

“Robust Preaching”
Acts 13:13-52
August 3, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

In a book full of sermons, we have in today’s passage the first sermon from one of the most influential preachers in the history of the church. The sermons preached by the apostle Paul left a lasting impact upon the world that continues to our day. We have mentioned before that the book of Acts is in some way a collection of sermons. Luke records so many sermons because he believes that preaching is God’s primary instrument for bringing lasting change to our world. God enters our lives to bring his abundant blessing through the preached word of God.

Luke’s emphasis on the importance of preaching is quite a bit different from the current view of preaching. There are two caricatures of preaching in our day. One is that to preach means to scold people and tell them what to do. If someone begins telling another person what to do, the response is often “Stop preaching at me!” I still remember clearly a scene from my childhood when I was playing church with my brothers. I was four years old, and was the preacher in our pretend church set up in the den of our home. The cushions from the sofa were placed on the floor, and I mounted them like the preacher climbing into his pulpit. Then I began to “preach” by telling people how bad they were and how they needed to stop being so bad. The second caricature of preaching is to see it as giving bland reassurances to people of the love of God. It is often done with a soothing voice and a sickly, sweet smile.

The reason preaching is so commonly viewed in a negative way in our day is that most preaching falls into one of these caricatures. It is far easier to imagine these preaching styles in a skit that would make us laugh than the kind of preaching that brings lasting change to our world. Paul’s preaching was so far removed from these cartoonish versions of preaching that it was like the difference between a mud pie and a real pie. There are two things we need to do with Paul’s preaching. First, we need to hear it and receive it in order that we might be transformed. Second, all who have been transformed by true preaching are called to some role in preaching the good news of the gospel to others. Do you know people that you long to see come under the blessing of God? Then God calls you to some role in preaching the gospel to them. Paul is presented to us here as a model that we are to follow.

This is the first of two main sermons Luke reports as having been preached by Paul. He selects these two sermons because they are representative of the way Paul preached to two different groups. In our chapter, he is addressing very religious people, and in Acts 17 he is addressing very non-religious people. Let’s

look now at how Paul preached to religious people. He did three things in this kind of preaching.

I. **Respect the Person – v. 17-25**

Paul begins his sermon with a partial review of Israel's history. Why does he begin in this way? He is not giving any new information that anyone in his audience was not well aware of. The points he highlights from Israel's history were among the most well-known and least controversial. He talks about the exodus from Egypt, King David and John the Baptist. What is his purpose in this section? One commentator has pointed out that these verses correspond to an ancient Jewish confessional summary. When they gathered in their synagogues for worship, the Jews would recite the great acts of God on their behalf, and these were the main ones they would repeat.

In reciting this history, Paul is showing respect to his hearers and building a bridge for the gospel to come into their hearts. Whenever we respect people's history, we are respecting them. Showing respect is a critically important, but often neglected part of preaching the gospel. We often approach people initially by thinking that we have to point out what's wrong with their thinking. Instead, Paul teaches us here that we must first build a bridge into people's lives by finding out what's right with their thinking. Because of God's kindness to all, we can be confident that God has preserved something of his image in every single person we may encounter. No matter how severely the image of God may have been marred in their lives, there is something we can find that is still a reflection of God. Paul does the same thing in Acts 17 when he speaks to the non-religious in Athens, quoting approvingly from one of their poets.

Note that Paul did this even though some of his hearers would soon turn against him. Luke reports how that happened on the very next Sabbath. Paul made such a splash during his first sermon that the synagogue was jam-packed for his second sermon, including many Gentiles. But the leading Jews of the synagogue **“were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him”** (v. 45). They were hoping for the conversion of these Gentiles to Judaism, but Paul seemed to be offering easier terms and they didn't like it. He was teaching that they could receive God's full blessing in their lives simply by faith in Jesus and without all the rigors of circumcision and Jewish ceremonial law-keeping. And these leading Jews became Paul's enemies. But note that Paul shows respect even for those who would later oppose him.

How do we apply this to our own lives? We need to see that our first task with those with whom we hope to share the gospel is to build a bridge into their lives by finding out and affirming what is right about them. We can do so in the way Paul did it here, by exploring their history. “Tell me about yourself” should be a common request we make of people. And then we listen and ask good questions

that draw people out. When we find something commendable, we note it in an affirming way. For example, I was recently meeting with someone who needs the Lord. This man was experiencing some marital struggles in his life, but I could tell he had a strong desire for the healing of his marriage. I took the opportunity to affirm him, noting his desire for his marriage as the good thing that it is. Though he later rejected the gospel, this affirmation opened a door for the presentation of the gospel.

II. Instruct the Mind – v. 26-37

In this next section, Paul gives instruction about the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is the heart of the gospel. The main points Paul traces out here begin with the fact that Jesus died, even though he was innocent. He died to fulfill the Scriptures. But Paul wasn't here to talk about some dead guy who had inspired some people during his life. God confirmed that Jesus was more than an inspiring teacher by raising him from the dead. Notice how much attention Paul devotes to the resurrection of Jesus, giving it eight out of the twelve verses of this section. And notice what Paul said in verse 31 about this resurrection. **“For many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people.”** At the time Paul was preaching, there were witnesses. This is a bold claim that lies at the very heart of Christianity. It is bold because it would have been so easy to disprove if it wasn't true. When Paul claimed to have witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus, he was giving his enemies an open door to disprove Christianity by simply refuting this claim. If it weren't true, it would have been so easy to go in search of these witnesses and upon not finding them, debunk the whole thing. But the enemies of Christianity could not do that for the simple reason that there was an abundance of credible witnesses.

