

distinctively different

Matt Lillicrap *considers living differently among non-Christians and answering their questions*



When you saw the title of this article, what did you think? Was it, 'Fantastic, another opportunity to sharpen up on witnessing, I'm looking forward to this'?

Or maybe your reaction was like this: 'Oh... An article about witnessing. Shall I skip over it? No, I'd better not, let's read it quickly and get it over with.'

For many of us the second response is more likely. If you're anything like me the phrase 'living differently among non-Christians and answering their questions' triggers a few emotions, most of which aren't positive.

Maybe you'd rather it wasn't mentioned at all: 'Why do people insist on trying to get

me witnessing? Can't they leave me alone to get on with my life?' Perhaps it's apathy: 'I've heard this all before'. Or maybe fear of what others might think: 'I wish I was better at living out my faith and speaking about it but I don't want people thinking I'm weird'. Or there might be hundreds of other responses.

One of the most common feelings triggered is guilt. 'I know I should be living differently, but I'm not' or 'I'm doing my best to live differently but I'm not bold enough to talk about why'.

If you identify with that, please understand that I don't want to produce a guilt-related response. In my life as a Christian so far, there have been lots of periods of increased activity in trying to share the gospel with those around me. These last a few days, maybe a couple of weeks, before fizzling out again for a while. The common theme? A sermon or an article like this one that made me feel guilty. The problem is the activity only

lasts until the sermon is forgotten or the article is safely on the shelf gathering dust, when I can forget the guilt and get on with my life.

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The problem isn't with the articles or sermons though, it's with me and my tendency to form wrong motivations for even the good things I try and do. So, in this article I want to tackle the motivation behind living differently before saying anything about the method. And the great thing is that getting our motivations right will not only help us live differently, but also give us the starting point to answer the question 'why?'

**motivation:
why live differently?**

The Bible stresses that the gospel is the starting point for living the Christian life. This is the ultimate revelation that

motivates us to live differently. In Colossians, Paul says: 'so then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, *continue* to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught...' ¹

If we want to live differently among non-Christian friends, colleagues and patients, and answer their questions about why we do, we need to be motivated by the gospel. There are three main ways the gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection motivate us.

**the cross: our past
death with Christ**

The place to start is at the centre, with Jesus' death. He was 'in very nature God'. ² He didn't just come into being that first Christmas, but left the glory and majesty of his throne in heaven and 'made himself nothing'. ³ He lived a simple life in first century Israel, and ultimately 'humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross!' ⁴

When Jesus died he suffered



unimaginably. The cry ‘My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?’⁵ echoes through the centuries. And he did that for us. What other response could there be but to live differently for him?

As Vaughan Roberts puts it: ‘He died to set me free from wickedness. How could I go back to it? What appalling ingratitude that would be! Surely the effort involved in living a godly life pales into insignificance compared to what it cost him to die for me.’⁶

Paul adds more in Romans 6 where he tells us that in God’s sight we were *with* Jesus when he died. We were there on the cross too! We have (spiritually) died to our old sinful lives.⁷ I don’t know about you but it didn’t take much medical experience for me to learn that unresponsiveness is a worrying sign. The point Paul makes is that Christians died to sin when Jesus died, so we should be completely unresponsive to its power.

So our first motivation is found at the cross in Jesus’ death to save us and in our death to sin, united with him. If we get asked why we’re living differently we can say ‘because when Jesus died I died too’. That answer is bound to provoke questions!

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the resurrection: our present identity with Christ

Jesus’ death doesn’t stand alone. Easter Sunday tells us that Jesus rose from the dead. As he did, he gave us new lives, which means that when we became Christians we underwent a fundamental identity change. United with him in his death, we are also united in his resurrection.⁸ We were once enemies of God, but are now his people,⁹ his friends,¹⁰ adopted as his sons.¹¹ That’s why, instead of telling us to be

‘salt and light’ as we live differently amongst those around us, Jesus says *we are* salt and light.¹² The issue is not will we be salt and light, but what kind of salt or light will we be?

*...if the salt loses its saltiness,
how can it be made salty again?
It is no longer good for
anything...¹³*

Similarly, Paul says that Jesus ‘gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.’¹⁴

Notice the word ‘eager’. Within this change of identity is a change of desire. So here’s a deep motivation to live differently, and a great way of answering questions about why: Because we’re new people, so we want to live differently!

