

GIFTED TO SERVE

“As each has received a gift,
use it to serve one another...”

(1 Peter 4:10)

GIFTED TO SERVE, Part 6 Telling the Good News

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, CA, on Sunday, November 14, 2021

We are exploring the gifts with which God equips His people—what they are, how they come to us, what they’re used for, what you can do to develop them, and how to use them most effectively.

Why all this talk about God’s gifts?

Because His gifts are God’s deposits of grace and ability in our lives that equip us for the purpose for which He made each one of us.

We briefly examined three lists of God’s gifts in the New Testament, which I categorize as:

- Motivational Gifts
- Leadership Gifts
- Demonstration Gifts

The first aim of God’s wealth of gifts is to build up His Church in terms of our daily identification with Christ, our confident trust in the Holy Spirit, and our godly passion for the revealing of God’s Kingdom.

This upbuilding process involves two primary functions or activities:

- serving “insiders” (fellow believers) through indiscriminate acts of kindness, or, as Paul put it: *“Making allowance for each other’s faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace.”* (Ephesians 4:2-3)
- serving “outsiders” (the unchurched) through compassionate evangelism, by which I mean sharing the truth about Jesus in a caring manner.

Serving “inside” and “outside” like this builds up the individuals who serve, as well as those who receive their service.

As I expressed before, the Good News about Jesus only becomes good when you embrace it with your whole heart—believing it intellectually, subscribing to it emotionally, and practicing it actually.

And, remember, this is not about faultless performance, but about persistent pursuit. *“Although a righteous person may fall seven times, he gets up again.”* (Proverbs 24:16)

Living the Good News softens hearts to the Message and opens doors for meaningful conversations... but the Message is only news to others if you announce it—telling others (not merely about your experience) about who Jesus is and what He has done for us. This is what I am emphasizing today.

Verbal proclamation, eventually, becomes NECESSARY. This is the part that intimidates many people (for reasons we’ll consider shortly), so permit me to assure you of several skills that are NOT REQUIRED in order to effectively share the Good News with others.

Skills NOT Required

You don’t need to speak like a preacher, or a prosecutor, or a Bible scholar!

Oratory skills are not necessary, and in fact, may intimidate or be unappealing to others (*I* know). If you have such skills, I urge you to set them aside, unless speaking to a crowd. Interpersonal conversation is far more appealing and effective, even with a small group. *Don’t act like a preacher.*

Although sin-awareness and repentance are necessary for entering God’s Kingdom, YOU are NOT the one to charge others with sin or convict them of their need to repent. Jesus said, *“When the Spirit of Truth has come, HE will convict the world of sin.”* Most people are well aware of their sins, even if unwilling to confess them; they don’t need to feel worse about themselves, they need HOPE. *Don’t act like their prosecutor.*

There are times and places for Biblical apologetics, but less often than you might suspect. And if you are not well-versed in the Scriptures and their most challenging passages and symbols, DON’T EVEN TRY.

It is honest to confess, “What a great question! I’m not sure I know the answer to that, but I know someone who might. Can I get back to you on that?” Don’t try to be a Bible answerperson. Just be your authentic self, and maintain the relationship you’ve established with that other person.

We all know today how polarizing words can be. We want our words about Jesus Christ, instead, to be encouraging and inviting.

Not So Eager

Yet, today, a number of factors are curbing many Christians' enthusiasm for sharing their faith, including the decline of religion in America, a spreading apathy toward spiritual matters, and a growing cultural suspicion of people of faith.

This has become such a concern among church leaders that a number of studies have been engaged to learn more. You need not memorize these statistics (aren't you glad?), but I want to share some of the significant results.

According to a study by George Barna, almost all practicing Christians (95%) believe that part of their faith means being a witness about Jesus, And that the best thing that could happen to someone is to come to know Jesus. Millennials in particular feel equipped to share their faith with others.

