

Seeking to Share Christ with our City Pt 2 -- The Shape of Hope

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 July 2022

Preacher: Rev. Jeremy Graham

[0 : 00] A few years ago, I heard a knock at my front door. And I went to answer it and there was about a 21-year-old young woman who was selling Telus high-speed internet.

And I politely informed her that we're happy with our Shaw service, thank you very much. And then the strangest thing happened. Right before my eyes, on my front porch, this young woman's face fell.

Her entire demeanor changed. And she said, you're right. There's no good reason why anyone should change their internet service provider.

I don't even like this job. I quit. I quit. But there's more, there's more. So she continued. She said, you know what, I just moved to Vancouver a few months ago and I hate it here.

This is the loneliest city I've ever lived in. I think I'm going to just pack up and move back home. So all of this is happening at my front door. Her entire life is deconstructing before my eyes.

[1 : 06] And she's expressing this sense of loneliness and isolation and hopelessness that we hear so much about in Vancouver. So what an opportunity was being handed to me by God to share the good news of Jesus Christ and speak into her experience.

To tell her there is a loving God actually. And he offers rest and a home for you in his presence. There is loving community in Vancouver. In fact, I'm actually part of a great community. Come with me to St. John's on Sunday.

In fact, if you've quit your job, why don't you come in and have a cup of tea with my wife, Kimberly, and I. And we'll tell you all about Jesus and we'll tell you about our family and we'll get to know you a little bit more. I could have said all of those things.

But to my shame, to my shame, I missed my chance. Instead, I just awkwardly finished up the conversation. And I closed the door.

And I went back to my day. You see, I didn't have any of the right habits. I didn't have any of the right practices. I wasn't actually ready for that situation at all.

[2 : 06] Because I'd compartmentalized my life in Christ so that it was separate from how I might behave when I answer the door to a stranger. And maybe you can relate to this experience.

Maybe you've had something similar happen to you where you feel like you missed an opportunity to share your faith. Or maybe you have been in a situation where you feel more like that young woman where your life is entirely kind of unraveling and a Christian either had nothing good to offer or they said all the wrong things in that moment.

Either way, this passage from Peter is for you tonight. And you know that we're in a short sermon series in Peter's letter and we're also overlapping that, overlaying that with our three-part vision statement.

And by now maybe you've memorized the vision. You can find it on page two of your bulletin. It's going to be on the screen behind me. And I invite you to say it with me now. Let's say it together. St. John's is a community of contrast, gripped by the gospel of grace, sharing Christ with our city.

And it's that third part of the vision, sharing Christ with our city, that we're going to focus on tonight. Evangelism, which I know is daunting for many of us. But Peter shows us a way forward here.

[3 : 21] And I want you to start by looking at the key verse, verse 15. Just have your Bibles open with me. Look at verse 15. But in your hearts, honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.

Yet do it with gentleness and respect. So be prepared, Peter says. Be prepared to share Christ when that door of opportunity opens. The obvious question then is, well, how do I get ready?

How do I be prepared? And Peter instructs us in three sections of this chapter. First of all, in verses 8 to 12, he says, prepare a loving community. You got to build a loving community to be ready for evangelism.

And then in the end of the chapter, in verses 18 to 22, he says, you will be prepared by the gospel of grace. Receiving it and rehearsing it will prepare you. And then right in the middle section where that key verse comes from, he says, then you will be prepared to share Christ.

We'll end there. So let's have a look at those first five verses, 8 to 12. We prepare a loving community. I remember attending a youth group weekend retreat years ago.

[4 : 36] And a friend had invited a non-Christian friend. And sometime during the course of the weekend, some money went missing from his bag. And at the next meal, he got up.

Nobody had fessed up. He got up and he said to this group of Christian kids, he said, if this is what it's like to be part of a Christian community, I don't want any part of it. And after that weekend, he never came back.

