

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, October 11, 1987, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

JOHN 9:25

“One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see.”

WHAT IS A GREAT WITNESS? (1)

What do these three people have in common? The first is a businessman who speaks for five minutes on a weekly TV program sponsored by the Chicago Sunday Evening Club. He owns and operates a large janitorial firm which specializes in cleaning hospitals in Indiana and Illinois; and he tells the audience about the main business of his life, which is to serve Jesus Christ. The second is a college student discussing the basic things of life with other students until the small hours of the morning and saying, “Well, I don’t know about you fellows, but my life never had any real meaning until I found Jesus Christ.” The third is a Russian girl who stands on a main street in Leningrad on a bitterly cold winter day handing out postcards on which is printed Christian poetry which she has written. What do these three people have in common? The answer is that they are all witnessing to their Christian faith.

Now, in legal terminology a “witness” is someone who saw an event, and was therefore a part of the event. He stands up in court and says, “This is the truth about it. This is how it really happened.”

Jesus called His disciples to be witnesses in that sense. He said to them before His ascension, “You have seen the Event of My life and death and resurrection, so I want you to go everywhere and tell people the truth about Me. Tell them what happened. You shall be My witnesses.”

Christ calls every Christian to witness in that true sense, and a committed Christian wants to know not only how to witness, but how to make a great witness. So that will be my subject today and next Lord’s Day: “What is a great witness?”

To find an answer, we’re going to look at a little-known character in the Bible, a man whose single appearance is recorded in the 9th chapter of the Gospel according to John. This man not only shows us how to witness; he shows us what it means to be a great witness.

He was one of the many people whom Jesus helped during His earthly ministry—one of the blind men on whom the Great Physician bestowed the gift of sight. Jesus was always healing blind people, perhaps because more people suffered from that malady in His day than from any other affliction. The blind man is still a familiar figure in the East. You see him going down a narrow street holding the wall with one hand and tapping on the gutter with his cane. Little wonder that the great prophets foretold that one of the blessings that the Messiah would bring would be “recovery of sight for the blind.” Little wonder that Jesus, pointing to signs of His

Messiahship, sent word to John the Baptist saying, “Tell John that the blind recover their sight” (Matthew 11:5).

Of all the blind people whom Jesus healed, only this man in John’s Gospel emerges as a distinct personality. We know something about his case history. We know that he participated in his cure; and we know that there was an aftermath to his cure—a little drama in which he played a leading role, and in which he shows us what it means to be a great witness.

1. He shows us that a great witness is a person with a story to tell. He declares what Jesus has done for him. He is not argumentative or arrogant. He doesn’t pretend to have all the answers—only the answers for himself. In a quiet, convincing way he simply tells what has happened to Him as a result of his encounter with Jesus. He speaks out of a first-hand experience. That is his witness. He had a great story to tell.

I heard about a blind man in Maidstone, England, a man who had been blind for four years. One day he tripped over his seeing-eye dog and fell and hit his head on the sidewalk. When he came to, he could see again. Can you imagine the story he had to tell?!

This man in John’s Gospel had a great story to tell because not only was he blind, he had never been anything else. He had been born blind, and he was stigmatized for it. You and I would sympathize with a person born blind, but in Jesus’ day it was believed that such a person either had sinned in his mother’s womb (if you could imagine such a thing), or else was being punished for the sins of his parents. Even the disciples asked Jesus, “Master, who sinned, this man or his parents?”

Blind people today by developing their remaining senses may lead rich and useful lives, but in Jesus’ day a blind man was denied even the most menial work. He couldn’t do anything. He was condemned to beg, as this man had been. Nor was there any such thing as surgery or medical treatment that could give him the hope of ever being able to see. Only a miracle could release him from his prison-house of blindness; and that’s what happened when he met Jesus. That’s the story he had to tell.

