

Do Talk To Strangers

How to initiate spiritual conversations naturally

By Steven R. Jones

“Don’t talk to strangers!” These admonishing words from our mothers have shaped our attitude toward the people who share our world. But what if Mom was wrong? What if the action she warned against in our childhood is the very thing that our Lord encourages? We find an answer to this question in an unexpected place.



Illustration by Franklin Hammond

When the Apostle Paul wrote Timothy about the character traits that define a Christian leader, he placed hospitable in the center of the list (1 Tim. 3:2). A Bible dictionary explains that *hospitable* means “friend of strangers.” A leader in Jesus’ church must be a friend to strangers!

This places our relationship with strangers in a different light than Mom ever expected. Perhaps it’s time we take a closer look at the everyday conversations of the friendly carpenter from Galilee.

When Jesus spoke to a stranger by a well, He gently confronted her about her multiple marriages and her current living situation, then offered her hope (John 4). When a wealthy and powerful yuppie sought to justify his lifestyle by claiming to have conquered the commandments, Jesus didn’t snap back at him or walk away from the encounter. He quietly gave the stranger two more commands: “Sell your possessions, and come follow Me” (Mark 10:17–22).



Illustration by Franklin Hammond

After Jesus returned to heaven, the church's leaders clearly modeled Jesus' willingness to interact with strangers. The book of Acts is rich with such encounters. Today we, too, are encouraged to follow His example of everyday evangelism.

But how can we interact more freely with our acquaintances without being abrasive? We can learn from Jesus' example of extending love to others, even when His dialogue required a certain directness.

Approach with the right attitude.

First, we must maintain an attitude that clearly shows we hold no malice toward those we encounter. Jesus was immensely popular with the crowds. As Mark 12:37 tells us, "The large crowd listened to him with delight." Clearly, Jesus' attitude didn't turn people off. Indeed, they seemed to line up to square off with Him. Of course, not everyone received Jesus' words well, but we never get a hint that Jesus' attitude was the cause of people rejecting His message.

In the same way, we must pray that God will give us an attitude of cheerful questioning when we interact with others, rather than a defensive or combative tone. Some people may disagree with our points, but the results can be fascinating.

I overheard a woman in a convenience store vigorously defending Hillary Clinton's use of imaginary conversations with Eleanor Roosevelt. As I stood behind the woman in line, I asked, "Why do you think she chose to get her ideas from an imaginary conversation?"

"Everyone's got to get ideas somewhere; we're not just born with them!" she replied. This opening permitted me to share a few thoughts about how important it is for our leaders to get their ideas from the only source of unchanging truth. She walked out a few moments later still disagreeing with me, but we hadn't argued. I stirred her thinking without closing her mind to biblical truth.

Encourage whenever possible.

Jesus liked to encourage the people with whom He conversed. "You have answered correctly!" He told an expert in the law, who had expressed a good answer (Luke 10:28). To another inquisitive teacher of the law, Jesus exclaimed, "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34). When a Greek woman gave a witty response to Jesus' gentle probing of her faith, He responded in Matthew 15:28, "Woman, you have great faith!" And Mark tells us that He added, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter" (Mark 7:29).

When conversing with nonbelievers, never miss an opportunity to tell them you agree with them, or that they have given a thoughtful answer. If you get a chance to deliver a sincere compliment, take it!

Occasionally I have even told someone, "Wow, I like the way you said that. Let me jot that down!" Enjoy the things that people say well, and you will find a greater openness when you gently need to question mistaken viewpoints about the Lord.

Keep love and truth in balance.

Once when Jesus was sitting by a well, He quietly asked a woman to go find her husband. When she demurred with the half-truth that she didn't have a husband, Jesus responded with a gentle clarification. "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true" (John 4:17–18). A closer look at this clever response by Jesus shows us that He began and ended by kindly telling the woman where she was right. Yet He still uncovered the complete truth she had tried to conceal.

Practice the art of correcting false ideas in a way that expresses kindness. We can't be so loving that we let error pass as truth. On the other hand, we must not be so impatient to correct error that others lose sight of our love as we insist on the truth.

Draw out others viewpoints.

Our Lord loved to ask questions, even in response to questions. To one man who asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus responded with two questions of His own. "What is written in the Law? . . . How do you read it?" (Luke 10:26).

Sincere questions draw people out, rather than make them defensive. Recently, I failed to see a stop sign and caused a fender bender. As I backed out of the intersection, the other fellow jumped out of his car and began yelling, "What's the matter with you?"

