

Bridging the Gap

Part 8: 'Telling our Story'

In our last sermon we took a closer look at what the Gospel is (and isn't) and that is really important. Having a clear understanding of what God has done for us in Christ is essential if we are to lead people to Christ and especially if we are to disciple them in their faith. We should have no trouble explaining to someone how Jesus secured our salvation through His sinless life, sacrificial death and glorious resurrection. However, in *Relationship Evangelism*, we are not called upon to preach to anyone or get into any deep theological principles – that all comes later in their discipleship journey.

Whilst it's really important that we know the Gospel and understand God's Word, what we really need to be prepared to share is *our story*, or what many people might call our *testimony*. If we start talking theology or quoting Bible Verses to a person who has had nothing to do with the Christian faith, we will most probably push them away. The most powerful tool we have at our disposal when seeking to lead someone to Christ is our story and we need to be prepared to share our testimony at any time.

However let's be honest here, sharing our testimony with someone isn't always easy, certainly not at first anyway. It is hard because all those walls that we may have so carefully constructed are forced to be stripped down. We can no longer hide behind a façade and sometimes the painful parts of our past are brought to the light. So knowing how to share our testimony with others is definitely something that requires intentionality and patient preparation. So today I would like us to consider how we might prepare our testimony so that we are always ready to provide a reason for the hope we have, as Peter exhorted us in his first letter:

1 Peter 3:15-16 *"But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."*

There are times when sharing our testimony can really miss the mark. In fact there is even an issue with the phrase 'our testimony.' When we are sharing our testimony, it is not so much about us as it is about Jesus. More often than not our testimony can go one in two ways. Either we hold back a lot of details out of fear and hurt about our past and as a consequence, our testimony loses the significant impact of exactly what God has done in our lives ... or ... we end up speaking too much about ourselves and we become the central character in the story, when in reality, Jesus must always be the main character. Our testimony can become a long, dramatized life story with a little of God on the side!

A lot of testimonies are focused on self. People talk about *their* faith and *their* decision despite the obstacles and difficulties they faced. This is not a true testimony if our faith and our choices become the focus. The testimony that we are called to share (and the only testimony which others will relate to) always focuses on Jesus.

Simply put: **if OUR story is not HIS story then we have no story worth telling.** Of course we are in this story but our testimony is about what God has done for us, in us and through us because of Jesus Christ. Telling someone what WE have done to overcome the struggles in our life is no help to them at all because they are not us and they need a power beyond themselves.

By contrast, telling someone about what our God and Creator has done in our life and the complete transformation we have experienced because of His love, His grace and His power, is a story every person can relate to immediately as they are led to the point of thinking, *“Well, if God did that for you, maybe He will do it for me.”* It is at this point that the Spirit of God can use our story to lead another person to embrace the love of God in Christ.

So we need to learn how to share our testimony in a way where it is a healthy mixture of being open and vulnerable about our life story, but humble enough to keep the story focused on Jesus rather than ourselves. This can be really challenging, but while you might lack the confidence in sharing your past so that you can bring glory to the Lord or you may find it difficult to lay down your pride and hurt from the past to shift the focus to the Lord, it really is possible to learn how to share your testimony with others in a way that glorifies the Lord and leads them to Him.

While you may never become a preacher or teacher of God’s Word you can certainly learn how to share your testimony with others in a way that truly highlights your trust in Him and emphasizes the change that God has made in your life from the moment you truly said ‘yes’ to Him.

1 John 1:3 *“We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard...”*

Your story is an eyewitness account of how God has changed your life and people can relate to a story like that. People can relate to experiences. When they hear a story, they immediately try to see how their own experiences or outlook in life fits with yours. People seek to be understood, to feel connected, seen and accepted. Testimonies can really be a powerful way to share the Gospel with others and form a connection with someone who is desperately seeking that all-knowing and all-consuming love of God. So let’s look at some tips which will help us prepare our testimony.

1. Pray

Before all else, through the power of prayer, we should pray to God about our testimony. Ask Him to guide our mind and our heart as we prepare our testimony. When we pray to God first about our testimony, aside from asking Him for the guidance and strength that is needed when it comes to sharing your testimony with others, it also helps us to seek Him first before all else. So, before we begin to prepare our testimony we ask the Lord for guidance and we need to be confident when we ask because God wants this to work even more than we do!

