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## *Can I Get a Witness (Again)?*

John 20: 19-23

Let's begin this way. Bring to your mind the face of a missionary. What face came to mind? Maybe Rob and Jennifer Taylor, the Koppes in Swaziland, or the Eubanks in Burma... or maybe even Mother Theresa. Very appropriate. Now, what face do you suppose comes to God's mind when he thinks of a missionary? The unsettling news, of course, is that *your* face comes to God's mind. If you are a follower of Jesus, you are a missionary; *you* are the missionary Jesus has sent to that place and those people: to your family, your school, your workplace, your neighborhood to bring the good news of Jesus. You aren't the only missionary God has sent to witness for Jesus there, but you are one of them.

We may be tempted to think that Jesus has this goofed up. If he had any sense, we think to ourselves, he'd send someone vastly more well-qualified: Pastor Mark or Jeremy, Shari Monson—she's a seminary graduate, or even Professor John—our beloved Dr. Dr. Dr. Lennox (he has three PhDs, you know). *They* could do a great job, we think: answer every question no matter how tough, they wouldn't have to frantically search their minds for a Bible passage they heard somewhere but can't dredge up when the pressure's on; they know how to listen and how to ask questions and how to get to the question behind the question like Michael Ramsden told us to do. Yeah, that's it, Lord: send Michael! Geez, Lord, haven't you ever heard of spiritual gifts inventories—didn't you pay attention to mine? I have the gift of helps, not evangelism—so I'm exempt from this witness stuff; Pastor Jim has it all wrong. I'm a detail kind of guy, I love it when a column of numbers add up, but I don't love it when people share painful things and cry—tears make me want to run away, not be a witness!

But, there it is in scripture. Last week the risen Jesus told his followers, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." And he meant us . . . *you*. This week the risen Jesus tells us, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven, and if you don't forgive them, they aren't." And we think, surely Jesus doesn't mean that ordinary Christians can do forgive sins. Surely that's a pastor's job, it's Mark's job . . . come to think of it, it's *Jesus'* job, isn't it?! But, Jesus means you as well as me. Mission is for *amateurs*—it's an amateur activity, not a professional one. Like being a cook—there are great professional chefs, but cooking is mostly an amateur activity. The same is true for parenting, being a friend, earning a living, managing money, being married, and raising children. We know that. It's also true for praying—prayer is an amateur activity, not

one meant for professionals. So is being a missionary and forgiving the sins of others.

Here's why you are the one who forgives sins, you are the missionary. None of the likely people like Mark, Jeremy, Shari, Ellis or Rachel work in your workplace, they don't go to your school, don't tuck your children into bed at night, don't go to your family birthday parties, don't live in your neighborhood, don't hang out with your friends. *You* do. You are the missionary, the witness, Jesus has sent to those places, those people. Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians—who were a *very* unlikely bunch of witnesses and missionaries, by the way—"In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, and he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us."

As crazy as it seems, that's God's plan—*you* are a key part of how God plans to reach your family, friends, co-workers, neighbors with the good news about Jesus. What was God thinking?! Well, it turns out that God is a lot smarter than we sometimes think.

Here's a crash course in missional theology. It boils down to three simple questions and answers that help us get everything about mission right.

First: **Whose mission is it?** Answer: **God's**. It's not our mission, we don't make it up, and we don't get a vote in what it is or ought to be. God is not asking us to "find our mission." It's God's mission, and the only question for us is whether accept his mission or make one up that we like better. God's mission is to reconcile the world to himself in Christ Jesus, to unite everything under Christ's Lordship (Ephesians 1: 10; Philippians 2:2:11). Whose mission is it? God's.

Second: **Who accomplishes God's mission?** Answer: **God does**. We don't get God's mission done, God does. The success of God's mission does not depend on us and what we do, it depends on God and what God has already done in space and time—especially in Jesus the Only Son—and what God does right now with others. It's God's mission and God is going to accomplish it.

Third: **What's our part**, then? Answer: **Participate**. Our part is to take part in what God is doing to accomplish his mission.

It's God's mission, God accomplishes it, and we participate in it.

