

Go and Tell by David Foster

Last week we looked at the parable of the banquet portraying God as a wonderful host who provides a sumptuous feast for the whole world. As “master-host” God commissioned his servants to go and spread the Good News of this banquet, even urging those in the “hedges and remote country lanes” to come. This scene sets the stage for us to consider the Great Commission which Jesus gave his servants just before returning to heaven. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

Recently my friend, Jim, told me about an interesting conversation he had with a group of Christians who met at a men's breakfast. After carefully reading Acts 1:8 in several translations the leader asked if anyone would like to share what this verse meant to each person or how it applied. After a prolonged, and somewhat awkward silence, one person spoke up, “My view is similar to St Francis of Assisi who wrote; “Preach the Gospel at all times and when necessary use words.” These are interesting words aren't they?

It has been my observation that many people like to quote this saying, even in sermons. I can't help wondering, “Why?” Do people think this means “lifestyle-witness” is enough and that verbal witness is unnecessary? Sadly, those who are drawn to this view, may think that it gives them an excuse not to prepare to answer questions unbelieving friends might ask. Even worse, nearly half of millennial Christians believe it's “wrong to share one's personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in hopes that they will one day share the same faith.” This is the result of a new poll conducted by the Barna Group. Furthermore, this view undermines what the Bible clearly teaches about proactively looking for opportunities to sow a word of witness.

“Devote yourselves”, says the apostle Paul, “to prayer, being watchful and thankful. 3 And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. 4 Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. 5 Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. 6 Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” (Colossians 4:2-6)

Notice throughout this passage there are phrases which strongly imply using words, such as, “message”, “proclaim it clearly”, “conversation” and last but not least, “know how to answer everyone.” Moreover, it is clear in this passage that proclaiming truth is seamlessly interwoven with actions and lifestyle. We are actually deceiving ourselves if we think that good character is sufficient. Both are necessary. Let us, therefore, seek to imitate our Master who was “full of grace and truth.”

The way many modern readers misconstrue the saying attributed to St Francis of Assisi tends to minimize the necessity and power of words. Not only is this misguided view at odds with Colossians 4:2-6, it does not correlate with the term “witness,” at the heart of the Great Commission.

What does it mean to bear witness? It means giving true testimony (often in a court of law) based on what one has seen or heard. By its very nature, witnessing requires the one testifying to speak words. Countless other Scriptures make the same essential point, although not from a court-room scenario. A couple examples are provided here: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Romans 10:13-14)

“Has the Lord redeemed you? Then speak out! Tell others he has redeemed you from your enemies.”
(Psalm 107:2)

So far, we have glimpsed how important words are in order to communicate the Gospel message clearly. When Jesus commissioned his disciples, he not only told them what to do – be witnesses – he provided a geographical overview, or road map, so to speak.

Now let's trace the next key event in the unfolding story of taking the Gospel to the ends of the world. Throughout the first 7 chapters of the book of Acts, we can see several occasions where the Gospel was preached in Jerusalem using words and the result was many thousands turned to Christ. However, these same chapters make no mention of anyone taking the Gospel beyond the city boundaries of Jerusalem. This fact is important as it helps us grasp the full significance of what happened next.

We read that “a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ... 4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. (Acts 8:1-4)

Notice all 12 apostles stayed in Jerusalem. It was the **ordinary**, “untrained” believers who fled en masse into the surrounding provinces of Judea and Samaria, the very places Jesus had instructed them to reach out to.

Did the Lord Jesus really expect these “common” believers to have a vital part in fulfilling the Great Commission? Let us look at a story recorded in Mark 5:1-20 which can help us answer this question. We read, “They went across the lake to the region of the Gerasenes. 2 When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an impure spirit came from the tombs to meet him. 3 This man lived in the tombs, and no one could bind him anymore, not even with a chain. 4 For he had often been chained hand and foot, but he tore the chains apart and broke the irons on his feet. No one was strong enough to subdue him. 5 Night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones.

