



Sermon Series by Season

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**Vol. 2 Part B
Lent through Pentecost Sunday**

***“Galatians – defending the Gospel.”
“Acts 3-8 The disciples after Pentecost.”***

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The purpose of this volume.

Churches are often vacant for long periods or are in locations where it is difficult to find pastors to fill the pulpit when they are vacant. This series of four books is my humble attempt to help vacant congregations. The fifty-nine sermons, divided into four sections by the seasons, will give congregations an option on Sundays that it is hard to get a pastor. The sermons are arranged in series, covering a specific section of scripture or topic. Some are meant to cover a season. Others will fill the long weeks between Pentecost and the beginning of Advent.

This is the second of four volumes of sermons that will cover the church year. The 59 sermons in the volumes can be used during the season indicated or as a sermon series at any time of the year. There is no cost to use these sermons and so I encourage you to freely use them with or without citation of authorship. God gave them as a gift to us at Bethany, and we want to pass them on to you. Feel free to pass them on to others so that as many as possible may share in what the Lord has given all of us. You are also allowed to edit them to fit your specific location or your style of preaching. May the Lord bless you as you learn and grow from His word.

Table of contents

Lent: Galatians – defending the gospel

- | | |
|--|--------------|
| 1 Is it enough? Gal. 1:1-10 | p. 3 |
| 2 Who is welcome in your church? Galatians 2:11-21 | p. 6 |
| 3 Does God keep His promises? Gal. 3:15-25 | p. 9 |
| 4 Is Christianity just a bunch of rules? Gal. 4:21-31 | p. 12 |
| 5 Living by the Spirit Gal. 5:16-26 | p. 15 |
| 6 Doing good Galatians 6:1-10 | p. 18 |

Easter

- | | |
|--|--------------|
| Disappointed with Easter? Luke 24:13-32 | p. 21 |
|--|--------------|

Acts 3 – 8 The disciples after Pentecost.

- | | |
|---|--------------|
| 1 Healed by the power of Jesus' name Acts 3:1-10 | p. 24 |
| 2 The author of life Acts 3:11-26 | p. 27 |
| 3 Not Afraid! Acts 4:1-22 | p. 30 |
| 4 Lying Threatens Unity. Acts 5:1-11 | p. 33 |
| 5 Faith Tested Acts 5:17-42 | p. 36 |
| 6 Using God's opportunities Acts 8:26-40 | p. 39 |

Pentecost

- | | |
|--|--------------|
| The ordinary becomes extraordinary. Acts 2:1-21 | p. 42 |
|--|--------------|

Lent – Galatians – defending the gospel.

Paul founded the churches in Galatia and taught the new believers the basics of church life, but some false teachers came along and told the fledgling Christians that faith wasn't enough. Those instructors said that they also needed to obey the Mosaic law if they were to be truly saved. Paul writes to refute those who were leading the Galatians astray. He presents his authority as an apostle of Christ whom the disciples approved. He then shows that it is faith and not works that bring us into a saving relationship with the Lord. If anyone knew the meaning of the gospel, it was Saul of Tarsus. His Damascus Road experience not only saved him but transformed him into an energetic evangelist. The Law leads us to Christ, but it is the gospel that saves us.

1 Is it enough?

Gal. 1:1-10

The big idea is that adding man's effort to the Gospel destroys God's free gift.

Galatians 1:1-10 1 Paul, an apostle--sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead-- 2 and all the brothers with me, To the churches in Galatia: 3 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, 5 to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. 6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel-- 7 which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! 9 As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! 10 Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.

Trouble for the church – it isn't enough.

It was a successful trip. Hundreds had come to faith, and Paul had planted churches on Cyprus and across Galatia in cities like Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. They had spent three years in what we would call Turkey and had healed people along the way. Yes, Paul had been stoned in Lystra, and the Jews who had rejected their message had dogged them much of the way. It didn't matter. This first missionary trip would pave the way for other trips and more ministry. The church in Antioch that had sent them was filled with joy.

Then Paul found out that a group of Jews had gone behind Paul and Barnabas and sowed the seed of doubt in the minds of the people. What Paul told you wasn't enough. You must keep all the Jewish laws to be saved. The cross of Jesus is not enough. The church has battled that same question for centuries. Is the cross enough? Don't you have to do penance like the Catholics? Don't you have to do good deeds like mission trips and give up dancing or alcohol? It seems too simple for Jesus to die on the cross, and you are saved if you believe.

The real Gospel

A. The real Gospel is a gift of rescue v.4. *who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father,*

The true Gospel is simple. Jesus died on the cross and rose on Easter to rescue us from the effects of the evil world we live in and to give us the gift of eternal life. It is a beautiful comfort that we have when someone we love dies. It is the comfort we have when life is not going well. We feel comfort in death because we don't look at our failings but at Jesus' sacrifice. Satan can't wave every one of the flaws

of our life before our faces as we approach death and make us doubt our salvation. Instead, We look to the cross and the empty tomb and see that Jesus did all we need.

We feel comfort in life because we realize we can be forgiven and restored. There is no terminal sin. Jesus can pick you up from the ash heap of divorce, addiction, or any other flaw in life that you can name. He will forgive you and help you rebuild your life. That is priceless. And it is all a free gift. Everything we do as Christians responds to what Jesus has already given us. Our faith is in the person of Jesus. Faith believes that He has made the sacrifice and has given us the benefit of that sacrifice. Nothing else is needed, but for some, that is too easy. It isn't enough.

The different Gospel

B I have to do something for myself v. 6 *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel*

The false teachers of Paul's day taught that to be saved, Christians had to follow all the Jewish laws and customs. Be circumcised and go to the temple for the feasts. Give a tithe of your income and eat only kosher foods. The cross was nice, but there were requirements to be saved. In our day, the cross is often not considered enough, and churches add requirements for salvation. There are requirements for forgiveness, like penance, or activities to prove that you have accepted salvation, like tithing, not dancing or drinking alcohol, or specific clothes to wear.

Others feel that the Gospel makes it so easy that they don't have to do anything. God is a God of love, so I don't have to attend church regularly or give an actual offering to God's ministry. They live their own way, and God will accept it because He wants us all in heaven. Both are examples of pride. We struggle to accept that we need a savior and that we cannot save ourselves. We either have to do a little to ensure God loves us, or we expect God to accept us on our terms. For both groups, it is not about Jesus. It is about me and my way.

C It doesn't make sense v. 7a *Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion.*

Paul asserts that the Galatians became confused by the Judaizer's false teachers. Paul had told them one thing, and now the Jews were telling them something else. Who was telling the truth? Sadly, many believed the Judaizers, for their ways made sense. Think about it: God becoming man and dying for our sins to save us from sin is hard to believe. You have to pay for food, clothes, and other necessities in life. Why shouldn't you have to pay for salvation even if God was willing to make it simpler? Good works, sacrifices, and worship as payment made sense.

In our day, many push aside the Gospel for things that are solid and are things of the Earth. Technology and science will save us. We only have to figure out how to heal the body or make life here on Earth a little heaven. Man can pull himself up by his own bootstraps. The cross is foolish. It can't be enough. Can you understand Calculus or every process in the human body? If God could design the human body or engineer the universe, couldn't he figure out salvation, even if it isn't entirely logical? Our need is to believe it, not explain justification in detail. It makes sense to God, and that is enough.

D It doesn't match the culture we live in v. 7b *trying to pervert the Gospel of Christ.*

Paul is upset that the Judaizers twisted his message. They took the words of the Gospel and recast them into a belief that left God out. They took salvation and made it appealing and easy to fit into the culture that they lived in. It became about the people and not about Jesus anymore. Sadly, some churches are more about the needs of people than about God. This market approach tries to adapt the message to what people want, not what God has said. While reaching people through their needs to proclaim the Gospel is proper, we must never water down the Gospel to reach them.

We also have to beware of those who want us to be open-minded and tolerant. Too many have claimed that all religions are all valid. Everyone should have a right to their own opinions we are told. Sadly, these human-made religions substitute their ideas for salvation in Christ. Paul would say beware of

them. A twisting of the truth is more difficult to spot than an outright lie. Many claim to follow Jesus but are more in tune with the culture, the desires of the people, and the culture in which we live. The Gospel is insufficient for them because it is not what people want.

The Gospel is enough.

The Gospel can be offensive to humanity.

It would seem so simple. Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead. He gave us everything we needed for salvation and a joy-filled life 2000 years ago. Why wouldn't you accept this free gift of salvation, which provides everything you need? Sadly, I see three reasons the Gospel is offensive. First, the Gospel offends our pride. It says that we can't save ourselves. We need Jesus. It tells us we can do nothing to bring us closer to heaven or please God. Jesus must do it all. We can only respond with thanks. Many don't like handouts. They don't want to feel they owe God.

Second, the Gospel offends our wisdom. It saves us by something that many think is foolish. The idea that a man dying on a cross 2000 years ago gets you into heaven doesn't make sense. The idea that a relationship with an unseen God can change the quality of your life today also seems ridiculous. Finally, the Gospel offends science and knowledge. The Gospel speaks of people rising from the dead and of life beyond the grave. It speaks of a God willing to do miracles in our lives and who listens to our prayers. People deny it all as fables, and fables are not enough. They cannot change a thing.

The Gospel can be a lifesaver for others.

Tim and Tom were twins, but that is where the similarity stopped. Tom was a Christian who was strong in his faith, and it affected the people around him. He prayed daily, giving God his problems, and lived out his faith with kindness to others and a smile on his face. Tim had given up God as being useless. He preferred solving problems by working hard and getting new gadgets to give him answers. He struggled in life but figured that was just his lot, and he could overcome it if given time. In the process, his life was filled with discarded people.

Then, their mother got cancer. Tom prayed with his mom and was comforted by her strong faith. Tom and his mother trusted the Lord and knew that even death was in God's hands. In contrast, Tim was angry that the doctors didn't give her much chance. He screamed at God and became depressed. His world fell apart. For Christians, the Gospel is more than enough. It is a relationship with a friend who keeps his promises, is trustworthy and fair, and is filled with love. We know we can't earn salvation, but it is given to us. In addition, God takes care of us now. What more could we need?

