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Speaker key

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TH Good morning, friends, it's really good to be with you. I've had the privilege, for the last two weeks, of being able to do some speaking and lecturing overseas, and it's just lovely to be back with you again here on a Sunday. As you entered the auditorium you were given a bulletin, and in that bulletin there is a leaflet, and I invite you to take that leaflet out. I'm going to be giving you some other verses today, of scripture, that you would... may want to make a note of, that you can maybe look at in the week to come.

But let me read now from Acts chapter one. These are the last words that Jesus spoke to His disciples before He ascended, and over the years I've learned to always pay attention to the last words that people speak. And then they gathered around Him and they asked Him, Lord, are you at this time going to restore the Kingdom to Israel. And He said to them, it's not for you to know the times or the dates that the Father has set by His own authority.

Don't ever be too concerned about times and dates. That's not the most important thing. Here's the important thing: but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit, that's the Spirit of Jesus Christ, when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and away to the ends of the earth.

And after He said this He was taken up before their eyes and a cloud hid Him from their sight. And they were looking intently into the sky as He was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. Men of Galilee, they said, why do you stand there looking into the sky? This same Jesus who has been taken from you into heaven will come back in the same way that you have seen Him go into heaven. So we thank God so much for these words that Jesus speaks to us, and we pray that today we will wrestle with them, what they mean for us today here in Johannesburg, amen.

I want to begin with a true story today, a story of two guys, in fact, who travel to work together each day in the same car. They worked at the same company. And they did this for a number of years, the journey from Benoni into Johannesburg. Over the weekends they would live their separate lives. They each had their own families. On the one... on a Sunday the one guy would play golf, a very keen golfer. The other guy attended the local Methodist church, and this is what they would do every weekend.

One Monday as they were travelling to work the guy who played golf said to the guy who went to the Methodist church, he said to him, you know, when are you going to give up all this hypocrisy of going to church? And the chap was... he was taken aback by that and he said, what do you mean? What do you mean by that, give up all this hypocrisy? This means a lot to me. And the chap said, you know, we've been travelling together to work now for just over five years. We've been together. If what you believe is true about God I am missing out on a great deal, and yet not once over five years have you ever shared the meaning of your faith with me, not once.

And I don't know why that story, when I heard it told to me for the first time, I don't know why that story challenged me so deeply. And perhaps it challenged me so deeply because it got me thinking about all the people in my circles of friendship and relationship and influence who maybe one day will say to me, you know, Trevor, I knew you for a year, I knew you for two, three, four, five years, yet never once did you ever share with me the meaning that your relationship with Jesus Christ had with you with me, not once.

And perhaps you can think of your circle of influence right now, your friendship circle. Would there perhaps be people in that circle who may say to you, you know, known you so well, and yet you have never ever shared with me what is so special to you about your faith. Now, it's against this backdrop that... what I want to do, and I'm going to do this very simply today, very simply, and I'm really praying that God will help me to be helpful to you today. What I want to do is simply explore this theme of witness, of witness. It's a critical theme, critical. It's a critical theme because this is the central assignment that Jesus gives to us.

I take you back to that reading that I read to you just before I started speaking, when He's with the gathered group of disciples, and these are His last words that he speaks to them. He says that when you receive My Spirit, when My Spirit comes upon you you will be My witnesses. You'll be My witnesses. The only reason that you and I are sitting here this morning is because that bunch of nobodies, and they were nobodies, they weren't people of importance, they were nobodies, those nobodies were faithful to that assignment that Jesus gave to them. Even though it cost them their lives we are here today.

It is a critical theme, not only because Jesus wants us to witness. It's a critical theme, friends, because we live in a context, a country, a society that desperately, desperately needs to experience the transforming message of Jesus Christ. I don't want to be naive this morning, but I really don't think as a nation we have a fruitful future unless we undergo a profound spiritual and moral transformation. I don't think we're going to make it.

I don't think the haves will ever share with the have-nots until there is a moral and spiritual transformation. I don't think we will ever rediscover an ethical framework for our lives unless there's a spiritual and moral transformation. I don't think we will ever learn to treat each other with dignity and respect and reverence unless there's a moral and spiritual transformation in our lives. We live in a context that desperately, desperately needs to experience the message of Jesus Christ. It's critical that we

become witnesses, and it's critical that we become witnesses because when we become witnesses, that's when we grow.

I'll never forget, I was 16 years of age. I grew up in a home where the name of Jesus Christ was never mentioned. I mean that, never, mentioned, never mentioned. At the age of 16 I gave my life to Christ through a friendship. And the first man who ever prayed with me was a guy by the name of Jeff. I'll always be thankful to Jeff. And he prayed for me when I gave my life to Christ, and afterwards he gave me my first bit of spiritual counsel. He said to me these words: Trevor, within the next 24 hours I want you to share with someone what you've done. I was petrified.

