A LESSON IN WITNESSING TO SKEPTICS

John 6:41-47

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John 6:41-47

When I’ve received training in how to share my faith, the instruction has often been along the lines of showing unbelievers how easy it is to trust in Christ. Give them examples of how every day we trust in people we don’t even know: “You trust the companies that make your food. You trust your doctor and the pharmacist. You trust the mechanic who fixed the brakes on your car. So now, just trust in Jesus. It’s easy!”

Some of these evangelistic methods also advise not to focus on the person’s sin and his need of repentance or on God’s wrath and the judgment to come. That might scare away a potential convert. Rather just tell them about God’s love and faith in Christ. Keep it positive: focus on how Jesus will meet his needs for a happy marriage, a successful career, and a life free of trouble and pain. After you “close the deal,” you can talk about the hard stuff.

But have you ever noticed how Jesus often took the opposite approach? When the rich young ruler asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus simply could have said, “It’s easy: God loves you, man, and I love you too! Just believe in Me and you’ve got it.” Instead, He told him to keep the commandments. When the young man claimed that he had done that, Jesus replied (Luke 18:22), “One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” Not so easy!

Jesus told the unbelieving crowd (Mark 8:34-35), “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it.” Death to self! Not so easy! Jesus often seems to have made it hard to believe. He never softened His demand for total commitment in order to win more followers.

To understand John 6:44, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him,” we have to view it in its context:
Jesus is talking with unbelieving skeptics. They ate the miraculous bread and wanted to make Jesus king. But He didn’t come to be the kind of king that they were looking for, so He withdrew from them. They later sought Jesus in Capernaum, but for the wrong reason. They wanted Him to be the new Moses, who could provide them with a lifetime supply of bread. They had a wrong expectation for who the Messiah should be and what He should do for them. So Jesus corrected their errors and asserted that He is the true bread out of heaven who could satisfy their spiritual hunger.

Then Jesus confronted their unbelief (6:36): “But I said to you that you have seen Me, and yet do not believe.” He then brought up the sovereign plan of God, who had given some to Jesus, whom He would certainly save and keep for all eternity (6:37-40). His mission would certainly succeed even if these Jews rejected Him, because Jesus came to fulfill the Father’s sovereign will. In this context these Jews were grumbling about Jesus (6:42-43): They thought that they knew His origin as the son of Joseph and Mary. How then could He be the bread of life that came down out of heaven? They challenged Jesus’ claims.

Sometimes Jesus followed the principle of not casting your pearls before swine (Matt. 7:6) by just ignoring such critics. But here, He witnesses to them, although not in the way many modern evangelism courses would advise. Rather than defending Himself or correcting their misunderstandings or telling them how much God loved them, Jesus restated His teaching about God’s sovereignty over our salvation. He showed them their inability to come to Him apart from God’s sovereign grace. That’s a subject which, as I said last week, some pastors won’t bring up at all, but especially they would advise that you never bring it up with skeptical unbelievers. But Jesus breaks that rule here by telling these skeptical Jews that they cannot come to Him unless the Father who sent Him draws them. In so doing, Jesus gives us a lesson in how to witness to skeptics:

**Christ witnessed to skeptics by confronting their attitude, showing them their spiritual inability, and pointing them to faith in Himself as their only hope of eternal life.**

1. **Christ witnessed to skeptics by confronting their attitude (6:41-43).**
John 6:41-43: “Therefore the Jews were grumbling about Him, because He said, ‘I am the bread that came down out of heaven.’ They were saying, ‘Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does He now say, “I have come down out of heaven”?’ Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Do not grumble among yourselves.’”

John uses the word “Jews” consistently to refer to those who were hostile toward Jesus. In this context, he also may want us to think back to the Jews who grumbled in the wilderness under Moses and brought judgment on their own heads (Exod. 15:24; Num. 11:1; 14:2-5, etc.).

