

Witness

The Everyday Disciple: Following Jesus One Step at a Time Sermon 8

Acts 1:1-8

November 7, 2021

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In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach,² until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.³ He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.⁴ And while staying⁵ with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me;⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with⁶ the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”⁷ He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:1-8, ESV)

When you are called by Jesus to follow Him, you begin to experience two new pulls in your life. One is a pull inward. The other is a pull outward. You are pulled inward to friendship and fellowship—with Jesus¹ and Jesus’ people, the Church.² We talked about this last week when we considered Jesus calling for disciples to “love one another.” There is a second pull that you soon feel, however. This is a pull outward. Jesus not only calls us to love His people but to love the world around us. Jesus quite literally sends us into this world: “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world,” Jesus prayed to His Father (John 17). There is a centrifugal and centripetal force in a disciple’s life. In his book, *Basic Christianity*, John Stott puts it like this:

The Christian life is a family affair, in which the children enjoy fellowship with their Father and with each other. But we must not for a moment imagine that this exhausts the Christian’s responsibilities. We are not to be inward-looking and interested only in ourselves. On the contrary, every Christian should be deeply concerned about others. And it is part of our Christian calling to serve them in whatever ways we can.³

Our outward pull has two aspects about it. They are related but need to be dealt with separately. Our outward pull towards the world involves these two things: witness and transformation.

Transformation will be our topic next week. This refers to our awareness that all the world is part of God’s good creation. And with Jesus, God has begun His new creation. This means that God is concerned about everything: from the laws of man to the laws of physics, from human hearts to

human societies, from molecules to atmospheres. And Christians are to be both salt and light in this world, making things a little more as God designed them to be.

This week we focus on witness—which is related, but distinct. In Acts 1:8, Jesus says the following to His disciples, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”. To bear witness to someone is to let others know the truth about them. And in this pivotal scene in Acts 1, where the resurrected Lord is about to ascend to heaven, He gives His disciples this crystal-clear command: *you are to be my witnesses*. Here, then, is our eighth mark of a disciple:

A disciple bears witness in the world to Jesus Christ.

We need to be clear about what this calling means. Looking at our passage, we’ll note these three things: a disciple witnesses *of* Jesus, witnesses *by the power of* Jesus, and witnesses *in the way of* Jesus.

I. Witness of Jesus

In a courtroom, a witness is brought in to confirm the truthfulness of an event or a person. If a witness doesn’t tell the whole truth or bends the truth, they fail to be a true witness. A disciple witnesses to the truthfulness of Jesus—what Jesus taught, did, and who He ultimately is. A disciple witnesses *of* Jesus. This is the point of the pronoun in verse 8: “you will be my witnesses.” This may seem an obvious point—“Well of course Christians witness about Jesus!” It is, however, the crucial point. And it’s easier than we think to miss the mark on this. If we are not careful, rather than witness to the full Jesus, we can witness to less-than-Jesus or other-than-Jesus. Some examples will clarify.

Less-Than-Jesus

In the early 20th century, some American theologians worried that Christians weren’t paying enough attention to the social implications of Jesus’ teachings. One could not study the life of Jesus and not see a call to care for the poor, disenfranchised, and oppressed. These thinkers helped Christians connect Jesus’ teachings with societal issues of economics, poverty, alcoholism, crime, racism, child labor, and education. They were correct to call the church to be Christ’s hands and feet in caring for others.

However, parts of this movement downplayed Jesus' teaching on sin and God's judgment. Harvard professor Richard Niebuhr, writing in the middle of the 20th century, called this movement *the social Gospel*, and worried that it witnessed to something less-than-Jesus. He summarized the message as: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."⁴

The great preacher of the middle of the 20th century, Martin Lloyd Jones, was also concerned about any so-called witness to Jesus that played down sin:

There is no true evangelism without the doctrine of sin, and without an understanding of what sin is. I do not want to be unfair, but I say that a gospel which merely says, 'Come to Jesus,' and offers Him as a Friend, and offers a marvelous, new life, without convicting of sin, is not New Testament evangelism.⁵

A disciple's outward call into the world involves a deep concern and compassion for the wounds and woes of the world, to be sure. However, when we lose Jesus' teaching about sin and forgiveness, we lose Jesus' teaching about reconciliation to God—the heart of the message.⁶

Another less-than-Jesus witness is what we might call the *nationalistic Gospel*. Here, we narrow Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God by attaching it too distinctly to a people group or nation. In verse 6 of our passage, this is exactly what the disciples were at risk of doing. After Jesus was speaking about the Kingdom of God (v.4), they ask Him: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts. 1:6).