2 Who is welcome in your church?

Galatians 2:11-21

February 25, 2018 – Lent 2

Galatians 2:11-21 11 When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. 12 Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. 13 The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. 14 When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? 15 "We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' 16 know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified. 17 "If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! 18 If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker. 19 For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. 20 I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21 I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

Peter's second denial of Jesus v.12b *But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.*

It was Antioch, which was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. The time was probably before Paul's first missionary journey, and the church had a special visitor. Peter had come to see the exciting things that the Lord was doing in Syria. Here, the church was multiplying. Here was a church that was a mixture of Jews and Gentiles, all living in grace and living as equals. God told Peter in a vision about a Roman Cornelius that the Gentiles would be welcomed into the church. He had eaten with gentiles before and was glad to eat at this mixed meal in Antioch.

Then, a group of strict Jews came to visit, and Peter withdrew and refused to eat with the Gentiles because of fear. Other Jews soon joined him, and the church was divided. Peter had denied the grace of his Lord, who had eaten with tax collectors and sinners. We still struggle with the question of who is welcome. We feel uncomfortable with people who are dirty or who have broken lives. We are glad to help the homeless in our inner cities but are unsure what to do when they come to our church for help. Who is welcome in our church is still a question we deal with.

An "F" for Faith

A. Freedom – Grace allows us to love everyone v.14b *"You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"*

Jesus had freed Peter from the law. In Acts 10, the Lord gives Peter a vision in which he is told to eat unclean meat from a sheet lowered from heaven. He balked because the food was not Kosher, and he didn't want to sin. The Lord showed him that he could eat with all men, for we were saved by grace and not by the law. When the vision ended, he went with Gentiles and ate at the home of a Roman centurion. Peter had learned firsthand that God loved everyone and welcomed them into His church equally.

It is a joy to worship with people of many colors and races at national events or when I have had the chance to worship with the international group at the university. Here is a cross-section of God's people with their diverse cultures and ways to worship the Lord. It shows the truth of grace. God gives

salvation to all people and gives it freely. Right now, Asia and Africa are the fastest-growing Christian regions in the world. They have caught hold of the love of God and are sharing it with all the people.

B Fear – Law makes us exclude the imperfect v.12b. *But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.*

Perhaps, the Jewish group caught Peter by surprise. Perhaps, they argued that Peter was abandoning his heritage and argued that to do so was a sin. These Judaizers argued that the gospel was not enough. You must keep the laws of the Old Testament and be pure by separating yourself from the dirty Gentiles. Peter gave in to their arguments, and the church was divided. Only pure Jews were welcome to dine together. Gentiles were excluded to the other table at the fellowship meal. They were imperfect and second-rate to the Jews. The grace that had made them one died in that instant.

The law does the same today. Is the divorcee with the broken life welcome in your church so that they can rebuild their life by grace? Is the gay person or the couple living together welcome in the church as they struggle to understand God's will for them? Too often, the church says no. I confess that I have struggled with this as well. As pastors and people, we fear what others in the church will say. We labor as we try to minister to messy people who do not have their lives together and sometimes want us to accept their sins as routine and not help them live in obedience.

C Failure – When we put our trust in the law v.16a *know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.*

By moving tables, Peter implied that there was a difference between Jews and Gentiles and that this difference could never be bridged. Like the temple in Jerusalem, there was no way a gentile could come into the inner court. That honor was reserved for those born Jews. To the Jews, God had made them unique and better than all the people of the earth. The rest of the world was trash, but God had chosen them. They forgot their choosing was grace and saw it as something they had earned. Keep the laws, and you keep that special position of God's love.

We likewise forget that we are here simply by grace. We did not earn our salvation even if we have been Christian and Lutheran all our lives. Salvation and God's love are gifts that are given to us all. Count your blessings if we are lucky enough not to have had a divorce or found lives crash. Then, reach out to someone not so fortunate and give them the grace God has given you. Don't trust in your goodness, for there is always something lurking in your life that you are not proud of. Trust God's mercy and share it with others so they can trust it, too.

D Following – When we lead others astray by our actions v.13 *The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.*

Sadly, as Peter changed tables, so did a whole group of others, including Barnabas. Peter was one of the twelve disciples, and the Jews followed his lead. They turned their backs on their friends because Peter said that was the right thing to do by his actions. Barnabas and the others should have known better. Suddenly, this church that had been so godly and so merciful became a church divided, with the Jews closing in on themselves and telling the Gentiles that they were not fully saved. Imagine how that hurt. They had turned their back on the world in favor of God, and now the church turned on them.

People follow the leader, and they follow the crowd without thinking. It is a tricky balance in our age to love the sinner and hate the sin. It is tough to reach out to people who are different from us or broken. It can be messy, and sometimes, the broken divide churches or cause others much pain. We should not fear them. We should realize that God loves them and wants us to reach out to them and show them that love. Love the broken and messy and lead others to love them. Let us work together to love the people who are divorced, the couples living together, and even the homosexual. Pray for them and let the love of Jesus work through you to heal them and help them with grace.

A change of attitude is needed for me.

Live by faith v 20 *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

Surrender to the Lord because of all that he has done for you. Think back on who you would be without Jesus. What would your family be like if there were never family devotions? What would your character be like if Jesus wasn't living in you? All God has given you is grace. I, for one, never earned it. I want to sacrifice my life to God so that he can keep living in me. I want to offer my life so that my character and love for others match His own. Jesus died for me to bring the good things I have in my life. I didn't earn it. I don't deserve it. It is a gift because of His love.

When I realize that salvation is a gift, I see that others need that gift and deserve that gift as much as I do. The broken and busy of this world need the healing that only Jesus can give. The dying and the forlorn need the hope that eternal life with Jesus can bring. I have no right to keep others from God's salvation or to think that they don't deserve it as much as I do. I need to give salvation away. It is a free gift. Jesus earned it, and Jesus has commissioned me to help those messy people in my life with the gospel so that we both can live by faith.

Welcome others into this life of grace and forgiveness.

One of our great gifts as Lutherans is the gift of grace. Martin Luther found out about grace the hard way. He beat himself, punished himself, and found that he was still a wretched sinner. He understood salvation was a free gift only when he read the book of Romans. We are his beneficiaries. We can say to Satan when he accuses us that the cross saves us. We can say with confidence that when we die, we will go to heaven because Jesus earned it for us. I know how wretched I am. I cannot save myself, but Jesus died to save me.

How can I ever say no to someone else? Their life may be in tatters, but my life feels that way at times as well. They may be broken, but I would be broken without Jesus. Jesus has saved me, and I need to open salvation to everyone around me. I need salvation, and they do, too. Let me welcome others into the gift of grace and pray for the Holy Spirit to work in their life and give this person what I have in Jesus. Jesus can heal the broken and clean up the lives of the messy. No one is outside of His power. Let us welcome the world into His presence so He can give us all His mercy.

3 Does God keep His promises?

Gal. 3:15-25

Big idea: God does keep His promises every day

Galatians 3:15-25 15 Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life. Just as no one can set aside or add to a human covenant that has been duly established, so it is in this case. 16 The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ. 17 What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. 18 For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise. 19 What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come. The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator. 20 A mediator, however, does not represent just one party; but God is one. 21 Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. 22 But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe. 23 Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. 24 So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. 25 Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

Hold on, what about the Law?

Paul had been preaching the Gospel. He had told the people of Galatia that Jesus had given them salvation by His cross and resurrection and that there was nothing more we needed for salvation. The Judaizers had come in and said hold on, what about the Law? To be saved, you have to keep the Mosaic Law. You must be circumcised, and you must make sacrifices in the temple. You have to eat only kosher foods and keep the Sabbath. God put all those laws out at Mount Sinai long before Jesus died. Promises are nice, but the Law must be obeyed if salvation is to be yours.

Today, many people look at the Law first and the gospel second. Many have walked away from the church because they don't think they can keep up to God's standards. They live less-than-perfect lives and abandon God because they believe he can't love them. Churches have focused on the Law as well. They act like the promises of God can only come true if we make promises to God about our lifestyle and keep them. Are God's promises conditional? Does God sometimes keep his promises, or can we depend on what he says?

The relation between the promise and the Law

A. The Gospel came first v.16. *The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ.*

Paul begins by pointing out that God's promise came before the Law. The promise came to Abraham six hundred years before Moses received the Law on Mount Sinai. God promised Abraham land, protection, and a descendant who would change the world. All those promises were unconditional. Abraham was required to do nothing for those promises to come true. We can look back and see how God kept every one of those promises and kept them in a way that was greater than Abraham would have ever guessed.

God continued to make promises to David, Daniel, and the people of Israel about their time in Egypt and Babylon. God also made promises about the Messiah, the seed of Abraham. Every one of those came true just as God said that they would. The gospel message came out of God's mouth to Adam and

Eve and Abraham long before the Law, and God has repeatedly shown His words to be true. So, what is the purpose of the Law? What is the Law to do since God will not go back on His promises?

B. Law can't set Gospel aside v.17 *The Law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.*

Let's start as Paul does with what the Law can't do. The Law being later than the Gospel can't set the Gospel aside. It can't alter or change God's promises to us. It can't say salvation is yours, but I have added some conditions for you. It can't take away the free grace that was given and make it different. As we have seen, God doesn't operate that way. When God makes a promise, He keeps it. Our Lord didn't alter any promises He made to Abraham. He didn't change any of the promises He made to David just because David sinned with Bathsheba. God's unconditional promises are always good.

The other thing Paul gets at is that the Law can't save us. We simply can't do enough good things to wipe out the bad. Religions can tell you that you must make pilgrimages or serve two years as a missionary if you want to get to heaven. They can demand you kill yourself to have the virgins. All of it is bull, and people in those religions always feel the doubt. Did I do enough to gain the favor of the gods? The Gospel pushes all that aside and says Jesus did it all. It is not about you. It is about Him and His work.