It's a tragic story. But it illustrates just how important Christian community is. This is what's at stake. If Christian community isn't recognizably different or even tragically could actually be worse than other social groups, imagine what's at stake.

So Peter calls us to Christ-like characteristics here of a Christ-like community in verse 8. That's where he wants us to start. Have a look at verse 8.

Finally, all of you have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. So five characteristics that help to shape a Christ-like community that's ready there to share Christ.

[5 : 39] I want to just unpack those five words. First of all, unity of mind. It literally means together thinking. In other words, not bickering, not being defensive, divisive, but working together self-sacrificially for the sake of love.

And perhaps you can think back to Philippians chapter 2 verse 2 where Paul says, Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. This is what Peter has in mind here.

And then next, sympathy. Sympathy. It means compassion towards one another. And you might think of Romans chapter 12 verse 15 which says, Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.

Can you be a community that has sympathy in a variety of emotions? Can be honest with one another emotionally? And thirdly, brotherly love. So the church is a family.

A spiritual family which means that our bond is actually thicker than blood. There is something thicker than blood. It's the spiritual bond that unites us in Jesus Christ. And fourthly, a tender heart.

[6 : 46] Now this is another compassion word but this time it's a word that's only used in the New Testament to talk about Jesus' own heart. So in other words, by the Holy Spirit when we become, when we are in Christ, we get the heart of Christ.

And this is such a gift because in a world where there's so much bad news, so many reasons why your heart might harden or grow callous to other people, instead, by the Holy Spirit we have a tender heart.

Our heart stays soft. And then finally, a humble mind, which is actually just means friendly or kind. Those are five characteristics. Five marks of a Christian community ready to share the gospel.

In fact, Peter says, ready to share the gospel even when people are out to harm you, which is where he goes immediately in verse 9. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless.

For to this you were called that you may obtain a blessing. In other words, we respond with words of blessing rather than curses. It's tempting to curse, isn't it? When people are out to get you.

[7 : 48] But instead we bless. We've already seen how candid Peter is about suffering, that it's just going to be part of the Christian life. And particularly in this letter, the type of suffering he keys in on is mockery.

It's verbal abuse. It's soft persecution. How are you going to respond to that kind of soft persecution? And he says in verse 10 and 11, quoting Psalm 34, this is how you respond.

For whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit. Let him turn away from evil and do good. Let him seek peace and pursue it.

And this type of response, friends, is only possible if we value the Lord's favor, his approval, more than any other approval from anybody with status and authority in our life.

God has to be our first love in order for us to be able to respond this way to curses. And let me share an experience of where I saw this in action.

[8 : 49] So when I was a new believer, new Christian, about 21 years old, I had a choice to make. I chose to follow Jesus not just going to church on Sunday, but in my lifestyle, in all my choices that I made throughout the week.

And making that choice to follow Jesus meant that almost all my non-Christian friends, I could no longer spend time with them because of the choices that they were making, the kind of recreational activities that they were enjoying that I no longer wanted to participate in.

So you can imagine that because of that, I was the target of mockery and misunderstanding. And it was an incredibly lonely time for me. But in God's timing, it was in that exact same year that a young adults ministry here at St. John's called Ecclesia started.

That was almost 20 years ago. And in those early days, I remember Ecclesia was this ragtag group of Christians and non-Christians. The thing we all had in common was that we wanted friendship.

Lots of people coming from outside of Canada, and they were longing for friendship. And we would spend long summer nights together, sometimes studying the Bible and praying, sometimes just eating and laughing and sharing life together.

[10 : 08] And we were actually becoming a verse 8 community. Those were the marks of our fellowship together.

And actually, furthermore, their love and their support during that important time in my life, where they enabled me to bless rather than, bless those who reviled me rather than curse, to seek the Lord's face for approval rather than my old friend's face.

Their love and support enabled me to do that. And the non-Christians that were part of our community at Ecclesia, this is the interesting part. Amazingly, that commitment to blessing rather than cursing also opened up the door for unbelievers to experience loving Christian community before they believed.

