

Follow who to be
Gal 5:13-26, Romans 2:17-29

Well brothers and sisters, last Sunday we acknowledged that we are a bit scared about going OUT, since our Lord has admitted to us in scripture that he is *“sending us out as sheep among wolves”* (Mat 10:16) so we can expect to meet people who are hostile to us and the message we share about Jesus...

And we acknowledged that most of us are frightened about actually having to speak up in public when we GO OUT and scared of having conversations with strangers.

However, I’m praying that our Lord’s promise in Mat 10:19 - that the Holy Spirit will give us the words to say when we need them – has begun to overcome those fears this past week...

So... now you are all fearless people when it comes to the prospect of going OUT and cooperating with the Holy Spirit as He tells you where to go, and who to speak to, and what to say to them.

However there is still some additional fear that we need to recognize and acknowledge this morning and that is that there are people out there who are afraid of us. Really, it’s true!

Now you might look at yourself, or you might look around and say *“come on – what is so scary and intimidating about us?? We’re just a bunch of friendly Christians!”* And I agree brothers and sisters... but the truth is that many people have a fear of Christians and of Christianity.

Lee Strobel, the author of the book *“A Case for Christ”* says that when his wife unexpectedly converted to Christianity it left him, as an atheist, considering whether or not he should divorce her because as he says:

“I had married one Leslie — the fun Leslie, the carefree Leslie, the risk-taking Leslie — and now I feared she was going to turn into some sort of sexually repressed prude who would trade our upwardly mobile lifestyle for all-night prayer vigils and volunteer work in grimy soup kitchens... I didn't want to be married to a Christian, and I thought she was going to turn into some 'Holy Roller' or something.”

So you see, Lee Strobel was afraid of who his wife would become and how that would impact how he lived his life when she became a Christian, he had all these stereo-types of what Christians were like and none of them were very positive.

And the unfortunate truth is that there are a lot of unpleasant stereo-types about Christians that are out there, maybe you've encountered some yourself.

There's the condemning and judgmental Christian... the hypocritical Christian who accuses others of wrong doing and then gets caught doing the same thing... they don't walk the talk.

There's the praise God on Sunday, but be a hard-nosed businessman on Monday Christian...

There's the selective Christian who only pays attention to the parts of the bible that backs up his particular political agenda...

There's the crazy Christian who tells everyone they get messages from God...

There's the social justice Christian who looks down at everyone because they are just not as enlightened as she is about helping the poor and disenfranchised.

And there are Christians who have been complicit in allowing injustices such as slavery and or tyrannical corrupt governments to continue, and there are the Christians who have abused, manipulated, bullied and/or just treated people very badly.

So you see brothers and sisters, as God sends us out, as we fulfill Jesus' desire in Acts 1:8 that we should be His witnesses to the ends of the earth we need to realize that we are not the first of His witnesses that people have encountered.

The church and the Christians who make up Christ's body have been around for two thousand years and that is plenty of time for people who are forgiven sinners to make plenty of mistakes that contribute to some very negative experiences for those who are not Christians and lead to these terrible stereo-types and the fears which they generate about us.

However, lest we think that the early church had a blank slate to work with I draw your attention to what the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 2:21-22 *“You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”*

All one has to do is read the Old Testament prophets to know that God’s people - as the nation of Israel - have had a long history of giving themselves a bit of a bad reputation with the surrounding nations as well.

So, the first Christians going out to be witnesses in Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth also had people who were afraid of their reputation... since at first Christians were considered to be yet another sect within Judaism, and there were just as many negative stereo-types about the Jews back then as there are about Christians now.

Now, I have to say brothers and sisters that I’m acknowledging the fear which people have of God’s people in the ancient past throughout history and up to the present day... not because somehow today we grown into more enlightened Christians who need to distance themselves from their barbaric and ignorant forbearers – though that is currently very much the fashion to do so right now...

I’m bringing it up because we need to be aware that it is something we are going to encounter, and we are going to have to be equipped to deal with it.

Friends, part of going OUT into our community is helping such people overcome their fear of us so that they trust us and they are willing to be open with us. Then we can know their spiritual thirst and wait for the Holy Spirit to provide the opportunity for us to share our story about how Jesus met that thirst in us.

In fact some of us here this morning may have had to already travel this path of overcoming our fear and learning to trust

Christians in order to be able to hear the message about Jesus and be able to put your faith and trust in Him – so you know what I’m talking about and how important it is.

And you also know, I think, that what was key for you in overcoming that fear was the ‘witness’ of those whom you knew were Christians.

