

Grace to Bear Witness

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, everyone. Hope you're doing well. As Lisa said, my name is Elliot. Good to be with you today. Jesse is actually down at the One Harbor Swansboro site. It is the final Sunday for Mr. Tom Tapping, who's the longtime site pastor down there. Him and his wife are kind of crossing to a season of retirement, and so they've been dear friends for a long time. So be praying for them this morning. That's a big Sunday for them and decades of kind of faithful ministry for Tom. So really excited for them. For us today, we've spent most of the month of January talking about the grace upon grace that Jesus gives us, that God gives us to follow Jesus. And next week we're going to be launching into a series in the book of Philippians. So we're going to go throughout the book of Philippians. Really excited about that. But today I'm going to wrap up this series by talking about one of the graces that many of us might actually feel is the one we need the most, which is the grace to display Jesus.

Or maybe to say it another way, the grace to bear witness to who Jesus is. And if you grew up in any kind of church context where evangelizing the lost was important, it became quickly evident to you that one of the obligations and responsibilities you had as a follower of Jesus was to share Jesus with the world around you. Romans 1 16, a famous verse, for I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. And the picture you see in scripture is one of people going off joyously to tell others about Jesus, right? Like going and sharing Jesus with somebody doesn't really seem to be a hurdle for them. But the tension would kind of come in when you started to feel like maybe that wasn't how you felt about it, right? Or to say it another way, like over the years growing up, it became evident to me that for whatever reason, I had like an anxiety about sharing Jesus with people around me. And I come to find out that I was not the only one. Telling other people about Jesus seemed to be one of the things that people were kind of the most afraid of. And I really think that was for a lot of reasons. So one of them was I always kind of felt like it put me in the place of feeling like what a follower of Jesus is, is primarily a salesperson, right? Like Elliot on QVC trying to be like, you know, buy Jesus now and you'll get, you know, free peace and all that, you know, that kind of stuff in your heart.

And if that's really not your thing, then, you know, it always seemed like it feels unnatural. Like my job is as a follower of Jesus is just to kind of go out and sell him. The other thing is if you were any kind of introvert like I was, then that kind of puts you in perpetual angst that life is just going to be this one series of like small talk to try to get to someone. You know, interestingly, I think people think that if you're an introvert, it means primarily that you're shy or you don't like to be in large groups or you don't like to publicly speak. Like actually, though, that can be it, but that's not really what it primarily means is, and always hesitate to tell people because then I feel like they're just going to stay away from me. Please, like you still need humans in your life, right? But what it primarily means, at least for me, is when I'm kind of empty, the place I go to get full is by myself instead of towards other people. So a lot of the stuff that told you how to share your faith was again kind of based on this idea of like, yeah, you just do it via small talk as you're going along, right? You know, like as you get on a plane and like the natural small talk conversation that you have on a plane, I'm like, wait a minute, wait a minute. For me getting on a plane, this is what should happen on a plane, right? Like you sit down and we briefly acknowledge each other's existence and then there's no reason to talk for the next four hours. Like I can read a book, I can watch a movie, you know, that's kind of what I'm looking forward to. And then beyond that, I think if we're honest, there's probably a dose of sort of the fear of man woven in, right? Like what if my boss thinks I'm weird? What if they label me a religious nut, right? Like what if someone asked me a question and I don't know the answer and that drives them farther from Jesus? And so it was kind of this hard thing and you might well ask, well, if it makes you miserable, why do you keep doing it? Well, the reason was because whether you liked it or not, you kind of had this incredible obligation to because on the one hand, like there are eternal consequences, right? Like people are lost and heading into an eternity in hell without Jesus. And also because you kind of felt like it just told me I'm not ashamed of the gospel and it feels like I'm being ashamed of the gospel, like I'm hiding Jesus and he's going to be mad at me. And while caring for people's souls and wanting to please Jesus are obviously key things, it's like the truth of it is at the end of the day, people can tell when you're miserable and guilty and just doing something because you feel like you have to. And so thankfully,

I think what we're going to see today is that's not how Jesus has called us to bear witness. And that's what we're going to look at today. But unfortunately, before we do, there's kind of another ditch on the other side of this that we have to talk about as well. And that's really this thought that kind of manifests like this. I'm just going to keep my faith really personal.

