

The Gift of the Gospel

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on March 27, 2022.

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for “Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.” But I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says, “I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry.” Then Isaiah is so bold as to say, “I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.” But of Israel he says, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.” (Romans 10:14–21).¹

Surely the Babylonian captivity was the low point for ancient Israel. The people set apart by God, redeemed from Egyptian slavery, given the law, ushered into the promised land, established as a nation were taken into captivity by a pagan king and people. As the prophet Isaiah put it, Israel nationally, and the tribe of Judah specifically, was “sold for nothing” (Isa. 52:3), like a piece of worthless property. Despite the punishment of captivity, Israel was not worthless in God’s sight but was the consistent recipient of his faithful provision, including his precepts, promises, and presence. And through Israel, despite their unfaithfulness and subsequent captivity, God would reveal his glory in the salvation of his people, good news for Israel but also, according to Isaiah, good news for all kinds of people, and the promise that “all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (Isa. 52:10).

How would God save his people; how would his salvation be revealed to the ends of the earth? The question of *how*, according to Isaiah, is answered first in *whom*, and this is the way he described him: He “shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted” (Isa. 52:13), but first . . .

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely, he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:2-6).

These words were given to Israel prophetically, spoken in past tense confirming its imminence, revealing that God’s servant would indeed come to Israel, pour out “his soul to death,” be counted a transgressor yet bear the sin of many and make intercession for the true transgressors (Isa. 53:12).

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

As Christians, we are familiar with Isaiah's prophecy of the suffering servant, so much so that we may forget the context into which and the people to whom it was originally given. It was a call for repentance and a declaration of forgiveness, a message for sinners and the hope of salvation, as it is for us today. Just as Israel was captive to the principality of Babylon, we "were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world" (Gal. 4:3). But Isaiah proclaimed God's promise of a Savior to bear our iniquities that we might be counted righteous (Isa. 53:11): And, "when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:4).

As God promised through Isaiah, for our sake God made his only Son, Jesus, to be sin upon the cross, so that in Jesus we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21). This was the fulfillment of the good news, or gospel, proclaimed to Israel, but also for the world. In fact, this is how God demonstrated his love: Whoever believes in the Lord Jesus Christ shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). And this *is* good news, good news worth sharing, a gift from God to be given, received, and believed.

Giving the Gift

Directing us back to Isaiah's prophecy, Paul quotes the prophet, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" (10:15), a poetic description of the delightful delivery of the greatest gift on earth. It is a lovely pronouncement of the duty and privilege of proclaiming the gospel, but also a pragmatic answer. If salvation comes through confession that Jesus is Lord and belief that God raised him from the dead, and if we believe and are justified and confess and are saved (Rom. 10:9-10), how do we hear the gospel in the first place? If "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:13), then "how are they to call on one they have not believed in?" It makes no sense. "And how are they to believe in one they have not heard of? (Rom. 10:14 NET). Really! How can they confess that Jesus is Lord and believe that God raised him from the dead, if they have never heard of Jesus, his righteous life, his sacrificial death, his victorious resurrection, and his heavenly reign, unless someone tells them? No one believes a gospel they have never heard: "how are they to hear without someone preaching?" (10:14).

There must be a preacher, a proclaimer of the good news. The problem is this duty and privilege have been distorted and deferred to someone else, and if someone else, often no one else. Part of the problem may be our translation and interpretation. The Greek verbs *kerysso* and *euangelizo* are rightly translated "to preach" and "to preach the gospel," but when we hear "preach," we often think of it in terms of vocation and occasion: The preacher preaches the gospel from the pulpit. (Let's leave the preaching to him.) But I think Eugene Peterson's paraphrase helps rescue this verse from misinterpretation: "how can they hear if nobody tells them? ...how is anyone going to tell them, unless someone is sent to do it?" (MSG). Everyone needs to hear the gospel; someone must tell them; who will it be?

The answer is, of course, you and me, all who are in Christ. We are those commissioned to go (Matt. 28:19); we are the mobilizing means of saving the lost, instruments in our Redeemer's hands. But often we are our own worst enemies, keeping ourselves from the duty and privilege of evangelism by the compromise of our conduct and communication. When the world sees

legalism or licentiousness in your conduct, they have no desire to hear of your Lord. When the testimony of your flesh shouts louder than your telling the truth of the gospel, no one hears it; they simply look and listen to what your life preaches. When what you say contradicts what you believe, who will believe you? For example, when your words (or posts, or tweets, or shares) shame, divide, and alienate, don't think anyone believes your gospel (or bible verse). Instead, we should stop and ask: Will what I say keep someone from hearing the gospel? Some things are best left unsaid.

