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TAKING A STAND FOR CHRIST

Luke 23:50-56

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Luke Lesson 112

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The evangelist Billy Sunday used to tell of a professing Christian who got a job in a lumber camp that had the reputation of being very ungodly. A friend, hearing that the man had been hired, said to him, "If those lumberjacks ever find out you're a Christian, you're going to be in for a hard time!" The man responded, "I know, but I need the job!"

The next morning he left for camp. A year later, he came home for a visit. While in town, he met his friend who asked, "Well, how did it go? Did they give you a hard time because you're a Christian?"

"Oh no, not at all," the man replied. "They didn't give me a bit of trouble—they never even found out!" ("Our Daily Bread," 11/83.)

While we may chuckle at that story, many of us may wince. It hits too close to home! Living in a world that is hostile to Christianity, it's easy just to blend in, to laugh at the dirty jokes, never to confront the gossip, and never to speak a word that would identify yourself as a Christian. Besides, it might cost your reputation or even your job! Sometimes even among Christian friends it's hard to hold to your convictions for fear of what they will think.

That's why you should be interested in the story of Joseph of Arimathea, the man who buried Jesus. No one knows where Arimathea was located, but the designation helps distinguish him from other Josephs. He was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, the body of 70 men who governed the religious and many of the civic matters in Israel. It was the Sanhedrin that had condemned Jesus to death, although Joseph had not consented to their plan and action. But probably he had not spoken out as vigorously as he should have. John 19:38 tells us that he was a secret disciple of Jesus, for fear of the Jews. His fear had caused Joseph not to take a bold stand for Christ, even though in his heart he knew that he should have done so.

But now, after Jesus was dead, when His followers had gone into hiding, Joseph gathered up his courage (Mark 15:43), went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus so that he could give Him a proper burial. If he had not done so, Jesus' body probably would have been thrown on a garbage heap and burned, robbing us of some of the major proofs of the resurrection, as we'll see. So we can thank Joseph for honoring Jesus with a proper burial and for giving us many evidences for our faith.

Joseph seemingly had nothing to gain and everything to lose by identifying himself with Jesus at this point in time. Jesus was dead and no one was expecting His resurrection. It would have been much easier for Joseph to have thought, "Oh, well! Jesus was a good man and a prophet of God. It's too bad that these things happen. But, life must go on. I'll have more influence if I don't rock the boat and keep my seat on the Sanhedrin. I'd better not do anything to upset anyone and jeopardize my position of influence." But in spite of the risks, Joseph came out of hiding and took a strong stand for Jesus by providing Him a proper burial. He gives us an example of what other Scriptures teach by precept:

The Lord wants us all to take a stand
for Him in this hostile world.

Great! How do we do it? More could be said, but our text reveals at least three factors that will help:

1. To take a stand for the Lord, go often to the foot of the cross.

I can't say for certain what made Joseph come out of hiding. Perhaps it was the result of a long process. He had heard Jesus' teaching, especially that final week in the temple. He had heard reports of His miracles, especially raising Lazarus from the dead. Knowing the Scriptures, he realized that Jesus uniquely fulfilled the many messianic prophecies. He also could see the jealousy and selfishness of his fellow members of the council. Unlike the majority of them, Luke tells us that Joseph was "a good and righteous man," "who was waiting for the kingdom of God" (23:50, 51; see 2:25). As Joseph's convictions about Jesus grew, he also grew more uncomfortable with the views of his fellow members on the Sanhedrin. Finally, he could no longer keep it in.

But I think that the deciding factor that pushed Joseph over the line was standing at the cross and watching Jesus die. Luke hints at this: In 23:47, he states that when the centurion saw the events at the cross, especially Jesus' final cry, he broke forth in praise. In the next verse, he reports that when the multitudes observed what had happened, they went home beating their breasts. He also reports that Jesus' acquaintances and the women who followed Him, "were standing at a distance, seeing these things" (23:48). Immediately Luke adds, "And, behold" to grab our attention. Not only were His followers observing these things, but of all people, a member of the Council was seeing these things! Seeing the sky darken, watching Jesus on the cross, hearing His final words, hearing the centurion's praise, watching the multitude depart in mourning—all of this mounted up until Joseph said, "That's enough! I can't hide my convictions any longer. I don't care what it costs me, I'm going to Pilate so that I can give this Man the decent burial He deserves!"

