

## **“Uncorrupted Evangelism”**

Today, as we examine Jesus’ initial calling of the disciples and his encounter with Nathaniel in John 1:43-51, we see what it truly means to be a witness for Jesus Christ. Jesus has already gone to Galilee and found Philip to follow him. Philip could not keep the good news to himself. So, he found his friend Nathaniel and told him that he had found the long-promised Messiah in Jesus.

Jesus was from Nazareth. There was nothing in the Old Testament which foretold the Messiah would come from Nazareth. Nazareth was an undistinguished place. Nathaniel came from Cana, another Galilean town, and in the country places, jealousy between village and village was notorious. So, Nathaniel says Nazareth was not the kind of place that anything good was likely to come out of.

Philip’s response to Nathaniel is our first lesson in evangelism. Philip was wise. He did not argue with Nathaniel. He simply said, “Come and see.” As discussed by the commentator William Barclay, not very many people have ever been argued into Christianity. Often arguments do more harm than good. It is not philosophical preaching and teaching which has won people for Christ. It is the presentation of the story of Christ.

Barclay relates a story about Aldous Huxley, the great agnostic and well-known English writer and philosopher of the nineteenth century. He is best known

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January 17, 2021

for his book *Brave New World*. Huxley was a member of a house party at a country house. Sunday came around and most of the members prepared to go to church.

Very naturally, due his beliefs, Huxley did not want to go. Instead, he approached a man known to have a simple and a radiant Christian faith. He said to him:

“Suppose you stay at home and you tell me quite simply what your Christian faith means to you and why you are a Christian.” But, said the man, “you could demolish my arguments in an instant. I’m not clever enough to argue with you.”

Huxley said gently: “I don’t want to argue with you; I just want you to tell me simply what this Christ means to you.”

The man stayed at home and told Huxley most simply of his faith. When he had finished there were tears in the great agnostic’s eyes. “I would give my right hand, “he said, “if only I could believe that.” It was not clever argument that touched Huxley’s heart. He could have dealt with any argument that the Christian made. The simple presentation of Christ caught him by the heart.

When I ministered in Manning, a man in his thirties was referred to me. He was having problems getting his life together. I met with him at the parsonage. He came into the living room carrying a thick Bible. He referred to it as a Jewish Bible which interpreted both the Old and the New Testament. He was proud he had it.

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Initially, he kept quoting Bible verses, but really did not seem to connect them to his reality.

I realized after about five minutes that he was using intellectual talk to cover up his need for forgiveness. He was suffering guilt over a failed marriage and a poor relationship with his children. He needed to simplify things. After listening to him for a while, I finally asked him to tell me, without quoting Bible verses, how he felt about God. It was clear he needed God's grace and forgiveness. He kept telling me he did not deserve God's forgiveness.

I shared with him my own story of accepting God's grace and forgiveness. I did not quote Bible verses or bring out theology books to show him. I just shared God's love for me and God's mercy for me. He finally got to the point where he asked for God's mercy on him as we prayed together.

The best argument is to say to people. "Come and see!" But we have to know Christ ourselves before we can invite others to Jesus. The only true evangelist is the man himself who knows Christ.

The second thing to take from today's passage is that when we encounter Jesus, he knows our heart. When we meet Jesus, we cannot hide our true selves from him. When he meets Nathaniel, he says, "Here is a genuine Israelite in whom

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there is no deceit.” This was a tribute to any Israelite. Nathaniel is surprised that anyone could give a verdict like that on such short an acquittance.

Nathaniel knew that Jesus had seen into the very depths of his heart.

Nathaniel thought, “Here is a man who can see into my most intimate and secret longings which I have never dared to put into words.” He then declared that this must be the Son of God, God’s promised anointed one and no other.

Nathaniel demanded to know how Jesus could possibly know him. Jesus says that he saw him under the fig tree. What does this mean? To understand what it means to be under the fig tree gives us an understanding of how we are to approach our faith. In Jewish thought the fig tree always stood for peace. The idea of peace was when a man could be undisturbed under his own vine and his own fig-tree. The fig tree was leafy and shady. It was the custom to sit and meditate under the roof of its branches. Nathaniel had been doing this. When he meditated under the fig tree, he prayed for the day when God’s chosen one would come.

What did this do for Nathaniel? He is uncorrupted in his faith and belief. In our scripture version today from the Common English Bible, Jesus says Nathaniel is genuine and without deceit. In the NIV version of the translation, Jesus says there is nothing false about Nathaniel. In another version, Jesus says there is no guile in Nathaniel’s heart. Guile means a cunning intelligence.

The third lesson we learn from this passage is that our faith and belief need to be simple. We do not need to be cunning or corrupted by what we consider smart thinking. We need to meditate under the fig tree and remove the clutter from our minds and our hearts. In this way we are effective evangelists for Christ.

In these days of uncertainty and division, those with faith in Christ have a great opportunity to be witnesses for the way of Jesus Christ. However, the church could also fail miserably in this time if the focus of believers is not correct. As I have told you before, you have the right to hold beliefs on public policy. You have the right to have certain political beliefs. But do not let these beliefs either define or corrupt your message for Christ. The message of Jesus and Jesus' life should always guide you in your actions.

In the same manner, you have the right to be part of certain organizations or groups. Once again, though, do not let the beliefs of these groups either define or corrupt your message for Christ.

And let us consider how we approach the institution of the church itself. Every institution, including the church, seeks to maintain itself. As we meditate under the shade of the fig tree, let us clear our minds and hearts and consider how our faith and beliefs relate to the church. Are we just trying to maintain the institution of the church itself? Have we become stuck in stale, outdated doctrine

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which makes no sense for today's world? Are we keeping things simple so we can truly invite others to Christ? As we use the approach of John Wesley, let us not just look to tradition, but let us use reason and life experience to make sure we truly are uncorrupted evangelists.

What does this uncorrupted faith bring us? At the end of the passage, Jesus quotes the old story of Jacob at Bethel, Jacob's ladder leading up to heaven. It was as if Jesus said: "Nathaniel, I can do far more than read your heart. I can be for you and all people, the way, the ladder that leads to heaven." As we reflect on this passage today, let us always remember that it is through Jesus and Jesus alone that the souls of humans can mount the ladder which leads to heaven. Jesus as the Son of Humanity serves as the intersection between God and all of humanity. Accordingly, part of our job in contemporary moments of fragmentation and discord, as we are under the fig tree in peace, is to be part of God's bridge for the connection of all peoples.