Walking with Philip:
Seven Principles for Going with the Gospel

Introduction

The Text

[26] Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is a desert place. [27] And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship [28] and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. [29] And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.” [30] So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” [31] And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

[32] Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. [33] In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.”

[34] And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” [35] Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. [36] And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” [38] And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. [39] And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. [40] But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea. (Acts 8:26–40)

Two Pass-Throughs, Two Perspectives

A. This is such a beautiful story. And there’s so much here, it seems to me, that it lends itself to two pass-throughs. So, no surprise, we’re going to spend two Sundays on this.

1. The first pass-through (today) we’re going to consider things more from the perspective of Philip.
2. The second pass-through (next week) we’ll consider things more from the perspective of this Ethiopian eunuch.

    a. What this means is that this first sermon is really going to look at how you and I can be on mission for God and go with the gospel as we see Philip is doing here. We get this wonderful picture of personal evangelism.

        i. And we’ll draw out some principles from this for ourselves as we try, by God’s grace, to do the same.

    b. And then the second sermon is really going to look at how a person gets closer to God. How do you go from distant and outside to getting on the in with God and

finding fullness of joy in him? How do you come to believe the gospel and grow in your faith like this Eunuch? What can you do?

i. Again, we'll draw out some principles from this for ourselves as we try, by God's grace, to do the same.

B. So for this morning, then, the title of this sermon is Walking with Philip: Seven Principles for Going with the Gospel.

1. These seven principles are really my seven points, and I'll bring them out for you one-by-one . . . starting now . . .

Principle #1: Be Ready

Are We on His Mission or Ours?

A. I'm convinced that one of the biggest issues we have with evangelism (myself included) is that, if we're honest, a lot of times we aren't even really looking for it. We're not ready.

1. We're too busy with our own lives, going our own way, driven by our own agendas. We've got jobs to work. We've got kids to feed. We've got bills to pay. We've got trips to take. We've got big plans.

B. And because of that we're not ready, nor are we even able, to hear God when he speaks and directs as he does with Philip here:

1. Look at v. 26: "Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.'"
2. Or later in v. 29: "And the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over and join this chariot.'"

a. In both instances, Philip hears and ultimately obeys. Why?

i. Because he's ready. Because he knows he belongs to God and he wants to be on mission for God—and he wants to go with the gospel to others.

C. Many of us talk about it like we want this too, but, I think often, if you really look at it, a lot of times, we want the opposite, I think.

1. We want God to get on our mission. We don't so much want to hear God, we want him to hear us. "Why isn't he answering my prayers? Why isn't he making my life all that I want it to be? Why isn't he getting with the program? He's not listening, he's not ready."

a. But, my friends, this is backwards.

D. In 2 Cor. 5 Paul is talking about what motivates him to live as an ambassador for king Jesus and here's what he says: " [14] [T]he love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one

has died for all, therefore all have died; [15] and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (vv. 14-15).

1. Or as he puts it in 1 Cor. 6: " [19] You are not your own, [20] for you were bought with a price. So glorify God . . ." (vv. 19–20).

E. "It's your name I want hallowed (not mine); it's your kingdom I want to come (not mine); it's your will I want done (not mine)!" Are we praying like that?

1. If we are, then we'll be ready to go: whenever he calls us, wherever he sends us, whatever he wants us to do.
2. But if we're not, we won't.

My Neighbor

A. I feel like God put me in a situation just this past week were I was able to work out these principles in real time. And so I'll be weaving in this story as I go . . .

B. But it was Thursday night and I had a few minutes, so I wanted to go out in the street and shoot some hoops. I have a basketball hoop I got for Father's Day a couple years ago now. It's fun.

1. To be clear, I did not hear an angel of the Lord or the Holy Spirit say to me: "Nicholas, thou shalt go outside and shooteth some hoops."

    a. I might try to tell Megan that.
    b. But the truth is: I just wanted to.

