

Personal Prayer Evangelism

How to change the spiritual climate

by Ed Silvos from [Prayer Evangelism](#)

Before we can change the spiritual climate over our cities, we must have a working knowledge of one of our primary tools: prayer evangelism. I introduced the essence of the concept of prayer evangelism in *That None Should Perish* in 1994, but since then much has been learned from using this potent weapon on the front lines. Several years of working side by side with pastors and leaders in cities all over the world have enriched tremendously our initial understanding of this concept.

Simply put, prayer evangelism is talking to God about our neighbors before we talk to our neighbors about God. This definition, coined by Beverly Jaime,¹ has helped us to put at ease thousands of Christians who have a genuine desire to witness to the lost but who feel inadequate or scared to share the gospel with them.

I know those feelings of inadequacy very well; they used to torment me as a brand-new Christian. Shortly after my conversion, a visiting evangelist pounded on the pulpit at my church and declared, “No one should hear the gospel twice until everybody has heard it once! Therefore, since all of you have heard it more than once, I will not preach to you. Instead, I will organize you into pairs to witness door-to-door to those who have not heard it yet.” At that moment panic struck, and I found myself foolishly wishing that an earthquake, a tornado, a flood, anything catastrophic, would hit our town so I would not have to go out to witness to strangers.

Why such a negative reaction? I wasn’t opposed to witnessing; I was just scared of talking to strangers. Being the shy person that I was, even if I had mustered enough courage to try, fear of rejection would probably have immobilized me anyway.

As it turned out, neither flood nor earthquake hit town to alleviate my anxiety. So I began to fervently hope I would be paired with a vivacious, engaging, talkative individual—someone to whom I could say, “Obviously, you have the gift and the anointing for door-to-door evangelism. You take the point and talk to people, while I step into the background and silently pray for you.” But it was not to happen that way.

Although I was painfully shy, I had always been perceived by my peers to be a leader—a shy leader but a leader nonetheless. As far back as I can remember, I was expected to lead. So, under the watchful gaze of the fiery evangelist, my pastor told me, “Ed, we are going to team you up with a younger Christian so you can show him how to do it.” Me? Show someone else how to do it? I did not know how to witness myself! But soon I found myself and my young charge walking up to a door that, to me, resembled the entrance to a lion’s den.

Under the admiring gaze of my pupil, I knocked on the door as softly as I could, fervently hoping that no one would be home. I heard steps approaching, and I dearly wished it would be a child, no more than 3 or 4 years old, so I could sit down with him and just talk for the next hour while others from my church visited the rest of the block.

I was so ashamed of my cowardliness! Fear and shame are a lethal combination for an aspiring evangelist. Even though I wanted to do great things for God, I was threatened by the prospect of having to share the gospel with total strangers.

However, all that changed the day I discovered the dynamic, biblical principle of prayer evangelism.

Prayer Evangelism in Four Easy Steps

Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace be to this house." And whatever city you enter, and they receive you, eat what is set before you; and heal those in it who are sick, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you" (Luke 10:5,8,9).

The principles of prayer evangelism are taught in several places in the Bible, but the most complete model is found in this passage. This is the only occasion in the Gospels where Jesus spells out an evangelistic method. Here He calls for us to do four things for the lost:

1. Speak peace to them.
2. Fellowship with them.
3. Take care of their needs.
4. Proclaim the good news.

The first of these four steps will open the door to the second step and so forth. It is very important for us to understand that the steps are interconnected and, to be effective, must be implemented in the order given. We will soon see why this is so.

This four-step method proved so successful that soon after Jesus taught it to His disciples, multitudes came to believe in Jesus and demons surrendered *en masse* to a bunch of rookie evangelists. Unfortunately, these are not the results we see today when we evangelize. What is the problem? Rather than following Jesus' four-step approach, we reverse the order and begin with the last step, witnessing, and skip the blessing, the fellowship and the caring that are to precede the good news. In most cases, this approach to witnessing does not work.

