

Adult Bible Study from Gospel Advocate

FOUNDATIONS

FALL 2017 Preaching and Ministry



Gospel Advocate

Preparation for study should include reading the biblical text, reading the corresponding lesson in *Companion* and *Foundations* or *Horizons*, and answering the questions at the end of each lesson. Doing so will give the reader a thorough overview of the lesson and provide a solid basis for spiritual growth.



Preaching and Ministry

Jesus gave instructions to his apostles to “go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). Preaching and ministry should be part of the DNA of any Christian. Paul instructed Timothy to “be ready in season and out of season.” God has shown his love to us and commanded that we should love others also (Matt 22:39). How better to show God’s love to others than by sharing the message of His saving grace?

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The Commission to Preach

Matthew 28:18-20

¹⁸ And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.

¹⁹ “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

²⁰ “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen.

1 Corinthians 15:1-6

¹ Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand,

² by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

³ For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

⁴ and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,

5 and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve.

6 After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep.

Introduction

Because He knows man's condition and needs, God sent Jesus to earth at just the right moment so that humanity might have the opportunity to be redeemed. Describing this, Paul told the churches of Galatia, "But 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, that we might receive the adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:4-5; cf. Ephesians 1:10). When Jesus came to earth, however, He did not come merely to die. Instead, He interacted with those around Him. Matthew wrote, "And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people" (4:23).

Jesus not only exhibited truth through His actions but also proclaimed it through His words. As a preacher, He understood the necessity of exhorting others to obey God. In fact, Jesus declared preaching to be one of the primary purposes of His ministry. He told His disciples, "Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth" (Mark 1:38). Given His focus,



it is not surprising that our Lord commissioned His followers to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (16:15).

Although Jesus is perhaps better known as a teacher (cf. John 3:2), His work in preaching the necessity of repentance and preparation for the kingdom should not be overlooked (cf. Matthew 4:19). The Son of God was a preacher, and He charged His followers to be likewise. This is not surprising when we realize God specifically chose preaching as a conduit through which to convey His message to the world. Declaring this, Paul wrote, "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21).

Despite the importance God placed on preaching, everyone will not properly appreciate it. As in Paul's day, some may consider gospel preaching to be either a "stumbling block" or "foolishness" (1 Corinthians 1:23). Even so, we must steadfastly proclaim God's message regardless of how it is received. When persecution arises because people reject the message, we must not quit preaching. Like the early Christians who were scattered because of persecution, we must go "everywhere preaching the word" (Acts 8:4). Perhaps the instruction given to Timothy best explains our task: "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching" (2 Timothy 4:2). We must preach when people want

to hear God's message; we must preach when people refuse to listen.

As we study what the Bible has to say about preaching and ministry, we will learn that God intends for His followers to share the saving message of the gospel and to encourage individuals to obey it. Preaching certainly involves the act of teaching, but it requires more. Those who faithfully preach the Word will also exhort their audiences to respond. Biblical preaching demands action. Nevertheless, the responses we seek are those that come when individuals submit themselves completely to the plan of God revealed in His Word. We have been given a commission to preach.

Preaching and Teaching: Are They the Same?

(Matthew 28:18-20)

Because preaching necessarily contains instruction, it is easy to suppose preaching and teaching are one and the same. But the two are not identical. The preacher's sermon must certainly present and discuss pertinent facts from Scripture, but this is not all. He must also apply the facts to his audience and exhort the listeners to make a change if necessary. Don Sunukjian summarized the difference between preaching and teaching: "The purpose of the sermon is not to impart knowledge but to influence behavior—not to inform but to transform. The goal is not to

make listeners more educated but more Christlike" (*Invitation to Biblical Preaching*, 12).

When biblical sermons are preached, those who hear may well learn a great deal. Nevertheless, this is not all that occurs, for preaching, when done properly, addresses both the head and the heart. Teaching is an important component in the sermon, but it is not the only component. The preacher must convince his audience, but he must also exhort them to make necessary changes. Tom Holland stressed this point, writing that sermons "should inform the ignorant, denounce the moral compromiser, expose false doctrine, inspire the faithful, challenge the indifferent, encourage the despondent, and reveal God's plan of salvation for the human family. Therefore, sermons are designed to accuse, to inform, to stir, to convince, to persuade, to reassure and to present saving truth" (*Sermon*, 12). As our study will show, the sermons presented in the New Testament contain both instruction and personal application. Ours should do no less!

One passage that illustrates the unique difference between preaching and teaching is Matthew 28:18-20—the Great Commission. In that text, Jesus, because of the authority given to Him, charged His followers: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (vv. 19-20). An examination of this commission

reveals the emphasis Jesus placed on going and making disciples. When we consider that Mark's parallel account of the Great Commission emphasizes preaching the gospel (cf. Mark 16:15), we can conclude that preaching involves more than merely disseminating knowledge; it is, instead, the means by which one seeks to exhort others to become disciples of Jesus. Thus, the preacher must seek to motivate his audience to change. According to Matthew 28:19-20, this change will involve submission to the Lord in baptism, and it will demand that the disciple learn and follow the teachings of Jesus. Preaching includes teaching, but it also requires an exhortation to change. This is a chief difference between the two.

The Preaching That Saves

(*1 Corinthians 15:1-2*)

Given that preaching should both inform the audience and encourage necessary action, it follows that sermons should address matters of utmost importance, like the salvation of the soul. The apostle Paul's sermons did this. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul observed that their salvation was dependent on their holding to "that word which I preached to you" (1 Corinthians 15:2). From this statement, Paul obviously not only addressed the subject of salvation but also encouraged the Corinthians to respond accordingly.

Sermons devoted to curiosities may elicit great interest from the audience but will evoke little



change. Sermons devoted to the gospel, however, strike at the heart of what men and women deeply need and should encourage transformation through obedience to Christ. Those who preach must never stray far from foundational principles or from the subjects most needed. Like Peter, we must seek to remind our audiences of the things that are most important (cf. 2 Peter 1:12-15). Like Paul, we must not be "ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation" (Romans 1:16).

In Paul's dealings with the Corinthians, he made the gospel message a point of emphasis (1 Corinthians 15:1), and it is important that the gospel message is the message of salvation. As David Lipscomb and J. W. Shepherd observed, "In the gospel the chief fact was the resurrection of Christ from the dead. On it Christ's claim to be the Son of God turns, and on it the resurrection of man and his eternal hopes rest. It was proper that [Paul] should state what he had taught them at first of the great elementary truths on which the church had been established, but from which their minds had been diverted" (*A Commentary*, 220). If our preaching does nothing else, it must help men and women learn what they must do to be saved.

Preaching According to Scripture

(*1 Corinthians 15:3-6*)

Although biblical preaching is not identical to teaching, it must be grounded in Scripture. In

other words, the message we preach must not be of our own creation. Instead, we must, as Paul told Timothy, “Preach the word!” (2 Timothy 4:2). Paul also made this point very clearly when he reminded the Corinthians, “For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord” (2 Corinthians 4:5).

The vital connection that must exist between the sermon and Scripture is easily seen in Paul’s discussion of the nature of the gospel message in 1 Corinthians 15. He wrote, “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures” (vv. 3-4). Paul’s message was not merely an emotional appeal. Instead, it was a rational discussion of how Jesus’ death and resurrection did precisely what the Old Testament scriptures promised. By pointing out the connection between the actual events that occurred in Jesus’ life and the existence of prophecies that looked forward to those events (something Jesus also frequently did during His ministry—cf. Luke 18:31-33; 24:27, 44-46), Paul highlighted the importance of the inspired Scriptures. In doing this, he showed that preaching must be grounded in God’s Word. Paul did not speak on his own authority, but like all the apostles, he spoke “as the oracles of God” (1 Peter 4:11). As we preach, we must do no less.

Applications

- Because God chose preaching as the method to convey truth and exhort men and women to obedience (1 Corinthians 1:21), we must not take the task of preaching lightly. Those who proclaim the Word must do so both respectfully and urgently. We must respect the text being presented, and we must plead with our audience to respond as needed. Those who hear the Word proclaimed should encourage the proclamation of Scripture and honestly consider whether a change needs to be made.

- Just as Paul did, preachers should seek to “declare … the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). To do this, we must root our sermons in Scripture and refuse to deviate from God’s truth. Sermons will incorporate moments of information and moments of exhortation. The goal is to encourage the listener to submit his or her life in obedience to God and His plan. For this to occur, personal application must be made.

Questions

1. What did Jesus say was a focus of His ministry (Mark 1:38)?
2. What task did Jesus charge His apostles to do (Mark 16:15)?
3. When Jesus issued the Great Commission, what did He command His followers to do (Matthew 28:19)?
4. In addition to teaching, what component is also needed in effective preaching?
5. What did Paul preach to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 15:1)?
6. What were the Corinthians expected to do regarding the message they heard from Paul (1 Corinthians 15:2)?



Discussion

1. How does preaching differ from teaching? How are the two similar?
2. What components must be present in a biblical sermon?
3. Why is the Great Commission important to Christians today?
4. What can congregations do to encourage the faithful proclamation of Scripture?

John and Preparation

Luke 3:3-18

³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins,

⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.

⁵ ‘Every valley shall be filled And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth;

⁶ ‘And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

⁷ Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

⁸ “Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.

⁹ “And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

¹⁰ So the people asked him, saying, “What shall we do then?”

¹¹ He answered and said to them, “He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.”

¹² Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?”

¹³ And he said to them, “Collect no more than what is appointed for you.”

¹⁴ Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, “And what shall we do?” So he said to them, “Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages.”

¹⁵ Now as the people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not,

¹⁶ John answered, saying to all, “I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

¹⁷ “His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.”

¹⁸ And with many other exhortations he preached to the people.

Introduction

The life and ministry of John, the son of Zacharias and Elizabeth, is chronicled in Scripture. Mentioned by all four Gospels, passages detail his birth (Luke 1:5-25, 57-66), ministry (Matthew 3:1-17; John

3:23-36), and death (Mark 6:14-29). Because of the emphasis he placed on baptism in his preaching, he is commonly known as John the Baptist (cf. Matthew 3:1). Jesus complimented John, declaring, “Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist” (11:11).

John’s ministry began before the public ministry of Jesus. Although many individuals listened to John and sought to be baptized by him, he did not promote himself. Rather, he consistently pointed others to the One who would come after him: Jesus. Concerning Jesus, John humbly declared, “It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose” (John 1:27). And when he saw Jesus, John identified Him: “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (v. 29). His understanding of Jesus’ position is especially seen in the way he responded before the baptism of Christ. Having been asked to baptize Jesus, “John tried to prevent Him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?’” (Matthew 3:14).

John knew his purpose and position. He realized his task was to point to the coming Christ; he understood his work was preparatory. Regarding this, John 1:7-8 summarized the situation: “This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.”

As a preacher, John did not hesitate to challenge his audience. His message was simple, yet powerful:

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matthew 3:2). Rather than seeking to gain a following, he consistently directed others to look for the coming Christ. Importantly, he filled the role predicted by the prophets Isaiah and Malachi (Isaiah 40:3-5; Malachi 3:1; 4:5). Noting his important work in this regard, Jesus said of John, “For this is he of whom it is written: ‘Behold I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You’” (Matthew 11:10).

As we study Luke 3:3-18, we will see that John faithfully fulfilled his duty to prepare the way for the Lord. In so doing, he addressed the specific behavior of those in his audience and challenged them to do more than merely claim to be penitent. He applied repentance to the specific situations of their lives. He not only told his audience what they needed to know but also showed them how the truth applied to their lives. In short, he made the application!

John and Prophecy

(Luke 3:3-6)

The prophets predicted that preparatory work would precede the coming of the Lord. For example, the prophet Isaiah wrote, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God’” (40:3). The one most clearly associated with this work was the prophet Elijah. Likewise, Malachi wrote: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet

before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse” (4:5-6).

Importantly, the prophetic reference to Elijah did not mean the prophet of old would literally return from the heavens to which he was taken (cf. 2 Kings 2:11). Instead, Malachi anticipated the coming of one like Elijah. According to the angel Gabriel, this is the very role John the Baptist filled. Upon the announcement that John would be born, the angel told Zacharias: “And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,’ and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:16-17). Not surprisingly, Jesus said of John, “And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come” (Matthew 11:14).

Given these descriptions, it is fitting that John the Baptist “went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins” (Luke 3:3). He prepared the people to hear the Messiah by challenging them to change their ways. It is especially significant that John instructed the Jews to be baptized for the remission of their sins. Leon Morris explained: “It seems certain that at this time the Jews used proselyte baptism, a ceremony to cleanse converts from the defilement they saw as

a characteristic of all Gentiles. The sting in John's practice was that he applied to Jews the ceremony they regarded as suitable for unclean Gentiles" (*Luke*, 112). Jews would no longer be accepted based on their lineage. Obedience was required.

John emphasized the necessity of repentance. He did not merely call for his audience to understand the concept; he charged them to make personal application. This required an intentional change. Darrell L. Bock observed: "Repentance produces a life lived with a sense of responsibility before a sovereign God. It is an internal attitude that aims at a product. ... This idea in a religious context speaks of a reorientation of one's perspective from sin to God" (*Luke* 1:1–9:50, 286). John's preaching prepared individuals to listen to and submit to the Lord, who would offer salvation to "all flesh" (*Luke* 3:6).

John and Warning

(*Luke* 3:7-9)

Although John had invited the multitudes to repent and be baptized, he did not blindly accept those who responded to his invitation. Rather, he sternly asked: "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (*Luke* 3:7) This question might seem ironic, given that John had instructed them to do this very thing. Nevertheless, it is likely he was emphasizing that an initial response to his message without subsequently changing one's life is not enough. Repentance and baptism are necessary, but

those initial actions, without a continued reformation of one's life, are empty.

Consequently, John challenged his audience to "bear fruits worthy of repentance" (*Luke* 3:8). In other words, they were to prove their penitence by their actions. One cannot repent of past sins and continue to practice the same. He or she must change. Too, he reminded the Jews that their salvation was not based on their physical lineage. Although they might try to argue "We have Abraham as our father" (v. 8), such would be fruitless. "John's warning is that—at an individual level—Abrahamic heritage guarantees nothing before God. The best religious pedigree by itself is not an adequate source of protection before him. Each individual must assess himself or herself aright. By itself the richest of biological connections is worthless spiritually if the spiritual environment and exhortation are ignored" (Bock, *Luke* 1:1–9:50, 305).

Thankfully, John indicated to his audience there was still time to repent—even if that time was limited. Making this point, he stated: "And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (*Luke* 3:9). Essentially, he argued that obedience to God could not be put off. Judgment was coming!

