (Mt. 9:37).

The opportunities for telling others about Jesus are all around us! The issue is whether we're looking for them...

Whether we've trained our eyes to see them...

And, whether we're ready to jump on the opportunities when they come!

Bill Hybels is the founding pastor of Willow Creek Community Church – one of the first true mega-churches in America.

Well, apparently one of Hybels great passions is sailing – sailboat racing, in fact.

But, Hybels doesn't do it the way you or I might.

You see, if I sailed, I'd get a group of my closest friends together...

People I trust and have a lot in common with. And, even if we didn't win, we'd definitely have a good time.

But, Hybels intentionally races with guys who aren't Christians!

With guys coming from a completely different worldview.

Guys who are more than content to throw back brew after brew after brew, while Hybels himself sips on a cold 7-UP.

And, as you can imagine, the longer the day wears on, the more colorful Hybels crewmates get – especially as the beers add up.

But, Hybels stays!

Why?

Well, he's asked himself that question many times!

***"What am I doing here?"* he says.**

“The voices are loud – the language foul – the egos are out of control. Why am I here?”

Then the Holy Spirit whispers back to him through the fog of blue talk and Budweiser, “Bill, you’re building bridges. You’re establishing trust. You’re laying the groundwork for conversations that might happen a year from now.”

“You’re doing the kind of work that Jesus did.”

And, eventually that kind of work pays off as it did when one of Hybels’ sailing buddies showed up one day with his arm in a sling – injured because he’d gotten drunk and into a fight the night before.

The two got to talking a little more seriously about faith – especially about a man reaping what he sows (Gal. 6:7).

And, over time – two years in fact – Hybels’ witness gradually began to make a difference – until this guy drove 200 miles one weekend to hear his friend Bill preach.

But, it paid off when the man eventually gave his life to Christ!

Of course, you’re not Bill Hybels and neither am I.

But, God doesn’t care! He just wants you seizing the opportunity when it comes your way.

For me that opportunity came this past Thursday when I went to the bank to deposit my paycheck.

The teller noticed the superhero design on my checks – you know – Superman, Batman, The Flash. I’ve got fun checks! And, so we got to talking about superheroes!

Well, eventually we started talking about the last Superman movie. And, without thinking I sorta delved into how while the original creators of Superman weren't Christian, they definitely had a "Messiah" archetype in mind when they conceived of The Man of Steel!

In fact, I told her, the last movie even contained a Resurrection theme when, after being beaten and left for dead, Superman "ascended" up through the clouds and came back to life again.

Well, she said she hadn't ever noticed that before and was going to have to watch it again and check it out.

Not an instant conversion – of course – but a seed planted perhaps -- just out of a normal conversations two people were having at a bank

Now, you might be thinking, *"Well, you're a pastor. That's what you do."*

That evangelism is better left to the professionals.

You might even be thinking that you're too shy and really wouldn't know what to say anyway...

That evangelism definitely isn't your Spiritual Gift

And, maybe it's not! Remember, we all have Spiritual Gifts.

But, listen to what a man named David Hubbard has to say.

Hubbard was the president of Fuller Seminary for 30 years. And, like a lot of us, Hubbard's often felt awkward when it comes to evangelism. But, he says:

Not all of us have the gift of evangelism. I admire people who can lead others to Jesus Christ right on the spot – who have the ability to turn every conversation into an occasion for sharing God's plan of salvation. I am not one of those – but I have a story to share – and so do you. I have a relationship with Christ that I can describe – and so do you. Evangelism will best take place when all of God's people have learned to express their winsome witness.

Hubbard's right!

We all have a story to share.

So, what's your story?

If you're a Christian, you've got your own story to share about how the crucified and Risen Christ has rescued you – and forgiven your sins – and is changing you day by day through the Power of the Holy Spirit.

So, just tell it like it is!

And, if you're not a Christian – well, we've got a story to share with you!

A story about a God who made you and loves you and won't let you go.

A story of a God who moved Heaven and earth just to find you!

And, you discover that story in Jesus Christ!

The One Whom Evangelism...

And God's entire plan to Redemption...

Is ultimately all about!

Amen.