That's why amateurs can be missionaries: it doesn't all depend on you. It doesn't even mostly depend on you. You aren't the star of the team. Know who is? Not me or Pastors Mark or Jeremy, and not even Professor Lennox. The stars are the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The rest of us, including you, are just part of the team . . . IF we'll play our part, that is! You know, though, the truth is that lots of us aren't participating at all in what God is doing—we aren't aren't in the game, and some of us aren't even on the bench on the sidelines, because we've given our lives to some other mission we think is more important to us. The games we care about are the games we make up, the games WE are playing instead. And what's

worse is that the way some of us live and talk and just “are” most of the time is helping the other team, the bad guys . . . or to be unpleasantly biblical about it, the things we say and do, the way we act at school, work, neighborhood and family are helping Satan and all the evil people and powers of this world and the spiritual world get what they want instead of what God wants—sometimes the way we talk and live we are helping Satan separate people from God in Christ instead of reconciling them to Jesus. Honestly, beloved: your behavior at school, at work, at home, in your neighborhood, in the world shows which side you are helping to win—God’s or someone else’s. There is a battle going on for the lives, the souls, of people; the soul of this nation, of your school, of your neighborhood, your work-team, your family. Your children. What team are you on?

When I was a young pastor, I heard my boss the senior pastor say something I’ve never forgotten, and that’s sometimes come back to haunt me. He said, “You can curse with the guys if you want to. But if you do, you will never lead them.” It took me some time to learn that lesson. When I was doing my doctor of ministry degree, I realized that I was cursing with one of my best friends—a friend who went all the way back to high school football with me, who remembered me before I was a pastor. I was a pretty good witness for Jesus at school and with my friends, but I also desperately wanted to fit in and what came out of my mouth was sometimes more like the boys’ locker room than like Jesus. And one day after I’d been in ministry for 15 years, I realized that I sometimes still talked the same way with this one friend—a friend I truly loved and valued, a friend I helped through his divorce, a friend I’d helped ask Jesus for forgiveness, a friend who admired my Christian values (even though my mouth didn’t match those values all the time) . . . and a friend I had never actually prayed would know Christ more deeply. It was an awful realization. I told the Lord I was sorry. I told my buddy I was sorry. And I started being a more credible witness.

You know, beloved, Professor John said that one of the ways we all do apologetics is by the content of our character. Our character comes down to two things: what we say and what we do. We are either defending the faith by what we say and do or we are trashing it. We are giving Jesus a reputation—the only question is whether it’s a good rep or a bad one. *That* is the main reason we watch our language; that is why we need to be good. Being good is good and it’s best to live Jesus’ way. But the point is not really that if we’re good boys and girls Jesus will love us and take us to heaven when we die; **desperately at stake is whether other people will go to heaven when they die.** We need to be good—to watch what we say and do, to watch what we do with the students we date and are friends with—so that *others* will believe in Jesus, fall in love with him, trust him to forgive their sins and help them live his way in his world. We need to be good, for Jesus’ sake, we need to be good; for our friend’s and children’s sake; for the sake of a lost world.

Here’s the summary of what I’ve tried to say so far: God is a missionary God and we are a missionary people. How can you tell God is a missionary God? Who did

God send? Yes, Jesus. And we are a missionary people if we belong to God. Jesus said, "As the Father sent me, I am sending you." Listen, beloved, God the Father, Son and Spirit are deadly serious about this. Jesus said that if we don't participate in his mission, the Father will chop us off from Jesus. That's John 15: 1-2—read it at home this week and tremble. It's deadly serious because people need the Lord. They need to live his way instead of any old way. They need to be forgiven, they need to know who loves them and is with them, they need to belong to his people, they need to be part of something bigger than they are, and they need an eternal destiny.

All of that is prologue to what comes next. The question is: what can amateur missionaries actually *do* to be witnesses for Jesus besides having a Christly character? We're going to get very practical for a bit.

As the ushers handed you a bulletin this morning, they also handed you this 3X5 card. Would you find your copy of it please? If you didn't get one, please raise your hand and an usher will bring one to you.

On the side that has less writing on it are the sentence completions we worked on together last Sunday.

### **My Personal Experience of Jesus**

**I love Jesus** because . . .

What I love about Jesus is . . .

Something **Jesus has forgiven me** for that I'm willing to share with you is . . .

Something **Jesus has done** for me is . . .

**An important difference Jesus has** made in my life is . . .

**Something I believe** about Jesus is . . .

Here's a reason I believe that . . .

Church **is an important part of my** life because . . .

