

Better Witness

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[0 : 00] Welcome here for this Sunday, February 2nd. My name is Kent Dixon. It's my joy to be the pastor here. Today is Grandhog Day. Perfect.

As you know, that means if your pastor sees his shadow, you may have 30 minutes more sermon, so hope for the best. Or it might be 30 minutes. We're done. I saw my show. No, it's not.

Just kidding. So welcome here this morning as we wrap up this sermon series, Better. Can you believe it's been four weeks? The year is already flying by. It's pretty crazy.

Each week of this series, we've tried to highlight some of the specific ways that a relationship with Christ can make our lives better. We've recognized that when we fully submit to him, that opens us up to his transformative power in our lives.

The first week, we looked at the impact God can have in our lives when we begin the new year with better priorities. When we put God first, the rest of our lives seem to fall into order.

[1 : 07] And if we get this backwards, the most important things in our lives tend to suffer. Two weeks ago, we discovered that the people we surround our lives with have far-reaching effects.

Sometimes it's important for us to focus on having better relationships to experience all in life that God has for us. And then last week, we considered how a connection to Jesus can really help us make better choices.

Largely the choices we make as we begin the new year are important. And perhaps we need God's wisdom to make better ones. So this morning, we're finishing this series by being challenged to live this year as a better witness.

So what does that mean? We're going to look at that together this morning. As a father of two children, I can remember times when some sort of offense had been committed.

Nothing as serious as a felony or misdemeanor, really, of course. More along the broke-something-of-mom-and-dad kind of variety. Often, mom or dad may not have been around when the incident occurred, so we would have to try and gather information from our kids after the fact.

[2 : 25] And typically, of course, no one knew anything. So fortunately, though, while we had an avoid conviction child, we also had a yes-your-honor child as well, so it often worked out.

The most common definition of a witness, and you are familiar with this, is generally someone who gives evidence. Someone who gives evidence in relation to matters of fact that are under inquiry or being investigated, when definition says.

So maybe you've been a witness to a vehicle collision. You've had to give your statement about what you saw or experienced. You've had to exchange information. Maybe you've been witness to an historical event of some kind.

You know, a fish story, perhaps. Oh, I went fishing, and it was this big. But maybe there are stories like that, something that you were part of or bore witness to that you shared with people later.

A humorous story or something that was meaningful. The Bible talks a lot about being witnesses, and we've looked at it in our series on Acts. But not in the way I mentioned just a moment ago.

[3 : 37] Instead, witnesses to the power of the crucified and resurrected Christ. That's the witness that we're commanded to give. As followers of Jesus, we're commanded to be witnesses for Christ.

It's not really an option. It's not a suggestion, right? If you get around to it, this might be a good idea. That's not what Scripture says about us being witnesses. Witnesses, excuse me.

Still getting over a cold, so I won't take it personally if anyone wants to distance. I had to phone Pat and Larry this week to talk about a few different things, and we had a good laugh over my voice.

Because it sounds like this. It was quite pained, and I said to Larry, I was experiencing second puberty. But as followers of Jesus, we're commanded to be witnesses.

And in fact, this is the final instruction that Jesus gave to his disciples before he ascends into heaven. You will be my witnesses, Jesus said.

[4 : 41] So in its simplest form, being a Christian is about sharing with others what Jesus has done in our lives. It's offering up evidence from our own experience that would validate that Jesus is, in fact, who he said he is.

The book of Acts speaks to this mandate that was for Jesus' followers then, and it's still for his followers today. Speaking of that, next Sunday, we're going to be returning to our sermon series on Acts that we dug into last year, Acts to all the world.

When we paused that series for Christmas, and then I said, oh, we're doing a New Year series at the beginning of 25, there were a few people who said to me, oh, but we didn't finish Acts.

And I said, be patient. It will come again. So next week, we'll be diving back into Acts to all the world as we're exploring the book of Acts together.

But in Acts 1, verse 8, Jesus says, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses, Jesus says, in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

[5 : 54] Jesus tells his followers that they will receive a helper called the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit will empower them to be witnesses.

Then when Jesus tells them they're to share the good news about him and their experiences with him, with people everywhere. The Greek word used for witness, and I've told you this in the past, is the word *martous*.

And I'm sure you can see this is where we get our English word, martyr. Come on, loud and proud, loud and proud. Just because we're a small group today. So it's interesting that at least originally, there doesn't seem to have been an inherent sense of persecution or risk of death connected to this term.

But we certainly perceive it that way when we hear it now, right? We don't see it as just a witness to something. We see it as a witness, and you're going to be persecuted and even killed for it.

That's generally how we see the term martyr nowadays, right? And it's a word that shows up through the book of Acts as the early Christians demonstrated their faith to Christ, of Christ, to others, even when that meant giving up their lives.

