

1. How to be effective in a hostile environment

Discussion guide – Series III



HOOK:

- What is one of the worst times you've ever 'put your foot in your mouth' (unintentionally said something inappropriate)?
- Has the tone of any stories in our national media, or from global media, ever left you feeling concerned that you might be judged if you expressed an opinion – because public media has become one-sided on a matter?

BOOK: Jesus' avoidance of admission that he was the Son of God

- When the question arose about who Jesus might be, he consistently called himself the 'Son of Man' rather than the Son of God. Why? (E.g. Mark 2:10, Mark 2:28)
 - Regarding what Jesus might have meant by 'Son of Man' – while it seemed he was saying 'I'm just a regular human', what does the prophecy of Daniel 7:3-14 suggest?
 - What were Jesus' words when directly asked by the Priest if he believed himself to be the Christ? (Luke 22:66-70 – quoting Daniel 7)*
- See Mark 8:26. When Jesus did miracles, why did he sometimes caution people not to tell anyone about it? (Consider Mark 1:28, but then Mark 1:45-45 and the implications of people talking)**
 - Contrast this with Mark 5:19. Why on this occasion did he say the opposite? (Consider where the man was from).
- Read Mark 8:27-31. While Jesus hid his identity from the crowds,*** he was open about it with his disciples. Why?
 - (Upon admitting he was God's Son to his disciples, what understanding did he immediately begin to clarify with them about this?****)
- Can you think of a place in the Gospels where Jesus finally admitted what he meant when he referred to himself as the 'Son of Man' (other than to his disciples)? (Read Mark 14:60-64).

LOOK:

- The video included a story from the first sitting of the NZ Parliament. What does this account tell us about the way they understood the relationship between the Christian faith and our nation? Does it seem they intended for us to be a non-religious or atheistic 'secular' nation – like is suggested today? Or was it clear to them we were going to be a 'Christian' nation – while also having religious freedom (because of the Christian belief that God gave all people free will)?*****
- Do you ever feel stuck for words when a controversial topic comes up in conversation amongst friends at work or school?

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- **Activity:** Make a list together of 'toxic topics', which you think are really difficult for us as Christians to discuss because of the changing views of our society.
 - o (NB: It is not necessary for your group to hold the same opinion on these topics. You only need to agree that they are difficult topics requiring special wisdom and sensitivity).
 - o Comment: These are the kinds of conversations this series is about – with Jesus as our role model.
- Have you ever attempted a conversation in which one of these topics backfired because the other person couldn't understand the reasons for your view, and judged you?
- From the video, in what different ways did Jesus relate to those who were *interested*, as compared to those who were *disinterested*, or *hostile*?

TOOK:

- What have you learnt from this discussion that you could put to use in your conversations?

Pray:

- ...for growing wisdom for how to engage those around us in meaningful conversations.
- ...for friends we desire to see consider faith in Christ.

* The title 'Son of Man' therefore had two meanings. It could refer to a human (a son of a man), or to God clothed in flesh – as in Daniel 7. Jesus chose this title because its meaning was unclear. In Matthew 26:64 Jesus quotes the fuller Scripture from Daniel 7 to the Priest. Jesus' intended meaning when saying he was the 'Son of Man' was now clear. Regarding these small differences between the Gospel accounts, we note that the Gospels are accurate summaries of events, conversations and teachings by eyewitnesses – not the full-length story or record of every word of a teaching).

** The Jews expected a military Messiah who would re-establish the nationhood of Israel, throwing off their oppressors; the Romans. So, to claim to be the Messiah might cause some to pick up weapons and begin a rebellion, which would have resulted in the Romans squashing that rebellion militarily.

*** There was a high potential for misunderstanding if he admitted to being the Messiah/Christ – because they expected a Military Messiah who'd rescue Israel as a nation from the Roman occupation. Also, if he claimed to be the 'Son of God' that would have been considered blasphemy – as eventually was the case at his trials prior to his death sentencing.

**** That he was the 'suffering servant' predicted in Isaiah 53, rather than the 'conquering King' predicted in many other Messianic prophecies. (He would be the 'conquering King' when he returns a second time!)