**People I know need Jesus** because . . .

*If you weren't here, the idea was pretty simple: some of the most powerful ways you can witness for Jesus involve you sharing what your experience with Jesus has been, and sharing your own faith. Most of the time it is those things that will matter most to other people. Sometimes people need powerful apologetic reasoning, sometimes they need some deep theology, sometimes they are ready for the four spiritual laws. But *most* of the time, most people will respond to your experience of Jesus and what you really believe—what you are betting your life and your eternal destiny on. So, if you haven't already done so, take about 10 minutes to finish those 6 sentences at home today. Then keep this card in your pocket or purse or*

Bible—somewhere where you can find it when you have an opportunity to witness for Jesus.

Now, on the other side of the card, the side with bullet points and lots more words, are a series of Sentences for Ministry Situations.

### **Sentences for Ministry Situations**

- Jesus **know you and loves you.**
- Jesus **knows** what you're going through . . . **and cares**
- Jesus is **with you** no matter what, and that means **there's hope**
- Jesus **shares your suffering**—your loss, your wounds, even the cost of your sin . . .
- Jesus is **at work** in you (others, too)
- Jesus will **forgive you** (others, too)
- Jesus **brings good out of bad/evil**
- Jesus **has taken sides** against  
injustice, abuse, oppression, cruelty and sin and is at work to overcome or redeem it
- Jesus **loves people you are concerned about**
- Jesus **will have the last word**
- Jesus **wants you to love him back**
- What's best is to **live Jesus' way**: he knows what gives life and what ruins it; what heals and hurts.
- Jesus wants you to **receive what he longs to give:**  
**love, forgiveness, community,**  
**right relationships,**  
**a mission bigger than self,**  
**eternal life**

*Stop, Look and Listen. Offer a brief prayer.*

My experience is that we have lots of very ordinary opportunities to be missionaries for Jesus that slip past us because they didn't seem like evangelism opportunities to us. Most ministry opportunities come as people share their ordinary, day to day, lives with us. And most of the witnessing and ministry we do comes down to things that you are already capable of—with some help from God the Holy Spirit.

Before we walk through Sentences, though, here's a first principle of ministry: **Stop, Look and Listen.** The first rule of ministry is "Be Present." Stop what you're doing. Make time, make eye contact, and listen. Of course you're busy. Of course you don't have the time for whatever is on someone else's mind or heart. Jesus was busy in heaven, don't you think, but he stopped, left what he was doing and came to be born in Bethlehem. There is no more precious gift than our time and attention. You cannot do ministry without being present, and you can't stop, look and listen without interrupting what you were doing in order to start being a missionary.

Okay, let's walk through the card—most of it we'll do very quickly. The most basic message is this: **Jesus knows you and loves you.** The universe is vast, and there are 6 billion of us on this planet, but Jesus knows you personally and loves you. Amazing and wonderful news. If you believe that, you can tell others. If you don't, you can't be a missionary. After stopping and listening, here's a simple prayer you can share with someone when the time seems right: "Lord, thank you that you love my friend. Amen." Nearly no one every says "No" when you ask if you can pray for them. And, the prayer of a nonprofessional, unpaid Christian is very powerful.

**Jesus knows what you are going through—and he cares about you.** You are not alone. Jesus "gets it about you" even when no one else does. He gets it about your weaknesses, your joys and strengths, your stupidity and your sin. Here's a simple prayer: "Lord, I'm so sorry my friend is having a tough time. Thank you that you know all about it and that you love him. Amen"

**Jesus shares your suffering.** Listen, beloved, this is the single most important answer to people's suffering—and it is the Bible's dominant answer. I know it's not an intellectual answer. I know that what people *really* want is for God to make the suffering go away. But God does not always do that, and he only rarely does it on our time schedule. Let's be clear: the most persuasive and scholarly answer that seeks to "explain" why there is suffering *does not end* suffering—doesn't end my suffering and doesn't end the world's suffering. And we don't like that. God doesn't explain suffering—not ever. God has a way of redeeming suffering; God shares our suffering, and God brings us through suffering. No one has to tell God how painful it can be to die, or to have your friends deny you, or to suffer injustice. God has been there in Jesus. It doesn't fix things. But the key biblical promise is, "I am with you." And that includes in suffering. Prayer: "Lord, this is really tough. Thank you that you know all about how tough it is. Thank you that you share this suffering. Please help my friend. Amen."