I went home and I went into the back door, into our flat, and my mom was peeling potatoes. I'll never forget that moment. And I stood at that door and I knew that somehow I needed to tell her what I had done. I told her. I said, mom, I've given my life to Christ. This is what I said: do you mind if we could say thank you before our meal tonight? And she looked at... she stopped peeling her potatoes and she looked at me and she said, that's okay, as long as you don't become religious and become a minister or something. But in that moment I grew. I grew. I was, kind of, putting my life out there. I was scared, you know, just to get the J word out, Jesus. But something happened that was important.

Friends, the challenge to become witnesses is critical. It's critical. Jesus wants us to become witnesses. We live in a society that desperately, desperately needs to experience the transforming power of Jesus Christ, and we need to share for our own sakes. But I think there's a question here. How do we do this? How do we do it? How do we do it in a way that's not toxic? Christianity has got a very blurred history, very blurred. Sometimes Christians have done it very, very badly. We've got the Crusades in our history, the Inquisition in our history, when Christianity was forced onto the lives of people. Sometimes we have shared our faith in a way that betrays our faith.

I cringe when I think of some of the ways I first shared my faith. When Christ touched me it was an explosive experience. I wanted to tell people. I remember on Sunday afternoons in Port Elizabeth, I can't believe I used to do this. I used to stand on the side of the road, the road going to Cape Town. This was Sunday afternoon two o'clock, and I would stand there with a friend, and his name was Phillip, and we would hitchhike, and we were doing nowhere. All we wanted to do was get in the car, because then we had a captive audience.

So the cars would stop, we would get in. I would sit in the front. Phillip would sit at the back. Phillip would then tap me on the shoulder and say, go for it. So as the poor guy who's had the decency to pick us up is driving I start going for him. When I've done it I'll feel a little bit proud, and then I'll say, can you drop us off, and we would go back into PE, and then we'd repeat the process two or three or four times. I don't know how many people I put off Christianity for life. Still today I think of those people and I say, Lord, I just hope You will somehow just be with them. Just be with them.

How do we do it? How do we do it? How do we share our faith in a way that doesn't betray the gospel? And what I want to do, and now I'm going to be very simple, very simple. I just want to give you three Ls, three Ls, and I want you to stick them on the fridge, write them in the Bible, put them on a screensaver, just I would love to write these three Ls into every life here today. This is how we witness. This is how we witness to God's love in Jesus Christ in a broken word. Are you ready? I think we start just by listening, by listening.

I love these words that James writes. Just look at them very carefully. James 1:19, and it should come... my brothers and sisters, take note of this. Now, take note of this. Everyone should be quick to listen, quick to listen. Now, watch this: quick to listen, slow to speak, we need to get that ratio together, slow to become angry. Often when we think of witness we think of talking. Talking is always dangerous before we've listened, always dangerous, and sometimes the greatest gift I can give to another person that expresses God's love is the gift of my listening.

To listen to someone else's joy and pain, heartbreak and heartache, to listen to other people's objections to Christianity, why they don't go to church, why they have rejected God, to listen to that. There's a story there. Behind every person's rejection of God there is a story and you usually it is a story of pain. And it's in listening that I get in touch with that story. And it's in listening that I communicate to this person that they are important to God.

One of my favourite theologians, if I can just be a bit larney for the moment, is a German guy, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was martyred by the Nazis because of his opposition to Hitler. He was a wonderful man. He was engaged to be married when he was killed. There's a wonderful biography that's come out on him, that's very easy to read, and I really recommend it, Pastor, Poet and Priest, beautiful book.

And he wrote these words once. He said, there are many Christians who... there are many people in this world, this is 1938, there are many people in this world who are looking for an ear that will listen, and they don't find it amongst Christians, because Christians are talking instead of listening. And then he added these words: the Christian who is deaf to his neighbour will soon be deaf to God. We witness by listening. We witness by listening, and we can do that as we leave here today. We can listen to those in our own home.

But here's the second L. Here's the second L. We witness through our life, through our life, our lifestyle. One of my favourite verses comes from Peter, Peter, when he's writing, and Peter is a wonderful letter about witness. He's writing to young, young followers of Christ, and he writes these words. He says, live such good lives amongst the pagans. Now, we're living amongst pagans every day, and that's not being judgemental. We are living amongst people who want nothing to do with God every day. But live such good lives that they may feel good deeds, and glorify God on the day that God visits us, our life.

The word witness, can I teach you some Greek for ten seconds? The word witness in the New Testament comes from the word *martyros*, M A T... it's a Greek word, M A T U R O S. *Martyros* means martyr. A martyr is someone who lays their life down. A

witness is someone who lays their lives down for others. That's how I witness, by laying my life down for you. That's how we witness in our family. I witness to Debbie and my kids, either badly or well, in terms of whether I lay my life down for them or not. God forgive me for the times I've been a bad witness in my own home, in my own home.