The cross is the center of the Christian faith. While we cannot stand and take in the events first hand, as Joseph and the others did that day, we should come often to the foot of the cross and think about its implications. Paul summed up the core of the gospel, "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3, 4). The cross is central (see also Gal. 2:20; 6:14). If you go there often, you will not be the same. It will strengthen you to take a stand for Christ. Note these particulars about going to the cross:

A. Going to the cross will remind us that Jesus died.

That may sound obvious, but it is an important fact to establish. If Jesus did not actually die, then He did not die for our sins. If He did not die, then He was not bodily resurrected, in which case, "your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:17). Jesus didn't just "swoon" or go into a semi-comatose state, to be revived later, as some liberals have asserted.

The gospels all make it clear that Jesus died physically. The soldiers regarded Jesus as dead so that they did not break His legs to hasten death, as they did with the other two men on the cross. Rather, one of the soldiers thrust his spear into Jesus' side, so that

blood and water gushed out (John 19:31-34). If He hadn't been dead before, that would have killed Him. Also, Mark 15:44-45 reports that Pilate ascertained from the Roman centurion (who certainly knew a live prisoner from a dead one) that Jesus was dead before he released the body to Joseph. If we accept the eyewitness testimony of the gospel writers, there is no question that Jesus died physically.

These seemingly incidental facts of Jesus' death fulfilled specific Old Testament prophecies. The fact that they were fulfilled in such an obviously unintentional manner underscores God's sovereignty and the careful accuracy of biblical prophecy. For example, the fact that the soldiers broke the legs of the two men on either side of Jesus, but did not break His legs, in spite of orders to do so, fulfilled the Scripture that none of the Passover lamb's bones should be broken (Exod. 12:46; Ps. 34:20). The soldier's piercing Jesus' side was probably a whim on his part, but he fulfilled Zechariah 12:10, that Israel "will look on Me whom they have pierced."

B. Going to the cross will remind us that Jesus died for our sins.

Jesus did not just die a common death, like that of the two thieves. He offered Himself as the Lamb of God, the substitutionary sacrifice for our sins. The darkness at noon pictured the judgment that God poured out on Jesus. His cry, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" reveals His agony as He was made sin on our behalf. The torn veil in the temple shows that through His death, Jesus opened the way into the holy of holies. The cross satisfied God's holy wrath against our sin, so that He is free to be both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26). As we think often of what Christ did for us there, it will strengthen us to take a bold stand for Him who endured all of that out of love for us.

C. Going to the cross will remind us that Jesus was buried.

Why does Paul mention Jesus' burial in his summary of the gospel? Jesus' burial is further evidence of His death. If there had been a glimmer of life left in Him, surely Joseph and those who helped him take down the body and prepare it for the tomb would

have noticed. As mentioned, the fact of His burial in the tomb, as opposed to being tossed on the dump in the valley of Gehenna, provides us with several proofs of His resurrection. We have the empty tomb. The disciples saw the grave clothes lying in the tomb. The heavy stone rolled against the entrance, sealed with the Roman seal and guarded by the Roman guard, give us evidence that the tomb was secure from grave robbers.

Also, Jesus' burial is further proof of His real humanity. In the early days of the church, a heresy called "Docetism" (from the Greek verb, "to seem") arose that denied that Jesus was a real man. Rather, He only *seemed* to be so. At the root of this heresy was the view that matter is essentially evil, whereas spirit is good. This in turn led to all sorts of wrong ideas and behavior. It undermined the incarnation, the atonement, and the resurrection. If Jesus was not a real man who died for our sins and was bodily raised, then we have no salvation. Thus it is important to affirm Jesus' burial.

