

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
Dr. Jay Howell
February 2, 2020

“Apologies: Waiting for the Words”
1 Peter 3:15; Matthew 10:16-23

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If this is how Jesus talks about evangelism, who can blame us for shirking away from it? And yet there remain the words from 1 Peter 3: "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you."

So, what are we supposed to do? There is this call on our lives to always be ready to give an account for our faith, and right alongside is this promise from the Lord himself that it will not be pleasant. What are we to make of that?

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But I raise that example because I believe in Jesus’ words, “Be shrewd as serpents and guileless as doves,” he’s saying the world will often be hostile to you and the message you carry. So, keep your heads up and your eyes open. Not in a way that turns us into schemers, but nor in a way that blindly hurls ourselves into danger.

Now, the setting in which the disciples were sent out and setting into which my friend Hannah felt called are different than the ones we typically face, so we have to be careful when we speak of evangelism here. If one stands on a street corner here shouting about Jesus, sure people might look at you funny, but let’s not confuse that with the threats to life and livelihood that saints past and present have endured.

Nevertheless, I believe the same principles apply. “Be shrewd as serpents and guileless as doves.” As you go out proclaiming the gospel, keep your heads up and your eyes open.

But still we wish we had some kind of road map. So if you were ever looking for a simple, straightforward way to communicate the gospel, to account for faith, there is a tried and true method out there that has been irrefutably effective.

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But here’s a caveat. There is no campus minister today who would walk up to a college student cold, and ask, “Would you like to go through God’s Four Spiritual Laws with me?” Why? Because they’d hit a brick wall. Because there’s no context, no trust built. Because Christ said be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Proclaim the gospel, but don’t be a dummy about it.

Still, even with something outlined and planned out, it’s still kind of daunting, isn’t it? To give an account for your faith, to share the gospel. Whether we go home to our families, out to our friends, into our workplaces, we can still feel woefully unprepared.

But we never know how sometimes even our own inadequacies could be exactly what needs to be shared. In that same conversation with Kent Koebke, and I asked him if I could share

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

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The name of this new series we are starting today is “Apologies: Accounting for Faith in a Skeptical World,” and if you saw it ahead of time, it might’ve made you do a double take, maybe even recoiled a little bit. Apologies? Are we supposed to apologize for our faith?

It’s an understandable question. The reason we’re calling the series “Apologies” is from an old usage of the word.

In 1 Peter 3:15, which we read a moment ago, Peter writes, “But in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” That word in there, “defense,” as in “make your defense” in Greek is in fact *apologia*, the same word we get “apology” from. Long ago, “making an apology” didn’t mean saying you’re sorry. It meant to “to give an account” or “to give a defense.” There were church figures known as “apologists,” those who have been uniquely prepared to give an account for faith when facing a challenge to it (logically, philosophically, scientifically, ethically, historically, practically, you name it). You may not recognize the more ancient names of Origen or Irenaeus, but you may recognize names like G. K. Chesterton or C. S. Lewis, all Christian apologists, people who gave an account for faith, to give an apology, in the face of public skepticism, or even hostility.

And at first we might like to think, well, good for them. They have that gift; but that’s not really my scene. I wouldn’t have the first clue.

And yet Peter writes, “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.” Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Did y’all know there was a bad word in church? Well, I guess there are probably any number of bad words in church, but I’m going say one of them from the pulpit. I just know it’s a bad word because we don’t like saying it in church. Here we go. “Evangelism.” I know. Wash my mouth out with soap.

Now I’m joking, but only kinda, because while I know there are some of you who not just do evangelism but that are very gifted at it. In a lot of church settings, evangelism, and by that I mean sharing the gospel in act *and* in word, is something that we often feel unequipped or uncomfortable with.

On that note, on that discomfort, over the past couple of months, three of our members independently of each other approached me about participating in a Pastors’ Breakfast later this month, in preparation for a city-wide Celebration led by Will Graham, grandson of Billy Graham, the famous evangelist, set to take place in May.

I love these sorts of efforts, getting pastors together, getting churches together, and I’m glad to be going in a couple of weeks. The purpose is, in part, to try to renew the evangelistic spirit

within the church. Apparently, we are not the only ones who feel unequipped or uncomfortable with it.

And who's to blame us? Just listen to how Jesus talks about it. In Matthew 10, just a few verses before the passage we read a moment ago, Jesus sends out his disciples, charging them to proclaim the good news, and while they did so, to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. And I'd bet they were all on board at that point.

And then Jesus says, you can't take any provisions with you, no extra clothes, no money, nothing. You will have to depend upon the generosity of strangers, and sometimes people aren't going to welcome you at all. At this point, I'd wonder if they were thinking, alright, not quite sure about this anymore.

And then Jesus drops the bomb, starting in v. 16. "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me," and then just a few verses later it gets worse, "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

Honestly, I wish I could've seen how their faces changed as Jesus goes from "Go and proclaim the good news," to "See, I send you out like sheep amongst the wolves!"

If this is how Jesus talks about evangelism, who can blame us for shirking away from it? And yet there remain the words from 1 Peter 3: "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you."

So, what are we supposed to do? There is this call on our lives to always be ready to give an account for our faith, and right alongside is this promise from the Lord himself that it will not be pleasant. What are we to make of that?

Jesus does give a few instructions prior to this passage: proclaim the good news, cure the sick, raise the dead, cast out demons. Not exactly easy, that work. Then a few more regarding travel arrangements: no bag, no extra clothing, no money. None of that is really making this more appealing, is it?

