



SERIES STRONGER LINKS FELLOWSHIPS

Seeking Earnest Seekers

Golfers are evangelists. Sometimes this is a good thing, sometimes not. If you play the role too closely, you'll be the bore of the party, the one who drones on and on.

But we all have at least two good reasons to tell others about the game. First, we love it. That is, we enjoy it, even though it can frustrate us and humble us. It gets us outdoors, issues us a challenge, allows us time with friends, and rewards us with a memorable shot now and then.

The second reason we want to talk golf is to invite others in. This is how we came to the game. Someone shared their love with us, put a club in our hands, and gave us a pile of balls to hit. Once those balls were going airborne and somewhat straight, we were hooked. We bought our own clubs, snuck out on long evenings for extra practice, and pretty soon the game was our own. Now we love it too, and we want others to love it with us.

ARTICLE BY JEFF HOPPER

Yet there is a truth we must admit to when it comes to sharing the game. No matter how compelling we make our case, how engagingly we tell our story, we have to find the right set of ears to listen. This is someone who is not just being nice by letting us ramble on, someone playing fair in the give and take of conversation. Rather, this is someone who listens in earnest. They ask authentic questions and the discussion may very well end this way: “Well, when can you take me out? I’d love to give it a try.”

Now let’s take a step away from golf, because golfers aren’t the only evangelists in the world. If you possess a living, breathing faith in Jesus Christ, you are one of these people, too. You have a love story to tell. Your Savior saw your sinful state and died for you anyway, allowing your sins to be washed away and your unrighteousness to be swapped out for his righteousness in you. That’s a run of theology, but it’s as real as it gets. Without Jesus, we die. With him, we live. No wonder we think it’s important that others know all about this.

Just like that golfing evangelist, though, you have probably had two kinds of experiences when you’ve tried to tell your story. You’ve encountered those who give you a listen and those who really hear you.

The first group is the majority in today’s society. Occasionally you’ll find someone who brushes you off in a moment, but most people are cordial enough to let you say your piece. They may respond kindly by saying, “That’s so

good. I’m glad you’ve found something that works for you.” But they have no interest in hearing more. Their personal philosophies or current circumstances keep them from digging deeper.

The second group—those who are interested in hearing more—are what we might call earnest seekers. We find an excellent example of such a person in Acts 8.

Philip was among those chosen to serve the church earlier in Acts, but we know that when the people were scattered because of persecution in Jerusalem, Philip “went down to a city in Samaria and

proclaimed the Christ there” (Acts 8:5). Miracles surrounded Philip’s teaching as well, and people were healed and delivered and responded in faith.

Later, though, Philip was given the specific assignment to head down a road from Jerusalem to Gaza—that is, to the southwest of where he was. Before long, Philip encountered a regal commissioner, the man in charge of the treasury of the queen of the Ethiopians. We don’t find out the man’s name; we are told only of his position and that he was a eunuch (a sign of his dedicated position before the queen). Interestingly, when Philip came upon the man, he was reading Scripture. More specifically, he was reading from the prophecies of Isaiah.

“Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked the official.

“How can I, unless someone explains

it to me?” the official replied. And he invited Philip up into his chariot to sit with him and help him understand the passage.

This Ethiopian official earnestly desired to know the truth behind what he was reading. By the time he and Philip parted ways, the Ethiopian had chosen to be baptized in faith.

Now imagine what this might look like in a setting familiar to you: your club.

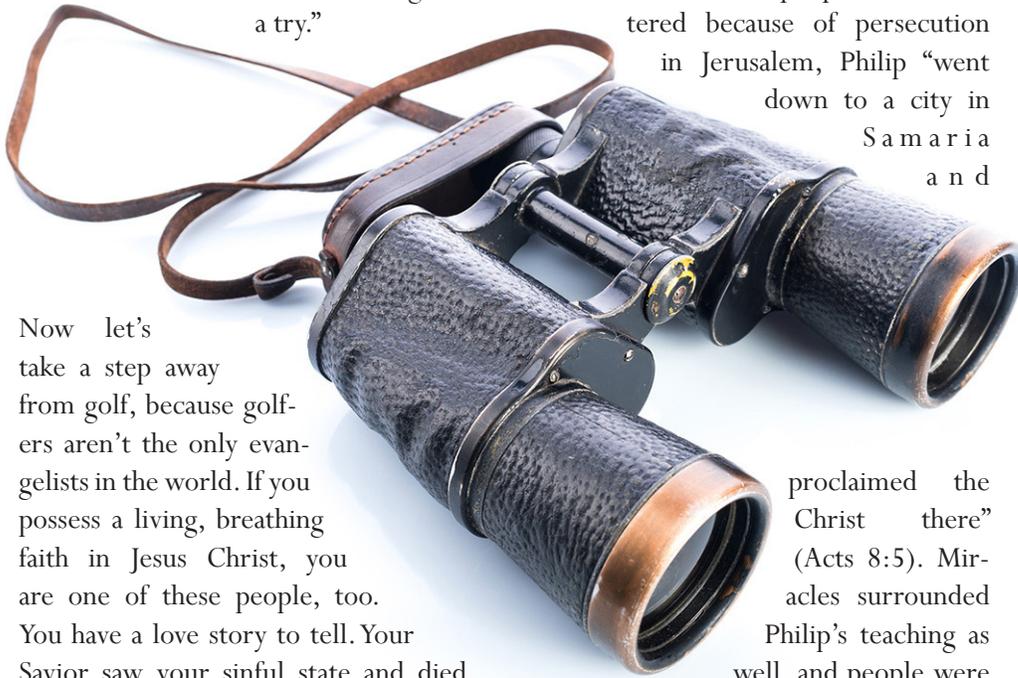
Perhaps some time ago, you gained permission to leave some Links Players magazines on a table in the locker room where you play golf. One morning you walk in to see a member you know by name sitting in one of those leather chairs where the TV replays yesterday’s tour rounds. He has the magazine in his hands and is reading with apparent interest. You say, “Hi Pete, what are reading?”

