

“You’re on Mute”

I Peter 3:15-18

Series: Cliff Notes Week 18. Peter, James and John

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Brothers and sisters in Christ – I must announce to you that I have made my decision. After much prayer and anguish, I have decided to switch denominations. Yes, I know this is a huge step, but my mind is made up. I am converting from Zoom to Microsoft Teams. I could enumerate many theological reasons for this switch, but the real reason Woodside is paying for Teams. I must confess that I will miss Zoom. It got me through the dark days of Covid. And Zoom has this one amazing feature: “Touch Up My Appearance.” When I am sick of looking at that old guy on Zoom I just click this button and suddenly I look like Matthew McConaughey!

Here’s a Zoom mistake I make in almost every Bible study. When I present a long and masterful analysis of Scripture, highlighting the nuances of the original Greek or Hebrew words, I finish to receive an awed silence from the members. I know I have delivered another outstanding lesson until someone says, “You’re Muted.”

Many Christians are muted. We attend worship, Growth Groups and Microchurches, participate in missions and ministries. Yet when it comes sharing why we believe in Jesus or inviting a friend to follow Jesus – we suddenly get silent. Why are we on mute? One word: fear. We are afraid of what people will say or how they will react. They may reject us, avoid us, stop being our friend. Besides, we say, my faith is just my opinion. Everyone is entitled to their own opinion. I shouldn’t try to force my personal preference on someone else. But let’s think about it differently. If I suddenly discovered the cure for cancer, would I keep it to myself? Should I say, “It’s just my opinion. I don’t want to force a cure on someone else. Let them find their own cure. That’s the tolerant thing to do.” No. You would do whatever it takes to get them that cure. Jesus offers us a guaranteed cure for an even deadlier spiritual disease: sin. Cancer kills the body but sin destroys the soul. The Gospel is not your opinion or mine. It doesn’t belong to either of us. It is the cure God gives for sin. We simply administer the cure. What’s more, salvation is not just about the hereafter. God longs to pour His abundant power and peace into everyone here and now.

The first Christians were not muted. As we near the end of our Cliff Notes Series we look at how the Good News of Jesus spread from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. Starting with Pentecost, the Apostles and first disciples were driven by the unstoppable power of the Holy Spirit to share the faith, hope and love of Jesus. We saw how Saul was converted to Paul and how he planted churches in cities throughout the Roman Empire. Today we turn to three other Apostles – Peter, James and John. After leading the church in Jerusalem, Peter left to preach the Gospel in Rome. According to tradition, John went to Ephesus and was imprisoned on the Island of Patmos. And James, the brother of Jesus, not the James the brother of John, stayed to lead the Mother Church in Jerusalem. Life was not perfect in the Early Church. They disagreed and debated. Yet

they were united in sharing the Good News with everyone. Peter, James and John each wrote letters in our New Testament, and they all paid for their faith with their lives. They were not afraid to share the hope they have in Jesus. They were not muted.

So how do we get past the fear? Peter gives us this powerful direction on how to apply God's cure for sin. He writes,

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always 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. I Peter 3:15

First: **Be Right with the Lord.** Make Christ the only Lord of your life. You cannot give away what you don't have. The first step, according to Peter, is declare Christ the Lord of your heart and the owner of your life. That requires you to clean out all the other lords, gods and idols that try to control your heart. Fall in love with Jesus. "No one can serve two masters," Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:24). Why is this essential? The number one criticism of Christians is hypocrisy. We say one thing and do another. How does this happen? We serve two or more masters and everyone knows it. You and I must decide up front who we follow: Jesus or other masters. Peter says when you follow Jesus alone you keep "a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (I Peter 3:16).

Second, **Be Ready to Give an Answer.** Imagine you are dropping your friend off at the airport. You know your friend does not believe in God. You have five minutes before your friend begins the check-in procedure. Suddenly your friend turns to you and asks, "Why are you a Christian?" What would you say? Are you prepared to give an answer for the hope you have in Christ? You do not have to memorize a lot of Bible verses although that helps. The New Testament is extremely important. But at that moment the "You Testament" is what your friend wants to know. Why are you a Christian? How did you become a Christian? What difference has Christ made in your life? What difference can He make in your friend's life? Here is a simple way to prepare your story: 1. What was your life like before Jesus? 2. How did you become a follower of Jesus? 3. What is your life like now that you follow Jesus?