John and Questions

(Luke 3:10-18)

Those who heard John preach were moved by his lesson. Thus, they asked, “What shall we do then?” (Luke 3:10). This question indicates they understood obedience to God requires more than merely engaging in a particular rite. It also stands as a reminder to preachers of the need to move from a discussion of abstract concepts to specific actions. We must not only tell people what they need to know but also instruct them regarding how they should respond appropriately to what they have learned. James R. Edwards observed that this “may signify that proclamation of the word of God should engage hearers in concrete action” (*The Gospel*, 111). John certainly did that. He indicates what repentance looks like in the lives of those who are wealthy (Luke 3:11), of tax collectors (vv. 12-13), and of soldiers (v. 14).

The passage ends with a discussion of John’s identity. Although the people wondered whether John was the Christ (Luke 3:15), he was quick to admit he was not the coming Messiah. Emphasizing his inferiority to the Christ, he stated: “I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (v. 16). Additionally, John indicated that the Christ would exercise judgment over the people (v. 17). This final point was vital to John’s overall message. John

prepared the way for the coming Christ by urging his audience to prepare for judgment.

Applications

- That the prophets predicted John’s work long before his birth reminds us of the trustworthy nature of Scripture. God not only knew Jesus’ work would be more effective if preceded by a forerunner but also understood and revealed the very details of how John could effectively accomplish such.
- Obedience to God requires more than going through the motions. It is not enough for an individual to repent and be baptized if that individual intends to live as he or she pleases. Submission to God requires that we yield both our actions and our hearts to Him.
- John sets an excellent example for preachers to follow by expressing the urgency of his message in a clear and memorable way. Listeners could “see” the ax standing ready to remove the tree. Likewise, they could envision the Lord coming in judgment. As we preach, we must not shy away from helping our audience envision the points we seek to make from Scripture.

Questions

1. What message did John preach (Luke 3:3)?
2. What prophet did Luke quote who foresaw the work of John (Luke 3:4-6)?
3. What did John call those who responded to his invitation (Luke 3:7)?
4. To what did John tell his audience that they could not appeal for salvation (Luke 3:8)?
5. What visual image did John use to help his audience envision the coming judgment (Luke 3:9)?
6. Who did the people think John was (Luke 3:15)?

**Discussion**

1. What can we learn about preaching by studying John's example?
2. How can individuals exhibit signs of repentance in their lives?
3. What can we do to help individuals understand the importance of doing more than outwardly submitting to a command?
4. In what way(s) does John distinguish himself from the Christ?

Jesus and Blessings

Matthew 5:1-12

¹ And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him.

² Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying:

³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ “Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted.

⁵ “Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth.

⁶ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled.

⁷ “Blessed are the merciful, For they shall obtain mercy.

⁸ “Blessed are the pure in heart, For they shall see God.

⁹ “Blessed are the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God.

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.

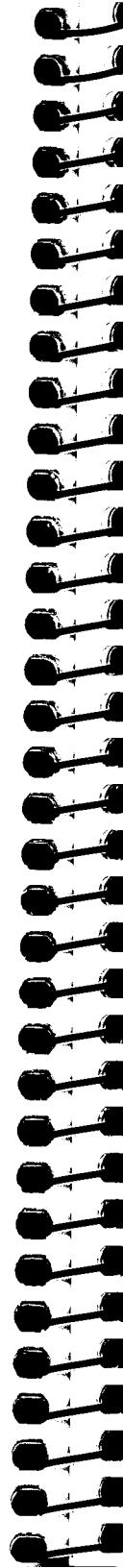
¹² “Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Introduction

The search for happiness in our culture never ends. Time and energy are spent amassing physical wealth that is seemingly never enough. Effort is expended in activities that promise to bring pleasure but leave the pleasure-seeker either unsatisfied or empty. And lives are wasted in unending attempts to obtain popularity and secure the approval and affirmation of others. Ours is an age where many individuals pretend to be happy, but few truly are. It is an age where people allow their emotions to be dictated by the number of “likes” they receive on social media.

As King Solomon did, many individuals today look for happiness in all the wrong places. Instead of seeking meaning or happiness in wealth, wisdom, pleasure, power, or ambition, we should instead seek the happiness that comes only from developing the proper relationship with God. Making this point at the end of Ecclesiastes, Solomon wrote, “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all” (12:13).

According to the New Testament, Jesus came so that spiritual happiness might be obtained. Contrasting what He offers humanity with what the world seeks to take away, He declared: “The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to



destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). But the abundant life Jesus offers is not found in the way our world typically associates with the obtaining of happiness. It does not come through wealth, status, or associations. We do not find lasting happiness by focusing on the things of this world, for this world will not last. So John wrote: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:15-17). Instead, we find true happiness when we empty ourselves of pride and ambition and humbly seek to serve God.

Perhaps the greatest discussion of happiness (or blessedness) in Scripture is found in Jesus’ most famous sermon—the Sermon on the Mount. In the section we commonly refer to as the Beatitudes, which gets its name from *beatus*, the Latin term for “blessed,” our Lord describes how individuals obtain the blessedness or happiness that often seems so fleeting. Concerning this section, Hugo McCord wrote: “Truly happy people have learned that the principles underlying the eight beatitudes of Jesus are basic, eternal, and sure. When these standards are carefully laid in men’s hearts and woven into their lives, happiness is ‘sure-fire.’ There are no misses. They lay out the pattern for happiness guaranteed”

(*Happiness Guaranteed*, 8). As we study this passage, we will see the path to happiness is not one of prideful achievement. Rather, it is one requiring humility, self-control, and devotion to God.

Poor in Spirit, Mourning, Meek

(Matthew 5:1-5)

The Sermon on the Mount is inarguably the most famous of Jesus' sermons. According to McGarvey and Pendleton, "The sermon is an announcement of certain distinctive features of the kingdom of heaven, which was said to be at hand" (*The Fourfold Gospel*, 227). At the same time, the sermon is particularly focused on behavior. Thus, Jesus powerfully, yet simply, emphasized that His followers must live differently from the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20). As He concluded the sermon, the power with which He spoke was evident to all who heard, "for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (7:29). Ultimately, as Leon Morris observed, the sermon brings us "into contact with Jesus' teaching on important aspects of the life of the servant of God" (*Matthew*, 93). Chief among these aspects, as our lesson text reveals, is the path to blessedness.

Charting the course to spiritual happiness, Jesus began, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). The term "blessed," which is sometimes equated with happiness, extends well beyond the common



understanding of that term. It involves the feeling of elation that is generally present but transfers that sensation from the physical and temporary realm to the spiritual and eternal. The happiness under consideration is not momentary. Instead, Wayne Jackson concluded, "The common word, 'beatitude,' suggests a state of blessedness or bliss" (*A New Testament Commentary*, 8). Importantly, the state is first associated with deep personal humility. To be "poor in spirit" is to realize how desperately one needs God (cf. James 4:6, 10). As David L. Turner wrote: "The first beatitude concerns authentic spirituality. God's approval does not come to those who boast of their spiritual riches. Rather, God's endorsement is for those who admit their spiritual poverty (cf. 11:5; Isa. 61:1)" (*Matthew*, 149). The reward for such is the inheritance of the "kingdom of heaven"—a reversal of fortune in the greatest possible way!

The second beatitude focuses on those who mourn. Jesus continued, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). Rather than having in mind those bereaved by tragedy or physical loss, this blessing is directed to those who weep over their sins and the sins of others. Noting this, H. Leo Boles stated: "The mourning referred to springs from sympathy with God, whose will is so grievously disregarded and thwarted by men. Not every sort of mourning can claim this blessing; the sorrows of disappointed ambition, the tears of wounded pride, have no claim on the blessings referred to here" (*Matthew*, 121). The reward for

mourning over one's sins is comfort. Such comfort is found in the forgiveness and salvation offered by Jesus.

Jesus also promised a blessing to those who exercised self-control, specifically the meek. He stated, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5). What a change from the usual assumption that one uses force to take what he or she wants! It is especially important, as Michael J. Wilkins observed, that "Jesus assumes this gentle posture as he preaches the good news, proclaims freedom, and announces the arrival of the Lord's favor (11:5), and blessed are those who do not take offense at his gentle messianic ministry (11:6)" (Matthew, 207).

Hungry, Merciful, Pure (Matthew 5:6-8)

Blessedness is promised to those who seek to learn and subsequently live according to God's will. Jesus continued, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled" (Matthew 5:6). The point in this beatitude is both straightforward and challenging. Individuals who desire to live righteously can be successful. If anything, this challenges those who are not living appropriately. "Those who realize their lack in attaining right behavior before God, rather than those who boast of their righteous accomplishments, will receive what they long for" (Turner, Matthew,



151). God is concerned with both how we live and whether we are seeking to do differently.

Beatiitudes are also bestowed on those who are merciful and those who are pure in heart. To the merciful, Jesus declared, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7). With these words, Jesus introduced a concept that would be stressed throughout His ministry: Those who wish to be forgiven must be willing to forgive (cf. 18:35). Later in this same sermon, He made a similar point and taught His followers to pray, "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (6:12). To the pure in heart, Jesus promised, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (5:8). The emphasis on the need for personal purity is not limited to this blessing. The author of Hebrews wrote, "Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). Paul stated, "Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Corinthians 7:1). And Peter charged, "Abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul" (1 Peter 2:11). The reward for purity is the opportunity to "see God."

Peacemakers, Persecuted (Matthew 5:9-12)

Jesus also extended a special blessing to the peacemakers. He stated, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God"

(Matthew 5:9). Because Jesus is the “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6; cf. Luke 1:79), those who follow His example will seek peace as well. This does not mean we will strive for peace in every circumstance. Such is not always possible (cf. Matthew 10:34-39). As far as we are concerned, however, we should be peaceful and promote such. So Paul wrote, “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12:18). This is what God expects of His children.

Finally, Jesus spoke particularly to those who were being persecuted. He was well aware that those who seek truth are sometimes mistreated. So He stated, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:10). Followers of Christ will not always be well received (cf. 1 Peter 4:14-16). Godly individuals may be subjected to slander and disdain (Matthew 5:11). Nevertheless, a reward awaits those who persevere.

Application

- The Beatitudes focus upon areas of life Christians can address and control. Those who humble themselves before God, who realize they fall short of His expectations and are saddened by that fact, who control their emotions and impulses, who seek righteousness as one seeks physical nourishment, who extend mercy to those who wrong them, who maintain integrity, who seek to live peacefully with those around them and who faithfully endure the

persecutions leveled against followers of Christ will truly have blessedness in their lives. This is not the sort of happiness that comes from an achievement or moment of success, for that feeling eventually passes. It is, rather, a spiritual happiness that endures.

Questions

1. What sermon was Jesus preaching when He issued the Beatitudes?
2. What does “beatitude” mean?
3. What kind of poverty is Jesus addressing in Matthew 5:3?
4. What is the meaning of the term “meek” (Matthew 5:5)?
5. What must we extend to others if we wish to receive it from God (Matthew 5:7)?

6. What will the peacemakers be called (Matthew 5:9)?

7. Whom does Jesus cite as an example to those persecuted (Matthew 5:12)?

Discussion

1. To what pursuits or things do people turn in their search for happiness today? What can congregations do to help people pursue true happiness?

2. How is it possible for those who mourn to be happy or blessed?

3. What can we do to increase our hunger and thirst for righteousness?

4. What steps can a Christian take to ensure he or she has a pure heart?



Jesus and Warnings

Matthew 6:1-15

¹ “Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

² “Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

³ “But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,

⁴ “that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.

⁵ “And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

⁶ “But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

⁷ “And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.

⁸ “Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.

⁹ “In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name.

¹⁰ “Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ “Give us this day our daily bread.

¹² “And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors.

¹³ “And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

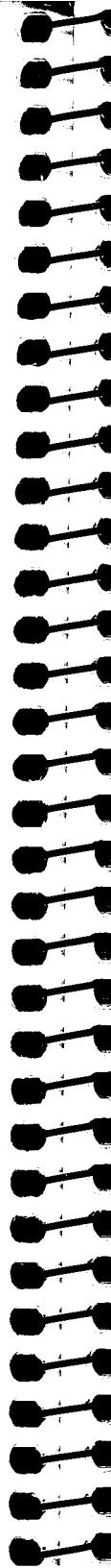
¹⁴ “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

¹⁵ “But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Introduction

When we hear the term “warning,” we immediately think of danger. For example, when a warning is issued with regard to the weather, we understand the conditions are unfavorable and protective shelter is likely needed. The same could be said when we see a warning sign on the road. Such indicates hazardous driving conditions exist. To ignore such a warning is to place one’s self in peril. Those who do so are unreasonable.

But warnings are not just issued with regard to physical dangers. The Bible is filled with warnings



about spiritual pitfalls. In the Old Testament, Moses warned the Israelites, “But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you” (Deuteronomy 28:15). Elsewhere, the psalmist discussed the value of God’s Word and the statutes, commandments, and judgments contained therein. Describing these, he wrote, “Moreover by them Your servant is warned, and in keeping them there is great reward” (Psalm 19:11). The warnings sounded throughout Scripture were issued for the benefit of those who follow God.

For this reason, we must not ignore warnings found in the Bible. In our lesson text, Jesus issued warnings concerning both our actions and attitude. He was particularly focused on hypocritical, insincere, and selfish behavior. Thus, He challenged His followers to do differently than the religious leaders who alerted others when they gave and who drew attention to themselves when they prayed. He also reminded His audience of the importance of possessing a forgiving spirit. Importantly, Jesus did not merely tell His audience what to avoid. He also taught them how to give, how to pray, and why forgiveness was necessary. He both sounded a warning and charted a path to safety. We would do well to heed the warning and accept the direction He offered.

Giving

(Matthew 6:1-4)

Our text begins with Jesus discussing the motivation behind “charitable deeds” (NKJV) or “righteousness” (ESV). He declared: “Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven” (Matthew 6:1). Essentially, our motivation—the reason we give or seek to practice and exhibit righteousness—matters. Here, followers of God were directed to act differently from the religious leaders of that day. Particularly, Jesus had in mind avoiding the practices of the scribes and Pharisees. The point, as Michael J. Wilkins noted, is simple: “If Jesus’ disciples fall into the same attention-seeking display of public piety, ‘you will have no reward from your Father in heaven’ (6:1)” (Matthew, 270).

Having noted the necessity of having a righteousness that “exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees” (Matthew 5:20), our Lord cited examples in which this can and should be the case. Jesus thus described a specific behavior He wished His followers to avoid: “Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward” (6:2). According to Craig L. Blomberg, “It is not clear whether the trumpets ‘in the synagogues and



on the streets’ (v. 2) were literal or metaphorical (cf. our expression ‘blow your own horn’). The best guess may be that they refer to the noise and clang of throwing money into various collection receptacles. But Jesus’ point is unambiguous: his followers must not parade their piety or show off their good deeds” (Matthew, 116). The Pharisee in Jesus’ parable in Luke 18 stands as an example of this point. He openly prayed and announced, “I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess” (v. 12).

