

Messengers of the Gospel

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Date: 19 March 2016

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[0 : 00] So what is happening is that Christians are finding it harder and harder to talk about God, talk about sex, talk about politics. We can talk about what you do, mention Jesus, and it's a different subject altogether.

Let's just change that and talk about something else. Don't want to talk about religion. I've read, for instance, that Christian teachers are choosing not to wear crosses because they know that their credibility would be thrown out if they were known to be Christians.

One student group, Christian student group, has decided not to speak about sex to its students on a university campus for fear of losing its university affiliation.

Last year, new graduate employees at a major bank in Sydney were told on their first day that we don't do religion here.

Talk of faith wasn't welcome and would be considered a breach of corporate policy. And just recently, you probably saw in the news or in newspapers this week, the University of Sydney's Union stated that the Sydney University's Evangelical Union must remove requirements for members to sign a faith-based declaration and threaten them with deregistration of the clubs and societies program if they do not comply by the end of this month.

[1 : 22] In practice, that means that non-believers could not only just be members of the Evangelical Union, but in fact could hold leadership positions in the executive committee.

On many fronts, there is pressure to be quiet, to withdraw, to retreat from public spaces. Christians, not just Christians, in fact anyone who does not agree with the liberal left, basically, but Christians are being silenced.

And yet God requires us, as his disciples, to be in this world and to speak as messengers of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus' own teaching in Luke chapter 24 shows that the nations need to hear and repent in order to be saved.

They need to hear the gospel, the good news of Christ, and they need to repent in order to be saved. And against the command to himself be quiet about the risen Lord Jesus, Peter said the same thing in Acts chapter 4, verse 12.

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which they must be saved. And this itself was the great commission of the Lord Jesus to his disciples and to us in Matthew 28.

[2 : 42] All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

I said in the first sermon in this series, this is now the end of it, we're coming to the close of front lines. In the first sermon in this series, seven weeks ago, I said that understood in the correct way, vocation, that is understood Christianly, vocation is centered in a sovereign God who calls us to embrace the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and to follow him in the power of the Holy Spirit. That is a theology of vocation. And so the first and the primary calling of all people is to embrace the Lord Jesus as his disciples.

That is, we are called to someone, not something or somewhere. The means by which God calls people to embrace their primary vocation is his disciples speaking as messengers of the very gospel that God calls people to embrace.

But under that primary calling, we all have a secondary calling, a secondary position in life in which we live out our primary calling with faithfulness and fruitfulness to the God who has called us.

[4 : 29] And so how do we work out our primary calling to embrace Jesus, to call other people to embrace Jesus in a society that wants us to be quiet about that primary calling, especially in our

places of our secondary calling.

And I think the temptation for us is in fact to be quiet, to keep our heads down and in the end to propagate the secular sacred divide which this whole series is against.

that is, to live two separate lives, my private life and my public life. Now let me say that there is a lot at stake for the people of our country at the moment.

There's a lot at stake. There's a lot at stake for the people who want us to be quiet. A number of Christians are starting to speak up about religious freedom in our country and I think that's okay. But, I get a little concerned if the motivation for speaking up is for Christians to be allowed to be Christians.

[5 : 49] That is, I'm concerned if we are speaking up just to protect who we are and what we are allowed to do.

Because that's not why we've been called to speak up. What's really at stake is the hope and the lives and the souls of millions of people who don't have hope.

That's what's at stake. As Dr. Ralph Winter, he was a former American missiologist, scholar and pastor. He was one time director of the United States Center for World Mission.

He made a very significant point about the task that is before us as Christians. He wrote this in 1978. We may do well to recognize what seems to be the consistent thrust of the whole Bible.

That unless and until in faith the future of the world becomes more important than the future of the church, the church has no future.

[7 : 09] as Jesus puts it, the most dangerous thing you can do is seek to save your own life.

Or to turn it around another way, being messengers of the gospel to our society is the only future of the church and it's not about protecting the church.

Every church in history that has not reached out has in fact gone down. Every church that has existed to protect itself, to protect its rights, has gone down.

God will always cause his people around the globe to give up their lives for the sake of his mission. but we have no biblical guarantee that any given denomination or local church or individual will endure to the end.

Denominations have come and gone. Churches have risen up and disappeared and many individuals like seed sown among thorns have confessed faith in Christ but have been choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of this life.

[8 : 30] Luke chapter 8. And so the future of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, future of St. Paul's Chatswood, future of you and me, hangs on whether we lose our lives as messengers of Christ and the gospel for the sake of others, not for our sakes.

And so our focus today is our personal readiness to be message of the gospel on our front line. This is first base stuff I think for us.

And so the text which I've chosen is 1 Peter 3 and especially 14 and 15 which come along with me on this. 1 Peter 3 verses 14 and 15.

What does it mean to be ready to make a case for your hope?

And how are we to get ready and to stay ready? A clue to that is in 1 Peter 3 and you do need your Bibles open because I want you to look at some stuff here fairly closely.

