

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Sharpening Discipleship's Focus

(Learning from the Gospel of Luke)

Courage

(Selected passages in Luke, Acts)

Study #8

Introduction: Profiles in (un)courage, in courage...

Psychologists tell us that most people believe that they are both courageous and non-conformist. They believe that they have the guts to stand up against the opinions of a group they belong to if they know they are in the right.¹

Sadly, psychologists also tell us that most of these people are wrong.

Back in the 1950's, psychologist Solomon Asch wanted to learn the degree to which a person's opinions and actions were influenced by a group. He conducted a series of experiments to find out.²

Asch discovered that an overwhelming majority of people were willing to ignore reality and side with a group's wrong opinion or bad behavior to conform to the group.

Men and women who have the courage to go against the flow are rare.

¹ Similarly, the majority of people believe they are "above average" in terms of intelligence, moral character, and attractiveness. 😊

² They are referred to as The Asch Conformity Experiments.

For a variety of reasons - peer pressure, fear of rejection, fear of reprisal - it's easier to go where the winds blow. I know.

When I was a much younger man and a relatively new pastor, I was invited to a meeting hosted by a well-known ministry that was coming to San Antonio.

This meeting was promoted as an enjoyable time to come and learn more about the ministry and its big, "coming attraction."

I was flattered to have been invited. (I was young.) At this meeting, the ministry's leader gave an inspiring talk. Then, another man stepped up to the podium as the ministry leader left the room.

He said, contrary to the advertised purpose of the meeting, "OK. *This is going to be a big event. It's gonna take a lot of work from a lot of people. Nobody leaves this room without an assignment.*"

I stayed. I took an assignment. I wish I had stood up and left. I was young and didn't want to stand out, go against the flow.

I like to think that if the same thing happened today, I would leave if I faced the same hypocritical, strong-armed, manipulative pressure. But I wonder...

In 1955, a young man from Massachusetts who was just starting his service in the US Senate wrote a book that profiled eight former members of the Senate.

Some of the men were famous historical figures (John Adams, Sam Houston, Robert Taft). Others were and are not well known at all.

But the author of this book didn't focus on their careers. No, he told about defining moments in each of these men's lives when they chose to stand alone, often against tremendous political and social pressure for what they felt was right.

The book? Profiles in Courage, John F. Kennedy.

According to one reviewer, the central issue that convinced Kennedy to include a Senator as a case study, was that Senator's

“willingness to accept malicious public abuse, the loss of friends, power, prestige and the sacrifice of future aspirations on an issue of moral conscience, regardless how posterity might judge his position.”

Kennedy called that *courage*.

Courage is the grace to persist in some hard thing, despite danger. Courage acts, even when frightened. Courage willingly faces pain to do what needs to be done.

Courage defined the life of Jesus and Jesus wants courage to define us who follow Him.

In these weeks, you and I are continuing to look (mostly) into the Gospel of Luke to learn more about what it means to follow Jesus. Today, we focus on courage.

On the last night that Jesus was with His disciples, He told them what life was going to be like after He was physically gone from them. He said this.

[John 16:33] “These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.”

When the Lord told those guys to **“take courage,”** He knew what He was talking about. Of the many attributes we might ascribe to Jesus, certainly one of the most glaring is that He was a Man of courage.

Jesus - A Profile In Courage

Glimpses of Jesus' Courage

Luke 4 - He courageously withstood the devil's temptations

After John the Baptist baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, the Lord went out to a deserted place for some protracted time alone, with God. During all of this time alone, He fasted.

This was not the daytime fast of Ramadan (just begun on Friday), during which Muslims fast during daylight hours. Jesus fasted for forty days AND forty nights.

When the time of fasting in the wilderness came to an end, He was approached by the devil (Satan), who tempted Him. Satan's very first temptation was timely.

Jesus was at the end of a nearly six-weeks-long fast. Satan tempted Jesus to turn some stones on the ground into bread that He could eat.

For you and me, not having the ability to perform this miracle, this would have been no temptation. But, Jesus, having the ability to do what Satan tempted Him to do, was tempted.

