

Evangelizing People with Disabilities

Because there are many questions and myths about sin and disability, it is important to have a strong understanding of scripture when engaging in outreach and evangelism. For example, Jesus' disciples asked,

“Who sinned that this man is born blind?” (John 9:1-3)

Our understanding of the answer to this question will affect how we share the gospel with people affected by disabilities. Do we cast blame or shame, as the crowd did in this Bible story? Or do we see, as Jesus did, how God's glory can be revealed through a person with disability? The man was not blind because of sin, and yet he was a sinner in need of an encounter with Jesus. While it is true that we are all made in God's image (Gen 1:27), it is also true that each person is born into sin (Romans 5:12).

The man born blind saw Jesus for who he truly was and responded in worship—this is ultimately what each of us must do, regardless of our abilities and disabilities.

The Gospel and Children with Disabilities

“Do children with disabilities get a free trip to heaven?” This is a question I am sometimes asked. People may also refer to children and adults with disabilities as *holy innocents*, or *special angels*, incapable of sin and therefore they will not suffer the consequences of sin. When answering a question like this, we should look to scripture as our guide. Romans 3:23 tells us that *all* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

And on top of that, most special needs parents that I talk with would agree that their kids show plenty of evidence of being sinners. Just like everyone else, they need the opportunity to hear the gospel and receive salvation.

One of the most important things to keep in mind when sharing the gospel with children affected by disability is that it is possible! It may take some creativity and intentionality, but we can be confident that God desires every individual to know and love him (1 Tim. 2:4). We can trust the Holy Spirit to work, even in ways we don't see or understand. 1 Corinthians 2:12-13 reminds us,

“Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.”

In other words, God does not need to use a person's intellectual ability to reveal Himself—sometimes a person's thoughts are too inflated with their own importance, their own intelligence. Sometimes God doesn't even need a person's heart through which to communicate His truth—hearts are often so dry and calloused. God expresses spiritual truths and spiritual words to our spirit so that we might understand what God has to say. And that's good news!

Children often respond well to a variety of learning styles, and children with disabilities are no exception. It can be a great idea to use music or act out stories. Repetition is helpful for children of all abilities (and for adults too). You might consider telling the same Bible story in different ways—once with pictures, once by acting it out, and once with a DVD. Using Bible verses that are short or paraphrased as well as making use of simple, concrete language and object lessons can help make a biblical truth easier for children with disabilities to understand and retain. Teaching children is an amazing opportunity to engage in creative thinking!

The Gospel and Adults with Disabilities

God has called us to share the good news of the gospel with all people. And, we can do so knowing that faith is not

... primarily a matter of intellect: it involves our entire self, including our hearts and wills—our whole relationship with God. While salvation is individual, faith development involves the whole community and continues throughout the Christian life as God more fully transforms us into the image of Christ.¹

Earlier we looked at the story of the man who was paralyzed in Mark 2 and noted in verse 5 that Jesus saw the faith of the friends who brought this man to him. In this example, the gospel was made known and experienced in a community. Individuals with disabilities, especially our friends with low cognitive ability, often come to know the love of Christ as they experience being loved by others.

We are called to confidently share the truth of the gospel and trust that the Holy Spirit is at work, even if we cannot see it or fully understand it. Corrie ten Boom once wrote:

They (adults with developmental disabilities) are grown-ups and they must be treated the same way as grown-ups. The language must be plain and clear—no dogmatic talk, no arguments, only the old, old story in plain language. The best way to reach them is by love. Love means understanding (Rom. 5:5). God must lead, for without the Holy Spirit no one can bring the message to anybody. The human spirit fails, except when the Holy Spirit fills.²

Every single person on this earth needs the gospel. Just because a person is unable to respond verbally or fully articulate the gospel, we cannot doubt that the Holy Spirit is working in their heart. We do not have the privilege of understanding how the Spirit is at work in an individual's life, we must simply share the gospel. So, how can we engage adults affected by disability with the gospel? Perhaps even without using words?

Individuals with profound cognitive disabilities generally experience things relationally rather than cognitively. In this context, sharing the gospel becomes less of a transmission of knowledge and more of an experience. The gospel is experienced by belonging and being deeply loved. It is not a one-sided conversation, where one person transmits knowledge and the other receives. Rather, the transforming power of the gospel changes both individuals. People

¹ BYS Bible, p. A19.

² Corrie ten Boom, "Common Sense Not Needed: Some Thoughts about an Unappreciated Work among Neglected People," no copyright, first published 1957, Christian Literature Crusade, Fort Washington, Pennsylvania 10034, available at <http://www.gotothebible.com/HTML/commonsensenotneeded.html>.

with disabilities call us to a deeper understanding of God's love as we give and receive love from one another.

Theologian and scholar John Swinton describes his friendship with Stephen, a young man with multiple disabilities, in *Building a Church for Strangers*. In this article, Swinton writes about how Stephen loves to worship God even though,

... he doesn't know the words of the liturgy and he finds little meaning in the words of the prayers and the hymns. He simply knows chapel is a place where he can go to sing and be with his friends. He knows the word 'Jeeshuss.'³

Swinton reflects on how the mystery of God's presence in Stephen's life has changed his personal understanding of the gospel:

Something is happening in the life of this young man, God is moving in him, and I have no idea how to explain it. 'Jeeshuss' is with him, but not in the words of Scripture that are spoken, or the complexities of the liturgy that is being worked through. God is with him in a way that transcends my intellectualized worldview.... In fact, my hopeless dependence on my intellect for making sense of the world actually prevents me from even beginning to understand how God might be with him in any kind of meaningful sense. The truth is that God is more mysterious and unpredictable than I am comfortable with imagining.⁴

When the body of Christ includes people with disabilities, we witness holy moments where God's Spirit is at work, and we are in awe as God's glory is revealed through those whom we often consider the weakest among us (1Cor. 12:22).

When sharing the gospel with adults with disabilities, please remember that while you may need to present ideas in a way that is simple, the ideas themselves do not necessarily need to be simple. You can use vocabulary that is accessible but does not treat them as children. For example, the gospel message could be shared using simple phrases:

- We are sinners
- Christ died for us
- I will receive Him
- I am forgiven
- I have a place in heaven.

It is important to use age-appropriate visuals and materials. And I would encourage you to focus on the person's faith rather than their knowledge. Simple drawings can also be helpful to illustrate the gospel message.

As we humble ourselves and posture our hearts to share the gospel with those around us, I have confidence that God will equip us and present us with opportunity. We can and should adapt the gospel presentation so individuals affected by disability can comprehend it, but at the end of the day we must trust that the Holy Spirit is at work in their lives. It is a privilege and joy to see the faith of others take root and flourish!

³ John Swinton, "Building a Church for Strangers" (Journal of Religion, Disability & Health, Vol. 1. 4 (4) 2001), p. 28.

⁴ Ibid, p.28.