The cause of the Jews’ grumbling here was Jesus’ claim to be the bread that came down out of heaven. They thought that they knew Jesus’ origin as the son of Joseph and Mary. So they couldn’t understand how He claimed to come down out of heaven, which He repeats over and over in this chapter (6:32 [implied], 33, 38, 50, 51, 58). So they were setting themselves up as capable of judging Jesus’ repeated claim because they did not know about His virgin birth. John is again using irony here, because he has already told us that the eternal Word became flesh and dwelt among us (1:14). If these Jews only knew the truth (as we, the readers, do), they would have known that Jesus’ claim was absolutely true.

Jesus did not correct their misunderstanding about His coming down out of heaven. Rather, He confronted their attitude (6:43): “Do not grumble among yourselves.” Grumblers invariably set themselves up as sovereign over God: “If God only saw things my way, we wouldn’t be in this mess!” “If God only took account of my insights, this problem would get cleared up right now!” Grumblers are not in submission to God’s sovereign rule. They want to tell God how to run the world so that things will go the way that they want. Grumblers arrogantly imply that they know more than God knows. These grumblers thought that they were competent to pass judgment on Jesus. So He confronted their grumbling attitude.

The point is, grumblers will not believe in Jesus even if they’ve seen Him feed 20,000 people with five loaves and two fish and they’ve watched Him heal the sick, unless they repent of their grumbling attitude. At the root of unbelief is not a lack of evidence,
but an attitude that wants to tell God how to run the universe, at least my corner of the universe! In John 7:17, Jesus states, “If anyone is willing to do His [the Father’s] will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself.” At the root of correct understanding about Jesus that leads to faith in Him is whether we are willing to be obedient to God’s will.

As I’ve said before, a good approach when a skeptic raises an objection to the faith (evolution, the problem of suffering, errors in the Bible, etc.) is to reply, “Are you saying that if I can give you reasonable answers to that issue, then you will repent of your sins and follow Jesus?” Invariably, the skeptic will say, “Well, there are other issues, too!” In other words, the issues are not the issue. The issues are smokescreens to hide the fact that the skeptic doesn’t want to submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ. If he can “control” Jesus to provide him with what he wants out of life, he might profess to “believe.” But then he’s not believing in Jesus as Lord, but rather in Jesus as Aladdin’s Genie. So in witnessing to such grumbling skeptics, confront their underlying attitude of not wanting to submit to Jesus.

Before I move on to 6:44-45, I need to mention that grumbling is not just a problem for unbelieving skeptics. It’s also a problem for many that profess to know Christ (1 Cor. 10:10; Phil. 2:14). If you’re grumbling about your circumstances, you’re not giving thanks in all things. And if you’re not giving thanks, you’re not trusting in the Lord and submitting to His sovereign hand over your circumstances. So we all need to apply Jesus’ words in 6:43 to ourselves as often as needed: “Do not grumble among yourselves.”

2. Christ witnessed to skeptics by stripping them of all spiritual self-confidence (6:44-45).

John 6:44: “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.” Note, also, that Jesus basically repeats verse 44 in 6:65, except that there He changes the Father’s drawing with His granting coming to Jesus as a sovereign gift.

Why would Jesus tell unbelieving skeptics that they are unable in and of themselves to come to Him? I can see why He would talk
privately with His disciples about such a profound theological truth. But why would He bring this up with these skeptics?

A. Unbelieving skeptics need to be stripped of their proud self-confidence.

I think that this is the main reason Jesus tells these skeptics that no one has the ability to come to Him unless the Father who sent Him draws them. Skeptics invariably are proud of their mental ability. They view believers as uneducated simpletons: “If they had half a brain, they could see how unreasonable it is to believe that this carpenter from Nazareth came down from heaven!”

Skeptics think that their intellect is sovereign over God. They base their understanding of God (if He even exists) on evidence and logic. But if a skeptic were able to come to Christ through his own intellect or will-power or decision, he would come in pride, which is antithetical to gospel repentance. The Bible yanks the rug of pride out from under us all: “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” J. C. Ryle comments on 6:44 (Expository Thoughts on the Gospels [Baker], 3:385):

Our Lord ... desired to magnify their danger and guilt and to make them see that faith in Him was not so easy an affair as they supposed. It was not knowledge of His origin alone, but the drawing grace of God the Father which they needed. Let them awake to see that, and cry for grace before it was too late.

