

How to Express Jesus

Rich Nathan
November 10 & 11, 2018
The E-Word

Evangelism has become the unmentionable word for many people in the church. One pastor called it the “E-Word”. She didn’t even want to say it. We followers of Jesus know that we should be sharing our faith, but the surveys tell us that we are increasingly uncomfortable in doing so. So, rather than speak to you this month about evangelism – in the classic sense of verbally proclaiming Jesus’ person and work on the cross – I want to talk to you about four other activities (all of which begin with an E) and all of which are accessible, I believe, to every follower of Jesus.

This series on the E-Word is not designed to persuade you to jump over a bar that’s seven feet off the ground. I’d rather start by talking about all of us stepping over a bar that’s one foot off the ground. Again, as I mentioned last week, I think these four activities (all beginning with E) are precursors, they are what I would call pre-evangelism – they create an environment in which a spiritual conversation can naturally emerge. Here’s what we’ll be talking about over the next month in this series:

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Encouraging others

Expressing Jesus

Eating with others

Engaging the Holy Spirit

Today, in this second message on the E-Word, I’m going to talk about “How to Express Jesus”. Let’s pray.

When I think about expressing Jesus, I’m not just thinking about expressing Jesus verbally, although we really do as followers of Jesus, want to get there. I don’t really want any of you to hear this series as, “Oh great, I’m entirely off the hook. I don’t ever need to speak to someone, my family, my co-worker, my roommate in the dormitory, my running partner about Jesus.” I don’t want you to hear the series that way. What I’m attempting to do this month is talk with you about creating an environment in which spiritual conversations become more natural, more organic, less forced or awkward or uncomfortable.

So, today I want to talk about expressing Jesus in ways that point to him without necessarily using words. I’m thinking of verses like this one from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount:

Slide Matthew 5:14-16

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Jesus is talking about how to create a signpost that points ahead of itself. If people follow the pointer, it will lead them all the way to God. In this particular text, Jesus speaks about “doing good”. Certainly, but not exclusively, he’s talking about acts of compassion, acts of mercy to people who are hurting financially or emotionally or physically.

I think there are other pointers to the Lord that go beyond acts of mercy. There are things that make our light shine in the world so that people see this signpost, and if they follow it, they will end up bumping into the Lord.

Here’s the first signpost.

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Make things beautiful

There are over 100 references in the Bible to the word, “beauty” and “beautiful”. Beyond the words “beauty” and “beautiful”, there’s an enormous list of things that the writers of scripture find beautiful. Houses can be beautiful. Clothing can be beautiful. Flocks of sheep can be beautiful. A person’s voice. A city. A piece of pottery. A mountain, seas, flowers. All these things are pointers to God who is the master artist.

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God is the master artist

Have you ever thought about God being an artist? Those of you whose primary calling is centered on creation and imagination, I bet you have thought about God being the master artist. If you are an artist or a musician, dancer, filmmaker, writer, this may be one way that you conceive of God. For the rest of us, it’s helpful to expand our view of God and to include that God is the master artist.

For example, after the flood, God gave a sign of his promise that never again would the world be destroyed by water. He didn’t just make this promise on a piece of parchment. And he didn’t just type it out in black and white. Instead, God’s sign of his promise was a rainbow.

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Rainbow pic

What we have in the brilliant, shimmering, colorful light of a rainbow is a promise not only that the world will be preserved, but that the world would continue to be a place of beauty and wonder. I don't know about you, but every time I see a giant rainbow I think of God's promise to Noah.

God's artistry is not restricted to rainbows. Most of us like to look at beautiful sunsets.

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Sunset pic

Every evening, all across the globe, except for places like Columbus, Ohio, God paints the sky. Each sunset is different. As Picasso said,

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God is the greatest artist; he never does the same thing twice.

Jesus talked about God as the master artist in the Sermon on the Mount. Here's what we read:

Slide Matthew 6:28-29

²⁸ "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.

Picture
Field of lilies

You know, God could have made everything purely functional. If you think about things from an entirely evolutionary perspective in which the only purpose of things is to propagate the species, to ensure the survival of a particular species, why did God create so much beauty? There's too much beauty in the world. We don't need a beautiful sunset in order to propagate the species, though it helps to put you in a romantic mood.