C. Law shows us why we need Gospel v.22. *But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.*

Paul does say that the Law has a purpose. The purpose is to show us that we need the Gospel. Look at history before the Law. At the time of the flood, people were so evil and thought that they didn't need God. During the captivity in Egypt, the Jews slowly forgot their God. The Law was given to show the people why they needed a savior. It was a standard that showed us that we lie, steal, and hate others. The Law shows us our sins so that we see our need for a savior. Without the Law, it would be easy to think that God must love us just as we are.

In our society, so many reject the Law because it is so good at showing us how wretched we are. People try to soften it by saying that killing is wrong, but hate is not so bad. They want us to tell them white lies are ok, but other lies are not. We think that if we deny the Law, we don't need the Gospel. The Law, however, is written on our conscience. It nags us and makes us guilty until we seek out the Gospel. It helps us see how bad we are so that we seek out the relief that can only come from the promises of God in the message of salvation.

D. Law leads us to the Gospel v.24. *So the Law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.*

The Law has another wonderful purpose. It shows us how we are to live as Christians. In many Roman households, well-educated slaves would be assigned to teach the children. They would teach them at school how to live as citizens. They prepared kids to be mature adults. The Law is our tutor. It shows us how Christians live. They are not to be liars or thieves. They are to care about one another and live with the character of Jesus. They are to be loving husbands and wives. They are to care for their children and their friends.

None of this saves them from sin, but the Law can show us how to live a joyful and fulfilled life here on earth. It shows us the need to be honest, kind, and loving. It shows us the importance of putting our Lord first above all things. It shows us the importance of rest on the Sabbath and having good character. Living with the Law as your guide will make you unique in this world. You will have a set of values that can help you be a blessing to others and yourself. You will also rely on God to help you live as His child even as you are confident of God's promises to His children.

God does keep His promises.

God kept His promise despite our sins.

The Law was not meant to supplant the Gospel but to prepare us for all the promises of God on the cross and in this life. Without the Law, how would we know that we needed the Gospel? Without the Law, how would we understand what is right and wrong? The Law shows us how much God wants us to have the Gospel. He knew we would not believe the promises until we were desperate and forced to look for someone to help us. The Law shows us our weakness, so we must throw ourselves on His mercy.

Those commandments that keep hammering at us finally convince us that we need the sweet promises of God. Thus, the Law is a gift of love. It was not meant to destroy people. It was meant to show us the bondage that we were already in. It will show us that we can't make things better but that we have to rely on the promises of God to give us hope and life. Don't be afraid of the Law. Embrace it so that you see all that God has given in the Gospel and the depth of this friend who continues to promise and give us so much.

Life without a faithful God would be miserable.

Just imagine what life would be like if God did not keep His promises. Imagine if we approached death wondering if we had done enough for salvation or if God might be favorable to us and let us into His heaven. Such is the fate of many in other religions, but God works differently. Just imagine what life would be like if you had to bargain or beg in your prayers for God to listen and to help. What would it be like to be desperate and hope that God cared? Such is the prayer life of many in other religions. Thankfully, God works differently.

The same Jesus who welcomed the thief on the cross into heaven without condition receives us, despite our sins, into heaven as well. We can have confidence that we will have salvation when we die because it is based on Jesus and not on us. God keeps His promises. We have also experienced faithfulness in this life as God answers prayer after prayer. He has promised to listen to us, and we see the result in our lives as people are healed, friends accept the Gospel, and we have our daily bread. Life would be miserable without a God who keeps His promises. Thank you, Lord, that we never have to experience such pain.

4 Is Christianity just a bunch of rules?

Gal. 4:21-31

Big idea: Grace should be what we are known for!

Galatians 4:21-31 21 Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? 22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. 23 His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise. 24 These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. 25 Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. 26 But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. 27 For it is written: "Be glad, O barren woman, who bears no children; break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labor pains; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband." 28 Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. 29 At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. 30 But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son." 31 Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.

It's just a bunch of outdated rules.

One of the criticisms of the church is that we are just a bunch of outdated rules. We should get with the picture and update our theology. Sadly, some have. Many denominations call good what has been called evil for centuries. Come to our church, for we have updated with the times. Now I can see that Buddhism and Zen religions are just a bunch of rules, for they give a path to their version of heaven on earth. You even sense an emphasis on regulations in Muslim or Mormonism faiths. Yet, is that really what the Christian church is?

If we have given that impression to the world, then we have failed them. The Christian church is about faith and grace and not rules and piety. It is about freedom in Christ, not slavery to Moses. Somehow, the Galatians were being pulled back to emphasize the rules. The danger is that the rules are easy to understand, even if they are impossible to keep. Faith is more challenging, for it is a relationship with God. It is, however, the path of freedom and is possible for everyone, even the most sinful people on the planet. Today, we let Paul tell us why we should embrace grace, not rules.

Four contrasts between authentic faith and pious rules

A. Grace frees, rules enslave v.22 *For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman.*

Paul uses the Old Testament Story of Abraham and his family to show us the difference between grace and rules. The setting looks at two wives and Abraham's first two sons. Ishmael is the father of the Muslim Arabs. Isaac is the father of the Jews and Christianity. Paul begins by examining how grace gives freedom and pious rules enslave us. Isaac was the child of a free woman named Sarah. Ishmael was the child of the slave woman Hagar. Hagar remained a servant even though she had born a child to Abraham. She could not change her spots.

Legalism still enslaves people. They worship the rules even though they can never keep them. They enslave themselves to guilt and doubt. Even if the Muslim dies killing infidels, his family can never be sure that he gets to the heavens. His sins and imperfections always haunt them. Faith frees people. As the Christian approaches death, the Christian knows that Jesus died for them and did all that was needed for salvation. They throw themselves on the grace of God and find comfort and confidence. We put the cross at the center of the church to remind us of our freedom in Christ.

B. Basis – Faith lives by a promise, not by earthly ideas v. 23 *His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise.*

Isaac was born as God's fulfillment of a promise. At age 100, God gave him the son promised 25 years earlier. It was a miracle. Ishmael was born because Abraham doubted the promise and tried to keep God's promise with his own hands. A slave woman conceived a normal child. Faith believes in a miracle and a promise. It knows that God has given us and every other believer salvation because of a cross and resurrection that happened almost 2000 years ago. We believe in that promise and expect that our sinful bodies have been forgiven and will be in heaven.

Rules are the pagan's way of gaining favor with their gods and a place in the hereafter. Take a pilgrimage, give up drinking and dancing, or sacrifice your life for the cause. They doubt the goodness of their god and seldom talk of their god loving them. They have to beg and bargain to get into heaven. Faith lives by the promise and expects that God has done what is necessary for our salvation. Rules result from those who doubt their god and feel there must be more than a cross. Something must set me apart from others so that I am worthy of salvation.

C. Persecution – Rules bring persecution of those living by faith v.29 *At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now.*

The Old Testament records in Genesis 21 that Ishmael began to mock his little brother. Ishmael could see that even though he was older, Isaac would inherit the bulk of the property and be placed above him. It caused Sarah to fear that Ishmael would hurt his brother and maybe kill him. Those who live by the rules still persecute those who try to live by faith. It was part of Paul's ministry that the Judaizers followed him and attempted to undo his message in every place in the province of Galatia and beyond. They persecuted him because they feared the pure grace of the gospel.

Rule-centered religions and rule-centered Christians still persecute those who try to live by grace. They demand that people be perfect and keep the laws even if they can't hold them perfectly. Grace is a threat, for it overturns all their rules and expectations and shows that God is not angry but filled with love. Churches that are grace-based will find persecution, for the world wants salvation their way and not based on what God has done for us. Rule people figure that if they have to keep the rules, then everyone else should hold their man-made rules as well. They want us all in bondage, not the freedom of grace.

D. Inheritance – Faithless Piety brings nothing v. 30 *But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son."*

A final contrast between the two is found in their inheritance. When the conflict arose between Isaac and Ishmael, Sarah wanted Ishmael thrown out, and God concurred. All the inheritance belonged to Isaac, so Hagar and Ishmael were sent packing even though he was the older son. Faith brings grace and the love of God in this life in ways that the Ishmael rule keepers of this world will never know. We have the freedom of forgiveness. Ishmael's kind are trapped in sin's failings they can never forget and doubts that will haunt them.

The Isaac Christians of this world will dwell in the house of their Father God for their life, enjoying the blessings of being part of his family and having the confidence that they will receive the Easter inheritance of heaven. The inheritance is theirs through faith. Ishmael, for all his rules, will be thrown outside the kingdom. Without Jesus, they will live in fear and doubt. Without Jesus, men will claim to no avail that they were good people as people lay their cold bodies on the ground. Faith brings everything. Piety brings nothing when it is without God.

The church is powerful when Grace comes first.

Emphasize grace and not the rules v.31 *Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.*

The greatest service the church can do is to emphasize grace and not the rules. If the world thinks we are about the rules, then we have failed them and our Lord. People will get the rules by themselves. We must give them the grace of the cross. Paul would fight for that grace throughout his ministry's 40 or so years. He would tell people of the love of Jesus and help them relegate the rules of the scriptures to being a response to a loving God. Gentiles didn't need to eat Kosher or be circumcised. They just needed to love and trust God.

In the same way, Churches shouldn't persecute others who don't live up to some moral code. They need to love others and live moral and decent lives so that others learn the value of a godly life. Let them see a strong marriage that living together can never match. Let them know the power of an honest tongue. Christ will teach his people and empower them to live with good character so they can have joyful and powerful lives. Rules can never succeed, for they attempt to be moral without our Lord. As the church lives by and with Christ, it can show why rules are essential.

Grace brings joy and the fruit of faith.

Let your light shine with God's grace so that this place becomes known for the love of Jesus that is found in grace. You are Isaacs and children of God. You are people of freedom in a world where everyone seems to criticize one another and hold people to some arbitrary code for life. Your grace trumps their rules. As the people of God live by grace and not the law, they will attract others to this place. They will see your freedom and love for one another and want to come out of the darkness into the joy we have in Christ.