Jesus doesn't rebuke them for this question but tells them it's not for them to know the times or seasons of such specific details (v.7). It's hardly surprising these Jewish men wondered about Israel—think of all the promises in the Scriptures about it. *And what disciples wouldn't long to see their homeland and people brought to a place of peace and flourishing?*

But Jesus' vision for the kingdom of God is deeper, wider, richer, and more enduring than any single kingdom of man. This is why, as He calls us to be His witnesses in verse 8, He goes on to underscore the *global* scope of that vision: "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Throughout church history, it has been hard for disciples to resist mixing the kingdom of God with a kingdom of man to such a degree that there's no difference. But no national flag is worthy of being the flag of God's kingdom. Only the Lamb who was slain is worthy to be that banner.

To bear witnesses to Jesus is to bear witness to all of Jesus. Any message that reduces Jesus' teaching about sin and judgment, or the scope and inclusivity of God's kingdom, is less-than-Jesus.

Other-Than-Jesus

We can also bear witness to something other-than-Jesus. This happens when we offer a Christianity where anything other than Jesus is the treasure. If we offer Jesus so that someone can get physical health, or financial well-being, or even relational bliss—we can subtly suggest that Jesus is the means to a greater end. But Jesus Himself—God Himself—is the treasure of our message. The opening of the Westminster Confession gets it right:

Q. What is the chief and highest end of man?

A. Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God and fully to enjoy him forever.

The treasure of the Gospel is that in Jesus we get God—and we have the promise that we will enjoy the Triune God forever. Jesus may bless us now in many ways. But the treasure of the Gospel is God—He is our portion (Psalm 73:26⁷). Let us not miss the pronoun in front of the title witness; Jesus says, “you are **my** witnesses” (Acts 1:8). A disciple must bear witness to nothing less-than, or other-than, the full Jesus. A second thing we notice about being Jesus' witnesses in this passage has to do with power. *We witness by His power.*

II. Witness by the Power of Jesus

Jesus is as adamant about the mission He's sending disciples on as He is about them not attempting to do it in their own power. To be His witnesses to the ends of the earth, the disciples must wait to be empowered. Verses 4-5 explain that Jesus

“ordered [His disciples] not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” (Acts 1:4-5).

Then in verse 8, Jesus says again, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses”.

It’s quite hard to convince someone to change their views on important subjects. It often takes persuasive arguments, persistence, and unexpected circumstances to bring about a change in someone’s worldview. Jesus, however, is not teaching in Acts 1 that it’s merely going to be hard for disciples to convince people about Jesus. He is teaching that it will be impossible. No matter how educated we are, persuasive we are, or well-meaning we are, we cannot do what Jesus asks us to do unless we rely on a greater power.

That power is the Spirit of God who works to empower witness to Jesus in two primary ways. First, the Spirit works in us. The Spirit works to give us the convictions and boldness we need to share Jesus with others. If we are not deeply convicted about our convictions, we won’t share them with others. The Spirit convicts us of our convictions about Jesus. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians:

⁴ For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵ because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the **Holy Spirit** and with **full conviction**. (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5).

It is also hard to witness about Jesus if we are bogged down by fear. Fear of man is perhaps the greatest detriment to the Gospel going forward in our time. But the Spirit can embolden us. Think of the difference between Peter denying Jesus during His hour of suffering than proclaiming Jesus’ before large crowds in that same city—and just weeks later. *What made the difference?* The Spirit. In Acts 4 the disciples pray for boldness, and we read they were all “**filled with the Holy Spirit** and continued to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:29-31). We need the Spirit if we are to have the convictions and boldness to speak about Jesus to someone.

Second, the Spirit works in the hearer. A person cannot come to faith in Jesus without the Spirit working in them to produce their own deep convictions and eventually a heart conversion. In Acts 6:10, Luke tells us that Stephen is bearing witness of Jesus to people from Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia, and that they were disputing what he said. However, Luke records that these men “could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which [Simon] was speaking.” (Acts 6:10). No matter how educated, winsome or impressive a person is, they cannot change the deeper convictions of another’s heart when it comes to what they believe about Jesus Christ—only the Spirit can stir those convictions. Jesus taught in John 3 that not only the stiffening of convictions, but the fullness of

conversion, can only come by the Spirit: ⁵ “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).

Disciples called to witness of Jesus must pray for the power of Jesus—the Holy Spirit— in order to do so.