As for Scripture: John 3:16 is a very simple Bible verse anyone can remember. Peter gives us another one here:

For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit. I Peter 3:18

It's all packed into this verse: Who saves us: *Christ*. What did He do: *died for sins*. How many times: *once*. Who did He die for: *all*. Why did He do it: *To bring you to God*. How did He do it: *He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit*.

The recent news about the hard-working TSA agents reminded me of a story I once heard. Pastor Timothy Johnson was going through security screening at Baltimore Washington International airport before catching a flight. The screener politely asked him to step back as he looked through Tim's bags. As he unzipped and checked the bag, Tim noticed a silver ring with a cross on his right hand. Tim mentioned it. He looked briefly at Tim. Then, as he continued searching the bag, he said:

Yeah, the ring. It means I'm a follower of Jesus. You know, in my job, one of the things we worry about is dynamite. But do you know where that word comes from? It's from the Greek word *dunamis*, which means 'power.' As a Christian, I know that all of the power belongs to God. That's why he sent Jesus. So while I'm doing my job, I know that he is doing his job. That's where I put all of my trust. It all belongs to him, and he's here with us. Well, Mr. Johnson, have a great trip.

As the official moved on to the next passenger, Pastor Johnson walked away with a smile, marveling how this man naturally rose to the opportunity to share his faith. It certainly wasn't the place for an extended conversation. There was a long line of people and he had plenty of work to do. But in less than 30 seconds, he shared his faith—calmly, confidently, and without hesitation.¹ He was ready to give an answer.

Third, **Be Respectful and Gentle to Everyone Who Asks.** They say you are not supposed to talk about politics and religion. Yet the Barna Research Group found in a typical week 100 million adults discuss politics and 90 million adults delve into religious or spiritual matters. 4 out of every 10 Americans raise spiritual issues or beliefs in a typical week.² If we are praying for God to open a conversation and prepared to share our story, it's likely we will have an opportunity to talk with someone about Jesus.

When that opening appears, it is essential for us to be gentle and respectful to those with whom we speak. The Good News about Jesus is the greatest gift you can give anyone. It's best shared through a relationship of love and trust. Inviting a seeker to know Christ takes time, a lot of listening and even more love. You cannot share God's gift of salvation through pushing, arm-twisting, judgment, guilt or force feeding.

Be Right with the Lord, Be Ready with an Answer, Be Respectful and Gentle when they ask. That's God's way to share His Good News. The simplest, easiest and most effective way of helping someone become a follower of Jesus is through a personal invitation – to a worship service, to a Growth Group or Microchurch, to participate in a mission project, to VBS, Adventure Club, Sunday School and Youth Group. One simple invitation can change a person's life and the lives of many others.

At the age of 16, someone invited her to go on a mission trip. It changed the direction of her life. At 27 she heard the call of the Holy Spirit to go on a worldwide mission trip - 11 months in 11 countries. I first met her after she returned. Impressed by

¹ Timothy Johnson, Bowie, Maryland.

² Four Out of Ten Adults Discuss Religious Matters During the Week (6-9-03).

this accomplishment I recall wondering how we could steal her away to be a Woodside leader. I didn't go through with my schemes, but God still brought Meg Smith to be a powerful leader, to show us how to follow Jesus, to inspire us love, grow and share in greater ways.

She began with our youth and then accepted the position as Director of Discipleship. In this role she oversaw all our Growth Groups, guided and coached our leaders, gathered and presented the Women's Retreat, and started new groups and microchurches. She developed her own preaching gifts and gave powerful messages. All this requires a lot in a regular year. Yet Meg faced the additional challenge of leading our discipleship ministry through Covid. That meant helping everyone discover and use this crazy thing called Zoom and finding creative ways to stay together when we couldn't meet together. Meg took it all in stride and used her spiritual gifts, outgoing personality, and passionate love for Jesus to guide us through to the other side.

But then the Lord stole her away from us, just like I tried to steal her for Woodside. I learned a long time ago not to fight with God. Today, Meg Smith Neill will be ordained and installed as the Pastor of the Anchor Presbyterian Church. She is ready to lead Anchor to give the reason for the hope of Jesus within them with gentleness and respect. Thank God Meg is not on mute.

Are you?