

“Making a Difference in the World”

“It Takes Courage to Make a Difference” - Part 1

Luke 9:18-26

preached March 21, 2010

Courage! It takes courage to change the world. And we want to be people of courage. And conversely, cowardice is one of the most despised of all human qualities. We'll do anything to avoid being called a coward. In school some kid would dare us to do something incredibly stupid and/or dangerous, and we would do it simply because we didn't want to be called a chicken. We love the courageous and despise the cowards. In every movie, the good guys are courageous but the bad guys are cowards. Fathers always want their wives and children to see them as being heroic, to be courageous. Usually when we think of courage we think of death defying acts. Firemen rushing into burning buildings to bring a child to safety; soldiers falling on a grenade to save their buddies; security personnel taking a bullet to save the life of another. We think of Congressional Medal of Honor winners, and maybe even Holocaust survivors. But the truth is, it takes courage, an enormous amount of courage, just to face the ordinary challenges of daily life. It takes a lot to do the right thing and not wimp out. Everyday we're making choices. Everyday those choices reveal us to be either cowardly or courageous.

We've been looking at how we can make a difference in the world. We've talked about Passion, Integrity, Commitment, but underneath it all, we need Courage. Because it takes courage to make a difference. We can only change the world if we are a changed people. Changed people change the world. We can't change the world by imitating it, by blending in. We never change the world by going with the flow, by maintaining the status quo. If I want to make a difference, I must be willing to be different. I must be willing to be talked about, criticized, questioned, and laughed at. To make a difference, I must be different. Jesus said in John 16 *“In the world you will have hardship.”* Not “you may have”, but “you will have” some tough times. So don't be surprised. *“But, be courageous. [for] I have conquered the world.”*

So let's be practical. How can we live more courageously, and more confidently? There are three ways that courage can be seen in our daily life, and they have nothing to do with running into burning buildings or jumping on grenades. But people will see our courage, and we will feel our courage grow if we own up, stand up and speak up.

1. I SHOW COURAGE BY OWNING UP TO MY SIN

Intentionally I say “sin” because we love to avoid sin; the word not the activity. Instead we use words like error, blunder, character flaw, personality defect, temperament, oversight, or poor judgment. In the Lord's Prayer we use “trespasses,” acknowledging that we stepped over a line that we shouldn't have crossed. But that often reduces our offenses against God to the level of walking on our neighbor's lawn. But the Bible calls it sin. And we have all sinned. 1 John 1:8 *“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”* We deceive ourselves. No one else is fooled when we claim perfection, but we just might be able to fool ourselves. But then the truth is not in us. We're not being honest with ourselves. We're merely deceiving what we should be acknowledging openly.

But we hate to admit our sin. We hate it because we're afraid that others will think less of us if we admit that we failed; that we've made mistakes; that we've sinned and fallen short of God's standard. But the truth is, the ability to honestly acknowledge our sins, to say, "I'm sorry, I was wrong. It was my fault. Please forgive me," being able to own up to personal sin, to take personal responsibility, is a mark of emotional and spiritual health. And it's a mark of courage. It takes courage to do that. There are grown men who have never been able to say, "I'm sorry. I was wrong." That's cowardly. There might be people sitting here right now who have never been able to utter those words, to say, "I have sinned." We don't like to own up to our sin.

I read about a young boy and girl at Disneyland who were browsing in a store filled with crystal and blown glass. She picked up some figurine, and promptly dropped it. It broke into about a million pieces. The boy, the brother took it like a man and ran out of the building as quickly as his little feet could carry him. But the girl opened her purse, pulled out all the money she had, five dollars, which won't buy you much in Disneyland and with great fear and trembling went to the manager and asked, "Is this enough?" That was an act of courage! I know adults who would never do that. Wouldn't even think of it. And the manager was so impressed that he simply said, "It's ok. You can go." It takes courage to own up to our sins, but good things can result from taking responsibility.