It’s true. A lot of guys might be hesitant to answer, especially if they’ve come to the part of an article where a player explains their relationship with Jesus. You might get something like this, “Oh, just a magazine that was lying here.”

But if this story took the shape of Acts 8, your member friend might say, “This magazine where everybody keeps talking about their religion. I don’t know what to make of it.” This might be the answer of someone who is willing to talk more, especially if you were to say, “Well, I’m the one who put the magazine there. I’d be happy to tell you what I know about where they’re coming from.”

Hypothetical scenes can feel contrived, no doubt, but Acts 8 was not hypothetical. There are earnest seekers in the world. When we know how to recognize them, we stand a good chance of finding a warm reception for the gospel message that is our story. Here, then, are some things to keep in mind when looking for earnest seekers.

Looks can be deceiving. Earnest



seekers are not always the religious looking people. Those who seemed to have their spiritual acts together in Jesus' time were often the ones most opposed to his message. Meanwhile others, like Zacchaeus, seemed so far away in the morning and were brought into salvation by afternoon! Maybe a good reminder here comes from God's words to Samuel when the prophet went to Bethlehem to anoint a future king: "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." Pray that as you open your eyes toward those who are ready to hear the gospel, you see them where their heart is.

Circumstances can create openness. Many pastors will tell you that they prefer officiating funerals to weddings. Why? Because people attending funerals are more spiritually attuned than those attending weddings. Death brings us to a place of sober consideration of our own lives before God. Other circumstances do this as well: Marital struggles. Legal tangles. Financial trouble. Wayward children. When a friend is dealing with difficulty, you may find a willing ear for this question, "Would it help you to hear where I turn at times like this?"

Listening really matters. Earlier we spoke of the fair play that others will show when they listen to your golf stories even though they are not that interested. This fair play works in both directions. Are you one who is willing to listen to what others are saying? We forget that when other people tell us the details of their current situations, they may be supplying us with the insight we need to ask questions that lead them to interest in Jesus. A good listener (and observer) can move a conversation in a Godward direction by picking up on topical clues, just as Paul addressed the Athenians in Acts 17 in connection with their alter to "the unknown god."

Relationship still wins the day. Both Paul and Peter wrote about the importance of winning the respect of outsiders in the way we live our lives (with diligent work and consistent integrity). You are more likely to find earnest seekers among people who have seen that you are earnest yourself, taking your faith seriously but also showing the grace that Jesus has shown you (see the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant in Matthew 18:21-35).

You don't have to do all the talking. Some believers are hesitant to start a conversation about faith because they fear being asked questions they can't answer. Remember that you are only looking for people whose hearts and minds are open to Jesus. Once you find them, your next best step may be to point the way to a good church, a helpful video, or a passage of reading. Let the teachers teach and you can keep the conversation flowing around what they have to say.

Pearls and swine. One of Jesus' harsher metaphors came in the Sermon on the Mount, when he said that we should not cast our pearls before swine. Get this: Jesus was calling those who fiercely reject our message pigs! If this seems like name-calling, Jesus' intention was to instruct his disciples not to waste their time and effort on those who have no interest and who may even be antagonistic toward good news. To insist on "bringing the goods" when the goods aren't wanted may do more harm than good—to you. Walk away from those who don't want to hear and pray that another time is right for this hard heart.

Just a stop along the way. While every evangelist hopes to be the one who sees the harvest—a person who gives their life to Jesus in that hour—you may be called only to play a part in a person's journey to salvation. It has been said that

the full gospel message should include a specific invitation, but this does not mean the invitation will be met with acceptance at the time. There is always work to be done, which is the planting and reaping that Paul wrote of to the Corinthians; but as he concluded, God brings the growth. And he does so in his time, no matter how antsy we are.

Offer to pray. Even if you don't seem to be receiving an initially receptive response, you can always offer to pray for your seeker, either right then or in the days ahead. But here's the thing: Be specific about what you will pray for. This way, as the Lord answers, it is more likely that the seeker will recognize the answer, which can lead to a response of faith.

You may be reading this article with a tinge of concern. Perhaps you have been warned about "those seeker sensitive churches." Never mind all that. We're not talking about watering down the message for the sake of making friends, if that's your worry. What we're saying is that when you know how to find people who "have ears to hear" (Jesus' description of a receptive audience), you position yourself to share the gospel in a way that may lead another to faith in Jesus. No church opposes that.

One thing that should compel us to seek seekers and share our faith is the hope and joy of celebration. Jesus said that when a sinner repents, there is great rejoicing in heaven. The father who welcomes the prodigal son in Jesus' unforgettable parable throws a party for his beloved one. When we are near those who turn from sin and give their hearts to Christ, we get to share in that rejoicing. It's a wonderful event! 🎉

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