

PROFESSING OUR FAITH

Part 2 - How We Bear Witness

Lk 19:1-10, Mk 10:17-31, Mt 23:26-28 (ESV)



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Imitating Christ:

Last week we began to examine what it means to profess our faith in Christ, asking, “Why bear witness?” In 1 Peter 3:8-16 we saw that we have an **ethical responsibility** to tell the truth. Bearing witness to Christ is a matter of telling the truth about our reverence and devotion to our King, and how we came to be citizens in His Kingdom in the first place. We also noted that professing our faith is an **essential response** of worship to Christ—we tell others as an act of bringing glory to His name. Now we turn to the question of **how** we bear witness.

To unpack this, we’ll look to the Author of our faith and ask, “How did Jesus bear witness?” Christians aren’t just called to talk **about** Him, we’re to **imitate** Him. (Eph 5:1) So it helps to look at how He testified of Himself and His Kingdom. We’re going to look at three examples and ask four basic questions: **1) Character:** Who was Jesus talking to? **2) Context:** What was their current situation? **3) Conversation:** How did Jesus engage them? And **4) Result:** What was the outcome? But first, who was Jesus that He would continually proclaim the message about how we are restored to a right relationship with God?

Jesus is God’s Son, come in the flesh for a very specific purpose. He came in the flesh to die in the place of humanity separated from God—more sinful, broken and flawed we could ever imagine ourselves to be. He came to take God’s wrath toward our sin upon Himself. And only one who lived a perfectly righteous life could justly offer to die in a sinner’s place. Jesus stands alone in this. He Himself says “*I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me.*” (Jn 14:6)

So who was Jesus that He would be continually proclaiming the message about how we are restored to a right relationship with God? He is the only one who can accomplish that end in us. When Jesus presented the Gospel, He was presenting Himself. So too, when we present the Gospel, we’re presenting Jesus as the only way to a right relationship with our Maker and Judge.

Jesus spoke of God’s Kingdom with many audiences—some large enough to fill a hillside, others an audience of one. And He came at the message of salvation in a myriad of ways. How did Jesus model bearing witness to Himself for us? Let’s take these three examples—Zacchaeus, the rich young ruler, and the Pharisees. Jesus engages each of them differently, but in each case presents Himself as the only way to God.

Zacchaeus the Tax Collector: Luke 19:1-10

CHARACTER: Zacchaeus appears to be a man genuinely open to Jesus. He was a Jewish tax-collector, despised by Jews for making his living collecting money for Rome. But he was wealthy as the result. Oh, and he was also short.

CONTEXT: Zacchaeus was intrigued by Jesus. He wanted to meet Him, to hear Him, to see Him in action. So because of his height, when Jesus was passing through, this wealthy chief tax-collector climbed up a tree to see Jesus. We encounter people like this—they are by no means opposed to hearing about Christ, it’s just that they’ve never heard. And God has built in them a redemptive curiosity. They want a glimpse of Christ.

CONVERSATION: We don’t know if Zacchaeus simply wanted to observe Jesus, but Jesus wanted to connect with Zacchaeus. He called Zacchaeus down from the tree and invited Himself over to Zacchaeus’ house. Zacchaeus welcomed him gladly.

RESULT: And here a couple things began to happen. First, people began to murmur that Jesus was going to be the guest of a sinner. Why would a holy man mingle with such a scoundrel? Second, Zacchaeus began to repent of his unjust dealings with his neighbors, promising to repay wherever he had cheated anyone, four times over. Jesus said, “*Today salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a Son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.*” (Lk 19:9-10)

The people marveled that Jesus would dignify Zacchaeus’ life like He did, but the fact that He did seems to have flooded Zacchaeus’ heart with hope and an eagerness to come clean, repent, make restitution and obey Jesus. This is what Jesus wanted for Zacchaeus, so Jesus initiated this, stepping into Zacchaeus’ world, and doing it publicly, so the watching world would have to recognize that Jesus was not repulsed by sinners.

The Rich Young Ruler: Mark 10:17-31

CHARACTER: Mark 10 tells of a successful, moral, wealthy young man asking Jesus how he could inherit eternal life.

CONTEXT: This man’s question, though earnest, was misguided. He fell on his knees before Jesus and asked, “*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*” He had built great wealth in this life, and now was looking to the next life. He was on a mission to build both personal and eternal security. But we don’t **earn** inheritances. We’re given them. Still, if he could manage to secure eternal life, he’d sure try. He assumed this was possible.

CONVERSATION: Jesus answered him according to the young man’s presumptions—saying to inherit eternal life, keep the law. To this, the rich young man says, “*I’ve done that since I was a boy.*” Jesus looked at him and loved him. “*One thing you lack,*” he said. “*Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*” At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.” (Mk 10:20-22)

RESULT: Jesus’ conversations with people were intentionally designed to expose idolatry in their hearts. With Zacchaeus, He did this by drawing near. However, with this young man, Jesus appears to **widen** the distance between him and salvation, rather than closing it. Why? Because this man believed he could earn his place before God, and Jesus wanted to banish all hope of that. When He says “*give everything away,*” this is not a mandate for every disciple to live without personal possessions. Instead, Jesus is showing him that he has something that gives his life meaning that is more important to him than God.