We knock on a door—many times out of guilt or, as in my case, pressure—and if that door opens a crack, we get three minutes of reluctant attention. And two and a half of those minutes are wasted explaining the difference between us and the Jehovah's Witnesses!

Why should the people in that house believe that we—complete strangers—are going to heaven and that they are going to hell? Why should they believe that the Bible is the Word of God? To them, the Bible is no different than the book of Mormon or the sayings of Buddha or Mao. What credibility do we have to cause them to believe anything we say? For credibility to develop, a process is necessary. This is where prayer evangelism comes in.

The beginning of Jesus' prescribed process calls for us to become shepherds to the people in our circle of influence. They may not yet know that we are their pastors; but we should know they are our sheep. We must begin by caring for them. This attitude is at the heart of Jesus' strategy.

We Must Make Peace with the Lost

Jesus' method of evangelism calls for us to first speak peace over the lost. This is important for at least three reasons.

Reason #1: We need to declare peace because we, as Christians, have been at war with the lost. Too often, "Repent or burn" is the banner under which we approach the unsaved of this world. Unfortunately, we have a tendency to strongly dislike sinners, and this soon becomes obvious to them. Our bellicose attitudes do tremendous disservice to Jesus, who in His earthly days was glad to be known as a friend of sinners. If Jesus is their friend, we cannot be their enemies.

I became aware of my own belligerence toward the lost the first time I tried to implement the Luke 10 strategy in our neighborhood. Instead of claiming the promises of God to deal with the problems I saw in my neighbors' lives, I told God about everything that was wrong with these people. I talked to Him in disgust about the unwed mother and how she had to change because she was such a bad example to my daughters. I demanded that He do something about the couple who kept us awake at night with their arguing and fighting. I complained about the depressive neighbor whose front yard was a disgrace and a bane to real estate values on our block. And of course I did not forget about the teenager on drugs. I made it perfectly clear to the Lord what a detriment this young man was to our neighborhood.

All of a sudden, I sensed God saying, "Ed, I am so glad you have not witnessed to any of these yet."

Surprised, I asked, "Lord, why is that?"

His reply was very sobering: "Because I don't want your neighbors to know that you and I are related. I hurt when they hurt. I reach out to them. I constantly extend grace to them. I am the God who causes the sun to rise over the righteous and unrighteous alike. I love them. But you don't. You resent them. Rather than being an advocate for them, a lawyer for the defense, you are instead a witness for the prosecution . . . if not the prosecutor himself." Then He rebuked me, saying, "Ed, unless you love them, I cannot trust you with their lives."

Right there, on a sidewalk in my own neighborhood, under tremendous conviction of the Holy Spirit, I cried out to Him to make my heart more like His.

Preaching the truth without love is like giving someone a good kiss when you have bad breath. No matter how good your kiss is, all the recipient will remember is your bad breath! This is what happens when, in anger or disgust, we tell the lost how terrible and depraved their lives are and how they are surely going to hell. Even though this may be true, our

negative approach blocks and distorts the central message of the Bible: that God sent His Son, not to condemn the world, but to save it (see John 3:17).

Reason #2: If we bless the lost, we will stop cursing them. We do not realize how often we curse others, or else we would not do it. When we say, “The lady across the street is a drunkard; she is going to die of cirrhosis of the liver,” we are cursing her. When we point to rowdy teenagers and complain, “They are nuisances and morons who drink and drive and experiment with drugs, and soon they are going to kill themselves,” we are cursing them. When we pronounce blessings on our neighbors, our city is edified (see Prov. 11:11). But when we curse our neighbors, we tear down the city, beginning with the block we live on.