1 John 5:14 *“This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.”*

2. Check your heart and motive

It is easy to run away with our feelings and begin talking about the deep hurt and tragic circumstances that we’ve gone through. It’s also easy to hide behind a facade by refusing to be authentic and truly showing others what God has done through the pain in our life. So, when we prepare our testimony, we should check our heart’s condition. We don’t just check our heart’s condition before we start writing our testimony, but check it during and after too!

We can ask ourselves questions like...

“Am I the central character of this story or is Jesus?”

“Can I see myself brushing over necessary details out of fear?”

“Am I downplaying God’s glory and mercy?”

It is actually really surprising how often and how easily our hearts can become separated from God when we begin allowing the emotions from our past to take a larger priority in our story compared to the promises and deliverance that God gifted us in the midst of it all.

1 John 3:20 *"If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything."*

3. Plan your testimony

Without being too prescriptive, in general terms a normal testimony will usually describe three key things about your journey:

- a) How your life was before you met Jesus
- b) When and how you became a follower of Jesus
- c) How your life is now you are a disciple of Jesus

By way of example a testimony could go something like this:

Life Before Jesus:

"Growing up, I was raised in a Christian family. I had two loving parents, but I struggled deeply with perfectionism and living up to expectations raised by myself and the world. I was the definition of a lukewarm Christian who went through all the motions of a 'good' Christian, but inside, I was not really close to God. The things I was so much more concerned about included how I looked to those around me and a lot less about how I was before God. I hated trying to reach out to Him because it only reminded me of how imperfect I was - and that was hard for a young person who thought their self-worth was based on their performance and perfection."

When I met Jesus:

"I had two really awesome friends who spoke truth and life into me. However, my heart wasn't yet ready to receive Jesus fully and completely. But gradually over time, He showed me the pride that was in my heart and the selfish desires that I had to conform to the world. At first, I was so utterly resistant to it because I had lived my life thinking that I was a good person. After all, I was striving so hard to be perfect! But it took a broken and toxic friendship before I realized how far I had fallen from Him."

How my life has changed:

"Now I know (even though I still struggle with it) that the foundation upon which I had built my identity was unstable and unreliable. I would reach highs when I lived up to my own expectations but fall so deep when I made even the slightest mistake. When God really began to show me how perfectly imperfect I was and how perfection could only be achieved through Him, my heart began to anchor itself in Him and not in my performance. It is an ongoing journey and even though it isn't easy, He has called me to share my testimony with others so that other people can experience the unwavering presence of Jesus Christ in their life."

Now that is just a really simplified idea of a testimony, but you get the idea. A testimony often follows the above layout and especially when you don't have too much experience in sharing your testimony with others, having a structure to follow can be really helpful to keep you on track and it's easily understandable to the listeners.

4. Look at the Apostle Paul's example of a testimony

There are many accounts in the Bible of people sharing about how God transformed their lives. One of the most well-known testimonies is shared by the apostle Paul. Paul went from persecuting Christians to following Jesus, planting Churches and writing over half of the New Testament. Read his testimony in Acts 22:1-21 and you will easily see the progression of Paul's story:

- Paul opens with a brief history of his life (vv. 1–3)
- Paul tells about his life before Christ (vv. 4-5)
- Paul explains how he came to know Christ (vv. 6-13)
- Paul tells about his life after coming to know Christ (vv. 14-18)
- Paul closes with his obedience to Christ (vv. 19-21)

5. Write out your testimony

Before you even begin sharing your testimony with someone, write it down first. You might be surprised by the results! When we write, we have more time to think carefully about what we want to say. Writing out your testimony can help with the intentionality behind it. Plus, it is an awesome way to begin visualizing it all before you are called to speak out loud. You will be surprised how quickly you are able to commit your written testimony to memory – perhaps not word for word – but close enough.

