

*Storytellers: Living The Tale*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Luke 8:27-39; Acts 8:26-40; 1 Timothy 2:1-10*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from 1 Timothy 2:1-10. May God add His blessing to the reading of His Holy Word. “I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men – the testimony given in its proper time. And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle – I am telling the truth, I am not lying – and a teacher of the true faith to the Gentiles. I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing. I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God.”

By nature, people are pragmatic. We want to know how something affects us where we live. We don't pay much attention to world events unless they threaten our way of life. We don't even pay much attention to our neighbors unless they have rusty cars sitting on the front lawn or throw crazy parties until three in the morning. Even as a pastor, I'm pragmatic. Every week, the hardest part of writing the sermon is the opening, the part where I try to get you thinking about the topic of the day in an amusing or thought-provoking way...just like I am right now! We don't launch right into Scripture, though that was once the common way of preaching. We expect to be brought into the story, to know where we fit into it.

As we conclude our series on evangelism today, we've reached the nitty gritty. We've discussed the story of salvation and how to listen and relate to others so that the story of Jesus is relevant to them. Last week, we talked about the adventure of faith – how we should expect great things of God and how He will do great things in us, for us, and with us.

All those things are excellent. But the pragmatic issue for us when it comes to evangelism is figuring out how. How do I share the story? Is God upset with me because I'm not an extrovert? What if the testimony I have is really simplistic – I became a believer at a young age and I have no amazing story? What if my life's circumstances make it so that I can't become a missionary or a pastor or a teacher or preacher of the faith? Does that mean I'm a lesser Christian? Is my faith deficient if I am not called to certain kinds of ministry? If my faith isn't strong, should I share what I've got?

Today's passages and a few other elements in Scripture help us overcome these fears. God is not so interested in your doing great things for Him as He is you doing the things He is asking you to do, where you are in the here and now. I want to look at these three passages we heard today and see where human plans were set aside for the greater good of God's Kingdom.

In the first passage, Jesus heals a man plagued by a group of demons for years. He wants to go with Jesus, but instead, Jesus sends him home to tell how much God has done for him. We would assume that Jesus would send this guy all over Israel to spread the word. This is a miraculous healing, with plenty of witnesses who could tell what he was like before Jesus came around. Imagine all the converts this guy could make! But Jesus says no. Jesus says, “Go home.” It limits the number of people he can witness to about God's work in his life. But he obeys, telling all over his hometown how much Jesus had done for him. Following Jesus would have been great, but it wasn't what this man was called by Jesus to do.

In the second passage, an angel of the Lord commands Philip, who was called to be an evangelist, to go on the desert road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza. He's led the whole way by the Spirit, who guides him to approach a certain chariot. He witnesses to an Ethiopian official, a eunuch, about Jesus and the man is baptized. A man who never could have entered the assembly of the Israelites becomes a member of the Kingdom of God.

And just as soon as it happens, Philip is whisked away, winding up in Azotus over 20 miles away. But the story doesn't end there. He preaches until he reaches Caesarea. We learn later from Acts 21 that he stayed there, raised a family, and had four daughters who were prophetesses. God's call on his life changed. He was used mightily by God – church history speculates that the Ethiopian official introduced Christianity to Africa – but he wasn't always a traveling evangelist. And while he was, he wasn't led everywhere to everyone, but to specific places and specific meetings where God found him useful.

Our third and final passage is from Paul's first letter to Timothy. What he said was shocking. He tells Timothy to have all the churches pray for worldly leaders and authorities. We think we have it bad with the Democrats and Republicans and praying for those on the other side, but many worldly leaders in ancient Rome considered themselves deities and demi-gods, and they could literally get away with murder!

Yet Paul wanted prayers for them, primarily so Christians could “live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good,” he continues, “and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” God's first priority for most of us is not to live an exciting, action-packed life. He doesn't want most believers as missionaries or doing extraordinary things.

He wants us to live lives of calm, assured grace...calm because we know nothing can separate us from the love of God, assured because we have forgiveness through Jesus, His Son, and grace because we have been shown grace. The adventure we have is the adventure of anticipation, waiting to see what God will do, how we will turn our trashed lives into treasures.

This brings to mind the Starbucks coffee cup controversy. This Christmas, there are no snowflakes on Starbucks' cups. One guy, a former pastor with a history of drawing attention to himself, made a big deal out of it. He created a video, it got picked up by a news agency, and now there's a ton of talk about it, even though it's a big nothing. Starbucks has never been a Christian company; they have never had sacred pictures on their cups at Christmas. And the hullabaloo over it has made a few well-meaning believers look really foolish.

But that's the opposite of what we're supposed to be doing. We aren't supposed to create controversies. We are supposed to live quiet, peaceful lives, lives that aren't marked by rudeness and disrespect of others, of looking for a fight and demanding our rights. We are supposed to be characterized by the peace that transcends the worries of the world because we know we belong to God. Our lives and our eternity are secure. We pray for our society that we can live rightly.

And Paul doesn't stop with “quiet and peaceful” but with lives lived “in all godliness and holiness.” You want to make neighbors take notice and be interested in whatever story God has given you? Live a life where it's clear that your church and church family matter to you, that your faith matters to you, that you care for other believers when it's inconvenient. Live a life where it's clear that you serve God before anything else. Live a life of grace that extends a warm welcome to the sinner in our midst. And that will speak volumes.

As Paul commends us, let's be believers where anger and disputing aren't seen, but where prayer and the love of God are evident. Let's be believers known not by our fancy cars or our designer jeans but by the gracious gifts we give and the good deeds we do, whether through our pantry or Operation Christmas Child or Rock Your Socks Off. The biggest obstacle to Christ is Christians who don't act like Christ. The biggest draw to Christ is Christians who do act like Christ. If we keep that in mind, it will steer our attitudes in the right direction.

