

What would our faith look like -- what would our lives look like -- if each of us committed ourselves to becoming more Christlike? Would you be more, or less, judgmental? Would you possess more, or less, stuff? Would you speak more, or less, charitably of others? Would you be more, or less, kind, forgiving, and compassionate? Do you think you would experience more, or less, hope, joy, and peace, in your life? These are the types of questions we are invited to keep before us as we continue through a 7-week series on the theme: *A More Christlike Christianity*. And while honestly engaging these questions might cause us some moments of discomfort, I think these are the questions we begin to ask ourselves on a regular basis as we seek to live more Christlike lives.

Over the past 3 weeks we've explored the themes: *A More Christlike Church*, *A More Christlike Worldview*, and *A More Christlike God*. Those recorded messages can be accessed on our church website, but they're also available on our podcast, St. Paul's Voyager, wherever you get your podcasts: Apple, Spotify, Anchor, etc. One of the cool things about a podcast is that if you think a particular message would be good to share with a friend or family member, you can just hit the share button and send them that episode.

That's worth mentioning as our theme today is *A More Christlike Testimony*. So, we're looking at how we share our faith. But not just how we share our faith, but what that looks like if we take our 'how-to' cues from Jesus. (Because today's message will include a video, it might be better to send a link to our YouTube channel if you want to share this particular message!) I've asked Scott and Jolene Wilbur to read our scripture for today. [1 Peter 3:8-16a]

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So obviously this passage is not from the gospels, and so it does not directly reveal what our testimony would look or sound like if we're looking to Jesus to discover Christlikeness in the ways we share our faith. But it does not seem a huge or illogical leap to think that what is written here reflects Peter's experience and knowledge of Jesus. What strikes me immediately is what we might call the 'tone' of Christlike testimony because, in what he writes, Peter is clearly concerned not only with the content, but with the tone of how we share our testimony. In fact, tone seems to be his primary concern.

We note this first in vv. 8-12 and then again in vv. 15-16a. (And I'll point out something I don't think I've run across before; that is, the division of vv. 15-16 are a little different in the NIV and the NRSV, so if you have the NIV translation, the portion of scripture that

was read this morning actually ends at v. 15 rather than continuing into the beginning of v. 16.) So, in vv. 8-12, Peter is concluding a discussion about appropriate relations amongst Christians. In vv. 15-16, he then broadens his focus to Christian relationships in the larger society; how Christians relate to those who are not.

Notice first that in v. 8, what is written is directed to 'all of you'. 'All' meaning all who call themselves Christian. "All of you have unity (or harmony) of the spirit, sympathy, mutual love, a tender heart, and a ~~haughty~~ mind." (The actual words are a humble mind, but I just want to make sure you're still tracking!) For Peter, these virtues are descriptors of how we are to relate to each other and this seems quite consistent with how the gospels characterize Jesus' manner and teachings as a gentle and loving shepherd, who's yoke is easy, who does not seek to crush the bent reed...

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Why then do we have so much division and acrimony within Christianity? This is surely one reason our testimony rings false to so many ears! Because virtues like unity of the spirit, sympathy, mutual love, a tender heart, and a humble mind are so lacking in those who are zealous to 'defend' their faith! I was meeting with a group of our members on Zoom and they agreed that Christians are more known for their divisions than for any of these virtues. In short, in word and in action, our testimony reveals a remarkable lack of Christlikeness.

This is not just across and within denominations. I'll be unusually candid. In every church I've served, we've needed to hire people to fill certain positions. Whenever someone within the church applies for the opening, I always caution them that by working in the church they are likely to discover that certain people they've known within the church – people who have seemed to be 'good' Christians – may end up disappointing them. Some are going to insist on their own way. They're going to try to use the church for their own agendas. They are going to say and do things that are meanspirited, petty, and hurtful.

So far, that warning has been confirmed 100 percent of the time. For whatever reason, and I suspect it's usually because of unresolved hurt, grief, or trauma, even those who can quote scripture chapter and verse, seem unable, and even unwilling, to live by 1 Peter 3:8 (not to mention 1 Corinthians 13, Paul's exhortation about how the characteristics of love ought to exemplify Christ's body, the church).

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Peter then expands his focus for how Christians are to relate to the broader world. In v. 15, he says, "Always

be ready to make your *defense* to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the *hope* that is in you.”

The Greek word for defense is *apologia*. The apostles adapted this legal term such that ‘apologetics’ has come to describe the effort to defend or explain Christian faith to others. Blaise Pascal, Søren Kierkegaard, C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton, and Dorothy Sayers are some good examples of those who have engaged in Christian apologetics. Unfortunately, more recent examples of so-called apologists are more problematic as they seem to think they are fighting something of a cage match against the secular culture and/or against Christians who have different perspectives. Such a crusading spirit seems contrary to what Peter adds at the beginning of v. 16: “yet do it with *gentleness* and *reverence*.” And so Peter’s advice is basically: “Be prepared to offer your hope-filled testimony, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” And I think Peter’s words strongly suggest that if we are notable give our testimony with gentleness and reverence, it would be best to be quiet.

As Dallas Willard observes, if we are seeking to defend our faith, to offer our testimony, it “is not fitting to engage in debates or arguments with an antagonizing or arrogant spirit.” Willard goes on to write, “However firm we may be in our convictions, we do not become overbearing, contemptuous, hostile, or defensive. We know that Jesus himself would not do so, because we cannot *help* people in that way.” (These quotes are from Willard’s book, *The Allure of Gentleness*, a good work of recent apologetics.)

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Does it not seem that rather than seeking unity of the spirit, sympathy, mutual love, tenderheartedness, humility, gentleness, and reverence, that most of what passes for Christian ‘testimony’ these days is really about winning an argument; being right? I don’t think this would be possible if we truly focus on pursuing a more Christlike Christianity. Indeed, Jesus says, ‘blessed is the one who takes no offense at me’ when testifying about himself in response to an inquiry of some followers of John the Baptist. So if we are going to be a more Christlike Church, this certainly means that the way we engage our primary testimony, the Bible, needs to be very different than what we are seeing the wider “Christian” culture around us.

With thanksgiving to the Rev. Steve Thompson who gave me permission to include it in today’s message, I want to share a video with you. [Video: This and That and Paradox].

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This week I have been thinking about how, within that past few months, we have lost two very dear and very different longtime church members: Marshall Saunders and Fred Mullins. I miss hearing Marshall’s sweet southern draw and I miss hearing Fred say, “Come on by” when I’d call to see if I could visit.

Anyone who knew them both, knows that they held virtually opposite views on many of the issues of the day. And yet both of their lives demonstrated gentleness and reverence; they both had tender hearts and humble minds. Combined, they were members of St. Paul’s for well over 100 years. That’s the type of church I want to pastor, the type where Marshall and Fred can worship side-by-side; where all of us, above all else, are seeking together to live more Christlike lives. Amen.