

Witnessing is Witnessing

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[0 : 0 0] In our evening services at the moment our series is called Doctrine for Mission and the reason we have that title is we are trying to think about doctrine, thinking about the big theological truths that the Bible presents, but we're trying to think about that in a way that is applied to the work of mission. God has placed us here as missionaries to bring the good news of Jesus to the people around us. That is such an important task, it's such an urgent task, it's such a wonderful task and it's such a scary task. And it's something that we all find difficult. None of us find it easy to share our faith and yet we know it's something that we need to do and something that we long to do. So in our series we're thinking through some of the big biblical truths that I hope will help equip us and encourage us as we seek to share our faith with people around us. Tonight we're going to turn back to Acts 1, we're going to read verse 8 again where Jesus said, 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, to the end of the earth. And our title as you can see is witnessing is witnessing. Now every so often in life we have those moments when something is shown to us that we never realised before and yet once it's pointed out it seems so obvious and you find yourself thinking, oh how did I not notice that until now. One of my favourite examples of this is a friend of mine who came back from a summer camp a couple of years ago and he said, I only just discovered that Benofi Pie is called

Benofi Pie because it has banana and toffee in it and his mind was blown. He thought it was just a name and so he was just, this was just amazing, this is an amazing discovery for him. I'm sure you can think of examples yourselves, it's happened to me lots of times.

I only recently discovered that Pokemon is called that because it's short for pocket monster. I also only recently found out that Fortnite is called Fortnite because it's short for 14 nights which I'm really embarrassed that it took me 39 years to discover that.

But even more embarrassingly I was well into my 30s when I realised that when you have a vote in Parliament in the House of Commons and the tellers come and they say the I's to the right and the no's to the left, they're not talking about your face. It's not I's and no's, it's I's as in A-Y-E, I as in yes and no's as in no plural. But it took me a long time before I ever realised that and I'm sure you can think of examples yourselves.

I had another of those moments when I read a book called Honest Evangelism by Rico Tice and Rico Tice is a minister in London and he was one of the founders of Christianity Explored which has been a wonderful ministry used all over the country and this is the paragraph that I read. I'm sorry, my button didn't work, there we go. He said this, our job is not to convert people, it is to witness to Christ. Conversion isn't the mark of successful witness. Witnessing is, think of a courtroom.

Witnesses are there to tell the truth, that's successful witness. If the jury doesn't believe them, that's not their fault or their failure.

[3 : 5 2] You've not failed if you explain the Gospel and are rejected, you have failed if you don't try. And when I read those words I discovered something that is incredibly obvious but which I'd never seen before. I realised that the task of witnessing is not to convert someone.

The task of witnessing is to be a witness. It's to testify to the truth of who Jesus is and what he's done. This was one of the biggest light bulb moments in my Christian life because for years whenever I thought of witnessing I had always thought that if it didn't result in a conversion then it was a failure which was one of the many reasons why I felt like I was such a poor witness myself. But this paragraph that Rico Tice wrote showed me what I'd never seen before. It showed me that witnessing isn't converting someone and that of course makes perfect sense because converting someone is only what God can do. It's not the witness's job. The witness's job is simply to be a witness. And that's why when it comes to sharing our faith we've got to remember that witnessing is

witnessing.

From the beginning of the New Testament church witnessing has been a key part of what Jesus wants and expects his disciples to do. In Acts chapter 1 that we read just before Jesus ascended into heaven he told his disciples that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them and they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Al-Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. That little paragraph there that you can see, that little sentence, is like an introduction to the rest of the book of Acts because that's the pattern that's followed. The Gospel spreads in Jerusalem, then it spreads in Judea, then it goes to Samaria, then it moves out towards the end of the earth and at the end of Acts Paul comes to Rome which in many ways is the gateway to the world in the classical period. The world isn't what was accessible from their geographical location. Similar to that witness was the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That was what they bore witness to. Their apostles themselves had met with the risen Jesus, that's part of what qualified them to be apostles and they testified to what they had seen with their own eyes. But the generation since then, even though we're not eyewitnesses of the resurrection in the way that the apostles were, we still do the same thing. Every Christian is called to bear witness to the reality of Jesus' resurrection and the transforming power that that has brought in their lives. And it's important to remember that this is actually the last thing that Jesus says before he ascends into heaven. He says, you will be my witnesses. That you includes me and it includes you. So let's think about it a wee bit more together and we're going to ask three questions related to witnessing. What is it? Who does it? When does it happen?