I doubt very much that Jesus expected this young man to enthusiastically embrace His counsel to give everything away. I think Jesus knew the man would hear His instruction, consider the extent of his personal wealth, and walk away sad because the cost was so great. Sometimes we think we can, as Jesus goes on to say after the young man leaves, serve two masters. Money doesn't care if you've got religion. But the One True God cares very much if you have material goods alongside Him.

Jesus presents this man with what I call an "apocalyptic moment," a revelation of the fact that his guiding presumptions about life are built upon lies and idolatry. The man believed he could **buy** heaven, so Jesus said, in effect, "It will cost absolutely everything you have. Can you afford that?" Sometimes we bear witness not for the immediate positive response of faith, but rather to lead them to despair of their presumption that they can find real meaning in anything apart from God. Sometimes we engage someone so that when they walk away, they walk away sad because what they thought they could afford, they can't.

The Pharisees: Matthew 23:21-28

CHARACTER: The Pharisee's were the religious leaders of the day—the ones people looked to in order to know how to serve God. The Pharisees answered by reducing walking with God to a list of rules. The problem was they didn't present God as one to love, but rather to appease through meticulous law-keeping.

CONTEXT: Jesus addressed the Pharisees in many ways at many times, and it doesn't take long to find that He often dealt with them harshly. And they dealt harshly with Jesus right back. They were constantly trying to trip him up doctrinally or get Him to show that He disregarded the Old Testament Law. Sometimes Jesus dealt with them individually, but on one occasion, He deals with them corporately, and very publicly.

CONVERSATION: In Matthew 23, Jesus preaches a very public sermon in which early on He proclaims: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." (Mt 23:26-28) It was not so much a conversation as a formal, public rebuke.

RESULT: The outcome was that everyone knew Jesus' opposition to the Pharisee's teachings, and why. I worked with a man who used to contend that if someone published their thoughts in a book, they were open to **public** criticism. The idea is that if someone espouses doctrine in a public format, detractors are free to offer rebuttal in that same public format. The Pharisees had been publicly espousing a doctrine of God Jesus found reprehensible. So here, to the same ones the Pharisees had taught, He publicly opposes their teaching.

I don't know many who thrive on public debate or like being the dissenting voice against the popular thinking, but Jesus models that there is a time and place to enter public debate as believers—to oppose false teaching, to warn against heresy. There is a time to stand on the courthouse steps and object.

But what we also need to keep in view is why He did this. I believe Jesus wanted the Pharisees to **love** God. I believe this was as much a presentation of the Gospel to them as His encounter with Zacchaeus and the rich young ruler. Its another apocalyptic moment, Jesus presenting the Kingdom of God in truth with the kind of weight and force to rouse them from

their false view of God. These were people who believed they were right because they were leaders. But as leaders, they were leading God's people away from the heart of God. So Jesus held them accountable with a public rebuke. Sometimes we follow this lead by bearing witness publicly in the face of opposition, contending for truth. But we must do it with a love for those we oppose—even if living out that love is tough.

Anyway You can Plus a Million More:

There are many texts we could examine for Jesus' "evangelistic style." There's the Woman at the Well in John 4, where Jesus exposes her adultery privately and calls her to repent and worship God. There's another woman caught in adultery in John 8, and Jesus stands between her and her accusers, inviting anyone without sin to cast the first stone. There are none.

There are the disciples in the Upper Room with Jesus in Matthew 26, where Jesus talks about how His body will be broken and His blood will be shed for them, and He gives them what we call a sacrament—the Lord's Supper, a physical sign of a spiritual reality—to call them regularly back to a multi-sensory remembrance and proclamation of His death until He returns.

When you look at Jesus' evangelistic style, what you see is that He didn't have just one style. He was always aware of who He was talking to and how they were seeing the world at that time. He cut to the heart. Sometimes He was tender, like with the woman caught in adultery, sometimes strong, like with the Pharisees. Sometimes He was winsome, like with Zacchaeus, other times He was challenging, like with the rich young man.

And sometimes people repented of their sins, like Zacchaeus, and other times they walked away sad because what Jesus was calling them too was just too costly for them, like the rich young man. Sometimes He left people with **something to think about**, like the Pharisees; other times He left them with **something to do**, like the Lord's Supper with the disciples.

Sometimes He was direct, other times a bit cryptic. Sometimes He was very formal and other times casual. Sometimes He asked questions, other times He made declarations. Sometimes He embraced, other times He defied. I could go on. The point is: How should you bear witness? Any way you can, plus a million more. And how **often** should you do it? I don't know how to answer except to say assume more than you do it now.

How we testify has to do with our audience. We should seek to know our audience and their context as best as possible—and speak the truth about Jesus in language and tone that meets them where they are. This liberates us to **embrace** "tried and true" methods like the Roman's Road with a stranger, or get a cup of coffee with a neighbor and talk about why you love your kids. Jesus' liberates us from feeling the need to "close the deal" by asking everyone we meet for a profession of faith. But He also liberates us to be so bold as well, publicly **and** privately.

The common thread throughout all this is that Jesus models for us that you can't talk with Him without things eventually coming around to His Father's Kingdom and the reason He's here. He both initiates and responds in conversation. He loves the ones to whom He speaks, and He wants good for them. This is our model—to initiate when you can and respond when you're asked. Love people and recognize that they need what only Christ can give. Imitate Him and be zealous for what is good. Love the life He gives openly and publicly. It is rich. Say so.