Unlike those who call attention to themselves when offering a charitable gift, Jesus’ disciples are to behave discreetly. So Jesus continued, “But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly” (Matthew 6:3-4). Jesus did not mean to imply it is possible to be so secretive that one does not even know what he gives. He was simply urging discretion. We do not give so we can brag about what we have given. Secrecy should characterize our efforts. H. Leo Boles summarized the point: “The motive should be to help the needy in the name of Christ; the motive should be to glorify God and not to receive glory for self. When one does have the right motive there will be no display, no parade, no self-laudation; but there will be the quietness of spirit and simplicity of purpose to honor and glorify God” (*A Commentary on the Gospel*, 156).

Praying

(Matthew 6:5-13)

Jesus also warned His audience to avoid praying like the hypocrites who sought to draw attention from others: “And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward” (Matthew 6:5). Rather than praying in a prominent location that might cause the focus to be placed on the one praying, Jesus instructed His followers, “But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” (v. 6).

This does not mean it is wrong to pray publicly or that one can pray only in isolation. Clearly, there are occasions where prayer was offered publicly by the early church (cf. Acts 4:24-31). The point, then, is as Leon Morris observed: Jesus “is giving direction for one’s own prayers and indicating that they are to be undertaken with a single eye on God, not with a side glance at people who could be impressed” (*The Gospel*, 141).

Those who pray properly must also learn that the efficacy of their prayer does not depend on either their eloquence or the length of their prayers. To continually use vain repetitions or slogans with the idea that God will be more likely to act because of



one’s phraseology is misguided (Matthew 6:7; cf. Acts 19:28, 34). The God to whom we pray already knows our needs (Matthew 6:8). We do not have to rely upon cleverly framed words or unceasing cries to capture His attention (cf. 1 Kings 18:26-29).

Instead of praying so that others might hear us and compliment our spirituality, we should seek to pray in a manner that acknowledges God, His will, and our reliance upon Him. This is seen in the components of the model prayer Jesus provided in Matthew 6:9-13. Although those who follow this model will request God to bless them in various ways, this prayer is hardly selfish. So David L. Turner argued: “Prayer is not first and foremost an exercise to vindicate the disciple’s causes, meet the disciple’s needs, fulfill the disciple’s desires, or solve the disciple’s problems. Rather, one’s priorities must be the promotion of God’s reputation, the advancement of God’s rule, and the performance of God’s will” (*Matthew*, 187).

Forgiving

(Matthew 6:14-15)

Having instructed His disciples to ask God for forgiveness (Matthew 6:12), Jesus expanded that theme and declared: “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (vv. 14-15). This reintroduces a prominent theme in the teachings of Christ: we must be willing to

forgive others if we want God to forgive us. Boles puts it simply: “The one who cannot forgive others or who will not forgive others puts himself where he cannot ask God to forgive him” (*A Commentary on the Gospel*, 162).

Here, Jesus was not imposing mandatory forgiveness without repentance. God does not forgive us unless we repent of our sin. So 1 John 1:9 declares, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” At the same time, He does not expect us to forgive others unless they repent. So Jesus said elsewhere, “If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him” (Luke 17:3). Nevertheless, we must follow the example of our Lord and be willing to forgive those who have done us wrong (cf. 23:34). Indeed, we must forgive if we wish to be forgiven. The warnings Jesus sounded in this section of the Sermon on the Mount are not to be taken lightly. Forgiveness, which is something we all desperately need, cannot be obtained by the one who is unwilling to forgive. Take heed! Emphasizing this, McGarvey and Pendleton wrote: “Forgiveness may be difficult, but it is essential: we should realize that as we pray. Jesus presents this truth positively and negatively, that we may make no mistake about it” (*The Fourfold Gospel*, 254).

Applications

- This passage shows us that the motivation behind our behavior is as important as the behavior itself.

Christianity is not about going through the motions. Instead, it is about yielding first our will and then our actions to our Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. We do not give so that others will praise us; we give so that God is glorified. We do not pray so that we might receive compliments; we pray to communicate with and express our dependence upon God.

- The model for prayer that Jesus utters in Matthew 6:9-13 is just that—a model. It provides a structure that guides the one learning to pray. We are reminded of the importance of exalting God and His will, and we are reminded of how deeply we depend upon God. This prayer should be learned from. Our Lord gave no evidence that it should be used to the exclusion of all others. In fact, this seems to be the very thing He was teaching against in the context (v. 7). Some prayers will be shorter (cf. Nehemiah 2:4); others will be longer (cf. John 17).

Questions

1. What did Jesus warn us to avoid with regard to our charitable deeds (Matthew 6:1)?
2. What did Jesus say the hypocrites do before they give (Matthew 6:2)?

3. How will God reward those who give from the proper motivation (Matthew 6:4)?
4. What should we avoid while praying (Matthew 6:5, 7)?
5. Upon whom and what should we focus when praying (Matthew 6:9-10)?
6. What does God promise to do for those who willingly forgive others (Matthew 6:14)?
7. What will happen to those who are unwilling to forgive others (Matthew 6:15)?



Discussion

1. What can Christians do to make sure their motivation is genuine?
2. Why do you think Jesus taught His followers to pray for their “daily” bread? What does this teach us about the requests we make in prayer?
3. How should the prayer found in Matthew 6:9-13 be used today?
4. Why do you think Jesus emphasized that we must be willing to forgive in order to be forgiven?

Jesus and Worry

Matthew 6:25-34

²⁵ "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?

²⁶ "Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

²⁷ "Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?

²⁸ "So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin;

²⁹ "and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

³⁰ "Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

³¹ "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'

³² "For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

³³ “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.

³⁴ “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”

Introduction

The preacher is constantly tasked with determining the message his audience most needs to hear proclaimed. This is not always easy. Do people need a reminder of first principles (2 Peter 1:12-15)? Are there times when encouragement is most appropriate (Hebrews 3:12-13)? Should we reflect on the lives of those who have gone before us (Romans 15:4)? Are there spiritual dangers Christians need to be warned about (1 Timothy 4:1-6)? Surely all of these deserve consideration. Regardless, the Word of God must be proclaimed (2 Timothy 4:2), for through its direction “the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (3:17).

What specific subject should the sermon address? Often the circumstances or events taking place will dictate the answer. Jude certainly felt this way when he penned his short epistle. He had one subject in mind, but found it more needful to address another. Expressing this, he wrote, “Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the



faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (v. 3). But what about when the answer is not obvious? In such cases, the preacher must seek balance and address issues affecting his audience. This can be done through either topical or expository studies.

In the Sermon on the Mount, we have perhaps the greatest example of a sermon addressing the needs of the audience. Because Jesus knows what is in man (John 2:25), this is not surprising. He understood what His audience needed to hear. Throughout the sermon, Jesus addressed a variety of subjects and challenged His listeners to conduct themselves in a manner different from the religious elite of that day (Matthew 5:20). But Jesus did not merely address outward conduct. He also discussed both the motivations and emotions of His listeners. In one particularly well-known section—Matthew 6:25-34—Jesus considered the problem of worry. Having charged His listeners to rely upon God in prayer (vv. 11-13), He identified worry as a hindrance to such. He understood that those who worry do not trust God completely, and He showed worry should not characterize His followers. Jesus’ discussion about worry was pertinent to His audience; it remains relevant today.

About Life

(Matthew 6:25-27)

In the section preceding the discussion of worry in Matthew 6, Jesus told His audience they had to

choose between serving God or worldly possessions, declaring: “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (v. 24). Jesus went on to say: “Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?” (v. 25). His point was clear: you must choose to serve God, and you must place your confidence completely in Him. Further explaining the connection between the sections, McGarvey and Pendleton wrote: “... having warned against a double vision and a double service, [Jesus] now warns against a double mind as to the comparative value of the benefits to be derived from the service of God or the service of mammon. ... By single-mindedness we can find peace, for only God is to be relied upon. By double-mindedness we fall to worrying, for mammon may fail to supply those things which we feel we need” (*The Fourfold Gospel*, 257-258).

Those who choose to serve God over physical possessions are instructed not to “worry” (NKJV) or “be anxious” (ESV) about their physical lives. The term that is translated “worry” can be used to depict legitimate concerns (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:32; Philippians 2:20). Even so, it can also be used to describe a lack of dependence upon God (4:6). Identifying the latter usage as fitting our lesson text, Michael J. Wilkins observed: “Worry is inappropriate or wrong when it



is misdirected, is in wrong proportion, or indicates a lack of trust in God. It is this latter sense that Jesus addresses here” (*Matthew*, 297).

To combat the problem of worry, our Lord asked several rhetorical questions (*Matthew* 6:25-28). The first question, found in the latter half of verse 25, reminded the audience there is more to our existence than the physical. There, Jesus asked, “Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?” Obviously, some aspects of our existence extend well beyond our physical needs or our limited abilities to secure those things for ourselves. According to David L. Turner, “The implication is that the God who gives life can easily supply the means to sustain it (cf. 4:4; Prov. 30:8-9)” (*Matthew*, 199).

The second question is found in *Matthew* 6:26. After instructing His audience to consider “the birds of the air” and notice that “they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns” yet are well taken care of, Jesus asked, “Are you not of more value than they?” His point was well made. The God who placed man atop His creation (*Genesis* 1:26-28) provides for creatures both great and small. If He cares for the birds, surely He cares for individuals made in His own image. Jesus then asked, “Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?” (*Matthew* 6:27) or “Which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life” (ESV). Like the other questions Jesus raised, this one was designed to show that God, not man, is in control. Even so, it reminds the audience of their inability to change certain

things. Whether Jesus was referring to man's height or the length of his days, Leon Morris observed: "It is clear that he is putting a firm limit to what worrying can do. Worrying is futile. Why engage in it?" (*The Gospel*, 159).

About Clothing

(Matthew 6:28-30)

As He had done when discussing God's care for the birds of the air, Jesus reasoned from the lesser to the greater when discussing God's care for the plants. His point was simple: if God cares for things that are seemingly insignificant, surely He cares for things that are important. Jesus continued: "So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these" (Matthew 6:28-29). Although plants do not put forth effort to care for themselves, they are more beautiful than the most extravagant king! How can this be? Only through the arrangement of God.

Nevertheless, the beauty of the plant is short-lived. So Jesus noted, "Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?" (Matthew 6:30). Importantly, He did not make this point to discourage His audience. Instead, Jesus sought to strengthen their resolve. Craig L. Blomberg explained: "If God lavishes such concern



over the rest of his creation, how much more does he love us! Again, Jesus uses the characteristically Jewish type of reasoning—from the lesser to the greater. If the logic of this argument be granted, then worry can result only from a lack of genuine belief in God's goodness and mercy" (*Matthew*, 126). No wonder Jesus referred to worriers as "you of little faith" (v. 30)!

About Tomorrow

(Matthew 6:31-34)

After challenging His audience to avoid worrying about food or clothing, Jesus explained why Christians should approach life differently. He concluded: "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things" (Matthew 6:31-32). Rather than acting like unbelievers who have no reason to consider God's care or ability to provide, His children should do otherwise. H. Leo Boles summarized: "We do not expect the Gentiles or heathen to trust God for these material blessings, but we do expect his children to trust him for them. He knows our needs and in his own way will supply them. He is wise enough to know our needs, good enough to supply them, and powerful enough to do so; furthermore he has promised to do this; hence we can trust him" (*A Commentary on the Gospel*, 170).

The question is not, should we trust God for our provisions and avoid worry? It is rather, will we express our faith in God by seeking first His kingdom rather than seeking first our physical needs? Ultimately, Jesus declared this to be the proper response to worry. He encouraged, “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:33). Too, He charged His followers to refrain from trying to handle too much at once. The problems of today are enough. So He stated: “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble” (v. 34). Tomorrow is in God’s hands. Rather than worry about it, we should turn it over to Him.

Application

- The sin of worry is both universally condemned and overwhelmingly practiced. We know we should not worry, yet many individuals do. Some worry about the past. Some worry about the future. Some even worry about the present. Whatever the case might be, a better course of action would be to learn to rely more upon God. When it comes to things in the past, we must trust that God is willing to forgive us when we repent. We may not be able to undo a wrong that has been committed, but we can be forgiven (1 John 1:9). When it comes to the future, we must trust that God is capable of keeping the promises He has made (2 Peter 1:3-4). And when it comes to the present, we must trust that God will give us the strength to



endure whatever trial comes our way (James 1:2-6). Regardless, worry is not the answer.

Questions

1. What animal did Jesus cite as an example of God’s care (Matthew 6:26)?
2. What king did Jesus say was not arrayed as finely as the lilies (Matthew 6:29)?
3. Who did Jesus say seeks after food and clothing (Matthew 6:32)?
4. What did Jesus say God knows about us (Matthew 6:32)?
5. What are we to seek first (Matthew 6:33)?
6. What did Jesus say is “sufficient for the day” (Matthew 6:34)?

Discussion

1. Why is worry a problem for so many people?
2. What can we do to address the problem of worry in our lives or in the lives of others?
3. Why do you think Jesus stressed the Father's knowledge when talking about the problem of worry?
4. What steps can we take to keep our focus on the problems of today?



Jesus and Challenges

Matthew 7:13-23

¹³ “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it.

¹⁴ “Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.

¹⁵ “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.

¹⁶ “You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles?

¹⁷ “Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.

¹⁸ “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.

¹⁹ “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

²⁰ “Therefore by their fruits you will know them.

²¹ “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.

²² “Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’

²³ “And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”

Introduction

Those who preach God’s Word must do more than relay information. They must also call their audience to action. Both the Old and New Testaments contain examples of preachers who did this very thing. The prophet Amos, for instance, warned the people of Israel that God’s judgment was coming. Importantly, he did not just want them to be aware of the punishment that would result if they failed to change course; he also wanted them to repent. Consequently, he declared, “Prepare to meet your God, O Israel!” (Amos 4:12). Having issued that stern challenge, Amos supported it by assuring the people of Israel that God was able to do what He promised. So he continued, “For behold, He who forms the mountains, and creates the wind, who declares to man what his thought is, and makes the morning darkness, who treads the high places of the earth—the LORD God of hosts is His name” (v. 13).

Like Amos, the apostle Peter also called his audience to action. After revealing the physical earth will eventually be burned up (2 Peter 3:10), he challenged, “Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on



fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat?” (vv. 11-12).

In our lesson text, Matthew 7:13-23, Jesus concluded the Sermon on the Mount and challenged His audience to act upon the things He taught them. They had been told they had to possess a righteousness that “exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees” in order to “enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:20). Consequently, each individual had to make a decision. Would they follow the well-traveled path blazed by the Pharisees? Or would they choose to live as Jesus prescribed? Ultimately, He taught that obedience to God’s will is what matters and challenged them to do so. Making this clear, He declared, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (7:21).

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenged His listeners to do more than hear the Word. He exhorted them to act upon it. Leon Morris summarized His teaching: “Jesus calls for wholehearted commitment to himself and denounces spurious discipleship. He speaks about two ways that lie before people, about the importance of living fruitful lives, and about deeds that back up one’s words” (*The Gospel*, 174). Perhaps His challenge is best seen in the way He concluded the famous sermon: “Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that

house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock" (Matthew 7:24-25). The challenge to both hear and do the will of God remains even today.