C. Nevertheless, God was going to use it, if I would be ready . . . and willing . . .

Principle #2: Be Willing

"This Is a Desert Place"

A. It's one thing to be ready. It's quite another thing to be willing, right?

1. You might be ready and listening for how God would guide . . .
2. . . . but when you hear from him, maybe it doesn't sound so good, maybe you don't really want to do it after all—maybe you're ready, but you're not willing.

B. I imagine that would have been a temptation for Philip here. Look again at v. 26: "Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' [But then notice that little comment Luke makes for us at the end there . . .] This is a desert place."

1. Now, why does Luke say that?

2. Well, I think he's trying to underscore the fact that this word from God, it wasn't all that favorable, at least on the surface. Philip was being called to go out into the desert. It's a

desert road—extending some 60 miles from Jerusalem to Gaza. It's not particularly fun or exciting. It's undesirable. It's uncomfortable.

a. One commentator puts it like this: "Old Gaza was a deserted town whose ruins lay near the now culturally Greek cities of Askalon and New Gaza. Philip might have no one to preach to on a little-traveled road that would lead by a deserted city, and after the revival in Samaria this command must seem absurd to him; but God had often tested faith through such commands (e.g., Ex 14:16; 1 Kings 17:3-4, 9-14; 2 Kings 5:10)" (IVPNTBC).

C. "What are you going to do Philip? Are you going to trust me and head out into the desert? Or are you going to stay where you're comfortable, where you've had success?"

1. Well, he goes, v. 27: "And he rose and went." He's not just ready. He's willing.

Don't Despise the Desert Road

A. But what about you? Maybe God's calling you down a desert road right now.

1. It could a hard place he's putting you in.
2. It could be a hard situation he's taking you through.

a. But whatever it is, it's a desert road. And at the end of that road, listen: there's an Ethiopian eunuch who needs the gospel. And God's got you on that road so you can get it to him.

B. So can I just encourage you: Stop grumbling about the desert and start looking for the eunuch.

1. Don't despise the desert road. God does some of his best work there—in you and through you.

C. Don't just be ready to go. Be willing . . .

My Neighbor

A. So I'm shooting hoops and I'm actually about to go in, because I've got some things to do with the kids, and then I'm going to go pick up tacos for Megan and I. But just as I'm wrapping up my neighbor comes out.

1. And, you know, sometimes I like to talk.
2. But other times I'd rather just carry on with my agenda.

a. And tonight, given the time, it's the latter. He starts his car, and I think: okay, he's on his way. But instead he's just warming it up and he comes out to chat.

B. Now, to be clear, I'm not saying this is a desert road but, on the surface, it's a minor inconvenience. I have other things to do.

1. But I guess I'll lean in and see where it goes . . .

Principle #3: Be Nice

A Gentile and a Eunuch

A. Obviously, I say that a little tongue-in-cheek. It feels like I'm talking to my kids when they're fighting in the family room. "Enough! Be nice!" But, you know, sadly, sometimes it just has to be said.

    1. Christians, even when they're trying to share their faith with others, they can be judgmental, crusty, critical, even mean.

        a. We can use our faith as a prop for our own ego and self-righteousness,
        b. when really it's meant to undermine those things and make us humble and compassionate and loving and, yes . . nice.

B. In our text, I'm thinking in particular of the fact that Philip, a Jew, is approaching a man here that he would otherwise, I would imagine, keep a good distance away from.

A Gentile

A. For one thing this guy is an Ethiopian. This means he's from Africa, probably a black-skinned man, more than likely a Gentile.

    1. Just so we're clear: Ethiopia in the ancient world here actually corresponds to the upper Nile region, located somewhere around modern day Sudan.

        a. It was the southernmost edge of the known world at the time. Indeed, the earliest reference to Ethiopia is found in Homer's Odyssey where he refers to the place as "the ends of the earth" (1.23).

B. Gentiles, you recall, came to be despised in many ways, by the Jews. They would make you unclean, so they thought. Better keep your distance.

