

Witness to the Light

John 1:6-8, 19-28 (NIV)

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ¹⁹ Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ²⁰ He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹ They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." ²² Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" ²⁴ Now the Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵ questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶ "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. ²⁷ He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸ This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

What do you think of when you hear the word "testimony"? Before living in Utah, testimony was a courtroom term for me, what someone would say after raising their right hand while placing their left hand on a Bible swearing before God that all their words will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Now, though, testimony has become a much more everyday term. People ask if they can bear their testimony, not in the court of law but taking an opportunity to tell you what they believe to be true. Right now people are up at microphones bearing their testimonies. Although our culture here in Utah gives us a different view of what a testimony is, bearing a testimony is not a bad thing, especially when talking about what you believe. What matters most in a testimony, though, is the content.

Last Sunday we were reintroduced to John the Baptist as he prepared the way for the Lord by making people's lives straight with God through a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. People flocked to see this guy John and to participate in this baptism, this cleansing of their sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to meet John. (Mark 1:5) They came to see this guy who wore camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, the same kind of clothes that the Old Testament prophet Elijah wore.

Elijah was one of the greatest prophets in Israel's history, serving in the 9th century B.C. He had a hard ministry calling the wicked king Ahab of Israel to repentance. Throughout Elijah's ministry, God allowed him to do miracles such as bringing and ending a famine on Israel through simple prayer, being fed by ravines during that famine, confronting and overcoming the prophets of the false god Baal, and even raising a dead boy back to life. Elijah is also one of two people in the Bible who never died. Instead, God carried Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind accompanied by chariots and horses of fire. Almost 500 years after Elijah's ministry, the prophet Malachi prophesied that the LORD would send the prophet Elijah before the day of the LORD comes. The people wondered, "Is John Elijah returned from heaven?"

So, the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to John to ask him who he was. "Who are you? What's your testimony? Are you the long-awaited Messiah, the Christ who would crush the head of the serpent and save us all?" John did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Messiah." (verse 20) "I'm not Elijah back from heaven, and I'm not the Prophet that Moses said would come, one greater than himself. Finally, the priests and Levites played their hand. They said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" (verse 22) "Bear your testimony. Tell us something true." John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" (verse 23) In other words, John's testimony, his truth, was that he was just a voice, a voice to get you ready for the coming of the Lord.

John could have had a very different testimony. He could have acted like a rock star, religiously speaking. He could have lived up the hype surrounding him. He looked like Elijah. He could have played that card and just said that he was literally Elijah come back from heaven. He could have said that he was that great Prophet that Moses spoke about. And to top it off, John was the son of a priest descended from the line of Aaron. He could have started his own church out there at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan. John could have made his testimony all about himself and built himself up.

That's not what John did, though. He didn't point to himself. He understood who he was and what he was there to do. As the first verses of our Gospel reading said, "There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify

concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.” (verses 6-8) John’s testimony, his truth, was simple, “I’m here to point you to Jesus, the Light of the world, and to help you prepare for him so that you believe in him as your Savior from sin when he comes.”

That was John’s testimony, but what about yours? What’s your testimony? I don’t think any of us have to worry about the temptation of taking a religious rock star status like John could have had, but what’s your witness? When people talk to you, what impression do you give them? Is your life all about you, about your worries, your concerns, your troubles, your triumphs, your joys? While all things that people may want to know, they all just point to you. Is your testimony only about your church? Is it more about who your church is, the history and heritage of it, more than the message of your church? When you talk to people, are they pointed more to your church, to the institution, than they are to our Lord Jesus Christ? When people look at you, observe you, (because they do) what do they see? Do they see someone who lives their life for God or someone who lives only for themselves? Is our testimony through our words and actions one that would cause someone to say about us, “I never knew that they were a Christian”? Are we a witness to the Light, to our Lord Jesus Christ, or do our lives, our words, our actions, darken the Light?

When our witness only points to us, we are not pointing to Jesus. When we point to us in the good things of life as well as the bad things, we are pointing away from Christ and robbing God of his glory. Instead, our witness, our lives, need always to point to Christ as our hope, as our reason for living, as the reason why we get through life, as the source of every blessing.

As you go through hard times, pain, sickness, etc., your testimony can’t just be about how bad it is for you but instead be a witness to Christ through the hard times. Our testimony can be about God by letting people know, “Yeah, this sucks, but I know that my God will see me through it. He always has done so before, and he promises to be with me always to the very end of the age.” And after you have gotten through those hard times, instead of pointing to how you prevailed, give praise and thanks to God that he did indeed get you through, that without him you would have given up.

When our testimony boldly points to Christ and what he has done for us, you will get opposition. It happened to John; it will happen to us. After he had answered the priests and the Levites question of, “Who are you?” now the Pharisees had a slightly different question: “Who are *you*?” They were asking, “Who do you think *you* are to come down here to the Jordan and baptize people? We are the religious experts. We are the most righteous followers of God Almighty. Who are you to have the authority to wash people and say that you are cleansing them of their sins? You’re not the Messiah. You’re not Elijah. You’re not the Prophet. How dare you!”

But John was unfazed. His testimony again pointed straight to Christ. “I baptize with water,” John replied, “but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.” I’m just a voice to prepare you for him, to point you to him, so that all of you would believe in him as your Savior from sin. Are you ready for him? Are you ready for the one whose sandals I’m unworthy to untie? John’s testimony, his witness to the truth, would continue to point to Christ as the very next day John literally pointed to Jesus and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29) Look at him, not me. I want you to see him so that you believe in him and have your sins taken away.

Let John’s testimony be our testimony. We are only witnesses to the Light. While our testimony points to Christ as the one who has made us clean from our sins, who has made us straight with God, perfect before him, someone is going to scoff and you and show their indignation towards you. “You think you’re so righteous and good.” They will point out your sins. They will point out the bad things they have seen you do and heard you say. They will say something to the effect of, “Who do *you* think you are?”

That’s a time to boldly testify again to Christ and what he has done for you. Boldly acknowledge your sins, how unrighteous you are. Own your sins, testify that Christ’s perfection shows your imperfection and unworthiness before God. But then also boldly confess that God has cleansed you of your sins through baptism, that he has clothed you with Christ’s righteousness, and how now God sees you as perfect because of what Christ has done for you. Boldly bear your testimony, your witness to the truth, that God has made you right with him, worthy to be with him. Point, as John did, to the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world – your sins, my sins. Bear a testimony that only and always points to Christ as the one who takes away our sins.

When our testimony points to Christ and only to Christ, we are his witnesses. We point people to the one thing needful. So we carefully consider our words and our actions that they would also point to Christ. I have something specific in mind for us to point to Christ. Every bulletin has one of our Christmas postcards in it. Invite someone to see the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. You can hand deliver it. You can mail it with just one regular stamp. You can point someone to Jesus, to testify to the truth that he has cleansed you of your sins and offers that to the world. May our testimony always point to Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Amen.