If you’ve ever spent time trying to explain the gospel to a friend, chances are you’ll have heard this objection: ‘if you can be forgiven for everything, and



being accepted by God doesn't depend on being good enough, why don't you do whatever you want?'

And the answer is... 'I do!' As Christians we have been given a new identity with new desires. Whilst there are times that we seem to be fighting against our old sinful desires (when living differently feels like the last thing we want to do) that battle is evidence that Jesus died and rose to make us a people for himself, eager to do what is good. We wouldn't be fighting at all if God hadn't made us new.

the resurrection: our future destiny with Christ

Jesus' resurrection doesn't just mean a new identity now. It also determines our future destination.¹⁵ We will be raised, and if united with him in his death will be united with him for eternity in the new creation.¹⁶ For Paul, his future in heaven was a supreme motivation for the way he lived, preaching the gospel and serving God:

*Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*¹⁷

Jesus' resurrection shows us that there is a world beyond this one

A friend of mine is currently working in Bangladesh. One of the things she did before she went was buy a Bengali phrase book. Then, once she had arrived in Bangladesh she spent a month learning some of the language before doing anything else.

Why spend time learning language like that? Because a month later she was working in a hospital seeing patients and needing to speak it.

The world around us is deeply focused on the here and now, forgetting or ignoring the world to come. But Jesus' resurrection shows us that there is a world beyond this one, and we're part of it. Like my friend using her time in light of her destination in Bangladesh, we should seek to live our lives in light of our destination - the new creation. If we get asked why we live differently we can answer 'because I know where I'm going'.

method: how do we live differently and answer questions about why we do?

Now we've got an idea about



what motivates us to live differently, and even some fuel for answering questions about why... but how do we actually do it?

get the balance right - living differently among non-Christians

There are two keys to living differently among non-Christians. They are:

1. Live differently
2. Among non-Christians

It really is that simple!

As Jesus put it: 'let your light

shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven'.¹⁸

Imagine three members of your CMF group. We'll call them Will, Sarah and Ben (not based on real people!)

(Worldly) Will is the kind of guy everyone likes. He plays in the university football team, is a popular member of your year, and has hundreds of friends on Facebook. He occasionally comes to CU and CMF and gets to church pretty regularly, when he's not with his football mates or his medic-friends. The problem is, whilst trying to get on well with friends, he neglects his Christian life. His motto is 'Christians are normal too' and he lives by it as much as possible. He's regularly found staggering home after a night out, and is often flirting with girls in the bar. Will is brilliant at getting among his non-Christian friends, but they think he's just one of them, and don't really see any differences at all.

(Saintly) Sarah also has lots of friends. Friends in CU, friends in CMF, friends at church... she's also very busy. She goes to church, Bible studies, prayer meetings, CU and CMF (she

might even be a CMF rep). In fact, all her friends are Christians, and everything she does is with Christians. She reads her Bible regularly, doesn't get drunk, and seeks to be kind and loving. She's doing pretty well at living differently; the problem is she doesn't actually have any non-Christian friends to be 'among'.

Finally there's (Biblical) Ben. He has fewer friends than the other two, but his friendships seem closer than theirs. He plays in the university orchestra and is regularly at CMF meetings and church, where he's a music group leader. He's often found in the pub with friends from the orchestra or his medical school seminar group, some of whom he lives with. He tries to talk to them about his faith, especially when they try to persuade him to play drinking games with them, or if they wonder why he gets up at some unearthly hour to read his Bible. His friends think he's a bit 'stuffy' now and then, but secretly they admit he's a good friend and they enjoy having him around.

Do any of these people sound familiar to you?

As much as we'd all like to think of ourselves as someone like Ben, striking a great balance between spending time among non-Christian friends, and living differently as we do, all of us have a tendency towards being like Sarah or Will.

Paul knew this tension very well. He wrote to the Corinthian church telling them about his methods of sharing the gospel with people:

*I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.*¹⁹

At this point Will would be pretty happy. 'See,' he'd say, 'Paul says that Christians need to be like non-Christians around them so they don't put them off'. And he'd be right, to a point. Paul was keen to make sure he was spending time with non-Christians, doing things they liked doing and sharing his life with them.