Reason #3: We speak peace in order to neutralize the demons that have been assigned to blind our neighbors to the light of the gospel. The Bible explains clearly why all the people in our circle of influence have not yet come to the Lord: “The god of this world [the devil] has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel” (2 Cor. 4:4). This means that the devil is actively blinding them, because light cannot be blocked passively. Given the fact that Satan is not omnipresent—he cannot be in more than one place at a time—how then can he blind the minds of billions of people simultaneously? He uses demons as implied in the parable of the sower, where we are told that after the seed is planted, the birds of the sky (representing the devil and his forces) come and steal it (see Luke 8:5,12).

The apostle Paul places the task of opening the eyes of the lost squarely on our shoulders and within a context of evangelism and spiritual warfare:

I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God (Acts 26:17,18, NIV).

Paul leaves no doubt as to the active role Satan and his demons play in blinding the lost to the gospel. Hence, we need to factor in how to disable the demonic grip on those we are trying to reach.

To deal effectively with our spiritual foes, we cannot empower them by approaching the lost in anger. The Bible clearly teaches that our unresolved anger gives room to the devil inside our circle of influence (see Eph. 4:26,27). Our curses will only strengthen the demonic grip on the ones we are trying to save. To reverse this situation, we must renounce our anger and begin to speak peace to the lost.

Blessings are more powerful than curses because curses can be broken. In the celestial poker game, a hand of blessings always beats a hand of curses. An atmosphere of blessings weakens the grip of demons, and they soon fold and leave the table.

A Tangible Peace

When we speak blessings over those in our circle of influence, sooner or later people who used to avoid us will begin to seek us out, opening the door to fellowship (step 2 in the process). This is because they can actually feel the blessings we have spoken over them. Jesus described this kind of peace as something almost tangible:

First say, “Peace be to this house.” And if a man of peace is there, your peace will rest upon him; but if not, it will return to you (Luke 10:5,6).

Your neighbors may come to you and say something like, “When I see you walking by, I get a positive vibration.” That’s New Age lingo for peace. What they mean is that in your presence they feel something tangible—and they like it!

A Christian lady in England had not been able to meet her neighbor, who was bedridden due to a serious condition. Nevertheless, every Thursday she and other believing women spoke peace to her from across the street. This went on for several months until one day, the unbelieving neighbor and her children showed up at the Christian woman’s door unexpectedly. The neighbor said, “I came to thank you for the blessings you sent my way, because thanks to those blessings, I am healed.” The surprised Christian asked how she knew about the blessings. “Oh, I felt them coming every week. Please, tell me more about it.” It took no effort at all to lead that lady and her children to Christ.

If I accidentally cut somebody off on the freeway, I can often feel the other driver’s silent curses, even if he or she does not make any obscene gestures or give me an angry blast from the car horn. I feel it first on the back of my neck and then inside as my “soul climate” takes a turn for the worse. If a child of God can feel a curse that is energized by the powers of darkness, how much more will the lost feel a blessing that is empowered by the blood that Jesus shed at Calvary? This is why when we bless our neighbors, they will begin to come around—because they feel blessed. Sinners loved to hang around Jesus, because there was just something about Him that drew others to Him. Our neighbors should feel the same way about us, as we are His representatives on earth (see Luke 10:16).

Two-Way Fellowship

Once you have broken the ice with your neighbors, do not rush to share the gospel with them. Fellowship is the next step, not proclamation. Proclamation is the last step. If you’ve invited these formerly neglected sinners over for dinner, do not ambush them with the Four Spiritual Laws between the hamburgers and the apple pie. Be patient. You may wonder, What value is there in fellowship with the lost unless I share the gospel with them? Fellowship provides an opportunity to show unconditional acceptance by welcoming our neighbors just the way they are instead of the way we want them to be.

So often, we come off decidedly un-Christlike in our interaction with the lost, especially with those who are certified, industrial-strength sinners. We barely put up with them, and we make it painfully clear that we can’t wait for them to change and become more like us. This is a destructive attitude unworthy of Christ and His kingdom. To change this, we must spend time with our neighbors, not to patronize or proselytize them but to receive from them: “Stay in that house, eating and drinking what they give you” (Luke 10:7). Jesus instructs us to eat and drink everything our neighbors set before us. His evangelism model calls for two-way fellowship, with an emphasis on receiving rather than unilaterally giving.