It was a dramatic miracle even in its technique. Jesus didn’t simply wave His hand in front of the man’s face and say, “Presto, you can see!” Rather, He spat on the ground and made a muddy ointment which He then pasted on the man’s sightless eyes. That may sound unhygienic until you remember that in Jesus’ day it was believed that the spittle of a distinguished person had curative qualities. Then He told him, “Go and wash in the pool of Siloam”—a small body of water outside the wall of Jerusalem. Can’t you imagine the man saying to someone nearby, “Friend, please take my hand; lead me to the pool of Siloam; hurry! There’s not a second to be lost; I’m going to get my sight!” And when they got there, the man did as he was told. I imagine he jumped right into the pool and splashed the water over his poor sightless eyes, and suddenly God switched on the light, and the whole world became visible to his eyes for the first time! All his life he had recognized people by the sound of their voices; now, for the first time, he actually saw what a human face looked like. All his life he had recognized flowers by their fragrance; now he was able to look upon the beauty of a flower. All his life he had been told that the sky was blue; now, for the first time, he could look up and say, “So that’s what blue is!” It was like

being born a second time. He must have been delirious with joy.

Well, that's the story he had to tell. He didn't go around preaching sermons or performing good deeds to persuade people that he was a follower of Jesus. He didn't really know much about Jesus at that point. That's what he told the Pharisees when they demanded that he confess Jesus to be a sinner. "Whether He's a sinner or not I don't know. All I know is this—once I was blind; now I can see!" And we hear that refrain all through the New Testament, "Once I was a cripple; now I can walk." "Once I was a tax collector; now I'm an honest man." "Once I was a prostitute; now I am a pure woman"—the firsthand testimony of something tremendous which had happened to a person as a result of his or her encounter with Jesus. And it is a great witness because no one can argue against it.

D. R. Davies had a great story to tell. His autobiography, which I have read with absorbing interest, is entitled, *In Search of Myself*. Davies started out as a Congregational minister, but he wasn't a very convincing preacher because he wasn't very convinced himself! After emptying a couple of churches, he drifted into journalism, then politics. He became, in turn, a socialist, a humanist, a Marxist, and an atheist. He fought in the Spanish Civil War, saw the break-up of his marriage, and even tried to commit suicide one night off the south coast of Wales. He intended to swim out to sea as far as he could go, until his strength gave out, and then simply drown. He went into the water, began to swim, and kept on going until he suddenly stopped; for with each stroke God had been reminding him of how his godly mother had told him, as a little boy, of Jesus and His love. And now, in these moments, as he faced eternity, the whole message of the Gospel came alive for him, and he exclaimed, "Oh, my God, what am I doing?" He struggled back to shore, and back to Christ; but not along the old road of intellectual discovery, but this time along the new way of personal experience. He later became a clergyman of the Church of England, and a distinguished Christian writer, and for the first time his ministry became a witness. He had a great story to tell.

Later he wrote, "Now I had a first-hand experience of the power of God, a first-hand knowledge of God. For that experience I had to pay a great price in terms of human frustration, defeat and suffering. But the Pearl was mine. Now I had a faith that could stand up to any disaster time could bring. I was able to do the one essential of the ministerial calling, namely, to witness to the redeeming power of Jesus Christ. Now I felt I could take my place on the witness stand and say, 'Yes! This is true: Christ can and does save men from despair and doom. He has done it for me!' Amid all the complexity and confusion of our time, I am forever sure of the redeeming power of God in Christ. Though all the world were to unite in denying this, I should still be certain. This one thing I know—whereas I was blind, now I see!" That is a great witness!

Are you a great witness like that, my friend? You can be, you know, and you ought to be! You don't have to preach sermons or perform miracles; all you have to do is to demonstrate to those you meet that you, who were once blind, can now see because of what Jesus Christ has done for you—that you, who were once dead in sin, are now alive, born again by the regenerating power of the Spirit of God. Do they see that you are different—that you ring true—that you have an inner peace and joy, a sense of meaning and purpose in your life that enables you to face up to anything that life can do to you? If so, then you too are a great witness.

2. The man born blind shows us that a great witness is a person who stands most alone.

Well, he certainly stood alone. Not only did people fail to support him; they actually came out against him. His former neighbors didn't even recognize him as the man who used to sit and beg, which means, of course, that they hadn't even recognized his existence as a human being. They had passed by him every day but hadn't noticed him as a person. The religious authorities openly resented his cure. His parents, who feared the religious leaders, virtually dissociated themselves from their son—"You can ask him. He's of age. He'll speak for himself."

