

Joshua Rhone

Just three years ago my wife and I called the greater Cincinnati area home. I had recently resigned from my pastorate so that we could pursue the possibility of church planting. Transitioning from two, steady, full-time incomes to one (my wife's) and three to four part-time jobs was difficult.

For quite a while we had to rely on the generosity of family and friends, as well as the kindness of strangers, just to get by. At one point I can remember finances being especially tight. My wife was the only one working. I was still struggling to find a job that provided adequate compensation so that I could help with paying the bills. Our cabinets were empty. We were in need of groceries.

As if by Providence, two men stopped by and knocked on our door that day. In their hands they carried a loaf of bread and a bottle of water. The bread bore a tag that explained that Jesus was the Bread of Life and that unlike with earthly bread, we will never go hungry. Likewise, the water sported a tag that identified Jesus as Living Water that will never run dry. The idea was novel. Take bread and water to people. Meet them at home—possibly in their hour of need—and share with them about Jesus while meeting a physical, tangible need.

The only problem was—I knew Jesus. He and I had, and still have, a

relationship. It was at His leading, after all, that we had resigned from my position at a local church.

As these men began to share with me about Jesus and what He could do for me, I explained that I understood and could identify with what they were saying. However, they just wouldn't give up. They kept after me, insisting that I pray a prayer and accept Jesus as Lord. I explained to them, as I pulled out my clerical credentials, that I did know Jesus and that I appreciated their zeal to share Him with others.

They still wouldn't budge. They were adamant that I needed to pray a prayer and come to know Jesus. Moreover, they were very clear that not only would I not receive Jesus unless I prayed a prayer, but they also would not give me the bread nor the water.

What should I do? Should I re-up? Should I go through the motions just to get these guys to leave? What could I do?

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In the game of Blackjack there comes a point when the player has the opportunity to "double down." This simply means that the player has the opportunity to double their bet, in hopes of getting more in return for their good hand. In many ways, this is what I felt I was being asked to do as I stood in the doorway to my townhouse. It seemed as if I was being asked to "double down on Jesus"—pray a prayer, get a new Savior and friend, PLUS the added benefit of some much needed bread.

Crazy, I know. But this has not been an isolated incident.

Recently I took part in a meeting of the minds. Gathering together were ministers and lay people of various denominations. The task we were charged with was: "To share the love of Christ with our community in tangible ways." During the course of the discussion, the needs of our community were listed and discussed. The most pressing needs, as well as the ones that we felt we could actually do something about, then came to the fore.

What then ensued was a dialogue of how we could go about meeting those needs in a way that was faithful to the Good News of Jesus Christ. The end result was three upset individuals and a decision by the rest of the group to help meet peoples' needs. The three upset individuals (I was one of them) were not upset about meeting peoples' needs. Our problem was the way in which this was going to be achieved. Not only were these people going to have to, in humility, call us and express their need, they were going to have to sit down and have a conversation with some of the area ministers. These ministers were going to talk to them about what could be done to help, as well as talk about Jesus.

What if these people didn't want to come to know Jesus? What if all they wanted, at this point in their lives, was help with a physical need? What if they already knew Jesus?

It was proposed that if people did not pray to accept Jesus, then they would not receive assistance. Moreover, it was said, "If they already know Jesus, they can go ahead and pray again—it's not going to hurt anything."

Jesus told His followers to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to them as well" (Matt. 6:33). Jesus uttered this promise in the context of a discussion with the disciples about the physical needs that we, as human beings, have.

Is this what Jesus meant, though? Did He mean that we would receive a loaf of bread and water if we half-heartedly utter a prayer to appease two men standing in our doorway? Did Jesus really mean that our physical needs would be met by God's people, the church, if (and only if) we pray with the minister that came to our home? Did Jesus really intend for those who already follow Him, but need some assistance with the necessities of life, to double-down on Him just so that they can get what they need?

It seems that in our quest to be "relevant" and "present the Good News of Jesus Christ in tangible ways," some things have been lost along the way. What I would like to suggest is: 1) what has been lost, and 2) what we might do to remedy the situation.

With that in mind, let's pause and look at some of the things that seem to have been lost (or at least set aside) in our pursuit of everything relevant and tangible. First, and most importantly, we have lost sight of Jesus' response to the religious leaders of His day when they asked what the most important commandment was. He told them that the most important command was to love the Lord their God with every fiber of their being. The second command was like it—to love their neighbor as they loved themselves (Mk. 12:30–31). When we make our love and assistance towards others conditional, are we truly embodying the kind of life and love that Jesus is speaking of?

Secondly, in his letter to the Ephesian church, Paul instructs the Ephesian Christians to be "imitators of God" (Eph. 5:1). Christ's followers, in other words, are to imitate and model for the world the same kind of life-giving life and self-sacrificing love that Jesus embodied. Are we doing this, however, when we make our love contingent upon someone's willingness to pray a prayer?