Yet, according to a Lifeway Research study among Protestant lay people (who attend church at least once a month) it's not really happening:

- More than four in 10 churchgoers (43%) feel a "personal responsibility to share [their] religious beliefs about Jesus Christ with non-Christians." That means 6 in 10 don't feel responsible to tell the Good News.
- But when asked how many times they'd "shared with someone how to become a Christian," 78% said "Zero."
- Only 10 percent said they'd shared with even one person in the past six months.

So that's what's happening in America with sharing the Good News?

What about inviting people to church, doesn't that count? Let's see how this plays out...

Are churchgoers actively inviting others to church?

- Nearly 6 in 10 (59%) said they'd not invited anyone to church and about 2 in 10 (19%) said it had been a long time ago.
- Only 2 in 10 (21%) said they'd invited one person in the past six months.

Christian Millennials feel especially conflicted about the actual practice of evangelism—and, in fact, almost half agree at least somewhat that it is wrong to share one's personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in hopes that they will one day share your faith.

Is there a disconnect between our beliefs and our behaviors?

Perhaps we can chalk this up to the cultural influence or intimidation of American pluralism (the belief that most religious ideologies are equally valid). Or, perhaps the unchurched just aren't interested...

What of the Unchurched?

Who are those people we hope to reach with the Good News? I refer to them as “unchurched” because they are not regularly connected to a local Christian fellowship like ours. But why? What are they like?

Compared to the U.S. population as a whole, today’s unchurched are predictably less Christian and more nonreligious.

Yet most of the unchurched still identify as Christian. More than half of unchurched Americans say they are Christian. Around a third (32%) are nonreligious, and 12% belong to another religion.

Among those who identify as Christian, only a quarter (24%) say they have a strong faith.

Around two-thirds of unchurched Americans who say they are Christians, consider themselves Christian, but are not currently practicing it (31%) or are not particularly devout (32%).

However, the unchurched say they’re OPEN to having religious conversations.

Granted, not everyone is interested to talk about matters of faith. People who don’t talk very often about faith offer different reasons, but most of these fall into two broad categories: *avoidance* and *ambivalence*.

For instance, the top two *avoidant* responses given for not engaging in conversations are: “Religious conversations always seem to create tension or arguments” (28%) and “I’m put off by how religion has been politicized” (17%).

The top two *ambivalent* responses were: “I’m not religious and don’t care about these kinds of topics” (23%) and “I don’t feel like I know enough to talk about religious or spiritual topics” (17%).

Here’s the full list of options:

- Religious conversations always seem to create tension or arguments: 28%
- I’m not religious and don’t care about these kinds of topics: 23%
- I’m put off by how religion has been politicized: 17%
- I don’t feel like I know enough to talk about religious or spiritual topics: 17%
- I don’t want to be known as a religious person: 7%
- I don’t know how to talk about religious or spiritual topics without sounding weird: 6%
- I’m afraid people will see me as a fanatic or extremist: 5%
- I’m embarrassed by the way religious language has been used in popular culture: 5%
- I’ve been hurt by religious conversations in the past: 4%
- Religious language and jargon feels cheesy or outdated: 4%

Still, the unchurched say they're OPEN to having religious conversations.

Close to half of unchurched Americans (47%) say they would discuss it freely if someone wanted to talk about their religious beliefs. *That's 1 out of 2 unchurched people that you know!*

Another 31% would listen without actively participating. That's almost 4 out of 5 who are willing to have a conversation!

And a third of the unchurched (33%) say they admire the faith of their Christian friends.

Despite the openness and relationships of non-Christians with Christians, and in support of the previous stats about the reticence of Christians to share their faith, few unchurched Americans have ever had someone explain exactly how to become a Christian or why they should think about doing so (29%). And 4 in 10 unchurched Americans (40%), have never had a Christian explain any of the benefits of the Gospel to them. Think about that! 40%. Never. That's close to one out of two! These are our fellow Americans!

Whose Responsibility Is It?

The number of Christians who believe that sharing the faith is every individual Christian's responsibility has DECREASED by one-third over the last 25 years!

Today, 65% of professing believers only share their faith non-verbally (in the way they live)!

While a Christian lifestyle is vital in setting the stage for a personal witness, it cannot communicate the Message as it needs to be heard. It may inspire curiosity or interest, but it doesn't tell a person HOW to come to Christ.