The Right Way

(Matthew 7:13-14)

Although many individuals in our postmodern culture question whether there is absolute truth, Jesus did not have doubts about that matter. Thus, He instructed His audience to choose between going one of two directions: "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it" (Matthew 7:13).

Jesus' words emphasize the contrast existing between two possible spiritual paths. One is narrow; the other is broad. Few follow one; many follow the other. One leads to safety; the other leads to destruction. Noting the differences between the two, Michael J. Wilkins wrote: "The broad gate and road is inviting, offering plenty of room for those who would follow the cultural and pious norm of the religious leaders. The terms 'wide' and 'broad' are spatial, but they also evoke a sense of ease and comfort. One can enter and travel comfortably and unmolested on this roomy road. ... The narrow gate and road is much more restrictive, because it is limited to Jesus and his manner of discipleship. His is the minority way insofar as few will dare abandon the popular opinion of people and the religious establishment.



The terms 'small' and 'narrow' are also spatial, but they balance the metaphor by evoking images of difficulty" (Matthew, 321-322).

What Jesus does not do is allow for either ambivalence or relativism. You do not have the liberty to refuse to choose a path, for if you refuse, you join with those who walk the broad and easy path. Too, you cannot seek an alternative path or attempt to chart your own course. Jesus does not give you that option. You must either follow the path He has charted, or you will follow the path taken by so many others. There are only two paths. One way is right; the other path is wrong.

Jesus' challenge is not unclear. His listeners must make a choice. Those who make the right choice and seek to enter through the narrow gate will face various obstacles. Nevertheless, they will find life. So He declared, "Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:14).

The Right Fruit

(Matthew 7:15-20)

Besides exhorting His audience to choose the right spiritual path, Jesus challenged His listeners to distinguish between those who teach truth and those who teach error. He warned, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves" (Matthew 7:15). We must realize that not everyone who teaches

speaks the truth. As Jesus' description shows, some false teachers will disguise themselves in hopes of getting individuals to let down their guard. Usually, false teachers do this by speaking just enough truth to gain the confidence of the listeners. After they have gained either a foothold or a following, they will introduce error and devour their prey.

So how can individuals identify false teachers? According to Jesus, they do so by inspecting the fruit the teachers produce. He stated: "You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit" (Matthew 7:16-17). Explaining the meaning of this admonition, H. Leo Boles wrote: "'Fruits' do not necessarily mean the doctrines of false teachers, but the entire moral effect of their teaching. The infallible test of all religious teaching is its practical result in the lives of those who receive it. The hypocrisy of all false teachers will be detected by those who closely watch them" (*A Commentary on the Gospel*, 180).

Rather than simply accepting everything someone teaches, we are obligated to test what we hear against the standard of God's Word. Like the Bereans, we should search "the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things" are true (Acts 17:11). This will especially require us to consider the eventual effect of the doctrine being promoted—i.e. its fruit. If the fruit is good, the preaching or teaching is also good. If not, it must be rejected. As the tree that stops bearing fruit is cut down and burned, so false



doctrine, when discovered, should be withheld and discarded. Our challenge is to consider both the doctrine being taught and the impact it has upon us. We should promote truth and reject error. To those who are spiritually mature, the difference between the two should be evident (Matthew 7:20).

The Right Action

(Matthew 7:21-23)

The third challenge Jesus issued in our lesson text involves putting religion into practice in one's life—something the false teachers, whom Jesus warned His audience about, were not doing. Stressing that acceptance in the eyes of God requires more than a mere profession of faith, Jesus stated, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Concerning this, Wayne Jackson observed: "Not everyone who claims [to] identify with the Lord is truly with him. Consistent obedience to the Father is the deciding factor concerning who will enter the kingdom of heaven (v. 21)" (*A New Testament Commentary*, 14).

It should be noted, however, that just because someone thinks an action or deed is religious does not mean it is. Nor does it mean it is acceptable to God. Making this point, Jesus continued: "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And

then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” (Matthew 7:22-23). Some actions appear pious but lack the approval of our Lord. God doesn’t want His followers to just bear fruit; He wants us to bear the right fruit! Our lives must reflect our devotion to Him. This is the very thing Jesus challenges His followers to do.

Applications

- Individuals need to be reminded that God has a plan for their salvation. His plan is not subjective. Rather, it is an objective plan requiring men and women to submit their lives completely to Him. Those who do so must “enter by the narrow gate” because it alone leads to life (Matthew 7:13-14). This does not mean the faithful will never experience difficulty or trial. Nevertheless, whatever trouble one has because of his or her dedication to Christ will be worthwhile eternally.

- Religion that pleases God requires more than a proclamation of faith. Followers of Christ must do the will of God (Matthew 7:21). The fruit we bear demonstrates our faithfulness. If we do not bear good fruit, it is because we are seeking to do our own will rather than that of God. We cannot replace devotion to God with empty claims. Neither can we substitute busyness for fidelity.

Questions

1. Which spiritual path do most people follow (Matthew 7:13)?
2. To what does the narrow gate and difficult path lead (Matthew 7:14)?
3. How do false prophets disguise themselves (Matthew 7:15)?
4. How can we tell if someone is a false prophet (Matthew 7:16)?
5. Who did Jesus say will “enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 7:21)?
6. What will happen to those who make great religious claims but fail to know Jesus (Matthew 7:22-23)?

Discussion

1. How does Jesus' discussion of the two spiritual paths relate to (or refute) the postmodern concept that all truth is relative?
2. What can Christians do to be better prepared to identify false teachers?
3. What did Jesus mean when He said we must do the will of God (Matthew 7:21)?
4. In your opinion, what is the greatest challenge issued to Christians in this passage?



Jesus the Good Shepherd

John 10:1-18

¹ “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber.

² “But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.

³ “To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

⁴ “And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.

⁵ “Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.”

⁶ Jesus used this illustration, but they did not understand the things which He spoke to them.

⁷ Then Jesus said to them again, “Most assuredly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep.

⁸ “All who ever came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them.

⁹ “I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.

¹⁰ “The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.

¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.

¹² “But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them.

¹³ “The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep.

¹⁴ “I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own.

¹⁵ “As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.

¹⁶ “And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd.

¹⁷ “Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again.

¹⁸ “No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father.”

Introduction

Scripture frequently uses figures of speech to communicate truth. The figures employed vary in form and function. Nevertheless, some teach by analogy. In such cases, comparisons are drawn



between the known and unknown in hopes of helping to explain or develop a particular concept. Perhaps the most familiar of these figures are the simile and the metaphor. The simile compares one thing to another and uses the terms “like” or “as” to describe the relationship under consideration. For example, when discussing the second coming of Jesus, the apostle Paul wrote, “The day of the Lord so comes *as* a thief in the night” (1 Thessalonians 5:2, emphasis added). His point is that Jesus’ return will occur at an unexpected moment. Thus, the analogy is drawn between the timing of the Lord’s return and the thief’s stealthy approach.

Although the metaphor also works by way of comparison, it is stronger than the simile in its assertion. It does not merely say that something resembles another thing. It declares that one thing *is* another. Explaining the difference between the two figures, E. W. Bullinger wrote, “While, therefore, the word ‘resembles’ marks the simile: ‘represents’ is the word that marks the metaphor” (*Figures of Speech*, 735). To explain his point, consider what is arguably the most famous metaphor used in Scripture: Psalm 23. That text begins, “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.” Essentially, the psalmist is saying that a faithful shepherd—one who cares for and protects his sheep—represents the way the Lord faithfully provides for His people.

In our lesson text, Jesus describes Himself using two different but very powerful metaphors, both of which pertain to the care of a flock. In the first

instance, He declared, “Most assuredly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep” (John 10:7). This analogy established Jesus as the means to safety for those who follow Him. In the second instance, He stated: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep” (v. 11). Again, He stressed His willingness to protect His people.

Given the obvious presence of metaphors in the text, it is easy for us simply to focus on the analogies being drawn by the Lord. But Jesus is doing more than comparing Himself to either the door of a sheepfold or to a shepherd. He is teaching His followers about His legitimate claim to lead, provide, and protect. As we study our Lord’s words, we will find comfort in both His knowledge of His people and His willingness to sacrifice Himself for those who follow Him. If anything, this should motivate us to faithfulness.

The True Shepherd (John 10:1-6)

Jesus’ discourse followed His healing of the blind man in John 9. After that notable miracle had been performed, the Pharisees attempted to coerce the one healed into denouncing Jesus (v. 24). Refusing to do so, the man boldly declared, “If this Man were not from God, He could do nothing” (v. 33). In response, the Pharisees cast the man from the synagogue. According to McGarvey and Pendleton, this precipitated the discussion that followed. They

wrote: “In this section Jesus proceeds to contrast his own care for humanity with that manifested by the Pharisees, who had just cast out the beggar. Old Testament prophecies were full of declarations that false shepherds would arise to the injury of God’s flock (Ezek. [34:1-6]; Jer. [33:1-6]; Zech. [11:4-11]). But other prophecies spoke of the true shepherding of God and his Messiah (Ps. [23]; [77:20]; [80:1]; [95:7]; Jer. [31:10]; Ezek. [34:31]; Mic. [7:14]; Isa. [43:11]). The Pharisees were fulfilling the first line of prophecies, and Jesus was fulfilling the second” (*The Fourfold Gospel*, 468).

Stressing His legitimate right to lead and protect His people, Jesus declared, “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber” (John 10:1). Here, Jesus referenced the sheepfold—a place designed to provide safety to the sheep, but He does so with the intent of contrasting Himself with those who seek to do harm to the flock. According to Gerald L. Borchert, “Such a sheepfold would likely have been either a circular or square enclosure, probably constructed like a high stone fence or wall and perhaps topped with vines.... Unless an intruder was willing to confront the watchman, the only way into the sheepfold was to climb the wall (cf. 10:1)” (*John*, 331). Unlike the thieves or robbers, the shepherd is able to enter the sheepfold properly—through the door (v. 2). When he approaches, the doorkeeper will allow the

legitimate shepherd to enter, and that individual will gather his sheep and lead them to the fields (vv. 3-4).

With these words, Jesus described a scene His audience would have been familiar with. They had seen a mass of animals dissolve as each sheep followed its shepherd. But He was not merely recounting a well-known occurrence. He was, instead, contrasting how He dealt with His followers in comparison with how the religious leaders did so. Just as sheep would not follow a stranger (John 10:5), so the people should not follow those who did not have their best interests in mind. Guy N. Woods summarized the point: “The lesson is obvious. Jesus is the good shepherd; faithful disciples will hear (understand and heed) his voice; they will not listen to strangers (false teachers) who would lead them astray. People thus indicate whose sheep they are by whose voice they follow! The voice of Jesus is heard through his word which has been revealed to us by inspired men (Heb. 1:1; 2:1-4)” (*A Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, 205).

The Door of the Sheep

(John 10:7-13)

Despite the clarity of Jesus’ analogy, His audience failed to understand the spiritual point He was making or its application (John 10:6). Thus, Jesus spoke even more openly and stated: “Most assuredly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who ever came before Me are thieves and robbers, but



the sheep did not hear them” (vv. 7-8). To declare Himself to be the door of the sheep is to say He is the only portal to safety. Those who looked for safety from any other religious leader looked in vain. All others—including the Pharisees—were likened to thieves and robbers. So He restated: “I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture” (v. 9). Concerning the analogies Jesus used in this section, Wayne Jackson observed: “All of his competitors (either messianic pretenders or those who opposed his teaching, e.g., the scribes and Pharisees) were spiritual criminals to whom the faithful must pay no heed (v. 8). Christ is the exclusive door to salvation and to sustenance (v. 9)” (*A New Testament Commentary*, 168).

To emphasize His concern for His followers, Jesus contrasted what He offered with what others sought to take. He declared: “The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). With these words, Jesus was not simply issuing a proverb. Instead, He was developing the contrast between those who would harm the sheep and the One who provided care and protection.

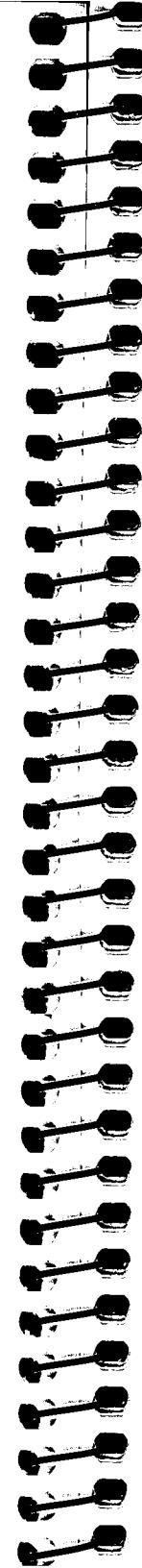
Unlike the hirelings who would flee when danger approached (John 10:12), Jesus—the Good Shepherd—would willingly sacrifice “His life for the sheep” (v. 11). This could certainly be done if a shepherd willingly stood between his flock and a wild beast (cf. 1 Samuel 17:34-36). But Jesus was willing

to do much, much more. Noting this, D. A. Carson wrote: Jesus “points beyond the metaphorical world to himself. He does not merely risk his life, he lays it down, in line with the Father’s will (vv. 17, 18). Far from being accidental, Jesus’ death is precisely what qualifies him to be the good shepherd—a point presupposed in Hebrews 13:20, which acknowledges Jesus to be ‘that Great Shepherd of the sheep’” (*John*, 386). Jesus is clearly more concerned for His flock than any hireling could be (*John* 10:13). He did not flee from danger; He willingly faced death.

The Knowledge of the Sheep

(*John* 10:14-18)

Jesus’ legitimacy, unlike that of the religious leaders of His day, is perhaps best seen in His knowledge of His followers. Just as a shepherd knows the animals under his care, so Jesus knows and is known by His disciples. Stressing this point, He stated, “I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own” (*John* 10:14). This knowledge is neither shallow nor overstated. So Woods wrote: “It is of the same kind, though, of course, not of the same extent as that communion subsisting between the Father and the Son. This means that there is a communion existing between the disciples of the Lord and the Lord himself of understanding, love, fellowship and regard that may properly be compared, in degree, at least, with that existing between the Father and the Son” (*A Commentary on the Gospel According*



to John, 211). Because of this knowledge, Jesus was motivated to “lay down [His] life for the sheep” (v. 15).

Lest anyone think Jesus died for only one race of people, He made clear His death was for many. He noted, “And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd” (*John* 10:16). His death makes it possible for all men—both Jews and Gentiles—to be saved. Importantly, His death was one to which He freely submitted (vv. 17-18). Noting the emphasis placed on Jesus’ death in this text, Andreas J. Kostenberger observed: “The repeated reference to Jesus’ sacrifice in 10:11-18 makes this the focal point of the characterization of the ‘good shepherd’” (*John*, 307). As the Good Shepherd, Jesus willingly sacrificed Himself for His flock.