So question one, witnessing, what is it? Well, witnessing is a key part of the job description of every Christian. But that can immediately raise two big problems for us. The first is that none of us feel up to the task and if you're anything like me, you will feel in a constant battle against the feelings of just not being up to the job. But it's important to remember that those kind of feelings are actually the norm and not the exception in terms of witnessing. Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Peter, Paul, Timothy and countless others are all ahead of you in the queue of people who don't feel up to the task of being a witness for Jesus. But the second problem is probably more subtle and probably more dangerous. Our problem is not just that we don't feel up to the job. Our problem is that all too often we give ourselves the wrong job. In that paragraph, Rico Tye said to think of a courtroom. So think of a courtroom. There's lots of different jobs. And when it comes to sharing our faith, we can easily fall into the trap of picking a job that's not ours to take. So sometimes we might think that we're the prosecution. So we come to somebody who's not a Christian, we need to confront them about the reality of their sin. We interrogate them concerning all the things that are wrong in their lives. We try to expose their guilt and failings and mistakes. We might even threaten them with the reality of hell. Sometimes we might think of ourselves as the defense. So anybody who opposes us disagrees with us or doesn't believe in Jesus, we see them as a threat. And so we're confrontational towards anybody who thinks differently. We're defensive if questions are asked that we're not able to answer. Sometimes we can think of ourselves as the press. So we keep a close eye on what's happening in people's lives. We're quick to make a noise if there's some kind of scandal and we're keen to talk more about people than we are to talk to people. Sometimes we can even think of ourselves as the judge in that courtroom. So we cast our verdict on people, on their circumstances and on their mistakes. And sometimes, maybe even most of the time, we can think that our job is just to sit in the public gallery. So we are onlookers in the work of evangelism, keen to see what happens but not too keen to actually be involved.

[9 : 57] Now, as I say all that, I'm not denying the fact that there are times when we share the Gospel when we need people to recognise the reality of their sin. We need to be ready to defend the Gospel and to give an answer for the hope that is in us. We need to be able to make appropriate judgements. We must try and learn about what's actually going on in people's lives and there will be times when looking on in silence is the wise thing to do. But we've got to remember that the primary task that Jesus has given us is not to be the prosecution or the defence or the press or the judge or the public watching on. Our primary task is to be a witness. And the crucial point we need to recognise is that the key thing a witness does is this. They talk about somebody else. Their job is to bear witness to the truth that they know about someone else. And that's why the little word my is so important in Acts 1.8. Jesus said you will be my witnesses. Our primary job is not to prosecute, defend, judge, report or watch. Witnessing is none of those things.

Witnessing is testifying about him. We bear witness to the truth that we have discovered about Jesus. And this is where we find another truth that is again so obvious but yet so easy to miss. When it comes to witnessing we've got to remember that talking about Jesus is talking about Jesus. Now the reason I'm saying that is because that's something that I've got wrong so many times in my life because so often when I try to share my faith I end up speaking about things like church services or church attendance or issues facing the church or maybe I'll talk to people, talk about people, maybe connected to the church locally or nationally. Sometimes I might talk about something I've read, sometimes we might talk about something from history or something like that. Now none of that's wrong, it's okay to talk about these things from time to time but none of that talking about Jesus is actually talking about Jesus. And yet that's what witnessing is all about. To be his witnesses we've got to talk about him. So we need to talk about who Jesus is, about the fact that he is the most captivating person in the whole of history. That he's absolutely fascinating to read about. That if you go through the Gospels you're going to read about somebody who leads and reacts and prioritises things in a way that's totally different to everything that we see in the world around us. That in Jesus we have somebody who is so full of wisdom and compassion and grace that he's given us more than we've ever dreamed of. That he's transformed the lives of so many people across the ages of history. We want to talk about how he is so worthy of our worship that he gives our lives a purpose and a meaning that nothing else does. All around us are people who are worshiping stuff whether it's their job or their homes or their family or their children or their pension or their plans or whatever it may be. And all of it is so empty. Jesus gives us something so perfect to worship.