Like I'm just going to live a good life, be nice to people, go to church, maybe put a Bible verse up in my cube at work, post something on social media, and you know, I'll just kind of quietly go about my business, and hopefully people will notice my life is different. The kind of, if you, any of you ever heard this, this banger from St. Francis of Assisi, preach the gospel wherever you go, and if necessary, use words.

[6 : 30] Well, kind of, like we don't, there's really no evidence that he said that, so like we don't really know if that's actually even a quote. But there is some merit to the idea that your whole life should testify to Jesus.

Like you are absolutely right. Your actions, your demeanor, the way you handle your fears and challenges in life are a testimony to a watching world of where your hope and focus is. But what I found most often is when people quoted that, myself included, usually it was just as a way to kind of relieve me of the obligation to use words. Like all of your life should testify, but never as an escape where you don't ever have to face skepticism or rejection or criticism or persecution because you declared the name of Jesus. So that's kind of one problem. And then we have this other kind of really modern issue, which is like for a lot of people, I think they just struggle with the idea that it's kind of inherently wrong to be on a crusade to change other people's beliefs, right? Like you're actually in some way sort of doing violence to someone if you're going to try to change the way you think.

Like no matter how kind or gentle you are, kind of the worst thing that you could do to someone is to tell them that they're wrong. To tell them that the way you were taught to do life is not a pattern that leads to flourishing. Again, the problem is to be a disciple by definition means change. Like it means you're going to stop being taught by what you were and you're going to start to be taught by who Jesus is. And frankly, following Jesus, you're going to run into places where maybe what your family taught you, maybe what your culture taught you, and certainly if you are of like another religion, you're going to be taught that that's not the truth.

And so to bear witness is the mission of the church. Go and make disciples, share the good news, is the mission of the church. And so obviously it's part of the grace we need, and how do we do it?

Well, the good news is if there's grace to see who Jesus is, for you to be close, if there was grace for you to believe, if there was grace to follow him as a disciple, we have to believe there's also going to bear witness. Like he's going to give us grace to do that. And so that's what we're going to talk about today. We're going to start in the same verse we've been in each week and then kind of move around from there. If you have your Bibles, we'll start in John 1. If not, it'll be on the screen behind me. And so reading from where we've been reading through the past few weeks, I'm going to start in 1.19. And it says this, it says, and this is the testimony of John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, who are you? He confessed and did not deny, but confessed, I am not the Christ. And then they asked, what then? Are you Elijah? And he said, I'm not. Are you a prophet? He said, nope. And they said, well, who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?

[9 : 44] And he said, I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord, the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees and they asked him, then why are you baptizing if you were neither the Christ nor Elijah nor the prophet?

And John answered them, I baptize you with water, but among you stands one you do not know. And even, even he who comes after me in the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie. These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing. And then the next day, he saw Jesus coming towards him and he said, behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. This is he of whom I said, after me comes a man who ranks before me because he was before me.

This is God's word to us. John the Baptist gives us one of the very earliest examples of testifying to who Jesus is. And it's beautiful, not just in its boldness, but it's in, in its simplicity because in these verses, we see that on a very root level, we simply bear witness of what we have seen and experienced. And later in the book of John, it actually, Jesus tells his disciples, that's exactly how it will be, how you should expect it to be. In John 15, he says, but when the helper comes, who I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me and you also will bear witness because you've been with me from the beginning. It's a simple idea that the way they would testify to Jesus is just by sharing with the world what he had done and what they had seen. And as the fledgling church starts to roll along, you see the same pattern. In Acts chapter 10, Peter speaks the same thing. He says,