A Eunuch

A. But, there's another layer to this as well. Because the man is not just a Gentile, he's a eunuch—which (though it's a bit awkward to our modern sensibilities) means, of course, that he's been castrated. His manhood has been removed. This is no good. It's not fun.

    1. But, interestingly, it's actually due to his high position in the Ethiopian courts. If you noticed there in v. 27, this man is in charge of the treasury of the queen of Ethiopia.

        a. In the ancient world, if you were to be in service of the royal family, as it were, if you were going to be especially close to them, a lot of times you would need to be castrated—to remove any threat of sexual temptation or the possibility of you establishing your own dynasty with offspring and things—so they could better trust you.

B. Well, that stinks for this poor guy, we might think, but what's the big deal for Philip with this?

    1. Well, if you know OT law, you know that castrated males were not permitted into the inner courts of the temple. They shall not "enter the assembly of the LORD," Deut. 23:1 says.

C. In the OT there are all these laws about who can and cannot come in and things, and there's a lot of suggestions as to why, but there really is a basic message at the bottom of it all.

    1. It's simply that God is holy and we're not. We're sinners. And, as such, we can't just walk into his presence. We deserve his judgment, not his favor.

        a. And so these physical blemishes on the eunuch become pictures of more spiritual realities. The imperfect can't come in.

            i. All of this leads one commentator to conclude that this eunuch, therefore, represents "the ultimate outsider, not even capable of circumcision should he desire it, and inadmissible to the temple" (PNTC).

A Brother?!

A. And so, given such facts—that this man is both a Gentile and a eunuch—it is almost unthinkable that Philip would have initiated such a connection with him were it not for both the transforming work of the gospel in his own heart and life and the clear prompting of the Holy Spirit in this moment.

B. When you get grace, it makes you (for lack of a better word . . .) nice.

    1. No one's off limits, no one's too dirty, no one's too far gone. You have compassion for the outsider, concern for the despised, hope for the sinner. Love wells up in your heart.
    2. Because you realize you're really no different. And God, in Jesus, by grace, has brought you near. Who are you to then turn and try to keep another out?

        a. It's as Paul writes in Rom. 15:7 when he's exhorting Jew and Gentile Christian to "play nice" with one another: "[W]elcome one another as Christ has welcomed you . . . ."

C. So when the word comes from the Holy Spirit, "I want you to go"—"Go over and join this chariot" (v. 29)—Philip doesn't object. He runs right up to him. He gets it.

    1. Jesus said we'd be bringing the good news of the cross to the "end of the earth" (Acts 1:8)—well, let's get to it then. Let's go after Ethiopia!

My Neighbor

A. So my neighbor and I begin to talk and, obviously, it's much different than Philip and this eunuch.

    1. He's not my enemy or an outsider to me or anything like that, he's a friend.

2. But he is quite different from me. He's a bit older. He's way into Harleys and the biker lifestyle. He's got tats up and down.

    a. I think it's cool, but I imagine there are some Christians out there who might throw shade for that and look down on him or something.
    b. But it shouldn't matter. God loves this brother. I should too.

Principle #4: Be Brave

An Intimidating Man

A. The bottom line is: it would be scary to do what Philip is doing here—not just because this guy is way outside his social circle in a religious sense, but because he's also clearly a man of great wealth and power.

    1. He's an officer in the royal court.
    2. He's riding in a chariot, at a time when most everyone else would either walk or, at best, ride an animal. This guy's getting the royal treatment.
    3. And he's reading from a scroll. Very few could have such a thing due to how expensive they were.

        a. So here is a man of remarkable influence and means, and Philip just going to crash in on his chariot and interrupt him like this? It would be intimidating. It would take courage.