***** To them being 'secular' meant being non-denominational (the Government was not going to be aligned to one specific Christian denomination), while also affirming the idea of the 'separation of Church and Governmental powers' (because when Government connects with Church structures, it corrupts Church power). What is clear is that they saw the nation as specifically 'Christian' – as measured by values. The idea of religious freedom naturally follows from this – as is seen around the world. The Christian belief that God gave us free will means we release people to choose and practice their own religion. It is also of note that our values as a nation are very specifically Christian – as contrasted with the values naturally arising from Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism or Atheism. Our patterns of law and justice were borrowed from England, and are based on the idea of (a) human rights (from the belief all people are equally 'created in the image of God' – Genesis 1), (b) the Ten Commandments (from which we get both a set of clear-thinking moral boundaries and also a basis for defining what our various human rights are) and (c) Jesus' golden rule ('do unto others as you'd have them do to you'). In history, it was Alfred the Great who established this foundation for law and government in England in 890AD. From here Christian teachings on the topics of (i) equality, (ii) charity and (iii) honesty were gradually accepted by their entire culture. This context made possible and led to the remarkable levels of (i) equality, (ii) care and (iii) prosperity we enjoy today – with all comparisons noted). While many in power in our nation today do not want to recognise our 'Christian' identity as a nation, the connection is clear when measured by our values, and reminding our nation of this connection is important because these values (and the blessings that come from them) will be unsustainable without the motivation that comes from accepting the idea of a moral and just Creator God.

2. Answering questions with questions

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BECAUSE
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HOOK:

- Has anyone been in a group where you had a strong opinion on something, but decided to stay silent? What were you silent about, and why?
- Has anyone ever been part of a group in which your own views were the minority, and you felt pressured into silence as a result? What happened?

BOOK: Matthew 22:15-22 – Taxes to Caesar

- Why was this question a trap?
- How did they seek to lull Jesus into a false sense of security through flattery?
- What things are clever about the way Jesus replied?

LOOK:

- What might a similar 'no win' (trap) question be for us today?
- Should we ever deny the truth to keep the peace?
 - Is saying nothing the same as denying the truth? (Consider Jesus' example).
- Why is giving opinions on some things so 'toxic' for us as Christians? (Put differently, what are others wrongly assuming about us when we state a belief that is different to their belief?)
- Regarding the topic of tolerance, consider these questions:
 - Is it intolerant to disagree with someone's beliefs or actions?
 - If it isn't intolerant to disagree, what then is intolerance? (It is when we judge a person's character or treat them differently because of what they believe).
 - Is all intolerance wrong?
 - (Would you tolerate child abuse or violence?)
 - Where then does the standard come from that determines what we should or should not tolerate?
 - So (1) is a Christian being intolerant when they say they believe a certain thing is morally wrong, because they believe the Bible?
 - (2) Is a non-Christian intolerant when they accuse a Christian of being intolerant for believing something different to themselves? (Yes – they are judging our character. Tolerance is not about agreeing. It is about how we treat people *irrespective of how much we disagree*).
 - Do you think many of the public and also in our public media (our journalists and their bosses) generally understand or consider this simple distinction between disagreement and intolerance? If not, what is the implication for us?***

2. Answering questions with questions

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TOOK:

- **Activity:** Look again at the list of 'toxic topics' you created last week.
 - How could you reply a question about each topic with a question, to avoid giving any personal answer, while potentially opening up a meaningful conversation?
- **Activity:** Break into pairs and have some fun taking turns at asking each other various awkward or fun questions, or making strange statements for them to respond to.
 - The goal in each case is for the person who is replying to avoid making any immediate statement in reply, or even a sense of disagreement – but instead to (1) somehow compliment the person, while (2) asking a question to better-understand what or why they have asked the question.
- Has this discussion been useful? What have you got out of it?

Pray:

- ...for growing wisdom in conversations.
- ...for those you would love to see consider and come to faith in Christ.
- ...for the preservation of our freedoms of information, conscience, speech and religion.****

* Sometimes non-believers assume a Christian is judging others when stating a view. They are presuming Christians aren't able to tolerate and treat the other person equally if there is disagreement. Their error is to confuse tolerance with agreeing.

Tolerance is not about agreeing. It is about how we treat people *despite the things we disagree on!*

** We are wise not to directly state some things – but instead to ask questions in the hope of discussing the 'topic behind the topic'. We will come back to this in greater detail in a coming video and discussion.

*** For the discussion leader's reflection: (1) **Freedom of information** = access to information. This requires journalism with integrity, that presents both sides of a thing in a fair manner despite personal prejudices. Without this, the public don't have the information needed to make an informed choice. This makes the 'freedom of conscience and thought' irrelevant. (2)

Freedom of conscience = the freedom of individuals to draw their own conclusions, based upon the information they have. (3)

Freedom of speech = the freedom of those individuals to state their opinion without being unduly criminalised or unduly victimised for it. (4) **Freedom of religion** = freedom for individuals to hold their own religious views without

being unduly criminalised or victimised.

