

“Evangelism”
Romans 10:14-21
May 21, 2023

INTRODUCTION:

The word “evangelism” has become a dirty word in today’s world. Among unbelievers, it connotes images not unlike the fast-talking, dishonest used car salesman. To many, an evangelist is someone trying to sell me something I don’t want, and he won’t stop pestering me about it. Among Christians, the word is also not always positive, provoking feelings of guilt and fear.

I mentioned last week an interview with Molly Worthen, a history professor at the University of North Carolina and an occasional contributor to the *New York Times*. In the interview, she shared her testimony of how she came to faith in Christ. She also mentioned that she has had the opportunity to visit numerous Christian study centers on college campuses around the country. It has been her practice when visiting these study centers to ask the student leaders about their views of evangelism. She reported that they are almost universally negative. These young Christian leaders feel it inappropriate to attempt to persuade their non-Christian classmates to receive the good news of the gospel.

The odd thing about these negative views of evangelism is that they are the exact opposite of the word’s true meaning. The literal meaning of the word “evangelism” is a “good message.” If you get a notice from the medical lab that the tumor they biopsied from your body was benign instead of cancerous, you have been evangelized by receiving this good message. So how did this word that is such a positive word come to have such negative connotations? How might we return it to its rightful place of honor in our own hearts? Those and other questions are answered in today’s passage.

I. The Beauty of Evangelism – v. 14-15

Paul begins by speaking of the indispensable necessity of evangelism, and it is its indispensable nature that is part of what makes it beautiful. If you are stuck somewhere in your car because you lost your keys, the sight of your keys upon finding them will be beautiful because the key is an indispensable part of starting your car. If a key is indispensable for starting a car, for what is evangelism indispensable? Paul had said in verse 15, **“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”** There’s our answer. Evangelism is necessary for salvation.

Paul expands on this by asking a series of questions tracing the sequence of how a person comes to call on the Lord for salvation, beginning with the end and working back to the beginning. In order to call on God for salvation, a person has to believe. Calling on God is not just saying some words, like repeating some magic formula. It is to call on him in faith, trusting him to be our helper and deliverer from our greatest problem, which is our own sin. How is it that a person comes to call on God in faith? Paul asks that question next. **“And how are they to believe him whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?”**

These two verses present a very strong view of preaching. Let me point out two things about that. First, preaching is described here as hearing the words of Christ. I take the alternate reading in the footnote of verse 14 to be the better translation, leaving out the preposition “of.” The result is to say that in the preaching of the gospel, people are hearing Christ. This is an astounding claim, stating that the hearing of one of Christ’s messengers is to hear Christ himself. Our postmodern age is one that doesn’t think absolute truth is possible. But here we read that truth from God comes to us as we hear the word preached by sinful and fallen human beings, as long as their preaching is faithful to God’s word.

In one of my pastor’s classes, I mention the crisis in preaching that we are seeing in our day because of the postmodern philosophy that dominates our contemporary worldview. If there is no possibility of truth, which is a central tenet of postmodernism, then why should someone be given thirty minutes to stand up and preach to people? Many seminaries over the last few decades have embraced the postmodern skepticism toward truth, resulting in a crisis in the pulpits of our churches. A widely used textbook in preaching classes in these seminaries carried the title *As One Without Authority*. The title is referring to the preacher. He is the one without authority because there is no such thing as absolute truth. But there is an authority in this postmodern preaching, and it is found in the pews. Each listener has authority. So the author of the book commends what he calls “inductive preaching,” which is something like stories that lead people to draw their own conclusions about what they are supposed to do. The biblical view, reflected here in Romans 10, gives such authority to preaching that it says to hear the preacher is to hear Jesus.

The second thing I want to say about preaching from this text is to point out the word that is used for preaching. It is the word *kerusso*, which is defined as the act of proclaiming or heralding a message. This was a familiar term in Paul’s day, and its meaning was not specific to Christianity. In the Roman Empire, heralds traveled widely to announce important political news. In a day without any print media capable of large-scale production, this was the only way to do it. I can imagine that the visit of an official herald to one’s community would garner great attention. Everyone would want to come out to hear the news. We must keep in mind that evangelism is the proclamation of

good news. It is not just good advice. It declares the news of an event that has happened that changes everything. God has come to rescue and fix his broken world in the person of his Son, Jesus. This has happened outside of us, and we can experience this rescue of God by trusting in what he has done through Jesus.

If the preaching of the gospel is so important, how does it come to be preached? Preachers are sent by God. **“And how are they to preach unless they are sent?”** (v. 15). No one preaches unless God sends them. This sending by God refers both to those called to ordained leadership in the church and in a secondary sense to all Christians. The street where you live, the place where you work, the hobbies you enjoy, and the contacts provided you through your children are all part of God’s sending of his people.

Concerning those who are sent by God, Paul is reminded of a verse from Isaiah. **“How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!”** Isaiah is talking about those who bring a message of God’s reign and the victory he gives to his people over their enemies. Specifically, he is prophesying about the return to their homeland after the Babylonian exile. If those declaring the good news of release from Babylonian enemies were celebrated, how much more should those declaring release from a far more deadly enemy be celebrated. The good news of the gospel is that of release from the bondage of sin and Satan, a bondage leading not to 70 years of exile, but to the permanent condemnation of hell. Even feet made dirty from walking on dusty and muddy roads while wearing sandals are rendered beautiful because of the glorious good news proclaimed by these messengers.