Welcome them. They will be filled with failings and doubts about themselves and God. Share with them the freedom you feel in Jesus so God might lift their hearts with His love. Let them see the character of Christ as a result of faith and not a way to earn salvation. Let them have the joy that comes from having Christ as our brother and friend who helps us to succeed in life and gives us His character. Grace triumphs rules and opens up possibilities for your friends and family that the world cannot offer. Let them feel the joy.

5 Living by the Spirit

Gal. 5:16-26

Big idea: How can God expect me to be different?

Galatians 5:16-26 16 So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. 17 For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. 19 The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. 24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. 25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

We all need a friend.

One of the complaints about the Christian life is that it is too hard. We find God's expectations for us to be too difficult. We try to keep the commandments and find ourselves overwhelmed by them. In the end, a lot of us quit. If we don't leave, we protect our "pet sins" and feel guilty for failing. There are two things everyone should keep in mind. The first is that Jesus never expected people to be perfect when they came to faith. He helped people to believe as the woman at the well did or the Jairus who wanted his daughter healed would come to learn. Then, he enabled them to grow in faith. Becoming more perfect takes time.

The other thing is that He gave a helper. A lot of times, we need a friend if we are going to succeed. We require someone who will exercise with us and keep us accountable. We need someone to help us with a home project that is too big for one person. What is impossible for one can be done with a friend. Jesus promises such a friend in the Holy Spirit. All of those who have faith have been given this special friend who has the power to help you do the impossible. Don't give up; walk with your special friend and see what you can do.

Winning control of your life

A Why you need the Spirit - Your life is a battle v. 17 *For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other,*

So why do I need a helper? If anyone has tried to start a new habit or reach a particular goal, you know how hard it can be. You want to get to the gym or eat better, but you still need to get it done. For every good intention, there are lots of factors that tend to keep you from your goal. In the spiritual realm, the battle is even more intense. Satan and his angels are constantly working against every good desire that you have. He tempts you to lie to protect yourself. He wells up feelings of anger when someone insults you. You are the battlefield, and Satan wants to bring you down.

Fortunately, the Holy Spirit is there to help you. He brings truth when Satan tells you lies. He strengthens the shield of faith when Satan tries to get us to doubt. He even gives you the sword of scripture so that you can stab Satan and knock him down. You feel the battle when you feel pulled one way and then the other. You sense the struggle when you fight doubt and temptations to do things you know are wrong. If you feel that the Christian life is hard, understand that sometimes the battle is hard but that the Holy Spirit is fighting for you every day.

B What is at stake? v.21 *I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

The temptation is to shrug it off and not worry about the battle inside you. You have bigger concerns like getting a job promotion, training for a half marathon, or keeping up with your favorite TV show. No big deal, right? No, it is a big deal. It impacts this life. There is a list of sinful behaviors that Satan wants you to slip into. He desires you to be jealous, have thoughts of lust for a coworker, or slip into fits of rage. He wants you to ruin your life, your marriage, and your future by being the kind of person no one wants to be around.

He wants you to jeopardize your eternal life as well. He knows that people stuck deeply in sin push away God and find it hard to connect with the Lord in worship or reading His scripture. Sin makes them feel guilty near God and the church, and so they stay away. They remain away so long that they forget God. Know that this side of the grave is never too late. Look at the thief on the cross who was snatched from Satan at the last minute. Just know that the Holy Spirit will keep fighting for you every moment of your life. He wants to keep sin from being such a habit that it owns you and sets your future.

C. What can be yours? v.23 *Against such things, there is no law.*

You will not be a vacuum, however. The Lord wants to fill you with what we often call the fruit of the Spirit. These are traits that people who have them are hard not to like. Who wouldn't want to be around someone kind, loving, and patient? I know that I enjoy friends who are like that. Those are not traits that you can work at promoting in your life but are the very kind of qualities that the Holy Spirit can build into your life. These fruits are the product of his work in your life, and the more you are in contact with the Lord, the greater the chance he will have of building them into your life.

They also bring you closer to other Christians and the Lord. Your kindness and patience will become a model for other Christians. Your love fills your family and is reflected back from your spouse and kids. Your faithfulness brings friendships that last through tough times. Life is better when you have the fruit of the Spirit. Instead of tearing your life apart, you build your life and the lives of others and push Satan away just by the quality of your life. It is what God wants for you, and the Holy Spirit will work hard to build in your life so that joy will be yours and in heaven.

D What power does the Spirit bring? v.24 *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.*

It is easy to doubt that such things can happen. We know how powerful the urge to give in to temptation and to sin can be. We can't control our weight; how can we prevent our anger? We can't manage our finances; how can we manage our life and keep it pure? The secret is that the cross of Jesus Christ and the word of God is stronger than Satan. Forgiveness is stronger than guilt. When Jesus says, "I forgive you," the Holy Spirit helps us believe so that guilt is gone. When the truth of scripture is proclaimed, the lies of Satan seem pale by comparison.

Remember in the scripture how Jesus never worked up a sweat when he cast demons out of people? He spoke, and the demons had to obey. The Holy Spirit is God, and the demons can't resist his commands either. Grab hold of the scripture and start quoting its promises, and Satan must flee. That works for Jesus in the desert at his temptation, and it will work for you. He is defeated at the cross because you have that power in the word. Don't fear Satan. Stand next to the Lord and let the power of God defeat Satan, for God is always infinitely more powerful than Satan.

Life doesn't have to be so hard.

What is the simple path of help? v.25 *Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit*

So, what does Paul say we are to do when the Christian life seems daunting? What do you do when you find that you have persistent sins or feel that you just don't measure up? Paul wants us to reach

out to a divine friend. He desires us to walk with the Spirit and not alone. We walk with the Holy Spirit, and he will convince us that the forgiveness of the cross is ours. All those burdens of the past can and will be forgiven. The Spirit helps us believe that our sins are forgiven and the burdens are taken away. You are free.

It is the Spirit who helps us to grow and mature in our faith. The list of good qualities looks daunting, but the Spirit will assist you in becoming a person that others want to be around. You may not be able to increase your patience or kindness, but being with the Lord will help you grow. Walk with the Spirit and build a relationship with God. The closer you hold the Lord in your life, the harder Satan will find it to get near. The closer you walk with the Lord, the more you will find yourself becoming like Him and being a person you can be proud of.

What would it be like to live without fear? v.18 *But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.*

Imagine what the new you could look like. Your past mistakes are gone and forgotten, for they are forgiven. The Holy Spirit will help you live in peace and know that Jesus died for you. You will want to be with God and not be afraid of him even when you royally mess up and need forgiveness again. You will walk with God and depend on God. Each step in life is given to Him so that as you walk with Him, you let him provide for you and protect you. The danger may come, but Jesus will be there. Questions will come, but He will guide you to the answers in scripture.

The future is certain. You may not know where you are going, but you walk with the Spirit as your guide, and he knows where to go. Lord, take me out there because I know that you have a good path picked out, and my life will be blessed because I follow you and have your character. In a world of uncertainty, walking with the Spirit is a slice of heaven. Life, in general, is difficult, and the world is filled with uncertainty, but it is easier when you keep the Holy Spirit near to take care of your past, present, and future. Amen

6 Doing good.

Galatians 6:1-10

Big idea: Why must I belong to a church to be a Christian?

Galatians 6:1-10 1 Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. 2 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. 3 If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. 4 Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, 5 for each one should carry his own load. 6 Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor. 7 Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. 8 The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. 9 Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. 10 Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Is the Christian faith just a personal thing?

Many people don't think they need a weekly church or Bible class. It takes away from the one day that they have to sleep in. It means they have to get up and wear clean and fancy clothes. Why bother? My relationship with God is a personal thing. They claim they can read the bible alone at home, but most don't. They assert they could watch it on television while sitting in their jammies and comfy slippers. They may feel once a month is plenty of time to connect with God, but it isn't.

To those who even begin to entertain those ideas, let me assure you that faith was never meant to be done alone. As soon as there were more than a handful of people, God created the church because faith is about others as much as about us. The bible even says, "Faith without works is dead." But based on Paul in this text, I give you a more personal reason to keep attending church. You will not survive well in this world if you don't surround yourself with other Christians. Only those who help others can expect to be helped in life. Going it alone is risky at best. Let's see why.

Christians bear each other's burdens.

A Restore the brother v. 1 *1 Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.*

We are to be in church to help others overcome sin. Sometimes, the new Christian is just learning what it means to be a child of God. They swear. They have a life full of broken relationships. These are people that God wants you to mentor and help grow in faith. Then, there are established Christians who mess up. They get divorced. They have anger issues or issues where they think they are better than everyone else. God wants you to gently show them their faults and help restore their relationship with Him.

Yes, that takes a lot of love and courage, but what is the alternative? Just leave the church and find another church filled with imperfect people? No, they are part of the body. We want to get them healthy, like fixing a broken leg so the church can walk again. Conversely, you hope that someone will be that honest with you. You could be the one who is newly divorced and desperately needs a friend who will walk with you and help you receive God's forgiveness and support with your walk in life. If you don't support others, who is going to help you?

B Help them carry their burdens v.2 *Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ.*

So, what if the burden is not a sin? It could be that someone is losing their parent to cancer or that they are struggling at work. We could ignore those people and act like we don't have time to help them

with their problems. Let them deal with their problems; I have enough problems of my own. Yet, Paul repeatedly tells people that the church is God's way of caring for those who are struggling. We are there to encourage, serve, and pray for those who have struggled in life. We are to be God's hands and feet to serve the brother. We can't do that if we are never here in church.

We also cannot let others help us with our burdens if we are not here. Sadly, so many people stop attending church when life is not perfect. They are ashamed that they have troubles or feel too busy taking care of their challenges to make time for church. We need to foster such a caring attitude that this is always the first place people think to come. They know that they will not be judged; after all, it isn't your fault that your brother has cancer. More importantly, they understand that this is a place for prayers, hugs, and people who care enough to help.