What are you afraid to admit? At work, what have you blamed on your boss or employees that was really your fault. At home, what have you blamed on your spouse, parent or children that is or was your responsibility. Proverbs 28:13 "*You'll never succeed in life if you try to hide your sins.*" Denial doesn't work in the long run. There might be some short term gains. We can wear a mask for a little while, but in the long run, denial doesn't work.

Many marriages, relationships, and careers have been destroyed by the inability to say, "It's my fault. I was wrong. Would you forgive me?" Particularly men find this very difficult to do. When we get lost do we admit it? No way! AI thought we'd take the scenic route. I always wondered where this road went. Of course I know exactly where I am. (Which should be translated as "I know that I'm sitting in the driver's seat of my car.") A lot of "macho posing" is really just fear, the fear of being found out that we're imperfect, that we make mistakes. We really believe that you think we are perfect and we don't want to burst your bubble. Or maybe it's that we don't want to burst our bubble because we think we're perfect. It takes courage to own up to our own sins.

Why am I talking about this? What is the connection between my personal sin and my ability to make a difference in the world? It has to do with authenticity. People who make a positive difference do it out of their personal authenticity. Fakes and phonies don't last. But the truth lasts. When we are willing to acknowledge both our strengths and our weaknesses, our victories and our failures, people can recognize our authenticity. This is who we are, warts and all. They can trust us to be honest with them because we are honest with ourselves. Authenticity leads to trust, and trust leads to the ability to make a difference. Paul could be honest with his strengths saying, "*Follow me as I follow Christ,*" but he also could say, "*I'm the chief of sinners.*" He even wrote it down so that 2000 years later we can still read about his sins and strengths. Paul is still making a difference in our world because of his authenticity. But it starts with the courage of owning up, of taking responsibility for our sins.

2. COURAGE IS STANDING UP FOR WHAT'S RIGHT

1 Corinthians 16:13 "*Stay true to what you believe. Be courageous. Be strong.*" Today, very few Christians are willing to stand up for what's right. In a world where tolerance is valued more than truth, where people doubt even the existence of right and wrong, where society says that truth is relative, what is true for you may

not be true for me, in this present world most Christians are afraid to stand up for the truth. Afraid that we will be labeled “Narrow minded,” “Prejudiced”, “Judgmental”, “Old fashioned”, “Out of date,” “Bigoted” or down right “Stupid and Ignorant.”

This past week, somewhere in your life, you saw something that was wrong. You knew it was wrong and yet said nothing. You didn’t speak up; didn’t point it out; didn’t confront it. Silence prevailed. At least I know it happened to me. Maybe you were thinking that it was wrong, but that as a Christian, you weren’t allowed to judge. Do you understand the contradiction between those statements? “I know it’s wrong, but who am I to speak up? It’s not my business. It’s not my life. Maybe I’ll just be quiet. It’s not my responsibility.” Are you sure of that?

Hear God’s Word spoken through the prophet Ezekiel (3:18) *“If you don’t speak out to warn the evil person to leave his evil ways, he will die in his sin. But I’ll hold you responsible for his death.”* That is one of the most sobering, most scary verses in the Bible. If I know the truth, if I know the difference between right and wrong and see somebody messing up their life, doing that which is wrong, harmful to themselves and those around them, if I see that and say nothing, God is going to hold me responsible. Who was responsible for the Holocaust? Hitler? Yes, but also everyone who knew, who saw, and yet kept their mouth shut. For when we fail to challenge evil, we become partners with evil.

Now here’s the thing. All of us know people who are messing up their lives, destroying their lives because they’re ignoring God, His way, His word, His will. They have decided to become their own god so they can obey their own commands, and follow only their own desires. We all have friends, relatives, neighbors, co-workers, fellow students, maybe even family members like that. And if we don’t speak to them, we are entering a partnership with evil.