One of the worst mistakes we make when evangelizing is to treat the unsaved like dirt, as if they have no value whatsoever unless they become Christians. Besides being wrong, this

attitude is also very demeaning and only widens the gap between them and us. Worse yet, it widens the chasm between them and Jesus, whom we represent.

Jesus always treated sinners with respect. The worse the sinners—e.g., Zaccheus or the adulterous woman—often the greater the respect with which He treated them. Therefore, we should never treat the lost as people without value. Regardless of how they rate as sinners, the lost always have value as human beings because they too were made in the image of God.

Two-way fellowship points us in the right direction. When we allow unbelievers to do something for us, we affirm their value and dignity as God's design and creation. In Jesus' day, the custom was to offer food and lodging to visitors, even to strangers. Today playing football, sharing a meal, working in the yard together or organizing a multifamily garage sale together allows us to speak blessings upon our neighbors at close range.

Fishing Requires Patience

Blessing sinners opens the door to fellowship, and fellowship eventually leads to the third step: an opportunity to meet their felt needs. This will only happen after they trust us enough to disclose those needs. Once such trust exists, they may share that their marriage looks good on the surface but is rotting inside. They may tell us about their fear of losing their job, or they may seek our help with an addiction they cannot overcome. The once-distant neighbors will begin to share heart-to-heart with us because they sense that we have an answer. And they will ask for our help because they now have tangible proof that we truly care for them.

It is at that precise moment when we can say to them, "I have been praying for you, and I would be delighted to pray about this, too." Now you may be thinking, Shouldn't we lead them to the Lord first? Understand, what our neighbors are sharing at this point in time is the need they feel is most important—in other words, their felt needs. Obviously, the most important need they have is salvation, but they don't know that yet. Nevertheless, through their felt needs, God creates an avenue to show them that Jesus is indeed a friend of sinners and He came to save them and not to condemn them.

What if I pray and nothing happens? you may wonder. I don't want God's reputation to be damaged. If you insist on knowing for sure that God will answer before you decide to pray, you are missing the point. You are only promising prayer, not an answer to prayer. Prayer is the most tangible trace of eternity in the human heart. When you pray for their felt needs, you touch your neighbors at the deepest level, the heart level. This is the closest you can get to them. Sooner or later that touch will register with them. Be patient. Even a master fisherman cannot force the fish to bite. Fishing requires patience.

Our fear that God will get a bad name because of unanswered prayers is unwarranted since unbelievers, at the most rudimentary level, understand prayer better than we do! They know they have a problem for which they have no solution. They suspect that someone greater and more powerful has the answer, but they do not know how to reach such a person. That is why an offer of prayer in a moment of crisis is always welcome, because it makes the connection between those two points in their thinking.

Suppose you have a problem that only the president of the United States can fix. He is the person with the power and the resources to solve your dilemma, but you do not know the man, and he does not know you. You can think of no way to make your need known to him. Then, in your most desperate hour, I tell you I have a very good friend who happens to be the head janitor at the White House and he cleans the Oval Office every day. I then propose that if you write a letter to the president about your need, I will give it to my friend to put on the president's desk. If I were to do that, would you say, "Well, Ed, before I sit down to write that letter, you must assure me that the president will read the letter and grant my request. Unless you promise me that he will, I will not write it"? You would never respond this way simply because you would be appreciative that I had reached out to you with a potential solution when you had none.

Unbelievers have the same attitude about prayer. They know that God has a solution, but they do not have His phone number. If you are willing to make the phone call on their behalf, they will be most grateful for it, regardless of the outcome—especially if it is on your dime.

