

“Spirit-Filled Witness”

Acts 1:1-11

December 6, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

We’re continuing today in our series on the mission of the Church. We’ve seen already that the big picture of the Bible is that God is restoring the garden of Eden as a place where he can live with his people. This restored garden of Eden goes by different names in the Bible. It is called the New Jerusalem, the kingdom of God and the new earth, as well as others. One of the central points we’ve seen is that it is God’s work to establish his kingdom. We see that again in this passage when the disciples ask Jesus if he is at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel. They acknowledge that it is God’s work to do so. Jesus challenges their right to ask the question, as well as their assumption about what this kingdom will look like, but he doesn’t disagree with their basic assumption that this is God’s work.

If it is God’s work to bring about his kingdom, the New Jerusalem, then what is God asking of us? What part do we play in this? That is the simple question that we are attempting to answer through four months of sermons. What is the mission of the Church? We looked in our last sermon at Matthew’s account of the Great Commission, where Jesus tells us that our mission is to make disciples. We are looking today at a second Great Commission text. These commissions are the last commands Jesus gives to his Church prior to his ascension. As the first verse of our text makes clear, the book of Acts is a second volume written by Luke to a man named Theophilus. So the author of Acts is the same one who authored the Gospel according to Luke. The primary word in our text that describes the mission of the Church is the word “witness.” **“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”** (v. 8). This task that Jesus gives to us is beyond our ability, and requires nothing less than the power of the Holy Spirit. I note two important truths about our mission of Spirit-filled witness.

I. The Location of our Witness

Jesus locates our witness in ever-widening areas beginning with Jerusalem, then Judea, Samaria and ultimately to all the earth. It has been pointed out by many that the rest of the book of Acts follows this pattern. The first few chapters describe the progress of the gospel in Jerusalem, followed by its expansion into Judea and Samaria after a persecution broke out in Jerusalem (8:1). Then chapter nine records the conversion of Saul, with much of the rest of the book a record of the spread of the gospel through this great missionary of

the church. It has also been pointed out that these groups are cultural as well as geographical. Those in Jerusalem are the people closest to you, and with whom you share a similar culture. Those in Judea are those with whom you share a similar culture, but who live at a distance. Samaritans are those who live not far away, but who have a different culture. The rest, to the end of the earth, are those with a different culture and who live at a geographical distance.

Jesus spoke these words as something of a correction to the disciples. They asked him, **“Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”** (v. 6). They had too small a view of what Jesus was all about. Their view was that his endgame was to restore Israel to its glory days, as in the era of kings David and Solomon. I understand that. They were an oppressed people, powerless in the face of their powerful Roman overlords. They had read all the Old Testament prophecies concerning the restoration of Israel in the latter days. We know from the New Testament that all these Old Testament promises are meant to be understood as applying to the Church. That is, God is creating a new Israel, to consist of people from every tribe and nation. So it’s not time to shrink back into a restored Israel, but to go forth into a grander version of Israel than any of them had ever imagined.

These disciples were fighting a battle that is familiar to us all. It can be described by two metaphors: a castle and an outpost. As I have said on many occasions, Jesus’ command viewed the church as an outpost of the coming kingdom. The kingdom of God is expanding into formerly hostile territory, into regions under the control of Satan and his lies and destruction. The church is to be a small sample of heaven and the kingdom of God. For the disciples to witness to Jesus’ grace and reign within the evil kingdom would feel like weakness. They preferred another image, that of the castle. I have in mind one of those impressive medieval structures, complete with a moat, a drawbridge, and high, thick walls. The disciples wanted Jesus to bring about just such a fortress in a restored Israel. They wanted a place of refuge, safety and comfort. But the Bible offers a better alternative. It says, “Let God be your fortress as he lead you out into places of risk and danger.”

One of the themes that runs throughout the book of Acts is the work of the Spirit to lead the disciples to places they don’t want to go. They kept wanting to retreat into their castle, and the Spirit kept sending them out. After this command from Jesus to go to the end of the earth, they all stay in Jerusalem. That changes in chapter 8, but not because they all of a sudden got convicted that they need to be more faithful to Jesus’ command. It happened because a persecution broke out after the stoning of Stephen and forced the disciples to flee for their lives. And when it was time for the gospel to cross the barrier into Gentiles, Peter at first refused to be a party to that. And how did Paul bring the gospel to Rome? He did so as a prisoner of Rome.

It has always been this way. Consider the case of St. Patrick of Ireland. He was the person God used to bring the gospel to that land in the fifth century. Ireland at this time was probably the place of greatest spiritual darkness in all of Europe. The people there worshiped spirits and practiced human sacrifice. About a century after Patrick went there to evangelize, it had been transformed to an island of saints and scholars. What many don't realize about Patrick is that he wasn't Irish. He was part of the Romanized British element of England, born of Christian parents in what we now call the Lake District of England. Like so many significant Christian missionaries through the ages, he did not set out to become a missionary to Ireland. As a young man, he was captured by Irish raiders who would come over from time to time and steal and take slaves. Patrick became a shepherd and spent six years in Ireland working for his master. In his desperate situation, he said that he learned to pray for the first time. God delivered him from his misery, and he was eventually able to escape and return home to Britain, hoping never to see Ireland again. But one night he had a dream in which an Irish man handed him some letters. In his dream he began to read the letters, one of which began like this: "The voice of the Irish—we beg you to come and walk with us once more." He eventually understood that voice to be God's voice calling him to be a missionary to Ireland. He went and established monasteries, from which monks went out and evangelized Ireland. They would later go back to Britain and Europe as Ireland became a missions-sending nation.

