

“Witness”

Sermon preached by Dr. Justin Houseknecht
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Text: Philippians 1:27-28
#10 in a Series of 10

Good morning. Paul, in his exhortation to the church at Philippi, wrote, “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved – and that by God.” Please pray with me.

Dear Father. Thank you for the opportunity you have given us to come together in this place for fellowship and to worship you. I ask that you speak to us in this time. Change us I pray in your precious name, amen.

I have the opportunity this morning to share with you the final value of Kirkmont’s Mission and Values Statement, witness. The Value Statement is: **“Witness:** We breathlessly and hopefully await the return of Christ (Revelation 22:20), and we proclaim the coming of His kingdom through the unwavering proclamation of the Word (2 Timothy 4:2), the promotion of social righteousness, the demonstration of hospitality to the stranger (Hebrews 13:2), and our care for the weak and the helpless. We confess our readiness to stay awake (1 Thessalonians 5:6) until the coming again of the Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2) and our hope to rouse from their slumber as many who have been given ears to hear (Luke 14:35) for the glory of God alone.” I would like to address three questions this morning: to what do we witness, to whom do we witness, and what happens when we are faithful witnesses? Before I go any further it is important to clarify that the term witness used in our Values Statement is, as indicated in Philippians, how we conduct ourselves. Our witness is the overflow of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Witnessing, or evangelism, is related to our witness in some ways, but what I will be discussing today concerns our behavior much more than sharing the four spiritual laws.

The first question I’d like to address this morning is “to what do we witness?” God came into this world, lived a perfect life, and died to set us free from the bondage and eternal consequences of sin. John summarized this as, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” This is the Good News that we are to share with all peoples, not only with words, but also by how we live our lives. In Titus 1:16, Paul saves some of his most stinging criticism for those who “claim to know God, but by their actions deny him.” Surely those who have been freed from the bondage of sin should live lives that reflect the love of Christ, the love that has saved them. Failure to do so often causes nonbelievers to curse Christ because of our hypocrisy and intolerance. The people I have known who most viciously attack Christianity have had far more problems with Christians than they have with Christ or His teachings. Along the same lines, who among us has been saved without first experiencing the love of Christ in a faithful witness? Expressing this love is something we can do every day by a friendly smile to someone we pass at the grocery store, a kind word to an exasperated waiter, or taking the time to stop and talk with a neighbor.

A further way that our lives can be a witness to the Good News is by living rightly and promoting justice. Paul, in his letters to numerous churches, encouraged his readers to put off the old

sinful nature (sexual immorality, idolatry, hatred, discord, jealousy, drunkenness) and live by the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control) (Galatians 5:16-26). Living as faithful witnesses, however, is not just about sinning less and being more gracious. Throughout Scripture we are also encouraged to defend the downtrodden. Moses, in Exodus 22:21-23:9, directed the Israelites to “not mistreat an alien or oppress him... not take advantage of a widow or an orphan... not follow the crowd in doing wrong... not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits.” James (1:27) wrote that the “religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” Throughout history the Church and individual Christians have been a driving force behind the rule of law, equal protection under the law, the civil rights movement, and many other issues that have brought relief to the underprivileged of society. Who are the downtrodden of our time? Who are they that haven’t the ability to speak up in their own defense? Are we doing anything to relieve their suffering? We have a representative form of government. We need to vote for candidates who will defend the defenseless and let our elected officials know that human rights are an important issue to us. I lament the killing that is occurring right now in Darfur, Sudan. I certainly do not know how to bring peace and justice to that region, but letting my congressmen know that it is an important issue to me could prompt him to work toward a solution. How we choose to use our resources is also important. Do we purchase products from companies that mistreat their workers, or worse yet mistreat the workers in our own businesses? Our God is the God of the poor, the widow, the alien, and the disenfranchised. Only by caring about these matters ourselves and working for social justice can we accurately represent our God in this world.

Finally, we are to be witnesses to the good work that God has begun in us (Philippians 1:6). “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28) We have been saved, changed, and blessed immeasurably by a God that loves us. Do we acknowledge, even to ourselves, what the Lord has done for us? My wife and I have been blessed with a 2 year-old daughter that is an absolute joy. The Lord and I know that it is only through His working that she is who she is. Nevertheless, how many times has someone complimented me on her good behavior or joyous attitude and I’ve passed up the opportunity to point out what God has done to prepare the way for her – how in the years preceding her birth He freed me of sins that surely would have made me an abusive, distant father? What work has the Lord begun in your life? Have you taken the opportunity to acknowledge before men His goodness to you? I pray that we all will. It may be the most powerful way we have to testify to God’s great power and love.

The second question I would like to address this morning is, “to whom do we witness?” I believe we are called to witness to our family, those with whom we spend time on a regular basis, and the world. Paul, in Ephesians 5 and 6, describes the godly family. Husbands are to love their wives “just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” The Christian marriage is to be an earthly model of the relationship between Christ and His church. Someone who spends a day, 18 years, or a lifetime observing our marriages should be able to walk away with a pretty good idea of just how much Christ loves us, enough that He “gave himself up.” That is certainly a high standard, but we are called and empowered to reach it by the Holy Spirit. Likewise, children raised in a Christian home should be able to imagine a loving and holy heavenly Father because of the example set by their earthly parents. This should be true not only of the husband-wife relationship, but also the parent-child relationship. Parents should not exasperate their children, but raise them up in the sight of the Lord. Finally, children are to obey their parents. What a powerful message it is when, in this day, a child chooses to obey their parents. How better could a 16 year-old witness to the work that God has done in his or her life than by being home on time or not going to a prohibited social activity?