The other morning, did I tell you this, I don't know, Debbie wakes up and she says to me, Trevor... she's been... she's been battling a bit with her body, and she said, Trevor, I... and I'm on my Blackberry and I'm trying to get the rugby scores from the day before. And she says, I've got something to tell you. And I'm walking at the bottom of the bed... she's walking at the bottom of the bed. I'm lying in bed on my Blackberry. And then she says, Trevor, unless you put that Blackberry down I'm not going to talk to you.

And you know what I say? What would you expect me to say, as a follower of Christ? You would expect me to say, thank you, Debbie, for challenging me. I'll put my Blackberry down. You know what I say? Well, then don't speak to me, then. It's shocking. It's shocking, and in that moment I'm just overcome by terrible, terrible regret. And I had to follow her into the other room and just say, I'm so, so sorry. I can't even lay my Blackberry down, let alone my life, hey. God forgive me. Can you imagine how she feels when she sits in church and listens to me?

We witness at work by laying our lives down for each other, for our colleagues. That's how I witness to them. The doctor who lays her life down for the person who comes, the lawyer for the person seeking help, the psychologist for the person he or she is counselling, the salesperson for the person that... the client that he or she is visiting. There is an expression of laying my life down. It's not just about me, and it's when I lay my life down, maturos, I'll put my life down for you.

That is witness, it's witness, and God begins to touch a person's life through that witness. The biggest mission trip that you and I go on every day is our mission trip from home to work. That's the mission trip, not from here to another country. That's okay, but that's not the main mission trip. The main mission trip for you and me is when I go to work every day, every day. That's the mission trip. That's my place of witness.

Can I say one more thing? I've got one more minute. You must get the third L, hey. I listen through my life, and then through my lips, my lips. Just look at these words that Peter... it's Peter again. Look at how he writes them, 1 Peter 3:15. But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. Now, but watch that next verse: but do it with gentleness and respect.

To witness to my faith is not to preach. When I got into those cars I began to preach. That's not witness. To witness is not to fix anyone else up. To witness is not to tell anyone else what they must believe. To witness is simply to share with another person the hope that I have in Christ. And there come moments when it is appropriate for us to do that. It's not boasting. It's an act of deep love for another person, to share with them what Christ means to me in my life.

And I don't know, but have you noticed that, again and again, God organises little moments in our life, and you know that this is a God moment, and God is wanting us, in that moment, to share something of our relationship with Jesus, not preach, not talk for ten minutes, maybe just 30 seconds, to name the name of Christ and what Christ means to me.

I'm on a plane travelling from one place to another. I was in North America. When I get on a plane I always say, God, please, just one favour, no one next to me please, no one next to me. God never answers that prayer. And this lady comes. I've just bought a book. It has just been released. I've got it. I'm going to read it. I'm going to bury myself in it so we don't talk. She gets on. She's tall. She's elegant. She comes and she sits beside me. I greet her and go back to my book.

She pulls out a book. I have a quick look at the cover to see what she's reading. It's exactly the same book that I'm reading, exactly the same book. This book has been on the market for about two or three months. Work out the stats of that happening. I, kind of, think to myself, God, this... You want me to do something? So I looked at her book and I looked at my book, and I said to her, ah, snap. I said, are you... are you interested in this kind of thing? It was a book about a monastery.

I said are you interested in this. She said, yes. She said I'm a Buddhist. I said that's interesting. She said to me, what are you? So I said I'm a... I'm a... I said I'm a Christ follower. She said, what's that? And for 45 minutes I was able to move into her world and she a little into my world. Her last, her last word to me was... she said, do you have a book that you would like, could recommend for me to read about Christ following, and I took the serviette and I just wrote down the name of a book. No, that, it's like a God moment. I learned a lot, and I was able to share a little bit, I hope, with respect and gentleness, the reason for my own faith.

Let me end. The central assignment that Jesus gives to us is to be witnesses, the central assignment. Three Ls. Do you want to give them to me, huh? I'm listening. Listen, lifestyle, lips, huh. Can you just write those down somewhere? But maybe the closing challenge is this, that if we're going to be witnesses, we ourselves need to grow and deepen our own transforming relationship with Jesus Christ. Otherwise we've got nothing to share.

Let me pray. Lord Jesus Christ, You entrust Your mission to us. And You call us to be witnesses to Your reality, to Your love, to Your mercy, to Your forgiveness, to Your power, to Your victory over death. You call us to witness to that. Lord, sometimes we are too scared to do it, but will you help us today to find our way into this? Will you help us and teach us and guide us?

Help us, Lord, to become a listening people, people who will lay our lives down for those around about us, and people who will with credibility name the name of Jesus. Help us to do this, Lord. We ask that You would breathe Your Spirit upon us today, Your own Spirit, and that You may come and live in us and help us to do this with You. This is the longing of our hearts, and we offer it to You in Your name and for Your sake, amen. May the joy of Jesus be with you. Take care, friends.