While Docetism may no longer be a problem, there are false teachers in every age that come along speaking of Jesus Christ. But the key question always must be, "Which Christ?" Are they talking about the Christ of the Bible or one of their own making? As James Stalker puts it, "only the Christ of the Scriptures could have brought us the salvation of the Scriptures" (*The Trial and Death of Jesus Christ* [Zondervan], p. 165).

Also, the fact that Joseph buried Jesus in his own tomb, where no one had ever lain, is significant. Matthew 27:57 tells us that Joseph was a rich man. Isaiah 53:9 predicted that Messiah's "grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His death." Joseph's burial specifically fulfilled this prophecy. The fact that it was a new tomb gives further evidence that Jesus' body could not have been mixed up with another body from that tomb. His was the only body there and it was gone!

All of these facts about Jesus' death and burial should strengthen our resolve to take a bold stand for Him because they give us solid evidence that He is who He claimed to be.

- D. Going to the cross will remind us that Jesus was raised from the dead on the third day.

Paul states, "Christ died for our sins..., that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3, 4). We will examine the resurrection in our studies of Luke 24, and so I only mention it here in passing. As you know, the resurrection is the foundation of the entire Christian faith. It is God's proof to all men that He will someday judge the world in righteousness through Jesus (Acts 17:31). If you struggle with taking a bold stand for Christ, go often to the foot of the cross and remember that Christ not only died for your sins, but also that He was raised from the dead and that He is coming again soon to judge the living and the dead.

But, still it's not easy to take a definite stand for Christ. It is costly, and we can only do it if we prepare ourselves for the cost:

2. To take a stand for the Lord, be prepared to pay the price.

We are not told what happened to Joseph of Arimathea after the day that he buried Jesus, but it is not being speculative to say that he paid a heavy price. We may face the same costs.

A. We may have to sacrifice our reputation for Christ.

When the Sanhedrin heard that one of their own had buried this despised Galilean, they would have been shocked. The religious leaders had thrown out of the synagogue the man born blind, whom Jesus healed (John 9:22, 34). It is not hard to imagine that they voted Joseph out of the Council, excluded him from any position of religious or social influence, and did everything they could to ruin his reputation in Jerusalem. His wife and children may have been ostracized. His stand for Christ cut him off from all of his former associates.

Often it is not only your reputation in the world, but also your reputation in the *religious world* that takes a beating when you take a bold stand for Christ. The evangelical church in America has grown tolerant of just about anyone except the man who stands for biblical truth on unpopular issues. I've had people in Christian ministry call me a legalist because I preach that we must obey God and I preach against sin. I've been called divisive because I won't join in the unity movement with denominations that deny the gospel. I've been called unloving because I changed my formerly tolerant view of psychology and began saying that it is soft on sin.

But the crucial matter is not what people think or say about you. The crucial matter is what does God think? If you live to please Him, then you can let Him take care of your reputation.

B. We may have to sacrifice our religion for Christ.

In order to bury Jesus, Joseph had to defile himself ceremonially by touching a dead body, right on the eve of the Jewish Passover (Num. 9:6; 19:11-22). But both Joseph and Nicodemus (another member of the Council who joined him, John 19:39) both felt that it was more important to give Jesus a proper burial than it was to remain ceremonially pure for Passover. Christ now was their true Passover lamb who had been slain. They let go of their rituals and laid hold of Jesus Christ.

To be a committed follower of Jesus, you have to let go of your religion, even if it goes under the label of "Christian." By religion, I mean any attempt to be righteous before God or others by keeping certain rules or by outward behavior. Religious people take pride in what they do or don't do, but they don't judge sins of the heart. They put on a good front at church, but at home they are angry and difficult to live with.