God's Priorities

Furthermore, God seems to be partial to the needs of unbelievers. As I shared in my previous book, our greatest surprise in Resistencia, Argentina, was how quickly and often unexpectedly God answered prayers on behalf of the lost. Sometimes His responses baffled us. A local congregation was praying for one of its members who had terminal cancer. At the same time, the church was praying for an unbeliever who was also dying of cancer. The Christian died and the unbeliever was healed. Someone in the congregation became very upset, claiming it was not fair and asking God for an explanation. The Lord responded, "Let me explain it to you. The believer who died is here with Me in heaven; but if the unbeliever had died, he would be in hell now." Obviously, God has his priorities straight. Let us emulate Him!

Safe to Approach

Once we have completed the first three steps—blessing, fellowship and taking care of their needs—leading our neighbors to the Lord becomes as easy as angling a whale in a swimming pool. You cannot miss because you have given them peace, which is what unbelievers lack the most; you have provided them with the most protective, healing fellowship they have ever enjoyed; and you have offered prayers for needs they feel very deeply and have not been able to meet on their own. Now it is very natural for them to ask, "Tell me, who is this God who loves me?" They feel safe in approaching you because there has been a gradual improvement in the spiritual climate of your relationship as it moved from step one to step four.

Let us review the four steps Jesus laid out for us in Luke 10 and how these steps lead from one to the next:

- 1) Blessing opens the door to unbiased fellowship.
- 2) Fellowship establishes a level of trust, allowing our neighbors to share with us their felt needs.

3) Prayer addresses their felt needs.

4) When we intercede for our neighbors, the kingdom of God comes near them in a tangible way: *"Say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you'"* (Luke 10:9).

Please notice that we are not to bring them into the Kingdom; we are to take the Kingdom to them.

Taking the Kingdom to the lost is like driving through the desert in an air-conditioned truck stocked with cold drinks. When you spot a weary pedestrian lost on a lonely road on a hot summer day, if you pull up next to him, you don't need to beg him to come on board. All you need to do is pull over near to him and open the door!

Why Are We Doing Such a Poor Job of Reaching the Lost?

In John 14:12, Jesus tells us that if we believe in Him, we will do greater works than He did while on the earth. This is a key passage, since it provides the answer to a most difficult question: Why is the Church today doing such a poor job of fulfilling the Great Commission compared to the Early Church?

The Early Church was able to fill the entire city of Jerusalem with the teachings of Jesus in just a few weeks (see Acts 5:28). This could not have been an easy task in the city where Jesus was publicly hung as a criminal and His resurrection discredited by rumors cleverly orchestrated and sustained by the religious power brokers. Nevertheless, Jerusalem was reached, and soon the gospel spread to all Judea and Samaria and beyond until *"all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord"* (Acts 19:10).

Furthermore, Paul saturated with the gospel an even greater area—from Jerusalem to Illyricum, across the Adriatic Sea from modern-day Italy—so much so that he had to move on to newer and distant regions, such as Spain, because he was determined not to evangelize where Christ had already been proclaimed (see Rom. 15:19-23). Just consider for a moment the implication of this statement. This means that from Jerusalem in the Middle East all the way to Southern Europe, there was not a single place where Christ had not been proclaimed.

Moreover, this extraordinary expansion of the faith happened in a relatively short time in the face of fierce and brutal persecution and without the abundance of resources available to us today. What's more, history tells us that by the beginning of the fourth century, Christians had "conquered" the mighty empire that had taken pleasure in persecuting them. How did this come about? The Early Church knew something that we have not yet learned: They could do greater works than Jesus did.