We want to talk about how he's the best friend that we could ever have. How he fills the gap in our lives. That nothing else has filled. That nothing else can satisfy. And we need to talk about what Jesus has done, about how he welcomed outcasts, how he challenged injustices, how he came not to be served but to serve, how he healed the broken, he taught the confused, he washed the feet of his disciples, he ate and drank with sinners, he laid down his life to save people who had done nothing to deserve it. The most amazing thing we can ever talk about is him. And that's what we want our testimony to be. That's what we want to talk about. Witnessing is telling people what we know about Jesus, about how outstanding he is and about the amazing difference that he's made in our lives. So there's loads of ways you can do that. So for example next time you're at work in the tea room or whatever and people are mourning about a corrupt leader or about corporate greed or about inequality in society. All you need to say is, you know that's what I love about Jesus, the fact that he's not like that. And that might start a conversation, it might not. But that's the kind of thing you can say. And that's I think one of the most helpful phrases that we can recognise in the world today. Jesus isn't like that. Because there's so much around us that's rubbish. Jesus isn't like that. Witnessing isn't about skirting around the numerous topics that are vaguely connected to Jesus. Witnessing is showing and telling our family, our friends, our neighbours, our colleagues the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about him. And that's why the success of our witnessing is not determined by whether or not we see a conversion in the person in front of us. It's determined by whether or not they see Jesus in the person in front of them. Witnessing is talking about him. So next question, who does it? The question of who in regard to witnessing is one that we can very easily get wrong. On the one hand, sharing our faith can feel like a very lonely experience. So when we think about doing it, we feel like everyone else is better than us. When we are doing it, we feel very exposed and vulnerable. And once we've done it, we are riddled with guilt about all the things that we wish we had said and done better.

When it comes to witnessing, we can feel very alone and isolated. But then on the other hand, it's also easy to feel very excluded. Because you think, well, there's loads of good witnesses out there, but I'm not one of them. And we see people who seem so much more capable than we are. When it comes to that question of who, it's so easy to conclude that it's either me on my own, or it's everyone else doing it without me. But neither of those conclusions are theologically accurate. They're both in fact completely incorrect. Because if you look at Acts 1-8 again, you discover the amazing truth that witnessing is something that we all do together. When Jesus said, you will be my witnesses, the words he uses, witnesses obviously is plural, you can see that. But the you is also plural. You is, we spell you the same. We need to make use a word in the English language. It's only in Lewis we have, but we've got to get it into the full English language. Because we need plural you in our language. Because Jesus is not just talking about individuals. When he commissioned the church to bear witness about him, he didn't send out a crowd of individuals.

He sent out a team. And you are all on it. Every single person who's a Christian, or he becomes one, you join that team. And what an incredible team it is. Let me start with the founding members. I want you to think about the founding members of this witnessing team. Now, when I say founding members, you maybe immediately think of Peter, James, John and the other apostles who Jesus actually said these words to in Acts chapter one. Surely these are the founding members of Jesus' team of witnesses. Well, actually, no, they're not. The founding members of the team witnessing for Jesus are God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. In terms of witnessing, it's the triune God himself who leads the way. We see that so powerfully in these verses from John. Jesus said, I'm the one who bears witness about myself and the father who sent me bears witness about me. John 15, Jesus says, when the helper comes, who I will send from the Father, the spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. The first and primary witnesses to the truth about Jesus are God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. And that means that in all our work of witnessing, we are just continuing a work that God himself has begun. And from that incredible starting point, a witnessing team for Jesus grows and grows. The apostles were added going from place to place, sharing the good news. And they were joined by others. So soon you had Paul and Barnabas, Silas and Timothy, Priscilla and Aquila and many, many more. And that's continued down through the centuries, thousands and thousands of ordinary people called by God to join his team of witnesses. And the amazing thing is that for everyone who's a Christian or who becomes a Christian, God has placed you in that team as well. And that's the crucial point. You're not a supporter of the team. You're not on the sidelines of the team. You're a member. You're part of that. That means that when Jesus calls you to be his witnesses, you're going to, you're being called to be part of something incredible. So as we think of witnessing, and it seems a bit sort of scary or a bit sort of like, well, that's just for the kind of super Christians or whatever. It's not like that at all. It's something that God has called us all to do.

[20 : 29] God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit began that work of witnessing today. God has placed you on that team to continue that work. That is such an incredible privilege and it is such an exciting opportunity. Now, let me ask you, you don't need to raise your hands. You can inwardly raise your hands. Who here likes Run Rake? So I am a very big fan of Run Rake. I like Run Rake very much. Run Rake, a Scottish rock band for nearly 50 years. As many of you will know, for the final 18 years of the band's career, the keyboard player in Run Rake was a man called Brian Hurran. And the story of how he joined the band is brilliant. He was 20 years old and was finishing his studies in music. And one of his lecturers told him that a band was auditioning for a keyboard player and he thought Brian would be good and that he should try. And so he applied for the audition and while he was rehearsing, he received a phone call from the band's manager. And during the conversation,

Brian said to them, is it just Run Rake songs that this band plays? And he'd assumed that they were just a kind of small band who kind of liked to cover Run Rake songs because they were so big. And it was at that moment when he realised it wasn't a Run Rake cover band.