Before they believed. And this actually led, over time, to some of them receiving Christ as their Lord and Savior, which is amazing. So some folks actually belonged before they believed.

Which is exactly what evangelist Sam Chan says we need to start thinking about. He says this in his book, *Evangelism in a Skeptical World*. This is a book that Chris has used as a resource for evangelism.

[11 : 23] It's a great book. I recommend it. In the past, our evangelistic strategy was something like this. Number one, you tell people what's true. And if it's true, then they must believe it. And if they believe it, then they must live it.

True, believe, live. And Sam says, well, if we're living in a post-Christian, post-modern setting, we need to change our approach.

Something more like this. First of all, demonstrate that the Christian life is livable. Then, if it's livable, it's also believable. And if it's believable, then it's true. Now, there's no perfect, perfect way to do evangelism.

This is just a suggestion. But here's a quote from Sam Chan. We need our Christian friends to become friends with our non-Christian friends. We need to be part of the same community.

And then our non-Christian friends can see how the Christian life works. Have you tried doing this? This is the approach that we're going to try out as the St. John's Church plant launches in the coming year.

[12 : 23] We're going to make mission part of our daily life so that we're not actually doing it alone. We're doing it in community, which is actually the best way to do evangelism, alongside brothers and sisters who want to get to know my neighbors and my friends.

And this is what it looks like to prepare a loving community that's ready to share Christ with our neighbors. And now we're ready to turn to the end of the chapter, to 18 to 22, the next step in our preparation.

Be prepared by the gospel of grace. So have a look at verses 18 to 22 with me. If you were with us at the beginning of this series, David started the series by saying that our three-part vision really is the nuclear reactor of it.

All the energy and the power source is grace, that key word grace. It's the power source for both our identity as a contrast community and our mission to share Christ.

In other words, we prepare ourselves to make a defense to anyone who asks for a reason for the hope that's in us. We prepare for that by first receiving the good news ourselves and then rehearsing it week by week.

[13 : 28] That's what we're doing tonight. That's what we're doing in the baptism service. That's what the liturgy's for. That's what the songs are for. We're rehearsing the beautiful good news. And verse 18 of our passage is one of the clearest single-verse summaries of the gospel.

It says, For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God. And this is what theologians call penal substitutionary atonement.

You can go ahead and forget that phrase if you want. But let's unpack it. First of all, Christ also suffered once for sins. Penal. Jesus took the penalty for our rebellion against the loving creator.

The righteous for the unrighteous. Substitutionary. Jesus took our place, the innocent for the guilty. And then, it's so that he might bring us to God. So Jesus' death and resurrection, it removes all that guilt and shame, and it invites us back into our Father's loving arms.

That makes the key question obvious, doesn't it? Have you received this good news? Have you received it?

[14 : 36] Do you believe it? Not just adding a little bit of Jesus to your already good life, but actual genuine repentance and faith, saying that Jesus is your only hope in life and death. Because, let me be frank with you, if you haven't received it, you won't even begin to consider sharing the gospel with anyone.

It's too hard. And if you don't rehearse it regularly, then what message will you be sharing? You won't even know what to talk about. We receive it, and we rehearse it, and then we're ready to share it.

So, Beckett Cook is the author of a remarkable memoir. The title of it is A Change of Affections, A Gay Man's Incredible Story of Redemption.

So, Cook describes how he rose to the heights of Hollywood success as a production designer. He was right at the top of Hollywood. And when he got to the top, he describes it as being hazy and unfulfilled.

That's how he felt. So, here's his words. There I was, in the middle of a Paris ultra-chic fashion party, feeling dead inside. I thought, if this stuff isn't going to do it for me, what on earth will?

[15 : 50] I've done everything. I've met everyone. I've been everywhere. What am I going to do for the next 50 or 60 years? And then six months later, after this intense despair, he was in a coffee shop in L.A.