I responded quietly with a question of my own, although my heart was racing. "First things first. Are you all right?" I said. "I know I was at fault, and I sure hope I didn't cause you to be hurt." When the other driver saw that I really cared whether he was all right, his anger melted away and he reassured me that he was fine.

As we waited for the police to take a report, I treated Benny to some ice cream from a passing ice cream truck. Soon we were laughing together, seated on the hood of my car. By the time the officer arrived, Benny had shared with me his life story, and we had prayed together about his difficult circumstances. The Lord used a gentle question about Benny's safety to help him get past his defensiveness and to eventually recommit his life to Christ and begin attending our church.

Be alert to the Holy Spirit's involvement.

A wealthy tax collector named Zacchaeus was so intent on seeing Jesus that he abandoned his dignity and clambered up into a sycamore tree. When Jesus came by, He astonished everyone by inviting Himself to Zacchaeus' house for dinner! Jesus' cheerful interaction with this despised stranger so moved Zacchaeus that he publicly announced his repentance and promised restitution to everyone he had wronged. Jesus must have beamed as He exclaimed, "Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:9).

The Holy Spirit is at work among the strangers who surround us every day. If we want to follow Christ's example, we need to scan our own crowds as well, looking carefully for people who are hungry to meet Jesus. To hurting and lonely strangers, the warmth of a cheerful conversation and the power of public acceptance and love is often all that is needed to bring salvation home to them.

A few weeks ago, I had an early breakfast at a neighborhood restaurant. As I stood in line to pay, a well-dressed, middle-aged man walked up behind me and began talking. “I don’t know why my wife doesn’t want me to go to our office party,” he exclaimed. “I’ve never given her any occasion to doubt my faithfulness, and she knows it’s important to me. Why do you think she is so bent out of shape over this?”

I was so astonished by the man’s abrupt words that I looked around to see whether he was speaking to someone behind me. But it was clear he was talking to me—a complete stranger! I said a quick, silent prayer and stumbled through a response to his unexpected outburst. I tried my best to inject my faith, but I didn’t do too well.

That unplanned encounter affected me deeply. I began to realize that our world is full of people who are so starved for a listening ear that they will pour out their hearts to complete strangers. It became clear to me that we need to soak our day in prayer before it begins, so we will be ready for any conversation that the Holy Spirit schedules.

When I shared with some friends at church about my impromptu conversation at Denny’s, we decided to begin a churchwide program of talking to strangers. We determined that if all 300 of us would speak to one person a day, we could contact virtually every person in our city with the love of Jesus in one year’s time! Starting on New Year’s Day, we made a commitment to chat with at least one stranger every day this year. While most of our conversations remain superficial and don’t lead to spiritual discussions, we have received many reports of conversations that developed into tremendous opportunities to share our faith.

We’ve concluded that Jesus still wants to strike up conversations with strangers. The members of the body of Christ are now His eyes, His smile, and His mouth, so we must be alert for His leading. The Holy Spirit’s command in Hebrews 13:2 rings true across the centuries and across the cultures: “Do not forget to entertain strangers.”

We live in a society increasingly darkened by isolation and loneliness. We will shine like beacons on a hill as we listen to the Holy Spirit and love the strangers around us by initiating conversations wherever we go.

» **See Also:** *On Your Own: Reaching Out*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

STEVEN R. JONES is senior pastor of Kalamazoo Missionary Church. He is passionate about striking up conversations with strangers and evangelizing outside his comfort zone. He wishes more believers understood and acted on the truth that “being a hero for Christ is possible to anyone who will follow Him wholeheartedly.”

**On Your Own
Reaching Out**

1. Why do questions draw people into conversation more effectively than statements of facts or opinions?

2. Read Col. 4:2–6. What instructions does Paul give regarding the way we relate to outsiders?

Think about how someone would describe your attitude toward “outsiders” if they watched you for a week.

3. Read 1 Peter 3:15–16. What characteristics mark a Christian’s attitude toward others?

4. What can you do to cultivate awareness of the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of people around you?

Are You Listening?

By David Ping
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Spiritual opportunities surround us every day when we take the time to engage with others and practice the fine art of listening.

Much to the chagrin of a few people at her church, Carol, a 25-year-old Christian college graduate, took a job as a waitress in a trendy nightclub. A month later, she ran into the leader of her mother's Bible study group at the grocery store.

After greeting Carol, the older woman drew her close, and with a look of deep concern said, "I've been praying for you ever since your mother told me where you're working. How are you doing?" Carol smiled and answered truthfully: "I guess your prayers are being answered. My spiritual life is better than ever. In the four weeks I've been working there, I've led three people to Christ. How are you doing?"

