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Welcome back to week two of our Stranger Exchanges series. Let me just recap what we talked about last week to make sure everyone is caught up and on the same page. We talked about the fact that we all will have some strange exchanges in our lives. Some of you have already had some really odd ones. Sometimes the conversations we have to have are strange, awkward, and sometimes even difficult. We talked last week about how, at times, they are also necessary. Maybe you were made to be used by God in a strange conversation, just like Esther was. We saw how God called Samuel, a 12-year-old boy, to a much more difficult conversation than most of us will ever have. He had to tell his mentor, the man who had raised him as his own, that God had had enough of him and his kids. God was going to take the priesthood from them. Samuel stood tall for that conversation, and he was blessed by God for it.

I know that sometimes we don’t want to have certain conversations, because we’re embarrassed. Even though the conversation would be good for the other person, we worry more about our being embarrassed than what’s good for them. I remember one time that I wish someone had said something to me, but he was embarrassed, so he didn’t.

[Author note: I shared a personal story from a time I wish someone had told me something but didn’t, because they were embarrassed. Use your own illustration here.]

At my first church, I was asked to fill in for the pastor, who was sick, so I did. I was dressed in my suit, because that’s what we wore every week, feeling like I was looking good. It was a nice suit, and it would have looked good, except there was one problem. My zipper was down. I had gone to the bathroom just before service and apparently forgot something.

I went up on stage and did announcements and came back down to my seat. There were a couple songs, and then I went back up again. I preached for 40 minutes, which was standard there. I came down after preaching, and Sarah – who had come in late – leaned over and said, “Jeff, your zipper is down. I couldn’t tell you, because you were already preaching when I saw it.” One of our teenagers, who was sitting by Sarah, leaned over and said, “I saw it during announcements, but I thought you’d notice. I didn’t want to say anything, because I didn’t want you to think I was being weird.” Jackson could have stopped me from looking ridiculous, but he was worried I’d think he was weird. He was embarrassed, so he said nothing. I wish he had spoken up, because it would have been far less embarrassing for me if he had. Sadly, he put himself before me that day.

[End Story]

We’ll all have opportunities to speak up that may make us uncomfortable or even embarrassed. No one is exempt. Sometimes God brings you to a conversation you wish you never had to have. As Christians, I believe it’s important be courageous in the face of fear and difficulty and have those conversations. If we don’t have them, the truth may go unspoken. The truth is always important, but we must recognize that there are critical times when an unspoken truth can be so damaging that we must speak up regardless of fears or consequences.

There are many things I love about Jesus. One of the things I love about Him is that He gets it. He understands everything you’ll ever go through. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that Jesus went through the same trials and faced the same types of temptations as us, but He didn’t sin. He did the right thing in those trials. But He experienced the pain, the emotions, the fears, and even the awkwardness. He gets it! He understands what it’s like to be thrust into strange, awkward exchanges. He knows what it’s like to be put in a place where the truth had to be spoken, knowing that people were going to get upset. They weren’t going to like it, and they weren’t going to like Him. I want to look at one of the stronger examples of that today.

John 8:21-25 (NLT)

*"Later Jesus said to them again, “I am going away. You will search for me but will die in your sin. You cannot come where I am going.” The people asked, “Is he planning to commit suicide? What does he mean, ‘You cannot come where I am going’?” Jesus continued, “You are from below; I am from above. You belong to this world; I do not. That is why I said that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I AM who I claim to be, you will die in your sins.” “Who are you?” they demanded. Jesus replied, “The one I have always claimed to be."*

There are two things here that would be seen as strange and unacceptable, both back then and now. First, Jesus told them that they would die in their sins if they didn't believe in Him. They didn’t like it then; people don’t like to hear that now. It’s a critical truth, though. This is one of the things the Jewish religious leaders got so angry about with Him. It’s the next thing in there, though, that really upset them. He called Himself I AM. Do you know where that comes from? It’s how God introduced Himself to Moses in Exodus 3. When Moses asked for His name, God said, “I AM.” Jesus called Himself that, meaning He called Himself God. They were a little suspicious about what He said, so they asked for clarification. Even after He explained it, they didn’t get it.

He continued having this conversation with them. Many did believe, but many of the religious leaders were anywhere from annoyed to angry. Jesus didn’t bow out, though. He kept talking. He told them that if they believed in Him, they would be free: free from sin and free from the Law. They didn't think they’d ever been anything but free, because they were Abraham’s descendants, though. They got more upset, but Jesus pressed on. They eventually accused Him of being demon possessed, because they did not like the truth He was speaking. We’ll pick up there.