B. And it always does when you're trying to share the gospel, doesn't it? No matter who you're talking to. It's scary.

    1. You're worried about sounding stupid, or offending someone you love, or getting persecuted, or whatever it may be.

A Sovereign God

A. But, in our text, we see why we can be brave, don't we? We can speak boldly because God is with us. Look at how he's orchestrating this situation with Philip and the eunuch.

    1. Philip is not on his own here. God has set him on the road. God has brought him to this chariot. God is preparing the heart of this man, as we'll soon see, he's reading Isa. 53 in this very moment, for goodness sake. God is going to give Philip the words to say.

        a. God is at work. This is first his mission before it's ever ours.

            i. We don't have to have it all figured out in advance. We don't have to be ready for every possible objection.
            ii. Our job is to be faithful, obedient, and brave. He'll do the rest.

My Neighbor

A. So as my neighbor and I are continuing our chat, I sense a growing conviction.

    1. I've been preparing a sermon on sharing the gospel, God are you calling me to share in some way with him? Give me the courage!

Principle #5: Be Relevant

One Gospel, Many Ways

A. Too often, in our evangelism, it seems to me, we are prone to come in with our own message and agenda and we get so focused on "sharing the gospel" that we miss the person right in front of us.

    1. We have a method or a presentation we've memorized and we've got to get it out.

B. But the Bible's portrayal of evangelism is much more flexible and fluid and contextualized.

    1. In the NT, believe it or not, we're never given a single gospel outline that we must share. We see the same basic truths, but they're brought out in many different ways depending upon the people they're trying to reach.

C. Consider the way this works out in Jesus' ministry throughout the gospel of John, for example:

    1. To the woman at the well, he speaks of himself as the giver of "living water" (John 4:10). I see that you're thirsty, that you're looking for something, you'll find it in me.

    2. To the hungry crowds in the wilderness, he speaks of himself as "the bread of life" (John 6:35). I see that you're hungry, you want food, but I wonder if you realize the thing that will really satisfy your soul is found in me and what I'm about to do for you on the cross: "[T]he bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (v. 51).

    3. To the man born blind, he speaks of himself as "the light of the world" (John 9:5). This man is not only blind in his eyes, he is blind at the deepest level, in his heart. And Jesus has come to shine light and give sight there!

    4. To those in front of Lazarus' tomb, he speaks of himself as "the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). The shadow of death that hangs over all humanity because of our sin, Jesus has come to remove. And in him we can have everlasting life, hope beyond the grave.

D. Don't you see? Though it's always the same gospel, it never comes out in the same way!

    1. He tailors his message to his audience—to help them see how relevant the gospel really is.

        a. It touches things they are really concerned with.
        b. It answers questions they are really asking.
        c. And it shows how he is the solution to it all!

E. And it's no different with the way the early church went about evangelizing. We see it with Peter, with Stephen, with Paul. And, of course, we see it here with Philip and this Ethiopian Eunuch.

1. When the Eunuch is seated in his chariot reading from Isa. 53, Philip doesn't interrupt this man's train of thought so that he can recite his memorized outline. No!

2. He meets this man right where he's at and preaches the gospel from there.

    a. He hears him reading from Isaiah and he opens with a question: "Do you understand what you are reading?" (v. 30). He wants to talk about what the guy is thinking about.
    b. And only then, do we read that "Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35).

        i. He didn't begin with his own favorite Scripture list.
        ii. He began right where that man was, attempting to answer the questions he was actually asking in that moment (cf. v. 34).

            (1) He wanted to know—"What's Isa. 53 about?"—so that's what Philip used as his starting point, because it would be relevant to him.

"Pre-Evangelism"

A. What this means is you and I actually need to do a lot more listening in our evangelism.

1. You might call it "pre-evangelism"—it's the stuff we do before we share so that when we share we share effectively.

    a. It's where you ask questions, and you truly listen to a person, and you show concern for their concerns.
    b. And then you seek to connect the dots to Jesus. But now it comes in a way that seems relevant to them addressing the stuff they're thinking and dealing with. It's the gospel in their vernacular.