Carol's outreach success is worth a closer look. According to denominational statistics, in one month she led to Christ more than three times the number of people half the churches in North America reach in a whole year. Surprisingly, Carol explains, her outreach efforts didn't depend on the *location* where she worked as much as another frequently overlooked "L-word" – listening.

Recently, Vineyard Community Church in Cincinnati (cincyvineyard.com) sent a video crew out for a man-on-the-street report. They asked passersby what they thought of Christians. Here's a sampling of responses:

- "It seems like they don't care about me or my views. They're all about what they want to pull me into...They try to open me up to their 'new views,' but it's kind of like it doesn't matter what I tell them."
- "They're too aggressive. They push their beliefs on you because they want you to believe what they believe."
- "I'd say 75% of these people don't really care who I am. They just want to build up their church or something. They don't even ask me what my name is..."

Each response suggests that when most Christians approached them, they didn't take the time to engage and hear their story and discover who they are. They didn't listen to them.

Is your congregation equipped to actively listen to their coworkers, family members, neighbors and those they see every day at their local Starbucks, drycleaners or gas station? Hopefully, these proven principles will give your worshippers the confidence, inspiration and empathy for others essential to listening to someone.

***"Being listened to is so close to being loved
that most people cannot tell the difference."***

David Oxberg

The Missing Factor

As Carol and increasing numbers of outreach-oriented leaders are now discovering, many angry and apathetic people who recoil at religious-sounding words are more than ready to open up when they meet someone who cares enough to genuinely listen.

That's not hard to believe. Look at Scripture and Christ's conversations with strangers. Countless times, Jesus met someone, asked a question, and then listened – without interruption – to his or her story. The people He healed, fed and talked with felt listened to and in turn walked away feeling important, their lives changed for eternity. Moreover, James 1:19 encourages us: "Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."

The 10% of evangelistic extroverts among us may confuse the concept of being quick to listen with passivity or silence. But evangelistic listening is one of the most vigorous and proactive activities you can engage in. **It requires you to use all of your senses in new and insightful ways.**

Listen With Your Eyes

Ever notice the people around you – the looks on their faces, the way they're walking, their eyes? It's called the ministry of **noticing other people** – picking up on hundreds of tiny nuances and minor details that speak volumes about what's happening inside other people. By paying special attention to messages sent by a person's eyes, nonverbal gestures and overall posture, we can tune into a seeker's deep heart. Noticing other people requires you to look outside yourself, focusing on others, to identify their needs.

It's a ministry Steve Bowen, evangelism pastor at The Vineyard Church in Dayton, Ohio (daytonvineyard.com), practices often. Recently, while eating a quick lunch at a local Chinese restaurant with his wife, Bowen noticed a woman a few tables down from them.

"Her eyes were sad, and her shoulders slumped as if she'd been carrying around the weight of the world," he recalls. "I said a quick prayer, asking God to help me encourage her."

A few moments later, Bowen flagged down a nearby waiter and asked him to put the woman's bill on his tab. On their way out of the restaurant, the couple stopped by the woman's table.

"You looked like you could use some encouragement today, so we bought your lunch," Bowen said.

The woman responded through tears, "How in the world did you know?"

Quickly, the Bowens gave her a card with The Vineyard's address and a phone number to call **if she needed someone to really listen to her.**

“Opportunities like this surround us all the time,” Steve says, “if we simply slow down and listen with our eyes.”

Whenever Steve visits a new city to lead an outreach, he makes it a point to walk around the local shopping malls with a cup of coffee in his hand. He watches the people around him very carefully, looking intently into their eyes and asking himself, “What do I hear?”

“God spoke to me early on in my ministry and told me that if I looked into people’s eyes – with His help – I could see where they’re hurting. It’s not mystical or magical; He made us all with this ability. If you watch closely enough, hidden pain, worry and hope are all there to see. This is how I get the ‘feel’ for what makes a person or a whole city tick so that I can discern the best ways to reach out.”

Speak Without Words

As Willow Creek Community church’s director of evangelism and author of several books, including *Seeker Small Groups: Engaging Spiritual Seekers in Life-Changing Discussions* (Zondervan), Garry Poole is a leader in the concept of seeker small groups – where unbelievers interested in exploring spiritual issues gather to discuss life’s questions of death, truth and God. In his own seeker small groups and others he has observed in churches nationwide, Poole has seen that for seekers, **evangelistic listening can often be infinitely more compelling than prepackaged Gospel presentations.**

“I usually spend the first four or five weeks of a group listening and encouraging participants to talk about their beliefs and questions,” he explains. “The more I listen, the more they want to know what I believe. Once, my whole group actually stopped me at the door and said, ‘You’re not going anywhere until you tell us your opinion about what it means to be a Christian.’”