Holy Spirit, convict us—of our lack of compassion and our lack of faith!

We need compassionate deeds AND passionate proclamation. (By "passionate," I don't mean excited or loud or hyped up; I mean deeply sincere—aware of the eternal cost of hell, and the narrowness of the path that leads to everlasting salvation.)

Good deeds validate the Good News we bring. And the Good News clarifies the motivation behind our good deeds.

To be effective, the Good News must be shown. But it also must be TOLD. God's *words* bear creative, transformative power. But THEY MUST BE HEARD in order to impart their power.

It is the MESSAGE about Jesus Christ that has the power to save.

As Paul wrote: *“I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes.”* (Romans 1:16)

Biblically, all Christ-followers are evangelists, who are to proclaim the Good News about Jesus within their circles of influence.

Jesus said, *“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be My witnesses, telling people about Me everywhere... to the ends of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8)

We are saved; therefore, we are witnesses-after-the-fact—whether frequently or rarely, earnestly or carelessly, effectively or poorly. We are His witnesses.

Previously, I spoke to you about evangelism as mercy. Today, I’m speaking about evangelism as work—the work of proclaiming the Good News to others.

I intentionally use the word “work,” because evangelism is hard work, if you are to do it well. There’s a learning curve, which necessarily involves on-the-job training—and that can produce anxious thoughts. There are objections and challenges for which to prepare (more hard work!). And every person with whom you speak is different—having different levels of understanding and misunderstanding, different concerns and needs, and sometimes, different customs, culture, and language. Wow! That’s work!

But it is our responsibility as followers of Jesus to enter into this work. And it is our great privilege to work alongside the Holy Spirit, the greatest evangelist of all.

Jesus said, *“When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me, and you will testify also.”* (John 15:26-27)

That’s what the first Christ-followers did:

“The disciples went everywhere and preached, and the Lord worked through them, confirming what they said by many miraculous signs.” (Mark 16:20)

For many, it was costly. It cost some their friends. For others, it cost their families. For some, their jobs or homes. For others, their lives. Yet, for over twenty centuries, Jesus People have continued to tell the Story, against all odds, and prevailed. On the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), 120 believers gathered in an upper room to pray. Today, one-third of the world’s population claim to be Christians—it is the largest religious group on the planet!

So, why are contemporary Christians reluctant to tell others about Jesus?

The overarching cultural trends of secularism, relativism, pluralism and the digital age don't support the Gospel message.

If not actively marginalized, Christians are at least relegated to the sidelines by many as irrelevant.

Christians in America today have to live in the tension between Jesus' commands to tell others the Good News and growing cultural taboos against proselytizing.

But the church is by no means irrelevant. God's Kingdom is still coming to the earth. Darkness may be on the increase, but there is where the Light shines more brightly. *Let the Church arise!*

From a Christian's point of view, I see four stumbling blocks:

- Fear of rejection
- Fear of argument
- Fear of persecution
- Compartmentalizing life's activities

From a non-Christian's point of view, I see three hurdles:

- Disrespect for the Church
- Judgmental Christians
- Religious errors

Let's consider each...

Stumbling Blocks for Christians

Fear of rejection – this one is personal.

No one like to be rejected, especially over something that is meaningful to them, especially when it touches their personal sense of identity.

However, witnessing is not proclaiming yourself, but Christ. We step into this trap if our testimony focuses on our own experiences, rather than the meaning and outcome of those experiences in relationship to Jesus.

If it's my major concern that you believe ME, and approve of MY experiences, and agree with MY conclusions, then I've already taken the bait to make the story more about me than about Jesus.

Thus, before Jesus sent out the 72 disciples as His witnesses, He warned them of the potential for rejection and gave them this encouragement: *"The one who listens to you listens to Me, and*

the one who rejects you rejects Me, and the one who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me.”
(Luke 10:16)

So, it's really not your problem. If you're accurately telling the story of Jesus love (for you and for the whole world), then people are faced with accepting Him or rejecting Him—not you. Don't take it personally.

