

### “Defending the Truth”

About this time last year, my son and I were walking from our parking spot in downtown Charlotte to Bank of America Stadium to watch the Panthers play the Saints. It was a beautiful day. The atmosphere was festive. And just about the time we approached the outside of the stadium with the turnstiles to the entrance in sight, we saw that guy. No, I'm not talking about the shirtless guy with the body paint. Not the guy who seemed like he started the tailgate party the night before. But the guy with the megaphone warning people to believe in Jesus or else. You've probably seen and heard these “street preacher” types. Like most of them, this guy was quoting verses like, “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe.” “Fear him who has the authority to cast you into hell.” But most of it was just off the cuff stuff threatening people that they better choose Jesus before it was too late. He went on and on and most people seemed either really uncomfortable or really annoyed.

And this got me thinking. Was this guy really defending the truth? I mean, if I wanted to know who Jesus was and what faith in him really meant, is listening to someone threaten me that I better believe in him or else helpful? I think we all know the answer... it's not!

Of course, when it comes to sharing the Word and witnessing to others about Jesus, it's easy to call out the street preacher because their methods don't seem very productive. Turning Jesus into something else people have to do to avoid divine punishment is not a message that most people want to hear. But what about you and me? When we have the opportunity to witness to others about Jesus, what do we say? Are our methods productive? Does it even matter? It absolutely does. So as we continue our sermon series looking at the early church in the book of Acts and some significant topics that are just as relevant to our present day church—right down to our congregation in the middle of zip code 27587—our topic today is standing for Christ and defending the truth.

To set the scene, I call your attention once again to our reading from Acts chapter 4. Peter and John had been arrested. Earlier that day they had healed a lame man in the name of Jesus. Not only did a lot of people witness this healing, but many more heard Peter say that it wasn't his or John's power that made him walk. It was faith in Jesus—

the author of life who was killed but who God raised from the dead— it was faith in him that gave the man perfect health. This greatly annoyed the Jewish authorities and they had them arrested. The next day they examined and questioned Peter and John. “By what power or by what name did you do this,” they ask? And at this point, Peter had a choice. He could have pulled a classic Peter move and denied that it had anything to do with Jesus. He could have said that he and John were sorry and would never do it again. But Peter didn’t deny nor apologize. He stood up for Jesus. “Filled with the Spirit,” Peter boldly proclaims “let it be known to all of you and all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” Talk about defending the truth. He might have sounded a little street *preacheresque*, but he stood up for the one who he had been with; the one who he knew more than any of the Jewish authorities that were asking the questions; the one who he had seen and heard before he was crucified and after he rose from the dead! Peter stood up before a hostile audience and defended the Christ!

And in this context, that’s exactly what needed to be done. The people were praising God for what had happened with the healing—people were coming to faith in Jesus and the high court had no choice but to let Peter and John go. But what about you and me? When we are given the opportunity to stand up for Jesus, do we simply follow Peter’s lead? Maybe break out the bullhorn? “People of Wake Forest, let it be known that by the name of Jesus, whom you sent to the cross but who God raised from the dead, there is salvation in no one else.” Maybe if it’s a hostile audience. But what if it’s a neighbor, a friend, or even a family member who gives us that opportunity? I don’t know about you I doubt this method would be productive. But here’s the thing. Sometimes, in an effort not to exclude anyone or offend anyone, we take those opportunities we have to speak about Jesus, to stand up for him and actually defend the truth, in the opposite direction.

We’ve all been there. A coworker says something like “Jesus may be true for you, but he isn’t true for me.” A family member says, “I don’t think it matters what you believe about God as long as you’re a good person.” A neighbor claims to be a Christian but also claims that it’s one of many religions that lead to God. We hear things like this all the time and we agree. What you might say? Well, we might not come right out and say we agree, but when we fail to ask any questions, or engage in a conversation, our lack of response kind of suggests that we do. I’m certainly not suggesting we break out the

bullhorn, but is our silence defending the truth? Is our apathy representative of standing up for Jesus?

It's the easy way out. I get that. And we keep quiet for a lot of reasons, but most of the time I think it's because we're afraid we don't have the answers. But standing up for Jesus and defending the truth is not about debating people or proving we are right and they are wrong. It's about proclaiming the message of God's free grace for sinners on account of the redemption won in the person and work of Christ! We might think people know this, but trust me, they don't. To a lot of folks Christianity is just another religion that says if you are good enough God will save you. But who is good enough? No one. And so when we talk about defending the truth, we should always start there.

I remember a friend of mine a few years ago who was kind of lost. His marriage was in trouble. He battled addictions. He was a mess. We were talking one day and he asked me what Jesus could possibly do for a guy like him. He gave me the whole "all religions are the same" line and it didn't matter anyway because he was too far gone. As I listened all I wanted to do was jump in and prove to him how wrong he was. Trust me, I was ready. But he didn't need that. He needed the truth. He needed the gospel. So I gave it to him. "Jesus Christ has taken all of your sin and shame upon himself," I said. "In him you are free. He doesn't want you to continue to wallow in the misery of your sin and shame. He wants you to trust in him. Know that in his name you are forgiven." All he could say is why? Why would he forgive me? "Because he loves you as his own," I said. "He has claimed you with his blood and he wants you to come home."

No bullhorn; no arguments or debates; only Jesus. I know we don't have opportunities like this all the time, but when we do we tell it like it is. But we tell out of love. "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." This is the truth. May we all be strengthened and empowered by the Spirit to boldly proclaim that name...the name of Jesus. **Amen.**