

## LARGE GROUP 1

# Turning Barriers into Bridges

## INTRODUCTION

Give Personal Introduction with an accompanying Awkward Story from Growing Up.

(An example I would use: Classic Love Triangle. When I was in college, I had a massive crush on this girl. For a couple years. The tricky thing? She was dating one of my best friends. But then they broke up. I knew I could hurt my friend – but had another close friend tell me “You’re dumb. Go for it.” Everything that came after was SO AWKWARD. I told my friend I wanted to date his ex, and he just sort of stared at me, shocked. Awkward. Then he ended up giving me what felt like a sort of half-hearted blessing. Awkward. Then I found out that this girl was starting to date ANOTHER guy. Awkward. Still told her I liked her and asked her out on a date. Very awkward. In the end – no – I didn’t get the girl, but taking those risks created a powerful set of experiences for me that helped me gain confidence, learn how to have difficult conversations, and actually grew my friendships.)

I’m curious to know – we’ve been talking about awkward all week and we’re gonna talk about awkward tonight – so, what is your awkward tolerance? How many of you have a low awkward tolerance...like if you’re watching an awkward situation on TV, you have to leave the room? How many of you thrive on awkward?

All week, we’ve been engaging students all over campus on this idea of awkward conversations because we think awkward conversations provide us with amazing opportunities to build bridges with others.

Awkward situations can either be a roadblock in our relationships with others or can become an opportunity to build a bridge. An awkward situation brings us to a decision point, a crossroads, where we have to decide if we’ll let the situation put up barriers or if it will push us to build a bridge.

Tonight, we’re going to spend some time learning about an incredibly awkward moment from the Bible about this crazy guy Paul that turns into an amazing bridge-building opportunity.

This story is from the book of Acts. Acts comes right after the Gospels, the four biographies of Jesus. After Jesus died, he rose from the dead and then spoke with the disciples and others before going back to heaven. Acts is a book that shows us what happens next when God’s Spirit leads his church.



## THE APOSTLE PAUL AND ACTS 17

We are going to be diving into Acts 17 and following this guy named Paul, a leader in the early church who had a dramatic, life-changing encounter with Jesus.

Paul, a Jewish guy, finds himself in the epicenter of ancient wisdom and civilization, in Athens. They love to philosophize. They are very impressed with themselves. They wear togas. Think Plato. Socrates. They are nothing like Paul, a Jewish man from the edges of the empire who is passionately committed to a new faith almost no one has heard of.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

How does Paul feel about idols? GREATLY DISTRESSED. Remember that phrase.

There is this thing called the 10 Commandments. Thousands of years ago, God gave the Israelites these rules to follow in order to have close relationships with God and with each other in community. The first one said. . .

“You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God...

These Athenians have idols everywhere. Why was Paul upset? Because of his Jewish faith and his commitment to God, he sees this all as sin, separation from the one true God, around him. Sin is everywhere. Walk of idols photo from turkey. This is like a crazy traffic jam of idols. Just one idol is enough to be offensive to God. But lots of idols? This is ridiculous! Needless to say this is an awkward moment. And we can be like Paul. We can easily be disturbed.





**This word for greatly distressed in the Greek means:**

irritated, provoked, exasperated, burning with anger

Paul is burning with righteous anger. He knows this is not supposed to be the way people lived. The little rocks the Athenians were worshiping aren't God! God is so much better! Like Paul, we can easily be upset and disturbed by what we see around us. Let's personalize this for a minute. What bothers you about our society today? Write down one thing.

- Maybe its human sex trafficking?
- Maybe it's racism in the US?
- Rape, sexual assaults that are all too common on college campuses?
- The refugee crisis around the world?

Paul would say to us: Be more bothered! That should bother you more! There is a better way of life! God wants more for the world! God created more for us than the tension and frustration and pain that these evil things cause. God desires us to live in peace and joy with ourselves, each other, and with God!

But our world isn't like this, so what choice are we going to make in response to the reality of the world? Before we get into Paul's choice, the next three weeks are about this sort of moment. We are going to intentionally walk into awkward situations to become bridge builders.

Look at the card on your chair. There are 3 steps to becoming a bridge-builder with Jesus' help:

- 1) Name your tension
- 2) Get in their shoes
- 3) Engage and invite

Now let's see how Paul's choice makes him an excellent bridge builder.

Paul had options about how to resolve this tension. He had a choice to make: stay mad and isolate himself from this community or find a way forward in relationship by having a potentially awkward conversation with the Athenians about their idolatry problem.

When was the last time you had an awkward conversation with someone about something they were doing that bothered you? Write that down on your card.

