

All Roads Lead Here: Preach It!
By Jason Huff
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Isaiah 52:7-10; Luke 24:44-53; Romans 10:12-21

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Romans 10:12-21. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word. “For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile -- the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?” Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. But I ask: Did they not hear? Of course they did: “Their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.” Again I ask: Did Israel not understand? First, Moses says, “I will make you envious by those who are not a nation; I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding.” And Isaiah boldly says, “I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.” But concerning Israel he says, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.””

This week, Cameron and I learned to fly drones. The boys got them for Christmas, but we hadn’t gotten the chance to fly them yet. Turns out they’re a lot of fun! They’re small so it’s easy to get them up really high in the air. They can do tricks and back flips. We had to knock a drone out of a tree limb a few times, but we’re getting the hang of it.

But the hard part was knowing what to do at first. The drones were all there, but there were no instructions. We turned them on, batteries flashing, all good, yet we couldn’t get them to work. Obviously they were made to fly, but we couldn’t make that happen. We were lost until I found a manual online telling us how to sync the remote control to the drone. Until we had the directions, this great gift simply wouldn’t do what it was made to do.

That’s a good segue way into our passage this afternoon, which is about the presentation of the good news. Last week, we discussed how we are saved through believing in Jesus, confessing our belief to others, and living that belief out. Folks from every people group are included; it’s open to anyone who trusts in Christ. That’s the good news. But how do we come to believe it? Paul switches directions here to recognize the importance of spreading the gospel. That’s what we’re going to focus on today: why it’s important for the gospel to go out to others.

The good news of Jesus is open to be accepted by people of all nationalities – but most of the nations are far away from Paul. “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”” In a sense, Paul is saying, how can they fly the drone if they don’t have the manual? How can anyone believe in Jesus if they don’t know who He is, without someone going and telling them?

I want to dissect a few truths from this portion of the passage. First, I want to talk about the human element of the good news. *The good news is spread by personal contact.* Why are we here today? Someone told us about Jesus. Someone told us that He was kind and merciful, loving, that He was God's Son to be believed and respected and obeyed. Someone led us to believe that eternal life was in His hands, and that we needed to entrust our lives to Him to be with God forever. Could have been a friend, a relative, Mom or Dad or Grandma or Grandpa, a pastor, a Sunday school teacher. But it's personal. We relay it person to person.

We use the Bible to tell about Jesus. The Bible tells us about Jesus and what God has been doing in the world over the centuries. It is divinely inspired and without error in its original form in its original language. But we don't just drop Bibles into remote regions and hope people find it and understand it. We go in and meet people and tell them what the Bible says and help them understand it as they read it for themselves.

We follow in the footsteps of Jesus when we do that. Because that's the amazing thing. God didn't just send His word to Abraham's family, to Moses, or to the prophets. He sent Jesus, His Son, to relate salvation to us. Jesus was the message, but He also taught the message. He was the sacrifice for our sins, but He also spent His whole life as a sacrifice on our behalf to make sure we understood God's love for us.

We can't ignore Jesus 2,000 years later because He's so captivating. Nobody met Him and came away unchanged. Some people loved Him; others hated Him and rejected Him, and that's still true today. His love speaks to us; His words challenge us; His Spirit changes us. And that's because Jesus is "God with us." No one who knows Jesus thinks that God is far away somewhere. Jesus lived on this earth. He walked the roads of Israel, traveling the whole length of it to minister to people. In Jesus, God is up close and personal. In Jesus, God came down in our humanity and was literally right here, in places we can go still today.

In America, we've become disconnected. We spend a lot of time on our phones, our screens, and we think that maybe God will work through the Internet. But well over 90% of those who become Christians become believers not because of a rational argument or a book they've read or a personal mission to become spiritual. Almost everyone who believes starts their faith journey with Jesus through a personal invitation through someone they know.

All this means that the gospel is personal. Jesus came to us personally, and His story and His good news is meant to be shared personally. And while we come to Jesus with a lot of biases and questions and objections, the primary way that we get past them is through the personal sharing of the story.

So the good news is spread through personal contact, but here's our second vital point: *the good news is spread primarily by preaching.* If you ever want a way to know that God isn't like us, it's that God uses preaching to bring people to Himself. How crazy is that? Even the best preachers can make you want to take a nap! (Not that any of you would sleep through my sermons!) And you know what? It doesn't say anything about you or me except that we're human, that preaching doesn't naturally appeal to us.

The American church has worked hard to make our music sound as modern as possible. Many big churches put on a show like you'd see at the Palace – lights dimmed, flashing stuff, sometimes even secular music because we want to get people's attention. It's like we've got to make things really interesting so that we can all make it through the boring part – the sermon.

But it's through the hard, difficult, boring work of preaching that changes start in people. Those changes are lived out in everyday life; they're expanded in Bible studies and ministry opportunities; but they have their spark in preaching we hear every week. And it's not because of anything great in my preaching or in anybody else's preaching. It's the Holy Spirit working.

Paul taught a lot about the upside down way God uses preaching. In 1 Corinthians 1:21, he wrote, "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe." God knows preaching is foolish to us – that's why God uses it! The method, the message...they are crazy to the world, but God works through it. It shows us that our belief comes from God's saving grace and not our own inherent goodness.

In 1 Corinthians 2:4-5, Paul says, "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power." Here's the thing: if I preach a wise sermon or a persuasive sermon, it doesn't mean the Spirit's working. If my words aren't blessed by the Spirit, they aren't going to do any good. There are weeks where I think the sermon's terrible and someone says, "That spoke to me," "that changed me." And so we keep preaching even when it seems out-of-date. God is pleased to use it as the central means by which people meet His Son.

Next thing: *the good news is spread primarily by those sent to preach it.* Paul says, "And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!""