You see brothers and sisters it is no accident that Jesus said in Act 1:8 “*you will be my witnesses*” when speaking about going OUT of Jerusalem into Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Jesus didn’t say we will be his teachers, or his sales people, or his apologists – but his witnesses... and what you need to know is that the Greek word for witness is “*marturia*” from which we derive our English word “*martyr*” which we define as someone who is willing to suffer for a greater cause.

So again – brothers and sisters, I want to offer you the encouragement that whatever hard times you are going

through in your life right now – it only adds authenticity and power to your witness as a Christian and the story you share about Jesus.

If you are going through hard times but people see and hear that you still have hope because you know the truth and the promise that this life is not all that there is... We can be confident that one day Jesus will return and save this world and refine it into a new heavens and a new earth where there is no more evil, sin, suffering, sickness or death – that is rock solid truth!

When people see that you are not angry and bitter – when you might have every right to be... that you are able to give when you have very little yourself... that you can forgive those who have wronged you...

That you follow and worship a Savior for reasons that are far deeper and more profound than the self-interested of consumer mindset of “*what’s in it for me? What can Jesus do for me?*”

That you may in fact be suffering because of your conviction that you must follow Jesus at all costs... Then brothers and sisters you are truly bearing witness to Jesus Christ as Lord.

Because the essence and the strength of a witness is whether or not they are willing to tell the truth and stay loyal in spite of their circumstances or if they will be unfaithful and change their story in because of them.

Now if you watch any of the legal/ court-room dramas on TV you know that a court case rests on either establishing or destroying the credibility of the witness – so you need to know that going through hard times as you go OUT and share about Jesus builds your credibility as a martyr... as a witness and it helps to build a good case for people not to be afraid of Christians.

However, the truth behind any credibility we may have as witnesses – whether we are going through hard times or not, is the fact that our credibility comes from our character being transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit.

And when it comes to the Holy Spirit transforming us, and people seeing those changes and the fruit of the Spirit being evident in our lives it requires our co-operation... obedience from us.

We have to follow the nudge of the Holy Spirit about who to be – as Paul says in Gal 5:25 *“Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”* The Spirit is changing us into effective witnesses whose lives bear fruit which helps people overcome their fear in order to hear more about Jesus.

So how do we co-operate and obey the Holy Spirit about who to be?

Well, this is a bit of a tricky question to answer – in the same way as it was last week when we looked at how we might anticipate what the Holy Spirit might have us say in any given situation – we probably really don’t know until we are in that situation, right?

With this question as well on one hand it's fairly simple – when the Holy Spirit convicts you that something in the way you exhibit your character is wrong, you need to follow that conviction and turn away from whatever it was that you were previously doing.

And yet we know how difficult doing that can be.

Paul himself says in Romans 7:18-19 *“I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.”* Who hasn't been there?!

And this struggle is further described in Gal 5:17 *“For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.”*

So brothers and sisters, I think we can see from how this struggle is described these passages that the fruit of the Spirit is not something that we produce from our own efforts.

And far too often we fall into the trap of looking for how much evidence of this fruit we can see in our life – how much love, gentleness, patience, kindness etc... do we see in ourselves, and if we come up lacking, which we invariably do – we then set upon ourselves the challenge for US to produce more of the fruit OF the Spirit.

Which won't work - because its fruit FROM the Spirit, it's not from us or our efforts.

And yet in some way we need to co-operate and be obedient to the Holy Spirit for this fruit to be displayed in our lives.

Brothers and sisters can I suggest that we've probably spent too much focusing on the fruit in this passage and not enough on Who is producing it, and in doing so we end up *“killing the goose that lays the golden egg”* so to speak.

I think the best way that we can be obedient to the Holy Spirit as He works at our sanctification, our transformation; our being set apart and made more and more like Jesus Christ... is

to learn more and more about the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

We certainly understand how it's important to learn about God Almighty and who He is and what He's done – and we look through scriptures to learn more about Him.

And we certainly know that Jesus is super-important to know about and we spend lots of time making sure we know about Jesus – and rightly so because our faith and trust is supposed to be in Him and we are sharing our stories about Him...

But we kind of relegate the Holy Spirit to being the one person of the Triune God that needs to stay mysterious and unexplainable and sort of vague... but the result is that we know very little about Him and thus we don't understand how he does work and how we can co-operate with Him and obey Him.

However, when we take the time to study what is revealed in the scripture about the person and the work of the Holy Spirit

many things become and we understand how He works so we can co-operate and obey with that...

And the result is the fruit from Galatians 5 that we get so excited about, which gives the credibility to our witness that is needed to help people overcome their fear of us.