(Tell a story, preferably funny, about a time you had to have an awkward conversation with someone about this topic.)

If you have done this, you know how hard it can be – even for something pretty little and silly! I think Paul took this situation really seriously. Paul likely prayed and shared his offense with God and asked for help. And then he went out and talked to real people and found a way to build a bridge.



So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

Paul talks with Jews and Greeks, in church and out of church. Paul didn't use his offense to beat up other people, he turned it into love and wisdom as he sought understanding into their values and beliefs. He wanted to know what was going on in their world. And, he shared his own faith experiences with the people.

**19 Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? 20 You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.” 21 (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)**

Paul's message gets him noticed. Some mock, but some decide to give him the honor of speaking to the elders in the Areopagus.

If you were offended Paul, how would you start your sermon? If I were him and I was offended, I might start by saying: “You idol worshippers. You have offended the almighty God. You shall have no gods before me.” (Booming preacher voice!)

Or others of us, if we were Paul and had worked through our offended feelings might say, “I love your idols. They are beautiful. What's good for you is good for you but I've got this messiah thing that's good for me. Here's my spiritual thing, but you've got your own spiritual thing, so that's cool.”

Paul does neither of these.

**Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god.**

Wow. Paul was greatly distressed, but now he is respectful and insightful. God helped Paul turn his anger into compassion and enabled him to build a bridge. What could have easily been a barrier has become a bridge. Paul was distressed, but now he is respectful. God helped him to be compassionate. This is an amazing bridge.



Paul is finding common ground. This helps the Athenians feel safe to engage Paul as he shows respect for their values. Paul is helping them to learn something about themselves. As followers of Jesus, we want to find “the unknown God” in everyone’s worldview. Where is the unknown God in their values, worldview, hearts? We can uncover this and build bridges.

## CALL TO FAITH

In just a minute I will invite us to respond in 2 different ways. First, if you want to become a bridge builder, we are going to ask you to work on turning awkward moments into good conversation over the next few weeks. I’ll ask you to stand if you are willing to take risks to do this.

If you are new to faith, I’m going to give you the opportunity to become a follower of Jesus tonight, to cross a bridge to relationship with him, and I’ll explain what that means. And I’ll also ask you to stand up as a sign of your response.

(One minute of contemplative music, no lyrics.)

## CALL TO RESPONSE #1:

I want to invite you to cross the bridge with me to have a personal relationship with God! If tonight you have learned new things about God that make you want to devote your life to Him, I am inviting you to respond to God with a yes. God gives us life and breath. We don’t serve him. We receive life and peace and joy from Him. Tonight, you can say yes to receive life and enter into a relationship with God. Jesus has made a way for you to have a restored relationship with God, the one you were made for. But he always leaves the choice to us to either receive him or choose other things.

Jesus died not just for the world, but specifically for you. And he rose from the dead to show his power over death and evil in this world. Through him we can receive complete forgiveness, and we can join in his mission to change the world. Jesus doesn’t just give us new life, he gives us a new purpose to advocate for justice and peace in the world.

If you’re ready to accept Jesus as the leader and savior of your life, please stand right now wherever you’re sitting. The act of standing is a step of faith, and Jesus said faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains. One small act of faith can become a life-changing movement of transformation in your life.

## PAUSE

You might think it’s crazy that I’m asking you to stand right now. But you see, our faith is personal but never private. When I got married, I stood in front of more than 300 people and publicly proclaimed my love for my wife. It was profoundly personal, but it wasn’t private. Similarly, Jesus took the stand of love for you 2,000 years ago on the cross, so that tonight you’d have the courage to stand for him. If you’re ready to make Jesus the leader and savior of your life, please stand now.



## CALL TO FAITH

Let me pray for you.

## CALL TO RESPONSE #2:

I want to ask you to commit to taking risks to build bridges. The next few weeks we're going to talk about what it looks like to step right into these awkward moments and to take them as opportunities to build bridges between people and God.

If you would like to commit to being a risk taker as we take this journey together over the next few weeks with us, will you stand? And I really want to encourage you to take this seriously – don't stand if you're not ready to take this seriously!

If you would like to commit to being a bridge-builder, I want to invite you to stand so I can pray for you.

## PAUSE

Let me pray for you.

## PRACTICAL SKILL APPLICATION

What we learn from Paul is to identify tension, to bring the tension to Jesus, to discover those places where our secular poets point to this reality of an unknown god as ways to build a bridge. We are going to get practical. Ready to roll up sleeves for a few minutes? Everyone say practical!

Right now . . .

God is going to use the next few weeks to transform us from awkward to bridge builders! We are going to step into our fears with boldness! It is gonna be awesome!