Application

- Jesus’ description of Himself in this sermon stands in contrast to the ways of the religious leaders of His day. Unlike the scribes and Pharisees, He possessed genuine concern for His followers. As the “door of the sheep,” Jesus alone provides a passage to spiritual safety; as “the good shepherd,” Jesus provides for and protects His people (*John* 10:7, 11). This would not occur if He were unconcerned. Neither would it occur if He were unaware. Thankfully, such is not the case. He knows His sheep and is known by them.

Questions

1. What does Jesus call the one who does not enter the sheepfold by the door (John 10:1)?
2. Who enters the sheepfold by the door (John 10:2)?
3. Why do the sheep follow the shepherd (John 10:4)?
4. Why will sheep not follow a stranger (John 10:5)?
5. What two metaphors does Jesus use to describe Himself in this text (John 10:7, 11)?
6. Why does the thief come (John 10:10)?
7. What does the good shepherd do for the sheep (John 10:11)?



8. What does the hireling do when trouble comes (John 10:12-13)?
9. What did Jesus say He had the power to do (John 10:18)?

Discussion

1. Why do you think Jesus used metaphors to describe Himself?
2. How is Jesus like the door of the sheepfold?
3. How is Jesus like a good shepherd?
4. In what way(s) is Jesus different from the religious leaders of His day?

Peter on Pentecost

Acts 2:22-39

²² "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know—

²³ "Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death;

²⁴ "whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it.

²⁵ "For David says concerning Him: 'I foresaw the LORD always before my face, For He is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken.'

²⁶ 'Therefore my heart rejoiced, and my tongue was glad; Moreover my flesh also will rest in hope.'

²⁷ 'For You will not leave my soul in Hades, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.'

²⁸ 'You have made known to me the ways of life; You will make me full of joy in Your presence.'

²⁹ "Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day.

³⁰ "Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit

of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne,

³¹ “he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption.

³² “This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses.

³³ “Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear.

³⁴ “For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: ‘The LORD said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand,

³⁵ “Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.”’”

³⁶ “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

³⁷ Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?”

³⁸ Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

³⁹ “For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.”

Introduction

Besides the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), the sermon preached by the apostle Peter in Jerusalem on the first Pentecost following the resurrection of Jesus is arguably the most well-known in Scripture. In it, Peter established Jesus’ identity as “both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36) by referencing His miracles (v. 22), His empty tomb (vv. 29–31), and himself as a witness of the risen Savior (v. 32). He did not, however, simply seek to inform his audience. Instead, Peter convicted his listeners of crucifying the very individual they should have honored (v. 36). Application was made, and those who were honest sought to make right their wrongs (v. 37). After being told what they needed to do—repent and be baptized for the remission of sins (v. 38)—about three thousand individuals responded obediently (v. 41) and were subsequently added by the Lord to the church (v. 47).

Peter’s sermon was delivered “when the Day of Pentecost had fully come” (Acts 2:1). Because Pentecost occurred fifty days after Passover (Leviticus 23:16), his lesson was presented on Sunday, the first day of the week. This is not insignificant. Jesus also arose from the grave on Sunday (Luke 24:1–7), and the early Christians met for worship on this day (cf. Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2). Significantly, Peter and the other apostles captured the attention of the large crowd gathered in Jerusalem by speaking in tongues (Acts 2:4). The people who had gathered from all over the known world were astonished when

they heard the apostles speaking their own language (vv. 5-6). According to Luke's report, "they were all amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'Whatever could this mean?'" (v. 12). Despite their lack of understanding, the crowd wanted to know more. Peter had their attention, and he took advantage of the opportunity.

Addressing the crowd, Peter explained the events occurring and declared, "This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel" (Acts 2:16). He then proceeded to quote from Joel 2:28-32. In that text, Joel described how "in the last days" God promised to "pour out [His] Spirit on all flesh" (Acts 2:17). The events taking place on Pentecost were the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy.

Importantly, Peter concluded the quotation by stating, "And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved" (Acts 2:21). Undoubtedly, those in the audience heard Peter state this powerful truth, yet when they realized they were guilty of crucifying the Christ and were convicted by the weight of that realization, they did not simply stop and cry out, "Lord, save us!" Instead, they asked, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (v. 37). Peter responded by exhorting them to repent and be baptized (v. 38). The only rational explanation for the response of the audience was to say that they understood that one "calls on the name of the LORD" by obeying His will (v. 21). Making this point, Wayne Jackson wrote, "If calling on the Lord results in salvation (2:21), and yet repentance

combined with baptism produces forgiveness of sins (2:38), it logically follows that 'calling' is equivalent to penitent baptism (cf. also Acts 22:16)" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, 22).

After making the point that the events unfolding were predicted in Scripture, Peter turned his attention to establishing Jesus as the Christ. Summarizing what Peter did in the sermon, Darrell L. Bock observed: "Peter details what God did through Jesus. God accredited him, showed him to be victorious, gave him authority, and calls those who hear the gospel to respond to him" (*Acts*, 119). As we study Peter's arguments in our lesson text, our faith in Jesus' identity will be strengthened.

God's Testimony

Acts 2:22-24)

Peter's first line of reasoning established Jesus as the Christ on the basis of His miraculous ability. Making this point, he stated, "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know ..." (Acts 2:22). Rather than introducing an argument requiring a defense, Peter appealed to a fact his audience was already well acquainted with: Jesus, empowered by God, was a miracle-worker. This line of reasoning would have been ineffective had the people present either not personally witnessed Jesus' miracles or been assured

of their veracity by reliable witnesses. But in view of the evidence, it was quite compelling.

The term “attested” (Acts 2:22) is elsewhere translated “approved” (KJV) or “accredited” (NIV84). The idea is that Jesus’ miraculous actions stand to support His claims to be the Son of God. This is a point Jesus also made prior to His death (cf. John 5:36; 14:11). As John B. Polhill noted: “The proof that Jesus was God’s appointed Messiah is to be seen in the ‘miracles, signs, and wonders’ he performed during his earthly ministry. ... Peter stressed that the Jerusalem Jews should have read the meaning of these signs and recognized Jesus as the appointed Messiah” (*Acts*, 112).

Despite ample evidence pointing to Jesus’ identity, the people seized Him lawlessly and put Him to death (Acts 2:23). Such, of course, was not unforeseen by God. Instead, it was part of the divine plan (v. 23). Yet death could not contain Jesus. Proclaiming this, Peter continued, “God raised [Him] up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it” (v. 24). F. F. Bruce thus commented: “The sentence passed on Jesus by an earthly court and executed by Roman soldiers has been reversed, Peter asserts, by a higher court. ... If his suffering and death were ordained by the determinate counsel of God, so were his resurrection and glory” (*The Book of Acts*, 64).

David’s Testimony

(*Acts* 2:25-35)

Having noted that Jesus’ miracles declare Him to be more than just a man, Peter moved to his second argument and quoted from Psalm 16:8-11. The passage, which was written by David, anticipated God’s unwillingness to allow the “Holy One to see corruption” (Acts 2:27). Peter made it very clear that David could not have been writing about himself, for “he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day” (v. 29). Nevertheless, David, was aware of a promise God had made regarding his descendant (cf. 2 Samuel 7:16). He spoke, as Peter explained, “concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption” (Acts 2:31). Jesus’ identity was not only supported by His actions (i.e., the miracles He performed) but also by prophecy.

Importantly, the individuals in Peter’s audience had the ability to investigate whether his claim was true. They could read David’s prophecy and go to his tomb. They could also go to the tomb in which Jesus’ body had been placed. At the tomb of David, they would find a body that had decayed; at the tomb of Jesus, they would find nothing! David did not write about himself; he wrote about the Christ. According to J. W. McGarvey, this was important for more than one reason: “David’s own flesh having seen corruption, as they themselves admitted, and his soul being still in hades, there was no alternative

but to admit that he spoke of the Messiah. This brief argument not only refuted the supposed objection, but opened the minds of his hearers to an entirely new conception of the prophetic throne of David, and of the Messiah who was to occupy it; showing, that instead of being the ruler of an earthly kingdom, however glorious, he was to sit upon the throne of the whole universe" (*Original Commentary on Acts*, 36).

Peter then stressed that all the apostles present were witnesses of Jesus' resurrection (Acts 2:32). Death could not contain Him. Even so, Jesus was now "exalted to the right hand of God" (v. 33). From that authoritative position, He orchestrated the events transpiring on Pentecost (v. 33). Peter then quoted from Psalm 110:1. Explaining this reference, John R. W. Stott wrote: "As he has applied Psalm 116 to the Messiah's resurrection, so he now applies Psalm 110 to the Messiah's ascension. For David did not ascend into heaven (34) any more than he had been preserved from decay by resurrection" (*The Message of Acts*, 77).

Peter's Testimony (Acts 2:36-39)

At this point in the sermon, Peter had argued that Jesus was the Christ based on His miracles, His fulfillment of prophecies concerning both the empty tomb and ascension, and His appearances to the twelve following the resurrection. It remained



for him to convict the audience of wrongdoing. Consequently, he concluded, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). The Jews to whom Peter spoke were guilty of murdering the Christ.

This difficult fact "cut" the audience "to the heart." "The verb refers to a sharp pain or a stab, often associated with emotion" (Bock, *Acts*, 140). In an attempt to make right their wrongs, they asked, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). Their question is both sincere and revealing. In their anguish, they realized they needed forgiveness for their wrongs; in their honesty, they understood they needed to do more than simply cry out to the Lord (cf. Matthew 7:21).

Peter then explained what they must do to seek God's forgiveness. He declared, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). He then added, "For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call" (v. 39). Commenting on verse 39, Jackson observed: "Peter affirmed that the divine promise (of salvation with its accompanying gift of the Spirit) would be available to future generations (expressed by the phrase 'your children'). ... Not only is the blessing to future generations of Jews, it is to all those who were 'afar off.' This is an allusion

to the Gentiles (cf. Eph. 2:13, 17)" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, 29).

Application

- Peter's sermon leaves little room to doubt the ultimate identity of Jesus of Nazareth. He was a man, but He was certainly more. When we consider His miracles, His empty tomb, and the testimony of those who witnessed the resurrection, we have ample evidence to support the idea that He is indeed the Christ. For this reason, we must submit our lives to Him.

Questions

1. On what day was Peter's sermon delivered (Acts 2:1)?
2. What prophet did Peter quote at the beginning of His sermon (Acts 2:16)?
3. How did God attest to Jesus' identity (Acts 2:22)?
4. What did Peter say about David's tomb (Acts 2:29)?



Discussion

1. What does it mean to "call on the name of the Lord"?
2. Why did Peter quote from Psalm 16 and Psalm 110?
3. What does this sermon teach us about the proper use of evidence?
4. What does the phrase "remission of sins" mean? What does this have to do with baptism?

Stephen's Historical Survey

Acts 7:37-53

³⁷ "This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear.'

³⁸ "This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us,

³⁹ "whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected. And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt,

⁴⁰ "saying to Aaron, 'Make us gods to go before us; as for this Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'

⁴¹ "And they made a calf in those days, offered sacrifices to the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands.

⁴² "Then God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the Prophets: 'Did you offer Me slaughtered animals and sacrifices during forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?

⁴³ 'You also took up the tabernacle of Moloch, And the star of your god Remphan, Images which

you made to worship; And I will carry you away beyond Babylon.'

⁴⁴ "Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as He appointed, instructing Moses to make it according to the pattern that he had seen,

⁴⁵ "which our fathers, having received it in turn, also brought with Joshua into the land possessed by the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers until the days of David,

⁴⁶ "who found favor before God and asked to find a dwelling for the God of Jacob.

⁴⁷ "But Solomon built Him a house.

⁴⁸ "However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says:

⁴⁹ 'Heaven is My throne, And earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me? says the LORD, Or what is the place of My rest?

⁵⁰ 'Has My hand not made all these things?'

⁵¹ "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you.

⁵² "Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers,

⁵³ "who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it."

Introduction

Those who preach God's Word must do so regardless of whether individuals are interested in

the message. There will be times when the message presented will be uniformly accepted and listeners will respond favorably; there will also be times when the message presented will be uniformly rejected and listeners will react with hostility. Regardless, we must preach God's Word! Making this point, the apostle Paul told Timothy: "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching" (2 Timothy 4:2).

As Peter addressed the crowd assembled on Pentecost, many of the individuals who listened to his sermon were moved to obey God's plan. Having been convicted by Peter of crucifying the Messiah, "they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?'" (Acts 2:37). It would be wonderful if everyone responded in a similar manner upon hearing God's Word, but this does not always occur.

In our lesson text, we find Stephen addressing the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin (Acts 6:12). He had been "seized" and brought before the council on the false charge of blasphemy (vv. 11-14)—a charge leveled against him only because he skillfully and completely answered the arguments of his critics (vv. 9-10). When given the opportunity to defend himself against this accusation, Stephen presented one of the most comprehensive historical surveys found in Scripture (7:2-53). He did not, however, merely recount key events or recall the actions of important individuals. He also convicted the Jewish leaders of

rejecting and murdering Jesus and compared their actions to those of their fathers, who had persecuted and killed the prophets (v. 52).

Like Peter's message, Stephen's sermon provoked an emotional response. Those who listened to him were "cut to the heart" (Acts 7:54). Although this phrase is identical in the New King James translation to the phrase found in Acts 2:37, the word "cut" in Acts 7:54, as well as the emotional response that occurred, is very different. Instead of being troubled by the message they heard and seeking to make things right (as Peter's audience did), Stephen's listeners became furious and "gnashed at him with their teeth" (Acts 7:54; cf. Acts 5:33). The English Standard Version conveys their emotion properly when it says the audience was "enraged." If nothing else, this reminds us that individuals are affected differently by God's truth. Some will accept it and obey; others will reject it and rebel. Our task is not to presume how an individual will react to God's truth. It is, instead, to present the truth in an accurate and loving manner.

Israel in the Wilderness

(Acts 7:37-43)

Near the beginning of his sermon, Stephen traced the history of the Jews from the days of "father Abraham" (Acts 7:2) to the period of Egyptian bondage (vv. 17-19). After describing the unusual circumstances of Moses being brought up by

Pharaoh's daughter "as her own son" (v. 21), he described Moses' role as the deliverer of his people and wrote, "He brought them out, after he had shown wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red Sea, and in the wilderness forty years" (v. 36).

But Moses did even more. Besides leading the Israelites through the wilderness, Moses acted as a prophet. In fact, Stephen noted: "This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel, 'The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear'" (Acts 7:37). Thus, Moses not only spoke the words of the Lord but also predicted the coming of the Christ (Deuteronomy 18:15, 18-19; cf. Acts 3:22-23). Emphasizing the importance of hearing the One to whom Moses pointed, J. W. McGarvey reasoned, "If Moses himself foretold the coming of a successor who should supersede him, he alone pays proper respect to Moses who submits to his successor" (*Original Commentary on Acts*, 84).