3. Avoiding the quotable quote

Discussion guide – Series III



Definition: By 'quotable quote' we mean something a person says either in person or on social media that others could later quote them as having said.

HOOK:

- Have you ever said something that came back and 'bit' you 5 or 10 years later?
- Has anyone ever got into trouble over something you unwisely typed online?
- How long can the effect of unwise spoken words last? (Do you remember something your parents said when you were young *that you later used against them?*)

BOOK: Matthew 21:23-27 – By what authority do you do these things?

- Why might Jesus not have wanted to answer their question?
- How did he avoid replying?*

John 8:1-11 – What to do with a Jewish woman caught in adultery

- Why didn't Jesus want to answer this question?***
- How did Jesus avoid replying?***

LOOK:

- What things might you not want to give a 'quotable quote' on to your parents, or children, or spouse, or boss? Each person try to give one example.
- Should we always be open and honest? Why/Why not?*****
- Do you think there are topics we should be bold to give 'quotable quotes' on? Give examples – and why.
 - Consider Jesus' bold and quotable statements in the 'The Seven Woes' of Matthew 23:13-36, directly confronting the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. Why was he quiet on some matters and vocal on others?
- **Read Matthew 10:33** (*"If you deny me before others..."*)
 - What kinds of questions do you think God expects his followers to give 'quotable quotes' on? What is the boundary?
 - Might there be different boundaries for different people – or even for people in different countries?
- **Activity – Part 1:** Consider topics people in the following roles would be wise to avoid giving 'quotable quotes' on.

A school teacher

An accountant

The boss of a bad employee

A Christian in a Hindu country

A recently divorced parent

A court-of-law Judge

The employee of a bad boss

A Christian in a Muslim country

A pastor in this country

A doctor

A social worker

A student

A policeman/woman

3. Avoiding the quotable quote

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Activity – Part 2: Now consider some situations in which people in the above roles really should speak up – no matter how awkward.

Summary comment: Our mission is to make Christ known. We must therefore certainly never deny Christ. Yet our goal is to win people – not just arguments. While it is true that we must never lie, winning people over requires wisdom. There is a time to stay silent, a time to only ask a question, and a time to speak plainly. *We need to assess each situation, while also listening for the promptings of the Holy Spirit!*

TOOK:

- **Optional extra activity - avoiding the 'quotable quote':** Break into pairs and take turns asking each other their opinion on various difficult topics – to which the other person is to somehow reply in a way that engages the conversation, but without ever making a quotable statement that confirms their personal view.
- Has this discussion been useful? How so?
- What topics do you personally feel you need to speak up about more?

Pray:

- ...for growing wisdom for conversations.
- ...for opportunities to discuss faith with others.

* He replied their question with a question which he knew they wouldn't be willing to answer – on which basis he likewise refused to answer their question.

** (1) There may have been hypocrisy amongst them in their accusation – as some amongst them may have been guilty of the same sin. (2) It was a trap – because Jews didn't have authority to give the death penalty - but he also couldn't deny God's moral law. (3) It's also of note that Jesus knew he would soon be on his way to the cross to pay for this woman's sin. He was having mercy on her because of love!

*** He simply refused to speak – and it was awkward.

**** Honest? Always. Open? It depends on who you are talking with!

4. When it's right to confuse people

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HOOK:

- Have you ever got completely lost going somewhere, even though someone tried to give you clear directions?
- How important is a good understanding of the reasons for our faith (apologetics) in our conversations as Christians? Why? *

BOOK: Who Jesus did and didn't explain the parables to

- Why did Jesus speak in parables? Read Matthew 13:10-11.
- Did Jesus explain the parables to the crowds? Read Mark 4:33-34 and Matthew 13:34-35.
- What did the disciples begin to think when they first heard Jesus speaking in parables without explaining them? Read Matthew 13:10 and John 16:29-30.
- Did the use of parables leave the public with no understanding of his messages? Read Mark 4:13. (Note Jesus was surprised the disciples hadn't worked out the meaning of the parable themselves, which implies that it was possible to work them out).
- Summary: Why do you think Jesus generally masked his messages when speaking in public places? **

LOOK:

- Have you ever had a lengthy conversation with a non-believer about why you believe Christianity to be a rational belief? What did you discuss, and how did it go?
- In your experience, does giving rational arguments for the Christian faith result in people taking a step closer to Jesus - or not? Did it make a difference for you?
 - o If there is a difference in responses, why might some people come closer through hearing an answer to a question, while others become more firmly entrenched in their existing view?
- What is the benefit of using a story, illustration or question – rather than a statement?
- **Activity – learning to speak in stories:** Have group members ask various random questions of the other group members. Try to reply with a short story from history or their own experience – without ever making a direct statement on the topic.

