



The Witness Practice

Teaching Notes

Practicing the Way

Witness Teaching 01:

Begin with Love

Intro:

- I live in California.
- My ancestry is Scottish on one side, and English on the other.
- And yet: I follow a Jewish Rabbi who lived on the other side of the world, at the far end of the Mediterranean Sea; at another time in history; he spoke a different language, in a very different culture, and yet every morning I wake up and devote my life to apprentice under his teachings, because I believe he was more than *just* a Rabbi.
- How did I — a twenty-first century Californian — end up following a first century Hebrew?
- Well, there was *another* apprentice of Jesus named Peter, who stood up in Jerusalem a few weeks after Jesus' death, and began to just tell people what he had seen: that Jesus had been crucified by the Romans, but three days later, God had raised him from the dead.
- That he had appeared to Peter and hundreds of other “witnesses.”
- And all this had led Peter to believe that Jesus was the Son of God.
- Then: some of the people Peter told *also* had an experience with the living Jesus; they in turn, told *their* family and friends who had an experience, who then told *their* family and friends, who told their family and friends ... until this good news about Jesus spread all the way down through history and across the world to a man named Craig in California in 1969.
- Craig was on a church retreat when the pastor asked everyone to invite the Spirit of Jesus to bring to mind one friend they should go talk with about Jesus.
- An old high school buddy named Phil came into Craig's mind.
- At the time, Phil was far from God, playing in a Bay Area rock band, with no Christian background. Craig called him up and asked if he could come over. Phil said, “sure ...”
- They sat on the curb in front of Phil's house and Craig told him the message of Jesus ...
- And Phil Comer, my father, became a follower of Jesus.

- He ended up in Craig’s church, where he was introduced to my mom, Diane, who was also a first-generation follower of Jesus; and they raised me in the way of Jesus.

Seam: My point is: I am here because somebody told somebody, who told somebody, who told somebody the good news of Jesus.

You are here because:

- And you are too!
- You are here because somebody *told* you about Jesus — it may have been a friend or neighbor or your parents.
- But all of us are here because someone was — in the language of Scripture — a witness.

Apprentice:

- This Practice was created to help you apprentice under Jesus.
- We define an apprentice of Jesus as a person whose life is ordered around three driving aims:
 1. To be with Jesus
 2. To become like Jesus
 3. And to do as he did
- And one of the main things Jesus did was go around preaching the good news of the kingdom of God.

Turn: Turn in your Bibles to Luke chapter eight ...

Luke 8v1:

- In Luke’s gospel we read this summary of Jesus’ life, look at verse 1:
 - “After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God.” (Luke 8v1)
- Turn the page, and look at chapter *nine* verse one ...
 - When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the

kingdom of God and to heal the sick ... (Luke 9v1-2)

- Then in the very *next* chapter we read:
 - After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them [the same thing] ... Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' (Luke 10v1-2,9)
- Then, stay with me, in Acts chapter 1, which was also written by Luke, (New Testament scholars consider "Luke/Acts" to be a two volume set) we read these words from Jesus to the early church ...
 - But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses ...
 - The word "witness" is *martus* in Greek;
 - It can be translated "messenger" or "envoy" or "ambassador," but the most straightforward meaning is just a witness, as in a court of law, where somebody who saw something important firsthand, is asked questions, and they tell people what they have seen, or heard, or know to be true.
 - Jesus envisions his followers as witnesses.
- But look at the next line ...
 - ... in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."
(Acts 1v8)
- First, the good news spread like concentric circles from Jesus, to the 12, to the 72, to *all* his followers.
- But notice Jesus envisions the gospel *continuing* to spread from Jerusalem, then in concentric circles: to Judea (that's the wider region), then to Samaria (crossing ethnic lines to new people groups), and then *to the ends of the earth*.

Seam: My point is: Not only did Jesus preach the good news of the kingdom; he envisioned his followers — you and me — doing the same.

The gospel:

- Now, you may hear the language of "preaching" and think, *That's not for me; I'm not a preacher.*

- That's because we use the words "preach" and "gospel" differently than in the first century.
- I hear the word "preach" and I think of a pastor speaking about the Bible from a pulpit.
- But a "preacher" in the first century was more of a government employee who would travel to cities and towns throughout the Empire with political announcements.
- This was over a thousand years before newspapers; if you had *news* to get out, you could not upload an article to a website or post it on social media or go on TV like today.
- Instead, you would send out preachers, or heralds, with your announcement.
- And there was a particular type of announcement that the Romans called "the gospel" or "the good news."
- The word was *euangelion* in Greek, where we get words like "evangelism."
- And *euangelion* was a *political* word in the first century, from the Imperial propaganda machine.
- It was the word used for when a new king would come to power, or a decisive victory was won for the Empire. Rome would send out preachers with the *euangelion*, the good news!
- It would sound something like, "Octavian defeated Marc Antony and brought peace to the world: Caesar is Lord."
- The early Christians adopted this imperial language and used it for *Jesus*, to say Jesus is the one, *true* Lord of the world; he won the decisive victory over evil and death itself; he brought a true and lasting peace; and his kingdom is here and available to all.
- At its core, this is what the *gospel* is.
- It is the announcement that there is another king, and another kingdom that is available here and now — offering the forgiveness of sins, the healing of the soul, belonging in the family of God and the hope of the age to come. Not just hope for your soul, but for the whole cosmos.
- And Jesus envisions this *gospel* going out to every corner of the world ...