6. Avoid using 'Christianese' language

"Churchy" words can alienate listeners/readers and keep them from identifying with your story. People who are unfamiliar or even uncomfortable with Church and Christianity might not understand what you are saying. They may mistake your meaning or even be turned off by your 'foreign' language. Here are some examples:

Avoid using the term ***born again***. Instead, use these words:

- spiritual birth
- spiritual renewal
- spiritual awakening
- come alive spiritually
- given a new life
- my eyes were opened

Avoid using ***saved***. Instead, use terms like:

- rescued
- delivered from despair
- found hope for life

Avoid using ***lost***. Instead, say:

- heading in the wrong direction
- separated from God
- had no hope
- had no purpose

Avoid using ***gospel***. Instead, consider saying:

- God's message to man
- the good news about Christ's purpose on earth
- God's message of hope for the world

Avoid using ***sin***. Instead, try one of these expressions:

- rejecting God
- missing the mark
- falling away from the right path
- disobedience to God
- going my own way with no thought of God

Avoid using ***repent***. Instead, say things like:

- admit I was wrong
- change one's mind, heart, or attitude
- decide to turn away
- turn around
- make a 180 degree turn from what you were doing
- obey God
- follow God's Word

7. Practice sharing your testimony

Now this can be challenging for those who have never practiced speaking out loud. But it can be a really valuable part of committing your prepared testimony to memory. Our goal here is to be able to share our story as naturally as possible whilst being careful we don't let our thoughts wander and the testimony lose its power. Practicing out loud can be a really important part of your preparation.

Many people find it hard to articulate their thoughts into comprehensible sentences sometimes. This is because our mind can at times take massive leaps before our mouth can catch up! So some of us sound like babbling ducks when we are put on the spot. That is why it is so important for us to plan our testimony and write it out in full so when we commit it to memory our mind is already pre-programed and we won't ever be lost for words when the opportunity presents itself. A testimony is something powerful and sharing our testimony with someone is important enough for us to devote some time to make sure we are prepared.

8. Share your testimony whenever the Lord opens the door

It goes without saying, the more we do something, the easier it becomes. The more we put ourselves in a difficult situation, the less difficult it will feel next time. So the more we share our testimony with others, the better we'll get at telling our story! However, one thing which is really important - that is to guard our heart. It is absolutely amazing to be open about our testimony and sharing it with people so that the glory of God can be shared with them. But God also calls us to exercise wisdom and protect our hearts - not out of fear, but out of wisdom.

Proverbs 4:23 *"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."*

Sometimes we may feel called to share our full testimony with someone we have only just met but from my experience that would be rare. We aren't called to be vulnerable with absolutely everyone on every occasion. We are called to use the wisdom that God has sown into our heart and listen to His Spirit so we know when it is time to be vulnerable and share it all as opposed to those times when we just give a 'Readers Digest' condensed version which does not require us to open up as fully to a stranger. That's why this tip says we should wait for the Lord to open the door and not just launch into it when we think there's an opportunity. Sharing our story in smaller instalments may seem strange but at times that is the wisdom of God at work helping us to guard our heart.

Conclusion

Always remember that you do not have the power in and of yourself to convince anyone of spiritual truth. The Holy Spirit convicts people of their need to know Christ.

John 16:8,13 *"When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment ... when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come."*

As you pray for those with whom you desire to share your personal testimony, be sure to ask God's Spirit to honour the proclamation of His word, to convince people of their need, and to strengthen you as you share the gospel.

God calls each disciple of Christ to be a witness to all that we have *"seen and heard"* (1 John 1:3). With *Relationship Evangelism*, witnessing becomes a lifestyle - we are a witness at all times. Loving others and showing our genuine concern for them are practical ways to communicate the Love of Christ. We also witness by our life. Our actions are usually more revealing than our words. Our actions, however, are not sufficient to communicate to another person the message of the Gospel of Christ. We need to witness by our words as well - to identify openly with Jesus Christ and to tell others how they can be reconciled to God.

One of the most effective means of communicating this to another person is through the story of how God has worked in our life - our personal testimony. The best thing of all about our testimony is that nobody on this planet can disagree with us when we tell our story. We can share Bible references and talk theology and find ourselves in a debate or disagreement pretty quickly. However, our experience is just that: OUR experience and whilst it may be very different to other people's experience, they cannot disagree with us or debate the truth of what we have personally gone through. That is why our testimony is so powerful.

In fact we are told in the Bible that we actually triumph over the enemy of God (Satan) through the blood of Jesus and the word of our testimony!

Revelation 12:11 *"They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony ..."*