

### ***The Power of Your Story***

My phone notification chimes. It doesn't matter what time of day. Early in the morning. Middle of the day. Late at night. There's at least a 50% chance it's my nephew Mike. These days, Mike is more like a brother than a nephew. He was raised for much of his childhood by my parents, and we've grown pretty close.

We chat about all sorts of things— NASCAR, politics, life, and, faith. Another interest we both share is music. When the pandemic started, like many other millennials, he got into vinyl. Let's just say I'm of an age where vinyl comes naturally.

He'd pick my brain and share his discoveries. I remember one day he sends me a message with a picture of this album, and he was gushing like a schoolgirl about her first crush. It's Tears for Fears *Songs from the Big Chair*. He writes, "Man this is awesome. Have you heard this album?" I'm like it was only the soundtrack to my Sophomore year in high school.

He also makes recommendations to me. He kept raving to me about how great Radiohead was. I'd heard a little bit, and wasn't too impressed. I didn't like the singer's whiney voice, but Mike kept going on about them. He listed all the things he enjoyed about them. So, I thought, "Maybe, I haven't given them a fair chance." So I asked him if you could recommend only one Radiohead album which one would it be?" He says, "*OK Computer*." So, I decided to give it a try.

I do the same thing with him. I'll send him a link to a YouTube video, and say check out this band. I'll tell him what I love about their music.

We're doing something every one of us does. We're sharing our personal testimony. We share the story of the things we love. We declare the praises of what we like about it. We urge others to give it a try. It might be music. It might be a favorite restaurant, the unputdownable page turner you just read, the latest binge that kept you up half the night on Netflix. It might be a new detergent, a great skin moisturizer, or some new lure you assure you buddy will work better than what he's using.

What if we talked to others about Jesus the same as we talked about all this other stuff? What if we shared cool things we discovered in the Bible like Mike and I share music, like you and your friends share recipes or the funniest memes you find online? Jesus is awesome. Here's why I love Jesus. This is what Jesus has done for me.

In our "Rooted series, we've been talking about what it really means to follow Jesus, and one of the things Jesus tells us is that if we love him, if we have faith in him and follow him, that if we are rooted in him, we will share him with others. In Matthew 10:32 he says, "*Whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven.*" In Acts 1 He calls his disciples to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

One of the most natural and effective ways to share Jesus with others is simply by sharing your story of Jesus. This morning I want spend a few moments talking about the power of personal testimony. Using your own story of faith can be one of the easiest, and also one of the most effective ways of sharing your faith.

#### **I. Biblical Command**

The apostle Peter was writing to a group of Christians who were struggling with how to be an influence for Christ in a world that was so often hostile to them. Here is what Peter told them:

### I Peter 3:13-16

*(2 Slides) 13 Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? 14 But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats[b]; do not be frightened." [c] 15 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. (Advance Slide) But do this with gentleness and respect, 16 keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. (NIV)*

#### A. It Begins with Your Example

This passage is talking about sharing your personal story– the reason for the hope you have. The witness that Peter is talking about here isn't forceful. It isn't confrontational. It begins with simply setting a good example, living a Christian lifestyle. It starts with being "eager to do good." People will never listen to what we have to say, if we don't first live it out. Then, when the time is right, we provide a verbal witness.

#### B. It's Personal

This verbal witness is very personal. It is the "hope that you have." It doesn't require special theological training. You don't have to be a walking Bible encyclopedia. Neither does it require you to memorize some sort of canned presentation. You are not preaching at them. You are not judging them. You're simply sharing your own personal experience with Jesus, and you do this with gentleness and respect.

#### C. It's Individual

Notice that this command is also individual, "your hearts," "everyone who asks you." "the hope that you have," "your good behavior." This is something all of us are called to do. This isn't just for preachers, or elders, those who have been Christians for ten years, or only those who have the gift of evangelism.

#### D. It's Relational

The verbal witness is also relational. Peter's point assumes that the person you're sharing with is responding to what they see in your life. That means they have to be close enough to notice a difference. They also know you well enough to not only wonder about this difference, but they ask about it as well. This is why you're sharing the reason for your hope. Since you are sharing your own story, it allows you to identify with the person you're talking to. You can be like Paul and become all things to all people. It also lets the person you're sharing with see you as a "real" person. They get to see authentic Christianity up close.

## II. Biblical Examples

This isn't just something Scripture teaches us to do. We find personal testimony being used as an effective tool many times in the Bible.

### A. Shepherds

The shepherds used the power of personal testimony after they went to the manger and saw the baby Jesus.