But genuine Christianity is a matter of the heart. True Christians have been to the cross, where they not only trust in Christ as their righteousness; they are crucified with Him. They daily put to death the deeds of the flesh. They judge sins of thought, as well as word and deed. They live in daily repentance, humbling themselves before God and others, so that the life of Christ may shine through them.

C. We may have to sacrifice our riches for Christ.

Joseph gave up his personal tomb, an expensive thing to do. Remember, he was not expecting it to be vacated in three days! He could have bought a cheaper tomb for Jesus, out in the countryside somewhere, but he gave Jesus the best. He also bought linen wrappings and spices. He may have had to pay Pilate for the body. But he was willing to give generously because he believed in Jesus as his Lord and Messiah.

Jesus said, "No one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions" (14:33). You say, "He doesn't mean that *literally*, does He?" No, He didn't mean it any more liter-

ally than when He said that we must hate our families in order to follow Him (14:26). But before you say, “Whew!” and go on living just as you were, you need to do some hard thinking about His words.

You can’t buy off God by giving Him a tenth of your income. In fact, for most of you, if you do not give more than a tenth, you’re robbing God. Most of us could easily give far more than a tenth to the Lord’s work if we really believed the Great Commission and if we were more careful stewards. We could live much more simply and give far more generously if, like Joseph, we were really “waiting for the kingdom of God.” If you give your money to God’s kingdom, your heart will follow (Matt. 6:21). You’ll find yourself being much more committed to Christ if you give radically. If you give what is safe and convenient, you’ll be safe and convenient when it comes to taking a bold stand for Christ.

To take a bold stand for Christ, go often to the cross; be prepared to pay the price. Finally,

3. To take a stand for Christ, “show up” and do what you can do.

Here I’m focusing also on the women who followed Jesus out of Galilee and now follow to see where and how His body was laid. They went back to prepare more spices and perfumes, intending to return after the Sabbath and further anoint His body. Matthew Henry points out that their actions sprang more from love than from faith, since they didn’t yet understand or believe that He would be raised from the dead. But at least they showed up. Why weren’t the eleven there with them, helping with the burial? They had gone into hiding out of fear of the Jews (John 20:19). But because the women were there and because they went back on that resurrection morning, they had the privilege of being the first witnesses of the risen Savior.

Norval Geldenhuys observes, “In the hours of crisis, it is often the Peters who have sworn loyalty to Jesus with big gestures and fullness of self-confidence, that disappoint, and it is the secret and quiet followers of the Master (like Joseph, Nicodemus and the women) that do not hesitate to serve Him in love—at whatever cost (*Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* [Eerdmans], pp. 619-620).

Maybe you can't be an articulate verbal witness for Christ in front of a group. But you can still take a stand by your behavior, your attitude, and your quiet resolve not to compromise. Just "show up" in the sense of siding with Jesus, even if you aren't clear about how to defend the faith. Show your commitment and love for the Savior, and He will use you as He used Joseph and these faithful women.

Conclusion

Martin Luther, who certainly modeled taking a stand for Christ, wrote, "If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the word of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that point attacking, I am not confessing Christ however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is tested and to be steady in all the battlefields besides is mere flight and disgrace if the soldier flinches at that one point" (source unknown).

If there is a point where you know you are compromising your stand for Christ, where you are blending in with the world but you know that you need to take a stand, learn from Joseph. Go to the foot of the cross and think about the Savior's death on your behalf. Be prepared to count the cost. And, the next opportunity you get, show up and do whatever you can to let others know that you are on Jesus' side. Even if you formerly were a secret disciple, God will use you as He used Joseph of Arimathea, to be a bold witness and to render valuable service for the Savior.

Discussion Questions

1. How do we know when to take a bold stand and when to be more diplomatic and polite? Is there ever a legitimate place for compromise?
2. How can a people-pleaser learn to become a God-pleaser?
3. How do we know when we've given enough to the Lord's work?
4. What is the difference between being bold for Christ and being abrasive? Was Jesus always "nice" to unbelievers?

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