Was there no one to come forward and place his hands on this man's shoulder and say, "My dear fellow, you can see—how wonderful! Let's celebrate!"? No. There were only angry glares all around him as if to say, "What do you mean by crawling out of your cave of blindness? How dare you allow this Jesus to open your eyes?"

Well, that sounds heartless enough; but then you look ahead a few months and you see those same people, or others like them, nailing Jesus to a Cross. If anyone ever stood alone, with every man's hand against Him, it was our Lord during that last terrible day of His earthly life: condemned by the priests, convicted by the State, betrayed by one disciple, denied by another, deserted by His friends, jeered at by the mob, and executed like a common and degraded criminal.

Now if that is what happens to the finest and the best this world has ever seen, it is also, in lesser degree, what happens to anyone empowered by God to witness for Jesus Christ before this sinful and wicked generation. Instead of welcoming you with open arms, they resent and ostracize you. You will inevitably find that you are a person who stands alone. That is your witness.

Dr. Leslie Weatherhead, the famous English preacher, used to tell about meeting a pastor in India during World War I. This young pastor was an Army chaplain. He told Dr. Weatherhead that when he became a Christian, his whole village blazed up in anger. To make him recant, they tied him to a pillar in the courtyard of his parents' house, stripped the turban off his head, which is a sign of indignity and humiliation in India, lashed his back with whips until the blood ran, and left him standing hour after hour under the burning sun. Then they emptied the contents of a sewage pit, containing human excrement, over his head. When the men had done their worst, he was subjected to another kind of torture. His mother came out and pled with him, "Son, I bore you; I brought you up; I love you. How can you bring such shame and hurt to me in my old age?" Tenderly he tried to explain to her that he had found Someone Who loved him even more than she did, and he must remain loyal to Jesus. He said that years afterward, when he had become pastor of a church in India, his family still would have nothing to do with him. Whenever he tried to visit his relatives, they just refused to receive him. Like the man born blind who accepted the gift of healing from our Lord, he stood alone. It was his witness. Yet there was something powerful in that lonely witness.

Ibsen, in one of his plays, has a character, Dr. Thomas Stockton. He was a champion of the poor and the oppressed, and it seemed as if everyone turned against him. At the end he says to his wife, "I'll go so far as to say I'm the strongest man in the world because I made a great discovery. Let me tell you what it is. The strongest man is the man who stands most alone."

Jesus was alone on Good Friday, most alone, and He was therefore the strongest Man, not only in the world, but in all of history. Yes, there is power in that lonely witness—in being the kind of person whom other people resent because you’ve found Christ and are therefore not like the rest of them. It’s often a hard and lonely road, and it calls for the utmost in courage, but it is a great witness.

What about you? Do you know anything about the loneliness, the ostracism that inevitably accompanies a great and faithful witness? Do they know you are a Christian down at the office? Are there circles from which you are excluded because you are a Christian? Remember, the Christian life is a warfare, and the faithful witness will have battle scars. The Lord Jesus Christ has scars to show—scars on His brow, and on His hands and feet! He will pull aside His robe of royalty and show you the scar on His side! What scars have you to show, my Christian friend? If everyone thinks well of you, then you are in deep trouble with the Lord. “Woe to you when all men speak well of you,” says our Lord (Luke 6:26).

A fine young Christian man in our congregation told me just last week that as he rides the Metro to work each day he likes to use that time to read and reflect upon the Word of God. And he says that most people treat him as if he had AIDS! When they see the Bible, they seem to be offended. Sometimes people will not even sit beside him, or some will get up and go sit somewhere else. Now that may seem comical, but it reflects the general attitude of the world to a Christian. We are regarded as somber-minded oddities.

But listen to what the Apostle James says to us, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance; and perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2—4).

A great witness—

a person with a story to tell;

a person who is not afraid to stand alone.

God grant that you and I may be counted among that noble company!

AMEN .