As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ, he is Lord of all. You yourselves know what happened throughout Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism of John proclaimed, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who are oppressed by the devil, for God was with them. And we are all witnesses of what he did in both the country of the Jews in Jerusalem. And they put him to death by hanging on a tree and God raised him up on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people, but to those of us who'd been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. Peter's whole argument is based on what you saw and knew in Jesus. You see that pattern later in scripture. Paul calls out when Jesus was resurrected, there were people who saw him and not just these, but you know, dozens, hundreds of other witnesses. It actually says that in scripture and points it to it. And that tells us that like, man, while there are a bunch of helpful tools, like one of the beauties of living when we do now is you have had saints of God throughout the ages, throughout the last hundred years produce all kinds of things that can be helpful ways for you to help the like simply share your faith with somebody. And all of those things are good and should be used, but at the bottom of it, there is really just power in your personal story. Like what Jesus has done for you. There's few things I think that testify more than the fact that you were one way and now you're something different and people know it.

That's how we testify to him. But if we're honest, I don't think the knowing what to say is the part that's the hurdle for us. It's not a lack of knowledge and it's not being an introvert or anything like that that really keeps you from talking about Jesus. Because in truth, I would argue you evangelize all the time. Like you have no problem at all telling people what foods you think are awesome. You have no problem at all talking about TV shows or movies that you think are great. Like you have no problem spreading the gospel of what you think the best coffee shop in town is. Like there's no hurdle to that there. And I think it's because rarely do those things have any consequences. It's not always going to be so as a follower of Jesus. And if we're going to bear witness to him, we do have to kind of square ourselves with that reality. To bear witness to Jesus, we must bear witness in spite of the consequences. The book of Acts, there's a story of a man named

[14 : 45] Stephen. Stephen's one of the first men selected to be a deacon in God's church, which means he's given the task of serving some of the needs of the most vulnerable people in the church. And as God continues to use him and actually does kind of wondrous things through him and people are coming to Jesus, those in power start to slander him. And the kind of line of attack they come up with is that he's speaking against Moses and he's speaking against God. And so in Acts, there's this really powerful and sacred scene. I'll be honest, it's one of those scriptures that kind of gets me every time I read it.

Where Stephen starts to declare to those who've pulled him in to trial. They pull him in to put him on trial and he declares all of the wondrous things. He goes back to the beginning and declares all of the wondrous things that God has done for Israel. And he declares how God has been faithful to Israel through the ages and how time and time again they've turned away and he has been merciful. And then he declares that it is the same now. Just as you killed the prophets God sent to deliver you, now you have killed Jesus and you do the same thing to his people. We pick up the story in verse 54 and it says, Now when they heard these things, they were enraged and they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. He saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. But they cried out with a loud voice and they stopped their ears and they rushed together at them and they cast him out of the city and they stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he cried out, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them.

And when he'd said this, he fell asleep. I mean, before we move on, just for a moment, think about how different that is than probably any of our experiences of testifying to Jesus. Like, Stephen starts with boldly declaring who Jesus is and what he's done, even to the point of challenging their very wickedness. But then at the end, he is not breathing out threats. Like, as literally as the stones are crushing the last ounce of life from him, what comes out of him is to mirror the words of the Savior he followed, Jesus, please don't count this sin against them. Have mercy on them.

He went all the way. And if that story seems extreme to us, the thing is, the Bible is clear that we cannot help but speak about what we've seen and heard. And in doing so, we're going to encounter resistance.

And it might not be exactly the same resistance that Stephen did, but we're going to have to square ourselves that declaring who Jesus is, spreading the good news, is going to bring resistance. Or maybe to say it more plainly, eventually, bearing witness to Jesus is going to cost you more than you want it to.

[18 : 09] Maybe that's a job, because they do think you're a religious nut. Maybe it's a relationship, because you can't just work it out. Or somebody doesn't want to be around you.

