

**“Making a Difference in the World”**  
**“It Takes Courage to Make a Difference” - Part 2**  
1 Peter 4:12-19                      preached March 28, 2010

Today, as we watch Jesus ride into Jerusalem, as we see Him continue His journey toward the cross, we see the picture of courage. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus changed everything. He changed the world. And that’s important for us to see, for we have been talking about how we can make a difference in the world. Over these past few weeks, we have seen that we need Commitment, Integrity, and Passion. But underneath them all, we need Courage. Last week we noted that we show courage when we Own Up for our sins, Stand Up for what is right, and Speak Up for Jesus Christ. Yet sometimes, we don’t show that courage. We are afraid to speak up for Jesus, almost as though we are embarrassed by our faith. In fact, Hugh Huett, a Professor of Law at Chatman University, wrote a book entitled The Embarrassed Believer. He writes that it shouldn’t be all that tough to find ways in our public and professional lives to tell those who do not know the Lord, that we are believers. But the sad truth is that many people are embarrassed believers.

What does that mean, to be an embarrassed believer? Well, I know that we believe that Jesus Christ is Lord, that He came into the world to save us, was crucified, died and was resurrected. He sits at the right hand of God, the Father and that He is coming back. But do the people we work with, the people in our neighborhoods, the people we see at our kids’ school believe that we believe? Do they know that in our hearts we are passionate about the gospel of Jesus Christ? Or do they think we’re just coming to some club on Sunday morning? Or going off to a flea market? Maybe a therapy group? Do they understand, by our words and actions, that we really do love the Lord? If there’s any doubt that they believe that we believe, we are to some extent an embarrassed believer.

Sometimes I’m an embarrassed believer, and I think I know why. Society is not particularly pleased with Christians, and particularly evangelical Christians. It seems that if we actually try to live and proclaim our faith, we are seen as radicals who can not and should not be trusted. We are identified with the Taliban, al Qaeda, or Timothy McVey. We have been called more dangerous than Hamas and Hezbollah. We are considered judgmental and mean, forcing everybody to believe what we believe; to act as we say they should act; that we have no problem killing or destroying anyone who disagrees with us. Comedian Bill Maher doesn’t think that we are dangerous. He just thinks we’re stupid, too dumb to be able to think for ourselves, so we have to look for answers in the Bible, and look for our Savior in the heavens. Our society doesn’t think very highly of those who take their faith seriously. We are often mocked and shunned. It is no wonder that we are occasionally embarrassed.

It shouldn’t surprise us. Jesus told us point blank that *“they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. ... You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me.”* (Luke 21:12,16) Considered in that light, we still have it pretty good. In parts of the world that prophecy is being fulfilled daily. And the time may come, even in this country, when the persecution will grow. It may get dangerous and even more violent. But we are called to follow the example of Paul who wrote, *“I am not ashamed of the Gospel of God for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”* (Romans 1:16) We need to keep that in front of us for we are often ashamed of who we belong to. And that worries the Lord to the point that he gave us a warning in Mark 8:38 saying, *“Whoever’s ashamed of Me and of My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.”* That’s quite a warning.

We cannot be embarrassed believers. But how can we avoid it. We avoid it by allowing our courage to grow, develop and mature. We need courage, but where do we get it? That’s the real issue. Where are we

going to get the courage to stand up and speak up? How can we build the courage to make a difference; to change the world? Four keys. And get those keys from Jesus.

### **1. BE EMPOWERED THROUGH BAPTISM.**

“Through baptism? How are we empowered through baptism? That’s something we usually do with infants?” True, but often we misunderstand baptism. We think about John the Baptist and a ritual of repentance. But that is not what our rite is about. Baptism is about God pouring out his grace on us, making us part of the family, which is the Church. The water is symbolic of the Holy Spirit coming down, as it did during the baptism of Jesus. It is immersing us in Christ so that God can say now to us as He did then with Jesus, *“This is my child with whom I am well pleased.”* (Mark 1:11)

Some argue that for a baptism to be real, we must be of a certain age, old enough to know the difference between right and wrong. I would agree with that if we did the work of baptism; if we were the ones on display. But that is not the case. Baptism is not about us. It’s about God. It is the love and grace of God being poured out us, and it is for everyone, for it is the will of God that not one be lost. Jesus died on the cross for all of us, and for each of us. And when we bring a child to be blessed by the grace of God we are proclaiming our belief in that God-given grace. God’s grace is available to all. It does not depend on us, but on God. And some say that a real baptism requires immersion, because that is what the word “baptism” means, “immersion.” True. But in baptism, being immersed in water is not nearly as important as being immersed, surrounded by the Spirit of God. So whenever we are baptized, even baptized as a child, there is an expectation that we will continue to be immersed in God’s Spirit, immersed in Christ, from that moment on. That is what Paul meant when he wrote, *“Your baptism in Christ was not just washing you up for a fresh start. It also involved dressing you in an adult faith wardrobe - Christ’s life!”* - Galatians 2:27