But a few verses later Paul adds to what he has already said:

*I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.*²⁰

Paul knows that a danger in spending time with non-Christians is that you can end up living like them too. Although he 'becomes all things to all men', he strives to make sure that he doesn't compromise. Instead, keeping his future destiny in the new creation ('the prize') as a motivation, he preaches the gospel and aims to keep his body in check and keep living differently.

So the key to living differently is: get the balance right - be among non-Christians but distinct from them.

be prepared - answering their questions

For some time after I became a Christian, I couldn't understand why I wasn't getting opportunities to explain the gospel. I was trying to live differently, and wanted to

explain the gospel if I could but no-one ever asked me any questions.

get the balance right - be among non-Christians but distinct from them

Then someone pointed out that it wasn't that no-one was asking anything, but that I thought they weren't asking the *right* questions. No one ever threw themselves at my feet, crying 'what must I do to be saved?'²¹

The problem was, that was pretty much the only question I was looking for.

It would be great if our friends were asking such direct questions, but often they aren't. More often they might ask about the way we live - 'why wouldn't you let someone else sign you in for that seminar you didn't go to - everyone else did?' or 'why get up so long before you need to leave



the house to read something as irrelevant as the Bible?' or 'why don't you have some fun and come drinking with us?'

These questions are a great starting point for explaining something about what we believe. Our motivation to live differently is found in the gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection, so the answer can always be 'because Jesus died and rose again'!

A bit more specifically, Peter gives us some great guidance on answering questions:

*'Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.' But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.*²²

Peter gives us four key

principles in these verses:

1. Do not fear people and what they think of you or might do to you ('Do not fear what they fear'²³ is a quote from Isaiah, as God encourages him not to fear other people but to regard God as holy)
2. Instead, remember: Jesus is Lord. He is in charge, so he's the one worth obeying!
3. Always... at all times even (especially) when we don't feel like it ... be prepared. It's actually OK to prepare (and even practise) answers to questions we might get asked! It's even OK to prepare by 'prompting the question'. For example, you might ask a friend what they did at the weekend, knowing they might ask you too. You can be prepared to talk about church and even why you went!
4. Answer with gentleness and respect. The way we answer questions is just as important as what we say.

Answering in a proud or argumentative way will give our friends the message that we think we're better than them, no matter how hard we try to stress that salvation is by grace alone, not what we do.

the only person who can do the work of opening blind eyes is God

pray, pray, pray

Paul tells us that before we believe, we are 'blinded by the god of this age'.²⁴ Ultimately, however clearly or gently we explain the gospel, the only person who can do the work of opening blind eyes is God:

*God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.*²⁵

If we aren't praying regularly



for our friends, we may betray an attitude that we think they don't really need the gospel, or that we can persuade them ourselves by being clever enough. Instead, in seeking opportunities to explain the gospel, we need to be asking God to work the miracle of salvation in those around us.

a final word:

messing up

There will be times when we go wrong. Either we'll mess up among our friends, we'll miss opportunities to answer questions or we'll answer them badly. What do you do when you've messed up?

repent and believe the gospel

Remember the motivations for living differently? We begin and stay with the gospel. So don't wallow in guilt. Instead, turn to God and repent. Seek forgiveness in the death of Jesus and resolve to live the new life he gives you in his resurrection.

preach the gospel

'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.'²⁶ Even when you mess up! We dread people saying something like:

'I can't believe you did that - I thought you were supposed to be a Christian!' but those times are opportunities to explain that being a Christian is about accepting God's forgiveness, not being 'a good person'.

pray

God alone has the power to help you live differently. Ask, and he will help you because he delights in changing his children to be more like Jesus.

seek accountability

Amazingly, God uses his people to help his people! If you're trying to live differently among non-Christians, your Christian friends are a vital support. Be honest with one another about your struggles, and pray together regularly about how you live and for the friends you live among.

the challenge

The gospel is amazing! God gives us forgiveness we don't deserve, a new life unrecognisable from our old one, and puts us in the world to live out our relationship with him as his people. Then he uses us to call more people to himself as he makes us more like Jesus, as 'salt and light' in the world.

The challenge is not 'are you being salt and light' among your friends, but 'what kind of salt and light are you being?'

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