Maybe it's a fortune. Like, maybe following Jesus shrinks your opportunity for financial gain. Maybe it's just, you know, sometimes to be part of the chic or cosmopolitan or sophisticated crowd, you kind of don't want to speak about Jesus because they think it's somewhat lowbrow.

Maybe it will cost you your life one day. And this is probably self-evident, but you will not have that kind of commitment to bear witness in spite of the consequences unless you really know and have experienced who Jesus is.

That's one of the reasons we focus on all these other things that we want the grace for, the grace to follow Him, because you have to actually know who Jesus is. Like, you have to know that it's worth it.

Like, if you're going to your death, you have to know that it's worth it. And I think part of how you know it's worth it is really simply just by, for what Jesus has done for you, right?

[19 : 23] Like, you know what Jesus has done for you, and that certainly should always drive you. I think another way is by realizing that your witness does impact others.

Like, in case you didn't catch it in that verse from Acts, it sort of subtly mentions that there was another unbeliever standing there watching the stoning of Jesus named Saul.

And if you read, oh, pretty much the rest of the New Testament, you'll come to realize that what Stephen did that day had a lot of impact. You know, the word for martyr and the word for witness are essentially the same word.

Like, what we think of as martyr is also the word for witness. And like, what Stephen did that day was a witness to the man who would become known as Paul.

It mattered what Stephen did. I think there's this one other reality in Scripture that's maybe a little easier to miss, but also can show you how much you're witnessing actually matters.

[20 : 27] And that's because the Bible also tells us that we also bear witnesses as priests. Let's kind of pull this apart a little bit. What that means is we literally help to make accessible the holy and the eternal to this world.

Like, it's not just a title that is given to the people in God's church and His kingdom. It is a privilege that you have to help bring His power into this world.

In 1 Peter 2.9, Peter says this, You know, in the Old Testament, priests were mediators between God and His people.

Like, all of the rituals and the sacrifices were to make it so that an unholy people could dwell with a holy God. And so when Peter uses the word royal priesthood, again, to him, it's not just a title.

You know, I think one of the abiding questions that would just always be with us in a fallen world and hard to understand is the, you know, the kind of typical, if God is so good and He cares, like, why doesn't He fix everything?

[21 : 52] And again, there's a lot of places you could explore with that. But like, whatever you think, I think one thing is really clear in Scripture. Wherever God's kingdom is, wherever His will is being done, things are right.

And that's why it tells us to pray, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done. And that's what you're doing. When you pray, when you act, when you bear witness, you are literally serving as one who makes access to God's kingdom real for a fallen world.

You know, like, at the end of the service, when we say that prayer, this really just mirrors the words that were given Aaron and his sons in the book of Numbers, the Lord bless and keep you, the Lord make His face shine upon you.

It's not just a cool saying that we think is neat to put in the liturgy. Like, I actually have the audacity to believe that because of what Jesus has done, I have the right to stand before the Father and ask Him to bless His people.

And that it actually changes things in how life happens. And so it's not intended to be some ritual. It's like an actual invitation to blessing. So, like, if you ever look around and maybe you see somebody with kind of like this posture or whatever, it's not magic.

[23 : 14] Like, it's just a physical expression of them saying, and again, you don't have to do that. But if you see someone doing it, literally what they're saying is, God, I want whatever you want to bless me with.

I want to receive whatever you want to give. They're trusting and believing that God's kingdom is actually coming near. Or like, if someone comes and asks me for healing prayer, and I pray over them, be healed in Jesus' name.

All I am doing is inviting His Holy Spirit. I'm inviting His kingdom to come and His will to be done in their life. And, you know, you come to moments like that, like you can't ever put your agenda on it, but I try to come to moments like that with anticipation because I've seen God answer that in that moment to take away whatever was hurting them.

Like, God can bring healing or truth or illumination or salvation any way He wants, but He uses His people, His church, His priest.

That kind of prayer is a priestly function. That priestly function, it's not just reserved to eldership. Peter says that is for everyone in God's church to participate.