The general lesson of the sentence ... is one of vast importance. Our Lord lays down the great principle: “That no man whatsoever can come to Christ by faith, and really believe in Him, unless God the Father draws him so to come and inclines his will to believe.” The nature of man since the fall is so corrupt and depraved that even when Christ is made known and preached to him, he will not come to Him and believe in Him without the special grace of God inclining his will and giving him a disposition to come....

This is, no doubt, a very humbling truth, and one which in every age has called forth the hatred and opposition of man. The favorite notion of man is that he can do what he likes—repent or not repent, believe or not believe, come to Christ or
not come—entirely at his own discretion. In fact, man likes to think that his salvation is in his own power. Such notions are flatly contradictory to the text before us. The words of our Lord here are clear and unmistakable and cannot be explained away.... Man never of himself begins with God. God must first begin with man. And this beginning is just the “drawing” of the text.

So Jesus is saying to them (in 6:44), “I know why you’re grumbling. I know why you don’t believe in Me. You’re got a desperate problem that only God can solve. You cannot come to Me unless the Father draws you.” He’s stripping them of their proud spiritual self-confidence, which is the opposite of trusting in Christ for salvation.

B. Unbelieving skeptics need to realize their inability to come to Christ apart from the Father’s powerful drawing.

Some who argue that God does not force Himself on anyone, but that we all must make our own decision to believe in Jesus, say that God’s “drawing” means that He woos sinners, much as a young man woos a woman to decide to marry him. But the Greek word is used in John 21:6 & 11 of the disciples dragging the net full of fish into the boat and then to the shore. They didn’t woo those fish to please decide to jump into the net and then to cooperate by wiggling their way onto shore! The word is also used of Paul and Silas being dragged to the authorities in Philippi after they cast the demon out of the slave girl (Acts 16:19). And, Paul was dragged out of the temple by the angry mob in Jerusalem (Acts 21:30). Obviously, they weren’t “wooing” him!

Leon Morris (The Gospel According to John [Eerdmans], p. 371, note 110) points out that there is always the idea of resistance with the use of this verb, but that there is not one example in the New Testament where the resistance was successful. He says, “Always, the drawing power is triumphant, as here.” A. W. Pink (Exposition of John, on monergism.com) describes this drawing:

It is the power of the Holy Spirit overcoming the self-righteousness of the sinner, and convicting him of his lost condition. It is the Holy Spirit awakening within him a sense of need. It is the power of the Holy Spirit overcoming the
pride of the natural man, so that he is ready to come to Christ as an empty-handed beggar. It is the Holy Spirit creating within him a hunger for the bread of life.

Note that the drawing of which Jesus speaks here is effectual. It results in the sinner actually coming to Jesus in saving faith. Jesus states in 6:44 that He will raise up the one who is drawn to Him on the last day (6:40 shows that He means, “raise up to eternal life”). And, in 6:45 Jesus reinforces that this is effectual when He says, “Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me.” It is the same unbroken chain of redemption that Paul outlines (Rom. 8:29-30): “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.”

Jesus makes a third point here:

C. Unbelieving skeptics need to realize that the Scriptures are the only source for the truth about Jesus that leads to salvation (6:45).

John 6:45: “It is written in the prophets, ‘AND THEY SHALL ALL BE TAUGHT OF GOD.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me.” Jesus is referring to Isaiah 54:13 (and perhaps also to Jeremiah 31:34) to show these proud skeptics that their own Scriptures supported Jesus’ point in 6:44. The “all” in the quote refers to true believers, as the second half of the verse shows. God draws all whom He draws to believe in Jesus by teaching them through His Word. The Holy Spirit uses God’s Word to open blind eyes to see the beauty of Jesus so that formerly resistant sinners are drawn to Him. You can know that you’ve been taught of God when you lay aside all self-confidence and come in faith to Jesus as the Savior of whom all Scripture speaks.