The Command to Do Greater Things

How can we possibly do something greater than the Son of God has done? Many Bible commentaries are silent or evasive on this topic. Others attempt to sidestep the issue by saying that although we can never surpass the quality of Jesus' works, we can certainly

exceed them in quantity. After all, Jesus preached publicly for only three years, and He never preached to more than a few thousand people at a time. Billy Graham and others have led international ministries that spanned decades, sometimes preaching to hundreds of thousands in a single gathering. Jesus never traveled far from Galilee during His ministry, whereas many believers have since carried the gospel to the nations of the world, thus having done something greater than Jesus. These are nice suggestions, but they represent awful hermeneutics because they have nothing to do with what the text actually says:

*Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and **greater works than these shall he do**; because I go to the Father. And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it. If you love Me, you will keep My commandments (John 14:12-15, emphasis added).*

Jesus states that everyone who believes in Him should do the same works that He did. And now that He has been glorified, these works have been upgraded to greater works. This point cannot be argued at all. It is a promise dependent on one condition: belief in Jesus. If we believe in Jesus, we are not only entitled to do greater works than He did; we are commanded to do so.

What are the greater works Jesus commands us to do? His own words suggest that they have to do with prayer: “And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son” (v. 13). He is not speaking about prayer in general, however, but rather about a specific kind of prayer: prayer that addresses the felt needs of the lost. How do I arrive at this conclusion? The key is the word “glorified.” Jesus says that He will do anything we ask in His name, so that the Father will be glorified in the Son. That is, unbelievers will come to the Father through Jesus when they have been convinced of His divinity by a miracle.

Philip: A Prototype of Modern Man

To see this more clearly, we need to go back to a few moments earlier in this same conversation, when Jesus says to His disciples, “Believe in God, believe also in Me” (John 14:1). In other words, “Believe also that I am God.” The disciples are probably stunned at this point, but Jesus goes on, making yet another amazing, absolutely unprecedented statement: “In My Father’s house are many dwelling places. I am going ahead to prepare a place for you. When those dwellings are ready, I will come and take you there myself” (see vv. 2,3). This is an extraordinary promise because up to this moment (as recorded in the Bible), never have mortal, sinful men been so openly and clearly assured of going to heaven. When Thomas asks how to get to this wonderful place, Jesus declares, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me” (v. 6).

Jesus then comforts His disciples, assuring them that because they have known Him, they have known God and have seen Him. Philip now chimes in, saying, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us” (v. 8).

Philip was probably a shy person. I say this because shy people make good diplomats; they are able to say something negative in such a way that it sounds positive. Philip says something here that on the surface sounds polite and humble but in reality is rude and negative: *“Lord, if you show me the Father, that is enough for me.”* But Jesus is able to see through his veneer to the core of unbelief behind Philip’s comment. This is why He confronts Philip, demanding, *“Why don’t you believe Me when I say that he who has seen Me has seen the Father?”* (see vv. 9,10). Knowing that Philip does not believe in His divinity, Jesus says, *“Philip, if you do not believe in Me by My words, believe in Me by My works. Let My miracles prove to you that I am who I say”* (see v. 11).

Philip believed in God, and he wanted to go to a better place—the Father’s house—when he died. Today, the vast majority of the population claims to believe in God, and they would love to go to a better place when they die; but like Philip, most of them do not believe that Jesus is the only way to the Father. That is why this passage merits attention and serious study. If we understand how Jesus dealt with this issue that affects so many people in this day and age, we will have the key to reaching our cities for Christ.

What Jesus is teaching Philip is that it is all right to see in order to believe. Jesus knows that Philip, once convinced, will do “the works that I do” and “greater works than these”—miracles worked through prayer—to convince others who likewise do not believe that Jesus is God or the way to God (v. 12).

This passage is extraordinary in that it presents prayer and evangelism as fully integrated components of the same equation. Traditionally, the Church has used prayer as a primer for evangelism. We have prayed for the lost so that, when evangelized, they will listen and hopefully receive Jesus. In this passage, however, Jesus presents prayer as evangelism. Prayer becomes evangelism when used to open the eyes of unbelievers to the divinity of Jesus. To that effect, He used someone like Philip, who did not believe that Jesus is God, to show us how to break through this widespread barrier of unbelief. The key is ***prayer for miracles that meet the felt needs of unbelieving people!***

Note

1. Beverly Jaime and her husband, David, are associate pastors at Cathedral of Faith in San Jose, California.