*So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. -Luke 2:16-19 (NIV)*

### **B. The Woman at the Well**

The Samaritan woman at the well used the power of personal testimony when she went into town after meeting with Jesus. She had zero training. All she had was more baggage than a 747 and one life-changing conversation with Jesus. She simply told the other people in town about that conversation, and that was enough to motivate many of them to check out Jesus for themselves. John 4:39 says, *"Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I ever did.'"*

### **C. The Man Born Blind**

In John 9, Jesus heals a man that was born blind. There was just one catch. Jesus healed him on the Sabbath, and he did it in such a way that it violated one of the many petty rules the Pharisees had invented about proper Sabbath keeping. Soon the formerly blind man found himself in the midst of a controversy. When he was hauled before the religious leaders, he didn't have all the theological answers, he merely had his personal testimony of what Jesus did for him. In verse 25 the formerly blind man says, *"Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"* It's a simple, but a very effective testimony.

### **D. The Apostle Paul**

Two times in the book of Acts the Apostle Paul shares his own testimony. He shares it with a crowd of Jews in Jerusalem in Acts 22. He also shares it again in chapter 26 before King Agrippa. Paul's testimony was a key tool in his evangelistic strategy.

Consider the following quote from John Caldwell's book, "Top Priority:"

*One of the fears that holds us back from the practice of evangelism is that we don't know enough and that we will not have the needed answers. Yet the most basic method of evangelism is one in which you are already the best expert in the world- that of sharing your personal testimony...for a testimony is simply YOUR STORY of how you came to Christ and of what He has done in your life.*

*Not only does every Christian have a testimony but a testimony is tremendously effective. For one thing, people can't disagree with you, for it is YOUR story... When you share your testimony, while they may not believe it, or may not believe it is relevant to them, they cannot dispute it. It is YOUR story. A testimony is also effective in that you can subtly say things that might otherwise be offensive. For instance, you can be critical of your own former false beliefs systems or sinful lifestyle practices which may be currently true of the person to whom you are witnessing. However, because your criticism is directed to yourself rather than*

*to them they are free to make the application without becoming defensive.*

Every single one of us should be able to share our testimony. We should be able to recount our spiritual journey. It will be easier and more effective if you prepare a basic testimony in advance. It is a good idea to write it down. It helps you understand your own faith and know what you may say to others. Although testimonies vary greatly in their content, they all have the same basic three point outline: what life was like before you came to Christ, how you came to Christ, and how Christ has changed your life.

### **III. How to Put Together Your Story**

Let me give you some general guidelines for preparing your own testimony. These are not hard and fast rules, but helpful ideas to keep your testimony on track and effective.

#### **A. Before I received Jesus (20%):**

We begin with the before picture. This is what our life was like before we had a relationship with Jesus. Notice that I said before we had a relationship with Jesus. Not before we went to church, or before we were religious. There are many people in America who are religious and who go to church, who don't really have a relationship with Jesus. What we are trying to share though is a true relationship with Jesus.

As you describe the before picture you can describe the things that defined your life. Talk about the issues and priorities that dominated your life. Explain how these things were letting you down. They need to know the source of your spiritual hunger and thirst that led you to Jesus.

Some of you, like me, have grown up in the faith. You can't remember a time you didn't believe, so your "Before" picture will look different. That's okay. If you're like me, you probably have a pretty good idea of what you would be like without Jesus, because you know what you're like when you start drifting away from him. You still deal with sin and temptation. You know what you're like when you begin to let some of these things take root, instead of being rooted in Him. So, instead of talking about your life "Before" Jesus, you can talk about how you are when you are not rooted in him.

The before picture only needs to be about 20% of your testimony. Sometimes Christians stumble at this point thinking that the worse their past sounds, the better their testimony. "Well after I became addicted to drugs and alcohol, I murdered three people, and while serving time in prison..."

When I was in college, there was a Christian comedian named Mike Warnke. I will say this about Mike— he was hilarious. He sold millions of books and albums. He packed auditoriums all based on his testimony. He claimed to have been a former Satanic high priest. He really glamorized the before picture part of his testimony to make it seem as bad as can be. And Christians just lapped it all up.

Eventually, a Christian magazine exposed Warnke as a fraud. He never was a Satanic high priest. He made the whole thing up. The worst part is that his record and publishing companies knew his story wasn't true, but they covered it up, all because of the money he was raking in.

Avoid talking about your sinful past with such vivid detail that it sounds like you're glorifying it. We're not bragging about what bad sinners we used to be. Depending on who you are talking to, you might have to go into some uncomfortable details, but that's not the goal. Be open. Be honest, and be vulnerable even, but

don't sound like you're reliving the good old days.