Again, Jesus is stripping these proud skeptics of their own intellect or power of reason as the basis for salvation. If someone can reason his way to salvation, he will take pride in his reason. But Jesus is saying that the truth about Him is contained in God’s written Word and that no one has the mental capacity to understand that truth unless God teaches it to him. As John the Baptist said
(John 3:27), “A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven.” Or, as Jesus told Peter after he made his famous confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:17), “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.”

If you’re proud of your spiritual knowledge, even if you are truly born again, you don’t know what you think you know. Genuine spiritual knowledge always humbles you in the presence of God and causes you to wonder why He ever chose to reveal Christ to your soul. The more you know, the more you realize how little you really know.

Thus Christ witnessed to these skeptics by confronting their attitude and by stripping them of all spiritual self-confidence.

3. **Christ witnessed to skeptics by pointing them to faith in Himself as their only hope of eternal life (6:46-47).**

Briefly, there are two points here:

A. Christ witnessed to skeptics by showing them that He is the only one through whom we can know the Father (6:46).

John 6:46: “Not that anyone has seen the Father, except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father.” This repeats the truth that John stated in the prologue (1:18), “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.” Jesus is the only one who can reveal and mediate the Father to us (Luke 10:22; John 14:6, 9). We cannot come to the Father through mysticism, philosophy, or human reason. We can only come to the Father through Jesus.

B. Christ encouraged skeptics with the promise that whoever believes in Him has eternal life as a present possession (6:47).

John 6:47: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life.” (The earliest manuscripts omit “in Me” after “believes.”) By again saying, “Truly, truly” (6:26, 32), Jesus was calling their attention to His next words. He is describing those who have eternal life: They believe in Him. I agree with D. A. Carson (The Gospel According to John [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 294),
Notwithstanding the strong note of predestinarian thought in the preceding verses, this is an implicit invitation to believe, and an implicit warning against unbelief. In this context, it strips the would-be disciple of all pretensions, of all self-congratulation, of all agendas save those laid down by Jesus himself. Those who believe … cannot approach Jesus as if they are doing him a favor …. They must believe— but they do so on his terms, and by his grace.

“Believes” is a present participle, which indicates that we don’t just believe in Jesus at the point of salvation, but as an ongoing, daily matter. The moment you believe you have eternal life (John 3:16). Jesus says of His sheep, who hear His voice and follow Him (John 10:28), “I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand.”

That invitation extends to you. You don’t have to put your brain on the shelf to believe in Jesus. But you do have to confront your arrogant, grumbling, skeptical attitude. You do have to be stripped of all self-confidence that you are able in and of yourself to make a rational decision to come to Christ. There is more than sufficient apostolic testimony to the truth about Jesus. But to come in faith to Him, you must cry out to the Father to do a sovereign work of grace in your heart. He must draw you to Jesus.

**Conclusion**

C. H. Spurgeon wrote (Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit [Pilgrim Publications], 6:259:

The doctrine which leaves salvation to the creature, and tells him that it depends upon himself, is the exaltation of the flesh, and a dishonoring of God. But that which puts in God’s hand man, fallen man, and tells man that though he has destroyed himself, yet his salvation must be of God, that doctrine humbles man in the very dust, and then he is just in the right place to receive the grace and mercy of God. It is a humbling doctrine.

Has God humbled your heart and drawn you to Jesus? If not, stop grumbling and start praying that He will do it soon!
Application Questions

1. Discuss: Many modern evangelistic methods are much too influenced by American sales techniques than by biblical models.

2. Some argue that unbelievers are able by themselves to believe in Christ; otherwise, God wouldn’t command them to do so. Why is this fallacious? Support your answer with Scripture.

3. Have you ever tried to witness to a skeptic? What did you learn from the experience? What can you learn from our text?

4. Why is grumbling such a serious sin (Exod. 15:24; Num. 11:1; 14:2-5; 1 Cor. 10:10; Phil. 2:14)? How can you overcome it?

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