Seam: *Through* our witness.

Definition:

- Witness is the practice of intentionally opening up our lives in love and telling others the good news of Jesus through our words, our stories, and our way of life in community.

- It's just telling people what you have seen, and heard, and know to be true.
- And it's a way of joining in what God is doing around the world and down through history.

Seam: But here's the problem: many of us feel emotionally allergic to the idea of "evangelism."

Allergy:

- A while back, I was having trouble breathing; I went to the doctor, and I found out I was allergic to alder and cedar trees. At the time I lived in Forest Park in Portland, Oregon, surrounded by thousands of alder and cedar trees! Somehow, something had gone wrong in my body, that made it react badly to something *good*.
- Many of us feel that way about the practice of witness.
- It's like something has gone wrong in our heart, to make us averse to something so good and beautiful and true.
- In a recent poll by the Barna Group, 96 percent of millennial Christians said, "Part of my faith means being a witness about Jesus," and 94 percent said, "The best thing that could ever happen to someone is for them to come to know Jesus."
- But a full *47 percent* — nearly half — *also* said, "It is wrong to share one's personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in hopes that they will one day share the same faith."
- That is a jarring inconsistency, but it's hardly surprising.
- We live in a pluralistic, postmodern culture where any form of Christian "proselytizing" is considered offensive.
- We're socially conditioned from a young age to keep our mouths shut about Jesus; "faith is a private, not public matter," we're told. "Who are you to tell me what is true?" is the sentiment. Because any truth claim, no matter how graciously presented, passes implicit judgment on *other* truth claims.
- But ironically, the truth is: *everyone is proselytizing*.
- Everyone is preaching a "gospel."
- The question is *not* "Are you preaching the gospel?"
- It is "*What* gospel are you preaching?"
- The gospel of third-wave anti-racism? Or sexual liberation? Or democratic socialism? Or free-market capitalism? Or cold-water therapy or intermittent fasting or the keto diet or

mindfulness or psychedelics?

- All of these are “gospels” — they are messages about where our hope lies, where human history is going, where salvation is to be found, where we can find a community to belong to, and how to live a good life and become a good person.
- Everyone is preaching a gospel.
- Apprentices of Jesus are those who preach *his* gospel.

Impulse of love:

- It’s like there is this impulse of the Spirit of Jesus in the hearts of all his followers to let the love and light of God come through our lives to those around us.
- The Catholic writer Henri Nouwen put it this way:
 - “As a reaction to a very aggressive, manipulative and often degrading type of evangelization, we sometimes have become hesitant to make our own religious convictions known, thereby losing our sense of witness ... [But] it belongs to the core of Christian spirituality to reach out to the other with good news.”¹
- “It belongs to the core of Christian spirituality.”
- Meaning: this is not a fringe practice for the extroverted “evangelists.”
- While there are those with a special calling to this work (and more on that later), this Spirit of Jesus is working his impulse of love in *all* of us to reach out to others with the good news.
- And if we suppress it, if we block it in, we halt our spiritual growth.
- It’s like there is a secret law of the kingdom: “You cannot *keep* what you do not *give away*.”
- As the missionary Frank Laubach once said:
 - “I must talk about God, or I cannot keep Him in my mind. I must give Him away in order to have Him.”²
- We must honor this deep impulse of the Spirit in our hearts, otherwise we will “quench the Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 5v19) in the language of the New Testament.
- If we stop this impulse, we will not only stop the spread of the kingdom of God *through* us, but also *in* us.
- On the flip side, if we let this impulse lead us to love those far from God, we will come *alive* in a whole new way.

- Many of you know from personal experience the common pattern; when people keep their faith quiet, they lose their spiritual vitality; but when they give it away, it's like they are infused with new spiritual life.

Hinge: The question is: *How?*

- The world has radically changed since Craig and my dad sat on the curb in 1969 ...
- Do we go door to door? Or pass out tracts on the street? Or get a bullhorn and stand outside our local college campus?
- Where I live, many of those older methods don't connect with people like they used to. They date back to a time when America was far more Christianized.

Seam: And the reality, especially for those of us who live in more secular parts of the world, is that a lot has to happen in a person before they are ready to enter the kingdom of Jesus.