Because as Paul says in vs. 22-23 *“Against such things - love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control - there is no law”*

You see this is important to remember friends... because sometimes people's fear about Christianity does not stem from a bad experience or a negative stereotype but from an honest apprehension of the truth.

We can counter-act the negative stereotypes and caricatures of Christianity with our “fruit of the Spirit filled witness.”

Regardless of what another person believes or holds to be true they will know if we are treating them with love and

kindness and goodness, they understand if we are peaceful and gentle, they can see if we are faithful and patient and so on... *“there is no law”* against these things and they will work to soothe the fears that people may have of us.

But, if they are afraid of a particular truth or teaching or doctrine of the Christian faith then we have to realize – as we learned last week in looking at things the Holy Spirit may lead us to speak about – then that is specifically where the Holy Spirit needs to convict them and change them.

We won't be doing them any favors by denying or downplaying or even changing that particular truth about the Christian faith – we just need to acknowledge it for what it is. For example if someone is afraid of Christians and says it's because they are so narrow minded and further conversation with that person reveals that what they really mean is they can't accept the biblical truth that Jesus says the only way to God is through him – you can't have a saving relationship with God through Buddha or Mohammed or Moses or Gandhi and so on...

Then their fear isn't really about Christians being narrow minded in the most accurate sense of that criticism, it's a fear that Christian truth will dismantle what they currently believe and have built their life around – and truly that is a frightening prospect, I'm sure we can understand that- especially if we have been through it.

So that's even more of a reason to make sure that we are witnesses who are credible, and who are full of the fruit of the Holy Spirit – and the best way to work at that is to seek out a closer relationship and deeper understanding of the Spirit.

Which is not hard to do – there are many excellent resources that you can use to help you develop that.

I have many good books in my library that can help you learn about the Holy Spirit from the scriptures – I'm happy to let you borrow one.

But even more so – I would encourage you to attend a conference put on by Dunamis Fellowship Canada – we

recently hosted one at Valleyview and people will tell you that they came away with a much better understanding of and a closer relationship with the person of the Holy Spirit and also a confidence in that relationship.

And that confidence is important brothers and sisters because otherwise the reality of what our witness is all about can make us become a bit paranoid or neurotic about how we live our day to day lives OUT in our community for fear of who is watching and what they are seeing or not seeing.

Do you know what I'm talking about?

We need to remember that Paul's description of true Judaism of under the Mosaic Covenant in Romans 2:29 rings true for Christianity as well. That a person is a Christian *"who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God."*

So we are free to follow where the Holy Spirit sends us and not worry about what other people may or may not think

about us- whether we are seen in a bar with a beer, or we are seen walking about of an R-Rated movie, or at a physic fair or in the vicinity of a pride parade... Our Lord was often among the sinners for he said it is not the healthy who need a doctor.

However let us also heed Paul's advice in Gal 5:13 *"You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh."* And then he goes on to specifically list what those acts of the flesh – or our sinful nature are.

Just a few weeks ago I was waiting for a green light in the left-hand turn lane down in the Westhills by Mcdonalds – the green arrow appeared... but the car in front of me did not move.

They had mistaken the left hand lane for the straight through the intersection lane and so they stayed put – well... if any of you have driven with me, you know I have a pet peeve about moving very quickly once you get an advance green on a left-hand turn.

So I did not do the good I should have done, but the evil I do not want to do—this I did... and I gave them a good long annoyed honk of my horn, while the light was green, and after it had turned red again to let them know how displeased I was at their bad driving!

Then suddenly I thought – uhoh... that looks like the car of a person who has just started attending our church! What if they recognize who is behind them and has been honking at them for their mistake?! That would not be a good witness for Valleyview by its minister.

Now by this time the light had turned again and they realized they had to turn regardless because they were in the left hand lane and as the car turned I was able to see it was no one I knew and no one who knew me – fortunately.

So the Holy Spirit convicted me that I have to be careful about giving a bad witness in our community when I am out – and I need to be more patient and kind and not give in to fits of road rage.

So you see how we need to have the confidence and freedom that comes from a good understanding of the work and person of the Holy Spirit and a close relationship with Him so that we are not legalistic about our witness, but nor are we careless about even little things that can have big implications.

So brothers and sisters, may you grow to know the Holy Spirit more and more – so that you will increasingly bear more and more of the Fruit of the Spirit and your witness among those who do not know Christ will overcome their fears.

Follow the nudge and obey the Holy Spirit's work in your life for who you are to be.

Amen.