

SERMON TITLE: Words of Witness (Part 3)

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SCRIPTURE: Selected Scriptures

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Not a day goes by that we aren't shaped by words—words spoken to us, words on the news, words on social media, our own words. We're shaped by words because there is a mysterious and yet certain power in them. The Bible says that there is life and death in the power of the tongue. Words are used to build up and give life. Or, sometimes, they're used to tear down and take life. So, how can we be sure that we are speaking life to others? How can we avoid words that cut and tear down? How can we know we are honoring God with what comes out of our mouths? Answer: God himself is not silent. He is the God who speaks. In Scripture and ultimately in Jesus, we have God's holy communication to us. His word should be the primary thing that shapes our words so that others might find life in him.

The word "gospel" means "good news." Specifically, the "Good News" about Jesus Christ. The Gospel is the story of God saving his people and judging his enemies by sending Jesus to die for our sins and rising from the dead. So, in that sense, the Gospel is both good news and bad news—good news for those who believe it—bad news for those who reject it. But the word itself means "good news."

In the Bible, there is no single way of sharing the Gospel. Instead, the Gospel is communicated in a variety of different ways. Most of us tend to think that the way the "Gospel" was presented to us when we first trusted Christ for salvation is the way the Gospel ought to be shared—or at least something very close to that. For many of us, the Gospel was presented to us as four or five biblical statements of fact that you have to believe in order to be saved. And, we believed those facts. We prayed a prayer putting our faith in Christ. As a result, God forgave our sins and gave us eternal life.

And that method was very effective. Millions of people received Christ when they heard the Gospel presented like that and many of them (many of us) are still following Jesus to this day. The reason that method was effective was because the great majority of people held the Bible in high regard—most people had some kind of church background—most people were concerned about "living a good life"—a life "good enough" to get them into heaven after they died—most people believed in heaven and hell and they didn't want to end up in hell. Those things shaped most people's worldview in this country from the founding of our nation up until about 2000. But all that has changed. We don't live in a culture like that anymore. The majority of the people we rub shoulders with every day have no church background and no regard for the Bible. Or maybe, they had such a bad experience in church or with God not coming through for them like they thought he should, they walked away from Christianity and never looked back. Or maybe, they grew up in the church, but then they went off to college and some atheist college professor convinced them that Christianity, the church, and the Bible are nothing more than the ways people in power oppress the poor and the marginalized. Now listen carefully: sharing the Gospel with people like the ones I just mentioned, using a four- or five-point, propositional outline, most often, has no impact on those kinds of people. I'm saying that many of the people we work with, go to school with, and live next door to cannot understand the words we use when we share the Gospel in the ways to which we've been accustomed. And that means we need to find new ways to share the unchanging Good News of the Gospel. But when I say "new" ways, I mean "new" to us, but they're actually the ways that the Gospel writers and Jesus and Paul and other New Testament writers shared the Gospel in their day. I'm saying, we must not confuse a method of sharing the gospel with the Gospel. And the Bible shows us that there are a variety of different ways to share the Gospel.

Hear me. The Gospel is true for all people, at all times, in all places. It is the same story—God's story—for everyone. But at the same time, the New Testament shows us a variety of ways of presenting the Gospel, tailoring it to people from different backgrounds and cultures.

Paul understood and practiced this—READ 1 Cor 9:20-22. And, the entire New Testament shows us this. (Sorry, the New Testament survey we will walk through contains way too much material to be included in this short summary of today's message).

The bottom line is this: There is no one-size-fits-all method for sharing the Gospel. There is no one single way of sharing the Gospel found in the Bible. In fact, nowhere in the Bible is there in one single place you find a Gospel presentation like Four Spiritual Laws or the Bridge or the Romans Road all packaged together (yes, the Romans Road is close). In fact,

Jesus never shared the Gospel in any of those ways. That doesn't mean those ways are wrong—of course they're not wrong. God has used all those methods to draw people to himself for many years, and those methods are still very effective in places like South America and Africa where people grew up in religious Catholic or Protestant backgrounds that still hold the Bible in high regard even though they might not follow what it teaches them about Jesus.

I'm saying, every Gospel presentation is a summary that says something about Jesus—who he is, what he's done, and what he promises he will do for you if you put your faith in him. And the flipside to that is that it will also communicate what sin is and what it means to reject the offer of salvation Jesus extends to us. But there are different ways to share that message with people who did not come to Christ the way we did. So, open your mouth and let God fill it with the wisdom and words you need to share the Gospel with those he's already prepared to hear it. Also, in your small groups and families, talk through some of the discussion starters in the section below.

Discussion Starters —

- Open your discussion time with this question—“How would you summarize what Charlie taught about sharing the Gospel this morning?” Don't stop with one person's answer. Ask others in the group to summarize the message in their own words. Don't stop until 3-4 people do this. Ask follow-up questions.
- Ask people in the group about the *content* of the message you heard when you first trusted Jesus. Tell people your story of grace, but put the emphasis on the message you heard to the best of your recollection.
- Discuss the statement—“We must not confuse a method of sharing the Gospel with the Gospel.” What does that mean?
- Have someone read 1Cor 9:2-22. Then ask, “How does this apply to us as we try to share the Gospel with people from different backgrounds and cultures?”
- What was your first reaction to the opening illustration about Bob and his daughter Sarah? After hearing the message, how might you share the Gospel with Sarah in a way that she could hear while staying faithful to Scripture?
- What was your takeaway from the New Testament survey Charlie walked us through to see how different biblical authors and characters shared the Gospel in different ways with different people or groups of people?
- Think about this—In one sense, every Gospel presentation is a summary of the Good News about God's offer of salvation that has come to us in and through Jesus Christ. A basic Gospel presentation cannot cover every single aspect of the Gospel message. What are the essentials of the Gospel message? What are ways to talk about “sin” other than “sin” simply being “we have broken God's laws?” How else could we talk about sin and stay true to Scripture?
- How could you use the biblical metaphor of “adoption” to help someone see how much God loves them and wants them to be in his family?
- How could you use the metaphor of “living water” from John 4 with someone who is obviously thirsty to know God or maybe, they wouldn't say it like that. Maybe they tell you they have been seeking something “spiritual” in their life and they've tried all sorts of so-called “spiritual” paths trying to find God, but they still feel empty. Talk about the story of the woman at the well to address the spiritual thirst you hear from that person.
- Instead of presenting the Gospel as entering into a “personal relationship with God,” how could you talk about becoming a Christian by having a life that matters and makes a difference in the world? How could you use the story of the rich young ruler to help someone see that Jesus' invitation to follow him means laying aside anything that would get between you and God? How could you talk about faith/trusting God with a person like that?