

SERMON TITLE: "Words of Witness"

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SCRIPTURE: Acts 1:8 and 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.

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In the Bible, the last words of Jesus before his ascension are Acts 1:8: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Jesus' followers are to be his "witnesses" (the Greek *martus*). We are to be witnesses to his rescuing love and kingship. Witness is an experiential word. You can only bear witness to something that you have personally gone through. It's also a courtroom word. When a witness takes the stand, they are supposed to share what is true as they have experienced it, and this requires words. A wordless witness in a courtroom is no witness at all.

But some Christians disagree with Jesus. They throw around the proverb, "Preach the gospel at all times, use words if necessary." Yes, we should live out the message of the gospel, and embody the freedom and love we have in Jesus. But the proverb is a false dichotomy, because the good news of Jesus is a message that has to be communicated with words, and not merely with good deeds. So, what should we do? Are we as compelled to speak of Jesus' love as his first followers? When called to testify about the grace and truth of Jesus in the courtroom of day-to-day life, are you silent? Are you a wordless witness, which is no witness at all? And if we do open our mouths to testify to the goodness and truth of Jesus, what should we say? In short, what should faithful 'words of witness' sound like? Let's look at four pictures from Acts.

First, in Acts 2:42-47, the early church stood firmly on God's Word clearly spoken in the gospel, and they taught about it, encouraged one another with it, and prayed about it. This led them to lives of self-giving love, reflective of Jesus himself. They held life in an open hand and not a clenched fist, and their lives were seasoned with gratitude and praise. And the surprising result of these things was that "the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (2:47). And this means that one of the broadest and most general ways to be a witness with our words is to:

Delight in God's people as a witness to those who are far from God.

In God's family, we should enjoy others, pray with others, pray for others, laugh with others, eat and drink with others. We should sing, forgive, grieve, share, confess, and speak life to one another. Jesus said, "They will know that you're my disciples by your love for one another." So, faithfulness to the mission will include using our words to delight in God's people.

Second, in Acts 3-4, Peter and John heal a guy, and a crowd gathers outside the Temple, so Peter stands up to speak. And this is not the life of the church (like Acts 2). Rather, Peter is about to engage with religious people, people wrongly think they know what God is like and what God is up to. And because that's the case, Peter has to use Biblical-spiritual language to show them what God is truly doing in Jesus. He even says, "We can't help but speak of what we have seen and heard." So, against the backdrop of this religious audience, here's a very simple way for us to be faithful like Peter. We should:

Know God's word as a witness to people who are confused about God.

This is not about you being the final judge as to whether someone is really a Christian. This is not about having all the theological answers. This is realizing that many people know just enough flimsy spiritual language that they think they're

cool with God, but there is zero relationship with him. Yet, Scripture teaches us what God is really like. And if you want your words to be energized for witness, and they're not energized by God's Word, you won't be equipped to call religious people to repentance like Peter did.

Next, in Acts 17, Paul is in Athens, a city full of idols. They loved new teachings, new ideas, and new philosophies. Athens was a modern city, full of culturally-savvy intellectuals. And to these people, Paul doesn't quote the Old Testament. Rather, he quotes their own poets and thinkers. The implication for us is that we should:

Understand how culture thinks as a way to engage others where they are.

Paul's awareness of how Athens thought should be instructive to us. We have to understand the broad narratives that people are believing so that we can make the gospel make sense to them. Sadly, many Christians are prone to do the exact opposite. Many conservative believers are scared to engage with cultural ideas, and don't know how to see the redemptive underpinnings of modern art, thought, or entertainment. But Paul wasn't scared. His example is an invitation to discover how other people are trying to find meaning in life, not primarily so that we can attack it and say that it's empty, but so that we can find points of agreement, and say, "Yes, but what are the desires behind that," so that we can then point to the deepest desire that is fulfilled in the gospel.

Fourth, in Acts 26, Paul is called to the stand in front of King Agrippa. And here, rather than loving God's family, knowing God's word, or thinking patiently about cultural ideas, here Paul gets really personal about his life with Jesus. He tells Agrippa about how Jesus met him and changed him. He tells Agrippa that Jesus gave him a new meaning and mission in life. And Agrippa was moved by Paul's personal testimony (26:28). So, based on this picture from Paul's life, each follower of Jesus should learn to:

Share your grace-story as a witness to the power of God's love.

Paul's story is completely about grace. And yours might not seem as drastic as Paul's, but every follower of Jesus has a grace-story we need to learn to share. It doesn't have to be anything fancy or flashy. It can include your life before Jesus, how you met Jesus, and your life with Jesus since then. But whatever it includes, we need to think about finding spaces in which we can share it. Personal evangelism isn't a career or job. It has often been over-professionalized. And the church of Jesus needs people ready to talk about Jesus in the routine of every-day life. God has chosen to use our words to show people their deepest need and then to show them his greatest provision in Christ. Our job is not to save people, but to be faithful witnesses to who Jesus is and what he came to do. And telling others what he can do to deliver them should often include telling them how he has delivered us.

These are four simple ideas from Acts about what it looks like to be a faithful witness with our words. Absolutely, there will be challenges. There will be pushback. This is a sacred and nuanced responsibility. There will be questions about sin and death and hell and judgement. But the content of our message is that Jesus took those things for us at the cross, and he emptied those things of their power in his resurrection. And if we trust Jesus and swear allegiance to him, rather than sin and death and hell and judgement, we get righteousness, life, hope, and acceptance. We get mercy, peace, love, and intimacy.

And if the gospel is true... If the Jesus-story is as historical as it is wonderful... If God has actually, factually, and indelibly invaded history in Christ, then nothing can stay the same, and all terms of humanity have been altered at the deepest possible levels. And we, as ordinary people, now have to communicate something that transcends all language but that also has to be spoken now, here, and in whatever words we can marshal. We must. We will be his witnesses.

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### Discussion Starters —

1. What stood out to you most about this message?
2. Which of the four pictures is the most natural for you?
3. Which of the four pictures is the most difficult for you?
4. Name a time that you feel like you weren't a faithful witness?
5. Who is someone that you know who wisely uses their words to bear witness to Jesus?
6. How do you think God wants you to be more intentional as a witness for him?