

Loving our neighbours

“You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere.”

1 Thessalonians 1:5-8 (NIV)

Outline of talk by Nay Dawson

Download video here: apassionforlife.org.uk/lc2-vid-download

Below is an outline of what the talk covers. Please see the corresponding session guide for more guidance on structuring the rest of the training session.

Speaking Clearly

Clearly communicating the gospel

Loving Dearly

Showing the love of Christ by our actions

How loving and speaking can lead to others coming to know Christ

- Praying and acting
- Intentionally joining a club
- Being the creative community spark at work
- Being an attentive neighbour

Transcript of talk by Nay Dawson

You are free to use and adapt the content of this talk to suit your context.

One of the huge phenomenons of the lockdown restrictions placed upon us by the coronavirus pandemic has been an increased awareness of community. Whether that’s clapping for the NHS on doorsteps, collecting bread for an elderly friend, or just simply chatting over the fence to a neighbour, we’ve all become increasingly aware of who is immediately around us.

But it’s not just about our immediate neighbours. Many have reported getting in touch with old groups of friends, gathering whole families together or running quiz nights on Zoom.

With this increased sense of belonging and community, there is an incredible opportunity as Christians. At the very heart of who God is, we see the relationship of Father, Son and Spirit. We have the ultimate reason to believe in community. I think that community is something people want,

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but are intrigued about how to get it. So how do we, as Christians, both care about and build community?

In 1 Thessalonians, we read this encouragement. "For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that He has chosen you because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, your faith in God has become known everywhere." Read from 1 Thessalonians 1:4.

Then later in the same letter, we read this. "We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship. We worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you." Read from 1 Thessalonians 2:8-10.

This letter is so rich and such a wonderful model for how we're to live in our communities, and we're going to look at two ways in which it should shape us, as we share our lives with those around us.

First, how we should be speaking clearly and loving dearly. Paul, a missionary to Thessalonica, was delighted to share this wonderful good news into the community. He preached with conviction and power and the Holy Spirit. He spoke clearly and saw many come to trust in Jesus for themselves. The new believers became sharers of his message, too.

But they didn't just speak. Paul is clear. It is not only the gospel of God that they shared. It was their lives, too. Paul lived amongst the Thessalonians for their sake. He treated them as brothers and sisters. This familial devoted love was radically different. This brotherly love was unselective. It united people that were completely different from each other. It was a love that was to be given out.

This is gospel brotherly love. This is the kind of love that we are called to give out not only to other Christians, but in our community, to our neighbours and to our work colleagues. So like with our blood siblings, you can't choose who God gives you to share your life with, but you can choose to love them. This love is to be given out to those who are given to you. It's into these relationships that Paul and others loved dearly. Even through suffering, toil and hardship, they loved.

But it's not just Paul. Early Christianity grew explosively 40% per decade for nearly three centuries. While a few individuals did engage in public preaching, the majority of the early church outside of the New Testament did not do this because it was too dangerous. There are hardly any evangelists or missionaries whose names we know from that time in history.

And yet the church was growing. The authorities scorned it, people discriminated against their Christian neighbours in many ways, and the church was persecuted. It was hard to be a Christian, and yet still the church grew.

How come? Well, Tim Keller, a Christian writer, explains it like this. Once nonbelievers were attracted to the community by the lives of Christians, they became open to talking about the gospel truths that were the source of this kind of life. So pursue loving dearly and living lives that attract others.

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But maybe we've forgotten how to be friends. Made for Friendship is an excellent book by Drew Hunter. In the book, he questions whether our friendships are intentional or based on convenience. Quoting C.S. Lewis, "To the ancients, friendship seemed the happiest and most fully human of all loves, the crown of life and the school of virtue. The modern world, in comparison, simply ignores it."

So take some time to pause and reflect on your friendships. Are they driven by love, self-sacrifice and generosity? Are they able to weather through the storms of life? Let's be intentional in our friendships. Let us be known as those who build community. Having seen how we should be speaking clearly and loving dearly, we're going to see how loving and speaking like this can lead others to come and know Christ.

