

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Practical Christian Witness: Witnessing by our Relationships

If you looked in a dictionary for the meaning of witnessing it would be to furnish evidence or to testify to one's religious beliefs. Before Jesus left this world He told His disciples, "you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8, New King James Version). Jesus expected His disciples to tell the whole world about Him. He also expected that they would do this by what they said and by how they lived. Their faith in Him and His power in them would be demonstrated in every aspect of their lives. A tall order!

We should not compartmentalise our faith in Christ. We should not keep it safe and bring it out on a Sunday or for special occasions. Nor should there be parts of our lives over which the Lordship of Christ is not expressed. We should witness to Christ in every possible way, including our relationships. This morning I want to look at some of these relationships and explore how God wants us to witness through them.

There is one relationship which defines all others – my relationship with God! If I am a Christian, I have a relationship with God as my Father; I have a relationship with Jesus as my Saviour and Lord; and I have a relationship with the Holy Spirit who indwells my heart, makes my body His temple and empowers my life.

In Genesis 1:26 God said, "Let Us make man in Our image." So we see relationships existed before man did. And, in the Godhead, we see the eternal perfect relationship between the Father, Son and Spirit.

When God created man, He also established a sequence of relationships. Adam's first relationship was with God. He was then given responsibility for Eden and a relationship with the natural world. After this, we see Adam's relationship with Eve his wife. This is a beautiful figure of the relationship between Christ and His church (compare Genesis 3:21-24 with Ephesians 5:31-32). All of these relationships were perfect and mutually beneficial.

However, when Satan enters the scene and, as a consequence, sin enters the world, these relationships are damaged. First Adam's relationship with God. Then the LORD God called to Adam and said to him, "Where are you?" Adam is lost. Then, Adam's relationship with Eve, Then the man said, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate." Adam blames his lost condition first on Eve, then by implication on God Himself. Finally, Adam's relationship with the natural world is damaged: "Cursed is the ground for your sake."

Christ's salvation is about bringing us into a new relationship with God, with one another and ultimately in regard to creation, "For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Romans 8:19-21).

The simplicity of the story of Eden establishes the profoundness of spiritual and natural relationships. It teaches us, on the one hand, about the power and beauty of relationships introduced and blessed by God and, on the other hand, the dire consequences of forming relationships outside of God's will. The vital lesson is that if our relationship with God is right then all other relationships will be blessed. So it is essential that our relationship with our Father, our Saviour and the indwelling Spirit be maintained.

Let's look at some verses in Ephesians 5 and 6 to see how Paul shows us how to witness to our relationship with God and the other relationships he highlights. "Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma. But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them" (Ephesians 5:1-11).

Paul first emphasises our relationship with God as dear children, our relationship to Christ as the objects of His love and our relationship to the Spirit as the One who empowers us to walk as children of light. Our relationship as the children of God is demonstrated by “walking in love” (verse 2), not walking in darkness (verses 3-7), “walking as children of light” (verse 8) and by a life that manifests Christ through the fruit of the Spirit - all goodness, righteousness, and truth. This fruitfulness of the Christian life also bears witness to my relationship with God the Father and the Lord Jesus. “By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.” God is glorified and Christ is followed (John 15:8).

Paul moves on to the relationship of husband and wife and addresses the wife first. “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Saviour of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything” (Ephesians 5:22-24).

A wife is central to the success and stability of the Christian home and to witnessing in the neighbourhood. She has a vast network of the daily contacts in the community which are vital to effective witnessing. Paul’s teaching about the role of women has often been criticised. However, an intelligent reader of his writings would soon discover the tremendous affection and admiration he had for the many women he knew and with whom he had worked. Paul explains in his writings the importance of Christian and family life. The relationship of a wife to her husband is characterised by submission. This statement taken in isolation would seem unfair. But it has to be understood within the context of Christian marriage in which Paul commands the husbands to “love your wives, just as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for her” (Ephesians 5:25). He teaches that the relationship between husband and wife is an expression of Christ’s love for the Church. The way we behave in our marriage relationship is a direct witness to the world of the effectiveness of Christ’s love in our lives.

At the heart of this is the concept of submission. This is often misinterpreted as weakness and as only applying to women. But when we look more carefully at the Bible teaching about submission we find this is not true. In 1 Peter 5:5 we read, “Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility.” All Christians are to be marked by a willingness to honour one another and always to act with humility. Peter uses the expression “be clothed with humility”. This could be a reference to his experience of the humility of the Lord Jesus in John 13. In that chapter the Lord Jesus washes the disciples’ feet. This was the act of a common household servant, probably a slave. It says in verse 4 that Jesus “laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself”. The greatest exponent of submission and humility was the Lord Jesus. These are the characteristics of the Great Servant. If we want to be effective in our witness we have to learn submission to God’s word and humility in our relationships.