B. This is what Francis Schaeffer is referring to when he says: "If I have only an hour with someone, I will spend the first fifty-five minutes asking them questions and finding out what is troubling their heart and mind, and then in the last five minutes I will share something of the truth" (As quoted in Gospel Fluency, 175).

1. That's it! That's not only a great practice for counseling or discipling or things like this . . . it's a great practice for evangelism.

My Neighbor

A. So I'm talking with my neighbor, and I'm asking a lot of questions.

1. And I learn more about the discouragement he's been facing lately because of his hand—he'd severely injured it and it's not getting better and he can't ride his Harley or work or do a lot of the things he loves.
2. He's telling me that the next day he's going to the doc and they're going to discuss two surgeries he may have to do. It's hard.

    a. And I ask about it, not just because I want to evangelize, but because I care, because God cares.

B. But, don't you see, now I have a sense of what he's dealing with, where he needs Jesus.

1. He doesn't just need a surgery.
2. He needs the Great Physician who, through the cross, can heal, not just his hand, but his heart.

Principle #6: Be Considerate

Be Brave But Not a Bulldozer

A. I'll make this one quick, but I think it's too important to pass by. A lot of times in our evangelism we can just be jerks. We get real pushy and argumentative and things like this.

1. "But Nick, you said be brave and go for it?!"
2. But be brave doesn't mean be a bulldozer. You still have to respect them and only go there if they're willing to go there.

    a. You probe and see: God are you opening doors here? But if they keep that door deadbolted, you don't go barreling through acting like it's your job to push and shove people into the kingdom. It's not!

B. In fact, why did I say you could be brave in the first place? It's because saving people is ultimately God's job not yours.

1. So the very same truth that enables your bravery should also enable your humility and courtesy. If God isn't opening doors, if they don't want to hear, let it be. Be considerate.

C. You see this in our text, I think, with the way the whole scene proceeds.

1. Philip doesn't push his way on up into the chariot, if you noticed.
2. He begins with a question about what the man is reading. The man realizes he'd love some help and invites Philip up: "And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him" (v. 31). And that invitation matters.

My Neighbor

A. So I'm talking with my neighbor. I hear his struggles and anxieties about what's coming the next day with his doctor and things.

1. And, trying not to be pushy but instead considerate, I ask him: "Would it be okay if I pray for you right now? Would that be too weird for you or would you be open to that?"

Principle #7: Be a Herald of Good News!

A. Sometimes when we think of evangelism we think of that guy standing on the side of the road with a condemning sign, screaming through a megaphone: "Repent or burn, God's anger is kindled, he's going to get you!"

    1. And, while it's absolutely true, we have to talk about the reality of sin and judgment and the need for repentance, the gospel, at the end of the day, is good news. That's what "gospel" means.

B. So to share the gospel is to share the good news of Jesus with someone.

    1. Because we've listened and we've cared and we've helped them see how Jesus connects as the answer to their deepest questions, and the satisfaction of their deepest longings, and the solution to their deepest problems—it should hit them as good news!

    2. Again, Acts 8:35: "Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus."

Why Isaiah 53?

A. Let's consider this eunuch for a moment. Why was he reading Isa. 53 and trying to figure out who this suffering servant is do you think? Why did he care so much?

B. Well, think about this man's story. (Admittedly, we have to do a bit of conjecture, but I think we can put some things together.)

    1. We know the trip from Ethiopia to Jerusalem would've been as much as a 1500 mile journey one-way. Even by chariot, this likely would have taken him a month or so.

        a. So you get a sense there's not just reverence for the God of Israel here. There's desperation.

    2. Somehow or other, when he was over there in his homeland, he felt like something was missing, like there's a hole in his heart, like the politics and the power and the money, they weren't enough to satisfy.

        a. He'd given up family, he'd given up so much to get it and it wasn't doing it.