Christians share our blessings.

C Support your church v. 6 *Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor.*

A second reason to be here is to support the ministry we all need. America has gotten into a terrible "me first" condition. College students demand that they receive free tuition. The poor demand that they acquire more money from the 1%. Everyone thinks that the world owes them. The church is not to be like that. We are all to give generously so that the church can help everyone. God provides for His church but does it through you and me. If the church members were to share two or three percent of their income, it would immediately double its money.

If people are not here, they often do not give the funds that we need to do the ministry that others need. How can we pay a pastor, have an Easter egg hunt for the community, or even turn on the lights? If we receive something valuable from the church, we should support it. Here, too, we support the ministry so that we can be ministered to in our need. There is no charge for the pastor to come and visit you in the hospital. There is no charge at the door when you arrive for worship. We support the church so that it can meet our needs when we have them.

D Invest in others v.7 *Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.*

Paul wants us to think of it all as an investment. He uses the example of planting and reaping. If a person plants quality seed liberally in their garden, they have a much better chance of a good crop than someone who buys dollar store seed and spreads it thinly on the soil. You reap what you sow. If you don't take the time to help others, who will you ask when you need help? Only the arrogant demand that the church support them when they haven't helped others. If you don't give to your church, how will they continue providing the worship services or assistance you need?

God takes our investment a step further. It is incredible how God can take a small amount of our time or resources and bring significant benefits. Think of what Jesus did with five loaves and two fishes at the feeding of 5000. Think of what God did with one life when you think of the impact of Paul, John, or Martin Luther. God will not be mocked by those who demand much and give little. He will amaze us. However, if we entrust the little, we have with Him for the good of others. God will bring a benefit that will bless not only them but all the church members and bring joy to our lives.

Look at the long-term benefits.

Be Patient and keep investing in others v.9 *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up*

It must have been discouraging for Paul to have spent two to three years ministering to the people of Galatia only to have them give up the gospel as soon as his back was turned. He could have thrown up his hands in disgust, but instead, he wrote them and visited them two more times. The people with the burdens and the church at large may sometimes frustrate you. Why do I keep working with this person?

Why do I give my time or money when we don't seem to get anywhere? It is easy to be weary and want to give up.

Remember that when you sow your garden, it takes time. Seeds don't come up immediately. You have to water them and weed them. You watch the immature plants come up, and finally, you receive a harvest of vegetables worth the wait. God wants us to keep investing and be patient. He desires us to water our work with prayer, trusting that He will bring a result from the work of our hands. It will probably take longer than we think or want. Yet, God can multiply our investment so miracles can happen in our lives and His church. Be patient and let God work.

Alone versus Together

Dan and John were brothers raised in First Lutheran Church. Dan got mad at a voter's meeting of the church. He thought that they were wasting money, and so he left. John was upset, so he talked to those in charge and prayed about it a lot. John continued to go to the church and to give generously to the church. He was always busy on Sunday talking to others and asking how they were. He organized the men to help Millie with her broken porch and faithfully went to see Joseph in the hospital with his cancer.

After a few years, Dan got cancer. People at church flocked to console John and asked what they could do to help. They volunteered to watch his kids so he could see his brother in the hospital and prayed with him when things got him down. Dan was mad that no one at his old church came for him. The truth is that few knew Dan. He decided to take the journey of life without the church and without God and had no one to help when he needed it. John had a church full of people eager to support him, and he felt their love through the whole ordeal. You reap what you sow. God did not mean for us to walk life alone.

Easter Day

Disappointed with Easter?

Luke 24:13-32

Big idea: Wrong expectations and weak faith ruin Easter.

Luke 24:13-32 13 Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. 14 They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. 15 As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; 16 but they were kept from recognizing him. 17 He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" They stood still, their faces downcast. 18 One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?" 19 "What things?" he asked. "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. 20 The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; 21 but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. 22 In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning 23 but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. 24 Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see." 25 He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" 27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. 28 As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. 29 But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. 30 When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. 31 Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. 32 They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

Disappointed with Easter?

The two disciples knew that the tomb was empty, but they didn't understand what that meant. They walked the eight miles home to Emmaus with heavy hearts. Jesus had been a disappointment. He had done great miracles and was surely from God, but He was not what they sought. The truth was before their eyes, yet instead of celebrating in the upper room, they went home disappointed. They had no clue what they would do next and what it all meant. They had given up and were not even gathered with the eleven disciples so that they could encourage one another.

The story of the cross and the empty tomb is known by millions of Americans, but Easter is hardly a day of excitement. The churches swell a little on this day but do so more out of habit than expectation. Our society barely recognizes the holiday with anything except lots of candy and bunnies. On Monday, it will be as if this holiday didn't even occur. There will not be Christmas presents or the start of summer like Memorial Day. It will just be the Monday after an ordinary weekend. What a disappointment. What a shame that the greatest holiday in the church year is so misunderstood.

Three strikes against them.

Their Jesus was too small v. 19 *"What things?" he asked. "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people.*

The first strike against these two disciples was simply that their Jesus was too small. They understood that He was a great prophet. He spoke on God's behalf and did some pretty impressive miracles. The trouble was that they never saw the rest of Jesus. They thought that, like so many prophets before Him, Jesus had been martyred, and that was the end of the story. He had an excellent life, and He

was fun to watch. Too bad it was over. They thought he was extraordinary, but he just turned out to be another in a long line of prophets from God.

For many, Easter is boring because their Jesus is too small. So many people think of Jesus as just a great teacher. They see his teachings as a moral code like Buddha or Mohammed. Learn from Jesus because he had great ideas, just like one would learn from Oprah. Even Christians treat the teachings of Jesus as something to sift through. He had terrific ideas, and they are worth considering. We might pray to Him when we are really in trouble. Most of the time, he is on the edge of life. If you want to find the truth, go and google it. That is where answers are discovered.

They had the wrong expectation about Jesus v. 21. *We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.*

The men also had the wrong expectations about Jesus. They saw the conquering Messiah who would come and take on the Romans. To many Jews, the purpose of the promised Messiah was to bring glory and comfort to the people of Israel. They were to be the envy of the world. They ignored all the passages about a suffering servant. They ignored all the passages about the people of Israel, forgetting their God. They had fashioned their own version of God, and Jesus did not match the picture. Some believers even rejected him because Easter was not their idea of victory.

I get so mad when people tell me that they can't believe in a God who would do something they don't like. So many people in our day have their own vision of Jesus. Like the Roman gods, they have fashioned Jesus in their own image. He is to allow them to live as they want and never judge anything they deem wrong. People will be disappointed in Easter when they have created their version of Jesus. He is to be exciting, and he is to grant their every wish. Easter should be more like Christmas, where people get gifts. How come Jesus isn't more like me? Why didn't I receive what I wanted?

They refused to believe the obvious truth v.22-3. *They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels who said he was alive.*

The final reason for their disappointment was simply that they could not believe the plain truth before their eyes. The crucifixion brought earthquakes and people rising from the dead. The Easter tomb was empty. Mary Magdalene had seen Jesus with her own eyes. Yet, they refused to believe. What more did they want? Did they want choirs of angels singing like at Christmas? Did they want Jesus to let them know that He was alive personally like He would do for the disciples? The proof was all around them, just like Jesus had said to them earlier. They refused to believe the obvious because it didn't match their ideas.

The church has existed for thousands of years. The Dead Sea Scrolls show the Bible not to be a recent book. Millions have been willing to die for their faith rather than give Jesus up. Yet, many today don't even believe that the Bible is a holy book. What would it take to convince the skeptics of the truth? Many are disappointed in Easter because they refuse to believe the word of the eyewitnesses. How odd we will consider what Julius Caesar says about himself or what a scientist thinks about a planet that is light years away. Yet, we refuse a truth 1000s of years old that archeology shows is true.

Easter's cure

Humble yourselves and learn who Jesus is v.27. *And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.*

The cure for the Easter blues is not hard. We must humble ourselves and learn who Jesus is. Jesus patiently listened to the two men and unpacked the Old Testament. He brings out all the passages that people had somehow forgotten. He showed the whole truth about His ministry. These men could have talked about Good Friday for days and still not gotten the answer because they were so enamored with the idea of a conquering Messiah. They had to humbly look at the scripture and let it teach them about the genuine Jesus. Only then would the events of the last week make sense.

People today need to get into the scripture. Easter is not impressive because too many people, even most Christians, don't have more than a first-grade understanding of the Bible. Jesus will never be impressive if you look at the artificial Jesus of popular culture. Get into the word and have an intimate dialogue. See why Jesus had to die and see what benefits that brings into your life. Get past Jesus as the great prophet and understand why freedom comes only when people give Jesus their lives. See the Messiah and understand His power for you.

Be in relationship with the authentic Jesus v.30 *When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them.*

All the teaching caused their hearts to burn. They knew something special was happening. Yet, it was only when they had a deeper relationship with Jesus that it all came together. At the end of the journey, they invited him into their home for the evening meal. At the evening meal, as a deep friendship was established, the two men saw Jesus for who He was. He was not just the stuff of teaching that was to be learned and memorized. He was a friend that they were to experience. They saw His face and had come to know Him personally.

Easter will be memorable to those who don't just know the facts about Jesus but have come to know Him personally. They have come to know Him through hours of prayer and years of watching Him answer their prayers and help them with their needs. Easter will be special to those who have not held Jesus out at arm's length but those who have gotten up and personal, seen the depth of his power and felt how much he loves them. They will celebrate this day as the center of their year. They will celebrate what He did for them. It is not academic to them but personal because Jesus is personal.

Wake up and believe v.34 *and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon."*

The men rushed into Jerusalem even though it was probably a dark and dangerous road. They just had to tell people that Jesus was alive. They had to inform people what they had learned about Jesus' death and resurrection. It all made sense, and they couldn't keep the joy to themselves. The best evidence that we have understood the real meaning of Easter is that we will share the message with someone else. The churches of America should be filled on this day because God's people are excited and want to tell everyone about their friend Jesus and what He did.

