

THE REAL “STRANGER DANGER”

Five weeks to help you overcome your fears of engaging with unfamiliar people.

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1. Introduction

Back in the 1980s, panic about the potential threats posed by random passersby swept across the United States and throughout much of the Western world. Broadly labeled "stranger danger" by the popular press, adherents cautioned others, especially children, to avoid speaking to or interacting with strangers, since they could, well, be dangerous.

Concerns about "stranger danger" came from an understandable, if also somewhat ultimately misguided, place. A handful of widely publicized kidnappings and other crimes against children caught the nation's attention in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Even though experts pointed out that these incidents were the exceptions rather than the rule, children were repeatedly cautioned not to talk to or otherwise interact with people they did not know.

The "stranger danger" panic, sadly, led to many wrongful convictions and unsolved crimes, and even as some of these wrongs have been righted in the intervening decades, we are still largely conditioned to be skeptical of the intentions of unfamiliar people. And to be sure, not every person you have yet to meet is a best friend in waiting; just like the people you know, some of them are rude, uncouth, or perhaps even dangerous. But do we really believe that many, most, or even all other people aside from the few we know are out to get us?

Or think of it this way. Undoubtedly, the hysteria around "stranger danger" saved some number of lives. Some crimes of opportunity were probably avoided because a child didn't accept a piece of candy from an unknown adult, or because an elderly person didn't open the front door when someone unfamiliar knocked. But "stranger danger" came with real costs, too. Aside from the harmful impacts to the judicial system and to individual lives mentioned earlier, Americans writ large continue to have significant difficulty engaging with strangers, even the friendly ones. One author has noted how "epidemic levels of loneliness in the United States and United Kingdom [affect] everyone, but especially the young, who, in a remarkable development, report levels of loneliness that surpass even those of the elderly." (Keohane xv-xvi) This is true despite increasing engagement with social media and increasing urbanization.

Aside from the impacts on our collective social lives, fear of strangers has harmed our spiritual lives, too, as we have largely turned inward and neglected our call to share the good news of Jesus. This unfortunate tendency is clearly reflected in downward demographic trajectories, both within Churches of Christ specifically and within the broader Christian world more generally.

In this lesson series, we will discuss the reasons why we simply don't engage with strangers much, as well as some of the reasons why we should. We will also look into practical tips and suggestions that will help us feel more comfortable meeting new people, establishing deeper relationships with them, and hopefully laying the groundwork for us to share Jesus with them.

For now, let's close with one story from scripture and one encouragement to you as we begin this study. The story is found in John 4 and begins with Jesus entering a small Samaritan town, where he enters into a most unexpected conversation.

Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water."

He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back."

“I have no husband,” she replied.

Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

“Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

“Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.” (John 4:4-26 NIV)

Notice in this passage that while Jesus does surprise the woman at the well--and the reader!--with his request for a drink of water, he did not go out of his way to find the woman so he could evangelize, nor did he engage in any sort of ostentatious public preaching or street corner shenanigans. A tired, thirsty man simply asked for something to cool down with, and the door was opened for a meaningful conversation.

Now, here is the first lesson for us, which we need to keep in mind as we move forward through this series: when it comes to anything related to evangelism, we seem to make things more difficult than they need to be. We envision the worst case scenario for every interaction and try to devise foolproof strategies to prevent it from happening. (See also: dating advice.) In short, we might be just fine speaking authentically to others about the new Marvel movie or the game last night or maybe even family issues and political views, but if or when the conversation turns toward religion, we turn into robots and hide behind canned approaches. This strikes the other person as a bit odd, more than likely, and we never make it to a Bible study or a church visit, much less leading that person to Jesus.

So remember to be yourself--seriously. The advice in the upcoming lessons is intended to encourage action and spark new ideas, not to replace your God-given discernment of how to interact with people. Our goal is simply to add the necessary tools to your kit so that you will be ready whatever the season (2 Timothy 4:2)!

Reflection Questions:

1. On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your comfort in speaking with strangers on a daily basis--not to evangelize, but just to be friendly, sociable, or professional?
2. Has that number increased or decreased in the last two or three years? Why do you think that is?
3. When and where was the last meaningful conversation (i.e., not just buying something at the store) you had with someone that you didn't already know?

2. Breaking Down Our Misperceptions

Before we start building up good habits and attitudes toward engaging with strangers, we first need to break down some of the bad ones that we have already developed. Whether we realize it or not, we all carry preconceptions about the world, our place in it, and the innate nature of the others sharing it with us. Being honest about these patterns of thought will help us figure out our areas of potential growth as both friends and evangelists. Not all of these cognitive distortions will apply to every reader of this chapter, but it is very, very likely that at least one does, so let's think for a while about how our brains respond to the unfamiliar--and why they do so.