The 5 Stages:

- Of course, the Spirit is drawing people to God all the time, and sometimes people do have a dramatic encounter with Jesus and decide to become his follower *in a moment*.
- But most people's journey to God is far more gradual, passing through various stages on their way to trusting Jesus.
- Don Everts and Doug Schaupp spent years doing campus ministry with Intervarsity at UCLA, and watching first hand the effect of secularization.
- They write about five thresholds that Western people need to cross in order to become followers of Jesus.
- **The first is: 1. Trusting a Christian.**
 - From distrust to trust — just building a relationship with a follower of Jesus who isn't crazy or a hypocrite, but is a good soul.
- **Then: 2. Becoming curious.**
 - Moving from complacency and not really caring about God or spirituality to curiosity, wanting to know more.
- **Then the third threshold is: 3. Opening up to change**
 - From being closed to change, to being open to change in your life.

- **Then to: 4. Seeking after God**

- From just kind of wandering to actively seeking God and truth.

- **And finally to: 5.**

- Crossing the ultimate threshold into the kingdom itself.
- They liken these five thresholds to Jesus' parable about the growing seed: and its process of growing from seed to stalk to head to full kernel to the harvest.
- Now: most "evangelism" that I grew up around assumed that people were right on the verge of following Jesus, at like a 4.8 or 4.9, and just needed a little emotional nudge to cross the final threshold ...
- But if you live anywhere like I do in LA, most of our friends and family members and neighbors and co-workers are all *in much earlier stages* in their spiritual journey ...
- For them, a huge step forward would be just to develop a friendship with a trustworthy Christian.
- We err if we think of witness as *only* about leading people in a prayer to cross that final threshold; witness is about companioning people at *every* stage in their journey.
- Our job is just to be a witness to people *wherever* they are with God.

Types of witness:

- Now the practice of witness comes in all shapes and sizes.
- Some people move to other countries and cultures and spend decades translating the message of Jesus for other people groups.
 - There are people who preach on social media and online, or in large, stadium size events.
 - There's intellectual apologetics, where experts help remove obstacles to the faith.
 - There's "stranger evangelism"; walking up to someone on the street or striking up a conversation with the person next to you on an airplane.
- All of those have a place, especially when they're done in healthy, loving ways.
- But we can't cover it all in four sessions.
- So, this Practice is going to focus on how we live as witnesses to people who are in our relational orbit — our family and friends, our neighbors and coworkers and baristas and fellow gym members.

- The plan is to start *there*.

Seam: To end ...

Love:

- Witness is ultimately an act of love.
- The apostle Paul explains his motivation for, in his case, traveling all over the world to tell others about Jesus, by saying:
 - “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all ... that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” (2 Corinthians 5v14-15)
- Love was the driving motivation in Paul’s heart to tell others about Jesus’ death and resurrection.
- And love — both love for God and for others — is the one and only proper motivation.
- I’ve seen some people’s witness get caught up in the culture wars and political polarization; it’s almost like they preach the gospel more out of *hate* than out of love; as a way of venting their angst at people they believe are ruining “our culture.” It’s not surprising that few people respond well to this type of “witness.”
- I’ve seen others do it out of duty or obligation, to be a “good Christian.”
- I’ve seen others do it out of ambition — they want bragging rights, to be *seen* as people who are great evangelists.
- But the one and only motivation that will bear long-term fruit is love.

Jesus’ love:

- In the four Gospels, the main word used to name Jesus’ emotional disposition toward others is “compassion.”
- In Greek, it’s *splanchnizomai* — which means to be moved in your *gut*. In your belly.
- It’s used constantly:
 - Matthew 9: “When he saw the crowds, he had *compassion* on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

- Mark 1 to a leper: “*Moved with compassion*, Jesus reached out and touched him ...” (NLT)
- Luke 7 to a mother mourning the death of her son: “When the Lord saw her, his heart overflowed with *compassion* ...” (NLT)
- And Jesus was feeling in his belly the emotional weight of God’s heart.
- God is the first “evangelist.”
 - John 3: “For God so loved the world that he *gave* ...”
 - He moved toward people, even people who were his enemies.
- This is who God is: *love*.
- And the driving motivation behind witness is exactly that: *love*.

Ending:

- So this coming week; we’re not going to ask you to go door-to-door or stand on a street corner and preach a sermon; we’re just going to ask you to start praying for a few of your family members or friends.
- To go on a prayer walk and imagine people behind the walls of their home; people living without God — going through divorce or the loss of a loved one or a teenager on drugs or dealing with an addiction or getting fired from work — imagine going through life — all without God or a community of love.
- Our first step is to let the Spirit of Jesus grow his compassion in our gut.
- To just walk, and pray, and open up space in your heart to let the love of God fill you, and flow through you to the world.

Notes

1. Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out*
2. Frank Laubach, *Letters by a Modern Mystic*