By way of response, Jesus quoted God's Word - ***[Luke 4:4] And Jesus answered him, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’”***

Jesus had the moral fortitude to refuse Satan's seemingly wise suggestion that He should eat.

He refused because to have eaten at Satan's suggestion and by the use of His own miracle-working power would have been against God's plan. He stayed hungry. That's courage.

Jesus' courage shows up in another scene that Luke records a bit later.

Luke 5 - He courageously touched an unclean leper

Right after having called His first disciples (Simon and Andrew; James and John) to follow Him, He was approached by a man with leprosy.

In the ancient world, to have leprosy was to be unclean, diseased and unwelcomed, shunned by society - including friends and even family.

This man approached Jesus and begged Him, **[Luke 5:12]... “Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.”**

Jesus’ response was to heal. But He healed the man in a very “socially incorrect” way.

Knowing that to touch a leper was to be unclean and contaminated, **[13]...He reached out with His hand and touched him, saying, “I am willing; be cleansed.”**

Again, courage. Jesus risked sickness, ritual uncleanness, and alienation. He valued loving this man above acceptance and even His own health.

Luke 5 - He courageously ate with the least, the last, and the lost

Not long after this, Jesus shows us another side of courage.

He had just invited a tax collector named Levi (also called Matthew) to follow Him. Levi jumped at the chance and immediately began to follow.

Levi was so excited to be following Jesus that he threw a big party in his own house, inviting his own people (**“tax collectors and other people”** - all probably equally unsavory characters) so that they all could meet Jesus, too.

It is hard for us to fully appreciate how wildly inappropriate Jesus’ attendance at this party was.

In first-century Israel, religious people kept their distance from notorious sinners for the same reason healthy people kept their distance from lepers.

They didn’t want to be contaminated by the sinner’s sin.³

Jesus brushed away concerns about moral contamination as easily as He had brushed away concerns about health when He touched the man with leprosy. He kept on hanging with the sinners.

Courage to go against the social flow. To be God’s agent to the outcast. That’s our Savior.

He was a loving Advocate for the powerless. And He was a tireless thorn in the side of the powerful, as this story shows.

He courageously spoke truth to the powerful (Luke 13)

Once, Jesus cast a demon from a woman who hadn’t been able to stand up straight for eighteen years.

As soon as He freed her from her bondage - which should have prompted a fiesta! - the leader of the synagogue in which this miracle took place rebuked the woman for allowing Jesus to heal her on the Sabbath day.

He told her, **[Luke 13:14] “There are six days during which work should be done; so come during them and get healed, and not on the Sabbath day.”**

See, Pharisees had rules that regulated what you could and couldn’t do on the Sabbath day. These rules went way beyond the Old Testament’s commandment that the Sabbath should be a day of rest.

Their extra-biblical rules applied to all arenas of life, including medicine. Doctoring was permitted if there was a medical emergency, or a matter of life and death.⁴

But tending to a minor wound was against the rules. Wiping blood off of a cut was not allowed. Healing a chronic condition such as this woman had was not allowed on the Sabbath.⁵

³ As well, these people were definitely NOT the company you want to keep if you are mounting a serious Messiahship campaign.

⁴ They also said that it was OK for a woman to receive assistance in childbirth on the Sabbath. (How very gracious of them...)

She was not on the verge of death. There was every opportunity for Jesus to have told her, *“Don’t take two aspirin and see Me in the morning. We’ll take care of that bad back - tomorrow.”*

He didn’t do that. He immediately advocated for her. And you can hear the edge in Jesus’ words.

[13:15]... “You hypocrites, does each of you on the Sabbath not untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it away to water it? [16] And this woman, a daughter of Abraham as she is, whom Satan has bound for eighteen long years, should she not have been released from this restraint on the Sabbath day?”

Of all days, the Sabbath day was the perfect day for a healing. It was a great day for doing good.

So, yes, Jesus was angry. He was good, and He was angry, and courageous.⁶

It is the rare person who dares to get angry, visibly and outwardly angry, with a powerful person. Get angry with powerful people and you risk their wrath. You’ll suffer consequences if you go up against powerful people and get mad at them.

The woman’s need AND the Pharisees’ hard hearts roused Jesus to anger and to action. He focused His anger on people who could - and did - make trouble for Him. Hang the consequences. That’s courage.