Oftentimes, rejection of a Gospel presentation is just a deflection. In other words, their stated rejection may not be conclusive, but simply a way of forestalling the conversation, escaping the pressure of the Holy Spirit, or ignoring the twinge of their conscience. Even if they accuse you of doing a poor job, they're wrong! They don't know what a good job of sharing the Gospel is. They only know what they don't like.

Fear of argument – this is usually based on a sense of personal inadequacy, a feeling that you are ill-equipped to defend the truth.

The good news is that you are not needed to defend the Truth; the Truth can stand on its own. You are called to present the Truth, and to represent it sincerely—not to defend it.

You don't have to convince anyone of what is true—that is the Holy Spirit's job. Jesus said, *“When [the Holy Spirit] comes, He will prove the world wrong concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.”* (John 16:8)

Remember, you're not the prosecuting attorney; you're simply an eyewitness. Tell what you've seen and heard and felt (in life and in the Scriptures), and what Jesus means to you—and then step down from the witness box and let the Lord present His case.

You don't need to be the Bible Answerman. If you don't really know the answer to a question or objection they present, say so, and offer to find an answer for them. That's both honest and helpful, and will win you points.

Fear of persecution – this is the dread of repercussions and backlash.

There may indeed be repercussions to your witness of Christ, there may be a cost. You might lose a job, or a friend, or your family. But what was Jesus willing to pay for your salvation?

Just be sure your losses are because of the offense of the cross, and not simply because you were acting like a jerk. God has the greatest insurance plan, and He will cover any losses due to the offensiveness of the cross of Christ: *“Jesus said, ‘I tell you the truth, there is no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for My sake and for the sake of the Gospel who will not receive in this age a hundred times as much—homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, fields, all with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life.’”*
(Mark 10:29-30)

But you must bear the cost of your own foolishness by yourself, though, even then, Jesus will not abandon you.

Be gracious, be considerate, be honest, be authentic. Don't exaggerate, don't over-promise, don't sugar-coat. *"When people's lives please the Lord, even their enemies are at peace with them."* (Proverbs 16:7)

Nevertheless, persecution is promised to the followers of Jesus, but you can minimize it with humility, and be prepared by the Spirit to endure what you must. Christ assures you of both victory and reward.

Compartmentalizing life's activities – witness is not something you do, it is who you are.

If you separate your ordinary, everyday life from your spiritual life, you will encounter a host of problems—confusion, conflict, unease, frustration, and pretense. Pretense is living a lie, and this gives access to the father of all lies, the devil. And that won't turn out well.

We all come into relationship with Christ from another worldview—a world of contrasting values, priorities, aims, and methods. The new birth happens in a moment of time, but spiritual growth is very gradual. Even with blasts of revelation and powerful impartations of the Spirit, the learning curve remains steep, the challenges relentless, and the pathway long and arduous. You will sometimes feel as if you took two steps forward, only to fall back three steps. *Nevertheless, press on!*

Seek to integrate your life with Jesus into every part of your day. Paul's admonition to the church of Rome (as translated by Eugene Peterson) is fitting: *"So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for Him.*

Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what He wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you." (Romans 12:1-2; MSG)

What Are the Hurdles for Non-Christians?

Disrespect for the Church – usually the result of wounds received from other Christians.

It happens. You may have been hurt by the legalism of a church system, or by the self-righteous behavior of another Christian (perhaps even your parents). Or, you may have caused the hurt of another believer. It happens. We get careless. We value behavior more than relationship. We value things and ideas more than people (but God made people, and people just make things).

“If someone says, “I love God,” but doesn’t love a fellow believer, that person is a liar; for if we don’t love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see?” (1 John 4:20)

The Church is not the Savior—Jesus is. If a local church has intentionally mistreated you, walk away. Find another church that preaches Jesus and follows Jesus. You NEED Jesus and you need the Church, but you don’t need the neglect or abuse.

Religious people who don’t understand God’s grace and haven’t experienced the grace of God through Jesus Christ, may become hard-nosed, narrow-minded, and harsh in their ways and their treatment of others. They fail to represent Christ well. Get away from them, but don’t forsake Christ or His Church.

