

“PREPARED TO WITNESS”

1 Peter 3:8-16

CHRISTMAS EVE. 1995. Very, very late. All the Christmas presents were wrapped and placed neatly beneath the tree—except for one. Before going to bed that night, I still had to assemble a tricycle for my youngest son Andrew, who was three-years-old at the time. Removing the parts from the box, I glanced at the instructions, yawned, then tore them up and threw them away. At midnight, I had no desire to read microscopic print in three different languages. “Besides,” I told myself, “I don’t need instructions. How hard can it be to assemble a toddler’s tricycle?”

For the next three hours I struggled with that how-hard-can-it-be tricycle. When I was done, one rear wheel wobbled; the handlebars were crooked; and most troubling of all, there were parts left over which I could not explain. Yes, you’re right. I should have read the manufacturer’s instructions. And if that is true of a tricycle, it is certainly true of life.

There is an instruction manual for life. It’s called the Bible. Paul wrote in Romans 15:4, **“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”**

God made us. God redeemed us. God knows us inside and out. Where then should we turn for answers in life if not God? In a real sense the Bible is God’s HOW-TO book for humanity; inspired by God the Holy Spirit; truthful and reliable in all of its parts; and therefore sufficient for all matters of doctrine and life.. Paul told Timothy: **“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”** 2 Timothy 3:15.

God’s HOW-TO book. Like HOW TO BE SAVED: Ephesians 2:8-9, **“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”** Or HOW TO LIVE A GODLY LIFE: Ephesians 4:22-24, **“You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”**

Or HOW TO FORGIVE: Ephesians 4:32, **“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”** Or HOW TO HAVE A HAPPY MARRIAGE: Ephesians 5:21, **“Submit to one another out of**

reverence for Christ.” Ephesians 5:22, **“Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.”** And then Ephesians 5:25, **“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her.”** That God-designed balance of love and respect. Or HOW TO RAISE CHILDREN: Ephesians 6:4, **“Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”**

These are merely a few HOW-TO examples from the Letter to the Ephesians. Imagine what instruction for life is contained in the rest of God’s book, the Bible. In Scripture, we even learn how to be prepared to bear witness to the gospel; that is, prepared to share Christ at every opportunity. And this HOW-TO is the subject of today’s text, 1 Peter 3:8-16.

Let’s read the Manufacturer’s or Maker’s instructions: **“Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For, ‘Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech. He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and His ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.’ Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. ‘Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.’ But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.** For the sake of our meditation this morning, let’s summarize these HOW-TO-WITNESS instructions with three simple phrases: Be reverent; be ready; and be respectful.

First, be reverent. Peter wrote: **“But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord,”** 1 Peter 3:15. Based on my episode with that tricycle, you may have surmised that I’m not a mechanically-gifted person. And I’m not. My crowning achievement was to install an automatic garage-door opener. When the installation was complete and I pushed the button, no one was more surprised than I was to see the garage door open and close.

In that instance, however, I actually read the installation instructions. After identifying and setting aside all the working parts, I began with step one. And dear friends, beginning with step one—beginning with the right step—is as important to

witnessing as it is to assembling. But what is step one in the HOW-TO of witnessing? It may not be what you think.

So very often, when given the opportunity to witness—canvassing a neighborhood; distributing religious doorhangers; sharing Christ with a hurting coworker or friend—we focus first on who we are and what we have. “Do I have experience or am I a novice? Do I speak eloquently or haltingly? Am I outgoing or shy? Do I have professionally designed outreach materials or merely homemade materials?” And this focus applies not only to Christian individuals but also to Christian congregations.

Consider all the preparations made to undertake this ministry in Lemmon, South Dakota. When relocating in 1963, identifying the right location; obtaining the right building permits; constructing the right building in view of the right size, right ease of access, right costs, right potential for growth, right parking space; obtaining the right permits.

Or consider all the items that were set apart for this ministry. Set apart. That is the phrase Peter used in today’s text, isn’t it? **“Set apart Christ as Lord.”** Setting apart funds. Setting apart pews, altar, pulpit, and lectern. Setting apart hymnals, Bibles, vestments, organ, tables, chairs, and let’s not forget the all-important coffeemaker. Setting apart an illuminated sign with church name, church service times, and church contact information.

These are all important preparations; but they are not the most important preparation. In undertaking a Christian witness or Christian ministry, the first step is not to set apart furnishings or outreach materials or even funds. According to Peter, the first step is to set apart Jesus Christ as Lord. Amid all the other tasks and hectic preparations of our lives and ministries, do we remember to put Christ first?

In the Greek version of 1 Peter 3:15, the word “Lord” is the very first word in the sentence and placed first for emphasis. Literally translated, “As LORD set apart Christ in your hearts.” In God’s HOW-TO book, the first step to witnessing and ministering is not to focus on who we are, but to focus on who Jesus Christ is. He is the Lord. He is the omnipotent Son of God. He is the one who commissioned His church with the words: **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age,”** Matthew 28:18-20.

Jesus Christ is Lord. And we confess that reality almost every Sunday, saying

in the Apostle's Creed: "And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord." We know Jesus is Lord. We confess Jesus as Lord. But do we live, hope, praise, minister, witness, and act as if Jesus Christ is Lord? That is the question. And that is what Peter meant by 'setting Christ apart in our hearts as Lord.'