Evangelism is hard, so it’s encouraging to know the Spirit is at work

Personally, I struggle with evangelism. It’s not that I don’t believe in its importance. It’s that I don’t do it much. I am too often bogged down either by being too busy (not making it a priority) or the fear of man. It’s not that I’ve never shared my faith; I just so wish I did it more and better. I find it incredibly encouraging, then, to know that the Holy Spirit may be at work on someone’s life, even when I’m not aware of it. And that evangelism is being invited to be part of the Spirit’s work—it doesn’t rest entirely or ultimately on me.

There was one instance in my life that particularly highlighted this—how the Spirit can work. When I was in secular graduate school, I made friends with a group of people who were not the religious type. They found it interesting that I was a Christian, but also kind of strange. One night my local church was doing an evangelistic event—a talk about Jesus geared towards those who didn’t know much about Him. I was planning on going to see how they did such a talk but had not planned to invite someone. I was too scared to do that. Beforehand, I stopped by a local museum where I had been invited to a school event. I bumped into this group of friends and when they asked me what I was up to I said, somewhat shyly, “I’m going to a talk at my church.” Then, to my own amazement, these words came out of my mouth next: “*would you like to come with me?*” To my even greater shock, one of the guys said, “sure.” We sat together through the talk. Afterward, he didn’t want to leave but wanted to keep talking. He opened up about some real pain in his life. He was an atheist, he said, but he talked of feeling so hopeless. This led to him coming to church a few times with me, praying with me, and learning about Jesus in the Bible with me. He eventually became a Christian.

What I didn’t know that night when I walked into the museum was all that was going on in his personal life. I didn’t know that the Spirit of God was softening his heart towards me, and thereby towards an invitation to church, and softening it to be open to hearing about Jesus. I am so deeply thankful those words came out of my mouth, “*do you want to come with me?*”

I'm guessing that evangelism—bearing witness to Jesus—doesn't come easy to many of us. For our final point, I want to suggest one practical way we can take a step in this area. To do so, we'll note that we must witness *in the way of Jesus*—and His way is relational.

III. Witness in the Way of Jesus

Jesus' model for reaching the lost was relational. Faith comes by hearing and hearing the Word of God (Romans 10:17). So, we must, at some point, be clear about the Gospel. But the words of the Gospel aim at relationships—reconciling people to God and other Christians. And Jesus often used the context of relationship to share about Himself.

How can we leverage relationships for our witness to Jesus?

I knew of a church a few years ago that explained their mission for that year with one question for each parishioner: *Who's your one?* This is all they called people to—to have one person they would pray for, work on a relationship with, and either invite to a church event or small group outing or directly share about Jesus with.

We can do this. We can choose a person to pray for and build a genuine friendship with this year. But focus on sharing Jesus with them. Parents, your “one” may be your child. Parents, evangelize your kids. Aunts and uncles, your “one” may be a niece or nephew. Students, your “one” may be a classmate. Workers, it may be a co-worker. Work on these relationships for the relationship's sake. Truly love these people—get to know them, invite them into your life, ask good questions and listen to what their hearts are yearning for our hurting over. You might invite them to join your small group for a fun outing. Or invite them to a basketball game. But build the friendship sincerely. At some point, and prayerfully, invite them to hear about Jesus. Invite them to church. Or tell them how Jesus has worked in an area of your own life. Ask if they'd be open to hearing more about what Jesus means to you—as their friend.

Pray for one person in the months ahead. Be intentional in your friendship with them. Listen to them; learn what it is going on in their life. Think of good questions to ask them. And tactfully, compassionately, share Jesus with them.⁸ Jesus calls His disciples to be His witnesses.

Who's your one? Who is one person you will pray about and take steps towards sharing the good news of Jesus with?

Endnotes

1. Jesus calls us inward to fellowship with him, saying “come to me” (Matthew 11:29) and “abide in me” (John 15:3-8).
2. Jesus calls us inward to love other disciples, to “love one another” (John 13:34).
3. John Stott, *Basic Christianity*, 3rd ed., 146.
4. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937), 193.
5. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company: 1984), 207.
6. The earliest summary of the Christian message we have comes from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians and focuses on sin and forgiveness: “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ² and by which you are being saved.... that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:1-4).
7. As the Psalmist says, “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:26).
8. “So relational evangelism? Go for it, as long as it turns into real evangelism. You hanging out having a beer with your buddy so he can see that Christians are cool is not what we’re called to do. You’re eventually going to have to open up your mouth and share the gospel. When the pure gospel is shared, people respond.” – Matt Chandler