Before we get into the academic research, though, we need to see what scripture has to say about our capacity to evaluate strangers. One of the most powerful passages in this regard is found in Hebrews 13:2, which admonishes us, "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it." How strange that we wouldn't even recognize angels! Yet there is certainly precedent, as this verse calls back to a story in Genesis in which Abraham is visited by a trio of mysterious travelers.

The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant."

"Very well," they answered, "do as you say."

So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread."

Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

"Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him.

"There, in the tent," he said.

Then one of them said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, "After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?"

Then the Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son."

Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh."

But he said, "Yes, you did laugh." (Genesis 18:1-15)

Fortunately, Abraham did a good job of being a generous host, even before he realized his guests' divine nature. But the fact remains that neither he nor his wife Sarah initially figured out that their visitors weren't human! That alone should be a caution to us that our ability to accurately gauge the unfamiliar may not be as finely tuned as we think. So, what kinds of mental mistakes do we need to guard against?

We think we can easily see into the hearts of others based on the flimsiest of clues. We jump at the chance to judge strangers. We would never do that to ourselves, of course. We are nuanced and complex and enigmatic. But the stranger is easy. (Gladwell 50)

1. In general, we are better at telling when someone is telling us the truth than when someone is lying to us. Somewhat paradoxically given our larger concern about "stranger danger," we tend to assume that people are telling us the truth, even when the evidence suggests they aren't. Tim Levine, a professor at UAB, has labeled this widespread tendency Truth-Default Theory, and it is only the fact that lies are comparatively rare in real life that keeps us from falling for them all the time.
2. A closely related shortcoming in our perception of strangers is our assumption of transparency--in other words, we expect polite, polished, well-spoken people to tell the truth, and shifty-eyed, nervous, agitated people to lie, because that is what we have been conditioned to expect. After all, shouldn't garbage out reflect garbage in? In reality, these purportedly universal "tells" simply don't apply in all individual cases.
3. A third faulty assumption on our part, the one most directly relevant to our class, is known as "displacement." By and large, we assume that people will continue striving toward whatever goal they already have, and that there is little we can do to change the ultimate outcome--we might remove one opportunity for someone to do something bad, for instance, but that will simply displace them to another opportunity to do bad, which they will then take. But this misperception fails to take into account the broader contexts in which people make decisions and the ways in which changing a single factor in a person's life can often lead to a profoundly different outcome.

Assumptions 1 and 2 imply that we are too trusting of strangers, which, again, would seem to run counter to our general disinclination to engage with people we don't know because of concerns that

they will take advantage of us. But the purpose of highlighting these cognitive distortions is not to analyze them in great detail; rather, the goal is to show that we simply aren't good at gauging the intentions, positive or negative, of strangers. Because we fall so far short in this capacity, it behooves us to not make faulty preliminary assumptions about who would or wouldn't be interested in hearing the gospel, having a Bible study, visiting for a worship service, or joining us for a time of fellowship.

Reflection Questions:

1. Have you ever made an assumption about a stranger that turned out to be wrong? Did that help or harm the relationship?
2. Has someone ever made an incorrect assumption about you? How did that feel?
3. What are some of the other misperceptions we hold about people we don't know? How can getting to know more people help us challenge those biases?

3. Practical Tips, Part One

So far, this series has focused primarily on making us aware of, and then secondarily on breaking, some of our bad habits and assumptions regarding interactions with strangers. It is also important, however, for us to fill those gaps with better habits and assumptions so that we can befriend and share the gospel with others around us.

The tips that follow are not "silver bullets" for friendship or evangelism, and they can't just be inserted in the middle of a random conversation without consideration of the broader trajectory of the interaction. They are adapted from Joe Keohane's book *The Power of Strangers: The Benefits of Connecting in a Suspicious World* (pages 212-213) and should instead be taken as suggestions for how we might break down the barriers, including our general skepticism toward strangers, keeping us from authentically engaging with unfamiliar people.

1. **Start with small talk.** Small talk often gets a bad reputation, but that's because it usually has to fill the bulk of our daily interactions with all but our closest friends--and even with those people, although we might be loath to admit it. When we remember that small talk is best used as a segue to a deeper conversation--remember the story of Jesus at the well from the last lesson?--it can serve several useful roles by making us more familiar to strangers, helping us establish a connection with them, and reassuring them that we are not serial killers. (They might be skeptical of us, too!)
2. **Break the script.** Start out with small talk, but don't check out of the conversation. Instead of giving the usual "Doing well, how about you?" consider answering with a number out of ten. If you're having a good day, give it a nine or a ten! If it's a tougher one, grade accordingly. It may catch the other person off guard at first, but that's kind of the point. The general principle is to diverge from the expected pattern of the conversation, whether you take this specific approach or not.
3. **Give the other person permission to engage.** "Mirroring" is the concept that a person will generally follow the lead of the other person in the conversation. If the first person keeps the conversation light and shallow, the other person will be hesitant to wade into deeper waters. (Except for that one uncle who can't read the room and always tosses out the political hot takes over Thanksgiving turkey.) But if the first person takes the initial step beyond small talk, perhaps by answering "How are you?" with a number, the other person is likely to respond in kind when asked. This could provide an opportunity to ask why the number is so high, or conversely, how it could be made higher.

