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## Until the Cows Come Home

We can talk about it until the cows come home. I have used that expression without giving it much thought. Usually, we use this expression when we are having a discussion that seems to have no resolution. An example might be, "We can talk about what the most reliable tractor is until the cows come home, but . . ." What we mean to say is that though we may talk about something all afternoon, we won't ever come to a resolution, so we might as well stop now and get back to work.

But where does this expression come from? When I was growing up on a dairy farm, my father would pasture the cows in the summer, often at the back of the farm where there was a woodlot. In the first month or so of summer, we would have to go back to the woodlot and chase the cows to the barn for feeding and milking. By the end of the summer, however, the cows sensed when the day was about over, and more often than not they would voluntarily return to the holding area outside of the barn right around milking time. At that point we dropped whatever we were doing, and we milked the cows. If we happened to be sitting on the veranda at the back of the house discussing one of those unresolvable issues, the conversation would stop when the cows came home. It was time to get back to work.

Yesterday, someone told me about a conversation she had had a few days earlier in which the individual wanted to argue the truth of the Bible. This individual said he didn't believe because he didn't trust the church because, he believed, the church had dismissed a number of books that should have been part of the Bible because the church wanted to control how people think. He didn't trust the church, and he didn't trust the Bible, and, consequently, he was not going to put his trust in Jesus. Clearly the member of our church and this individual could have had a conversation "until the cows came home" but they would never have come to a firm conclusion. He was dead set against the Christian faith and there was nothing that would change his mind.

I have talked with people like that, and they have all sorts of reasons not to be a Christian. They point to the failings of Christians, or they say that Scripture cannot be trusted, or they don't like the organized church, or they name some other reason that they don't want to believe. I have a fairly good education, and I often see the fallacies of their arguments, but even if I try to reason with them, we can talk until the cows come home, and we still won't come to a resolution.

That expression, "until the cows come home," seems to say that cows have more common sense than humans. Cows focus our attention on what we can and should be doing rather than on things that produce no fruit. I have an acquaintance who used to attend church who is always trying to discredit the Christian faith and church. (I think he was attending church because he was more interested in a girl from the congregation than he was in worshipping God.) I have had a number of rather fruitless conversations with him where neither of us budged. As much as I try to defend the truth of the gospel, the reliability of the Bible, and the blessings of the Christian community, he refuses to listen. We can (and have) talked until the cows come home, but there has been no fruit from our conversations for either of us.

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It would have been better, in my mind, if I had simply stopped engaging him in conversation. There is another saying, “Make hay while the sun is shining.” In other words, do the work that is before us instead of talking on the back porch until the cows come home. It seems then, that like the cows who focus our attention on getting back to work, my time with my acquaintance would have been more productive had I been a better friend. I knew that he was somewhat lonely and that he had given up a lot to move to a new community to care for an aging relative. Looking back, it might have been better for me to find ways to encourage him rather than argue with him. (Truth be told, he was the one who baited me and almost forced me into discussions that would not be resolved. Especially in online discussions, he showed a mean and condescending attitude which was quite unpleasant. I don’t think he wanted encouragement, although, I have to confess, I didn’t try too hard.)

Sometimes there are times when conversations are pointless, for they will accomplish nothing. This is especially true of those who have no other intention than to discredit what we believe. We shouldn’t wait until the cows come home to end the discussion, for it will be wasted time.

However, that does not mean there is nothing we cannot do. As I mentioned before, we can find ways to love those who are so harsh in their view of the faith and the church. I suspect that they often arrive at their position because they have been hurt in some way and have become bitter against Christ and his church. Being kind and loving and focusing on being a friend might be far more productive than engaging them in an unresolvable argument.

Sometimes it is better to do rather than talk. There is a place for talking, of course, but when talking is fruitless, doing can be productive. Loving a bitter person might go a lot further than arguing with them. Loving someone with the same grace and compassion that God shows us might open doors to more fruitful discussions.

If we find ourselves in one of those situations where there will be no resolution, there is not much point in wasting the afternoon. If the cows have come home and we haven’t come to a resolution, perhaps we should have been out in the field making hay. Talking is good and important and necessary, but doing is often more productive. We should be out making hay when the sun shines instead of talking until the cows come home.

*Pastor Gary*