[24 : 33] I mean, think about it like this way. In a lot of ways, what it means to be a priest as a member of His church is it's kind of like you're reaching up to grab Jesus' hand, and you're reaching out to grab someone else's hand who maybe doesn't even know to reach, and you're just putting them together.

Like, that's part of the privilege you have as a priest of God. And so, it matters what you do. Like, it changes the world.

It brings people close. And frankly, that is an unfathomable responsibility that I don't think any of us are really prepared for or equipped for.

Now, that's okay, because the Scripture also tells us we don't bear witness alone. So, remember this from earlier, Jesus speaking, but when the Helper comes, whom I'll send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness about me.

God gives us His very Spirit as a helper. And Jesus tells us that you're not the only one in the world bearing witness.

[25 : 48] My very Spirit is as well. And that really should be a game changer for us. Several years ago, I did this Bible study by a gentleman named Henry Blackaby.

He was a pastor who actually just passed away last year for a lot of years. And he wrote this study, probably his most well-known work, called Experiencing God. It was really just a Bible study that was designed for people who felt like, I just don't really see or experience God.

Like, I feel like I never hear Him. I never see Him doing anything in life. And he was really burdened by that, so he kind of wrote this study as he had come to understand experiencing God over the years.

And it had a really simple premise. God is at work. Like, whatever you care about this world, whatever you care about the lost, God cares more.

And whether you are working or not, He is working every day. So God is at work. And then God will reveal to you where He's at work. Like, if you want to know what God is doing in the world, He will show you what He's doing in people's lives.

[26 : 55] And then when He does, that is your invitation to join Him. And if you do, you will experience and see what God is doing in the world.

And the whole study was about how to do that. And if that's true, it's really a totally different way to think about bearing witness than something that just looks like a cold call, right?

So, let's go back to that idea of being a salesman for Jesus, right? There's this old exercise, like if you're trying to test somebody's skill in salesmanship, and it basically goes like this.

Sell me this pen, right? And if you've ever been a part of that, like, the way you know immediately if somebody is not a good salesman is because that person will try to, well, sell you the pen.

Like, they'll start by going, this is the most amazing pen you've ever seen. It's like the best color in the whole world. You have never seen a pen that is as indestructible as this. It'll write for hours.

[27 : 54] Like, they try to sell you the pen, right? A good salesperson will start by asking you questions that have nothing to do with the pen. Tell me about what you do.

What kind of business are you in? What are some of the challenges in your business? You know, where are the places where you really think you could use some more efficiency in writing notes? Like, the purpose of the exercise is to try to demonstrate that the way you are a good salesman is not by trying to sell the thing, but by trying to understand where people are and what they need and then meeting them their needs.

Now, I do hope that if nothing else we've seen from today, like, the idea of being a salesman for Jesus is really just a bad metaphor in general, right? Like, it doesn't really fit how we bear witness because we're not called to sell anything.

Like, we aren't trying to manipulate anyone into believing they need Jesus. Like, you are not called by, like, the slickness of your presentation to bring someone into the kingdom.

But what if... But what if what Blackaby said is true, it really is a different way of approaching how you witness to Jesus in the world because it means you don't start by deciding what you're going to do and who you're going to witness to.

[29 : 14] You start by asking God, show me where you are working around me. Who is asking spiritual questions in my life? Where are the real needs of people that God has put right in front of me?

What are the things I see happening around me that I think are things only God could do? Now, to be clear, sometimes the way you're going to see what God is doing and how He is working is simply to boldly declare the gospel and see what the Holy Spirit does.

Like, there is no version of being a follower of Jesus where you never speak His name and you never testify in front of people to what He's done. Like, that is going to call for a courage.

But now, because of the helper, you don't have to feel the pressure that you've got to make it all happen. You don't have to feel the need to jam it into every conversation in a way that doesn't make sense or where it's obvious that God isn't doing something.