It is remarkable that, in the Bible, wives are only once asked to love their husbands. This occurs in Titus 2:4 and refers to young wives. On the other hand, husbands are reminded to love their wives on several occasions. It seems women have a greater ability to demonstrate love whereas men are apt to fail in showing affection. Paul commands husbands to show love to their wives. The background to this teaching is important. Paul lived at a time when women, like slaves, were treated as the property of their husbands. He does not exhort men to demonstrate authority but love. It was common, as today, for men to be angry and even violent towards their wives and not to be held accountable for cruel actions. Paul insists that this is not the behaviour of a Christian who is always to act in love and gentleness towards his wife.

In Galatians 5:13 Paul writes, “through love serve one another.” This service of love is seen in a most beautiful way within a Christian marriage. We live in an age where women are still abused within and outside of marriage - an age in which men’s actions are too often characterised by violence. The happiness of a true Christian marriage serves to witness to the world the power of God’s love in the reality of day to day living.

In Ephesians 6 Paul turns to the child and parent relationship and interestingly puts the child first, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honour your father and mother,’ which is the first commandment with promise: ‘that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.’” (verses 1-3).

We hear a lot today about civil disobedience and the increasing resentment towards authority. More than ever, the disruptiveness of children and the problems of discipline at home and in school are in the news. These are not new problems. Paul was obviously aware of the difficulty of disobedient children in his own day. And he speaks directly to children. As with adults, the example he always presents is the Lord Jesus. Jewish children had been brought up with an understanding of the Law. In it they were commanded to, “Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you” (Exodus 20:12). It is striking that Luke reminds us of the childhood of the Lord Jesus. When He was twelve years old we read that, “He went down with them (that is His parents) and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them” (Luke 2:51).

Most children get to a stage where they think they know more than their parents. When Jesus was a child He did know more than His parents. But He still obeyed them. It is amazing to think that the very Person who sustains the whole of creation entered not only into that creation but also into the very relationships we know as parents and children. The Lord Jesus always valued human relationships and the responsibilities they brought. At the beginning of His life, He demonstrated obedience towards His parents. At the end of His life, as He died on the cross, He ensured that His mother would be properly cared for by asking John to look after her. The Lord Jesus' service included obedience to His earthly parents and responsibility for them. There is little wonder that He is pleased when Christian children follow His example.

But there is another side to this story. If children are to be obedient, fathers are not to discourage them. It is once again interesting that Paul did not see mothers as a discouragement to children. In fact, in 2 Timothy 1:5, he remembers the great encouragement Timothy's mother and grandmother were to his young friend and how he had been taught the Scriptures from childhood.

Paul did find it necessary to warn fathers not to discourage their children. The problem highlighted by Paul was the tendency always to find fault with children or perhaps just some of them. The result, and it can cause lifelong damage, is that the child feels it can do no right and becomes despondent. There is today the added danger that parents can become so ambitious for their children, even to the extent of trying to fulfil their own ambitions through their children. When children do not meet their parents' expectations, they are criticised and sometimes persecuted for their failures. We have to recognise that our children are individuals. It is for Christian parents to provide the protection, authority and discipline that they need. We are encouraged to "to bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). The word for "training" applies to teaching by example and action. This is complemented by admonition which emphasises training by what we say. A Christian parent has to be consistent in word and action and this is the service which fathers, in particular, are encouraged to undertake. An effective father is neither a bully nor a weak man who gives way to the will of his children. A father is a man who serves the Lord by gently leading and keeping his children in the right direction in life. I remember that DL Moody, the remarkable American evangelist, made it a rule to apologise to his children when he got it wrong. Openness and honesty with our children will always enhance their respect for adults. Stubbornness and unfairness will always diminish that respect. By following the advice of the apostle, our family life witnesses to the world a pattern of life which honours God, is mutually beneficial to young and old alike and contributes to the well-being of the wider community.

