

A walk with Mr O (44)

Mind your language!

Mr O, at work recently I've had a few opportunities to speak about the Lord, but I'm afraid that I haven't handled them very well. Have you got any tips?

Don't beat yourself up. The Lord understands. Most of us don't do very well at witnessing. But our poor efforts are still the Lord's way of reaching others. The sowing of a single seed can lead to quite a harvest!

Thank you for that encouragement, Mr O. But I'd still like to do better. Please give me some tips.

There are two things that come to mind. You will have heard the first one before. The second one might be new to you.

To be a soul winner you need a life of secret prayer. Pray regularly for all the people you meet regularly – family, friends, neighbours, work colleagues, shop assistants and so on.

Pray that the Lord will make you the unashamed servant of everyone on your path; that He will give you unforced opportunities to witness to them; that you may in each case be able to sow one seed well; and that every conversation will lead someone to have a higher view of the Lord Jesus Christ than they had before.

To be honest, I don't pray like that. I've jotted down those points and I'm going to try to make them part of my daily prayer time, which will obviously have to be a bit longer in future. But what is your second point, Mr O, the one that you said might be new to me?

It is this: speak to people in their own language.

Oh, I don't think I can do that. I only speak English.

Fine, but that's not really what I'm talking about. May I ask you a question? When you speak to people about the Lord, do you speak to them in their English or in your English?

I'm sorry, Mr O. I'm not following you.

Let me explain. The average English speaker knows between 20,000 and 35,000 words. That is how many words they understand. But in their day-to-day lives they only use a very small number of words.

How many?

That depends, but in all cases it's just a few thousand. In fact, 90% of an average English speaker's conversation is composed of the same one thousand words used again and again.

This is all new to me. But how do you know all this?

I'm a preacher and it's part of my job. The words people know but don't use are called their passive vocabulary. The words they use on an everyday basis are called their active vocabulary. This is the language of their heart, and when we seek to win people's hearts, that is the language we must use.

Can you give some examples?

Of course. Almost all English speakers know the word 'consider'. But they don't use it. They don't say, 'I'll consider what you say'. They say, 'I'll think about it'. Another example would be the word 'conclude'. People don't usually say, 'To conclude this conversation . . .' They say, 'To wrap things up . . . '.

But come on, Mr O. Is it really that important?

It's vitally important. If you speak to men and women in their passive vocabulary, your message will come across as something which isn't really for them. And, besides, what I am saying to you is biblical. The New Testament was written in Greek, but not in the Greek of the politicians and philosophers .

The Spirit-inspired authors wrote in market-place Greek, the language which ordinary people used at home and on Monday morning. Yes, the gospel message has some technical words like 'justification', 'sanctification' and the like. These are words that we must explain. At all other times we should use plain words and nothing else.

But surely active vocabulary varies from place to place, and even from person to person. How can I learn the active vocabulary of the people around me?

Love them, listen to them, and make a mental note of what words they use and don't use. And then speak like that, but without using any words which cheapen the gospel message. It's not that hard really.