Judgment to come – Personal fear of death and of ultimate justice cause some to avoid Christianity.

Therefore, if you come off as judgmental of the minor things in their life, or frighten them with tales of hellfire, you’re building barriers to the Good News, instead of building bridges.

Jesus affirmed, *“I have not come to judge the world, but to save the world.”* (John 12:47) Can you say that as well?

The fact is that all humanity ALREADY stands condemned, and our own conscience affirms this. As it is written: *“There is no one righteous, not even one”* (Romans 3:10). We will all be damned unless there is a real Savior who can rescue us. *Thank God, there is!* It is Jesus Christ.

So, it is not Good News to shame someone for their sins; rather, it is Good News to tell them that Jesus has come to forgive them and set them free from the curse of sin. *Proclaim that!*

Paul asserted, *“So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to Him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death.”* (Romans 8:1-2)

And Jesus Himself said, *“I tell you the truth, those who listen to my message and believe in God who sent me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life.”* (John 5:24)

Religious errors – the false teachings of people who have refused the message of Christ.

These are mostly spawned by non-Christian religions, but some so-called “Christian” teachers have strayed from the truth and begun to teach things contrary to the Scriptures.

There are too many variations to list, but the prominent ideas include these:

- Reject the deity of Jesus.

- Divorce the deity and humanity of Jesus.
- Reject or minimize the cross (the substitutionary death of Jesus).
- Reject or allegorize the resurrection of Jesus.
- Reject the new birth, or render it imaginary.
- Present the Church as a man-made organization.
- Reject the Holy Spirit sent from Heaven.

People who have been steeped or indoctrinated in these concepts will fight against the truth, even if their heart wants to believe it.

If you argue doctrinal points, you will limit the battle to the arena of the mind. Present the truth, yes; quote the Scriptures, yes; but don't *fight* for it.

I suggest, rather, that you reach for their heart (their emotion), their sense of incongruity in life, their lack of peace and joy—and show them how Jesus has answered those issues for you.

Pastor Tim's recent message reminded us to ask ourselves in such situations, "Whose problem is this? Mine? Theirs? Or God's?"

Witnessing is not persuading (apologetics is). You're not the prosecutor or the defense attorney (you're a witness—to tell what you've seen or heard first-hand—opinions and conjectures aren't helpful).

What Do We Need to Say?

There are lots of Scripture verses and stories that can be useful, but don't bombard people with text. Only use the verses and stories that are fitting for the person you're speaking with. Even your own story can be pared down to the parts that are suitable (leave the rest for another time).

In this way, each time you share the Gospel will be unique (even though the central story doesn't change), because it will be slanted toward the person or persons you're sharing with, and reduced or expanded according to the time you have.

Boiling the Message down to its briefest form, it might look like these five points:

- *God loves you intensely* and wants to share good things and eternal life with you;
- *But there's a problem:* we don't want God to rule over us—this is called sin, and it separates us (from God and others);
- *So God provided the Answer,* by coming into our world Himself in human form, as Jesus of Nazareth—a man who never sinned;

- *As a man, Jesus offered Himself in our place,* to be our substitute and pay the penalty for our sins, to restore our relationship with God as our Father;
- *This saving grace is offered to us as a free gift,* and it must be received by faith, in order to be effective.

If you boil the Message down to a brief outline such as this, you will find it easy to commit it to memory, so you leave nothing out that needs to be said, and can easily return to where you left off if you are interrupted.

Then you can expand the outline by adding one or two pertinent Scripture verses to each point. You don't need to share all of them each time, but if you have linked them in your mind to the points of your outline, you can more easily share what may be needed.

You might even have (or discover) a favorite illustration for each point to explain it more personally.

How you say it, and where you put the emphasis, and how you will respond to whatever comes up in the conversation—THE HOLY SPIRIT WILL GIVE YOU in that moment. Remember, this work is a partnership!

Jesus instructed: *“Don't worry about how to respond or what to say. God will give you the right words at the right time. For it is not you who will be speaking—it will be the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”* (Matthew 10:19-20)

So, for our part, how should we say it? We have the Scriptures as our basis, and we have the Spirit as our Coach, but what is our motivation?