Living a godly life is the best way to prepare others to hear the good news about Jesus. We don't have to worry about an exciting testimony or a great ministry to show off. A good, godly life lived well in front of others says as much if not more than your words. When you share the story we've been talking about since September, you'll have an audience because your words will carry the weight of your life.

With that said, what other steps might we take in order to help others hear the gospel? There are only two I want to suggest today, but I think they might solve many of our questions about the purpose and direction of our lives. The first is simply this: be a friend.

Friendship has become the lost art in society. As we grow more globally interconnected, we become less connected to each other locally. You can shop online for everything you need; you never need to leave the house. As society becomes more withdrawn, it's harder and harder to make friends. Children no longer play in the neighborhood, bringing together folks who live a few doors away from each other. We make friendships only to find them drift apart as soon as our interests fade.

In an article called “Need A Friend?” in *World Magazine*, Janie Chaney states, “Stranded in a landscape of ferocious individualism with families and communities falling apart all around, it might be time for the church to develop a theology of friendship...we recognize loneliness is a big problem in our society, but also in our churches. Without a firm grasp on the value of friendship and making time to cultivate it, we drift further into our own worlds or claustrophobic pressures. Men who feel the loss of emotional intimacy may seek it in unhealthy places. Women sometimes need a breather from family demands. Christians who are same-sex attracted long for nonsexual intimacy but can't seek it without raising eyebrows...individual Christians are the friends of Jesus...we enhance our friendship with Jesus by letting others in.”

We need friendship to fulfill our purpose in life at its deepest level. The Westminster Confession summarizes that the chief end, the chief purpose, of life is “to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” We cannot glorify God to the greatest heights if we do it in a vacuum. Psalm 22:22 is the cry of the one redeemed by God's suffering servant; it says, “I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters; I will praise you in the gathering.” Integrity gives glory to God, to act in secret the same way you do in public. But the ultimate end of that integrity is to have others follow after you as you follow Christ, to join together with them praising God.

My recommendation is that we first begin with deep friendships within the church. Galatians 6:10 tells us, “Let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” Jesus said to the twelve in John 13:35 at the Last Supper, “By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you love one another.” To grow in the ability to make friends, start here. Start with the people around you that you already see on a regular, hopefully weekly basis.

Come to the Christmas lunch. Invite people over. Get to know them. Pray with them – you know they are here, they've been here for years, so why should that be scary? If we have one thing going for us as a small church, it is that we can care for one another in ways that often are ignored or impossible in a larger church. Let's do it. I can tell you that this season at our Bible study has been incredible for getting to go deeper with friends and with the Lord in His Word. Try it out!

Then build some relationships outside. It doesn't matter with who. Just listen for the Holy Spirit. Let Him guide you to start conversations, to build friendships in the places you frequently go and the hobbies you enjoy, just like He guided Philip. Trust Him to make this happen, making yourself available, and He will.

And while we do it for the Lord, we get personal benefits. We begin to understand the fullness of God's creation, how He made all of us so differently and yet in need of love and forgiveness. Friendship can be a source of pain, but often it gives us great fulfillment. I encourage you to show the love of God that is already in your own life through the power of friendships.

The second thing I encourage us to do is this: show grace. To yourself, to your family, to your friends, everybody. We all desperately need it, and it's rare to be shown grace. When the church father Tertullian remarked about Jesus' command to love one another, he commented from the point of view of the average person in Greco-Roman society. Quoting him, “They say, look at how they love one another (because they all hate each other), and look at how they look out for each other's best interests (because they are all ready to kill one another).”

We extend grace because God has forgiven us all our sins – not just some, but every last one we will ever commit. He does not require good works from us to make up the difference. Our sins are paid for in full by the blood of Jesus Christ. Immense grace has been shown to us, so we extend it to others.

Even in the face of sins that disturb us, we show grace. We show overwhelming patience to the single mother, to the person struggling with a same-sex attraction, to the addict, to the militant atheist. We show them patience because God was patient with us, not condemning us but bringing us to Himself at just the right time. We don't overlook those sins because we want the best for others, and sin does not make us thrive but destroys us from the inside out. But we show grace because God's grace is greater than our sinfulness.

We often need to show the most grace to ourselves. The world continues to tell us that we must be gods – we must be able to manage a household, pay all the bills on time, look perfect, act perfect, never get angry (except for the right causes), never speed (but drive a fast car), never lie (except when it's useful), give all our money to charity while maintaining a million dollar home, eating the finest foods without ever gaining a pound. It's impossible. It's not even sane, and it's certainly not godly. But it is the picture presented everywhere.

We need to show grace to ourselves because the grace we show to others must start with us. Others will not believe us if we are graceful to them but graceless with ourselves. The Corinthian church started dividing into factions over their leadership, one claiming Paul as his leader, another claiming another disciple as his leader. Paul writes to them in 1 Corinthians 4:3-4, "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me."

Paul wasn't worried about self-judgment, about what the world or even the church said, when his conscience was clear. He was constantly under fire because of his history before he became a believer, as a persecutor of the church. But he knew that didn't matter. He showed himself grace. He was very honest – he considered himself the worst of sinners and the least of the apostles – but he also did not judge himself on that. His letters sometimes seem arrogant. But it's because of all Christ was doing through him, not his own merits.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let's show grace to others. Let's tell them the story as we listen carefully to God and to them, careful to make true friends as we seek to bring them into the Kingdom. No matter where we are, no matter our history, our past, our story, God will work through our lives, our tales, to reach those He will bring into His Kingdom. God has so much good in store for us. Let us look forward to the adventure with anticipation of all He will do and all those friends He will bring alongside us into His eternal home.