When you reach out to someone, who does most of the talking? Surprising people by genuinely listening to them, Poole says, allows you to model the same brand of openhearted listening that you want them to use when considering the Gospel.

See With Your Ears

Instead of using canned, prepackaged points to tell someone about Christ, let others be your guide to their unique emotional and spiritual world. Use your ears carefully, and words sparingly, to identify and meet their felt needs.

Watch for feelings. What is he happy, sad, afraid or angry about? Strangely, these simple emotions offer a direct line to a person’s soul. And feelings are inextricably attached to beliefs. People *feel* depressed because at some level they *believe* there is no hope. They *feel* worried because they have a nagging *belief* something bad is about to happen. Getting to the deep heart issues requires a combination of peace, self-control and reflective listening that encourages someone to explore the threatening areas of pain or mystery. And listening to someone enhances his or her sense of self-worth.

The people who listen to us are the ones we move toward; when we are listened to, it makes us unfold and expand.

A recent Gallup organization survey reports that 72% of respondents said they view spirituality as a highly personal and individual affair rather than a matter of religion or church doctrine. And there is nothing more individual and attractive than telling your story to someone who cares enough to genuinely listen.

One pastor tells his congregation that if they want to connect with the unchurched in their community, they should know the answers to three questions: **What do you worry about? What do you wonder about? And what do you wish for?**

Showing someone that you're listening lets you connect with him or her on a feeling level. Demonstrate with your body language (nods, gestures, uncrossed arms, eye contact) and verbal expressions (groans, exclamations) that you genuinely care. And take time to put the thought and feelings they share with you into different words, mirroring their emotions and perspectives back to them.

Recently, Jan, an Athletes in Action leader, and one of her fellow staffers experienced the power of listening and mirroring. After a long day at a conference, the two women were unwinding in a hotel whirlpool when a couple of teenage girls joined them. One of the teens, Brittany, began to tell her friend about an upcoming Wiccan gathering she planned to attend.

"Normally we would have tried to counter the girl's ideas, but we decided to listen instead," says Jan who recently completed a listening for outreach course. "I said something simple like, 'Wow you really sound excited about this!'"

Jan's response was all the encouragement Brittany needed to launch into a five-minute explanation of why she was so attracted to neo-pagan rituals. She'd had a really traumatic time in high school, and the Wiccans accepted her, she said.

"I've gone through so much just trying to make it through high school that I'll probably be in therapy for the rest of my life," she said.

Jan mirrored back Brittany's comments back to her, saying, "It's hard for you to even imagine a future where you'd be free from all the pain you've gone through, huh?"

With tears starting to form in her eyes and complete sincerity in her voice, the teen responded, "Sometimes I wish I could be born all over again. I'd really like to start over from scratch." After a long pause, Jan's friend asked if she would really like to be born again.

"Yes, I really would," she answered.

It seems the Holy Spirit works through us so much better when we slow down and listen. Often, putting aside our personal agendas, schedules and self-consciousness to tune in to God's heart for another person is a sacrifice. But gradually those efforts begin to open hearts and awaken an irresistible hunger to find and know God.

Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Romans 15:1-3 in *The Message* puts it this way: "Those of us who are strong and able in the faith need to step in and lend a hand to those who falter and not just do what is convenient for us. Strength is for service, not status. Each one of us needs to look after the good of the people around us asking ourselves, 'How can I help?' That's exactly what Jesus did. He didn't make it easy for himself by avoiding people's troubles, but waded right in and helped out."

Share Your Story

When you've listened patiently and well to people, almost invariably they'll want to know your story. You may be so "slow to speak," as Scripture says, that you never get around to talking about what's really important. The risk of being rejected or labeled "annoying" looms large. Instead of retreating into silence or a "safe," prepackaged formula, relax and be real. Share yourself.

Briefly tell your story – warts and all. Simple, honest sharing is attractive. Don't worry if you don't have answers for every question, or if someone doesn't agree with everything you say. When you've engaged with someone and listened well, you'll likely be surprised by the level of attention and interest in what makes you who you are.

Our culture is crying out for the life essentials of understanding, hope and acceptance. Active listening – taking the time to listen with your eyes, see with your ears and speak without words – forges that life-giving pathway to others.

David Ping is executive director of Equipping Ministries International, an organization that has equipped more than 120,000 leaders and lay people in 45-plus countries worldwide to effectively reach out to their communities in practical ways. He is the co-author of Listening for Heaven's Sake (Teleios) and Irresistible Evangelism (Group).