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Women of Witness

TIPS TO BETTER YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS

The Best Weapon Is an Open Door

By Rosaria Butterfield

If you believe that these are dangerous times, then you are right. The worldview du jour is called “intersectionality” — the belief that who you truly are is measured by how many victim-statuses you can claim, with human dignity only accruing through the intolerance of disagreement of any kind.

This has landed Christians squarely in a post-Christian world, where the highest achievement of personhood is this: the autonomous, independent individual finding meaning in nothing but himself. Thoughtful Christians know that the steady erasure of Christian tradition in the day-to-day fabric of life will mean, sooner or later, that Christians will find ourselves living like the early church in hostile Rome.

How tempting it is to withdraw. How easy it is to let fear rule our hearts as we shelter ourselves and our children from evil. How afraid we are to speak when our words, in spite of good intentions and biblical integrity, are declared hate speech. How ought we to live? Your best weapon is an open door.

But how? Especially if we have been burned before, how do we open our doors to the world?

1. Learn to Listen. Traditionally, Christians have been taught to share the gospel by starting with the good news that Jesus saves us from our sins. But we live in a world that does not believe it needs saving from sin. It believes it needs saving from its Christian neighbors.

Instead of starting with talk, we need to start by listening, and listening well. In post-Christian communities, your words may only seem as strong as your relationships. So learn to know your audience, and try to be some earthly good to them. Your best spiritual weapon is an open door, a set table, a fresh pot of coffee, and a box of Kleenex for the tears that spill. Because tears *will* spill.

God has written eternity on the hearts of us all, and part of that eternity is a longing for dignity. Life without the Lord is hard. It has hard edges and steep slopes. Its betrayals hold out no hope, its sufferings hold out no redemption. Only life in Christ offers redemptive suffering. Get to know your neighbors well enough to know where it hurts, and then accompany them in their suffering. Show — as well as tell — that Jesus comforts the suffering. Bear on your back the words that Jesus holds out to all who will listen,

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

Being available to neighbors means cutting back on your entertainment indulgences, building in margin time in your day, and budgeting to feed many more people than those who share your last name. Make sacrifices for your unsaved neighbors that mean something. Go out of your way for them.

2. Prepare Your Heart and Home. Being hospitable in a post-Christian world means meeting strangers and making them neighbors and, by God’s grace, welcoming neighbors into the family of God. Our homes are crucial for this. Our homes are the bridge between the church and the world.

The first challenge is *how to meet strangers*. Class and time barriers work against this vital Christian work. But prison, refugee, and foster-care programs are ready and waiting for you to partner with them. We must think of our homes as hospitals, embassies, and incubators, not castles, fortresses, or museums.

The second challenge is *how to direct the conversation to Christ*. For the Butterfields, the nightly practice of family devotions has helped our family manage this sometimes awkward transition from amusement to eternity.

How? Every night is the same routine. Dinner, followed by my husband leading us in a short Bible lesson, followed by prayer, and sometimes ending with singing a psalm. Because we do this every night, incorporating others into the practice of Christian table fellowship is normal. Without being asked, when dinner plates are passed to the head of the table to be brought to the sink, Bibles are passed around with the coffee mugs.

And almost-daily hospitality is much easier to pull off than those micromanaged, well-planned events. Here is what this looks like: Singles from the church and neighborhood come over after work and help get dinner going. We have fun doing this. Sometimes there is laundry on my table that needs to be folded and put away (or stuffed back in the dryer). Sometimes there is a child still struggling with a math lesson. And we all behave better when it is not just us dealing with the messiness of unfolded laundry and unfinished math sheets.

Other neighbors start to show up. People with secret lives — people with secret drug addictions or dangerous relationships — cannot make plans easily. Christians need to be sensitive to this. They don’t know if they will be sober or safe three Tuesdays from yesterday. But if the invitation is open and regular, they can make it to your table on the fly. All people — believers and unbelievers — need to see transparent, Christian lives lived out in the real-time of tears and mess.

And at the table, peace reigns. We make room for everyone. We pull in extra chairs or piano benches, or some of us sit on the floor. We share what we have. We put our phones away. We bring our problems and our questions. We don't have to worry about what our unbelieving neighbors think of us because they are here too, and they are more than happy to tell us what they think. And after dinner, we open our Bibles with our hearts. And then we pray. We ask Jesus to enter into our lives, not to stop conversations, but to deepen them and to give us hope.

3. Give Away Your House Key. We live in a world that has normalized crushing loneliness. But the Bible does not. Biblically speaking, conversion to Christ renders orphans into sons and daughters, bringing intimacy and belonging.

Christians have allowed idols (achievement, acquisition, selfish ambition) to deface the gospel. We have swapped out the biblical priority that the church is the family of God for a counterfeit that says the blood of biology ranks higher than the blood of Christ. And when we do this, we toss the most vulnerable brothers and sisters under the bus. The Christian life comes in exchange for the life (and sometimes the family) we once had, not in addition to it.

But loss becomes gain in community — or, it would if we were obedient to our Lord's hospitality commands. Mark 10:28-30 says this:

Peter began to say to [Jesus], "See, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life."

Please note what Jesus says about those who give up everything to follow Christ. They will leave everything behind. Even such necessary loss will cause grief and sadness and body memories and night terrors — all of the complex emotions that accompany counting the costs of gospel living. But this verse also promises that, in the family of God, they will receive a hundredfold now in this lifetime.

This hundredfold will not fall from the sky. It will come from you and me, or it will not come at all. This hundredfold includes warm embraces, regular, nightly meals, and prayer, bearing one another's burdens, and doing life together as the family of God. It is organic and messy and life-giving. It includes people who are married and single and young and old and able-bodied and infirm and everything in between. It means that, in Christ, you belong to each other, and this belonging has a physical and material dimension, as well as a spiritual one.

This verse is promising something vital: you, Christian, have a family of God. You, Christian, have a place at the table. And how do you get through the front door to the table? You, Christian, have the key. The gospel comes with a house key for those who have left everything for Jesus.

What's Stopping You? If the world saw Christians living in vital, life-giving communities, with families and singles and children sharing a rhythm of life, with extra time and hands and energy left over to lend a helping hand to those who do not yet know the Lord, perhaps they too could “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8)

Perhaps our children would not live and speak and think one way in church and another way on Facebook or in school — regarding Jesus as a prop to pull out for church or youth group. Perhaps our unsaved neighbors would regard us as the go-to people on the block when trouble hits — people who they can tell their deepest secrets, who go out of their way to help people in hard situations, and who have a sober handle on the problem of evil in the world. Perhaps the transparency of our lives would help people to see how, even when Christians lose, the gospel heals and helps and advances. Perhaps our everyday lives would reveal that the hand of God reaches into the hardest situations imaginable and that nothing is impossible with God.

Hospitality is the ground zero of the Christian life. What is standing in your way?

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