John 8:52-59 (NLT)

*"The people said, “Now we know you are possessed by a demon. Even Abraham and the prophets died, but you say, ‘Anyone who obeys my teaching will never die!’ Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?” Jesus answered, “If I want glory for myself, it doesn’t count. But it is my Father who will glorify me. You say, ‘He is our God,’ but you don’t even know him. I know him. If I said otherwise, I would be as great a liar as you! But I do know him and obey him. Your father Abraham rejoiced as he looked forward to my coming. He saw it and was glad.” The people said, “You aren’t even fifty years old. How can you say you have seen Abraham?” Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, before Abraham was even born, I AM!” At that point they picked up stones to throw at him. But Jesus was hidden from them and left the Temple."*

They didn’t like that He seemed to have placed Himself and people who follow Him above Abraham. Abraham was the father of the Jewish race. God promised Abraham that he would be the father to many and that through his descendants, the entire world would be blessed. He is still a significant figure in both the Jewish and Christian faiths. To a Jew, though, no one can place themselves above Abraham. It’s God, then it’s Abraham under Him. Since Abraham had died, even though he believed in God, to say that believing in Jesus would make someone live forever was unacceptable.

Jesus turned aside their rebuke and told them that Abraham looked forward to seeing Him, and he did see it, and he was glad. They’re confused. Jesus was around 30-years-old at this time, and Abraham had lived and died over 2,000 years previous. The more Jesus talked, the more they thought poorly of Him. They thought He was confused, then rude, then demon possessed, then crazy. Finally, they thought He was blasphemous. They thought He was being disrespectful to God by claiming to be God. Of course, He was claiming to be God, because it was true.

He answered them and said, “before Abraham was I AM.” There’s that name for God again. The people were enraged. They wanted to kill Him. Sometimes we come to conversations where we think, “If I tell him that, he’ll kill me!” It’s hyperbole, of course. But this wasn’t an exaggeration. They really did want to kill Him, and as we know, they ultimately did have Him crucified on a cross. Jesus knew all of this would come to pass. He’s God. He knew before He had that conversation in John 8 that it would upset people so much that they would set out to betray and kill Him from that day forward. But He also knew the truth: without believing in Him, there is no forgiveness for sins, or things we do to break God’s laws. Through Him is eternal life, and without Him is eternal death. So, He embraced the conversations.

Some of you know how awkward it can be to share the same truths Jesus shared. Going into sharing your faith, you may be afraid. The conversation may be awkward. People may get upset with you. When you speak up and share the truth about Jesus, sin, and eternity, there may be some pushback. That’s probably why a lot of Christians avoid bringing it up altogether. Here’s the thing, though: you’ve been created to do just that, and you’ve been commanded to do it.

Matthew 28:18-20 (NLT)

*"Jesus came and told his disciples, “I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”"*

Jesus calls all believers to have faith conversations with people. We’re supposed to go and tell them about Jesus, to lead them to faith in Jesus, to encourage them to obey Him and be baptized, and eventually teach them to obey everything He said. That is strange exchange after strange exchange. Have you ever tried to lovingly tell a Christian friend or family member something the Bible says that is contrary to the way they live? It can get tense and awkward. Yet, Jesus said we are to continue teaching those who have gotten saved, those who have accepted Jesus as God, everything He said and to obey all His commands.

We let ourselves get talked out of sharing our faith and holding each other accountable, and then we make excuses for it that make us look noble. “Well, I just don’t want to push my beliefs on anyone.” Or, “I think it’s best to not discuss religion or politics.” Or even, “Who am I to tell someone what to do or believe? I’m not supposed to judge.” These are all weak excuses meant to make ourselves feel better about abdicating our responsibility. The truth is that if when we don’t have these conversations, we choose ourselves over God, and we also choose ourselves over our friends.

We might even say something like, “I know my friend needs Jesus, or he or she will be separated from God for all eternity. But I just love hanging out with them so much. I don’t want to jeopardize my ability to feel fulfilled in our relationship, so I’ll just stay quiet. I’ll let them go to hell, so I can keep going to their house."

You’ve probably never actually said that exact thing, but perhaps you’ve lived it. Perhaps you’ve stayed quiet, because you are afraid of the awkwardness of speaking up. Perhaps you’ve kept quiet, because you’re afraid of possible fallout if you speak up. Perhaps you’ve stayed quiet, because you love your friendship more than you love friend. It’s time to stand up, speak out, and embrace the stranger exchanges, especially when it comes to the truth about Jesus.

Let’s pray.