How we act and what we say really does matter. What Paul said of the Philippians must be said of us too: we are all to “shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life” (Phil. 2:15-16). Jesus says to you and to me, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:14-16). And our light shines brightest when we are giving what the world needs most.

Though we are a people with feet of clay, we have a beautiful gift to give. But Isaiah says that “the feet of those who preach the good news ‘are beautiful.’” Of course, feet are a metaphor, referring to carrying and sharing the gospel. But why “beautiful”? Feet that carry the gospel are beautiful because they are the mobilizing means of God's love for the lost. It is a beautiful thing to love our neighbor, considering the love with which God loved us, and there is no greater gift of love to give than the gospel.

Yes, loving your neighbor requires the humility of valuing others above yourself (Phil 2:3). It requires living peaceably with everyone, as possible (Rom. 12:18). It requires self-sacrifice, spending and being spent for souls, as Paul put it (2 Cor. 12:15), but also sincere relationship. J.I. Packer says, “the enterprise required of us in evangelism is the enterprise of love: an enterprise that springs from a genuine interest in those whom we seek to win, and a genuine care for their well-being, and expresses itself in a genuine respect for them and a genuine friendliness toward them.”² In short, sharing the gospel requires the love of God, the same love with which God loves us.

Receiving the Gift

If we are to share the gospel, in love for our neighbor, what is our responsibility and what is God's? Is the burden of the lost and dying world resting on our ability? In short, never! The gospel is a gift from God. We simply deliver the gift as Christ's servants, “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1). We deliver the gift by sharing it in its simplicity and profundity, as Paul put it to the Corinthians, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). And we deliver the gift as ambassadors for Christ, entrusted with the message of reconciliation between God and man (Eph. 6:19).

Delivering the gift of the gospel does not, however, mean that it will be received. Isaiah delivered the gospel to Israel; they heard it but did not obey it, leading Isaiah to lament, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” (10:16). Undoubtedly, “faith comes from hearing,

² J.I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 80.

and hearing through the word of Christ” (10:17), but hearing does not guarantee believing, even truth from the mouth of God. But this does not deter our advancing the gospel to our neighbor and the nations.

Quoting from the nineteenth psalm, Paul reinterprets a description of God’s general revelation to describe the special revelation of the gospel beyond the borders of Israel: “Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world” (10:18). Just as “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork,” and just as “Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge,” so God has purposed that the gospel be given and received by every tribe, tongue, and nation.

And consider that we too are the recipients of this glorious advancement. Fort Smith is over 6700 miles from Jerusalem. We are separated by over 2000 years from Jesus’ death and resurrection. And yet, we are assembled as Christ’s church this morning worshiping the one, true God because the gospel was sent to us. This God purposed for his glory, and this God accomplished through Christians like you and me. Our ancestors did not know, nor do we know, who will believe the gospel, but you cannot believe what you never receive. The gift of the gospel is worth sharing with the world.

Believing the Gift

As good as the Good News is, we might wonder why doesn’t everyone believe? But even those to whom Christ came first did not believe. God says, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people” (10:21). But in striking contrast, he says, “I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me” (10:20). What is the difference between the two? One people were a nation established by God, the other people were no nation at all. Yet, those who once were not a people have become God’s people; those who had not received mercy received mercy (1 Pet. 2:10).

God said to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion,” to which Paul adds, “So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy” (Rom. 9:15-16). The difference between the believing and the unbelieving is that believing the gift of the gospel requires the gift of belief. But for the grace of God, no one would believe. Paul writes to the Ephesians, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). God’s gift of faith is his to give. Yes, he includes us in carrying, sharing, advancing the gospel, but believing the gospel is exclusively of God. As J.I. Packer says, “Evangelism is man’s work, but the giving of faith is God’s.”³ Believing in the gift is a gift.

And this must inform our evangelism. We cannot make someone believe, even those we love most, but we must be faithful to give the gift of the gospel, praying that the Giver of all good things will give the gift of faith. For, God is glorified through the salvation of his people, and through the gift of the gospel “all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (Isa. 52:10). Amen.

³ Ibid., 44.