How excited these two men must have been when Jesus appeared during His conversation with the disciples of Jerusalem. Their witness and their faith made Jesus alive to others. Jesus' appearance was a sign that all that they said was true. Tell someone about Jesus, and let the excitement flow. Let Jesus become genuine to someone else just because you have learned about Jesus and have a relationship with Him. Easter is the center of the church. The empty tomb is the truth about the Christian church. Let your eyes be opened and see how the true Jesus is greater than anything you could have imagined.

Easter Season: Acts 3 – 8 The disciples after Pentecost.

The first chapters of Acts are the story of the disciples after Easter. Chapters 3-5 are all set in Jerusalem. In these chapters, the disciple's witness is solely to the Jews of Jerusalem. These chapters are intricately connected. Chapter 3 begins with a healing in the temple square. The miracle attracted a crowd to whom Peter preached. The crowd made the Jewish authorities uneasy, and they arrested Peter and John. The story continues with the story of Ananias and Sapphira as Satan tries to destroy the church from within. Finally, we jump to the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, in which we see the mission of the gospel jump to another land. It is the story of persecution from without and within the church before the gospel moves to another land.

1 Healed by the power of Jesus' name

Acts 3:1-10

Big idea: God's name changes lives when His people have faith

Acts 3:1-10 1 One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer--at three in the afternoon. 2 Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. 3 When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. 4 Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" 5 So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. 6 Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." 7 Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. 8 He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. 9 When all the people saw him walking and praising God, 10 they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

The power of a name

A name can be more than identification. A name can be filled with authority and power. When an ambassador goes to speak to someone in the name of the president, they have the authority to negotiate and to threaten with all the power of the nation of the United States. You and I may be Americans, but we cannot speak in the president's name. We do not have the power that comes with that name. Only the one whom the president has given the authority to speak in his name has that power. Names can be powerful as we represent influential people.

Those who speak in the name of God have even greater power. The prophets of the Old Testament would speak to kings and leaders, telling them of victories and defeats. They would promise incredible blessings and warn of death and defeat for those who had angered God. Jesus has given members of His church the authority to speak in His name. We have the power to forgive and the power to do ministry. We can do miracles in His name that we could never do by our authority. It is the way Jesus multiplies ministry through us. It is something we should use more.

God empowers His people.

A. God brings opportunities for ministry v. 2 *Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts.*

God is good at giving us ministry opportunities. Peter and John were not going to the temple to do a miracle. They had come, as was their custom, to pray. They had arrived to worship the Lord or to meet others and have Godly fellowship with them in God's house. It was God who put the beggar along their path. He had been crippled since birth, and few would have expected that anyone could do anything for

him other than giving money. The Lord knew different and would set off a chain of events that would give glory to His name and change the lives of many.

It's odd how we think we must look for opportunities to serve. If we are patient and observant, there will be multiple chances to do the Lord's work in our lives. We can go about everyday things like attending church or work, seeing friends we have known for years, or even going to the store. God will have opportunities waiting for us if we dare to stop and take advantage of them. Our problem is that they often rush us because we are in a hurry to get where we are going or are afraid to get involved. God has opportunities that will change your life if you let them.

B. God touches the hearts of His people to do ministry v. 4 *Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!"*

God put compassion in the heart of Peter. Out of the thousands of people near the temple and multiple beggars, God led Peter to see and be touched by this man. It was Peter who spoke first. The man didn't reach out to Peter. God reached out and helped Peter and John notice the need before them. They didn't have a fantastic plan for what would happen, but God did. Our Lord used the compassion that Peter had learned from Jesus to begin a day when healing would come for man, and the gospel would be preached powerfully. Peter followed God's heart, and miracles happened.

Often, compassion gives us the courage to reach out when the Lord presents a chance to do ministry. We don't stop to think about whether it will be successful or what the consequences will be if it doesn't go well. We reach out because of something God has put on our hearts. The opportunity lies before us, and the power of God is in us. We know that God would want to use His power to help this person through our words or actions. We reach out because of love and because we believe God desires to assist this person through us.

C. God gives us authority and power v. 6 *Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk."*

Peter knew his limitations but also the power God had given him. The disciples were not rich by any standards. What they did have was faith and the authority to do remarkable things in God's name. Peter called on that authority and offered to heal the man by the power of God. The name that had been almost a curse during the life of Jesus was now words of power. Peter believed that Jesus would heal this man through him just as the Lord cured the leper and the lame in His own life. Peter's words showed the faith that he had in the love and compassion of our Lord.

Modern Christians must begin with their limitations. They know that they do not have the resources or skills to do great things in ministry. What they do have is they have been given the power and authority of the Lord to do things in His name. God wants them to do ministry and will back them up. We have to have the faith that Peter has in this text. He offers to heal, knowing the Lord will work miracles if given a chance. We must step forward confident that the Lord will provide us with the words when someone is hurting and the actions that can heal broken lives through the gospel power.

D. Miracles can happen when God's people use His authority v. 7 *Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong.*

The man may not have been convinced or had the faith to believe that a miracle could happen, but Peter encouraged the man to get up and be healed. His feet and ankles, which had never been able to hold his weight before, became strong, and he could walk and dance. Peter's faith had left the man no choice but to believe and test what God could do. Peter pulled him to his feet, and the impossible happened. Something more precious than tremendous amounts of silver and gold came to the man. He could walk because of the name of Jesus.

People around us may not believe we have the words they need or that anything can change. Our faith and confidence in God are often what they need for a breakthrough. We believe in the gospel

message and the Holy Spirit, who can work through it. We believe that God will enrich our humble actions because we know God has compassion and wants to do miracles through His people. It is not our power that we wield. The power of God given to His people is the tool we have to change the world.

God's name changes lives.

It brings joy to those around us v. 8 *He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God.*

He sat outside the temple courts begging for years but could never go inside. Leviticus 21 prohibited those with defects from entering the temple and offering sacrifices. On this day, he received physical healing and acceptance before God and his fellow Jews. He jumped and shouted praises to God. His whole life had been changed as God had given him a new lease on life. He recognized that God had done something great for Him. A new future was his; he was beside himself with joy, celebrating the moment and the God who had shown mercy.

God's miracles open up lives. Like the lame man, those healed and helped by the Lord can walk with the saints in fellowship, use the healing the Lord gave them for a better life, and praise God because they know that God has changed their lives. There will be a change in the lives we touch simply because of the name and power of God. It will not be us who do these great things but God. Our compassion and courage to use the power we have been given will make a difference in the lives of people and those who are connected to them.

It brings glory to God v. 10. *They recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.*

It must have been some scene. The beggar whom they had passed for years at the entrance to the temple was shouting and leaping there before them in the temple. A miracle had happened before their eyes, and they knew God must have had something to do with it. It drew a crowd, and this quiet time of prayer for the disciples would suddenly become a time of teaching and witness to Jesus, who made the miracle possible. The healed man brought validity to their words, and the crowd would be cured by the message they would hear.

Miracles done by God's people draw attention to God's great love and power. Some will doubt it, but many will find it hard to question how gracious God can be. They will see the power of the Lord firsthand and want to come near to the Lord so that he can help them in their troubles as well. The power of the name of the Lord goes beyond simple miracles. We can change whole communities if we follow the opportunities that the Lord gives us and use His power and authority. God will do things we never dreamed of but that He had planned. Let the power of His name go forth and change the world.

2 The author of life

Acts 3:11-26

Big idea: Share with the world that Jesus has the answer to their needs.

Acts 3:11-26 11 While the beggar held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade. 12 When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? 13 The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. 14 You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. 15 You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. 16 By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see. 17 "Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. 18 But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer. 19 Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, 20 and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you--even Jesus. 21 He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. 22 For Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. 23 Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from among his people.' 24 "Indeed, all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these days. 25 And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.' 26 When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways."

How do you share Jesus with a hostile world?

We see churches declining all around us. We know of several people in our lives who either don't believe in Jesus or don't want to worship him regularly. How do we witness to them about Jesus? How do we help them to have the blessings we have in a world that is falling apart? It is an age-old question that Peter may be able to help us with within our text. Realize that it was difficult for early Christians to talk about Jesus. It had only been a few months since Jesus's crucifixion. Several in the crowd had probably seen Jesus die on the cross.

How do you convince people to trust Jesus, who think that the crucified Jesus was cursed by God and a great sinner who deserved the punishment? Peter uses the opportunity that has presented itself because of the crippled man's healing to turn their ideas about Jesus around. He wants the people to see Jesus and themselves differently. That is what we are trying to do. People in our era see the church as a bother with little value. They live in a culture that has its purposes and gods and struggles with the simple truth about Jesus. The truth is that you need to start with their problems and show God's blessings.

The steps Peter took in his message

A. He started with something that interested them v. 12. *When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our power or godliness we had made this man walk?"*

The healing had piqued their interest, and Peter used the opportunity. People wanted to know how the crippled man had been healed. Peter pointed them to the very Jesus who they had crucified. They couldn't deny the miracle before them as the man now leaped for joy and praised God before their eyes. Peter connected that miracle to Jesus and the resurrection. God had worked a miracle, and the

healing proved they had misjudged Jesus. He was not a criminal. He was the Messiah whom they had been looking for thousands of years. Peter got their interest by answering a burning question.

The evangelist Win Arn created a whole evangelism program based on sharing Jesus when people are hurting. People who are doing well don't think that they need Jesus. Those who are struggling are more open to hearing that there is a savior who can help them when they are hurting. Churches often start with the message that people are going to hell if they don't believe. Few people accept hell exists. We need to begin with the message that someone can help them when they are hurting. Peter started with their needs, and we must also get their attention when life hurts.

B. He told them about the qualities of Jesus v. 13 *The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go*

In a world that had misjudged Jesus, Peter wanted them to know who Jesus was. He was the servant of the God that they claimed to worship. He was holy and righteous and the one who brought life to men. They never understood His miracles or His teaching. Some had even said that the power of Satan did the miracles. Peter wanted them to see Jesus for who He was. Just as He had changed the life of this disabled man, Jesus could transform their lives with the power of God. Our Lord was not someone to be hated. He was someone to be loved. He was someone to embrace and learn more about.