Thirdly, when we make our acts of grace and mercy about a result, we miss the point. Jesus did not come to earth and obediently travel the *Via Dolorosa* with the

hope that people would pray a prayer. Instead, the oft-quoted verses from John 3 make it very clear that Jesus came and accomplished these things so that the world might be saved through Him, because “God so loved the world” (cf. John 3:16–17). When we offer help and assistance is it out of love for the world, or is it because we hope to get another notch on our “salvation belts”?

Finally, when we make salvation about simply saying a prayer, we truncate the Good News of Jesus Christ. We take the good news of life to the full, both now and for all eternity (John 10:10), and make things exclusively about eternity. Moreover, in making salvation a prayer in a moment of crisis, we fail to adequately convey the beauty of the transformative nature of the Christian faith.

With that in mind, let us now turn our attention to what I perceive to be some of the ways in which we might make corrections. First, and most importantly, we need to remember that the chief end of humanity, as the Westminster Catechism puts it, is to “love God and enjoy Him forever.” As Christians it is incredibly easy for us to get caught up in good things, such as seeing people enter into a relationship with Jesus. But all too easily those good and noble pursuits can become the defining and guiding purpose of our lives. The problem is that even when we set a good and noble thing as the purpose for our lives, we commit idolatry. We put something other than God, in the position of God, in our lives.

I think that this can be the case with evangelism, just as it can be the case with anything else. There are people who very much love God, like the two men who stood in my doorway in Cincinnati. However, they love the excitement of evangelism and seeing people come to know Jesus much more than they love Jesus. When they wake up in the morning, what drives them is a passion to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with the world (a passion that I think every follower of Christ should have); yet that ambition, rather than loving God and enjoying Him forever, is what defines them.

What I am suggesting, therefore, is that as followers of Jesus we make our lives about loving Him and enjoying Him forever. If we make that our purpose and our aim, everything else will follow. If we are dead set on loving God and enjoying Him with every moment of our existence, sharing our faith will become a natural byproduct of our lives.

Secondly, it seems that our view of people needs to change. In the aforementioned illustrations, people, myself included, were little more than potential converts. In many ways these approaches to evangelism are very akin to the sales techniques of corporate America. People are seen as potential consumers. In this case, rather than being seen as potential consumers of “Product Z,” people

are seen as potential consumers of salvation. In that way, I guess it should come as no surprise that even Christians would see the “bait-and-switch” as a means of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. If corporate America can offer something free, in an effort to get you to purchase what they really want to sell you, why should it be any different with Christians? If we can give away free loaves of bread, or if we can throw a little money at peoples’ problems, knowing that they will “buy” Jesus, then why not do so?

As we read Scripture, however, we see that this was not the way of Jesus. There are periods of time in Jesus’ life when such an approach could have yielded incredible results. There were times when Jesus had been healing people continually. The crowds were in a frenzy; so much so, in fact, that Jesus couldn’t seem to find a quiet, solitary moment. It would seem in those moments that Jesus could have leveraged the moment, offering to heal peoples’ physical infirmities, so that He could then peddle to them what He really came to bring. Yet, Jesus did not do that. Instead, He moved on (cf. Mk. 1:45; 6:45; 7:31; 8:13; 9:30). He did not see people as potential converts or customers. Instead, He saw them as needy, broken people who needed His help, assistance, and compassion.

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Thus, it seems that as followers of Jesus, who are to imitate Him, we should move away from seeing people as potential converts or religious consumers. Instead, we should see them as broken, hurting people who are in need of not only the love, compassion, and mercy of Jesus, but also the love, compassion, and help of those who consider themselves to be His followers.

Finally, we need to embrace a soteriology that is big enough to encompass not only the moment of crisis when someone takes the initial leap of faith, but also the life-long, life-transforming process of being renewed and remade in the image of Christ. We need, in other words, to move beyond seeing conversion as a moment when someone prays a prayer; and, instead, envision conversion as the entire process whereby we become increasingly Christ-like.

Such an understanding of salvation offers people hope, not only for eternity, but also for the days, weeks, and years in which they will continue to call earth home. If people know, as Scripture tells us, that God can make a difference in our lives both now and for all eternity, we not only present good news that is worthy of our belief and faith, we also present good news that commands our hopes, our dreams, and our lives. What is more, we present a God who unequivocally commands our love and enjoyment both now and forevermore.

Jesus once told His disciples that “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few” (Matt. 9:37–38). We live in a world ripe with opportunities to share the Good

News of Jesus Christ. People are broken and hurting. They are in need of a Savior. The question is: how will we respond? Will we join with Jesus in His work? Will we be compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love—like Jesus? Or will we be compassionate, gracious, and loving only to the extent that we can accomplish “the real work” that is at hand?

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