Being immersed in Christ, we are empowered by grace to go forth to do the works of God; works of justice and mercy; acts of healing and compassion. Often we walk away from those actions because we are too concerned about ourselves. But whenever we return to God, whenever we seek to be immersed in God’s Spirit again, seeking God passionately, with our whole heart, that graceful power is available to us. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, there is power and strength that we do not have on our own. In Christ we are undefeated and undefeatable. When we live in that knowledge, when we show the courage of Jesus in our life, we have nothing to fear and everything to gain. Our first step in faith is to be empowered through baptism.

### **2. PRAY FOR BOLDNESS.**

In the Garden of Gethsemane, with His powerful prayer, Jesus showed that He really didn’t want to deal with all that lay before Him, yet He also showed the courage to continue by saying, *“Thy will not mine be done.”* But considering that this was the purpose that He came to earth, asking the cup to be taken away was a very bold prayer. We need to be bold when we come before God, and we need to be bold when we go forth in the name of God. And when we do, think of the possibilities. Jesus said, *“I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father”* (John 14:12) That’s what is possible for us if we boldly go in the name of Jesus.

Ask God for courage. The Apostle Paul did that. *“Pray and ask God to give me the right words as I boldly tell others about the Lord.”* I remember a time in my ministry long ago when the Lord showed me a vision on the altar steps. Sometime I will tell you about that vision, but for today, just know that the time came when I was instructed to tell my congregation, *“Thus says the Lord....”* It was not reading the scripture. I was not quoting someone else. It was me acting on God’s instruction, and I was scared half to death. Who was I to say such a thing? And the Lord said, *“You are a child of God, and I will be with you.”* That gave me the courage to follow through, and deliver God’s message. And I continue to hear God’s voice, to hear

that same message today or I would never be able to preach as I do week after week. It is God’s activity in my life giving me the courage I need. So let us ask God for courage. Let us pray for boldness.

### **3. EXPECT GOD TO USE ME.**

In John 17 we hear Jesus saying, “*Father the time has come. Glorify your son, that your son may glorify you.*” (John 17:1b) He knew that God’s purpose was going to be fulfilled in Him. And we need to know that, too. The Apostle Paul knew it. In Philippians 1:20 we read, “*I expect and hope that I will have the courage now, as always, to show the greatness of Christ in my life here on earth.*” What a beautiful prayer that is. It’s something we ought to put our refrigerator or desk, or on the visor in our car. It is a prayer that we should pray regularly. Understand that courage is not the absence of fear. No! Courage is doing the right thing in spite of our fear. It is not the absence of anxiety, because we can get anxious whenever we talk about an important issue. Courage is acting and speaking even in the midst of anxiety. Courage is doing the right thing because we care enough about God and about people to speak and act. In fact, if we don’t feel any nervousness, any fear, then it’s not really an act of courage, because we only need courage when we’re scared to death. The fact that we’re moving ahead in spite of our fear means that we are being courageous. And that’s pleasing to God. The Bible says, “*Be strong and courageous. Don’t be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.*” (Joshua 1:9) Be empowered through baptism. Pray for boldness. Expect God to use you.

### **4. REMEMBER THE END OF THE STORY.**

Throughout His earthly ministry, all the way to the cross, Jesus knew the end of the story. In Matthew 16 he said, “*For the Son of Man is going to come in His Father’s glory with His angels, and then He will reward each person according to what he has done.*” (Matthew 16:27) He didn’t need Paul Harvey to hear the rest of the story. He knew it. And we need to remember it as well, for every generation believes that they are living in the last days because things have never been this bad, and we can’t imagine how they could get much worse. A couple of month ago the movie “2012” came out. It was all about how the world was going to end. Now it is possible that we are living in the last days. We could be seeing the fulfillment of the end times prophecies. But I also know that I don’t know, and it really doesn’t matter. St. Francis was working in his garden day when he was asked what he would do if he was told that the Lord would return that afternoon. Without even looking up he said, “I’d keep working in my garden.” Which is to say, that he would continue to be faithful to God, continue to do what God had called him to do, until the Lord actually comes. St. Francis knew the end of the story. He knew he would be safe in Christ no matter what happened in the world. We should know that, too. And we should act like we know it, with confidence and courage. We are to always live as though we know the Lord is coming soon. We just don’t know what soon means.