You don't have to do it out of a sense of guilt or obligation. You simply start with praying for the grace and understanding to recognize what God is already doing around you.

[30 : 29] Like, when Jesus tells His disciples, that the harvest is plentiful, again, that already implies somebody's been doing some sowing and some watering.

Like, a lot of times when you get to someone's heart, again, you're not trying, like, God has already been drawing them. Like, you're just the person that He's revealed to now give the next step that draws them close.

And that means we can do it without guilt or fear. Like, there is urgency. Like, there is urgency because we want people to know Jesus. We want them to be freed from their sins.

We want families to be restored and made close to God. But now we have the grace to believe that the advocate is actually working and to believe that it matters when you pray for God's kingdom to come, God's will to be done.

And so I think what that practically and simply looks like is just the grace to believe when you're praying over your children that you want to know Jesus to believe that your prayer, God show them who you are, matters.

[31 : 36] Like, when you're praying for your coworkers, when you're praying for your friends, anyone, whoever you would think of in your mind that you would say, they will never become a Christian.

That person will never become a follower of Jesus. Ask God to start working in their lives. It matters. And so as we kind of launch into the rest of this year, I think maybe our prayer should just be that God gives us that grace to bear witness, to join Him where He's at, to see His kingdom come and His will be done in this church, our city, to the ends of the earth.

Amen? Amen. As a band comes up, if you're here and you're not a follower of Jesus, again, I'm so glad you're here.

I have no idea what you think of church or Christianity or Jesus. And I don't know what questions you have, but I hope this is a place that could maybe be helpful in answering them.

And I would not try to sell you Jesus, but I would say to you from my personal experience, there's nothing better in my life. Like, I don't walk around full of guilt and shame because I know Jesus has taken that from me.

[32 : 58] I don't worry about what my destiny is going to be because I know it's going to be with Him and it's safe. Like, I don't look at each day like it is just some mundane rat race, like I believe every day has value because of Him.

And I don't do that perfectly. Like, I'm still growing into that like everybody, but that's part of what Jesus has meant to me. He's taken away my sin and shame.

He's made me more of the kind of person I always hoped I would be. And if any of that's interesting into you, we'd love to share it with you. There'll be a prayer on the screen that's a way maybe you could express that.

Maybe you'd rather just chat with a pastor or one of the people on the prayer team just ask a question. You can come and do that today. His arm is open. If you are a follower of Jesus, I would just ask, let us be a people that prays for the grace to bear witness.

It's how people, like, you know about Jesus because somebody told you about Jesus. Somebody told you about Jesus. May we ask Him for the grace to tell this city, this region about Him to see people cross from death to life.

[34 : 16] And not because we have some slick program or some charismatic orator, just God's people telling what God has done for them, living it out, and inviting others.

Like, believing you are a priesthood and asking Him for the grace to simply say, show me someone who I can put their hand in yours, Jesus. Who I can be a part of that process.

And then leave it with Him. Feel the freedom that the weight of saving the world is on Jesus' shoulders. Not on yours. But you get to be a part of it.

In a moment, we're going to take communion. And it's just a good moment to pause and ask Jesus for that. To ask Him, maybe the thing you know is like you lack the belief or the faith right now to believe your prayers actually do change things or He actually cares like that.

Jesus will be with you all the way. The meal testifies to like His very body, His very blood. Nothing He would hold back. So when you're ready, go and take that.

[35 : 23] Take it to your seat and partake of it. And again, just trust that. Just ask Jesus for the grace to be with you. Father, we give this moment to You. Holy Spirit, I just ask for the grace in this place to see where You're at around us.

To feel the weight not just of the responsibility but of the grace You've given. That everyone in here You would just convince their heart that the role they play as priests in Your kingdom is critical.

That there's something of Your kingdom that You want to come to this world through them. Not one person, not one title, not one position in the church.

Everyone here, God. Let us be a royal priest to the holy nation. Draw us close. Holy Spirit, have Your way.

In Jesus' name. Amen.