Our world has misjudged Jesus as well. At best, they think He is an old-time person with sound advice for how to live our lives. Usually, they think of Jesus as a judge who doesn't like everything they do. They see no reason for him or his church to judge them. We need to let them see the real Jesus. Let them notice that Jesus has been such a good friend in your life and who you can turn to any time of the day or night for help and advice. Let them see the loving Jesus and not the bothersome Jesus that the world wants to paint him as.

C. He admitted their ignorance v. 17: *"Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders.*

Peter let them see that they had done something terrible in being part of Jesus's crucifixion but that a big part of their problem was ignorance. They crucified Jesus because they didn't understand that He fulfilled the Old Testament that they proclaimed to believe. They were also not alone in their guilt. The Romans, like Pilate, shared in the guilt, for they were the ones who nailed Jesus to the cross. Finally, they should know God turned their evil actions into something beautiful. The death of Jesus was the beginning of life. They sinned, but God triumphed.

Much of the evil in the world comes because of ignorance. Does the world think people should live together rather than get married? Do we believe that it is justified for people to burn a neighborhood just because they were wronged as a child, or do they feel people of their race are badly treated? Our world has lost its sense of right and wrong. People claim to have the truth but are ignorant. They have been taught that these things are okay, but that doesn't undo the harm these evils cause. God's people must point out evil but realize that people may not see it, only the damage in their lives.

D. He laid out the blessings of forgiveness v. 19 *Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,*

What they need is a new course of action. The Bible calls that repentance. Peter is offering the people pardon based on the very Jesus they crucified. If they admit their sin, God will wipe it out and not hold it against them. God will offer forgiveness to take away their guilt. People should not just feel sorry for what they did and do the same thing repeatedly. They must make a change and chart a new way of doing things. They must return to the Lord and begin again in His mercy. Only that will bring a different outcome in life.

The greatest thing Christians can offer is a new beginning in the forgiveness of Christ. Is someone struggling in marriage because of anger or selfishness? Jesus can provide a new beginning. Is someone destroying themselves because of greed or lust? Jesus can forgive and rebuild a life. While they must admit the sin, Jesus will not force them to labor under the guilt. He will forgive them and help them rebuild. When you find someone whose life is broken, let them know that Jesus will assist them with a new start. He will enable them to turn away from sin and begin again.

E. He laid out the blessings of being a child of God v. 22 *For Moses said, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you."*

Why would you want to live this dead life when the Lord desires to bring you times of refreshment? The people had been searching for generations for the Messiah to come. He had arrived, and they had crucified him, but that didn't mean that they could not have him as their own. Jesus wants to live with them and give them all the blessings the Old Testament promised. In the dingy life that they were living under the Romans, Jesus would offer them a better life filled with joy and peace. If they listened to Jesus, life would be better, just as it was in the days of David.

So many commercials promise a better life if you buy their product. For people in our world who are struggling, you have something to give them for free that will change their lives from hopelessness and frustration to peace and joy. Jesus is the answer when people are straining to make life work. He forgives the sin of divorce and infidelity and rebuilds life in the first marriage or a second. He helps people who struggle with anger to find peace with their world and the joy of making new friends. Whatever a person's problem, Jesus has an answer and a new direction for their life.

God's purpose in Christ was to help us, not to hurt us. v. 26 *When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways."*

God wants to turn people away from their sins to bless them. People usually hear God telling them not to do some sin but don't understand why. If I ask you to stop hitting your thumb with a hammer, am I being mean, or is that the first step to healing? Sins destroy, and God wants you to stop. People usually miss the promise of forgiveness and help the Lord wants to give when they are down in the dumps. He will take away the guilt and repair the life. That is what we need to focus on in our witness. Focus on the good things Jesus has done for you in good and bad times.

The church and our Lord are here to build people up in a world where many struggle. That is often the opposite of what people think the church is here for. It is not to make you feel guilty or kill all the fun but to help you be a better person who can enjoy all the blessings God can give. So, start with their need or hurt and show that Jesus wants to help. He desires to forgive our past, walk with us as our friend in the present, and enable us to have a better future. In Jesus, you have nothing to sell and everything to give as a gift from a God who loves you.

3 Not Afraid!

Acts 4:1-22

Big idea: It is not your job to justify the truth!

Christ divides the world v.2 *They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.*

The disciples preaching in the temple would never do. A large crowd had gathered in the temple to hear them. At the temple, the disciples proclaimed that Jesus, whom the Sanhedrin had condemned, had risen from the dead. They were preaching, and the crowd was intently listening around the healed cripple. The Jewish leaders must stop this heresy. It implicated the Jewish leaders in a crime against God. It went against the Sadducee's belief that there was no resurrection from the dead. They would arrest the disciples, but they couldn't stop 2000 listeners from converting to the Christian faith and believing in Jesus.

Today, the church is facing the same kind of opposition. Talk to your friends about Jesus, like Peter does, and see their reaction. Many will tell you that the idea that Jesus is the only way to salvation or that Jesus is what the world needs now in this mess will fall on deaf ears. It is not what they want to hear. People may even walk away from you or try to punish you in some way for speaking about Jesus. Yet, the truth is that, like Peter, some will believe and find the joy that comes from being with Jesus. Jesus still divides people, so what do you do?

The witness

A. Whose power did the miracle v. 7 *They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"*

The Sanhedrin opposes Jesus, and it is all about authority. They were charged with protecting the faith and wanted to know why these disciples felt they could speak about Jesus in the temple. The crowd thought the miracle validated the message, but the leaders were unsure. Satan can do miracles, too. They had put Jesus to death, thinking that they had ended the teaching of Jesus. Now, his disciples were doing miracles and teaching that Jesus had arisen from the dead. The leaders were implicated as being enemies of God. It challenged their authority, and they wanted to know what rights they had.

The Christian faith still challenges the authority of our society. Man wants to do things that are pleasurable and selfish. We tell everyone that it is right to change what marriage means or that the government has the right to take our rights away to protect their speech or ideals. The church is challenged when it talks about unchanging truth or the need to follow the Lord to have absolute joy and happiness. The statistics about marriage versus living together or about godly living versus selfish living are there, but no one wants to see the advantage God gives us.

B. Telling everyone about Jesus v. 10. *Then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.*

The authority for the miracle and the power to do the miracle all came from Jesus. Peter turns the tables on the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin had put the disciples on trial, but Peter put them on trial. They had crucified the Messiah of God, but God had shown who Jesus was by raising Him from the dead. Jesus was the power of their ministry and the focus of everything they did. The Sanhedrin denied the miracles that Jesus performed while he was alive. They would find it hard to deny the miracle of the crippled man standing before them. His healing showed the power of Jesus to everyone present.

We must turn the tables on the world by talking constantly about Jesus. They want to criticize the church for its beliefs on sexuality, finances, and how we want to raise our kids. Please don't get caught up in their discussions. Keep talking about Jesus's help and healing in your life. Let them see how every Christian has an advantage because Jesus's love and power are in our lives. Let them see how our lives

may not be perfect, but Jesus changes our marriages, work ethic, and how we deal with money. Let them see that Jesus gives us goals and values in life.

C. The greatest miracle of all v. 12 *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."*

Yet the greatest miracle that Jesus does for people is the gift of salvation. All the sacrifices and rituals God instituted in the Old Testament and done by these religious leaders pointed to the cross and empty tomb. Jesus had saved more than the cripple. He saved the world. They had crucified Jesus, but He had risen from the dead, and they had seen the empty tomb. Here was the greatest miracle of all and one that could save every one of them, but they refused to believe it. They would have no part of the God that they claimed to serve because they rejected His Messiah.

It is still the one miracle that can impact every living person. The salvation that Jesus offers is for the whole world. He wants every person to live with Him here on earth and in heaven later on. Gone are the temple sacrifices, for Jesus has made the ultimate sacrifice. There is no salvation in any other name. Only the cross and Easter tomb of Jesus can provide life for us. It gives us eternal life when we die. It gives life to us now as we have the opportunity to walk with Jesus and to have his blessings each day. Like the cripple, our lives are changed by the power of Jesus.

Ignoring the truth

D. Trying to explain the truth away v. 14 *But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say.*

The Sanhedrin faced a dilemma. They couldn't deny the miracle, and the words of Peter, given to him by the Holy Spirit, were so powerful that they had no answer for them either. Jerusalem was ringing from the voices of people who had seen the risen Jesus, yet the Sanhedrin refused to believe. The truth was so powerful that it smacked them in the face. Honest men would have come to faith and embraced their Messiah. These men wanted to hold onto their lies so much that they desperately sought another answer and found none. God's truth was irrefutable.

The world faces the same dilemma. If the leaders were honest with themselves, the power of Jesus and salvation would be hard to ignore. Think of all the people who have sacrificed for the church and the Gospel. Think of lives that have been drastically changed as they have come to know Jesus. You can deny it all and call it a farce, but the world has no power to help people or transform lives like Jesus can do. Other movements have come and gone. Christianity still exists. Those like C.S. Lewis who have studied it to try and refute it have often come to faith in its power.

E. Thinking you can silence the truth v. 17. *But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name.*

Not being able to refute Peter's words, the Sanhedrin tries to silence them. They forbade the disciples from telling the story of Jesus or preaching in His name. They blindly hoped that the Gospel of Jesus would die as so many messages of false teachers they had encountered had before. They misjudged the truth. The church would expand from a few to millions across the Roman empire, while the Jewish temple that they sat in would be destroyed in just 40 short years. They couldn't stop 2000 who had come to faith, and they couldn't stop the truth about Jesus from overtaking the world.

Foolishly, the world still tries to censor the church's message. They will purge it from social media and keep it off the city square. They will label it hate speech and tell Christians to be silent because it is old-fashioned morals. They don't want to hear the truth and don't want others to listen to it, either. It has made the church afraid to speak out about what they believe. We stop praying in a group and seldom share our views by the water fountain at work. We feel uncomfortable. It won't change what works and what will survive. Opinions and culture are temporary. God will endure forever.