And the table next to him, lo and behold, there's a group of Christians doing Bible study, which is a great reason to do Bible study in a coffee shop, by the way. Here's his quote. I asked what their church believed about homosexuality, and they explained that they believed it's a sin.

I appreciated their honesty and that they didn't beat around the bush. But the reason I was able to accept their answer was because I had that moment in Paris. Five years earlier, I would have been like, you guys are insane.

You're living in the dark ages. But instead, I was like, maybe I could be wrong. Maybe this actually is sane. So I was open to the gospel in that moment.

And that Sunday, he showed up at their church, and two hours later, he left a transformed person. So here's his summary of what happened. I grew up at a Catholic school, and I honestly thought religion was just being a good person, doing good things.

[16 : 55] I don't think anyone ever explained to me what the gospel was. So when the pastor was preaching all these things that were the exact opposite of what I thought the gospel was, it really resonated, and it prompted me to go forward at the end of the service to receive prayer.

I was all in. I was all in. And of course, this isn't a typical experience, but it's by far, it's far from an impossible experience. And I know that some of you tonight here have had experiences not very different from Beckett Cook's experience.

So have you been gripped, gripped by this gospel of grace, which is the training ground for evangelism, receiving it and rehearsing it? And that's also why Peter introduces those strange words about Noah and the baptism in verses 19 to 22.

You probably wondered what the heck that's doing there. Well, I don't have time to address verse 19. I'm not going to go into verse 19. But if you're curious about what that verse is all about, you can ask me about it after the service.

I do want to talk about baptism for a moment. This seems like a good night to talk about baptism, doesn't it? We know it's a sacrament, which means it's a visible sign of the gospel, which complements and goes alongside the verbal proclamation of the gospel in things like sermons.

[18 : 14] So visible and verbal go together, proclaiming the gospel. And Peter knows, he's saying here, he knows that our human nature is to be in the sin management business.

So we keep our vices, our addictions, our idolatries in little compartments where no one can see them, with walls around them. And we convince ourselves, therefore, that salvation is just a little sprinkling of water to confirm that we're basically good people.

The way he describes it is, it's like a little removal of dirt from the body. That's all it's going to take, verse 21. But of course not. Of course not. Christian baptism and Noah's flood narrative in Genesis chapter 6 and 7, they both point us to the same thing, the seriousness of sin.

The need for a new conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's also from verse 21. A new conscience. In other words, in our baptism, we symbolically die with Christ.

We die to sin, and we're born again into new life out of that symbolic flood water. You might not have, you might not have, you looked at Hazel tonight, and you thought, there's not really that much going on.

[19 : 25] It's kind of underwhelming. They didn't even fill up the dunk tank. They didn't even put her under. Like, but there's so much going on in the sacrament of baptism. Most of all, though, the thing that you can't really see, but that's going on there, is the grace of God.

The grace of God. In fact, that's the beautiful thing about baptizing a baby, isn't it? I mean, there's so much grace at work in a newborn life. There's nothing really that Kathy and Willie, you know, this is entirely a gift to them.

And this is a great time when you just receive this gift to say, you know what, God, I'm giving you back this gift. This is entirely grace. So in this way, we're prepared by rehearsing and receiving the gospel of grace.

We're prepared so that we're ready for those opportunities to share Christ. And that brings us, finally and briefly, to the middle section, verses 13 to 17. Be prepared to share Christ.

And let's just take a moment here to have a little rest, to have a little break. I know it's getting hot in here. So why don't you just take a moment, stand up, stretch, move around for a minute. I can see your faces. You're fading. Somebody get a bottle of water and mist themselves, you know, whatever it takes.

[20 : 37] Little stretch break. You know, you can stay standing during the sermon if you want. I could sit and you could stand if you want. But just as you're relaxing for a moment, I'm going to read verse 15 again.

You don't have to sit down right away. When you're ready, you can have a seat again. So verse 15, reminder of what it said. In your hearts, honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks for a reason for the hope that's in you.