In September 2020, as a second wave of the coronavirus pandemic loomed on the horizon, I prayed in a frustrated sort of way. "God, how can I love my friends and share about you if we're all in lockdown again?" I sensed Him saying, "Nay, where do you think you should be?"

Halloween was fast approaching, something as a Christian I'd always steered clear of. But seeing that families were struggling to keep motivated in lockdown, I decided to set up a community trail. I invited a few friends around, hoping they would run this for me. But in the end, I was nominated as the organiser. Having steered clear of Halloween to suddenly having to organize a community trail was quite a shock. It certainly was taking me out of my comfort zone.

We decided that each house would decorate the front of their garden. We had a trail map and prizes and over 25 local families got involved. I then talked with my family and asked what we should do. We decided together that we would be the House of Light. So during the Halloween weekend, our house was decorated with beautiful lights. We dressed up pumpkins to make them look as funny as possible. We gave out hundreds and hundreds of little gift bags, glow sticks and sweets, and we shared stories of light.

One acquaintance wrote to me afterwards and said, "I don't believe in God. But if I did, your lifestyle would be exactly what I hope He'd be like. Thank you for loving our community so well."

But it didn't stop there. We set up a Facebook page and continued to do trails through lockdown. These included Christmas and Easter trails that gave opportunity to tell the story of Jesus reaching thousands of people locally.

God has called each of us into a community. Whoever you are and however you're made, think through how you can love more dearly and speak more clearly about Christ.

Let me share with you some examples to help you get thinking. My friend Tara has joined a local rowing club. She's become known for her friendliness. After taking part in the club's activities for two years, she was nominated to be the club welcomer. She's the one that welcomes newcomers. What a brilliant role for her to be in. This has enabled her to be extra friendly, to set the tone of the welcome. In turn, she's been able to share her faith and invite her friends to find out more about Jesus.

Or how about Simon? Simon joined a new team at work during lockdown and realising that they never met socially, he initiated a weekly Zoom coffee chat. His colleagues were so grateful. He's had many opportunities to talk and listen and get to know others. Off the back of these friendships, he's even invited some of them to a course where they could find out more about Jesus.

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And then there's John. John had lived next to his neighbour, Jason, for six years. They'd waved across the fence and chatted occasionally. But then one day, they met on the street. Jason asked John if he could go to church with him. John, slightly shocked, asked him why.

Jason replied, "I've been training for a new job in the police. All the most senior officers talk about the difference that it makes being a Christian. They say that they can cope with the darkness of their jobs because of the light Jesus offers." Jason went on to say that he had been feeling low and depressed for years and that he simply wanted to find out if what the officers have been saying is true.

Of course, John welcomed him into his church. They read and discussed the gospels together. They got to know each other more. And on a wet cold night in the middle of January, Jason gave his life to Christ.

Be the kind of person that asks lots of questions. Listen well, and be prepared to answer questions when you're asked.

So now to us. Which of these comes more naturally, loving dearly or speaking clearly? Which do you need to be more intentional about? What community or communities has God called you to? Who are the people in your everyday lives, your school, your workplace, your street, your family, your sports club or your social network?

Firstly, stop and start praying for them. Invite other Christians in this community to pray with you, too. Pray for your friends, pray that you will delight in the good news of Jesus. Pray for courage to share. Then with your community in mind, ask yourself what kind of relationships are there in this community?

I find it helpful and easier to think in terms of three types of relationships: acquaintances, occasional friends, or deep friendships. How can you be more intentional in your relationships with people in your community to move them towards a deeper friendship with them? How can you love the whole community more?

We need to speak clearly as well as love dearly. So take every opportunity to share the gospel personally. And remember, it will always take courage and boldness. You'll never feel ready or prepared enough.

But as well as sharing the gospel personally, take the opportunity to communicate the gospel publicly, too. You'll never know who living near you might be interested in finding out more. You could do this by sharing content on social media, publicising an evangelistic course or church service, or even something unexpected, like organizing a community trail.

Whatever you do, remember that Christians ought to be people known for speaking clearly and loving dearly. And as we do this, it is often how other people can come to know and trust Jesus for themselves, too.

The training video is available for anyone to watch at apassionforlife.org.uk/lc2-view