

## **“BRIDGE BUILDING 101: How to be Positive in a Put-Down World”**

by Rom A. Pegram (3/11/18)

There is an old saying that goes, “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.” My mom used to remind us of this while growing up. I’m sure that all of us have heard the wisdom of these words at one time or another. Maybe we’d said something negative in the course of a family conversation ... and then Mom spoke this truth. This *homey* proverb points to a biblical truth about thriving spiritually in a world that’s all too quick to put someone else down—to be negative...

***If we’re going to be more than survivors in a world that desperately needs to hear a word about a living God who loves them, then we’re going to have to find a way to do that ... in the midst of the culture we live in...***

A few years ago, I had the privilege of attending a meeting in Green Lake whose main speaker was Len Sweet. Len spoke, for the most part, about what the Church needs to be aware of and do in order to *connect* with today’s culture. He gave this example...

What if I was a missionary to China? My main objective was to go there—to a primarily pagan culture—and share the love of God with them. So, here’s my approach. I go to the first person there and say...

- You know, you guys talk funny...
- ...your food stinks...
- ...and your clothes are hideous...

But, I want you to know ... IN SPITE OF THAT ... I’m here to share the love of God with you. ... How do you think they’d react? Is that a good missionary strategy? Could God use that kind of approach to further His Kingdom?

Folks, my answer is a resounding “NO!” And yet, too often today, that’s exactly how we approach the unchurched (‘pre-churched’) in our culture. Let me suggest, instead, that we take our cues from today’s Bible teacher—the Apostle Paul. Listen, now, to his story as we catch up to him in the city of Athens (Acts 17:16-34, NLT) ...

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city. <sup>17</sup> He went to the synagogue to reason with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and he spoke daily in the public square to all who happened to be there. <sup>18</sup> He also had a debate with some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers.

When he told them about Jesus and his resurrection, they said, “What’s this babbler trying to say with these strange ideas he’s picked up?” Others said, “He seems to be preaching about some foreign gods.” <sup>19</sup> Then they took him to the high council of the city. “Come and tell us about this new teaching,” they said. <sup>20</sup> “You are saying some rather strange things, and we want to know what it’s all about.” <sup>21</sup> (It should be explained that all the Athenians as well as the foreigners in Athens seemed to spend all their time discussing the latest ideas.) <sup>22</sup> So Paul, standing before the council, addressed them as follows: “Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way, <sup>23</sup> for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: ‘To an Unknown God.’ This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I’m

telling you about. <sup>24</sup> “He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn’t live in man-made temples, <sup>25</sup> and human hands can’t serve his needs—for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need. <sup>26</sup> From one man he created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand when they should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries. <sup>27</sup> “His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us. <sup>28</sup> For in him we live and move and exist. As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ <sup>29</sup> And since this is true, we shouldn’t think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone. <sup>30</sup> “God overlooked people’s ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now he commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him. <sup>31</sup> For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead.” <sup>32</sup> When they heard Paul speak about the resurrection of the dead, some laughed in contempt, but others said, “We want to hear more about this later.” <sup>33</sup> That ended Paul’s discussion with them, <sup>34</sup> but some joined him and became believers. Among them were Dionysius, a member of the council, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

*Like Paul, those who are more than survivors reference the culture to share God’s love.* The classic biblical example is found right here in this story. While *waiting* for his companions to arrive in Athens, that they might go on to Corinth, Paul began noticing some things—some things that upset him a great deal. He got agitated because what he was seeing was *not* of God. So, did he get angry & blow up and throw their culture right back in their face? No! His distress caused Paul to *search for common ground* with the Athenians ... from which he could share the Good News of Jesus Christ. Not wanting to ‘put them down,’ he found something in their everyday world that he could be positive about! Instead of trying to ‘break down walls,’ as some may’ve been tempted to do, Paul began to ‘build a bridge’ ... over which the truth of the Gospel could travel. There’s our lesson today. When we don’t like what we see in this world, how are we going to react? With an anger that would surely destroy any hope of sharing Christ? Or, with a bridge of love? Paul would recommend the first...

I want to suggest to you, today, that one of the keys to the truth of this entire passage of scripture can be found in the very first verse that was read. V. 16 says, “While Paul was waiting in Athens...”

*Have you ever had to hurry up to wait before?* I hear people complain sometimes that they have to wait. But, *don’t!* Make good use—heavenly use—of your waiting time, like Paul did...

Where are some places in this world we have to wait? Or we get tired of waiting?

- In line at the check-out (at any kind of store)...
- In the service center while your waiting for an oil change...
- In line at the DMV office, when getting your license renewed...
- In the waiting room of the doctor’s office or dentist’s office...
- In line at the financial aid office at school, only to find that you forgot some paperwork and you’re going to have to get back in line again...

Our list could go on and on, couldn't it? *Waiting* is a reality of life ... and one we have to learn to deal with. So, what I'm suggesting today—what I believe Paul would suggest—is *we use our waiting time for God's glory ... that we might be more than survivors in this world of ours!* What would Paul tell us? First, while waiting...

**BE ATTENTIVE.** Verse 16 tells us, "While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply troubled by all the idols he saw everywhere in the city." o you remember my example of the missionary going to China? There is a *bad example* of how we could approach people & share the love of God with them! Paul looked for something in Athens to be positive about, rather than beginning with something negative! Do you remember? Paul complimented *their religious fervor*...