He courageously rebuked His hosts (Luke 14)

And this wasn’t the only time Jesus courageously spoke truth to the powerful of His day.

At a banquet to which He had been invited by one of the leaders of the Pharisees, Jesus noticed that the guests had all been picking out seats of honor. He called them out on it.

He suggested that they should choose the less honored seats for themselves to avoid the embarrassment of being asked to sit lower when a more highly honored guest showed up. That was gutsy.

He then advised them to rethink their invite list.

Now, before reading what Jesus said, can you imagine doing this? You’ve been invited to a nice meal at the home of a societal VIP.

It’s a grand setting. Good food. There are well-heeled guests, string quartet playing quietly. Lights are low. Pleasant conversation.

You call out to the host, *“I’ve got a suggestion for you. At your next banquet [Luke 14:12]... “...do not invite your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor wealthy neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you to a meal in return, and that will be your repayment. [13] But whenever you give a banquet, invite people who are poor, who have disabilities, who are limping, and people who are blind; [14] and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”*

We can only imagine Jesus’ suggestion went over like a lead balloon.

But He dared to introduce awkwardness and unease into a polite gathering. He saw self-serving religious leaders who ignored the poor, pointed out their missed opportunity, and called them to more.

He courageously exalted the tax collector’s piety (Luke 18)

He pushed boundaries, again, when He told the parable of two men who went up to the temple to pray.

⁵ Later, Jesus will spark controversy for healing a blind man when He made mud out of dirt plus spittle and wiped them on the man’s eyes. Combining spittle and dirt was considered the same thing as making mortar, which was, of course, work.

⁶ Jesus was angry at the Pharisees’ insensitivity to human need.

One was a Pharisee, who prayed **“to himself,”** thanking God that he wasn’t like the other guy who was praying, boasting about his showy religiosity.

The other guy was a tax collector who humbly begged God for mercy, recognizing that he was a sinner.

It was a great story that highlighted the truth that God loves the humble in heart and is opposed to the proud. But did you notice to whom Jesus told this story?

It was to **“some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt.”** (Luke 14:9)

He was speaking to the very people who were the villains in the parable. Again, courage.

Throughout His three year ministry, Jesus regularly violated the traditions of the Jewish elders and the Pharisees.

He didn’t fast when they thought He should have. He healed people on the Sabbath, plucked grain on the Sabbath, and in other ways violated the leaders’ picky rules.⁷

But we see the most enduring image of Jesus as a Man of courage in something He did in Jerusalem’s temple, at the season of Passover.

An Enduring Image of Jesus’ Courage (Luke 19:45-46)

The Feast of the Passover

Jesus entered Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday, right at the beginning of the annual observance of Passover, Passover being a week-long commemoration of God’s deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage.

⁷ Which weren’t really violations of the spirit of God’s Law, just the “letter” as the Pharisees had come to interpret it.

More specifically, Passover celebrated the deliverance of the first-born males of any family that sprinkled the blood of a spotless lamb on their doorposts on the night of God’s judgment against Egypt.⁸

In Jesus’ day, huge crowds of Jews from all over the world flooded Jerusalem and the surrounding areas during Passover.⁹

Sadly, in Jesus’ day, in the holy city of Jerusalem, the season of Passover had become an unholy mess.

Conditions in Jerusalem’s temple

Caiaphas served as the official High Priest at this time. But his father-in-law, Annas, was the real power behind the position.

The temple precincts had become known as *“the Bazaars of Annas.”* It was like a flea-market. Inequities abounded.

Merchandisers set up shop in what was called *“The Court of the Gentiles.”* This was the one place in the temple that allowed outsiders. There, they sold animals that would be sacrificed - and they were selling them at exorbitant prices.

Money-changers were charging usurious rates for the exchange of Galilean money and other currency for “temple coins.” It was quite the racket.

So, in walked this Man. He had ridden into the city on a donkey while crowds waved palm branches and shouted, **“Hosanna!”**

Jesus dismounted and walked toward the temple during what was supposed to be one of the most holy weeks of the Jewish year.