There is an important application of this. The Holy Spirit leads us to the places where we are to have a witness, even though at times he leads us through some suffering. I think this is a word we need to hear in this COVID era, during which there are so many difficulties and challenges. But God's Spirit still leads and empowers us, and there are opportunities presented by COVID for witness. For example, we would not otherwise have an outdoor worship service at our park across the street. Maybe there are relationships that have formed in your life as a direct result of this pandemic. Whatever your situation, this promise from Jesus of the Spirit's power to make us witnesses encourages us to see our circumstances as opportunities for such witness.

II. The Content of our Witness

Jesus told the disciples that the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives would lead to their role as witnesses to him. It was a different role than what they had in mind. It is clear that they were expecting Spirit-given power to be warriors who would restore Israel as a powerful and self-governing nation. They were right to assume that kingdoms are expanded by power, but wrong in their concept of the nature of this power. I like what John Stott says about the spread of Christ's kingdom. "It is spread by witnesses, not by soldiers, through a gospel of peace, not a declaration of war, and by the work of the Spirit, not by force of arms, political intrigue or revolutionary violence."

A witness is someone who testifies to something outside of himself that he has experienced. Jesus makes it clear that their witness is to be focused on him, for he tells them, **“You will be my witnesses.”** This has both a narrow and a broad meaning. The narrow meaning is that the eleven are to testify to the resurrection of Jesus. They were eyewitnesses to the astounding fact and impossible reality that a man who had truly died was now standing before them, very much alive. No one survives death; but this man had done so because he is more than man. He is the God-man who has come to restore the paradise of God’s home with man. And to do so he had to die to provide forgiveness and be raised again to lead his people into his new life. So part of their jobs as disciples was simply to testify that the one who had died was now alive.

There is also a broad meaning to this statement about being Jesus’ witnesses, one that applies to us all. Though we haven’t seen the resurrected Jesus as the eleven had, we have experienced the power of the resurrected Jesus. We have experienced sins forgiven, hearts changed to want to obey God, humility through seeing our sins, and we have been given a heart to love God and his people. We too can speak of our experience of new life through Jesus.

What exactly does it look like for us to be Jesus’ witnesses? The book of Acts shows us what it looks like by its record of the way these early disciples fulfilled Jesus’ command to be his witnesses. This is stated in the very first verse, where Luke writes that in his Gospel, he **“dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach.”** The clear implication is that his current book will describe what Jesus continued to do and to teach through his people. Luke summarizes the ministry of Jesus as doing and teaching, as deed ministry and word ministry. He showed people the love of God through his deeds, and he told people of the love of God through his teaching and preaching.

There are multiple examples in Acts of being Jesus’ witnesses through a blend of word and deed ministry. I find one of the clearest to be the account in chapter six of the appointing of the first deacons in the church. The chapter starts with the report of a problem. Some of the widows in the church complained that they weren’t being treated fairly in the daily distribution of food. This was an alleged failure in the deed ministry of the church. Widows in the church who had no one else to care for them were provided for by the church. The apostles recognized that this was an important ministry, but they also recognized that for them to have taken up the administration of this important ministry would have resulted in the decline of the ministry of the word. They said, **“It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables”** (6:2). So they appointed what is generally considered to be the first deacons in the church to take care of the widows, thus freeing up the disciples to continue the important ministry of the word. But note that they were unwilling to give up either deed ministry or word ministry. They didn’t

say, “Well, the ministry of the word is the only mission we must do, so the widows will just have to find a way to solve this themselves.” Nor did they say, “Our widows can’t eat and drink the words we speak, so we must lighten our preaching load in order to take care of them.” They were unwilling to give up either word ministry or deed ministry because Jesus’ ministry was marked by both, and they understood Jesus to be continuing his ministry through their witness. The text of Acts 6 makes it clear that this commitment to both word and deed ministry is a good thing. At the end of this story we read, **“And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith”** (6:7).

There is a real danger in the church today of “mission creep.” It’s the danger of continuing to add things to what the church does to the point that we lose the central thing we are to do. The word “missional” is often used today, but it has come to mean something a little different from what the Bible teaches. It has come to mean doing anything good for society. So a church is considered missional if it does such things as encouraging recycling as a way to be environmentally responsible, promoting literacy efforts in the community or opening a food bank. Of course, those are all good things to do, and Christians ought to be involved in such efforts. It is even appropriate at times for churches to help organize such efforts. But these things must never be allowed to take the church away from its central calling of being a witness to the life-giving work of Jesus. Deed ministry is part of this, but there is a need to clarify its place in the church. We are going to be looking at that in a later sermon in this series. But what is crystal clear in the book of Acts, and throughout all the Bible for that matter, is that deed ministry must never be allowed to displace the centrality of the word.

CONCLUSION:

At the end of our passage in Acts 1, we are told that the disciples stood gazing into the sky after Jesus had ascended. Two angels, with the appearance of men, stood by them and said, **“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven”** (v. 11). It’s a mild rebuke. They are looking back, and the angels are encouraging them to look forward, all the way to Jesus’ return. We are to do the same, not resting on things from the past, but moving forward in confidence that Jesus will use us for his good purposes. Is there a next step God would have you take as you move forward toward faithfulness to the mission he has given to the church? Perhaps it’s asking God to help you see the opportunities the Holy Spirit has given you right where you are. Or maybe there’s someone you need to speak to about trusting in Jesus. The power of the Spirit is promised to you to be a witness. Be encouraged and move forward.