Although Moses was responsible for conveying God's law to the people (Acts 7:38), they rejected him and, in essence, rejected God and His message as well. Stephen noted their reaction: "In their hearts they turned back to Egypt, saying to Aaron, 'Make us gods to go before us; as for this Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him'" (vv. 39-40). This is especially significant to Stephen's personal defense because he was accused of violating Moses' law (cf. Acts 6:11, 13-14). In reality, the opposite had occurred. Those

who accused him were the descendants of individuals who did not properly respect Moses or God's law, and they did not properly honor the Prophet like Moses. Stephen, however, both respected Moses and honored the One he anticipated—Jesus Christ.

Continuing his description of the rebellious behavior of the Israelites during the wilderness period, Stephen quoted from the prophet Amos: "Did you offer Me slaughtered animals and sacrifices during forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? You also took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan, images which you made to worship; and I will carry you away beyond Babylon" (Acts 7:42-43; cf. Amos 5:25-27). Although the Israelites professed allegiance to God, they also worshipped idols. This occurred when "God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven" (Acts 7:42). Concerning this statement, John B. Polhill observed: "In [Romans] 1:24-28 Paul used the same word in a similar context of idolatry to describe how God 'gave over' the Gentiles to such works of their hands and how this led to all kinds of sinful distortions. It is perhaps the most fearful judgment of all when God turns us over to ourselves and lets our own rebellious ways take their destructive natural course" (Acts, 201). As Stephen noted, there were consequences for this behavior.

The Tabernacle and the Temple

(Acts 7:44-50)

Rather than worshipping idols in pagan tabernacles, God's people were to honor Him in the house He authorized and designed. During the period of wilderness wandering, they did so in the tabernacle. Describing this, Stephen declared, "Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as He appointed, instructing Moses to make it according to the pattern that he had seen" (Acts 7:44; cf. Exodus 25:40; Hebrews 8:5).

Worship in the tabernacle continued through the days of Joshua until the time of David, who planned to build a permanent house of worship, and of Solomon, who built the temple his father planned (Acts 7:45-47). Obviously, the Jews took great pride in the temple (cf. Jeremiah 7:4). Whether Stephen favored the tabernacle over the temple is debated. What is not debated, however, is that God transcends any structure man might build. John R. W. Stott wrote: "It is evident then from Scripture itself that God's presence cannot be localized, and that no building can confine him or inhibit his activity. If he has any home on earth, it is with his people that he lives" (*The Message of Acts*, 139).

Consequently, Stephen boldly declared to the Jews, "However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands" (Acts 7:48). To bolster his point, he quoted from Isaiah 66:1-2: "Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. What house will

you build for Me? says the LORD, or what is the place of My rest? Has My hand not made all these things?" (vv. 49-50). As Darrell L. Bock noted, "Stephen's remarks are not against the concept of the temple. The problem with the temple is not that it exists. Its existence is rooted in God's permission. . . . Stephen's point is that a dwelling place for God made by human hands is not the only place God dwells. Ultimately it is inadequate to contain God, and so to think of the temple as 'his house and nowhere else' would be wrong" (*Acts*, 302-304). To the zealous Jews of Jerusalem, this was heresy.

The Indictment

(*Acts* 7:51-53)

Having shown that the Israelites rejected God and worshipped idols and having also established that the presence of the temple alone does not indicate the approval of God, Stephen argued that his audience was no better than their ancestors. He charged: "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you" (*Acts* 7:51). If calling them "stiff-necked" or obstinate didn't get their attention, calling them "uncircumcised in heart and ears" certainly would have. F. F. Bruce explained, "The description of them as disobedient—'uncircumcised in heart and ears'—meant that, while they were circumcised in the literal sense, in accordance with the Abrahamic institution, their unresponsiveness and resistance



to God's revelation were such as might have been expected from Gentiles to whom he had not made known his will (cf. Lev. 26:41; Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4; 6:10; 9:26; Ezek. 44:7)" (*The Book of Acts*, 152).

Just as their fathers had persecuted the prophets, the Jews to whom Stephen spoke had persecuted "the Prophet." Like their fathers before them, they were guilty. So he stated: "Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers" (*Acts* 7:52). To make matters worse, Stephen declared that the Jews failed to keep the law that had been delivered by angels (v. 53; cf. Galatians 3:19). It is hardly surprising, given Stephen's strong denunciation of their behavior, that the Jews were unwilling to listen any further after this statement. His words "cut to the heart" (*Acts* 7:54), and they unlawfully took his life (vv. 57-59).

Application

- Although we do not have a temple, as the Jews did in the first century, some individuals act as if God dwells in church buildings. They act differently when in such a building than they do otherwise. Like the Jews, they need to be reminded: "the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands" (*Acts* 7:48). Instead, God is omnipresent. The psalmist expressed this well when he asked God: "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from

Your presence?" (Psalm 139:7). We are always in the Lord's presence. We should act accordingly.

Questions

1. Whom did Moses declare God would raise up that would be like him (Acts 7:37)?
2. What did the Israelites do when they rejected Moses and sought to turn back to Egypt (Acts 7:40-41)?
3. What prophet did Stephen cite to prove Israel's idolatrous behavior (Acts 7:42-43)?
4. How was Moses supposed to construct the tabernacle (Acts 7:44)?
5. Who planned the temple (Acts 7:46)? Who built it (v. 47)?
6. Whom did Stephen say his audience resisted (Acts 7:51)?



Discussion

1. How was the reaction of Stephen's audience in Acts 7 different from that of Peter's audience in Acts 2?
2. Why did Stephen discuss the tabernacle and temple in his sermon?
3. Why do you think the Jews were so enraged by Stephen's sermon?
4. What lessons can we learn from Stephen?

Peter and Cornelius

Acts 10:24-43

²⁴ And the following day they entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends.

²⁵ As Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him.

²⁶ But Peter lifted him up, saying, “Stand up; I myself am also a man.”

²⁷ And as he talked with him, he went in and found many who had come together.

²⁸ Then he said to them, “You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.

²⁹ “Therefore I came without objection as soon as I was sent for. I ask, then, for what reason have you sent for me?”

³⁰ So Cornelius said, “Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing,

³¹ “and said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms are remembered in the sight of God.

³² ‘Send therefore to Joppa and call Simon here, whose surname is Peter. He is lodging in the house

of Simon, a tanner, by the sea. When he comes, he will speak to you.'

³³ "So I sent to you immediately, and you have done well to come. Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God."

³⁴ Then Peter opened his mouth and said: "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality."

³⁵ "But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him."

³⁶ "The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ—He is Lord of all—

³⁷ "that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism which John preached:

³⁸ "how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.

³⁹ "And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree.

⁴⁰ "Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly,

⁴¹ "not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead.

⁴² "And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead.

⁴³ "To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins."

Introduction

Although Jesus clearly declared the gospel should be preached throughout the world "to every creature" (Mark 16:15) and instructed His apostles to be "witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8), individuals with a Jewish background were reluctant to share the gospel with the Gentiles. This reluctance stemmed, at least in part, from the Jew's long-standing belief that they alone were God's chosen people (cf. Deuteronomy 7:6). In the minds of Jews—and even Jewish Christians (e.g., Acts 10:28-29)—a clear distinction remained between Jews and Gentiles. The two were divided not only by race but also by their relationship with God. In fact, a "middle wall of separation" formerly existed between the two groups (Ephesians 2:14). Thankfully, Jesus' death changed everything (cf. vv. 11-18).

Despite Jesus' sacrificial death for all (Hebrews 2:9), the gospel was not immediately preached to the Gentiles after Pentecost. According to H. Leo Boles' chronology, Peter did not preach to the household of Cornelius until AD 37, some four years after the church began (*A Commentary on Acts*, 16). This fact led David L. Roper to conclude correctly: "Although the wall between Jews and Gentiles came down

theoretically at Calvary, it came down practically at Caesarea. To put it another way, the wall came down in the mind of God in Luke 23 (Mt. 27; Mk. 15; Jn. 19), but not in the mind of men until Acts 10" (*Acts 1-14*, 380).

The circumstances that led Peter to Caesarea to preach were recorded in Acts 10. In the early portion of that chapter, we are introduced to Cornelius. Luke described him as "a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always" (v. 2). Concerning this, Wayne Jackson observed: "This latter expression indicates that he had renounced the idolatry of paganism and was a believer in the true God. These 'God-fearers' (cf. 13:16), though not having adopted circumcision (hence were not proselytes), accepted many elements of the Mosaic system, including worship in the synagogue" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, 118). Much more could be said about him. Nevertheless, Cornelius needed to hear the gospel so he could be saved (cf. Acts 11:14). Consequently, God instructed him, through the agency of an angel, to send for Peter and await instruction. The angel declared, "He will tell you what you must do" (10:6).

God also prepared Peter to approach Cornelius. Through a vision, He showed Peter that the Gentiles were proper candidates to hear and obey the gospel (Acts 10:9-16). Thus, Peter heeded the direction of the Holy Spirit and departed to preach to Cornelius and his household in Caesarea (vv. 19-23). As God



intended, the message of Jesus was finally taken to the Gentiles.

A Ready Audience

(*Acts 10:24-33*)

As Peter made the journey of approximately thirty miles from Joppa to Caesarea, Cornelius invited others to hear God's message. Conveying the scene Peter and his company found when they arrived, Luke wrote, "Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends" (Acts 10:24). This devout man realized that if he needed the message of salvation, his loved ones needed it as well. What a wonderful example for us to consider today!

Upon seeing Peter, "Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him" (Acts 10:25). John R. W. Stott believed this indicated "spiritual humility and receptivity"; nevertheless, he also noted, "It was an inappropriate gesture" (*The Message of Acts*, 188). Rather than allow Cornelius to worship at his feet, Peter intervened and replied, "Stand up; I myself am also a man" (v. 26).

At this point, Peter began addressing the assembled crowd and revealed how God had challenged and changed his understanding regarding the dealings Jews were supposed to have with Gentiles. He stated: "You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call

any man common or unclean" (Acts 10:28). Peter was willing to stand under a Gentile's roof. Darrell L. Bock summarized: "Peter interprets the vision's provision to eat food as freeing him to associate with Gentiles, since their dietary habits would be one of the Jewish concerns about purity, especially being hosted in a Gentile home" (*Acts*, 394). Even so, Peter was not yet aware of why he was instructed to come to Caesarea, so he asked, "For what reason have you sent for me?" (v. 29).

In response to Peter's question, Cornelius described his recent encounter with the angel (Acts 10:30). He conveyed the angel's assurance that God had heard his prayer (v. 31) and relayed the instructions he was given: "Send therefore to Joppa and call Simon here, whose surname is Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea. When he comes, he will speak to you" (v. 32). Regardless of whether this answered Peter's question, Cornelius' next statement certainly did: "Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God" (v. 33). In other words, Cornelius wanted Peter to teach him the gospel. As John B. Polhill observed: "God had brought them together. ... God had led [Peter] to Cornelius's house. But Peter had a message, the message, the word of life. It was now clear to him why God had led him there. He was to bear his witness to the gospel before this gathering of Gentiles" (*Acts*, 259).

The Word

(*Acts 10:34-38*)

After learning why he had been instructed to meet Cornelius in Caesarea, Peter started preaching to the assembled group. His first statement set the tone for the events that would follow: "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him" (Acts 10:34-35). Whereas the Jews believed God's concern and provisions were only for them, Peter declared that such was not the case. God is not partial toward one race or nationality, or as the phrase is elsewhere translated, "God does not show favoritism" (NIV84). "The point is that he makes no distinction in how he reacts to people. All have the same potential access to God" (Bock, *Acts*, 396).

Access to God is granted on the basis of trust, which results when one properly fears or respects God, and obedience, which is demonstrated through one's submissive actions (i.e., his attempts to work righteousness). Regarding the idea of working righteousness, Jackson wrote: "The term 'works' is a present tense, middle voice form, suggesting that one throws himself energetically into a steadfast mode of obedience. ... 'Righteousness' reflects the components of the sacred plan which God has given, and to which one must submit, whereby being accounted 'righteous' is achieved (Rom. 1:16)" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, 125).

Peter then emphasized the importance of the message of Jesus Christ—the “Lord of all”—and stressed how that message or “word” had been proclaimed to the “children of Israel” (Acts 10:36). The proclamation of the gospel to the Jews was not news to Cornelius or the interested individuals who had assembled. Knowing this, Peter continued, “That word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism which John preached” (v. 37). Importantly, the message formerly preached only to the Jews was now available to the Gentiles. It was a message for all. At the heart of the gospel message was Jesus. So Peter declared, “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him” (v. 38). Jesus was clearly more than just a man. He was God’s Anointed One (cf. Isaiah 61:1-2; Luke 4:17-21). Peter did not introduce Jesus to Cornelius and his company. He did, however, show that Jesus was the One who gives hope to all.

The Witnesses

(Acts 10:39-43)

Stressing the truthfulness of his testimony, Peter referred to himself as an eyewitness of Jesus’ ministry (Acts 10:39). His information regarding Christ was not secondhand (like the knowledge Cornelius possessed). Peter had been with Jesus. He was aware



of the circumstances surrounding Jesus’ death and blamed the Jewish leaders. But more important than that, He was a witness of Jesus’ resurrection. Emphasizing this, he continued, “Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead” (vv. 40-41). “This emphasis would have been particularly important in preaching to Gentiles like Cornelius for whom the idea of a bodily resurrection was a new concept (cf. 17:18)” (Polhill, *Acts*, 262).

Having provided reasons for the Gentiles to believe in and submit to Jesus as Lord, Peter then offered an additional reason: Jesus “was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42). The scope of Jesus’ authority extends across the ages of history. As Boles noted, it “covers all past, present, and future” (*A Commentary on Acts*, 174). Because Jesus will serve as our Judge, we must yield our will to His. According to Peter, those who do so “[believe] in Him” and will “receive remission of sins” (v. 43). This does not mean belief alone produces forgiveness. It is, instead, a summary of what one must do. Jackson helpfully observed, “If God ‘made no distinction’ (15:9) in the manner in which he saved both Jews and Gentiles, and if baptism ‘for the remission of sins’ was involved in the Jews’ salvation (2:38), it necessarily follows that baptism was not excluded as a requirement for Gentile pardon” (*The Acts of the Apostles*, 127).

Application

• When we study Acts 10, we usually focus on what occurred as Peter preached—i.e., the Holy Spirit falling upon the Gentiles who were present (v. 44). As the text of Acts 11:15-18 shows, this occurred to confirm the Gentiles' right to hear and respond to the gospel. What is sometimes overshadowed when we study this chapter is the comprehensive message Peter preached concerning Jesus. He declared Jesus to be Lord of both Jew and Gentile (10:36). He described the message of Jesus as a message of peace (v. 36). He identified Jesus as the Anointed One (v. 38). He stressed the reality of Jesus' power, death, and resurrection (vv. 38-41). And he noted that Jesus will be the Judge of all (v. 42). No wonder we must obey Him!