6 When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran and fell on his knees in front of him. 7 He shouted at the top of his voice, “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? In God’s name don’t torture me!” 8 For Jesus had said to him, “Come out of this man, you impure spirit!”

9 Then Jesus asked him, “What is your name?”

“My name is Legion,” he replied, “for we are many.” 10 And he begged Jesus again and again not to send them out of the area.

11 A large herd of pigs was feeding on the nearby hillside. 12 The demons begged Jesus, “Send us among the pigs; allow us to go into them.” 13 He gave them permission, and the impure spirits came out and went into the pigs. The herd, about two thousand in number, rushed down the steep bank into the lake and were drowned.

14 Those tending the pigs ran off and reported this in the town and countryside, and the people went out to see what had happened. 15 When they came to Jesus, they saw the man who had been possessed by the legion of demons, sitting there, dressed and in his right mind; and they were afraid. 16 Those who had seen it told the people what had happened to the demon-possessed man—and told about the pigs as well. 17 Then the people began to plead with Jesus to leave their region.

18 As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. 19 Jesus did not let him, but said, “**Go** home to your own people and **tell** them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.” 20 So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.”

Let's re-read the story and discuss the following questions taken from the Discipleship Making Movement.

1. What does this teach us about God?
2. What did this teach us about ourselves / people?
3. What do you need to apply / obey?
4. Who are you going to tell?

Conclusion

This story of deliverance from demons may seem irrelevant in our situation, considering how few Canadians believe there is a Devil, much less acknowledging that he exerts an influence. But why allow this spiritual “climate” of ignorance to inhibit and intimidate us from telling the Good News? Let us not be ashamed of the Lord Jesus, how he saved and transformed us, indeed, how he's continuing to conform us to his likeness. Rather, let us boast in the Lord and tell how we've been set free from bondage to fear of death. As Scripture says, “Now since the children have flesh and blood in common, Jesus also shared in these, so that through His death He might destroy the one holding the power of death—that is, the Devil—and free those who were held in slavery all their lives by the fear of death.” (Hebrews 2:14-15, HCSB)

We concluded last week's message by reading 2 Timothy 1:10; “God has made all of this plain to us by the appearing of Christ Jesus, our Savior. He broke the power of death and illuminated the way to life and immortality through the Good News.” All of us have been released from Satan's grip by the Lord Jesus. Our story may not seem as dramatic as the man from Gadarenes, but each of us has been freed from slavery to fear of death and therefore, we can testify,

“Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?”

For sin is the sting that results in death, and the law gives sin its power. But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:54-57)

Let's close by singing *O Church arise*, a song penned by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend highlighting our Lord's command to declare his liberating message of salvation around the world: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A98YQHG8tLY>

Appendix: How do Muslims view Satan? (And do they believe Jesus could exorcise demons?)

These questions are significant not only considering the story in Luke 5 but also because Islam is the fastest growing religion in Canada, as it is also in many other western nations. Furthermore, Islam is the second largest religion on earth. Muslims believe the Devil is the arch-enemy of mankind. Every day they pray for protection from “the accursed one.” (Shaitan) You may want to read some useful insights for sharing the Gospel against the backdrop of Satan's deceptive and deadly attack on Adam and Eve in the garden as recorded in the Bible. (John 8:44) Two helpful articles are: *Who can overpower Satan & release his captives?*, available here: https://www.answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/overpower_satan.html and *Fish tank parable illustrating God's power to save*, available here: <http://answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/fishtank.html>

Endnotes

The Christianity Today article of 2019 February 6th, as cited above, noted another interesting finding from Barna's research group, “Nearly all practicing Christian millennials (96%) said witnessing for Jesus is part of being a Christian.” Naturally this belief corresponds with the first part of the frequently quoted statement by St. Francis of Assisi, “Preach the Gospel at all times.” However, it does make one wonder, “How on earth could nearly half these young adults (millennials) simultaneously reject sharing one's personal beliefs with a view to converting non-Christians?”

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/february/half-of-millennial-christians-wrong-to-evangelize-barna.html>