[10 : 07] 1 Peter 3 verse 15 is the clue. It's the relationship between the phrase be ready and what comes just before it in the text.

Literally and sorry for getting real technical here there is no verb in the phrase be ready or be prepared. Literally Peter says set apart Christ as Lord in your hearts ready always to make a case for your hope.

That's what he literally says. And this suggests that there is a very close connection between setting apart Christ as Lord in your heart and always being ready to make a case for your hope.

There's a connection there, close connection. So one key to understand what it means to set apart Christ as Lord in your heart is to notice that it is the alternative to fearing men.

Verse 14 is the Lord. But even if you should choose to be afraid, do not be frightened, but or instead in your heart set apart Christ as Lord.

[11 : 29] In other words, don't be afraid of the sort of things that men threaten you with. Instead, greatly revere Christ in your hearts.

Setting apart Christ in our heart is what you do in order to not have fear in your heart of what men might do or say about you.

That's what you do. So whatever setting apart Christ means, it is the opposite of fearing men. And it is, in fact, the source of your confidence and your hope.

In verses 14 and 15, Peter is giving a Christian adaption to the text of Isaiah 8 verses 12 to 13.

And you might want to look at that with me. Isaiah 8 verses 12 and 13. And it gives us a whole lot of help in deciding what it means to set apart Christ as Lord in our hearts.

[12:41] God gives Isaiah a warning in these verses about how we should feel, or how he should feel about his unbelieving countrymen, about the Lord God.

And beginning at verse 11, he says, the Lord spoke to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the ways of his people. He said, do not call conspiracy everything that they call conspiracy.

Do not fear what they fear. Do not dread it. The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy. He's the one you are to fear.

He is the one you are to dread. And so Peter takes this word of God addressed to Isaiah about his adversaries and he applies it to the Christians in his own day and our day in relation to our adversaries.

And he says, don't fear what they fear, but regard the Lord instead. Isaiah 8, 14 makes it clear that the way to regard God or to treat him as holy is to fear him instead of fearing what men fear or to dread him instead of dreading what they dread.

[14:06] But God doesn't mean that we are always to be gripped by an emotional fear when God is our Lord.

That would seem to, in my mind, to be an invitation to misery, I would think. And I don't think that's what he means here. One clue that he doesn't mean that is the very next phrase in verse 14.

It's a promise for those who fear him as God. It says, God will become a sanctuary.

sanctuary. A sanctuary is a place where you feel safe and secure and peaceful. Now, it seems on the surface to be somewhat paradoxical.

If God is your dread, how can he be your refuge and your sanctuary? But it's not as paradoxical if we take the words of verse 14 to not mean be constantly gripped by the emotion of fear, but rather or instead always regard the displeasure of God as more fearful than the displeasure of man.

[15:30] What God wants here from Isaiah is for the prospect of offending God to be much more dreadful thing to him than the prospect of being persecuted by people.

And that's the way Isaiah was to revere the Lord. It's the way that Isaiah was to set apart God in his heart.

The degree to which God was set apart in his heart was the same degree of his desire not to displease God. And what was it in particular in the context that would have displeased God?

Verse 12, do not fear what they fear or be in dread of what they dread. God would have been displeased if Isaiah, he would have been displeased with him if he had feared the same thing that his unbelieving countrymen feared and that is the threats of people.

And the reason is that God had made many promises to his people that should in fact have taken away the fear and instead filled them with confidence and hope.

[16:54] And so if Isaiah feared man and not God, it would show that he doesn't trust the promises of God. God had said, Isaiah 41 verse 10 and 13, do not fear for I am with you, do not be dismayed for I am your God, I will strengthen you and help you, I will uphold you by my righteous hand for I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, do not fear because I will help you.

God had promised him that already. God promised them that already and a bunch of other promises and if Isaiah feared the threats of God, he cast his vote against the trustworthiness of God and does not revere the Lord in his heart.

But if we do not fear what men fear but instead fear to displease God and so trust in his promises then you reverence the Lord in your heart.

You set apart Christ as Lord in your heart. And so what we see from the Old Testament background background of Peter's teaching here in chapter 3 is that setting apart Christ as Lord in your heart means first of all feeling that to displease Christ is more fearful than the threats of any human being. Firstly and more specifically since what displeases Christ most is unbelief in his promises promises then setting him apart in our hearts means setting your mind on his promises and setting your heart on trusting his promises.

[19 : 04] Promises like 1 Peter 5 verse 7 cast all your anxiety on him for he cares for you. Promises like 1 Peter 5 10 after you have suffered a little while the God of all grace who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ will himself restore establish and strengthen you.

To set apart Christ as Lord in your hearts is to set your mind on his promises to take care of you and to trust those promises with all of your heart.

And if you do in increasing measure the fear of men will decrease and instead be turned into hope. And you will have a reason to give for the hope that is in fact in your heart. Now if what Peter has written here seems like a tall order let's not forget that Peter discovered this secret of hope.