It was the real thing. And the rest, as they say, is history. He went to the audition. He joined them on tour and for the next 18 years, he was a member of the greatest rock band that the world has ever seen. Now, why am I telling you that story? I'm telling it to you because Brian did not realise that he was being asked to be part of something phenomenal. And all too often, we are the same. We just don't realise the opportunity that God is giving us. So often, we think that there's no room for us in Jesus' team of witnesses, or it's easy to think that we're just not on that level, but that's not true.

You're on the team. You're part of something incredible. And that's why in your witnessing, you don't have to do it all. And that's one of the most important lessons that we need to learn. You don't need to explain every detail of the Gospel. You don't need to bring someone from unbelief to regeneration in the space of 10 minutes. You don't need to have an answer to every question. You just need to share what you know about Jesus and about what he's done in your life. And in doing so, you might just be a tiny link in a big chain that God is using to bring that person to faith in Jesus. Never forget that it's very rare, I think, for God to use one single witness in someone's journey to faith. By far the majority of the time that I'm certainly aware of, he will use many, many people. That means you don't need to do everything. He's got many other teammates to fill in the areas that you weren't able to cover. When it comes to witnessing, you're not isolated. You're part of an amazing team. When it comes to the question of who, the answer to that question is me, for every one of us. And then our last question is, when does it happen? This again is a crucial question because like

the who question, it's an easy one for us to get wrong.

So when does witnessing happen? Well, my instinctive answer to that question when I look at my own life is to say, well, not very often. Because the conversations that I long to have with people feel very rare. Opportunities to share the gospel don't come around very often and when they do, I never feel like they go as well as I would hope them to. And for that reason, we'll maybe pray to God that we would be a witness in our lives. And in praying that prayer, we're hoping that a moment will arise when we can share our faith and we're hoping that B when it does arise, we won't make a complete hash of it. And that is a good prayer to pray. We want opportunities to arise. We definitely want to be ready for the moment when they do. But if when we ask the question, when in regard to witnessing, if we think that witnessing is confined to those moments when a conversation that's directly about the gospel takes place, if we think that's when we're witnessing, we're totally wrong. So when does witnessing happen? The answer is that it happens from the moment you come to faith in Jesus until the moment he takes you home to be with him in heaven on the day you die. And there is never a single second in between when you're not doing it.

[25 : 58] Witnessing in other words is the constant activity of every Christian. When we come to faith, we join his team of witnesses, we stay on that team for the rest of our lives.

And the implications of that are enormous. It's telling us that witnessing is not something that we sometimes do and that we sometimes don't do. Witnessing is something that we constantly do. But sometimes we do it well and sometimes we do it badly. So yes, there are times when we will speak specifically about the good news of Jesus with people around us. But these moments are occasional. Alongside them is the fact that 24 hours a day, seven days a week, the way that you and I behave is saying something to Jesus, to everyone around us. And this explains why Jesus and the whole of the New Testament makes such a strong emphasis on good works and good behavior in the lives of Christians. A great example of that is in Matthew 5. Jesus teaches about witnessing. He tells his disciples that they are the light of the world. And in explaining how witnessing works, he says, you are the light in the world of the world. A city set in a hill cannot be hidden, nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket but on a stand. And it gives light to the house.

In the same way, let your light shine before others so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. The good works in the lives of us all as Christians are a constant witness bearing testimony to the transformation that the risen Jesus has brought in our lives. And that's why the opposite is also true. That bad behavior in the life of a Christian massively undermines the witness that we bear. That's why later in the New Testament, if you read the epistle of James, he'll say that faith without good works is useless and dead. It's easy to think that witnessing is a bit like exercise. It's something that everyone should do. It's something that we sometimes do and it's something that some people are much better at doing than others. But for everyone, it's still occasional. It's easy to think that witnessing is like exercise. Witnessing is not like that. Witnessing is like breathing. We do it all the time, whether we realize it or not, and sometimes we do it more intensely when the need arises. That is what witnessing is like. There are times when we will have opportunities to speak about Jesus directly.

These moments are an enormous privilege. In those moments, we'll breathe harder as we seek to share the truth about Jesus, about who he is, about what he's done, about the massive difference that he's made in our lives. But when those moments pass, the witnessing doesn't stop. The breathing goes on in our day-to-day conduct, speech, reactions, attitudes, generosity and above all, in our love for God and in our love for other people. These bear a constant witness to our Savior. And the importance of that constant witness cannot be underestimated. It's amazing what God can do through it. I can say this because he's not here and he might be watching at home, and if he is, I apologize for embarrassing you. But I heard something so encouraging from Neil Ingram a couple of weeks ago. We were chatting and we were talking about witnessing and about sharing our faith and he was saying that he'd met somebody in another part of the island who had come to faith and he said, apparently the guy had said that one of the key things that had helped him come to faith was just conversations that he'd had with Neil about everyday stuff. Neil said it wasn't any kind of direct gospel conversations. We were just talking but he had said that he'd known that Neil was a Christian and just the relationship and the friendship they built up had been just such a powerful draw for him in terms of coming to faith. I think that's just amazing. Neil didn't even have a clue what was happening and if he hadn't been told he still wouldn't have a clue what was happening. It just