From 6:5 Paul takes up the relationship between employees and employers. Of course, in his day, many employees were slaves. In his letter to his friend Philemon, Paul deals with the matter of a runaway slave called Onesimus. It was very important to the Christian testimony that Christian masters and Christian servants lived out their faith in Christ. One of the great dangers was that Christian masters might continue to treat their servants unjustly and with little respect. The other danger was that Christian servants, who now knew liberty in Christ, might show disrespect towards their masters and bring the Gospel into disrepute. Paul's teaching about these relationships demonstrated how true Christians could be a real witness in the way they fulfilled their responsibilities at work. As most of us spend a good deal of time working for a living, this passage has a lot to say to us today.

The Christian should regard everyday work as a service to Christ. Work has always had the same problems. Some people do as little work as possible because they are lazy or do not think they are paid enough. Some work hard only when they are being watched and try to curry favour with their bosses. Some complain endlessly about the conditions of work or are very unhappy about their bosses. Often there are genuine reasons for complaints and such things need to be addressed. But Paul is encouraging Christians to do everything in the light of serving a greater Master - the Lord. We have a Lord in heaven to whom we shall one day give an account of our service. He will not want to hear excuses like "I didn't have a good boss," or "My work wasn't very interesting." He will ask how we served Him in the circumstances in which He placed us.

I know of a family where the son never did any housework. This used to really annoy his sister. The son started university and after his first year came back home. As soon as the family finished their meal, he began clearing the dishes and then started the washing up. His sister could not believe the change she was seeing. When she asked him about his new behaviour, he told her how he had been taken along to the Christian Union at university and had been become a Christian. It was not long before the sister took the same step of faith and now the whole family are believers. Why? Because a new Christian had the right attitude to work. Nothing is too menial to be a witness to the Saviour. Paul encourages the Colossian servants to undertake their service as something which is done for Christ and in a Christlike spirit. If all Christians worked like this, what a difference our testimony would make!

Today work can exert tremendous pressure and stress upon the individual and the family. It is very important that work does not undermine relationships and family life. This can happen because the demands of work are too great to bear. It can also happen because we become so absorbed in our work that we no longer have time for the vital relationships in our lives. We have to ask ourselves the reasons why these things happen. Have we become covetous? Are we striving too competitively in our work? Are we serving ourselves rather than the Lord and those we

love? It is important to sit down especially with our spouses to evaluate the direction our work is taking us. We need to prioritise things in our lives so that the work we do to live does not become life itself. Many solid marriages have failed because ambition and the pressure of work have become too great. It is equally important that, in serving the Lord, we do not overlook the service He has given us in regard to our families. Albert Einstein was wise when he wrote that we should, "Try not to become a man of success but rather try to become a man of value".

To help us to do this it is sometimes a good thing to sit down and list all the commitments we have. Then look at each one and ask ourselves the question, "Is this something the Lord wants me to do?"

A few years ago at a young couples' weekend my wife and I organised, a couple were complaining about all the work they had to do. It was obvious everything had become too much for them. We asked them why they did certain things and it became clear they had gradually taken on so much work that they could not carry on. We suggested they looked at all these responsibilities carefully and asked themselves which ones the Lord really expected them to do and which ones were over-commitments. The next year they came to the weekend and told us that they had reviewed their commitments and reduced them. As a consequence, they were a much happier family.

Employers should not be threatening (verse 9). Paul reminds them that they also have a Master who is in heaven. They were responsible to treat their employees with justice and fairness. This applies to Christian employers. The world has always suffered from injustice. The greatest example of this was when the Lord Jesus was judged and crucified. Justice and righteousness are attributes of God Himself and, as His people, we are expected to demonstrate these same features. Paul emphasises the special responsibility which Christian employers have in regard to these qualities. The history of industrial relations in this country is one which is born out of the conflicts between employees and employers. A lot of this history involves the exploitation of workers who for many centuries suffered long hours, very arduous work, and lived in extreme poverty. Throughout the world today, there is still much evidence of the same injustices. Christian employers should never be associated with such practices. The standard Paul sets before Christians, with such responsibilities, is that they are to be just and fair. And this was to be done in a spirit of goodwill. It is possible coldly to administer justice, rather like judges with no particular empathy with the person receiving the justice.

The complexity of Christian relationships should never be underestimated. We live in a world which constantly challenges our faith. It is a world in which Jesus says we are to be His witnesses. We show Christ to the world as the children of God, as disciples of Jesus Christ and as temples of the Holy Spirit. We will never witness to the world by adopting its practices but by witnessing to it. CH Spurgeon once said, "The sermons most needed today are sermons in shoes". We might add, "in the shoes of wives, husbands, children, parents, workers and bosses"!

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