Right now, I want you to reflect on an awkward relationship using this bridge builder tool. Earlier you wrote about the last time you had an awkward conversation with someone about something that was bothering you. Name your tension about interacting with that person. Get in their shoes and ask God for wisdom and compassion to find a bridge. Write what comes to your mind. Thank God for the insight. What is your next step to engage and invite them into a deeper relationship? Ask God for courage to be a bridge-builder.

## CONCLUSION

I pray that we would be known as a community of bridge builders, a tribe of awkward people who relentlessly point people to Jesus. (Encourage students to receive prayer ministry, invite them to engage with God through worship.)

## Turning a Dead End Into a Path Forward



### INTRODUCTION

(Give Personal Introduction)The past few weeks, InterVarsity has been awkward. To set the mood, I wanted to share a story of an awkward situation I have faced. Share a story of an awkward situation in general, or an awkward situation that led to some sort of conflict – you should be able to tie the story into the theme of bridge-building. (Example Story: When I was trying to pursue this girl to try to date her, I thought I would impress her by driving up to run a race near where she lived. I have a wedding to go to the night before, so I drive with a friend of mine really late at night after this wedding where we had a full 10 course Chinese banquet. I'm staying with this girls' friend who I barely know, and walk in and crash for like an hour before I have to wake up for the race. I wake up and my host offers me coffee. Coffee is just what I need. So I thought. I took a sip and immediately my stomach goes queasy. Turns out a ton of greasy food + no sleep + anxiety + coffee do not make for a good combination. I know I'm doomed so I run to the bathroom where I promptly throw up all over the wall, floor, myself and everything else except the toilet. I am so embarrassed and it is so awkward. To make matters worse, when I finally get to see this girl I really like after the race, the first thing she says to me is "Hey. So I heard about your vomit explosion at Nicole's house this morning."

So awkward. So not impressive. But I had a choice to make in that situation. Would I let the awkwardness take me out and create a barrier to a relationship? Or could I embrace the awkward and build a bridge? Thankfully I had the inner strength to pause, think about my words and chose the latter by making a comment to the effect of "Well, I really wanted to make an impression." It turns out my choice to step into the awkward and build a bridge was the right one – I found out this girl and her friend wanted to test me to see how I would respond to an awkward situation, and I guess I passed the test, because I'm now married to her!)In this series, we are helping you be awkward! Isn't that cool? What do awkwardness and God have to do with each other?

Awkward moments can either be like a massive belly flop—ugly and painful—or they can become God moments if we step into them with courage. Awkward moments always involve an opportunity to build bridges – to other people and to God.

Tonight we're going to be looking at a passage from the book of Mark that is all about Jesus turning a very awkward situation into a powerful God moment, and he becomes a bridge builder. Pull out the card that was on your chair, because it will guide us to become bridge builders like Jesus.

Mark is one of the first books in the New Testament, and it is essentially a biography of Jesus – a collection of Jesus' teachings and actions.



## PRAY

13 Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words.

Right away we know something is up. First of all, the story TELLS us these people are intending to put Jesus in an awkward situation. But there's even more going on here. Pharisees and Herodians are two groups of people that should NOT be working together. These are groups of people that are more polarized than Trump supporters and Hillary supporters (feel free to insert another appropriate illustration) coming together to cooperate on something.

Let's get in their shoes to better understand the situation. The Pharisees were the religious heroes of the time in Israel – intensely devoted to God's laws. They were also fiercely opposed to the Roman rule of Israel. Israel belonged uniquely to God and for these foreigners who knew nothing about God to be ruling was profoundly wrong and unjust. The Herodians, however, were a group of Jews who actively cooperated with the Romans. These groups hated one another.

This raises a question. Why would two groups who hated one another decide to cooperate to create an awkward situation in which to trap Jesus? Just before this, Jesus had gone to the Temple. The Temple was the center of the Jewish world, so sacred and important that it's difficult to comprehend. And what does Jesus do? He shuts the place down. He accuses the Jewish authorities of injustice in the way they run the temple and tells them all they're messing up the purpose for which the temple was designed: for people from all over the world to come worship God. Jesus' life was all about this one thing: building bridges between people and God, and this dramatic action shows how serious he is.

But, Jesus' action in the temple did not make him very many friends.

So, powerful Jews of different persuasions are trying to put a stop to this Jesus fellow, and that's how we arrive at this awkward situation.

14 They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? 15 Should we pay or shouldn't we?"





They think that flattery and telling Jesus how awesome and revolutionary he is and how he is not a people pleaser will butter him up to say something stupid. Ironically, what they say is true, even as they try to trap him.

