

Since the start of January, we’ve been in a series of messages rooted in Scripture but outlined by part of a book by John Mark Comer. The book and the sermon series are titled, “Practicing the Way.” So, we’ve been looking at the practices, or habits, or disciplines, of Jesus and what it would look like for us to put them into practice as well.

One of the basic premises of this is that we all need a “rule of life.” **A Rule of Life is “a set of practices, relationships, and commitments that is inspired by the Spirit for the sake of our wholeness in Christ” (Rich Villodas, *The Deeply Formed Life*). In other words, it’s a plan of how to be with Jesus and live more like Jesus.**

A “Rule of life” doesn’t sound very inviting, but you’ve actually already got one. The question is: is your rule of live giving you the right kind of life? As a saying goes in the business world, “Your system is perfectly designed to give you the results you are getting.” Your rule of life – the practices and habits that shape who you are – they are giving you the results they’re designed to give. As John Mark Comer puts it, **“If your emotional life is off kilter, if you feel far from God, stressed, anxious, and chronically mad, and you’re not becoming more of a person of love, then the odds are that something about the system of your life is poorly designed” (Comer, *Practicing The Way*, p. 163).** Your rule of life is working perfectly well; the problem is that it’s not a very good rule of life. It’s not leading you to flourish as an image-bearer of the God who created you.

So, thus far in this series we have looked at 8 practices of Jesus that if we were to put them into regular practice in *our* lives, would lead us to live in a more positive, flourishing way, the way God designed us and Jesus modeled for us:

1. **Sabbath**
2. **Prayer**
3. **Fasting**
4. **Solitude**

5. **Generosity**
6. **Scripture**
7. **Community**
8. **Service**
9. And the last one... **Witness**

Now, if you missed any of the messages in this series, I highly encourage you to watch them or read them at our website, or even pick up a hard copy out in the lobby. Even better, because I'm not in this to receive credit for your spiritual growth: read the book by John Mark Comer – all the copies we got 10 weeks ago (70!) are now gone except one. It's in the lobby, so one of you can pick it up later. But it is easy to order online on your own, as well.

As I said, our last one today is “Witness.” **A witness is simply a person who testifies, or who tells the truth, about something that they saw, or heard, or experienced.** We're all familiar with the idea of a witness in a court of law, or at the scene of a car crash, or a dispute on the playground of a school, or more positively: witnesses of a marriage – every marriage license is signed by a couple of witnesses that the ceremony took place, the people getting married are who they say they are, and so forth.

So, what does this mean for those of us who are apprentices, or disciples, of Jesus? Today's reading from Acts helps us answer this question, or at least opens the door to answering it. This passage is a post-resurrection encounter between Jesus and his disciples. Luke is the author, and he has already stated that Jesus gave many convincing proofs he was alive, and did so over the course of 40 days. Then we read this (**Acts 1:6-8**)...

So, to start with, let's just acknowledge that the disciples, who are the “they” who gathered around Jesus...they seem to believe, even after Jesus' death and resurrection...they seem to believe that Jesus' kingdom is going to be an earthly one. **“Are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6).** The grammar of the Greek, when it says “they asked him,” is more like “they were asking him” or “kept asking him.” It's got this sense of an ongoing asking.

We saw this even last week with James and John and the request for them to sit Jesus' right and left hand in his kingdom. And now here, post-resurrection, the disciples still didn't totally get the nature of Jesus' kingdom. This should give us some comfort that even if we don't understand everything right, Jesus can still work in and through us. And, in fact, today understanding the nature of Jesus' kingdom is still a challenge. Yes, we pray thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven...but it's not just about the kingdom being restored to Israel or about their ruling over the world or anything like that. It's a Kingdom that is centered on the throne of God in heaven, and to the degree it exists here on earth it's *global*. **It's a Kingdom that welcomes in anyone who will acknowledge Jesus as King, and truly live with him as Lord of their lives.**

And so for those of us who are believers, our lives are oriented around Jesus and his grace, truth, love, and mercy ruling in our lives. This is why we put into practice the habits and ways of Jesus – so we'd be oriented around him. And then as we live out our lives, we bear witness to his lordship, to his grace, to his truth, to his mercy, to his love and point people to him.

When we do that, we are witnesses to the transformative power of Jesus Christ to lead us out of the darkness and into the light...to lead us away from sin and into holy living...so that we might say "I once was blind but now I see; "I once was lost but now I've been found." Your life and my life points to this new seeing, this new sense of being found.