Still, many focus on the darkness of this world rather than look to the light of Christ. The result is that instead of building our confidence and courage, we are discouraged. But God doesn’t want that. Remember the end of the story. I’ve looked at the last chapter, and we win. Christ is victorious, and if we are with Christ, if we are in Christ, we are victorious, too. I think that’s the main reason we have the Revelation in the Bible. God wants us to know that life will get nasty, but we must never forget that there is a happy ending. The evil will be punished. The righteous rewarded. In the end, we win. That ought to give us courage. We might lose a battle here or there, but the outcome is inevitable. We win.

James 5:8 “*Take courage, for the coming of the Lord is near.*” Job tells us “*You’ll have courage because you will have hope.*” Atheists are trying to call themselves enlightened. I don’t care how smart they think they are, we can never be intimidated by anybody who doubts God. The psalm says, “*The fool has said in his heart there is no God.*” (Psalm 14:1) Don’t tell them that because they won’t believe you, but we should never forget it. It is not a matter of education, but a matter of wisdom and grace. And it is a matter of trusting in God over and above all things. In the end, we win.

Many times I have heard that religion is for the weak and cowardly. Or that God is simply a crutch for the simple and spineless. How foolish, for the fact is that it takes enormous courage to be a Christian. We have to own up to our sin. “God, You’re right, I’m wrong.” We have to repent, that is, turn our lives around, change the way we think and act, and that is never easy. And then we have to commit our life wholly and completely to Jesus Christ, to follow him wherever he leads, even to the cross, and that takes courage.

It takes courage to follow Christ when it’s unpopular or inconvenient. It takes courage to follow even when we don’t understand our freedom and His grace. It takes courage to obey Christ when it doesn’t make sense and everybody’s going the other way. It takes courage to be ethical in the market place, to hold on to honesty even when it costs us personally. It takes courage to reach out to others, to share our faith with them. It takes courage to tithe, to remain sexually pure in a sex obsessed society. It takes courage to own up to our sin; to stand up for what’s right; to speak up for Jesus Christ. And anybody who does that has more courage in their little finger than all our critics have in their entire body. Agnostics don’t even have enough courage to even make up their minds. “Maybe there is a God, maybe not.” Well if you don’t know, you’d better figure it out real quick because your eternity is in the balance.

The truth is that most people are moral cowards. “What’s right for you may not be right for me.... I might think it’s wrong but I don’t want to judge you.” That’s moral cowardice. It takes no courage to blend in with culture. Cowards follow the crowds. It was the cowards who cheered when Jesus came into town and turned around and shouted “Crucify Him” at the end of the week. The Courageous follow Christ. If you don’t believe that, then take a good look around the world. Because today, every day, millions of people are tortured, imprisoned, even losing their lives because they are willing to stand up for their faith. That takes courage. In countries in Africa, in the Middle East, in the Far East, it’s a capital crime to be a Christian yet people continue to stand up. Some think that my preaching gets tough. Look at the things Jesus said. “*If you want to find your life, give it away.*” (Matthew 16:25) “*When the enemy hurts you, pray for him and do good for him.*” “*Turn the other cheek and go the extra mile.*” (from Luke 6:27-29 and Matthew 5:41) Is that easy? Then there’s this one, “*Take up your cross and follow Me.*” (Matthew 16:24) That says that as faithful followers of Jesus, we should be willing to accept a death sentence for our faith. Cowards do not last in the Christian life. We need courage.

How about you? Do you have the courage to publicly profess your faith in Jesus? Do you have the courage to preach the gospel of Christ with your words and deeds? Here’s the challenge. I dare you to make a difference by daring to be different and caring more about what God thinks than what other people think because we only need to please one person, Jesus Christ. Great people never follow the crowd. Never. They take the road less traveled. Let us walk the narrow road into salvation with Jesus.

So who do you need to talk to about Jesus? That neighbor; that person at work; the family member that Jesus already died for? Who do you need to talk to? This day, this week, may we have the courage to act. Let us do something courageous. Let us make the commitment to own up to our sin, to stand up for what is right, and to speak up for Jesus Christ. Seek empowerment by being immersed in the presence and Spirit of God. Pray for boldness in faith. Expect God to use you even now. And always have hope, for in the end we are victorious. Never forget it. So let us be a people of faith. Let us be a people of Commitment; a people of Integrity; a people of Passion. Let us be a people of Courage. And let us go forth to make a difference in the world with God and for God. And in your life may it be so. Amen.