    3. And then he hears about the God of Israel, about YHWH, and he thinks maybe, maybe here is the answer.

    4. So, likely at risk of his job, he made the trek to come worship in the temple, likely for one of the pilgrim festivals. Maybe he'd been here before, but my guess is probably not.

5. And as he approaches the holy city, he can see the temple now elevated above the horizon, and expectation is growing.

6. He gets as close as he can, parks that chariot, throws the e-brake on, hops out, and starts moving towards the temple courts.

    a. But just before he's about to enter, to his dismay, what does he discover? He can't go in. Not only is he a Gentile, he's a eunuch.

C. So what now?

1. Well, my guess is he's devastated.
2. But then, just as he's about to abandon all hope, something comes to his attention. A prophecy, in the scroll of Isaiah.

    a. Not Isa. 53 at first.
    b. But Isa. 56. It's talking about a time when God will welcome the foreigner, the Gentile, and even the eunuch.

        i. He says, the foreigners, I'm going to bring them into my house.
        ii. The eunuchs, I'm going to give them "a name better than sons and daughters; . . . an everlasting name that shall not be cut off."
        iii. The outcasts, I'm going to gather them in (vv. 3-8).

D. But how is he going to do this? How is this going to happen? I want that! So he's reading around this chapter, looking for clues.

1. And he traces the promise back to Isa. 53, where the prophet is talking about this suffering servant. He seems to be the one by whom God will accomplish such things. So he's reading about him there . . .

    a. He is innocent and pure, like a spotless lamb.
    b. But he is rejected and despised.
    c. He suffers on behalf of his people, for their sin.
    d. God lays on him the iniquity of us all.
    e. And by his wounds we can be healed!

    f. He's treated as the foreigner, the eunuch, the outcast, all so that we could be brought in!

E. And just as he's reading and contemplating such things, this strange little Jewish man comes running up alongside his chariot. "What are you reading? How can I help?"

1. So he asks him: "What is this text about? Who is this man? Is it Isaiah or someone else? Can you make sense of this for me?"

a. "Yeah, I think I can! Let me tell you about Jesus. Let me tell you about the cross. I know, brother, up to this point you've felt like the 'ultimate outsider' but today, through Jesus, God is inviting you in. He's got a name for you, a heritage, an eternal salvation!"

i. Now, perhaps, you get why by the end of our story this man goes "in his way rejoicing" (v. 39)!

My Neighbor

A. With me and my neighbor, obviously, we didn't start off talking about Scripture or Isa. 53. We started off talking about his broken-down body, and the letdown that comes with all that.

1. But you can see how Jesus and the good news he brings connects to that too, don't you?

a. Our physical frailty it gets us thinking about life and death and what really lasts and what if anything can really fix this, and bring healing. It gets you wondering what life is really about, when you can't ride your Harley anymore, when stuff isn't going the way you planned.

B. So when I asked him if I could pray, that's where the conversation immediately turned. Just that little question opened up a discussion about God.

1. He knows something's missing. He can sense there's this hole in his life. And he knows it's because he doesn't have a relationship with him. So he's softening to the idea of going to church and praying and all this. (He may even show up at Mercy Hill someday.)

2. But some of this had already been set in motion before we even started talking. He had been at a funeral a couple weeks ago and something about the service spoke to him, got him thinking.

a. And I just got to come and encourage him along the way.

3. And when I prayed, I prayed the gospel over him. Sure, I prayed that God would help heal his body, but more importantly I prayed that God would use this struggle to lead him into deeper relationship himself, and to Jesus, and help him find his deepest satisfaction in him. It was awesome.

C. This is just a simple example from the past week with my neighbor. But it's the kind of thing God wants to do with all of us all the time.

1. If you're not a Christian in this place, he wants to reach you with the gospel.

2. But if you are a Christian here, he wants you to go with the gospel. So let's go like this! Let's be ready; let's be willing; let's be nice; let's be brave; let's be relevant; let's be considerate; and let's be a herald of good news!