Do you know someone who is abusing alcohol and/or drugs? Right now, some of you know somebody who’s in the middle of an affair. It’s destroying their marriage and destroying them. Some of you probably know somebody who’s cheating, stealing from their company, or they’re stealing from the government. Some cheat the government by manipulating tax returns, and some accept payments that they do not deserve. Some of you know someone who is addicted to pornography, and they can’t get out of it. We know, we see, and yet we say nothing. And the excuse we give for our cowardice, for our silence is, “They seem to be ok. They seem happy. They know what they’re doing. And who am I to judge anyway?” Proverbs 14:13 *“Sure, those people appear to be having a good time but all that laughter will end in heartbreak.”*

At the very least we need to pray, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” And if we claim to be believers, if we claim to be followers of Jesus, there will be times when out of love we must care enough to confront. Out of love. There must be times when we say to that friend, that family member, that spouse, “You’re blowing it. You’re making a major mistake in your life. You’re on the wrong path. And I care too much to let you do it. Because I care about you, because I love you, I’m going to confront you and say this is wrong.” I know people who have had to do that rather than see their child or their friend destroyed. And it is tough. But if we see somebody doing something wrong and we don’t confront them, we’re not much of a friend. We’re not much of a parent. Sometimes love is tough. Love cares enough to confront. And because we care, we cannot stand on the sidelines in silence. We have to reach out and speak out in spite of the risk that it might be to our relationship, because our love compels us. That is love. If I would see my house on fire with my family inside, nothing could stop me from trying to rescue them in spite of the risk it might mean to myself. The press might call me a hero. The fire department might call me stupid or crazy. But love leaves me

no choice. It’s something I have to do. I have to take a stand, to act, to speak out, to confront. I have to stand up for what is right.

Where do we get the courage to do that? Where do we get the courage to speak to that relative, that friend, that co-worker about the mistakes their making in their life? About the hazard their life has become? Psalm 119 (Message paraphrase) *“Let your love, God, shape my life. Then I’ll be able to stand up to mockery because I trust Your word. And as I look for Your truth and Your wisdom, I’ll tell the world what I find and speak out boldly in public unembarrassed.”* Love, Truth, God’s Word. These are the things that give us the motivation, the courage to stand up for what’s right. If I really love God with all my heart, if I really love the truth which is contained in God’s word, and if I really love people, then those three things are going to motivate me to take action rather than sit in silence on the sidelines. When I see someone that I care about making a mistake, going the wrong way, thumbing their nose at God, I am going to have to say something about it. Love for God, love for truth, love for people is the foundation of the courage we need.

3. I HAVE TO SPEAK UP FOR CHRIST

1 Timothy 1:7-8 *“God doesn’t want us to be shy with His gifts but be bold and loving and sensible. So don’t be embarrassed to speak up for our master.”* In the New Century Version it says *“Don’t be ashamed to tell people about our Lord Jesus.”* And in 1 Peter 3:15 we read, *“Always be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks you why you’re living the way you are and always do it with the utmost courtesy.”* Don’t use truth as a club to beat people up. Truth is not a gun to fire, it’s not a hammer, it’s not a dagger that we can stick in people. We speak truth with courtesy in love.

Some of you would like to tell others about Christ, but you’re afraid because you’re not an expert in scripture. You don’t know theology. You’ve never been to seminary. You’re afraid that you don’t know enough to tell people about Jesus. But you do. This isn’t rocket science. You learned all the theology you need in kindergarten. *“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”* You can say that. *“Jesus loves you. He died for you on the cross to prove his love.”* People don’t need more knowledge. They need more love. They need your love and my love. After all we can never argue someone into heaven, but we can love them there. When we express our love, we build a bridge of love from our heart to theirs and then we simply let Jesus Christ walk across.

We can do that, but often we don’t because we don’t have the courage. And yet we need the courage. How can we build up our courage? That’s for next week. But as we go into this week, let us begin to speak up. Let us begin to stand up. Let us begin to own up to who we are and whose we are. Then we can begin to make a difference. We can begin to change the world for God and with God. And in your life may it be so. Amen.