shows what God can do through that constant witness that we can all bear in every part of our lives. It's so important and if the constant witness of our behavior is strong, then it will back up everything that we say on those occasions when we have the chance to talk to someone about Jesus. But if the constant witness of our behavior is poor, then when we eventually pluck up the courage to talk to someone about Jesus, we have already undermined everything that we're trying to say. But there's one other thing that we need to mention in terms of this question of when and this is a subject that Jesus identifies as a particularly powerful opportunity for witnessing. In fact, there's a strong case to say that this one topic is the single most effective moment for witnessing to take place. This arguably is the situation that God uses more than any other. This topic is where witnessing opportunities are on another level altogether.

What is it? Persecution. In Luke 21, Jesus prophesies to his disciples about the future experiences of the church both in the decades after his ascension but also with implications towards the whole history of the church until Jesus returns. He says to his disciples, there will be great earthquakes in various places, famines and pestilences, there will be terrors and great science from heaven but before all this they will lay hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons and you will be brought before kings and governors for my namesake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Throughout the whole history of the Christian church, Jesus's words have been proved true again and again and again. It is in moments of suffering that the witness of the Christian church has been at its most powerful. Sometimes that suffering was unimaginable, sometimes it cost people their lives. I'm sure many of you will know that our word martyr when we speak about someone who's died for their faith that comes from the Greek word for witness, the word martyr in Greek is just the word witness. In the midst of suffering and persecution, the witness of ordinary believers has been incredibly powerful and that of course explains why the apostles did not pray for persecution to be taken away. They pray that in the midst of persecution

[34 : 15] Christians would remain faithful in their witness. Now a lot of people will talk nowadays in Scotland about persecution facing the church and because people say we're more and more secular and it becomes harder than harder with different world views and all that kind of stuff. I think my own view is that I think sometimes our fears are exaggerated but maybe I'm wrong in saying that. But even if they're not exaggerated, even if we are going to face persecution as a church, even if 2022 will be a hard year to be a Christian in Scotland, if those words are true then we should not be saying oh, isn't it awful, we don't want persecution to come, we should be saying bring it on because if it brings people to faith then it will be worth it. In the midst of persecution, God does amazing things. If we pray for persecution to go away, we might be praying away the greatest witnessing opportunities that we could ever have. When does witnessing happen? It happens all the time in our behaviour.

It happens from time to time in conversations that we hope will have about Jesus and it happens with particular power when the church is persecuted. So, witnessing is witnessing.

It's something that we constantly do in our behaviour. It's something that we occasionally do in our conversation. Often on a Sunday I prayed that I would be a witness in the week ahead and in my mind I'm thinking of wanting to have opportunities to witness at certain points in the week thinking it would be really good if I had a conversation with somebody and often it doesn't happen. But I've come to realise that that prayer, I pray that I would be a witness in the week with the idea of having chances to witness.

I've come to realise that that's not the precise prayer I need to pray because I don't need to pray to be a witness. I already am one and so are you. As Christians we don't actually have a choice in the matter. In Acts 1-8 Jesus doesn't make not being a witness an option.

So what I need to pray is not that I will be a witness. What I need to pray is that I will be a credible witness. We need to pray that our witnessing, our lives, our day to day lives as Christians in our homes, our communities, our jobs, our church activities that what the way that we live is so genuine, so consistent and so convincing that it's impossible for the people around us to ignore. That is how I want to live my life in 2022.

[37 : 38] Now if you're sitting here thinking I want to do that too but I'm just not capable then look at what he says at the start. You receive power to do it. So we can just go for it because Jesus has kept his promise. He's not going to stop keeping it as we go into the next year together. Amen. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus help us to be credible witnesses in every single part of our lives. We pray that the constant witness of our behaviour would speak powerfully of you in every part of our lives. We pray that the occasional opportunities that we have to speak about Jesus we would do so in a way that just speaks honestly and openly and clearly about the amazing difference that you've made in our lives. Help us to be credible witnesses in every part of our lives. We pray that in 2022 you would indeed use us. Use us in ways that we have not even begun to imagine to share this amazing news about everything that you've done for us. Please bless us and help us all we pray in Jesus name. Amen.