[7 : 12] And we see that. We will see it more in the book of Acts. One source I read suggested that when Jesus references Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth in that passage, this was his way of drawing an expanding circle out from where they were at that moment, which was Jerusalem, and extending out from there to as far away as they could have imagined, the ends of the earth as they knew it.

Because there is no place on earth that we are not meant to be advocates for. Examples of the power that results in living a life that's submitted to the leadership and love of Jesus.

There's certainly many things that Jesus wants us to do in response to his grace and forgiveness. We need to read the Bible, read his word. We need to spend time in prayer, in communion and connection with God.

We need to be intentionally plugged into Christian community like we are here. But the most basic response to faith in Jesus is to look for any way possible to tell other people about him.

Can you recognize that? Through our words and actions, we can be witnesses to the love of Jesus, the mercy, the sacrifice, the hope, the power of Jesus.

[8 : 42] But we need to be careful to not become so removed from this world that so desperately needs to be restored and healed that we forget to be faithful to this basic calling.

In one of his late meetings, D.L. Moody, late as in towards the end of his life, not late as in arrival, D.L. Moody, a man once testified that he lived on the Mount of Transfiguration for five years, as if to brag about his piety.

How many souls did you lead to Christ last year? Moody bluntly asked him. Well, the man hesitated. I don't know. Have you saved any?

Moody persisted. I don't know that I have, the man admitted. Well, Moody said, we don't want that kind of mountaintop experience. When a man gets up so high that he cannot reach down and save poor sinners, there's something wrong.

So perhaps in this new year, we need to challenge ourselves to be better witnesses. We need to commit to giving evidence to the love of Christ by what we say, what we do, to and for people,

wherever and whenever we cross paths with them.

[10:05] Let your light shine. There's other places in the gospel where Jesus talks about what it means to be a witness. In fact, in the middle of his most famous sermon, Jesus tells his followers they have a very important job to do.

They are to be lights in the darkness. So let's hear Jesus' words in Matthew 5, 14 to 16. You can flip there if you like. Matthew 5, 14 to 16.

Jesus says, You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on a stand and it gives light to everyone in the house.

In the same way, let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. Have you ever thought about how important light is?

Hopefully that's kind of a rhetorical question. You ever been driving on the highway at night and your lights go out? That's a come-to-Jesus kind of moment, isn't it? I'll never forget the time we went caving with friends of ours.

[11:20] Caving, for those of you who don't know, essentially means abandoning nearly all hope of rational thought to enter a domain that is really best suited to bats, nasty things that prefer to be in cold, dark, wet places.

And there's a part of my brain that would have definitely preferred to have stayed in a warm, dry coffee shop somewhere, certainly than braving a deep, dark network of caverns.

But thankfully, I'm not cripplingly claustrophobic, so we gave it a try. Our friend knew these caves well, so we embarked on this adventure together.

And of course, we had flashlights. It wasn't so remote a place that our bodies would have never been found. I remember thinking to myself, though, what if I get separated from the group and my flashlight goes out?

So I'm not afraid of the dark, but I am wisely afraid of what may be in the dark, if you can relate to that. I thought to myself, what if I hit my head in the dark and get knocked unconscious?

[12:26] I know this may be hard to imagine now, but I also thought, what if a bat gets tangled in my hair and I begin screaming like a four-year-old girl in front of my friends and total strangers?

So in fact, I did hit my head, good Scottish construction. I did not knock myself unconscious. I got cold, I got muddy, and man, was I ever glad to get back into the warm sunshine and daylight.

The importance and the significance of Jesus' words to the disciples would have been clearly understood to the people living at that time. If they wanted light, it either had to be daytime or they had to light something.

They had to set fire to something. They had to have a torch or a lamp or a candle or something similar. We take electricity for granted, I think.

Light was a precious thing in those days that was never taken for granted. When Jesus was born into our world, he came into the midst of darkness, literally at night, born at night, and figuratively a dark world that so desperately needed a Savior.

[13:40] He came to a people that were full of sin and brokenness, and he was the only source of the true light that they needed. The witness of his life says, you know what it's like to be in the dark?

Do you know how even a small light can change everything? That's what I have come to do. That's what Jesus came to do, to change our perspective by bringing light in a way that we could have never experienced it otherwise.

When you place your faith and hope and trust in me, Jesus implied, you now have the same light that originates with me living inside of you.

Jesus tells them a city on a hill cannot be hidden. When Jesus preached this message, he was more than likely in the hills of Galilee, up above the lower areas of the region.

And in the ancient Near East, a city was often built on a high point of the surrounding area because this would make it safe from invasion. You could see enemies coming from a distance.