In chapter 6 Paul also discusses the relationship between employee and employer in the first century language of slave and master. We can be grateful that slavery has been prohibited in this country for almost 150 years, but we still have the relationship between employee and employer. How

should employees relate to their boss? Paul says “with respect, and fear, and with sincerity of heart just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.” I know that this has been a particularly difficult, and important, area of my life. One of my greatest regrets is how I interacted with my PhD mentor in graduate school. Full of pride, I was always convinced that my ideas were better than his and wasn’t afraid to let everyone I worked with know about it. Two of these guys were really close friends that I spent a lot of time with. Neither are believers. I spoke frequently with them of Christ’s work and love for us. I prayed regularly for their salvation. But I also continued to show contempt for our boss. I don’t know that they would have discovered God’s truth and love if I had followed our boss’s leadership with respect and sincerity of heart, but I certainly missed an excellent opportunity to be a living witness to them. Now, with little direct contact, I can only hope and pray that God will bring a faithful believer into their lives. The behavior of employees can certainly be a powerful testimony to Christ’s work in our lives, but so can that of employers. Paul directs employers to “not threaten” those who work for them. That isn’t to say that employers should turn a blind eye to unproductive or disruptive employees, but rather that problems should be dealt with constructively and without threatening. A caring and supportive boss can do much to help an employee understand how our heavenly Father loves and cares for us. In all these things I try to remember that when we claim to have the love of Christ in us it is important to demonstrate that love. Otherwise people may come to question the power of His love.

I also believe we are to be a witness to people that we do not know and may never even see. I think of the witness of those Christians who fought that others might have the same civil rights they already enjoyed. Or Christians who volunteer their time and energy to provide for the basic physical needs of the less fortunate. There are many ways to get involved in activities that proclaim God’s love to the world. Two weeks from now a group from Kirkmont will volunteer at the Gospel Mission. There are numerous Christian agencies such as Compassion International, James Fund, and others that serve the needs of poor children, orphans, and widows all over the world. It is easy to get involved. Will you? Our involvement, as Christians, is a witness to the world of God’s love.

So, what happens when we witness? The most immediate answer is that if we have been faithful witnesses those around us will notice that there is something different about us and want to talk about it. Peter says, “Be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have, but do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience” (I Peter 3:15-16). This command assumes that the hope which is in us will be visible. When that hope is visible we will have opportunities to talk about it and should be prepared to do so. There are a variety of responses that we should expect to this message of hope. Some will respond by sharing that they too have this same hope. Others will respond by seeking to better understand the reason for our hope. Finally, some will respond with hostility. Regardless of the response, however, spiritual conversations are a result of our witness.

The outcome of these conversations is also an indication of our witness. We should see greater fellowship with other believers, an increasing number of people beginning new relationships with Christ, or increased persecution from those hostile to the faith. I contend that the results of spiritual conversations are the work of God alone. When we need Christian friendship He often leads us to conversations with fellow believers. When we need to be stretched and others are ready to begin seeking after God He will lead us into conversation with one another. There are also those times in our lives when, for whatever reason, we need a little tribulation. These times of being persecuted for our faith can also be great times of growth if we let God work in us. They are also a reminder of the suffering of Christ and the promise of his return. As Peter says in I Peter 4:12-14, “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to

you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory of God rests on you.”

Finally, I think it is often easy to wonder whether it really matters if we are faithful witnesses or not. We are, after all, each no more than a single person. What can one person do? I believe our faithfulness is essential. Jesus himself tells us throughout the Gospels that if we love Him we will obey his teaching. John, in Chapter 14, describes a time when Jesus was explaining to His disciples how the Holy Spirit would teach us once Jesus returned to be with His Father. One of the disciples objected that this amounted to Christ revealing Himself to the disciples but not to the world. “Jesus replied, ‘If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching.’” Obedience is commanded by Jesus, it is empowered by the Holy Spirit, and it is the way God has chosen to reveal Himself to the world. This should strongly imply that our witness does make a difference in this world, but most people still doubt the efficacy of their own witness. This past week a senior at Virginia Tech was feeling powerless as a result of the shootings at her school. She wanted to do something to comfort those mourning the loss of their classmates, friends, professors, and sense of security. Unfortunately, she didn’t know any of them personally; she lived off campus, and just didn’t see how a college student could do anything about such a horrible situation anyway. Her father encouraged her to do what she could, to work with the leaders of the campus ministries she was familiar with to organize a campus-wide prayer meeting. Well, one thing has led to another. Several international ministries including Campus Crusade, Navigators, and Intervarsity heard about the prayer meeting and encouraged local chapters all over the world to meet at that time to pray for the victims. Thursday evening, as the group of students met to pray at Virginia Tech they were joined in spirit by Christians all over the world. Does one person’s faithfulness matter? Yes. From the fear and despair that the Virginia Tech community experienced has arisen a great outpouring of prayer and fellowship all around the globe. Not only that, but non-Christians in Blacksburg, Virginia and all over the world have seen Christians demonstrate love and support to those who experience suffering. Why? Because a senior in college, in the midst of her own personal despair, turned to her earthly father and he pointed her to the Lord. She then faithfully did what she could to effect change in her community. It really was a small thing, but the Lord has used it to bring comfort to the people of Virginia Tech and glory to His name. Does one person’s faithfulness matter? Yes.

So, the final value in Kirkmont’s Values Statement is witness. For those who have experienced the love of Christ and accepted his righteousness I encourage you to live as faithful witnesses in your families, with your friends, and with your coworkers. If you have not yet accepted Christ into your life I pray that you have experienced at least a measure of His love in this place today.