This is actually a brilliant trap. If Jesus says “Pay taxes,” then the Pharisees get to accuse Jesus of being cozy with Rome. This would make Jesus SO unpopular with most of the Jews who were his followers that it would be the end of his movement. It was so unpopular that it might have even gotten him killed by some of the more zealous Jews.

However, if Jesus says “Don't pay taxes,” he sets himself up as an enemy of Rome – a dangerous revolutionary. He would be arrested, executed and again dismissed by the people as a failed revolutionary leader.

Pay taxes – Jesus is done. Don't pay taxes – Jesus is done. Checkmate.

If Jesus tries to build a bridge with one group, the bridge is burned with the other.

Share another story of being put in an awkward place by someone and how you responded. (Example: I was recently visiting with my friends' parents. This couple is incredible generous and they have been partners in ministry with me for a long time. They also have VERY STRONG political opinions – opinions I don't always agree with. I remember walking up to their home and praying they wouldn't ask me anything about the election. We end up having this fantastic conversation, and they pray for us and we are getting ready to walk out the door and I'm beginning to pray prayers of thanksgiving that God helped us to avoid any awkward interactions around politics – but my wife has to run to the bathroom at the last minute, and my friend's mom takes that minute to turn to me and ask: “So, who are you going to be voting for?” I felt like I was trapped. It felt so awkward.)

Write on your card – when was the last time you were in an awkward conversation about politics?

The thing about Jesus' awkward situation that is true about most awkward situations is that it deals with something really important. The reason a situation is awkward is because of the tension that situation brings up, and we only feel tension when we know something important is at stake. Think about some common topics that give rise to awkward situations: Romance. Politics. These are things that somehow connect to deep values and desires which can make us upset or afraid to talk about them. Next time the stakes are high, take a deep breath. There is more than one option to resolve the tension.



Some of us here tonight don't consider ourselves followers of Jesus, and maybe you feel awkward just being here and talking about Jesus because we Christians can be very weird sometimes. Our music can be weird; the words we use can be weird...there are lots of things about us that can seem weird. Thank you for joining us and risking feeling awkward. We are so grateful you are here!

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." 16 They brought the coin,

Why does Jesus ask them to bring him a coin? He is decompressing all the intensity of the moment. They have to go scramble and bring him an object lesson. This is a great lesson in awkward situations. Decompress the intensity. Notice Jesus doesn't take the coin. He makes them look at the coin. He is now in charge of the conversation. They come to him in an ambush, but he turns the tables on who is in charge of the conversation. They are doing what he says. And he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied. (Sarcastic) Nice work, guys! Good observational skills!

17 Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him.

Why were they amazed?!?

They had Jesus in checkmate. Their trap was foolproof. They had him in a corner.

They wanted him to look like an idiot. Instead, he shifts the conversation completely, and even invites them to be transformed. He wants to bring good out of this situation.

Let's sit on the word "image" for a second. Why does Jesus use that word?

In Genesis 1, God says in verse 26 "Let us make human beings in our image," and then reaffirms this in 1:27 "So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them."

Image.



What Jesus is saying here is: Yeah. Caesar put his image on this piece of metal. Fine. I'm not worried too much about that. Go ahead and give it back to Caesar. Who cares? But God put his image on all human beings, including you, including CAESAR! You are made in the image of God, and you are not giving to God what is rightfully his—your life. You think you are honoring God by trying to trap me. But I invite you to get right with your Creator and live in a way that is faithful to God's image that is imprinted upon you.

When Jesus said that, they knew he was right. Their conscience convicted them of his truth. "I should get right with my Creator. I should live out the image of God."

What do you admire about Jesus in this passage? Jesus always finds a 3<sup>rd</sup> way when he is "stuck" in an either/or. He does not let you box him into a corner or manipulate him.

Earlier I mentioned being caught in the middle of an awkward political conversation. In that moment, I knew the "wrong" answer could lead the conversation down a nasty path. I took a deep breath, prayed a quick prayer, and tried to answer with my own version of a "third way." I told her that in the midst of this season, I've been thinking a lot about how people's passion for politics is a sign of our deep hunger for a better world, our deep hunger for the kingdom of God. I went on to explain that I had made the choice to not talk about politics when the topic came up, and to use those conversations as an opportunity to ask people how they want God to use them to be a part of building the kingdom and to pray with them. Sadly, an ill-tempered toddler cut that conversation short, but I'm grateful God helped me to redirect the political conversation to focus on Him!