But then how about Jesus' instructions: "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves"? Given how things with a serpent worked out for Adam and Eve, why would Jesus tell us to be like this?

I like how one translator rendered that phrase, "Be shrewd as serpents and guileless as doves," because I think both of those word choices, "shrewd" and "guileless," capture a bit more than "wise" and "innocent," a bit closer to how the words are used in Greek. For example, if someone is considered "shrewd," could be a positive thing. Means they think practically, strategically. But taken too far, being "shrewd" can become manipulative or scheming. Similarly, if someone is "guileless," could be a positive thing. Means they're earnest, honest, what you see is what you get. But taken too far, being "guileless" can become gullible or naïve.

I'm reminded of a friend and former colleague in ministry. I'll refer to her as Hannah, not her real name, and I'm going to speak vaguely about her because she was at one point called to a ministry of evangelism in the border regions of China and North Korea. These are, as some of you know, two countries who are less than receptive to open evangelism, and missionaries have been deported or worse because of something online, like a sermon text, that identified them as an evangelist.

So when my friend Hannah had to complete a visa application, next to the line “Reason for Stay in China,” do you think she wrote, “To Save Souls for Jesus”? That was her reason. Could’ve just been honest. But then, she never would’ve been accepted into the country. So she wrote instead, “English teacher,” which was also true. Her visa was granted.

Even once she was there, she had to be very careful in speaking openly about Jesus with someone. Now, on one hand, one might think, don’t be ashamed. Proclaim it loudly, and let the chips fall where they may. But then her ministry there would no doubt be cut very short, perhaps endangering herself directly. So, she would wait. She would wait for trust to build, for relationships with others to form, and then for just the right opening to share the good news. And sometimes that would take a long time.

But I raise that example because I believe in Jesus’ words, “Be shrewd as serpents and guileless as doves,” he’s saying the world will often be hostile to you and the message you carry. So, keep your heads up and your eyes open. Not in a way that turns us into schemers, but nor in a way that blindly hurls ourselves into danger.

Now, the setting in which the disciples were sent out and setting into which my friend Hannah felt called are different than the ones we typically face, so we have to be careful when we speak of evangelism here. If one stands on a street corner here shouting about Jesus, sure people might look at you funny, but let’s not confuse that with the threats to life and livelihood that saints past and present have endured.

Nevertheless, I believe the same principles apply. “Be shrewd as serpents and guileless as doves.” As you go out proclaiming the gospel, keep your heads up and your eyes open.

But still we wish we had some kind of road map. So if you were ever looking for a simple, straightforward way to communicate the gospel, to account for faith, there is a tried and true method out there that has been irrefutably effective.

One of our deacons Kent Koebke dropped off a small Gideon’s New Testament. In the back, there’s a page or two including a short guide to sharing your faith and inviting another to believe it. I’ve come across it before in Campus Crusade, the campus ministry I was involved with in college. It’s sometimes called the Four Spiritual Laws, and it’s been in use for decades in guiding people to faith.

And they go like this: 1) God loves you. [Good place to start.] 2) We are sinful and in need of redemption. [There’s something broken between us and God.] 3) In Jesus Christ, God meets our sin with forgiveness and life. 4) If we believe, we will know this salvation and peace.

So if you have ever thought, I have no idea how to even share or give an account for faith, using that very simple and straightforward method isn’t the worst place to start. Now there are plenty who do not care for this approach, and there are valid reasons for it, but it’s tried and true, and it has been effective for years.

But here’s a caveat. There is no campus minister today who would walk up to a college student cold, and ask, “Would you like to go through God’s Four Spiritual Laws with me?” Why? Because they’d hit a brick wall. Because there’s no context, no trust built. Because Christ said be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Proclaim the gospel, but don’t be a dummy about it.

Still, even with something outlined and planned out, it’s still kind of daunting, isn’t it? To give an account for your faith, to share the gospel. Whether we go home to our families, out to our friends, into our workplaces, we can still feel woefully unprepared.

But we never know how sometimes even our own inadequacies could be exactly what needs to be shared. In that same conversation with Kent Koebke, and I asked him if I could share

this, he shared an example of just how this accounting, this evangelism, this apology just might work.

He was stationed in Australia years ago and was in school with some officers from the Australian military. One of those officers, after learning Kent was a Christian, asked him why he had this faith. Kent coughed up the ball. I'm teasing, but by his telling, he flubbed it. He didn't know what to say and stumbled over his words. And that has remained with Kent to this day.

But then that same officer sadly was diagnosed with cancer and unfortunately died two years later. After his death he received a letter from the officer's widow, who told him that the man had died in the Lord.

Kent was of course happy to hear that news but also kind of surprised, because Kent had no reason to believe that anything he said to the man made any impact. But we can never tell what seeds our words will plant, no matter how fumbling or incoherent we might think them to be.

Instead, though sharing and accounting for faith may be intimidating, though it seems like we'll just stumble over ourselves doing it, be comforted of what else Christ shares, right in the middle of everything he's shared about the hardships that await them. In v. 19: "Do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of the Father speaking through you."

For you it might not look the same as the person next to you, because your words are different, and even more than that, the people you'll share with are different. It could be as straightforward as following those four simple steps. Or it could start with just a kind word to someone who's hurting, waiting for another window to share a word of grace. It could be at a huge city-wide celebration in a few months. Or it could be the cautious but persistent display of love to someone unreceptive.

For us, the call remains the same, to always be ready give an account for the hope we have within us, but be assured that no matter what form that account may take, it is not we who speak, but the Spirit through us, so let us do so wisely, innocently, boldly, gently.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**