He discovered the secret of boldness in the face of opposition after a massive failure. This is the Peter who declared that he would never forsake Jesus but waiting in a courtyard at the home of the high priest while Jesus was being questioned he failed miserably.

[20 : 37] Three times he denied he was a disciple of Jesus. He wasn't with Jesus. He did not know Jesus. And in the background in the shadows stood Jesus and Jesus turns and he looks at Peter and as he predicted the crow the cock crowed the rooster crowed the bird whatever it was crowed three times just as Jesus said it would.

And contrast this in that moment in that dark night huddled around that fire and the absolute failure of Peter running out from them bursting into tears failing Jesus to because he feared man.

Contrast that Peter with the Peter who had seen the risen Jesus who was filled with the Holy Spirit he's no longer huddled around a fire but he stands as the accused.

He who had feared to confront a servant girl now confronts the high court and accuses the high court of crucifying Jesus and he refuses to be silent about the resurrected Jesus.

He says we must obey God rather than man. in Acts 4 and 5. You see Peter shows us that our hope provides both the courage for our frontline witness and in fact the content of our frontline witness.

[22 : 21] Our hope is in the Lord risen. Our devotion to Christ makes us ready not only in rationale but in attitude.

Notice it says give a reason for the hope you have in gentleness. Respect, gentleness or another word is humility of life is an important, is just as important as boldness with the word.

Humility is the other result of setting apart Christ as Lord in your heart. surely no pride is more offensive than pride in being trophies of God's grace.

Is there anything more offensive than that sort of pride? pride? You see the lack of fear before man doesn't lead to pride or smugness or arrogance or abrasiveness.

This humility is far more than politeness and political correctness. It's an attitude that reflects the fear of God in your heart.

[23 : 29] You don't want to disappoint Christ. You want to have the same attitude of Christ. Christ. And so I wonder, and just wonder, if the reason we aren't more free and natural in testifying to the reality of our hope in Christ, on our front lines or in our society, I just wonder if it's because we don't feel very hopeful I wonder if it's because of lack of hope that we're not free to testify to Christ.

And so the fear of man grips us. I think that if that's the case, if we're not hopeful, when our hearts are not full of hope in the promises of Christ, Christ, and when the occasion arises at work or at school, university, at a bar, and the opportunity is there to make a case for our hope, we sense it in fact as a duty to defend doctrine.

doctrine. If hope's not there, it's just a duty to defend doctrine instead of a delight to tell someone why we have so much hope in our hearts.

Being messengers of the good news of salvation in Christ Jesus will always be a burdensome duty to defend a doctrine, as long as Christianity means for us simply accepting certain doctrines as truth and keeping a certain list of do's and don'ts.

That is, our mission to the world will simply just be a duty that we have to do if we don't have hope in our hearts. Any concept of being messengers of the gospel will be a painful duty to be avoided if we confess the lordship of Jesus with little more that are sent in our minds.

[25 : 54] If Jesus is our treasure and our heart's devotion, then it is a delight to tell someone why we have hope.

and I fear that too many church people have simply inherited the motions of church life and outward morality and piety, but the heartfelt reality of Christ and a joyful hope in his promises, in spite of opposition, are foreign.

And so we want to defend our way of life, not see people wonder Christ. Christ. And some people who are in that position, they can defend a doctrine, but they cannot make a case for the hope that is within them because they don't feel hope brimming up within their hearts.

promise. And so the way to get ready to be messengers of the gospel on your front line, the way to get ready to make a case for the hope that you have is to get hopeful.

Pretty straightforward, really. it makes the job so simple. It simplifies it for us. Don't start by writing out beforehand a bunch of answers to someone else's questions.

[27 : 53] That's not where you start. Apply yourself to settling the questions of your own heart, your own mind. do that first.

That's where hope begins. Settle the questions of your own heart, your own mind. We have to find for ourselves reason enough to get over our fear of men and to live in hope.

And if our own hope does not spring up from something that Christ did or that something that Christ said, then it is a mere sham to try and make a case for someone else to put their hope in Christ.

But if we search out the promises of Christ and meditate on his character and work for the sake of banishing our own fear and kindling our own hope, then this very act of setting apart Christ as Lord in our hearts will be the preparation for making a case for our hope to others on our front lines.

And if it is so, then our primary activity in preparing to witness is to keep our own hearts happy in Christ, hopeful in Christ.

[29 : 25] And so that means day after day, we go to the scriptures not anxiously trying to amass a bunch of arguments for work colleagues and university students and whatever else, for every possible rebuttal that somebody might have in our secular age.

We go there day by day because our own hearts are so desperately needy for hope. Because our own hope wanes.

Our own trust in the promises of Christ wanes. We have fears that need to be overcome by the promises of God. We have doubts that need to be answered. The fight of faith is waged in the word of God and prayer.

And when we emerge from that encounter with God, with a renewed and lively hope in his promises, we will be ready to make a case for our hope.

hope. And in making the case for our hope, we have in Christ with gentleness and respect, we are praying that God would make us fruitful on our front lines for his glory and the joy of many people.

[30 : 41] for our