We'll offer some additional practical tips in the fifth lesson in this series, but try to put some or all of these into action at least once during the upcoming week. For now, let's explore one instance when

breaking from a standard interaction with a store clerk led to a wonderful friendship and an opportunity to extend an invitation.

Last summer, I noticed that there had been a car with a “41” tag in the parking lot of our local video game store during several consecutive trips, so I made the reasonable assumption that it probably belonged to the clerk who was working there each time. (For reference, in Alabama, car tags are numbered by county, so a 41 tag is for Lauderdale County, where I grew up, and 63 is for Tuscaloosa County, where I have lived since 2008.)

I asked the clerk if the car was his, and after a brief moment of panic on his part (I think he thought someone had hit the car!) we discussed our shared connections to the Florence area. Although he was the better part of a decade younger than me, we had both attended and graduated from small Christian schools in Florence before moving to Tuscaloosa. He and his wife had recently relocated as she finished up her college degree, but due to the difficulties inherent to moving cities during a pandemic, they hadn’t really settled into a church family yet. I extended an invitation and left my contact information, they visited the next Sunday, and since then, they have been a key part of our young professionals ministry. And all that from a quick question about a car tag!

In closing, let's turn to Matthew 25 for a reminder of why it is so crucial to be thoughtful in our interactions with strangers, whether or not those interactions lead to evangelistic opportunities:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

“He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” (Matthew 25:31-46)

Reflection Questions:

1. Have you ever successfully moved beyond small talk with a stranger to speak about a more significant topic?
2. If so, how did that conversation take place? How did you make that transition?
3. What is one normal or routine interaction you have with a stranger each week that might make for a good testing ground for the tips listed above?

4. The Benefits of Talking to Strangers

Our last class focused primarily on specific, tangible ways that we can become more comfortable talking to strangers, and the class before that helped us break down some of our misconceptions about unfamiliar people and the dangers they supposedly pose. But it's not enough to have the ability to do something; we also need a proactive reason to do it. (After all, I can imagine lots of things that I could theoretically do, but just because I could doesn't mean that I should. I've seen *Jurassic Park*!)

Setting aside dinosaurs for the time being, we will now take some time to explore the benefits of talking to strangers. Fear of a failure to evangelize should be a motivation for us, perhaps, but it should not be the only or even the primary one. Meeting new people exposes us to new ways of thinking and being, opens up doors for new experiences, and enriches all aspects of our lives. That doesn't mean that it is easy or comfortable, but keeping the positives in mind can help us overcome our hesitations. Think about what you are moving toward, not what you are moving away from.

So, what are those benefits? First and foremost, while our society often equates money or sex or power with the good life, the best scholarly research tells us time and time again that our social interactions are the clearest indicator of whether or not we are happy. To be sure, our closest relationships, positive or negative, will have a greater impact on our happiness than chance encounters in a store. But studies have shown that engaging more fully in those short interactions--smiling, making eye contact, conversing for a minute--also had a measurable effect on participants' moods.

Second, finding even the smallest bits of common ground with a stranger--links known as "incidental similarities"--helps us remember that we are not alone. Commenting on someone's Alabama shirt here in Tuscaloosa is not likely to open a conversational door, of course, but across the country, who knows where it could lead? (You might remember my story about the 41 tag from the previous lesson. In Lauderdale County, a 41 tag is a given, but in Tuscaloosa County, it's a bit less common.) One study regarding these trivial links found that when strangers were told that they shared a birthday or a first name, they were demonstrably more likely to contribute time or money to help the other person, even though those commonalities had nothing to do with the inherent virtue or worthiness of the person.

Third, positive interactions beget further positive interactions. In the same way that "stranger danger" fears can condition us to be suspicious of new people, setting us on edge and decreasing our ability to engage authentically, we can establish a better cycle by having just one quality interaction with a stranger. I will admit freely that while I am a talker now--my wife has developed the patience of a saint during our time together, since I frequently hold us up at church talking to friends and

visitors alike--simple actions like ordering in a drive-through or calling a customer support phone number used to stress me out to the point of physically shaking and becoming nauseated. But once I eventually realized that it was okay if those interactions didn't go perfectly, and that the other person wasn't out to "get" me, I started to see those opportunities for what they really were: a chance to interact with someone that I probably wouldn't have otherwise encountered.