[14:51] And it also would have made it extremely visible at night. The placement of these cities would have been important because for someone who's traveling in the dark, especially from a distance, a city would have been seen easily from far off with its lights as the only place where light may be present at night.

Some scholars actually believe that Jesus would have been speaking and motioning to a city in that area called Safed. and Safed sits at an elevation of more than 3,000 feet and it's the highest city in

the Galilee region and actually all of Israel.

Look it up. My friends, you are a light to the world. Do you always feel like a light? We are called to illuminate the darkness and light the way for other people.

You are like, sorry, croaky voice. You are like a city on a hill that can be a visible place of refuge and protection for people who need that.

We should be rays of hope to other people. You will be as important as light in the darkness to someone else, as visible as a city placed on a high point when you live faithfully for Christ.

[16:14] Have you ever had someone say to you, you are different, why are you different? There's your opportunity. I have a friend who's an RCMP chaplain who's obviously a Christian being a chaplain.

She told me once and I thought this was so awesome. She works in a detachment and people use colorful language all the time and people are always apologizing to her, right? Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to use language like that and she said, I understand the language, I just don't speak it and everybody goes, oh, isn't that great?

I thought that was great. I've adopted it a few times because I've had people apologize to me first before I became a pastor but people, friends who knew I was a Christian but now definitely because I'm a pastor, blah, blah, blah, oh, sorry.

And it's like, yeah, it's fine. Just don't, don't, don't assume I'm judging you because I'm not. So one of the greatest challenges I think to live as a better witness certainly in the new year as we look to that is the fear of what others may be thinking about our relationship with Jesus.

Is that fair? Some of us might be embarrassed. Some of us might be ashamed. Some of us might be timid or shy about boldly living out our Christian convictions.

[17:36] It's not popular. Did you ever get the impression it was supposed to be? The Apostle Paul was one of the greatest witnesses for Jesus and he offers us the reason for his willingness to live boldly for Christ in the book of Romans.

Romans 1.16. If you have your Bibles open and want to flip there. Romans 1.16, Paul says, you know it, for I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.

First to the Jew then to the Gentile. Paul writes that he is not ashamed of the gospel. He will not be silenced. He will not hide his faith.

The reason is because he knows this message is the power of God. It is something that will, the only thing in fact, that will provide salvation for anyone who believes in Jesus.

Paul is writing to encourage his readers to be better witnesses because there's so much at stake. People's eternal future is at stake.

[18:49] If you believe that your faith in Christ guarantees your eternal future with him, do you recognize deeply that for those who don't declare faith in Jesus Christ, their eternal security is lost?

Do you love someone who doesn't know Jesus? Do you tell them about Jesus? If you don't, why not? Because, I hate to sound like a pastor, but, their eternal future is at stake.

The power of God is with us to strengthen us and give us the words. We don't need to know what to say. We just need to be willing to step out.

We need to ask him to bring people into our path and give us the words to tell them. In his book, Good News is for Sharing, Leighton Ford writes these questions to ask ourselves whenever we become fearful.

He says, when I'm conscious of the fear of failure holding me back, I go through kind of a personal checklist, he says. Does this fear come basically from pride?

[20:09] A fear that I will not live up to my own expectations or to those of others? Do I remember that God has called me first to faithfulness and then to efficiency?

do I trust that the Holy Spirit is working before me, with me, and through me? Do I trust that?

Do I believe that? Do I remember that I'm called to be neither more nor less successful than Jesus Christ was in sharing his own message?

Do I remember, the Bible is full of these stories, do I remember that God does his greatest work when I seem to be weakest?

Isn't that, after all, Ford says, the mystery of the cross? Some food for thought. As followers of Jesus Christ, we literally hold the good news in our hearts.

[21 : 14] the good news is that because of the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, our lives, and indeed the lives of anyone who believes in Jesus and receives him as Lord of their life, can be and will be transformed and made new.

We have experienced forgiveness. We have experienced hope. I hope we have experienced joy. friends, we are witnesses, but we must overcome our fear to share with a world that is in great, great need.

Gospel needs to be shared and we are called to do that. So I challenge all of us to ask ourselves, who is one person in my life that I can be a witness to?

What is the one thing I can do to be a better witness to the world around me? This new year, look for opportunities to be an advocate for Christ.

Don't be silent. Take those opportunities. This is the call on our lives and the imperative that Christ left with us.

[22 : 36] And the truth is we will have a better year if we focus on better priorities, better relationships, and better choices. And because of the changes we make in those areas, we'll naturally be a better witness to the transformative power of Christ.

Our lives will bear witness to him and we will open up opportunities to share the good news with others. Let's pray together that God will bring these opportunities to us and this will truly be a better year ahead.

Amen and God bless you.