

Words and Deeds: Speak and Spell
By Jason Huff
April 28, 2019
Psalm 139:7-10; John 3:1-12; Acts 18:18-28

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 18:18-28. May God's richest blessings be upon the reading of His perfect, infallible, and sacred Word. "Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because of a vow he had taken. They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined. But as he left, he promised, "I will come back if it is God's will." Then he set sail from Ephesus. When he landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch. After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples. Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately. When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ."

In 1978, Texas Instruments released a new learning toy: the *Speak and Spell*. It was an orange and red gadget the size of a small woman's purse with a handle that you could carry around. It was the first device to synthesize speech on a microchip that wasn't just a recording of someone's voice. It was programmed with several hundred of the most commonly misspelled words. The goal was for kids to practice with the *Speak and Spell* and become better spellers.

In the 14 years it was made, it was a cultural phenomenon. In the movie *E.T.*, E.T. used a *Speak and Spell* to create his device to "phone home." It became the title of a best-selling album. Musicians hacked into the machine to create new sounds. What's funny is, studies showed that the *Speak and Spell* on its own rarely accomplished the purpose it was built for! If a kid played with the *Speak and Spell* but didn't use the words writing a letter or an assignment, they quickly forgot what they'd learned. It only worked if they used the words from the *Speak and Spell* in their everyday life.

That seems like a strange bit of '80s trivia to start our Sunday with. But parts of our passage reminded me a lot of the *Speak and Spell*. As we return to the book of Acts this week, this passage encourages us in our walk as believers, how we share our beliefs, and how God blesses us as we walk in faith.

The passage has two parts, and the first part is all about Paul. It's actually about a lot of different places; in just a few different verses, eight different cities or regions come up. I don't want you to get lost in those names, which is easy to do.

Here's what we need to see: Paul is finishing his second missionary journey by backtracking his way through the cities where he's worked before planting churches. He is on his way back to Antioch, his home base, but before he gets home he goes back to encourage the believers along the way.

In the body of Christ, in the church, we check in with one another. We encourage one another. We hold one another accountable. And we do it not only in the local community, but in community around our nation and around the world. Paul wanted to make sure that the churches he planted were thriving, that people were becoming disciples of Jesus, that they were growing in righteousness and listening to the Holy Spirit.

The biggest trend in the North American church is independent churches that have no connection or accountability to the larger universal church. That is a huge danger. Doesn't mean that those churches can't do amazing things; they really can. But we need connection to others outside our little corner of the world. Paul's constant checking in with the churches he planted proves it.

We wouldn't have survived as a church if others from our denomination hadn't supported us. As the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, we pray for pastors and elders and churches, we encourage them, and if they start sliding into disorder or argument or sin, we call them to task. The early church had many factions and branches; Paul talks about them. But there was never a sense that there wasn't a unified church. And as much as it depends on us, when we can join with others who hold to the truths the church has always taught, we will.

Now there were two other interesting points I saw in the end of Paul's second missionary journey. The first is that Paul had his hair cut because of a vow. That might surprise us because we don't see any vows either commanded or authorized in the New Testament. In fact, Paul writes to the churches in Rome and Colossi about how some Christians celebrate special days and seasons and others believe every day is alike – and how they are to follow their God-given conscience, not a rule. So what is Paul doing?

Based on the haircut, it was a Nazarite vow. In the law, in Numbers 6, a person could dedicate themselves to the Lord by taking this vow. During the vow, they couldn't have any alcohol or anything made from grapes at all, they couldn't cut their hair, and they couldn't go near a dead body, even a family member who died, because they were dedicated to the Lord.

No one took these vows because of a promised reward because there wasn't any. It was simply a way written into the Law for someone to be holy before the Lord – and that was its own reward. Paul didn't have to do it; he wasn't forced to do it. There's nothing saying a Christian needs to do it. But remember, in every city he traveled to, Paul went to the Jews first. He was a missionary first to his own people before the Gentiles. Taking this vow showed his loyalty to God, his desire for holiness, and his place as a Jew speaking to Jews about the Jewish savior who had come to rescue them.