There are two things we learn about proclaiming the gospel from this section. First, the gospel must be proclaimed as good news rather than merely good advice. Martin Lloyd-Jones has made a helpful distinction between good news and good advice. Advice is counsel about something to do in the future, while good news is about something that has happened in the past and about which you can do nothing. Lloyd-Jones gives an illustration of a king leading his army to repel an invading force. The king defeats the invader and sends a messenger back with the good news of the victory, by which the kingdom has been made safe. Had he lost the battle, he would have sent back a messenger with advice, not news. The advice would have been, “Head for the hills, the invasion is coming.” We serve not by giving advice, but by proclaiming news that Jesus has defeated all enemies, including the three great enemies of sin, death and Satan. We declare and celebrate this good news every week when we meet together. We did so at our hymn-sing last Sunday night when we sang the hymn *It Is Well with My Soul*. “My sin—Oh the bliss of this glorious thought—my sin, not in part but

the whole, is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more. Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, Oh my soul.”

A second thing we learn from this section is our need to learn a summary presentation of the gospel. While proclaiming the gospel is not merely instructing the mind, it is also not less than that. You cannot preach the gospel without some instruction about these central events of Jesus’ death and resurrection and their meaning. There are different ways of doing so, but I think all Christians need to learn how to proclaim the gospel in some form. If someone were to approach you and say, “What’s so different about you?” would you know what to say? Let me encourage you to consider joining a Sunday School class we will offer beginning September 7. I will be assisting in the teaching of this class as we look in greater detail at how to share the gospel. One of our goals in this class is to teach everyone who attends a short gospel presentation that can be adapted to various situations.

III. Challenge the Heart – v. 38-41

To proclaim the gospel is more than addressing the mind. We must challenge the heart, the very core of our motivations and of who we are at a deep level. Paul begins his appeal to the heart in verse 38, and I notice that he does three things. The first challenge Paul brings is one that you almost never hear anymore, but which was quite prominent in all the preaching of the early church. He warned his hearers about the judgment to come if they rejected Jesus. In verse 40, he says **“Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about.”** He then proceeds to quote a warning from Habakkuk about the coming of King Nebuchadnezzar to destroy Jerusalem. We see another warning in verse 51, where it reports that Paul and Barnabas **“shook off the dust from their feet”** when they left this city. The idea behind this gesture is that this kind of rejection of God will lead to a judgment that is so complete that even the dust on the ground will suffer. It must therefore be removed. The challenge of our next point, the promise of the gospel, will have no traction in our lives until the judgment of God becomes real to us. Without judgment, there is nothing to be saved from. How valuable are trophies for youth sports if everyone who participates gets a trophy, even if the team finished in last place? When they become so common, they cease to have meaning. When talk of the love of God is removed from the context of the judgment upon God that is due to all sinners, the love of God becomes meaningless.

If we accept the Bible, then we must believe in the reality of judgment upon a human race whose instincts are to live without God in our lives. Listen to the way the Bible speaks of the judgment of God. **“Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and freed, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from**

the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” (Rev. 6:15-17). I know of very little that will cause greater panic among more people than the thought of being buried alive. But the judgment of God is so awful that people would gladly choose being buried alive to facing the wrath of the Lamb.

The second challenge, which makes sense only in this context of the reality of judgment, is to believe in the one who brings freedom. Notice how Paul words it. **“Through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything”** (v. 38). Jesus has lived and died that we might be free. Once we are freed from the judgment due our sins, once we are forgiven fully and completely, we are free from every bondage. It may take some time for our freedom to dawn upon us, but as soon as a person believes, they are from that moment completely and utterly free. This freedom is different from the autonomy sought by many Americans, an autonomy that is understood as the freedom from having anyone tell us what to do. When we try to be free from God in that way, we only end up enslaving ourselves. We become slavishly addicted to food, to money, to sexual promiscuity, to dieting, to exercise.

This brings us to the third challenge, which is to forsake one’s current belief system. What I mean by a belief system is that in which you are trusting to cope with a fallen and broken world. Paul’s hearers were Jewish, and they were trusting in the law of Moses for their help. He says in verses 38-39, **“By him [Jesus] everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.”** In order to believe in Jesus, a person has to stop trusting in every other belief system. Faith is like sitting in that you can only sit in one place at a time. In order to sit somewhere else, you must leave where you are currently sitting. We will more commonly come across people who are trusting in the three great alternatives offered by our culture: money, success and appearance. We must challenge people in the same way Paul does. Notice that he points out how the thing they are trusting in, the law of Moses, will not work. It will not provide the freedom that can be found in Jesus. We need to challenge people in the same way, helping them identify where they are placing their trust, and then helping them see that it’s not working.

CONCLUSION:

Paul says that this freedom comes by believing. “Everyone who *believes* is freed.” Freedom doesn’t come because you are nice or rich or good-looking. It comes to those who will simply believe. To believe in the biblical sense means to trust. It comes to those who will trust in Jesus alone. May God grant you to believe in Jesus alone, and to experience the freedom he brings from everything!