

# SHARE THE TRUTH RESPECTFULLY

By Rev. Will Nelken

*Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, September 12, 2010*

---

*Set Christ apart as Lord in your hearts and always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks about the hope you possess. Yet do it with courtesy and respect, keeping a good conscience. (1 Peter 3:15-16; NET)*

Peter has written about relationships and how to treat one another in a Christian manner, even when there may be cause for angry reactions. He reminds us to control ourselves so as to honor God by the way we behave.

As I said last Sunday, we are called to live our lives “out loud,” so that others may discover our trust in Christ. If we keep our faith a secret, so that those who are closest to us have no idea that we are followers of Jesus, then Jesus is dishonored and our faith will go largely unrewarded.

*“I tell you the truth, everyone who acknowledges me publicly here on earth, the Son of Man will also acknowledge in the presence of God’s angels. But anyone who denies me here on earth will be denied before God’s angels.” (Luke 12:8-9; NLT)*

Of course, living your life out loud has consequences. Some people will react; others will rejoice. Some will reject you; others will welcome you.

Since most of the suffering of the early church was the result of persecution for their faith, Peter addresses the matter of living in a manner that will minimize hostile reactions and maximize God’s honor.

## **Christ First**

This passage urges two things upon you, as you follow Christ. The first is also the most important, that you “*set Christ apart as Lord in your hearts.*” To do so is to yield to Him alone your allegiance and obedience. It means to enthrone Him as your divine King and bow before Him as His humble servant.

If Jesus Christ is not Lord of all, then He is not Lord at all, and your religion is an illusion. We have been bought with a price and we are no longer in charge. We are the owers, not the owners; we owe Jesus our very lives.

“All that I am, and ever hope to be, I owe it all to Thee.”

When you live life this way — God’s way — it will attract attention, just as Jesus attracted attention, from those whose hearts are seeking God. God-devoted lives are unusual and they are attractive. Someone is bound to ask you why — why you have chosen to live this way? Why you have hope even when things are upside down?

Are you prepared to answer them? Do you know what you want to say? What you should say? Peter said, “*Always be ready to explain it.*”

Readiness requires thoughtfulness; it is the opposite of carelessness. Thoughtfulness means planning, gathering information, considering possible contingencies.

Peter said to be ready at all times (*“in season and out of season”*) and in all ways (*“always”*). This means that a canned approach — a spiel, a patter, a pitch, a Christian commercial — is not preferred, and often will be ineffective.

Let’s talk about times and ways.

## **Finding an Open Door**

*“Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends.”* (Revelation 3:20; NLT)

The artist of the painting associated with that verse painted a door with no outside handle; it can only be opened from within. Jesus comes to us; we must respond and welcome Him in.

In a similar manner, we are to go to others with the message of His love and saving grace. While we are to prepare to receive them here and minister to them, we are not to sit around idly waiting for them to appear at our doorstep.

Anywhere we go, anyone we meet — Jesus could be knocking on the door of their heart. If we are ready, we may have the opportunity to be the Lord’s voice and express His invitation.

How does this verse suggest that we, as Jesus’ representatives, should approach the door of people’s hearts?

The time to enter a door is when it has been opened for you. Pounding on an unopened door, or breaking one down, is not a good option for a representative of Jesus Christ, because it usually turns people off or even drives them away.

The best way to find an open door is through a conversational relationship. It need not be a long-term relationship, but the conversation must be two-way, and it must be genuine and candid.

It may be easiest to recognize “closed-door” hints, which include strictly superficial conversation, one-syllable answers, no eye contact, signs of discomfort, or changing the subject when anything spiritual is mentioned. With extraordinary compassion, these can sometimes be overcome, but they usually indicate a prerequisite trust-building period.

The door is *open* when you are invited to talk about your faith, or when comments about God or the Bible or spirituality gain a welcome and interested response. Some more subtle “open-door” hints include expressions of compassion toward others, or concern about injustice, marginalization, or guilt, or comments about what happens after death, because all of these hint at God’s activity in people’s lives.

## **Affirming Faith (wherever you find it)**

*I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as **God has allotted to each a measure of faith.*** (Romans 12:3; NASB)

Christians are sometimes better trained to recognize unbelief than to recognize faith. As an example, how quickly can you think of two or three common doctrinal errors? Yet, when it comes to identifying genuine faith, many Christians find their definition is vague. Or else, it is fairly narrow (certain wording, certain experience). Outside of such a narrow definition, the landscape of faith appears very foggy and uncertain.

Jesus, on the other hand, did not demand narrowly defined declarations when He spoke with individuals. He seemed to see more indicators of faith in people's *care and behavior toward others* than in their words about religious themes. Why do you suppose this was so?

If you were unable to hear a word, or others were unable to make a sound, so that speech was rendered impossible, where else would you look for indicators of another person's faith?

When Jesus stood outside the tomb of Lazarus, it was not His treatise on life, death, and resurrection that got the people's attention. But when He wept, "*the people who were standing nearby said, 'See how much he loved him!'*"

God didn't simply tell us of His love, but He "*showed how much He loved us by sending His one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through Him — this is real love.*" (1 John 4:9-10)

Not everyone has faith in God, but many who do don't yet know what to call it or how to express it. They may describe it by the feeling it gives them, or borrow words that seem similar from something they've read or someone they've known. Many people have some level of faith in God, yet have never met Jesus. Jesus Himself said to His disciples, "*You believe in God; believe also in me.*" (John 14:1)

## **Universal Journey**

Every human being is on a journey toward Christ. It's the way God has arranged it. We were originally created in God's image so that eventually we might be conformed to the likeness of His Son (Romans 8:29).