4. When it's right to confuse people

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TOOK: Read Matthew 7:6

- There has been a significant Christian influence in our nation's history - resulting in the high levels of equality freedom, care and prosperity we now enjoy. What resource do you know of that could increase your knowledge of these stories?***
- How could you learn more about the rational reasons that exist for believing the Christian faith – so you can better help people who have various questions?***
- What is your next action step?

Pray:

- ...for growing wisdom in conversations – to engage the interested, while only seeking to intrigue the disinterested.
- ...for opportunities to engage with others in meaningful conversations.

* Regarding apologetics (reasons for believing), see 1 Peter 3:15. Also consider the Apostle Paul's ability to reason with all manner of people, including Jews and non-Jews (who were very different in their thinking) about why he believed their claims about Jesus to be true. (E.g. Acts 17:2-3, Acts 17:17).

** Because of the motives of those in the audiences. Also, maybe he was the crowds excitement for a while because of their belief that the coming Messiah would be a military leader, who would re-establish the nation of Israel. (Riots were not tolerated under the Roman occupation).

*** In New Zealand, the Hope Project's Easter booklets have summarised various key stories from our nation's bicultural history, and also to where our nation's values came from. See HopeProject.co.nz/ebooks, or contact them to request as many free copies of these booklets as you would like (admin@shininglights.co.nz). Note also the 'A minute in history' radio series – which can be listened to via HopeProject.co.nz/a-minute-in-history. Regarding books, consider also *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born*, by D James Kennedy, amongst others.

5. How to say nothing – unless you really say something

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HOOK:

- Can anyone remember a time when an important conversation was happening - and you said way too *much*?
- Can anyone remember a time when an important conversation was happening - and you said way too *little*?

Comment regarding the video: We are often wise to investigate *why* people say things before speaking, because much can sit behind a question or comment.

BOOK: Read Mark 10:17-22 - The Rich young man and Jesus

- Jesus actually was truly and fully good. So, why do you think he asked, 'Why do you call me good?' instead of answering the question?
- Why do you think Jesus went on to list the various commands when he already knew there was no way this man could have kept every one of them?
- Do you think the rich man's claim that he'd kept all of these commands was true?
- How do you feel about Jesus' final instruction to this man in verse 21? The disciples seemed to feel it was a bit harsh. Do you?
- What motive did Jesus have in his heart when he gave the man this very awkward and difficult instruction? (It's stated in verse 21).
- How was the way Jesus engaged this conversation wise?*

LOOK:

- Did any examples from the video today stand out to you as a good way to redirect a conversation?
- **Activity – identifying the question behind the question:** Go through your list of 'toxic topics' again and consider afresh:
 - (a) What might the question behind the question be?
 - (b) What question could we ask to draw this out?
 - (c) What question could we potentially ask to avoid answering their question if we sensed a hostile motive?

5. How to say nothing – unless you really say something

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TOOK: Questions to summarise the series:

- How did Jesus respond differently to those who were interested, disinterested or hostile toward him?
- How did Jesus avoid giving 'quotable quotes' to some people, and why?
- How did Jesus avoid giving 'quotable quotes' when trying to teach the crowds due to the varying motives of people present – while also still saying something useful?
- While Jesus was deliberately quiet on some topics, what topics was he deliberately vocal about?
- On what basis did he decide what he would or would not say?
- What have you got out of this series?

"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."
Matthew 10:16

Conclude with a time of prayer

- ...for the nation as a whole
- ...for the Government
- ...for key people in public media
- ... for the people of your own city and community
- ...for the Principal and teachers of your schools
- ...and for each other as witnesses to them all!

* Note that Jesus may not have explained that salvation was a gift from God, received through faith, because (a) he was still on the way to the cross himself to pay for our sin and (b) had foreknowledge from God that this man would later become aware of his own death and resurrection, and then truly surrender his life to God.

A summary statement for the series: To impact people's lives we need to address the questions and needs of their hearts. A person's first words don't always reveal this. In fact, first words are often a 'smokescreen'. While it is encouraging that some are interested in seeking spiritual truth, others will be disinterested, and some hostile, and for a wide range of reasons. This is why Jesus consistently asked questions – to uncover the motives of people's hearts. He told intriguing stories for the same reason – to sift his audiences. Only then did he respond, because only then could he discern their motives, and how he could best encourage their faith.