We don't need rainbows or gorgeous waterfalls or majestic mountains to ensure human survival. Everything in the world could be flat and drab and colorless. But God is a master artist. Whatever he does, he does beautifully.

While we have none of Jesus' woodworking projects, we do have Jesus' extraordinarily creative stories. His parables, his brilliant sayings – has there ever been a more creative or memorable speaker than Jesus? Think about Jesus' stories and how powerful they are. The story of the Prodigal Son. Millions and millions of people for the last 2,000 years have found hope that God would receive them back through a simple but profound story of a prodigal returning home to his father.

Think about the story of the Good Samaritan and the countless acts of charity and kindness that have been motivated by that simple but profound story of the Good Samaritan. Think about the Golden Rule – “do unto others as you would have others do unto you”. Think about how many choices for good have been made because people took this golden rule to heart and said, “I’m just going to treat this person the way I want to be treated.”

One way to express Jesus, to display him to the world is to work together with him in this holy calling of making things beautiful. The Bible says God not only makes beauty, he is beautiful! Here’s what we read:

Slide Psalm 27:4

⁴ One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,
to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.

It’s a fair inference from texts like these that an experience of earthly beauty can awaken in a person a longing for a beauty that’s more lasting, more wonderful, more transcendent than anything this world can provide – a longing for the beauty of God.

As human beings

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We are called to make the world beautiful

Do you know who the first person in the Bible who is said to have been filled with the Holy Spirit? Not the disciples on the day of Pentecost. Not John the Baptist in the womb. Not even in the New Testament. We have to go way back in the Old Testament to an artist and master craftsman named Bezalel who is the first person in the Bible said to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Here’s what we read:

Slide Exodus 35:30-35

³⁰ Then Moses said to the Israelites, “See, the LORD has chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, ³¹ and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills—³² to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, ³³ to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic crafts. ³⁴ And he has given both him and Oholiab son of Ahisamak, of the tribe of Dan, the ability to teach others. ³⁵ He has filled them with skill to do all kinds of work as engravers, designers, embroiderers in blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen, and weavers—all of them skilled workers and designers.

The Bible lists for us all kinds of creative activities to make the world a little more beautiful. God gave us human beings the ability to write and speak poetry, to write and sing songs, to dance, to design buildings, to make sculptures and paintings, to create beautiful clothes.

Apparently, fashion design and fashionable dress is not a bad thing in scripture. Life is more than utilitarian. If you have a great sense of fashion, it's not just a worldly thing. You don't have to be frumpy and dress plainly or wear ugly, out of style fashions from the 1950's. If you have a great sense of fashion or an incredible decorating sense, if you enjoy playing a musical instrument and you do it well, if you are a great gardener so that people stop on the street and say, "Your flowers always look beautiful!", if you're a great cook and people enjoy meals you make, if you're a creative speaker and people love coming out to listen to you speak – all of these things point ahead of themselves. God's the master artist who is the most beautiful being beyond all imagination.

I spoke with a hair stylist who is a member of our congregation a few years ago. I asked her, "What is it about being a hair stylist that you find most fulfilling?" She said, "Oh, that's easy. I love the feeling that women get when they look in the mirror and they see themselves as beautiful." I love the feeling that women get when they look in the mirror and they like what they see. Talk about an environment in which a spiritual conversation can easily take place.

How do we express Jesus in ways that go beyond words? We can make things beautiful.

We can

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Tell the truth

I want to show you a video from a late night comedian named Jimmy Kimmel. Watch this with me. [Rich, remember to explain the background.]

Video

Does anyone doubt that we live in a culture of lying and deceit? Gallup surveys tell us that in most institutions – whether we're talking about public schools or media, large businesses, banks, Congress, the President – trust in most institutions is in negative territory in the United States. People just don't trust the leaders of most of our institutions to tell the truth. In fact, these days, folks are so used to lies and deceit they just shrug it off.

I heard an interview this past week with a political supporter of one of our politicians. This woman said without any hint of shame or concern, "I know he lies. He lies all the time. But I don't care. I really like him." I don't care that he lies.

In the Bible, God is known among other things as the God of truth.