God has not predetermined that some will be saved and others will be condemned. He wants *everyone* to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4) and *no one* to perish (2 Peter 3:9). What God *has* predetermined is that Jesus is the only Savior of the world; only those who come *to Him* will be saved.

From the moment of conception onward, God works dynamically in the life of every person to reveal Jesus as faithful, inviting, compelling, urgent, and persuasive.

## **Your Mission**

Your mission, if you accept it, is to encourage people to consider Jesus and to nudge them forward (toward Him) in their journey to faith. Sometimes, this requires countering notions that suggest falsehoods about God, but most often it means revealing accurate ideas about God that people have not considered, or deemed uncertain. In other words, expressing and affirming what is true about God (Jesus). Emphasize the positive truth. Affirm faith at every level.

Think about it: When people do not have the background or experience of church or Bible, they will not use the same language or references as those who do. This is increasingly true of our culture today. Thus, we find ourselves in an increasingly "foreign" culture, and require sensitivities and techniques that are less parental and more missional.

I think we are all familiar with a "parental" approach: telling people what's wrong with their lives and how they need to make correction. It's not well-received and has caused countless people to write-off the church. We've become best known for what we're against, instead of what we're for. This ranges from nagging friends and relatives to quit smoking cigarettes, because their "*body is the temple of the Holy Spirit,*" to protesting alternate lifestyles with placards and bullhorns.

This type of witnessing may make us feel proud of our own self-righteous beliefs and practices, but it does little to win others to the faith. It is akin to the Pharisee who prayed, *“I thank you, God, that I am not a sinner like everyone else”* (Luke 18:11). Parental witnesses view sinners as foreigners who threaten our Christian culture, and must be adjusted.

Missional witnessing, on the other hand, recognizes that it’s we who are living in a foreign culture, as the Bible says — a worldly culture increasingly foreign to the Gospel. As missionaries, our aim is not remake the culture in our image, but to infiltrate it for the sake of rescuing people alive. To do this, we must learn their language and customs well enough to express God’s message in a way they can understand. This is our task.

In terms of sharing our faith, this underscores the need to learn (or re-learn) another language (the idioms which are used by those we are reaching) and use more universal references (illustrations) to accurately assess the needs of others and to communicate our hope in Christ. This means discovering how other people, who do not know Bible terms, express their faith and hope in God, however unreligious it (or they) may seem. It also means discovering idioms and expressions from their world that can be used to convey Biblical principles and truth.

## **The Golden Rule**

Thus, Peter’s admonition to always use *“courtesy and respect.”* If you disrespect someone, how can you hope at the same time to win their confidence? If you begin with the notion that the person you are speaking to is inferior or distasteful, how will that attract their interest?

There is a narcissism in contemporary American culture that regards anyone who is different as inferior and does not practice courtesy; on the contrary, it is often considered cool or hip to be rude. Much contemporary humor simply puts down other people.

If this is the attitude you practice in private, your efforts to tell others about Jesus in public will sound hollow and disingenuous. The more you love Jesus, the more you will love those He loves; He will change your attitude.

Paul echoed Peter’s counsel:

*Let your conversation be gracious and attractive so that you will have the right response for everyone.* (Colossians 4:6; NLT)

*Gently instruct those who oppose the truth. Perhaps God will change those people’s hearts, and they will learn the truth.* (2 Timothy 2:25; NLT)

Anyone can change, if God gets hold of them, even the atheist or the persecutor.

## **Can You Help?**

One of the most effective ways of demonstrating respect for another person is to ask for their help. Asking for help conveys esteem and trust. Jesus began His conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well by asking her, *“Please give me a drink.”* (John 4:7)

Self-righteous Christians think they should never reveal need — they think it reflects poorly on God if they need the help of another person, especially a non-Christian. This foolish pride (not real faith at all) misses many opportunities for making friends for Jesus.

And, of course, another way is to offer help, without condescension or arrogance. Taking your time and effort to help someone else, simply because it is a kind thing to do, is both courteous and respectful.

Demonstrating a proper attitude does not guarantee an immediate positive response, but it does lay the appropriate groundwork for a trusting relationship and future conversations.

## **Timing**

Remember that God's timing is perfect; no one else's is. We make our plans (as we should), but God orders our steps; He has the final word.

Therefore, you need not (in fact, *cannot*) force the matter of faith's decision before it's time. Add to your faith *patience*, so you may receive what God has promised (Hebrews 6:12).

This is primarily *God's* work; we are merely His servants and partners. So, observing appropriate timing means learning to follow His lead, neither running ahead, nor lagging behind. Again, we must first "*set apart Christ in our hearts as Lord.*"

Ask yourself: Is it timely? Is the door open? Is there receptivity? If so, proceed. If not, pray. You can only accomplish what God initiates, so let Him lead. And always be respectful of those for whom Jesus died.