Questions

1. How was Cornelius described in Acts 10:2?
2. What did God do to convince Peter to go to the Gentiles (Acts 10:10-16)?

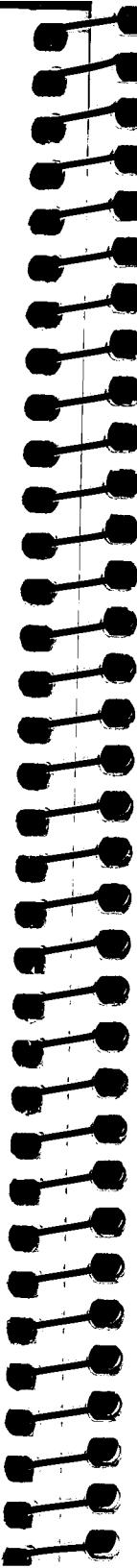
3. What did Cornelius do as Peter was traveling to Caesarea (Acts 10:24)?
4. What did Peter say that indicated his understanding that the Gentiles were proper candidates to hear the gospel (Acts 10:34)?
5. Whom did Peter charge with the responsibility of killing Jesus (Acts 10:39)?
6. What did Peter say Jesus would do for the “living and the dead” (Acts 10:42)?

Discussion

1. What can Christians do to help individuals overcome prejudices?
2. What can we learn from Cornelius' willingness to invite others to hear Peter?

3. What can we learn about Jesus from Peter's sermon?

4. What are the implications of Peter's statement about Jesus that "He is Lord of all" (Acts 10:36)?



Paul at Athens

Acts 17:22-34

²² Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious;

²³ "for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you:

²⁴ "God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands.

²⁵ "Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.

²⁶ "And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings,

²⁷ "so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us;

²⁸ "for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.'

²⁹ "Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising.

³⁰ "Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent,

³¹ "because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead."

³² And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, "We will hear you again on this matter."

³³ So Paul departed from among them.

³⁴ However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Introduction

To be effective, a preacher needs to know his audience. He should be aware of both their strengths and weaknesses. He should know their needs and consider how to address them. This does not mean he must know everyone personally. It does, however, mean he should seek to know about them, for such knowledge equips the preacher to discuss the most appropriate subjects in a timely and helpful manner. He must be a student of humanity as well as Scripture. If he is a keen observer of culture, he will be able

to communicate in a way that both identifies and dissects the issues of his day.

Obviously, Jesus did this better than anyone else. Because "He knew what was in man" (John 2:25), He was capable of preaching and teaching in a manner that uncovered and addressed the needs of His audience members. After He had done this when He spoke with the woman at the well in Samaria (cf. 4:7-26), she felt the penetrating truth of His words and announced to those in the city, "Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" (v. 29).

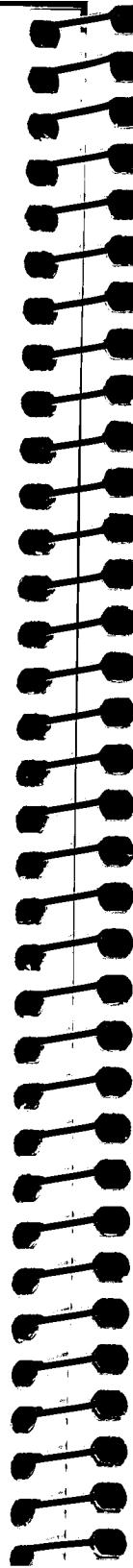
Although the apostle Paul did not possess intimate knowledge of Jesus, he was eminently qualified to preach to both Jews and Gentiles. Having been born in Tarsus of Cilicia (Acts 22:3)—a center of ancient learning, he was aware of Gentile culture; having been trained in Jerusalem "at the feet of Gamaliel" (v. 3), he was an expert in Judaism. Given his background (and his zeal—cf. Galatians 1:14), it is little wonder he attempted to relate to those to whom he preached. Declaring this, he wrote: "To the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law... that I might win those who are without law I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:20-22).

Perhaps one of the greatest examples of Paul employing this strategy is found in our lesson text—

Acts 17:22-34. While in Athens—a city with a reputation as a bastion of learning—Paul observed “that the city was given over to idols” (v. 16). This was both ironic and disturbing to the apostle. Wilber M. Smith observed, “As he walked into the city the first thing that smote his heart was the fact that here in the world’s center of learning was the most foolish thing that men could ever create, a vast multitude of them—dead gods, that, having eyes never saw, and having mouths never spoke, and having ears never heard a prayer” (Therefore, Stand, 248).

But instead of openly rebuking the Athenian philosophers who had invited him to speak (Acts 17:19-20), Paul made his case for the existence and expectations of the one true God by skillfully addressing the pagans on their own terms and discussing one of their own altars—the one dedicated “TO THE UNKNOWN GOD” (v. 23). Complimenting this approach, Smith continued: “[Paul] not only avoids the snare, but uses the very difficulty of his position to make a road to the convictions of those who heard him. He becomes a Heathen to the Heathen. He does not say that he is introducing new divinities. He rather implies the contrary, and gently draws his hearers away from polytheism by telling them that he was making known the God whom they themselves were ignorantly endeavoring to worship” (Therefore, Stand, 257).

If anything, Paul powerfully engaged the pagan culture of Athens and did so in a manner worthy of duplication. As we study this important sermon,



let us learn from his approach. Darrell L. Bock summarized it well: “The Paul of Rom. 1 who speaks of the sad state of society is still able to love and connect with that society in Acts 17.... He knows how to confront but does so honestly and graciously. Both message and tone are important in sharing the gospel” (Acts, 573).

You Are Very Religious

(Acts 17:22-23)

Paul’s audience in Athens was filled with skeptics. Many were either Epicurean or Stoic philosophers (Acts 17:18). F. F. Bruce helpfully explained the difference between the two groups: “[Stoicism] aimed at living consistently with nature, and in practice [Stoics] laid great emphasis on the primacy of the rational faculty in humanity, and on individual self-sufficiency.... Stoicism at its best was marked by great moral earnestness and a high sense of duty.... [Epicureans] presented pleasure as being the chief end in life, the pleasure most worth enjoying being a life of tranquility... free from pain, disturbing passions, and superstitious fears” (Acts, 331). Although the two philosophical camps were dramatically different from one another, they united together in opposition to Paul’s message. As far as they were concerned, he was an “idle babbler” (v. 18 NASB).

Despite the dubious invitation extended to Paul by the Athenians (Acts 17:19-20), he did not address

them with hostility. Instead, he began calmly: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious” (v. 22). Although the term “religious” (NKJV) can also be translated “superstitious” (KJV), it seems Paul was speaking with the intention of gaining the favor of the crowd. John B. Polhill believed this and wrote: “He surely did not wish to alienate his audience at the very outset.... Perhaps Paul deliberately chose the ambiguous word. For the Athenians his remark would be taken as commending their piety. For Paul, who was already fuming at their idolatry (v. 16), the negative connotation would be uppermost in his mind” (Acts, 371).

Nevertheless, Paul not only found something to compliment his audience about but also used that fact as the foundation from which to launch his sermon. So he continued: “For as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: To The Unknown God. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23). Essentially, Paul shifted the focus from the erroneous practices of the Athenians to the nature of the true and living God.

God the Maker

(Acts 17:24-27)

Paul argued that the God the Athenians did not know was actually the God who created the world. He declared, “God, who made the world and everything



in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands” (Acts 17:24). Despite the existence of their altar to the Unknown God, their understanding of God was lacking. Even so, Paul proceeded in a manner that demanded their attention. As McGarvey observed, “They had ... already confessed that there was, or might be a God to them unknown; hence they could not complain that he should attempt to introduce a new God to their acquaintance” (Original Commentary on Acts, 220-221). This is especially true since the God Paul introduced was the Creator of all!

Showing the difference between the one true God and the false gods the Athenians worshipped, Paul noted that God neither dwells in human temples nor needs human praise. He declared, “Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things” (Acts 17:25). In other words, God’s existence and power do not depend on man’s efforts. He transcends any physical structure; He does not subsist on man’s adulation. All the idols the Greeks worshipped lived where the pagans placed them and died when their suitors forgot them. Not so with God! Wayne Jackson explained: “As a completely self-sufficient Being, God is not dependent upon human service. This is a very important point. The Creator does not demand our service for any enhancement to Him. Rather, He has imposed upon human beings the obligation to surrender to Him because this is the best thing for us; it is where our ultimate and only

true contentment is [sic] to be found!" (The Acts of the Apostles, 214).

The apostle went on to affirm God's governance of the world (Acts 17:26) and stressed the purpose for man's existence—to "seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us" (v. 27). Whether they were accepted, these words would have surely resonated in the ears of the philosophers who spent their time pondering the reason for man's existence. In our case, they remind us that God is near enough to be found, yet not so close that He overwhelms us. We must seek Him. We must serve Him. This is our purpose (cf. Ecclesiastes 12:13; Ephesians 2:10; Hebrews 2:10).

The Offspring of God

(Acts 17:28-34)

Because God created all things, we are part of His creation. To emphasize this point, Paul quoted one of their own poets: "For we are also His offspring" (Acts 17:28). It is significant that these idolatrous individuals acknowledged this point. "Though these pagans did not know the true God, they acknowledge an origin from a higher source. It is not enough, however, to simply know that we have derived from a superior, personal Cause. We must come to know Him, and honor Him as our Creator (1 Jn. 2:4)" (Jackson, The Acts of the Apostles, 216).

Consequently, Paul called them to act upon what they unwittingly recognized. If they were created, they should readily reject the idols created by their own hands. Making this point, he stated, "We ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising" (Acts 17:29). Instead of worshipping idols, they were told to repent and submit themselves to the One who would serve as judge—the One who was raised from the dead (vv. 30-31). Paul's invitation motivated a few to respond favorably and caused others to mock (vv. 32-34). The same continues to be true today (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18).

Application

- Paul's skillful use of the altar to the Unknown God reminds us truth can be presented in an effective manner even in the tensest of situations. Rather than rebuking the Athenians for their rampant idolatry and immediately causing the audience to become hostile, he used their ignorant, superstitious behavior to introduce the true God. The wise man lauded this approach when he wrote, "The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly, but the mouth of fools pours forth foolishness" (Proverbs 15:2).

Questions

1. Where was Paul when he delivered this sermon (Acts 17:16)?
2. Why was Paul's spirit provoked (Acts 17:16)?
3. What two groups of philosophers were prevalent in the city (Acts 17:18)?
4. What altar did Paul mention as he began his sermon (Acts 17:23)?
5. What does Paul identify as man's purpose (Acts 17:27)?
6. Why should we not think idols are divine (Acts 17:29)?
7. What did Paul call the Athenians to do (Acts 17:30)?

**Discussion**

1. Why do you think Paul began his sermon by referencing the Athenian altar?
2. Why is it important that Paul says God "does not dwell in temples made with hands" (Acts 17:24)?
3. What is the significance of God being near enough to seek yet far enough that we must make an effort to seek Him?
4. What can we learn about preaching from Paul's approach in this text?

Paul and the Ephesian Elders

Acts 20:17-35

¹⁷ From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church.

¹⁸ And when they had come to him, he said to them: “You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you,

¹⁹ “serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews;

²⁰ “how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house,

²¹ “testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

²² “And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there,

²³ “except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me.

²⁴ “But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.



²⁵ “And indeed, now I know that you all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, will see my face no more.

²⁶ “Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men.

²⁷ “For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.

²⁸ “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

²⁹ “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

³⁰ “Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.

³¹ “Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.

³² “So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

³³ “I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel.

³⁴ “Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me.

³⁵ “I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

Introduction

When a preacher works closely with one congregation over a period of time, he comes to love and appreciate them. Relationships are built. Knowledge is gained. He learns their strengths; he also learns their weaknesses. If his attitude is right, he wants the very best for them. This is true while he is working with the congregation; it is also true if he moves on to work with another congregation or in another area.

According to the New Testament, the apostle Paul spent more time working with the church at Ephesus than any other. He first came to the city near the end of his second missionary journey (Acts 18:19-21). This visit was evidently brief, but he promised to return, “God willing” (v. 21). Paul made good on this promise during his third missionary journey (Acts 19). Through his efforts, “the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed” in Ephesus (v. 20). Paul spent approximately three years working with the church there (20:31).

Although he was forced to leave Ephesus after a riot occurred (Acts 20:1), Paul did not forget his brethren there. Consequently, when he was later traveling close to Ephesus, he sent word for the elders of the church to meet him at Miletus, a port city some thirty miles distant (v. 17). The elders accepted Paul’s invitation and came to him. Upon their arrival, the apostle took the occasion to deliver a heartfelt message filled with both appreciation and caution. Interestingly, it is the only sermon in the

book of Acts delivered to an audience composed of Christians.

It is not possible to read Paul's sermon to the Ephesian elders without seeing his dedication to the church and his concern for its well-being. Too, it is obvious from their reaction to Paul's words that the men from Ephesus also cared deeply for him, for "they all wept freely, and fell on Paul's neck and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more" (Acts 20:37-38). Besides whatever else we might conclude, it is a sermon that provides both a defense of Paul's conduct and the direction to the elders in moving forward. Clearly, Paul respected the authority of their office (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13), and he encouraged them to fulfill the responsibility God had given them (Acts 20:28). Regarding the sermon, Darrell L. Bock observed: "Here we see ... Paul passing the torch to the leaders of a community he has nurtured. ... This is not a response to enemies but a reminder of how he has prepared them to take charge once he has to leave them because of circumstances they all understand" (*Acts*, 625).

Paul's Defense

(*Acts 20:17-21*)

Having spent time in both Macedonia and Greece after leaving Ephesus (Acts 20:1-3), Paul began to make his way to Jerusalem. Luke recorded the details of the journey and noted that Paul "decided to



sail past Ephesus, so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the Day of Pentecost" (v. 16). Because Paul's reason for rushing to Jerusalem was not explained in this passage, much speculation exists. David L. Roper listed several possible reasons: "to visit with friends from far and wide, to celebrate his Jewish heritage, to take advantage of the opportunity to preach, and more. However, since he was going to Jerusalem to deliver the collection for the poor, his primary purpose probably related to that contribution. Perhaps the contribution would make a greater impact if more knew about it; perhaps the fact that Jewish Christians from all over Judea would be present would make distribution easier" (*Acts 15-28*, 240). Regardless of whether this accurately describes Paul's thinking, our text shows he wanted to speak with the Ephesian elders; thus, he asked them to meet with him in Miletus (v. 17).

When the elders arrived, Paul began to discuss the time he spent with them. He was especially concerned with reminding them of his personal conduct, so he declared, "You know, from the first day that I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you, serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials which happened to me by the plotting of the Jews" (*Acts 20:18-19*). It's possible Paul felt the need to defend his conduct because certain individuals who had arrived after his departure were besmirching it (cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12). Fortunately, the Ephesians were witnesses

of Paul's behavior. They had watched him handle the trials and tribulations of ministry. They did not have to rely on the testimony of others.