Jesus took courageous action (Luke 19:45-46)

[19:45] And Jesus entered the temple grounds and began to drive out those who were selling, [46] saying to them, “It is written:

⁸ See Exodus 12.

⁹ Estimates of the crowd size range from 1 to 3 million.

'And My house will be a house of prayer,' but you have made it a den of robbers.'

What does this obviously violent act do to your concept of Jesus?¹⁰

I don't know if you have ever heard the line from an old song, *"Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon His precious child..."*

That hymn accuses Jesus of being "mild." Does the Jesus we see here - or anywhere else in the Gospels - bring to mind the word mild?

Nope. Jesus was, in no sense, mild. He was a man of rare and raw courage.

When Jesus saw the injustices that were happening, He put together a plan, put the plan in place, and put a stop to those injustices.

And you will notice, as many others have also noticed, that nobody made an attempt to stop Him. Here's what one author, John White, wrote about this act many years ago:

"Sheep, oxen, pigeons, and people were forced out through the temple gates. Unsuspecting merchants arriving with more animals would be startled to find their way barred by the Man with the unflinching gaze.

"It is false to assume that there was something supernatural about the awe He created. He was God, but He called down no legion of angels to help Him, nor is there any evidence that a mystical terror paralyzed the merchants.

"His control of the crowds was by a moral force, forged by His total lack of ambivalence."¹¹

¹⁰ Mark's account adds that Jesus was not allowing anyone to carry merchandise through the temple precincts, and this, ***"MY HOUSE WILL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL THE NATIONS."*** (Mark 11:17)

¹¹ Jesus' temple cleansing did not ONLY occur at Luke 19. John tells us that He had already done the same thing three Passovers earlier, on that occasion using a whip to drive out the money-changers. (See John 2) I am not persuaded by those who say that Jesus only performed this act once.

When Jesus did what we read about here, everybody knew it. He did it in broad daylight, in plain sight of a huge crowd, during Passover, in the temple. Everybody saw what Jesus did - and He didn't care.

He was motivated by a passion to do God's will, to protect the integrity of the temple, and to liberate the *"Court of the Gentiles"* so that ALL PEOPLE could draw near - hang the consequences.

He was caught in the current of the force of passion for God and the result was an act of courage. So it was, for Him. So it will be, for us.

From the beginning, it was Jesus' plan that those who followed Him would learn courage. The discipleship curriculum He set for those first disciples gave them a front row seat to what courage looks like.

Christians - Called to the Path to Courage (Luke 22)

In so many of the Gospel scenes where Jesus was strong and courageous in the face of adversity or opposition, His disciples were right there with Him.

They saw Him do the loving thing, when it would have been easier to walk away. They heard Him speak truth to power when to do so was risky.

They understood that courage was needed to walk with this courageous Jesus.

And yet, as it is with me, and maybe with some of you, those first disciples were a long way away from being courageous.

Do you remember what Jesus said to Simon Peter, the preeminent apostle, on the night before He died on the cross?

[Luke 22:31] "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded to sift you men like wheat." [32] but I have prayed for you, that your faith will not fail; and you, when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."

Those words would not have been an encouragement to Simon. They weren't meant to be. They were meant to be a grave warning. Jesus was putting Simon on notice.¹²

Simon should have been thinking, *"I'm going to be tested. Courage will be required. I need to be walking by faith and in utter dependence on God for what Jesus says is coming my way. I need what only God can supply."*

That was not what Simon was thinking. And instead, he said, **[33]...*"Lord, I am ready to go with You both to prison and to death!"***

That doesn't sound at all dependent. It sounds self-confident, exactly the opposite of the mindset needed when tough times hit.

With that response, the warning turned to prophecy.

[Luke 22:34] But He said, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me."

And it happened. A few hours later, Peter denied that he even knew who *"this Jesus-guy"* was. Three times.

Three years of watching and listening to Jesus and three years of following Jesus didn't transform Simon Peter into a man of courage.

But in time, Jesus' prayer was answered. Peter's faith ultimately did not fail. He did turn back. He did strengthen his brothers.

The Simon Peter of the Gospels was not a bastion of courage. But, when we turn to the book of Acts, we find a different Simon Peter.