Yet do it with gentleness and respect. So the obvious thing to ask is, what does it mean to make a defense? defense. And that word appeared in that long passage we read from Acts chapter 26.

Paul was making his defense in a courtroom setting. But actually, in the context of Peter's letter, it's not really, he doesn't really have that setting in mind, as beautiful as that passage was.

He has something more like you walking your dog with your neighbor, you sitting in a lawn chair at a backyard barbecue. That's where you're going to make your defense. defense. And the Greek word that we translate defense is the word we get apologetics from, Christian apologetics, explaining the gospel to someone.

[21 : 44] And then the word, we say, asks you for a reason for the hope. The reason is just logical. It's the word for logos, logical. So, I mean, you have to make sense.

You have to be able to articulate something. But it doesn't require you to be an extrovert. It doesn't require you to be a theologian. It requires you to know how to have a conversation.

I think we all know how to do that. We all know how to talk, and then someone else talks, and we respond, and we answer their questions. One year, I had a summer job cutting lawns, and as I got to know my boss, who I was riding around in the truck with all day, I discovered that this 30-something-year-old guy named Sean had never been to church in his life.

He'd never known any Christians. He hadn't even gone for Christmas, and he'd actually never heard anything about Jesus. So I was the first Christian who ever got a chance to talk about Christianity with him.

And I got to tell you, nothing dramatic happened. He didn't become a Christian that summer. But I got to introduce him to just a little bit of the gospel of grace. He had no idea what grace was even. The word grace was even not in his vocabulary.

[22 : 56] And also, I got to be a Christian who showed him that a Christian isn't weird. And a Christian can be a good friend and a good employee. And author Tim Chester points out how we often make the mistake of assuming that people, when we share our faith with them, that on a scale of one to ten, their interest in the gospel is like a seven or an eight.

You know, they're just about there. We just got to say the right thing and they'll become Christians. But he says, well, more than 70% of people in our culture are probably more like a one or a two. Maybe you know some of these people like Sean who hardly know anything about Jesus.

So this is him speaking. In everyday evangelism, our role is to move people one or two steps along rather than to get them all the way to number ten in one go. And that's not so overwhelming, is it?

To just think about playing one role, one small role in getting someone a little bit closer to the cross of Christ. So our apologetic strategy, Peter says, is very simple. It comes from a combination of having a good conscience and showing, demonstrating good behavior.

Some of it's internal, some of it's external. So in our passage, it's things like when friends and family see us acting zealous for what is good. That's verse 13. Suffering for righteousness' sake, verse 14.

[24 : 14] Blessing rather than cursing. In our hearts, honoring Christ the Lord as holy. All of those things, they generate curiosity. And curiosity, of course, produces what? Questions.

And questions give us an opportunity to answer them. They open the door for us to share Christ. Which brings us all the way back to the beginning. We have to be prepared.

We have to be prepared. And lots of things prevent us from being prepared. I mean, in this time of soft persecution for being a Christian, it makes us suspicious of unbelievers.

Or, when we are experiencing this soft persecution, it makes us spend all our time with Christians. And the more time we spend with Christians, the less ready we are, the more tongue-tied we are when a colleague asks us something about our faith.

Or even more seriously, when we let the grip of the gospel loosen on our own hearts, well then, it makes it almost impossible for us to be prepared to share Christ. But the good news is that God's grace is sufficient in all of our weaknesses.

[25 : 16] God's grace is sufficient. So I just want you to look around. Look around at all the brothers and sisters here tonight. And look at them and see faces of people who are actually eager to partner with you in learning how to do this together, to share Christ.

And we prepare by growing a loving community. That's what we're doing here at St. John's, that welcomes those who are curious about the hope that's in us. And we are prepared by receiving and rehearsing the gospel of grace.

And so, we're ready to share Christ. We honor Christ the Lord as holy. We're always prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks for the reason, for the hope that is in us.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.