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Sunday School That Clicks

Lesson 1 / March 7, 2010

# Finding the Sacred Intersection

for use as  
**STEP 1** 

Lesson 1  
**Focus:**

Our obedience to God  
is a witness to others.

Lesson 1  
**Bible Basis:**

Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1-9.

**An atheist and a Christian debate if Christianity is “good” for the world, and we begin a discussion of the Book of Jonah.**

**OPENING STORY:** [read it aloud to your class, or make copies and pass it around]

## IS CHRISTIANITY GOOD FOR THE WORLD?

When atheists and Christians debate one another, quite often it's more of a yelling match than a stimulating discussion. However, a refreshing exception has recently appeared on the scene.

Two men representing polar-opposite worldviews have been asking each other the question, “Is Christianity good for the world?” On one side is Christopher Hitchens, a renowned and outspoken atheist and author of *God Is Not Great*, and on the other side in this dialogue is his friend Douglas Wilson, a conservative Christian and pastor of Christ Church in Moscow, Idaho.

The discussion began a couple of years ago as a correspondence between the two published in *Christianity Today*, which then led to a book they authored together, which was, in turn, supported by a debate tour. Now their discussion has become a reality-TV-type of documentary called *Collision*, available on DVD, which gives a behind-the-scenes look at the debate. Of course, both men are interviewed extensively throughout the program.

While Hitchens insists that no thinking person could possibly believe in Christianity, he seems to respect the intellectual rigor that Wilson brings to the debate. While Hitchens thinks it's dangerous to consider the “will of God” when making personal decisions, he appreciates that Wilson does so without apology. Hitchens says of his Christian friend, “I [always] know where I am with him.”

Wilson teases Hitchens by frequently telling him he “would have made a very good Puritan” because his atheist friend does apparently have a well-defined sense of right and wrong—and lives his life accordingly. But Wilson also reminds his friend that Hitchens's innate sense of right and wrong is simply the “coherent morality” he is borrowing from the Judeo-Christian worldview.

Lesson 1  
**Memory Verse**

The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

—Jonah 3:5

Despite their growing friendship, Hitchens clearly defines the stakes in the battle: “One of us not just has to lose the argument but has to admit real moral defeat. I think it should be him.” Even so, Hitchens has conceded that if he had the power to drive religious belief from the world, he wouldn’t do it. But the reason why isn’t presented in the documentary. Could it be that that the articulate witness of a caring Christian is making a difference in this atheist’s thinking?

Today’s lesson focus states, “Our obedience to God is a witness to others.” We can certainly see this in Douglas Wilson’s interactions with Christopher Hitchens. In his case, he’s not only entering into a dialogue with a non-believer, but he’s doing so in an articulate, caring, and respectful way. Wilson seems to fully understand the nuances of his opponent’s non-biblical worldview and is willing to engage that worldview at multiple levels.

In regard to obedience, Wilson is clearly following the commands of Peter and Paul when it comes to witnessing: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Pet. 3:15), and “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Col. 4:6).

So what lessons in obedience can we learn from this debate to make us more effective witnesses for Christ?

Certainly serving people as Jesus would in ways that are practical and meaningful to them is a good first step. In Wilson’s case, his non-Christian friend’s needs are mostly intellectual—and so that is where he meets him. For others, it might be tutoring, baby-sitting, buying a needed bag of groceries, or simply having a listening ear. At the same time, of course, we are identifying with Christ in creative ways so that people make the connection between our serving obedience and God’s love for them in Christ.

[Form small groups and discuss the following ideas.]

- ▶ Why is yelling at or being belligerent to people who do not believe in Jesus or the Bible not a good way to “win them over” to the Gospel?
- ▶ Describe the most meaningful expression of faith that someone made to you, an action that met a significant need in your life. Especially think of this happening before you were a Christian, but it could also be something that happened after you became a Christian.
- ▶ If you were a non-Christian, what meaningful act of kindness toward you might make you think twice about Christianity?
- ▶ If you were a non-Christian, how would you like your questions about the faith to be addressed? What would make you feel safe enough to even ask your questions?
- ▶ In what ways has the obedient serving of others in your life affected the way you view God and His love for you?

Now let’s take a look at the story of Jonah, who, after a period of initial resistance, chose to be obedient to God and thus made a significant impact on an entire city.

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**News Sources:**

<http://www.breakpoint.org/commentaries/14532-collision>

<http://www.crosswalk.com/11626459/>

<http://www.collisionmovie.com/>

[When you are finished with the questions, go on to Step 2 in your *Adult Teacher’s Guide*, where you read the Scripture and begin to discuss it.]

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# Finding the Sacred Intersection

for use as  
**STEP 4** 

Lesson 1  
**Focus:**

Our obedience to God  
is a witness to others.

Lesson 1  
**Bible Basis:**

Jonah 1:1-3; 3:1-9.

## YOUR DEEP GLADNESS AND THE WORLD'S DEEP NEED

**T**he most common complaint about Christians from people outside of the church is the apparent hypocrisy of Christians—or perhaps it's better to say the hypocrisy of apparent Christians. Of course, the church has many authentic believers who are living out their faith in very practical and meaningful ways within their respective communities. As those who are “outside of the kingdom” or “not far from the kingdom” observe these selfless people, non-believers are often compelled to take a closer look at the claims of Christ that drive His followers.

Sometimes serving people in the name of Jesus can seem a bit awkward because we're called to do things that may not come naturally to us—like helping to build a church in a village in Mexico when we usually spend our days behind a desk or running kids to school. Nevertheless, we may find out things about ourselves, and how God works through us, when we take a chance on doing something we don't usually do.

But of course our most effective areas of ministry are going to be in those areas where we have developed gifts. Very few of us could probably take on the intellectual rigor of the Hitchens vs. Wilson debates. But perhaps one or two of us could lead a small group. Or take a casserole over to a new neighbor. Or become a foster parent for a child during a time of crisis.

Frederick Beuchner [BEEK-nur] has said that the will of God for each of us is to find “the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need.” As we determine and develop our gifts, and find those places where those gifts can meet significant and legitimate needs, we will have a much better idea of what it means to be a better witness through our obedience—that is, serving people in the name of Jesus.

Lesson 1  
**Memory Verse**

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—Jonah 3:5

[Activity]

Return to the small groups you had in Step 1 and discuss the following questions:

- ▶ **Into which category do your gifts best fit: Mental, Manual, or Management? Explain your answer.**
- ▶ **What do you think will be some of the most significant needs in your church and community in the next few weeks?**
- ▶ **Where are you likely to find the “sacred intersection” where your most satisfying gifts could address a significant need?**
- ▶ **When you exercise your gifts out of love and obedience to Christ, how do you think the people affected by your actions change their view of God?**

Close the class in prayer, asking God to give your students the courage to step out and exercise their gifts in such a way that draws people into the Kingdom.

(David C. Cook is not affiliated with and does not endorse any Website listed on these pages.)