Jesus makes it clear here. He tells them that they are to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. It's like concentric circles, moving out, so that the good news of Jesus spreads around the entire globe. Which, essentially, it has done in the last 2,000 years.

Now, when he said this to them, the first two regions make sense: **Jerusalem is their city and their people and Judea is their part of the nation of Israel.** Whether each disciple actually lived in or near Jerusalem or not, it was the epicenter of the Jewish faith that gives birth to Christianity, and Jerusalem is in Judea, which is in the southern kingdom of Israel. So that resonates; they get that. But Samaria...that's a little questionable to them.

Samaria had at one time been the capital of the northern kingdom of the nation of Israel. And over time there developed some animosity between the two sides, even though they were at one time all part of one nation and had a shared faith background. But at the time of Jesus' day, Samaria was more of a "region" than a city (like when you're travelling and you say you're from Seattle even if you live in a suburb), and it wasn't the capital any longer. And people from Judea, in the southern kingdom, would avoid the region of Samaria in their travels. Judeans and Samaritans just didn't really care for each other.¹

But Jesus challenges that cultural assumption. For instance, at one point in the Gospel of John, Jesus walks through Samaria (Jesus even says that he must do this), and John notes for us that this was unusual – normally people went around Samaria. Then Jesus talks with a Samaritan woman – another challenge to their culture. Jesus also tells a parable where a Samaritan is the hero – over and above Jewish religious leaders who could have been the hero in the story. Another time it's a Samaritan who is the only one out of 10 people Jesus heals, who comes back to thank Jesus for the healing. So, **Jesus demonstrated this idea of bearing witness beyond the places of our comfort zones and with people who like us.** We don't just bear witness to our friends and family and people we like. We do it with people we might even have deep-seated uncertainty about, even hatred. Jesus teaches in the sermon on the mount not to hate our enemies, but to love them. Elsewhere he teaches to love our neighbor as ourselves, where neighbor is defined essentially as anyone who walks the face of the earth who you might come in contact with. With social media and the internet today, the potential is there for your "neighbor" as Jesus defines it, to literally be just about anyone.

So: Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria...And then he closes this by saying his disciples are to be his witnesses "to the ends of the earth." We have the opportunity to do that more than at any other time in the history of the world from the phones in our pockets and purses to short-term mission trips to supporting missionaries all around the globe or even going on the missions field ourselves for a long-term commitment to being Jesus' witness in another part of the globe.

But: This witnessing to the transformational, resurrection power of Jesus is the culmination of apprenticeship to Jesus. All the other spiritual practices Jesus employed – starting with Sabbath and ending with service – are for the purpose of sharing his life with others. And it’s the same for us. They are shaping us to be more Christ-like all the way to being his witness; to testifying to the saving grace of Jesus by how we live and what we say.

So, I don’t know who God has put in your life to testify about Jesus, or where he’s leading you to do that. It might be someone in your home your place of work or at school or the coffee shop you frequent or the book club you’re part of or the soccer team you play on...or it might be the neighbor you’re having a property line dispute with, or your ex-boyfriend or girlfriend or the person who beat you out for the promotion at work, it might be a Husky or a Cougar...It doesn’t matter. **Jesus calls us to bear witness to his love and grace to any and all because that’s exactly what he did.** Everything he did was for the purpose of bearing witness to who he is. He served people, he blessed them, he was hospitable, he prayed for people...And it was all done with a heart of care and compassion and generosity, testifying to who he is.

Everything he did bore witness to himself, with the empty tomb being the final piece of testimony that Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords. Whether a person acknowledges Jesus as King or not doesn’t change the fact of who he is. We acknowledge his position as King, so: let’s testify to it. Let’s make that one of the practices we engage in. Let’s make sure our “Rule of Life” is in line with Jesus so our lives would bear fruit for his kingdom. Maybe right now the practices that are shaping us, aren’t lined up very well with Jesus. As I said at the start: we’ve all got a rule of life, and the fruit born in our life – whether it’s good fruit for Jesus or some other kind of fruit – that fruit is indicative of what our rule of life is. So, let’s follow Jesus and the example he sets so that our rule of life, the habits that shape us, lead us to bear witness to Him. We can do that with those who love us and to those who don’t, from across the fence to across the sea, so that the good news of Jesus the Messiah would be witnessed to far and wide and people would be drawn into Jesus’ eternal Kingdom. Let’s pray...Amen.

¹ When I preached this, I kind of mixed up “Judea” and “Judah” so that could have been a bit confusing. Judah was the entirety of the southern kingdom, while Judea was part of a region within Judah. Judea is the “province” that contained Jerusalem.