I'm sure there're different ideas on where to begin when dealing with the 'pre-churched'—those not yet active in the faith. But, I really do *like* Paul's approach. I believe he was on to something here. And, this's very important, so hear me: ***Paul began with people where they were in their thinking, NOT where they were not!***

When God has you in a place where you're *waiting*, use the time to look around & see where people are at! That's so important to learn—by observation. Then take advantage of wherever God places you. Paul got to go before the city council, didn't he! And this was no 'one horse town!' What an opportunity God gave Paul to share the Gospel—the Good News of Jesus Christ—because Paul was willing to *be attentive* and find out where these people were at in their thinking ... *before he opened his mouth!* There's a lesson there. You may get upset like Paul did ... and that's O.K. to be angry at what's not of God. But, *it's what you do with your anger that counts*, which leads me to the SECOND thing Paul teaches us. While waiting, remember to...

**BE POSITIVE.** Be attentive, then *do something positive* ... like Paul did! Find positive ways to communicate with people! In a very positive way, so as *not* to turn them off with negativity (as so often happens), Paul found a way to *speak their language!* Paul used words & ideas that were part of *their* vocabulary and used that as a platform for the Gospel... **Remember this: It's our goal this week to be "bridge builders"** (like we were "wall builders" last week)!

Back when I was in sales & management for a company called Burlington Air Express, I had the opportunity to be a part of the hiring & firing process at the local office. I remember I was hiring a sales rep one time, took all the applications and divided them into two piles: BB and AB—which of course stood for "Before Beatles" and "After Beatles," speaking of their first U.S. appearance (*the picture's not exactly what I had in mind*). You know, some were born before 1964 and other applicants were born after the famous '64 Ed Sullivan Show. Now, that may seem silly, but it was one way I had of knowing how to approach the different applicants and 'talk their language,' so to speak...

So, why would I do that? And why am I talking about this crazy method for reviewing applicants for a job? To help you see this: *Everyone* doesn't see things the same way we do. Many times, the realization of this has an affect on *how positive we*

are when dealing with life's issues—dealing with those who live in our culture but don't necessarily talk the language we do, or choose to do things the way we do, but rather 'the way they've always been done before.' How do we communicate with them? It's important to know...

Paul could've taken a different approach, but I'm glad he didn't. Rather than putting down the icons of their culture, Paul used their language & culture to point them to God... It's true Paul could've chosen to be negative with the Athenians. He could've stuck his head in the sand and said "to heck with these people; they don't see it *my* way, I don't need 'em anyway." But, you know what? Paul didn't do that ... and we shouldn't either...

Folks, when we have the opportunity to *wait* in life, let's begin to observe the world around us—the language ... and the ways ... of those who may not do things like we do ... or think like we do. And, let's *be positive* as we look for new ways to communicate the love of God with others too! Finally, while you're waiting in life, don't forget to take the knowledge you've gained from these times and...

**BE BOLD.** While it's true we're looking for common ground, wanting to be positive in sharing the Gospel, not everyone's going to applaud or accept it! But, as Paul discovered, *some* will come to believe; *some* will come to know eternal salvation because we've not been afraid of the "r" word—religion ... or the "J" word—Jesus ... or the "G" word—God.

I spoke briefly last week about the opposition we'll experience when building 'walls of protection' around the idea of Sabbath. This week it's still true: whenever someone takes a *bold* stand for God, even when building bridges ... opposition will come. Just look at our scripture lesson for today:

- V. 18 – the teachers of Athens called Paul *ignorant*...
- V. 32 – some [others] made fun of Paul...

Folks, **we can't be afraid of others' words who just don't understand yet what the Gospel's all about!** Many *today* don't understand the Easter story; how can *anyone* be raised from the dead? Many reactions today to the Gospel message would be the same as in Paul's day, but, we need to be *bold* in the face of opposition!

*Who doesn't want to thrive spiritually in this world God has placed us in ... particularly when it comes to making a difference in someone's life that's yet to believe? Where do we start? Take Paul's lead and start with a concern for 'unbelievers' that says, "With God's help, I'm going to find a way to reach them!"*

**Paul was more than a survivor when it came to influencing others for Jesus; he learned to build bridges by finding common ground—something to be applauded. And we can learn to do the same.** Rather than being negative and critical of our culture—people's way of life, *first find something that can be complimented instead!*

Several years ago now, I read a one page editorial in a Christian pastor's magazine entitled something like "The Evangelistic Power of a Fender T-Shirt!" Once upon a time, I was one of those youth workers who encouraged my youth to wear Christian Ts ... with creative Christian messages on them—that is, until I learned years later, that the only people who really paid attention to those Ts ... were other Christians. The article spoke about something I'd already realized in my life. It's what Paul's been talking to us about. If you want to reach others for Christ (pre-churched), find some common ground to meet them on—something you're both interested in that you can talk about—like Fender guitars. Folks, never fear: God's smart enough to find a way to break into any conversation, if we're just willing to do our part. So, my collection of guitar Ts grows...

Here's what I want you to do this coming week: Think about *those individuals* in your life who aren't Christians yet—haven't claimed Christ personally in their lives. What're their areas of interest? Think about it ... and *be a bridge builder* this week. And when you find yourself in situations in life where you have to wait, ask God to use those times ... and help you be attentive, positive, and bold for Him. I know someone (or maybe *many*) will be eternally grateful you did...