

Another view

Striking the balance: friendship and faithfulness

Disagree, without being disagreeable.

Love the sinner, hate the sin.

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger (Proverbs 15:1).

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do so with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15).

We may be familiar with all of these statements, but fleshing them out in real-life situations is much more difficult. We live in a society where, increasingly, what we believe as a church is contested, challenged and condemned. For some of us our instinct is to retreat into our shell. To surround ourselves with those who think the same as we do. To back off from difficult conversations. For others, keen to engage, nervous of giving offence, always wanting to be agreeable at any cost, dumbing down what we believe as followers of Jesus becomes the easy option. For others still, the temptation is to go on the offensive, to get into heated arguments and to increase tension. Is there a better way? Can we show genuine friendship to those with whom we disagree while remaining faithful to sharing what we believe? From whom could we learn how to strike this balance?

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Q. When others criticise Christianity or the church, what do you find is your natural response? To retreat from relationship? To give ground on what you believe? To go on the attack?



Full of grace and truth

In John's gospel the coming of Jesus into our world is described like this:

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14)."

Jesus knew what it was to live in a world in which not everybody agreed with the message his Father had given him to bring. Nevertheless, others experienced in him the glory of the balance of grace and truth in the way he treated them. This is the tone and tenor, poise and posture we need to seek to imitate in our relationships with those who hold another view.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Q. Think of a situation in which you experienced someone handle a difficult conversation well. What did they do? What did they not do? How did it sound? How did it feel? How did it end?

Q. Think of a situation in which you experienced someone handle a difficult conversation badly. What did they do? What did they not do? How did it sound? How did it feel? How did it end?



The gaze of grace. The tang of truth

In Mark chapter 10, verses 17-27, we have an example of Jesus handling a difficult conversation well. He shows genuine friendship to a man who comes with a different view, but remains faithful to the teaching of the gospel.

READ MARK 10:17-27

What can we learn from the Master about relating to those who hold another view from this encounter?

First of all, Jesus is prepared to enter into dialogue that he knew was going to be difficult. The man asking the questions is often referred to as 'the rich, young ruler'. As such, he would have been a prominent person in the community. As someone well known, respected and used to getting his

own way, he, and others listening on, might have expected that Jesus would be intimidated, agree with him for a quiet life or roll over on what he knew to be the truth. Often we fear talking to others who question what we believe in the church for all of these reasons. Yet, Jesus' example encourages us not to shy away from difficult encounters.

Jesus is not afraid to answer a question with a question. He doesn't feel compelled to give a quick, or easy, answer. He sets up an atmosphere of respectful dialogue in which both he and his questioner are prepared to listen to one another and challenge each other's views.



Jesus gets under the skin of the issue to the values that are being contested. The man's bottom line is that good people earn eternal life. Jesus begins to expose that view as he asks why he calls him good, when only God is good. He then begins to show how no one keeps God's law perfectly. In our encounters with others who hold a different view than we do, it is always important to ask the kind of questions that bring out into the open the real nature of our disagreement. Often this is not about the particular issue raised initially, but goes to a deeper level about what we and others consider the basis for forming their values. In today's society, it is rarely enough to argue that we should believe it because the Bible says it, we also need to work hard at demonstrating the wisdom of God's ways for living.

In all of this, let's not miss Jesus' attitude to the man in verse 21. He looked at him and he loved him. Those two little phrases challenge us in our difficult encounters with those who believe something different than we do. We need to have the kinds of conversations that are open and honest enough to look others in the eye. We also need to love them. Do we want to win a better hearing for Christ and the gospel more than we want to win an argument?



FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Q. As you think of this story what do you imagine was the tone and tenor of the conversation between Jesus and the man? Is it harsh or soft? Loud or gentle? Tense or playful? Animated or controlled?

Q. What can we do to set a good tone and tenor of conversation with those with whom we disagree?



FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Q. If our witness is to be effective it always involves eyeballing the issues without ending the relationships with those who hold opposing views. How can our life and witness as a church do both? What tensions will surface when trying to find this balance?


Ultimately, Jesus makes the conversation about willingness to follow him. There will always be people and principles to follow and foundations on which to build our lives other than Jesus and his way. In the end every conversation about things that run deep in people’s lives become personal. It did for this man. His face fell. He went away sad, because he wasn’t prepared to change his ways.

What happens next is also interesting. When Jesus says how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, the disciples engage in a bit of ‘whataboutary’; a kind of comparison between this man and everybody else, that leads them to ask, “who then can be saved?” This is also something we encounter as it is common for all of us to default to the kind of comparisons that tend towards a hierarchy of sins. That is never helpful and can be a diversion from the cutting edge of truth. Jesus steers the discussion away from it. It is fair to assume that as Jesus loved this man, he too was saddened by his response. Nevertheless, as graciously as he conducted this encounter, he was also unbending with the truth. Like Jesus, we need to be ready for the reality that not everyone wants to hear or receive God’s message for their lives. However, we should also expect that some will. As Jesus went on to explain to his disciples, “with God all things are possible.”



FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Q. How do we feel when people who hold another view distance themselves from the church and its message? What is healthy or unhealthy about our answer?

 Watch this short clip that encourages and challenges us in how to engage well with those who hold another view.



FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Q. Talk about a time when you felt uncomfortable in a conversation in which the church or Christian values were being maligned. How did you feel? How did you respond? What did you learn? What might you do differently next time?

Q. In what areas of life do we particularly need to learn the lessons of engaging others with other views with Jesus' balance of grace and truth?

POINTERS FOR PRAYER



- Pray for those with whom we frequently rub shoulders who hold and express another view about life and the world than we do. Ask that God would help us to love them, show grace to them and share truth with them.
- Pray for the public witness of the church expressed through its members in their everyday lives, through our congregation's influence and reputation in the community and at denominational level as we speak as the Presbyterian Church in Ireland into society at large.
- Pray that we might grow in wisdom of the knowledge of God's Word and the ability to express its truth in God's ways.
- Pray for those who live at close quarters with the strife of contrary values and views in their family lives. Ask that they would find grace in following truth.