We read this in

Slide Numbers 23:19

¹⁹ God is not human, that he should lie,
not a human being, that he should change his mind.
Does he speak and then not act?
Does he promise and not fulfill?

And this in

Slide Isaiah 45:19

¹⁹ I have not spoken in secret, from somewhere in a land of darkness;
I have not said to Jacob's descendants, 'Seek me in vain.'
I, the LORD, speak the truth; I declare what is right.

Because God is a God of truth, a being who always tells the truth and never lies, because God keeps every one of his promises and he's always faithful, one way for followers of Jesus to express Jesus is to be known as completely honest, honorable people who tell the truth even when it hurts.

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Truth-telling matters to God

Here's what we read in Proverbs:

Slide Proverbs 6:16-19 (shortened)

There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him...
a lying tongue, ... a false witness who pours out lies...

The truth matters to God. He hates it when we tell lies. Here's what we read:

Slide Revelation 22:15

¹⁵ Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

This should cause all of us to shutter just a little bit. I don't know about you, but I find it somewhat surprising and more than a little disconcerting that God classifies liars alongside of murderers and those who practice the occult as people who will be excluded from God's kingdom.

Truth-telling matters to God.

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Truth-telling tests faith claims

Many of you who are listening to this message right now claim to have a personal relationship with Jesus that's making a real difference in your life. Is that really true? Does our relationship with Jesus make a real difference in our lives? How can we test this?

Mark Twain once said,

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The weakest of all weak things is a virtue that has not been tested in a fire.

May I suggest to you that a great test of the reality of our relationship with Jesus is whether we tell the truth even when it's embarrassing or makes us look a little less intelligent or less competent or less successful?

James Bryan Smith in his wonderful book titled *The Good and Beautiful Life*,

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Book cover

...confessed to a really common form of lying that most of us have engaged in at some point or other. Mr. Smith was asked to a dinner party with ten couples, all of whom were very well educated, and someone introduced him to another man by saying, "Jim teaches at a college." The man said, "Oh, I love talking to fellow academics." This other man began talking with him about literature and he said, "I think that Hawthorne was the most brilliant writer of his generation. Don't you agree, Jim?" Jim said without thinking, "Yes, he was quite good," even though he had never read a sentence of Hawthorne's.

"Quite good? He was the best! Anyway, I was making this point of the genius of the *Scarlet Letter* and its irony. I mean, the fact that the accusers are the true sinners, and the accused sinner is actually the most righteous character. Don't you agree, Jim?"

"Yes, yes. I agree." And, again, he had never read a sentence of Hawthorne's writings; he never had read the *Scarlet Letter*. But he finds himself smiling and nodding and agreeing. He said the conversation lasted 10 minutes and it was painful because he had just dug this hole of pretense.

Why do we do that? Why do we exaggerate our accomplishments? Why do we pretend to know more than we do, or pretend to be better than we are, that our kids are doing better than they're doing, that we're more successful than we are? Why are we so

afraid of, for a moment, looking ignorant, confessing that we don't understand a word that's being used or not quite as accomplished as we appear?

The bottom line is that we engage in all of this pretense because we who claim to be followers of Jesus don't have identities that are deeply rooted in Christ. If we walked around knowing that at the core of our being that Jesus loved us, that we're never alone, that Jesus was with us, that Jesus accepted us and approved of us, and called us his friends, that Jesus welcomed us just as we are, even though we hadn't read this or that, or haven't done this or that, or weren't very bright, or weren't great athletes, or didn't have a string of boyfriends or girlfriends in high school or college; if we knew that we were acceptable just as we are, don't you think that this would eliminate so much of the neurotic lying and pretense and exaggeration that you and I engage in simply because we're craving the approval or acceptance of another person? We can't bear the social awkwardness.

If you don't really know down to your toes that you are a child of God, if you don't know that you are loved, it is incredibly scary to be vulnerable before someone else, especially if they have power over you, especially if you think that they might disapprove of you.

Truth-telling matters to God. Truth-telling tests faith claims. And...