II. The Rejection of Evangelism – v. 16-21

The reality of evangelism and preaching seems to be quite different than Paul’s glorious portrayal of it so far. Paul’s experiences of preaching the gospel were frequently met with fierce opposition. Instead of his feet being regarded as beautiful, he was often run out of town in a wave of persecution. We sometimes think that our era is unique, that there were times when the gospel was widely and enthusiastically embraced. There may have been times of revival where that was the case, but those times have been relatively few and of brief duration. The general pattern has been one of both opposition and acceptance. Some welcome gospel messengers while others take offense at them.

Paul acknowledges the reality of gospel opposition in verse 16. **“But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, ‘Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?’”** When God called Isaiah, he told him what he could expect from his prophetic ministry. **“Go, and say to this people: ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive’”** (Isaiah 6:9). Jeremiah was given a call that was even more difficult. **“So you**

shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you” (Jer. 7:27). That would be a difficult calling. Dedicate your entire life to preaching a gospel no one will ever accept. Expect no conversions, but keep on preaching.

We sometimes are guilty of an over-idealized view of evangelism in which we expect that people hearing the gospel will accept it readily. Indeed, some will. But many will not. Several years ago, a woman visited our church, and I had the chance to speak with her following her visit. She reported on how much she loved our church building, the people and the music. But then she added that she didn't like our missionary board because she equated missions with cultural imperialism. I explained to her that this is a calling God has given to us, though I could tell that she was offended at that idea. Though I didn't use this analogy with her, the idea that churches ought not to be engaged in evangelism is like someone who says that they like everything about a transoceanic passenger ship except one thing. They love the luxurious accommodations, the elegant dining room with its delicious food, and the conversations with other passengers. They just don't like the fact that the ship traverses water to get to its destination. Of course, that's what a ship is, and the celebration of the good news of the gospel of Jesus is what the church is.

Why do people reject the gospel and conclude that it is bad news instead of good news? Specifically, Paul is speaking of Jewish unbelief. In the rest of this chapter, he offers four reasons for this unbelief, two of them are negative statements and two are positive statements. First, he asks if it's because they haven't heard, only to reject that suggestion. Using Psalm 19 with something of a twist, he says that they have heard. **“Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.”** Psalm 19 is talking about the testimony from God's creation, but Paul uses it here to say that Israel has heard the true gospel just as clearly as creation speaks of God's glory.

Perhaps then, their rejection is due to a failure to understand the gospel. That's the next question Paul asks, only to reject that as well. Even the “foolish” Gentiles, foolish at least from Israel's perspective, have understood the gospel and embraced it. So their rejection can't be explained by a lack of understanding.

Paul then concludes with the two positive reasons for their rejection, and these are the same two reasons people still reject the gospel today. Quoting from Isaiah 65:2, Paul writes, **“All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people”** (v. 21). Israel is simply stubborn. The problem is not in their minds or their IQ, but in their hearts. They simply have no room for God in their lives. But notice what God is doing even as they reject him. He is holding out his hands to them, spreading wide his arms to welcome them. He is like a parent inviting a rebellious child to come home, offering a hug and kiss should they choose to do so. Notice the emphasis on the length of

time God has done this. “All day long” he holds himself out to them. Think about the kindness of God in this action. When someone rejects your offer of friendship, what is your response? The natural response is to withdraw from them and to close the door to a future relationship with them. God doesn’t do that. In the face of continual rejection, he holds out his arms continually to welcome them to him. This is the fourth reason for the rejection of the gospel—the rejection of God’s kindness.

From another angle, these four reasons can be looked at differently. We can see them as four things necessary to come to faith in Christ. A person must first hear the message of the gospel and then understand it. But next he must allow that gospel to address the sins of his heart. We refer to this as humble repentance. Last of all, a person must see the kindness of God through Jesus. Let’s apply this to the desire we all have to see our children and grandchildren come to the place of following Jesus. As we raise them and pray for them, these are the four things we must seek. We begin by teaching them and helping them to understand the gospel. We do this by bringing them to Sunday School and church, reading the Bible to them in the home, and helping them learn to apply the Bible to their daily lives. That takes care of the first two steps we have just covered, those of hearing and understanding the gospel.

But just as was the case with unbelieving Israel, there are many children who have grown up in the church who come at a later time to reject the gospel. That’s where these third and fourth steps apply. There must be a time when the gospel begins to address the sins of the heart, leading them to humble repentance. If we see them loving the world, we need to pray for their hearts. If your teen is consumed with clothes, appearance, popularity and sports, pray for God to change their hearts. And pray for their eyes to be opened to the kindness of God in their lives. These are the components of evangelism available to us all.

CONCLUSION:

Like many of you, I was shocked and saddened by the news this week of the passing of two of our fathers in the faith in our denomination. Harry Reeder and Tim Keller were both called home to Jesus this past week. I want to close with something Ligon Duncan wrote about Tim Keller. “If you don’t know that Tim Keller was an evangelist, you don’t know Tim Keller,” said Duncan. “Tim care[d] about the city [and] engaging culture ... but ultimately Tim want[ed] to see men and women, boys and girls from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation worshipping the triune God through faith in Jesus Christ. Every molecule of his DNA just scream[ed] that out. And when you got to know Tim, that [was] unavoidable. Tim in the PCA was a little bit like Gandalf in the Shire. We think he’s just a guy that does fireworks at birthday parties, when he’s actually out there in the world slaying dragons and taking on evil wizards.”