¹² I see Jesus' words to Simon Peter as being similar to Jonah's words against Nineveh. That prophecy of Nineveh's destruction turned into a warning when the Ninevites repented. This would be true of many of the prophets' warnings in the Old Testament. A trusting turn to God in light of a warning, turns away the predicted disaster.

Peter - The Courage to PROCLAIM (Acts)

- **In Acts 2**, on the Day of Pentecost, he preached a sermon that rocked thousands of Jews back on their heels. He pulled no punches in his proclamation of the sovereign Lordship of Jesus. He called on the Jews in Jerusalem to repent of having crucified this Lord, and to turn to Jesus in faith.
- **In Acts 3**, after healing a lame man at the gate to the temple, Peter was surrounded by a crowd. He took one look at the crowd, recognized an opportunity to speak out about Jesus, and preached another barn-burner of a message.
- **In Acts 4**, the same thing happened. He took advantage of a chance to speak up for the Lord, and refused to back down - even under threat of punishment from the Jewish rulers.
- **In Acts 5**, the Jewish Supreme Court had just reminded Peter that they had told him earlier to NOT preach Jesus. Peter responded with, **[29] "We must obey God rather than men."** - and he kept right on courageously proclaiming the risen Christ.

Conclusion:

Did you notice? God didn't command Peter to preach on Pentecost or at the temple. But he did. He spoke, lived, and loved for Jesus when he knew that to do so was risky.

He was faced with a choice. *"Share the Good News about Jesus... or don't."*

Peter calculated that it was worth it to risk it all with bold proclamation. And that, because, one, Jesus was courageous. Two, because eternity matters. Therefore, risking it all for Jesus is the only thing that makes sense.

Appendix: Barnabas - The Courage to EMBRACE (Acts 9)

Turn over a couple of chapters in the book of Acts, to chapter 9, where you find reference to another man, a man who was not an apostle, who (as far as we know) didn't know Jesus, personally, and who had only heard the stories of Jesus second-hand, just like us. His name is Barnabas.

We know a lot about Peter's past, very little about the former life of Barnabas.

Barnabas' name means "*the son of encouragement*," though, and he regularly shows up in the pages of Acts when a word of affirmation or encouragement would be well placed.

In Acts, chapter 7, massive persecution came to the church. Stephen, a deacon in the church of Jerusalem, was martyred. And there, at the site of the stoning, was a young man named Saul of Tarsus.

The Bible tells us that Saul was in "**hearty agreement**" with Stephen's stoning. On that day, Saul became a violent persecutor of the church, dragging men and women off to jail, and putting some to death.

Then, we flip over to Acts, chapter 9, and we see Barnabas and the whole church at Jerusalem facing a challenging situation. They were approached by this man - Saul - who is now claiming to be a Christian.

The one who had been out earning a reputation as a chief persecutor of believers, is now singing Jesus Loves Me and Amazing Grace. What would YOU have done?

The issue that confronted the early church in Jerusalem was whether or not to believe Saul.

Many in the church said, "*No way!*" **[Acts 9:26] When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple.**

Enter Barnabas.

[Acts 9:27] But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the

road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.

Certainly, Barnabas would have been more comfortable NOT accepting Saul. That would have been the safe route.

After all, to have offered him the right hand of fellowship could have meant endangering not only his life, but also his family, and the families and children of all the other Christians in Jerusalem. If Saul was faking it, everything would be at risk.

Yet Barnabas walked right up to Saul and embraced him as a brother in Christ. Talk about risk! Nothing but raw courage moved Barnabas to do what he did. Barnabas showed guts!

The choice Barnabas faced was stark. Either...

...run the risk of losing life and limb by accepting an impostor who would betray him and turn all the believers over to the Roman or Jewish authorities.

OR

...run the risk of failing to welcome a true brother in Christ with whom he would spend eternity.

Barnabas calculated the possible losses in both scenarios and determined that the greater loss would be that of lost fellowship if he failed to treat a fellow Christian with warmth and love.

The key to Barnabas' courage was that he had adopted an eternal perspective, a perspective made possible by Jesus' victory.

And, for Barnabas, growth in courage brought an enlarged capacity to embrace a fellow believer in Christ with risky love.