Here's a simple takeaway from this: *there are many methods to grow closer to God – use the one God calls you to use.* Some people fast regularly to get closer to God. Some people read a lot of Scripture on their days off. Some people listen to Christian music. Some dedicate themselves to prayer. Some people commit to a specific discipline or fast over a time period like Lent, liking giving up chocolate or giving away extra money that comes their way. All of these things are biblically appropriate ways to draw close to God *if that's what they're used for.*

These methods aren't guaranteed results; they're more a way of saying, "Thank you, God, for everything you've done – and I want to grow closer to you because of it." They aren't to gain God's favor because we already have God's favor; He's shown His favor to us by sending Jesus for us. But they are means that we can reach out to God, to know His grace even more, and grow in His love. We shouldn't ignore them. Paul reached out to God in many ways over time, but one at this point in time was a specific Jewish vow. We don't need to do that specifically. But we should ask God, "How *would* you have me grow closer to you?" In time, He'll show us. Just as some of us learned to spell from parents and others from teachers and others from a Speak and Spell, each of us will grow closer to God in His appointed way for us.

Now here's another interesting thing in the first half of the passage. Paul goes to the synagogue in Ephesus and reasoned with the Jews there. They wanted him to stay and talk with them some more. He declined. That's odd, isn't it? Usually, Paul stayed wherever he was wanted. As a missionary, that was his job. Maybe Paul wanted to go to Jerusalem to complete his vow as the Law commanded. Maybe the Holy Spirit was guiding him to finish his journey. We don't know. But it is surprising that he turns the Ephesians down. He leaves them with the promise, "If it's God's will, I'll be back."

There's no rule in this but something important to think about: *not every battle in God's Kingdom is your fight.* It overwhelms me from time to time to see just how many things are wrong with this world. Whether it's the homeless or the plight of the unborn or those affected by natural disasters, the poor in other countries, it's so much it's paralyzing. The brokenness of this world shows itself in a million ways, and we could spend all our money and every second of every day fixing those problems and barely make a dent in one of them.

Not every battle in God's Kingdom is your fight. At Compassion where I work during the week, our goal is to give ultrasounds to women making decisions about abortion or who are at risk for abortion. We can't give an ultrasound to every woman who wants to see her child. As a church, we want to help those who are less fortunate and need help, but because of our funds we can't help everyone – we help those who have made an effort to be connected to our fellowship in some way. That's OK.

If God is calling you to serve at a homeless shelter, do it. If God asks you to give funds to help our missionaries reach the Muslim world, there are dozens of missionaries in the EPC doing just that. Pray where God would have you move, and do it. But not every Kingdom job is your job. Paul needed to move on from Ephesus despite the interest in the message. He knew God would fulfill the need through him or someone else. He cared about them, but God revealed to him that it was not his current job. In the same way, do what God is calling you to do for the Kingdom. But know that God will handle a great many things without you, and that's OK.

Now the passage splits into its second half. Paul has reached home and is doing his encouraging work in his own region as God calls him. And there's a new guy in Ephesus named Apollos. Priscilla and Aquila were already on the scene, but Apollos is really something. He speaks boldly in the synagogue with an awesome passion for Jesus; he's well-informed and knows the Scripture really well.

He's got a problem, though; he only knows about John's baptism. He knows about a washing for repentance, for the coming of Jesus, but not the baptism of the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised. And so Priscilla and Aquila invite him into their home and make sure that he knows everything he needs to know about Jesus. Once he is fully taught, Apollos becomes an even greater witness as a result and starts doing his own missionary work.

I want us to think about Apollos' story in a couple of ways to encourage us in our Christian walk. The first thing I want to encourage us with is this: *sharing our faith is not a matter of perfect knowledge but faithful willingness*. Apollos is an effective witness for Jesus even though he doesn't have all the facts straight – primarily the major one that baptism in Jesus is important because He sends us the Holy Spirit.