The Ephesian elders were also aware of Paul's tireless work in proclaiming the gospel. Noting this, Paul continued, "I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:20-21). Paul's sermons were not self-serving; rather, they were "helpful" or "profitable" (ESV). By this, he meant that he proclaimed what the Ephesians needed to hear. His message was not secretive, like those of some of the false teachers of his day. Instead, it was a message that needed to be taught so that all—whether Jew or Greek—could hear. Importantly, Paul's message stressed the need for both repentance and faith (v. 21). This should not be taken to mean that repentance necessarily precedes faith, nor should it be taken to mean that these two actions alone are all God requires of man. As Wayne Jackson explained: "One cannot possibly 'repent toward God' unless he already has faith in the creator (cf. Rom. 2:4; 2 Cor. 7:10). Different points of emphasis are in view Elsewhere, immersion in water is included as well (2:38; 22:16; Rom. 6:3-4; 1 Pet. 3:21)" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, 256-257).

Paul's Destiny

(*Acts 20:22-27*)

After defending his conduct in Ephesus, Paul turned his attention to the future and told his friends what the Holy Spirit revealed would soon take place: "And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me" (Acts 20:22-23). Although Luke did not record specific warnings about the persecution Paul would face until after he departed from Miletus (cf. 21:4, 11), it is reasonable to conclude that other warnings had already been issued.

Despite the tribulation that awaited in Jerusalem, Paul was determined to fulfill his ministry. He would not allow persecution to stop his efforts. He was ready to die for Christ if necessary. Revealing his mentality, he went on, "But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24).

In arguably the most touching moment of this very intimate sermon, Paul then revealed he would not see the Ephesian elders after this meeting (Acts 20:25). This statement, no doubt, affected both Paul and the men to whom he spoke. Even so, he wanted them to know they had been properly prepared to face the future in his absence. He reminded them:

“Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God” (vv. 26-27). If nothing else, the elders had been instructed in how to handle matters of utmost importance. Paul had done his job. Their task, which was to properly know and apply God’s Word to the situations arising in congregational life, remained.

Paul’s Desire

(Acts 20:28-35)

Paul had revealed he would not be able to continue working with the Ephesian elders but would instead be leaving, never to see them again (Acts 20:25). Even so, he was not leaving them empty-handed. He prepared them to function in his absence by proclaiming to them “the whole counsel of God” (v. 27). With that said, it remained to charge them with the responsibility of functioning as the leaders they were called to be. Paul urged, “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (v. 28).

An examination of this charge reveals elders have a responsibility to govern their own behavior (“take heed to yourselves”). Because it is not possible to teach others if one is not living properly himself, elders should examine and guard their lifestyle (cf. 1 Timothy 3:2-7; Titus 1:6-9). At the same time, elders



must also shepherd the flock or congregation. To do this, elders must respect and follow the teaching of Christ above all. They must also be careful not to abuse their authority in matters of opinion (cf. 1 Peter 5:2-4). Those who serve well as shepherds or overseers deserve the utmost respect of the congregation (cf. 1 Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:17). The responsibility given to elders is made all the more important when we consider the price paid to purchase the church—the very blood of Christ!

If Paul’s message had ended with his charge to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:28), we would have been left with a healthy appreciation for their task. But his sermon continued and impressed upon the leaders the great responsibility they had to protect the flock from “savage wolves” (v. 29). Expanding upon the shepherd imagery, the sermon shows that elders must not only lead and feed but also protect the flock. This latter task is especially difficult when false teachers arise from our own ranks (v. 30). Nevertheless, these tasks are necessary. Thankfully, we have the ability to turn to God and the standard He has provided, His Word (v. 32).

Application

- The responsibility of elders is emphasized in Paul’s sermon. The task of shepherding the flock is one that should not be minimized. Individuals need to be properly fed. This requires the eldership to guard against doctrinal error and to provide a constant diet of sound doctrine. Unless they love the

church, elders will not put forth the effort needed to see these properly done.

Questions

1. How many years did Paul live and work in Ephesus (Acts 20:31)?
2. Where did Paul ask the Ephesian elders to meet with him (Acts 20:17)?
3. How had Paul taught the Ephesians (Acts 20:20)?
4. Why did Paul say he would face tribulations in Jerusalem (Acts 20:22)?
5. What had Paul declared to the Ephesians (Acts 20:27)?
6. From what source did Paul say false teachers would arise (Acts 20:30)?



7. Why did Paul command the brethren to God and His Word (Acts 20:32)?

Discussion

1. Why is the credibility of the person preaching so important?
2. Why did Paul stress he had preached “the whole counsel of God”?
3. What can elders do to fulfill the responsibilities assigned to them in this text?
4. What can congregations do to encourage their elders?

Paul at Jerusalem

Acts 21:37-22:21

³⁷ Then as Paul was about to be led into the barracks, he said to the commander, “May I speak to you?” He replied, “Can you speak Greek?”

³⁸ “Are you not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a rebellion and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness?”

³⁹ But Paul said, “I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city; and I implore you, permit me to speak to the people.”

⁴⁰ So when he had given him permission, Paul stood on the stairs and motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great silence, he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, saying,

^{22:1} “Brethren and fathers, hear my defense before you now.”

² And when they heard that he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, they kept all the more silent. Then he said:

³ “I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers’ law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today.

⁴ “I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women,

5 “as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished.

6 “Now it happened, as I journeyed and came near Damascus at about noon, suddenly a great light from heaven shone around me.

7 “And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’

8 “So I answered, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’

9 “And those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me.

10 “So I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Arise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do.’

11 “And since I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of those who were with me, I came into Damascus.

12 “Then a certain Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there,

13 “came to me; and he stood and said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that same hour I looked up at him.

14 “Then he said, ‘The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth.

15 ‘For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard.

16 ‘And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.’

17 “Now it happened, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I was in a trance

18 “and saw Him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me.’

19 “So I said, ‘Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You.

20 ‘And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.’

21 “Then He said to me, ‘Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.’”

Introduction

In his sermon to the Ephesian elders, the apostle Paul revealed that the Holy Spirit warned him about “chains and tribulations” awaiting him in Jerusalem (Acts 20:23). Although he did not dismiss the warning, he did not alter his course. Instead, he declared, “But none of these things move me; nor do

I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" (v. 24). Paul's resolve is reminiscent of Jesus, who, despite knowing the persecution He would face, "steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51).

Despite being warned by disciples in Tyre that he should "not ... go up to Jerusalem" (Acts 21:4), Paul did not change course. Continuing on, he came to Caesarea, where Agabus used Paul's own belt to demonstrate how the apostle would be bound (v. 11). This demonstration had a great effect on Paul's companions, so that Luke wrote, "Now when we heard these things, both we and those from that place pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem" (v. 12). In response, Paul simply reaffirmed his steadfast devotion to the cause of Christ and answered: "What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (v. 13).

Encouraged by Paul's determination, the group made the journey to Jerusalem (Acts 21:15). Upon their arrival, they were welcomed joyfully by the brethren (v. 17). Paul took the opportunity to meet with James and the other elders from the Jerusalem congregation and reported to them "in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry" (v. 19). This good news caused the brethren to rejoice (v. 20). Nevertheless, they

were concerned that Paul's work among the Gentiles would serve as a stumbling block to individuals from a Jewish background (v. 21). To alleviate any concerns the Jews might have had concerning Paul, James encouraged him to go through a purification ritual with others who had taken a vow (vv. 23-24). Paul complied with this suggestion, but as the period of purification was coming to an end, "the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him" (v. 27).

Jerusalem was in an uproar; Paul's life was in jeopardy. If not for the intervention of Roman soldiers, Paul might have been killed (Acts 21:32). Pulling him from the mob, the soldiers carried Paul away from the temple and up the stairs of the castle of Antonia. This was a Roman garrison situated next to the temple. Describing the placement of this building, Darrell L. Bock wrote: "The location allows [the Romans] to keep an eye on the potentially volatile temple without violating its sanctity, from one of the turrets just over a hundred feet high. If a problem arises, they can react quickly, using two sets of stairs running from the fortress into the outer court" (Acts, 652). On this occasion, the reaction of the soldiers seems providential. Paul's life was spared, but he did not go away silently. Instead, he asked permission to address the violent mob (v. 39). This request was granted (v. 40), and the sermon Paul subsequently preached was recorded in our lesson text.

May I Speak to You?

(Acts 21:37-40)

After being saved from the angry mob and carried up the steps from the courtyard of the temple to the Roman fortress, Paul addressed the Roman commander and simply asked, “May I speak to you?” (Acts 21:37). This question took the Roman by surprise because it was asked in the Greek language. The commander had wrongly assumed Paul to be an Egyptian insurrectionist who had previously escaped the punishment of Rome (v. 38). According to F. F. Bruce, that individual “appeared in Jerusalem, claiming to be a prophet, and led a large band of followers out to the Mount of Olives. There he told them to wait until, at his word of command, the walls of the city would fall flat; then they would march in, overthrow the Roman garrison, and take possession of the place” (*The Book of Acts*, 412). Although the Egyptian’s plan was thwarted and many of his followers killed, he somehow escaped. Paul, however, was no Egyptian terrorist.

Identifying himself, Paul stated, “I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city” (Acts 21:39). Besides distinguishing himself from the Egyptian, this description gave the commander an idea of his background. Given Tarsus’ reputation as an intellectual center, this may have also explained Paul’s ability to speak more than one language. Regardless, it opened the door for his request to address the crowd. John B. Polhill explained: “That



he was a Jew obviously gave him some grounds for addressing his fellow Jews. That he was obviously cultured assured Lysias that he was not one of the rabble and merited the honor of his request” (*Acts*, 456). The commander then gave Paul the opportunity to address the crowd. After gaining the attention of the audience, “he spoke to them in the Hebrew language” (v. 40). As H. Leo Boles noted, “Paul is given opportunity to make his first defense; he does so with courage and clearness” (*A Commentary on Acts*, 350).

Hear My Defense

(Acts 22:1-13)

Having been accused of teaching against the Jews, the law, and the temple (Acts 21:28), Paul took the opportunity to answer the charges made against him (22:1). Both his use of the common language of the people as well as the respectful manner in which he addressed the crowd caught their attention (vv. 1-2). He then began by discussing his background: “I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers’ law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today” (v. 3). With this statement, Paul established a bond with the Jews. His background was like their own. He was born a Jew and well-versed in the tenets of Judaism. Perhaps even more important, however, was the fact that he had formerly attempted to stop the spread of

Christianity. He reported, “I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women” (v. 4). But this is where Paul’s similarities with his current audience ended.

While Paul had been on a mission to persecute Christians, near the city of Damascus, everything changed (Acts 22:5-6). A great light shone upon him from the heavens and the Lord spoke and asked, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (v. 7). After identifying Himself as “Jesus of Nazareth” (v. 8), the Lord instructed Paul—or Saul, as he was then known—to “go into Damascus, and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do” (v. 10). Because he was blinded by “the glory of that light,” Paul was taken by his companions into the city (v. 11). Regarding this, Wayne Jackson observed, “His companions had seen the bright light (v. 9), but they were not blinded; it was the ‘glory’ of the divine Christ that impaired Saul’s vision in that dramatic experience (cf. Lk. 2:9)” (*The Acts of the Apostles*, 284). Once in the city, Ananias, who was sent to him by the Lord (cf. Acts 9:10-16), found Paul and restored his sight (22:12-13).

God Has Chosen You

(*Acts 22:14-21*)

Ananias did not come merely to heal Paul of his blindness. Instead, he came to reveal God’s plan for his life and instruct him in the way of salvation. Discussing what God had in mind for Paul from that



point forward, Ananias declared: “The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth. For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard” (Acts 22:14-15). These words parallel what Ananias was told when initially instructed to go to Paul (cf. 9:15-16). They also accord with what Paul later revealed the Lord told him (cf. 26:16-18). Explaining why this was important to Paul’s present audience, David L. Roper noted: “Paul knew that the reason he was hated by the Jews was that he preached to Gentiles. Specifically, he was hated because he preached that Gentiles could be saved without first becoming Jewish proselytes. He wanted the crowd to understand that it was not his idea—but the Lord’s—to go to the Gentiles. The Lord had hinted at this through the words of Ananias. ... Ananias did not specifically mention Gentiles, but they would be included in ‘all men.’” (*Acts 15–28*, 321).

In addition to revealing what God intended for Paul to do, Ananias was charged with the responsibility of telling him what he needed to do to be saved. Therefore, upon confronting Paul, who obviously believed in the Lord he had seen and who was clearly a broken and penitent man (cf. Acts 9:9, 11), Ananias instructed: “And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord” (22:16). Baptism was no mere formality or sign; it was required to cleanse one who was still in his sins (cf. 2:38; 1 Peter 3:21). So Boles

wrote: "As Paul's body was to be washed in the act of baptism, so his sins were to be forgiven. 'Calling on his name' means invoking the name of Christ in so doing. He was thus commanded to do all in the name of the Lord Jesus. Here baptism is clearly set forth as one of the conditions of the remission of sins, and not merely as a symbol of what had already been done" (*A Commentary on Acts*, 355).

After obeying the gospel, Paul recounted how he then went to Jerusalem to presumably preach the message of Christ to his own countrymen (Acts 22:17). Nevertheless, the Lord had other plans (v. 18). The one who had formerly persecuted Christians to their deaths (vv. 19-20) would be used to spread the message far and wide. Thus, Paul revealed the Lord's charge: "Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles" (v. 21). At this juncture, the sermon came to an abrupt halt, for the crowd was outraged and refused to listen any further (vv. 23-24).

Application

- Paul's sermon illustrates how one may speak in a respectful yet truthful way and still be rejected. We should not expect everyone to appreciate and seek truth. Some will be open to the gospel message, but others have already decided they have no interest. In this case, the Jews allowed their prejudices against the Gentiles to affect their ability to listen honestly and examine Paul's message on its own merits. This should not keep us from preaching, but it should

motivate us to find fertile soil in which to scatter our seed (cf. Matthew 13:18-23).

Questions

1. Where was Paul seized by the Jewish mob (Acts 21:27)?
2. Who rescued Paul (Acts 21:31-33)?
3. What did Paul request to do (Acts 21:39)?
4. In what language did Paul speak to the Jewish crowd (Acts 22:2)?
5. How did Paul respectfully relate to his audience (Acts 22:1-4)?
6. What disciple was sent to Paul in Damascus (Acts 22:12)?

7. What was Paul instructed to do without waiting (Acts 22:16)?

Discussion

1. Why do you think Paul recounted the story of his conversion to the Jewish mob?
2. What does this lesson's text teach us regarding the necessity of baptism?
3. What steps can we take to overcome prejudices?



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