We have to be careful with this one because the spread of the gospel is the responsibility of every Christian. All of us are to share Jesus with our friends and neighbors. We do that through living out our faith in obedience to Jesus, loving God and loving our neighbors. If we live a life that's loving, people see it and notice we're different. That gives us the opportunity to share what Jesus has done in our lives and to invite them to learn more. We have that responsibility even if we aren't called to be preachers and teachers.

That said, the good news comes primarily through people sent to preach. In our tradition, the local congregation and the pastor and the presbytery that has oversight over local churches all come to an agreement that the pastor is called – that God is sending that preacher to that church. Other traditions do it differently, but almost all Christian traditions agree that preachers need to be sent by the church – people who God called specifically to preaching to others about Jesus.

This takes a lot of different forms. I met Thursday with Jonathan and Fozia Young, who are missionaries to a difficult part of India, a place where many Indians tell them, “Don’t go there, it’s not safe.” Jonathan replies, “I grew up in Detroit...we’ll be fine.” They live in a heavily Muslim and Hindu community; they are the only Christians in their neighborhood. But they tell anybody about Jesus who asks. They invite people into their home at Christian holidays so they can hear the story. And slowly but surely, they are making inroads there.

Some people today are called to take the gospel all over the world. Some are called to take it to suburban Detroit. But there’s still a huge need for missionaries, for those willing to say, “Wherever you call me, Lord, I’m gonna go and share your love.” There are plenty of pastors in the world, but not enough who will go anywhere, do whatever, take whatever salary is offered, and do the job God is calling us to. The world needs preachers sent out into the world so that God’s Word goes throughout the nations and all those who God calls would enter His Kingdom through the gift of Jesus.

Final concept we’re going to draw out of this passage today: *the good news is good regardless of whether or not it is accepted*. In the second half of today’s passage, Paul says, “But not all the Israelites accepted the good news.” He quotes the Old Testament’s knowledge of how the Gentiles would start coming into God’s Kingdom while Israel would eventually reject the Messiah they had been waiting for.

The truth that Jesus lived, died, and was resurrected so that we could have eternal life is the best news anyone could ever receive. But to some, it seems like bad news. The bad news is, we’re sinners. The bad news is, we can’t save ourselves. The bad news is, there’s an authority higher than ourselves – we don’t have the right to make up our own morality that suits us. To believe in Jesus means that we give up our selves – we exchange our plans for God’s plans, our ways for God’s ways. Without God’s help, we can’t accept that.

The modern church struggles with telling the whole story, the good news and the bad, because the size of our buildings and the payrolls of our churches are dependent on the number of people who come every week. Many people fund ministries based on how many people say they’ve come to believe in Jesus through that ministry, on the success they can put into statistics. There is no statistic for faithfulness.

And so we compromise in order to get people to come. We rarely hear about hell or eternal punishment. We overlook a lot of sins and couch them in softer language – we didn’t sin, we made a mistake. We’re afraid to talk about how Jesus should affect our outlook on money, on politics, on racial reconciliation because we think we’ve got to get people to believe by any means necessary. We will ignore the hard things Jesus talked about in order to get people to say, “I believe.” The problem is, the Jesus we’ve preached to them is not the Jesus of the Bible, not the Jesus who saves. And when they get the full package, they fall away because they never actually heard or believed the whole story.

Jesus would not have gotten funding! He drew crowds of thousands and then taught them such difficult things that they stopped following Him. The prophet Jeremiah preached for over 40 years without a single convert. In our own era, the famed theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who lost his life for preaching and teaching against the regime of Nazi Germany, his congregation was half the size of ours!

The good news is good even if your friends and family don't respond. Our calling as Christians is to share the good news and to disciple those who believe it. God creates Christians by planting faith in our hearts as we hear the message. When Paul described how it worked, he said, "I planted the seed and my fellow worker Apollos watered it, but God provided the growth." We can be honest and loving and truthful with those around us, and then we let God provide the growth. You are not responsible for their response, only your faithfulness to invite, encourage, and speak up for Christ.

In our last moments, let's think about how what our part is, where we fit into this passage. Most of us are not called to preach the gospel as a profession. He's given us somewhat normal lives in normal workplaces and normal neighborhoods. We haven't sensed in our prayers that we should be going out to preach the gospel someplace else, as a pastor or a missionary. And that is perfectly OK. God wants most of us to live faithfully right where we are.

Our work, then, is planting seeds – encouraging friends and family and neighbors to come to safe events like Meal and a Movie Night, places where they can see the church is a loving place to hear about Jesus. When they're ready, we encourage them to come to a worship service and see what it's like. That can be scary. But you're not alone in this. I can't encourage you strongly enough to come to The Art Of Neighboring seminar coming up on September 30. It will be a way for us all to grow in being faithful to bring the good news to others.

Another way we can fulfill this calling is to be senders and prayer warriors. There's a reason we pray for a missionary family and another local church and our Compassion children every week. We pray for those who are sent and for those who are on the receiving end. As we can, we give to those who are sent so that they can do their work without having to worry about the financial piece. Because their job isn't fundraising, it's sharing the gospel. In Matthew 10:41, Jesus says anyone who aids a prophet or a righteous person because they are a prophet, because they are righteous, they will receive the reward of the person they helped. When we aid the work of those called to preach the gospel, we are helping ourselves.

Friends, there is nothing in the world like telling others about Jesus. It has eternal ramifications. You could be instrumental in a friend or family member becoming a part of God's Kingdom and living in His love and glory forever. If you've not met Jesus personally, I encourage you to get to know Him today. Talk to me and I'll help you get started on that journey. And if you have, when you share Him with others, not everyone will respond...but those who need to hear that good news will be blessed because of your faithfulness.