A quick story in closing. Customer support at major corporations usually gets a bad rap, often rightfully so. But I have found that my attitude about having to call those numbers makes as much of a difference in how I perceive those interactions as the amount of time I spend on hold or the quality of the waiting music. Case in point: Several years ago, I had to call our cable provider's customer support number to discuss an overcharge on our bill. While I could have gone in hot, yelling and demanding to speak to a manager and threatening to have the worker fired, I instead took a different path. I took the time to calmly explain the situation, asked the person on the other end of the line how they were doing, and generally treated them like a human being. (Shocking, I know.) It turned out that the person was located about two hours from Tuscaloosa, just one state over, and that they had spent a significant amount of time in the area around the time of the infamous 2011 tornado. They asked how the recovery process was going in different places around town, we discussed what it was like living through such a traumatic event, and they ultimately removed the charge and gave us a discount.

Not every error on your TV bill will lead to a deep conversation about personal and communal recovery from natural disasters, but that one did, and I'll always remember it.

Reflection Questions:

1. Read Proverbs 15 together. Which of these sayings have you found to be true in your interactions with strangers?
2. Which of these sayings do you need to work on the most? How might you do that this week?
3. Did you try any of the practical tips from the previous lesson? If so, how did that go?

5. Practical Tips, Part Two

Two lessons ago, we introduced some practical tips to help us navigate interactions with strangers, making it more comfortable for us to move from small talk (useful, but incomplete by itself) into deeper topical waters. This class will build on those strategies, offering some additional conversational tools for our toolboxes. As was the case before, these are not guaranteed to work in all instances, nor can they be used without regard to the broader context of the conversation. (You probably don't want to test these out while crossing a busy street, no matter how promising the conversation seems. Wait a few more seconds, then give it a go.)

1. **Look for points of triangulation.** In our busy day-to-day lives, we often avoid engaging with strangers because we are already overburdened. We are thinking about our to-do lists, checking our phones for messages, listening to music or the news, and trying not to run over or into anyone. To avoid being pulled in even more directions, we tune out the world around us. But finding a point of triangulation--some sort of external thing or event to comment on--allows us to break out of our routines and poke through someone else's barriers. Ever celebrated a home run or a touchdown with the stranger sitting next to you at a game? Or exchanged a knowing glance and an eye roll with another person in line while the customer at the register makes a fool of themselves? You've found a point of triangulation and may not have even known it.
2. **Ask for help, within reason.** I've lost track of how many times I was stopped and asked for directions during the twelve years that I was a student at the University of Alabama. It's an ever-growing and ever-changing campus, with a constantly rotating assortment of parents and students who don't know where anything is, and not once did I ever snap at someone who asked for help locating a building or make fun of them for not knowing. I've been on the other end of these kinds of interactions, too. For instance, my Alabama upbringing did not prepare me to navigate the complex public transit systems of many large cities, and I would probably still be lost in Seattle if not for the directional assistance I received from some strangers at a bus terminal. (Maybe don't ask to borrow a stranger's car, though!)
3. **Spend time in places where talking to strangers is seen as normal, or is at least tolerated.** Libraries, museums, and other public spaces are great examples of these locales, and they often have the added benefit of providing points of triangulation (works of art, for instance) that can provide conversational openings. Outdoor spaces like dog parks or walking trails work well, too, since people tend to feel more physically at ease in open areas.

Like we did in our very first lesson, we'll close with a pair of stories from scripture which should remind us of the significance and gravity of our dealings with strangers. (They should also remind us of the anonymous writer's admonition in Hebrews 13:2 to show hospitality to strangers!)

The angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.”

“Pardon me, my lord,” Gideon replied, “but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, ‘Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?’ But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian.”

The Lord turned to him and said, “Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?” (Judges 6:11-14)

Then Manoah inquired of the angel of the Lord, “What is your name, so that we may honor you when your word comes true?”

He replied, “Why do you ask my name? It is beyond understanding.” Then Manoah took a young goat, together with the grain offering, and sacrificed it on a rock to the Lord. And the Lord did an amazing thing while Manoah and his wife watched: As the flame blazed up from the altar toward heaven, the angel of the Lord ascended in the flame. Seeing this, Manoah and his wife fell with their faces to the ground. When the angel of the Lord did not show himself again to Manoah and his wife, Manoah realized that it was the angel of the Lord. (Judges 13:17-21)

Reflection Questions:

1. What commonalities do these two stories have with each other? With the story of Abraham and Sarah from a few lessons back?
2. What lessons can we learn from Gideon's, and from Samson's parents', interactions with strangers?
3. What is one way that you can use the tips from this lesson during the upcoming week? How do you think it will go?