**B. How I received Jesus (30%):**

The second part of your testimony is the how part. How you became a Christian. How did you first hear the gospel? What were your initial reactions? What things did you struggle with, and finally, what persuaded you? Most importantly though, share specifically what you did to become a Christian. By doing this, you are subtly point them to what they can do, without being in your face about it. All in all, this should be about 30% of your testimony.

It might be something like this:

*After I realized that my life was heading in the wrong direction, I began talking to a friend who was a Christian. He seemed to have a grip on things that I didn't have. I began attending a Bible study with him and his wife. It was the first time I really ever read the Bible seriously. I became convinced that Jesus really was who he claimed to be. I prayed with my friend about it, and finally I decided to let Jesus change the direction of my life. I had my friends and some of my family over and I announced my decision to them. The next Sunday at church I made my decision official in a very special observance where we symbolically reenacted what Jesus did for me.*

Now notice what I did here. I explained it in terms that any non-churched person could understand. Avoid using religious clichés and Christian lingo which Christians might understand, but may confuse the non-Christian. Here's how I could have said the same thing, but in religious terminology.

*My life was empty and I realized that I was falling short of God's glory. A Christian friend began to evangelize me with the gospel. We went to Bible study where we exegeted God's word and the Holy Spirit began to convict me. I came to have faith that Jesus was the Messiah. I decided to repent of my sins and confess Christ and my Lord and Savior. Sunday at church I went forward at the altar call and I was baptized.*

Now imagine your non-christian friend's response after hearing this. "Huh! What was that?" There will plenty of time later as they come to faith to explain what certain words mean. Right now just plain every day terms are needed. Leave the Christianese at church.

Also keep it personal. This is not a sermon or theology lesson. This is not the place for lengthy explanations of baptism, or an extensive Bible study. A couple of highly meaningful verses can be helpful, but a hitting them over the head with the Bible may only push them away. They opportunity to teach will come later. Our purpose now is just to tell your story of how you became a Christian.

**C. How Jesus changed my Life (50%):**

The last part of your personal testimony is the after part of the picture. How Jesus changed your life. What difference did becoming a Christian make? How did God answer prayer in your life? How did he strengthen you for life's challenges? How are you different from before? What's changed in your attitudes, your lifestyle, your priorities, your emotions?

Don't just use vague generalizations here. "God really blessed my life. I am much more fulfilled now."

Give specific examples. Something like this:

*Before I was a Christian, money and possessions had such a grip on me. I was obsessed with getting more. It controlled me and it drove a wedge between me and my family. Now that I have a relationship with Jesus I have been freed from that obsession. I have learned to be more content with what I have, and I actually enjoy what I have much more, since I'm not consumed by what I don't yet have. I am able to spend more time with my family. My marriage is healthier, and my kids love having their dad back.*

As you are sharing the after part of the picture, don't fall into the trap to make the Christian life seem better than it is. We are not perfect. We still have problems. What we do have is a new way of dealing with them. Let them see a real faith that makes a real difference in real life. Your story is still being written.

Your testimony isn't a canned presentation that is shared identically each time you tell it. The Apostle Paul shared his testimony or parts of it two different times over the span of five chapters. Each time he shared it, it was different. No he didn't lie or bend the truth. He simply shared the parts that most fit the audience he was talking to.

Emphasize the aspects of your story that most relate to the person you are talking to. It's okay to leave irrelevant parts out. What you are trying to do is connect your story to the person you are talking to. Don't get sidetracked on tangents or irrelevant details.

I knew a couple that would love to tell stories about things they did, but they always interrupted each other with irrelevant details. "No honey it was green, not blue. Sweetie, it was 1966, not 1967." And so the story would go on forever, with all these pointless facts that made no difference to the story. Sometimes, they would even forget why they started telling the story in the first place. It doesn't matter the exact year something happened, or the precise location something took place. This is not A&E's Biography of your life. It is your spiritual journey.

Now many of you are thinking, "but my testimony is really boring. There's nothing deviant about my past life. I never did drugs. I never slept around. I grew up in the church. I became a Christian at an early age. What good is my testimony, because I don't really have a "before picture."

Don't fret, even your boring testimonies can play an important role, even if you were born into a Christian home, and grew up in the church, and always believed in Jesus. Your story is still powerful even if you were never a wild child. We're not turning your story into a blockbuster movie. You aren't writing a bestselling memoir. You are simply telling someone else about Jesus.

There are people out there who can relate to you more than anyone else. There is someone in your life who struggles with the same things you did. They have the same fears, the same hopes, the same broken dreams. Your story can speak to them better than a hundred sermons from me. They need to hear your story.