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Truth-telling point to higher commitments

Some of you who follow college basketball may remember the story of Brandon Davies. He was a basketball star at Brigham Young University. BYU raced out to a 27-2 record. They were ranked #3 in the country. Everyone expected BYU to easily win the Mountain West Division and make a big splash in the NCAA Tournament. But just as they were about to go for their conference title, the media got lit up with the story that Brandon Davies, one of BYU's star players, was dismissed for an honor code violation of having pre-marital sex with his girlfriend.

Lots of people criticized Brigham Young for being small-minded, being old-fashioned. But they said, "Look, we have an honor code here and our honor code is rooted in commitments higher than winning a basketball game or even winning a national title."

One of the verses in the Bible that I have thought about and have tried to put into practice many, many times over the past 40 years is found in Psalm 15.

Slide Psalm 15:1, 4b

¹ LORD, who may dwell in your sacred tent?

Who may live on your holy mountain?...

[he] who keeps an oath even when it hurts,
and does not change their mind;

Do you want to be a signpost to Jesus? Someone who points ahead not just by talking about Jesus, but by really living your faith? Then tell the truth and keep your commitments even when it hurts you. How do we create an environment in which it's more natural for us to talk about Jesus?

Slide

- Make things beautiful
- Tell the truth

And third,

Slide

Make peace

We live in a world not only lacking in beauty and truth, we live in a world that's also lacking in peace. God is a God of peace.

Here's what we read:

Slide Hebrews 13:20

²⁰ Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep,

Do you remember the first words spoken when God brought his Son into the world on Christmas morning? What did the angels proclaim that God was doing through the birth of Jesus? The night the Son of God was born, the angels cried out,

Slide Luke 2:14

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

It says of Jesus in Isaiah 9:6

Slide Isaiah 9:6

⁶ For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

When Jesus takes control of a marriage or a family or of a person's life, when people yield control to Jesus and to his good rule and reign, the result is always peace.

And often, the reason a marriage or a family or a person lacks peace is because the people involved have not surrendered their lives to Jesus. Making peace – what the Bible calls reconciliation – is a key word in understanding what Jesus accomplished on the cross.

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Peace with God

Romans says,

Slide Romans 5:11

¹¹ Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

I love the old King James Version of this verse.

Slide Romans 5:11 (KJV)

¹¹ And not only *so*, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.

Do you know how we got the word “atonement”? It’s derived from the phrase

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At-one-ment

Human beings who were previously alienated from God are now made “at one” with God, at peace with God, through faith in Jesus Christ.

If you want to express Jesus, if you want to be a pointer to him, if you want to create an environment in which talking about spiritual things becomes natural, we need to help people make peace with each other.

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Peace with each other

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, said

Slide Matthew 5:9

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

The NIV translation is really unfortunate in this case, because what Jesus literally said was,

Slide Matthew 5:9

⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called sons of God.

The NIV takes away the gender bias, it's inclusive. But they're missing Jesus' point. As I said last week, in Jewish thought the phrase "you're the son of something" means that you partake in the character of that thing. In Jesus' day, in other words, someone called you the son of a pig, they're not saying something about your parents, they're saying something about you. They're saying that you have the habits, you have the behavior of a pig. So, when Jesus says "blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God", he's not just talking about our adoption into the family of God, he's saying, "and you make peace between people. You're displaying the character of God who is a God of peace."

Along with making beauty, along with telling the truth, a major pointer to Jesus is when we followers of Jesus orient our lives towards bringing people together rather than pushing people apart. Christians are people who spread peace, not division.

How do you express Jesus? Look for ways that will bring people together instead of keeping people apart. When we see a fire, we Christians try to pour water on the fire. If you're the kind of person who, when there's a little fire, when there's a controversy, when people are at odds – you pour gasoline on the fire – if you're the kind of person who separates people, slandering others, letting people know that someone has said something bad about them. If you're the kind of person who constantly stirs up controversy wherever you go, it's doubtful that the kingdom of God has ever broken upon you.

But if you're a person who in some way makes the world a more beautiful place, if you're a person who tells the truth, even when it's embarrassing, even when it costs, if you're a person that goes out of your way to bring people together, then you are someone who is expressing Jesus and his good rule and reign in this world. Let's pray.

How to Express Jesus

Rich Nathan
November 10 & 11, 2018

The E-Word
Matthew 5:14-16

#TheEWordVC

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