Apollos is in a long line of effective witnesses who share what they know. The woman at the well gets her entire village to come and meet Jesus with the simple phrase, "He told me everything I'd ever done." (That was a little exaggerated, but still!) Or the witness of the man born blind – "Whether Jesus is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know – I was blind and now I see!"

We talk about a lot of things we only know about casually. We don't study music theory when we tell somebody about the latest singer whose songs we enjoy. You don't have to take a course in film studies to give the latest blockbuster a good review. It might help to be able to discuss some things better, to say more than, "Yeah, it was really cool!" But we talk all the time about things we like and dislike based solely on recent experience.

Of course we should know our faith well to discuss it; we'll talk about that more in a minute. But most people aren't won to Jesus by a professor giving a lecture about the minute details of the Bible. Most people aren't even fully won by a preacher's message. They see you living a righteous, moral, and most importantly compassionate and loving and forgiving life in front of them, and then they hear, and then they're ready to believe what they've heard based on what they've seen.

Sharing your faith isn't about knowing all the kings in the Old Testament or the names of all twelve disciples. Good if you know those things, but not very important. What's important is your faithful willingness. Your willingness to share your faith in love and compassion for others is going to matter more than knowing your Bible inside and out, as important as it is. Don't let your knowledge (or lack of it) become a stumbling block.

Knowing the overall story of who Jesus was, why He came, and what He did are super important. But you can share what you know. The Pharisees tried to intimidate the man born blind with their superior knowledge and their doubts, but he knew what Jesus had done for him, and that made his testimony stand out. If we wait until we know and understand everything about Jesus, we'll never share.

We share for the sake of others – for their eternity. That is our #1 reason. We share for the sake of God's Kingdom so it will grow. We share because it's a command from Jesus. And, quite selfishly, we share for ourselves. When I went to the dentist when I was a kid, I was always told one thing: "You only have to brush the ones you want to keep." The same thing is true when we invite people to church – you only have to invite people to the church you want to keep. We love our fellowship of folks at CrossWay; we love each other; we try to take care of each other, rejoice with those who rejoice, and mourn with those who mourn. But that can only continue as long as new people become a part of our fellowship.

Last thing we learn from Apollos: *Keep learning, keep growing, keep faithful, and you will make a difference for God's Kingdom.* Apollos didn't have to listen to Priscilla and Aquila. He could have kept preaching his message without the full knowledge of what he was talking about. At best, he would have become a footnote in church history of yet another wayward teacher who didn't give the full counsel of God. But he was willing to learn. He was willing to say that he didn't know everything he needed to know, and he was willing to get the full story. Once he does, his ministry takes off like wildfire.

You don't have to know everything to share your faith...but you do have to keep growing. The best thing for your testimony is a daily walk with God where you know Him and He knows you. The more you learn, the more you understand, the easier it is to relate to others and know where the good news of Jesus meets them.

Going back to the Speak and Spell...the kids that actually learned how to spell the words did it through taking the words and using them outside of the game. You want your faith to mean something? Keep learning and then practice it. Whether it's through going to a conference like many of the women did last weekend or helping with a service project, being a part of our Bible study or coming to the faith film night in a few weeks, having an informal group of friends meet to discuss faith together...don't think Sunday meets your obligation.

The Christian lives in very much the same way that a shark does. Sharks have to keep swimming or they die. They can't breathe unless they're moving. They sleep swimming. We have life, joy, and peace in Christ; we don't need to worry about our salvation or what tomorrow will bring. But we must keep moving in our faith – growing, learning, practicing. The most certain way for a Christian's faith to die is to stop tending to it. I love seeing you all on Sundays and I'm so glad you're here. But you don't want to breathe just one day a week, right? That's an awfully long time to hold your breath!

Keep your faith active, and you will make waves just like that shark that keeps swimming because it's how he stays alive. Friends, commit your life to the Lord each day, and He will direct your paths, He will keep you growing, and you will see His work in your life.