Jesus creatively builds a bridge between them and God AND invites them to respond Jesus doesn't run away AND he doesn't change the subject or make a joke AND he doesn't lash out in anger or take a side. He takes the awkward situation and finds the amazing God moment right in the middle of the awkwardness. The precious jewel is right there in the middle of the chaos, if you have both the eyes to see it and the bridge building skills to seize the God-moment.

How can we be like Jesus, turning an awkward situation into a bridge building situation?

What are some lessons we can draw from this passage?

1. 1. See it coming. Identify when an awkward situation is upon you.

2. 2. If you feel the "either/or" binary options, you know you need wisdom. Pause. Decompress. Take a deep breath. Pray for God to reveal the 3<sup>rd</sup> way.



3. 3. Take a risk.

4. 4. Invite everyone to respond, to be transformed.

Jesus here models a fantastic way that we can also address awkward situations in our lives – to invite others to experience transformation and to be transformed ourselves. Look at your card again. Remember, the three steps to being a bridge builder:

1) When you face an awkward situation, recognize the personal tension that causes you to feel awkward. For Jesus, these guys were missing a much more important lesson about living as an image bearer of God.

2) Secondly, get in the other people's shoes. I think Jesus does this here when he recognizes the deeply held values that each of these men have when they try to test him.

3) Finally, engage and invite the other person into conversation with you and Jesus.

### **CALL TO FAITH**

Just as Jesus invites the Pharisees and Herodians to respond. Jesus is inviting us to respond tonight. Jesus' response to this awkward situation provides all of us in the room tonight with an invitation.

### **CALL TO RESPONSE #1:**

If you wouldn't consider yourself a follower of Jesus, I want to invite you to take Jesus' words seriously to "Give back to God what is God's."

The amazing truth is that God created you. God created you in his image. You are a bearer of God's image whether you have acknowledged it or not, and maybe tonight is the first time you are waking up to that reality. That you are God's image-bearer has huge implications. Yes, you belong to him, and he loves you, he wants the absolute best for you. You were made for a relationship with God.

Jesus came to earth just for this reason! Because God's image-bearers, God's people were living for themselves and not for God. As humanity turned away from God, things all over creation went wrong. God saw what was happening and was determined to rescue and restore his creation by sending his son Jesus into the world. Jesus lived the kind of life God designed all humans to live. Jesus died to put to death all the evil and wrong in the world, and rose again to show his power and victory over evil! Through him we can receive complete forgiveness for the ways we have failed to be faithful image-bearers, and we can join in his mission to change the world. Jesus doesn't just give us new life, he gives us a new purpose to advocate for justice and peace in the world.



In Jesus, God has built a bridge that leads to relationship with him and God is inviting you to cross that bridge tonight.

If you're here tonight and are ready to give back to God what belongs to God by committing your life to Jesus, please stand right now wherever you're sitting. The act of standing is a step of faith, and Jesus said faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains. One small act of faith can become a life-changing movement of transformation in your life.

### **PAUSE**

You might think it's crazy that I'm asking you to stand right now. But you see, our faith is personal but never private. When I got married, I stood in front of more than 300 people and publicly proclaimed my love for my wife. It was profoundly personal, but it wasn't private. Similarly, Jesus took the stand of love for you 2,000 years ago on the cross, so that tonight you'd have the courage to stand for him. If you're ready to make Jesus the leader and savior of your life, please stand now.

### **PAUSE**

Let me pray for you.

### **CALL TO RESPONSE #2:**

For those of us who are in the room tonight who consider ourselves followers of Jesus, how can you be more like Jesus in awkward situations? When you are confronted with a situation that creates tension because you know there is something better – you know there is something more for someone, how can you point that person to God and build a bridge? How can you take an awkward situation and render it to God instead of running away, taking a side, or lashing out in anger?

If you're here tonight and are a follower of Jesus, and you want to commit to engaging in these awkward situations like Jesus, I want to invite you to stand as an expression of that commitment.



## PAUSE

Let me pray for you.

## PRACTICAL SKILL APPLICATION

Remember the three steps to being a bridge builder? We are going to get practical right now to grow in handling awkward situations like Jesus. Ready to roll up sleeves for a few minutes?

We are going to practice finding the third way like Jesus. Earlier you wrote about an awkward political conversation you had. If not, pick another awkward conversation you've recently had. Fill out your card and consider what the third way could be. Then, discuss in groups of three.

Debrief. What third way ideas did you have? What was challenging about this exercise? What was encouraging about this exercise?

## CONCLUSION

I pray that we would be known as a community of bridge builders, a tribe of awkward people who relentlessly point people to Jesus. (Encourage students to receive prayer ministry, invite them to engage with God through worship.)