**Jesus is at work** for our sake. To redeem. To forgive. To give courage. To comfort. Jesus is with you, Jesus loves you. Jesus is at work for your healing, redemption and for your eternal life. Prayer: "Lord, my friend needs your help. Please . . . (fill in a simple, short, request). Thank you that you are at work. Amen."

**Jesus will forgive you.** The message is not that sin is no big deal. It's that Jesus takes our sin seriously and is at work for us because he loves us.

Here's a true example from my own life. What if you and I were on the golf course, and because we are old friends, I told you that in my very first call as a pastor, I was in a high powered church and I had very high expectations of myself. And

there was absolutely no way I was going to fail—I was going to do a great job, in fact. So, in order to meet everyone's expectations, including my own, I worked 6 or 7 days a week and 5 nights a week, was gone 10 weekends that year leading retreats, and nearly tripled the size of the youth group. And in that year one of my sons was 5 years old and the other was 3, but I remember almost nothing of their lives for that whole year. I know I let them down—they should have been able to count on me as their dad, but they couldn't, and I would never, ever be able to get that lost year back.

What would you say to me? Would you give a typical American answer and try to help me stop feeling bad? "Gosh, Jim, don't beat yourself up. We all make mistakes. It's no big thing—just let go of it. Look what a great dad you are now—your kids love you!" That's very American, and it's even an effort to be "nice." It's American and it's nice, but is it what Jesus offers? Is it what I need to hear from someone who cares about me and who knows and trusts Jesus? No, what I needed was for someone to listen to me and take me seriously. I needed someone to get it that what I'd done was tragic—who gets it that some things can never be fixed or taken back, there are no "do overs" for some things. I needed someone to tell me that Jesus knew it was sad and bad, that I was forgiven. I needed someone to help me learn to work and be a dad in a new and better way. I needed a missionary who would be in ministry to me in Jesus' name. Here's the prayer: "Jesus, my friend really messed up, really hurt some people. He's sorry. I ask you to forgive him for (name it). Thank you, Lord, for forgiving him. Help him live your way. Amen."

I hope you see how this works. Let's skip to the bottom bullet. If someone wants to become a Christian, then you can help them to receive what Jesus longs to give them. People don't have to "get" each of these, but it's a reminder to you of the breadth of what Jesus offers. Forgiveness of sin is what the sinner's prayer is all about, and it's a good starting point. But please notice this: some people who aren't so worried about their sin and about going to hell are ready to begin getting to know Jesus. If they get to know him, they are likely to fall in love with him. And anyone who knows and loves Jesus will learn how costly their sin is, and will be grateful for his death on the cross to rescue them from it and to give them eternal life.

Now, here's the last point. You may not feel up to being Jesus' missionary. Would it help if you knew that when you are in missionary situations that you aren't alone—that you have help? When Jesus gave his followers his mission, he also gave them the Holy Spirit. And when you are in mission with Jesus, you have the whole Trinity with you: Father, Son and Spirit. You are accompanied. Here is a very charming video clip about a story I've been telling in sermons for 16 years. It's about offering our little gift and having what we offer turn out to be just magically beautiful.

[Video]

So, beloved, be Jesus' missionary, his witness. The maestro told the little kid, "Keep playing," and what came out was marvelous—way more than a childish offering. When you witness, you may feel like a little kid and an amateur, but that's okay; keep playing because the music that comes out will only partly depend on you. You may feel like you aren't really qualified, don't have enough training but keep playing, the outcome mostly depends on God, who's mission it is, not on how well you did. You may know for certain that if Pastor Mark or Professor John were there, it would be vastly better, but keep playing because God the Father, Son and Spirit are there.

Now to God, who by the power at work in us is able to do way more than we ask or even imagine. To God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus now and forever. The Lord is with you. Amen.

## **SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

Read John 20: 19-23

Please begin by following an abbreviated "WordLife" process: read the passage aloud, circle words and phrases that get your attention and then reflect on them (be sure to consult the notes in your Study Bible), jotting your reflections and application down. Share your reflections briefly.

Then, perhaps you'd like to engage some of the sermon content, since it was another semi-workshop style sermon. Practice sharing, listening and praying: have someone who's willing volunteer a concern, a specific instance in which they've sinned or let someone down, or something at work or school that needs to be remade so that it's more pleasing to Jesus; one other person listens, and then offers a one or two sentence witness about what Jesus offers and a one or two sentence prayer addressing the need. After that, help each other consider other short verbal witnesses and prayers.