What does it mean to set apart Christ in our hearts as Lord? Surely, it means to reverence Jesus Christ as in complete control all things—everything in the universe; everything in our individual lives; everything in Tehran, Iran and Washington, D.C.; and everything that happens to this Christian congregation, St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Or do we think that Jesus Christ has forgotten us simply because there are empty pews on Sunday mornings? That may be true of earthly lords and rulers and kings; but it is never true of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one who declared: "**For where two or three come together in My name, there am I with them,**" Matthew 18:20. So, when you read the statistics in bulletin announcements on Sunday mornings or in annual reports, recognize that there is always one in attendance here who goes unreported but should not go unrecognized; and He is the Lord of heaven and earth.

Every one of us could spend the next year and our remaining budget fretting and worrying about the future of this congregation. But ultimately, this congregation is not our congregation. It is Christ's congregation. Its future is not up to us but up to Him.

Jesus Christ is Lord. Jesus Christ has the power. Jesus Christ is in control. Jesus Christ loved each of us enough to die for us in atoning for all our sins. Set these realities apart in your heart. Let them rule over your worries and doubts. Let them empower your witnessing. For when we reverence Christ as Lord, then, as Peter wrote in our text, we have no reason to be afraid of anyone in our lives or anything in our church. "**Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened,**" 1 Peter 3:14.

One day, while serving my previous congregation in Florida, a member and I met at church prior to canvassing surrounding neighborhoods. As we loaded our clipboards with doorhangers, he told me: "Before I knock on a door, Pastor, I pray for the Lord's help and guidance." That, dear friends, is a perfect example of setting Christ apart in our hearts as Lord—bowing before His Lordship and saying, "You're in charge, Lord; I'm not. You have the power, Lord; I don't." This is the first and most important step to being a prepared witness of the gospel. And truthfully, everything else I have to say this morning about witnessing flows from that same Lordship of Christ, including the readiness to witness.

Second, be ready. What does readiness have to do with reverencing Jesus Christ as Lord? The answer is, everything. As Lord, Jesus will give each of us

opportunities to witness to family members, friends, church visitors, coworkers, fellow Christians, and even complete strangers. When these opportunities are presented, we must first recognize them and then be ready to use them.

Where does this readiness or preparedness come from? From the Lord, of course, who never asks us to do something without empowering us to do so. And the power to do so comes from His word. Listen again to Paul's instructions to young Pastor Timothy: **"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."** And this most certainly includes the good work of witnessing.

Some years ago, I received a request to study canvassing techniques in Bible Class; and particularly, how to best manage objections to our witnessing. Sharing witnessing experiences can certainly be useful. But the best preparation for witnessing has always been and always will be studying the word of God. The more you learn about Scripture, the more of a capable witness for Christ you will be. Church is preparation. Bible Class is preparation. Midweek services are preparation. Family devotions are preparation. Each time you study God's word, you are preparing—no, more properly said, God the Holy Spirit is preparing you to bear witness to the gospel of Christ.

And believe me, if the Lordship of Jesus Christ is preeminent in your home-life, church-life, and spiritual-life, people will ask you the reason for your hope. "Why don't you end your troubled marriage and pursue happiness with someone else?" Because Jesus is the Lord of my life. "Why don't you give up on that little Lutheran church?" Because Jesus is the Lord of my church.

When Peter wrote, **"always be prepared to give an answer"** in 1 Peter 3:15, the Greek word he used for "answer" was APO-LOGIA; the source of our English word APOLOGY—not apology in the sense of expressing regret, but in the original sense of expressing conviction and defending faith, that is, apologetics. No one will ever come to faith on the basis of your personality, power, or eloquence. Faith is created and behavior is changed by the all-powerful word of God. So, I say again, if you want to be a ready witness for Christ, study your Bible. The power lies in it, not in you. Your testimony about Christ does not have to be eloquent. It simply needs to be heartfelt; that is, from the heart—where, as Peter wrote, Christ should sit enthroned as Lord and Savior.

The apostle Paul was perhaps the greatest of all New Testament witnesses for Christ. He spoke of Christ to kings, governors, rulers, hostile crowds; and while in

Athens he witnessed to Greece's finest philosophers—some of whom called him a “babbling,” Acts 17:18; in Greek, a SPERM-O-LOGOS, literally, a ‘seed-picker.’ Yet, did Paul keep silent or demure from defending his faith? No. Instead, he wrote to the Corinthians: **“I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!”** And do you know what compelled him to preach Christ above all else? The fact that Christ loved and redeemed him.

You can hear Paul's eternal gratitude to Christ in his words to Timothy: **“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that He considered me faithful, appointing me to His service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst,”** 1 Timothy 1:12-15. And so you see, witnessing is not a professional endeavor. It is a personal one.

Third, and finally: Be respectful. Peter wrote, **“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander,”** 1 Peter 3:15-16.

The words require no explanation, do they? How can we talk about Christ's love without being loving ourselves? How can we talk about God's forgiveness without being forgiving? How can we talk about God's patience without being patient. Our behavior will either lend credibility to our Christian witness or undermine it. Our deeds will either show the Lordship of Christ or deny it. Which type of witness do we want to be?

Do you want to be a prepared witness? Read the assembly instructions in Scripture. Be reverent. Be ready. And be respectful.