- We've integrated our faith with our daily life.
- We've dealt with our fears of rejection, inadequacy, and persecution.
- We have a simple outline in mind to guide our conversations.
- We also have some Scriptures and stories to brighten the truth.

How Should We Say It?

How shall we approach the prospect of sharing the Best News in the world with family, friends, and strangers?

I have four words for you:

- Organically
Unforced, building on established relationships

- Conversationally
Not teaching, challenging, prosecuting, or judging
- Personally
Be authentically vulnerable, humble, relatable
- Invitationally
Aim to offer them Christ (low pressure, but earnest)

“You must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way. Keep your conscience clear.” (1 Peter 3:15-16)

Who Should I Tell?

There is no limit to who you may tell!

“You will be My witnesses, telling people about Me everywhere.” (Acts 1:8)

Tell everyone who asks of you!

“Always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks about the hope you possess.” (1 Peter 3:15)

Tell everyone you know!

“As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon possessed begged to go with Him. But Jesus said, “No, go home to your family, and tell them everything the Lord has done for you and how merciful He has been.” (Mark 5:18-19)

Mark used a Greek word, *oikos*, which is translated here as “home to your family.” It’s a word that means “a dwelling, a house, a home, a family.” It may refer to the structure in which you live, but it is more likely to refer to the circle of people among whom you live, and move, and share your life—your circle of influence.

That’s the place to begin. Don’t think about going overseas to witness to foreign nationals, if you haven’t given a effective witness to those you already know. To borrow a phrase, “How can you love those you have never seen, if you don’t love those you see all the time?”

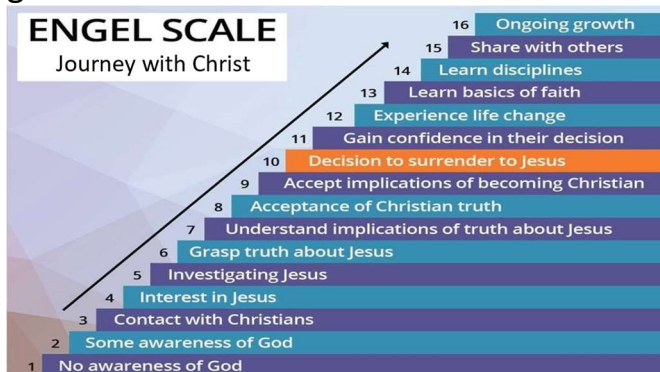
I am well aware that Jesus said, in His own hometown, *“A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown, and among his relatives, and in his own house” (Mark 6:4)*. Nevertheless, He went there, and He ministered to some, even after He said that.

We’re On a Journey

I have often said that every human being on the planet is on a journey to meet Jesus Christ—it is our destiny. It's a journey that began before your birth, as God formed you in your mother's womb. He brought you into this world for a glorious and eternal purpose: to know Him, to be with Him, and to serve Him with joy.

You will meet people at various stages of their journey—some still unaware that there is a Creator God, others at various levels of faith's awakening. Even those who have met the Lord and been born again, are still growing and maturing in the fellowship of the Church until we meet the Lord face to face.

This concept was quantified and developed by James F. Engel and is commonly known as the Engel Scale.



Starting from the bottom of the stairsteps, notice how many steps are involved *before* crossing the threshold of faith (surrendering to Christ and being born again).

Can you identify where your family members and friends are on this journey? What steps remain for them before they cross the threshold of faith (Level 10)?

And where are YOU? For until we are like Jesus in every respect in which a human may be like Him, we have not yet arrived, and we are still on a growth track. What steps do you have yet to take?

When it comes to sharing your faith with others, you will not win them all, but you most surely can influence each of them positively for Jesus.

One plants, another waters, and still another reaps. In some cases, you will be the planter; in other cases, you will be the waterer; and some precious times, God will use you to reap a soul for Christ.

“Don’t despise the day of small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin.” (Zechariah 4:10)

Let the work begin in you!

Do you need to make that decision before the Lord today?