Speaking the truth because God must be honored v. 19 *But Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God."*

Peter refused to be intimidated. In Chapter 5, they will be flogged for speaking about Jesus. All the disciples, except for one, would later die for speaking the truth. It didn't matter. They proclaimed the Gospel and told of the salvation that could only come from Jesus. God must be obeyed and not man. Notice that the disciples never picketed, never picked a fight, and never denounced the Sanhedrin or Rome. They wouldn't stop telling the Gospel to everyone who would listen. Their message eventually brought millions to know Jesus and to have the salvation and healing that came from Him.

At times, people will want to pick a fight because you stand with Jesus. Don't do battle. Just don't give in. Keep praying at the table even when others are not Christian. Keep talking about what you learned at church or in Bible class. Keep living your life according to the guides of scripture. Some won't like it, but I guarantee that you will lead others to see how special Jesus is. Your words and actions divide people but keep holding onto the truth so that it can set you free and free some of those who come on your path. God's way is the only way, so you must live it out.

4 Lying Threatens Unity.

Acts 5:1-11

Big idea: Sometimes, great punishments are used to keep the church on track.

Acts 5:1-11 1 Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. 2 With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. 3 Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? 4 Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God." 5 When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. 6 Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. 7 About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price." 9 Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." 10 At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11 Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

Harsh Judgement

This passage has always presented a challenge for believers. The judgment seems too harsh, with no chance of repentance. How can God, who is kind and merciful, treat such a sin so severely when no one died, and they were being generous with their property in giving a portion to the church? It is worth noting that the Lord judges sin severely at the beginning of new periods of the church. Achan and his family were killed when he stole from Jericho as the nation began to conquer Palestine. Nadab and Abihu were killed for presenting unholy fire as the priesthood was started. God wants good beginnings, not bad.

No place says that any of these people were excluded from heaven, but their judgment would serve as warnings to the church so that people took God's commands seriously and the church would not fall into sinful patterns that would destroy the ministry and the mission. In the text, we are at the beginning of the Christian church, and God does not want the church derailed when it is so young and tender. Let us all recognize that our God never takes sin lightly. He sees the effect that sin can have on others. He wants the church to triumph and is not afraid to punish.

The grievous sin

A. Motivated by pride v.2 *With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.*

The story is preceded by a few verses that tell how Barnabas sold a field and gave the church the proceeds from the sale to help those in need. Barnabas did so humbly, but others still praised God for his work. Ananias and Sapphira wanted that glory as well. Pride motivated their offer of a gift. They wanted the glory but didn't want to pay the price. They sold property and told everyone they would give the entire amount while holding back part of the money. They envied Barnabas for all the honor that he was given. They wanted others in the church to praise them.

That they would hold some back was not wrong. When God speaks of giving a tithe, he tells you to keep nine times as much as you give. God is pleased with the cheerful giver, giving as much as they wish. Yet that would not do for the couple. No one would give them the honor of Barnabas that way. They desired the honor that Barnabas received. They wanted people to sing their praises and think highly of them. They wanted a higher place in the church. The motivation for giving was not a concern for others. It was pride and seeking a higher place for themselves.

B. A tool of Satan v. 3 *Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?"*

When Satan can't defeat the church from the outside with threats from the Sanhedrin, he will attack from the inside. He will use the pride and vices of the members to try to split the church and stop the message of salvation from being proclaimed. Satan knows how to lie to the hearts of church members and get them to seek their glory and honor selfishly. It was Satan who planted the idea for Judas to betray Jesus, and Satan used the pride of Ananias and Sapphira to try and derail the church.

People would come to know that they hadn't given the whole amount and see their actions as a pattern for gaining glory for themselves. Such attitudes are contagious. Soon, the church would be filled with envy, with each man and woman doing what was best for themselves. The ministry would be discredited before the community, and the Lord himself would look selfish. This was not a simple white lie but an attempt to take glory away from God and gain the respect of others for themselves. It was the first step in Satan's plan to destroy the church.

C. Directed at God and the church v. 4 *What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God."*

Their prideful sin was directed at God and the church. It mattered that they gave for their glory, not because of a love for the Lord. It mattered that what they did was based on a lie and the deception of their fellow Christians. If allowed unchecked, it would fester and destroy the church. Barnabas would be honored and ascend to the highest levels of the church. He would be a leader in the Jerusalem church and would be appointed by God to travel with Paul on the first missionary journey. His actions would be watched and emulated, and people would live more like the Lord.

Suppose that this lie from Ananias went unchecked. What would have happened if a selfish person who sought their glory had become a leader of the Jerusalem church? What kind of policies and direction do you think such a greedy person would have taken the church? People judge by outward appearance. God looks at the heart as he did when he chose David and rejected Saul. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for outward piety and angry and selfish hearts. This was an attack on the church and God. God would not stand for such a start to his church.

The verdict

D. Judged by the Holy Spirit v. 5 *When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened.*

The Lord chose to stop this blight on his church before it took root. Peter exposed the sin. God dealt out the punishment. Ananias could not deny the truth but fell over and died. His wife would later repeat this pattern when she lied to Peter and the church. Notice that Peter did not pronounce judgment. God judged them and found them wanting. Had Ananias or Sapphira admitted their sin, God surely would not have judged them. When they continued the lie, God dealt with them severely. God had to protect His church from the influence of Satan.

One assumes that they will be in heaven, for they were, after all, believers. Yet, their death and the quick burial were without any honor. People did not mourn their deaths or talk about any good things they had done. They died in disgrace and will be remembered for their sin. So it is today for the person who boasts about how they grew a church or is a church leader who falls into sin. Look at the people who create the megachurches and give in to Satan. God will find them lacking, and they will just fade away without honor. All honor belongs to the Lord.

The effect on the ministry v 11 *Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.*

The effect of their death was powerful. One doesn't doubt that this sin was not copied. It was just as it was in the time of Achan, who stole from the Lord, or Uzzah, who touched the ark and died. Death for

your sin from the hand of God tends to be a powerful witness that keeps people holy. God knew that the early church would not survive unless its people had high standards like honesty and a desire for God's glory. Believers needed to hold those values and show the community the character of their Lord. To tell half-truths or have pride and selfishness in your heart would destroy the church.

It showed the character of God. Unlike the Roman and Greek gods, who committed all kinds of sins and had evil characters, the God of heaven was holy and expected his people to be righteous. He would build a righteous people on earth and let their message and lives conquer the evil world around them. Unity would be based on holiness. The kindness and love of the early church as it ministered to each other and served the Lord would be based on the holiness of God and a church that lived out the values of the Lord. Their mission would flow out of character rather than the practices of the world.

God takes the protection of His ministry and church seriously. v.9 *Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."*

Many people try to figure out or dismiss the severe punishment in this passage. To our thinking, the fact that he didn't give the whole amount was no big deal. That is true, but the fact that he tried to lie to God and gain honor for himself at God's expense was a huge deal. God took seriously the sin because it threatened the early ministry of the church. It gave Satan a foothold and could easily have destroyed the unity of the church and soiled the reputation of God before the community that he wanted to save.

We still want to excuse the pastor who has an affair, the leader who is concerned about his honor more than the gospel message, or those who would cause divisions in a church. To us, it is not a big deal. To God, it is something that deserves divine punishment. God dealt out strict punishment so that it would unlikely happen again. He has high standards for His church and wants it to be a holy place that represents his values and gives honor to him. We are not to question God's judgment but to learn from it. Amen.

5 Faith Tested

Acts 5:17-42

Big idea: Getting out the gospel is the heart of ministry.

Acts 5:17-42 17 Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. 18 They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. 19 But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. 20 "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life." 21 At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people. When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin--the full assembly of the elders of Israel--and sent to the jail for the apostles. 22 But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, 23 "We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside." 24 On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were puzzled, wondering what would come of this. 25 Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people." 26 At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them. 27 Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. 28 "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood." 29 Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men! 30 The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead--whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. 31 God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. 32 We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." 33 When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. 34 But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. 35 Then he addressed them: "Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. 36 Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. 37 After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. 38 Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. 39 But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God." 40 His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. 41 The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. 42 Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

What is the purpose of the church?

While we have seen the early church gather funds to help its poorer members, the real purpose of the church is demonstrated here. They spent most of their time sharing the gospel message with the people around them. People needed to know the truth. They came to the temple and proclaimed the message because the faithful of the Jewish nation would gather there. It had already proved dangerous for Peter and John, but it was where they could reach people. They had a truth that must get out and wanted to share it with the world.

What is the purpose of the church today? It helps and feeds the community. It enables the world to see sin as the church stands against injustice. It is about fellowship gatherings and caring for one another—good things but not the primary purpose. The purpose is still to proclaim the gospel message so people are saved. It is simple to say that, but it is hard to focus on that purpose because there is a cost to

preaching the word. The world tries to stop the message, and Christians often pay a price. That may be why Christians usually don't share their faith, and the world doesn't know the Savior who loves them.

The truth about God's truth

A. Their command to tell the truth v. 20 *"Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life."*

One would think God would protect His servants from suffering as they share the truth. In reality, God releases them from prison so that they can speak the truth some more. A crowd would gather for early sacrifices and prayer. God wanted his servants there to talk to the people. The release signaled that Satan couldn't stop the message. We will see that the angel brought them out without the Jews even knowing. We can see that the disciples courageously obeyed the Lord's command to tell the complete message of the gospel of life and not leave out anything about Jesus.

The Lord will protect the church today so that it can continue to share the message. That doesn't mean it will be easy, or God's first concern is our safety. All we have to do is look at the persecuted in Africa or Finland to see that the gospel message is crucial. The disciples immediately obeyed. They sensed the power of the message to change lives. They were as adamant that the message should get out as Jesus was. God has commanded us to share the message, and we need to be as eager as they were to share because we want others to have this gift.

B. Attacks on the truth v. 28 *"We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."*

Not everybody is happy with the message that the disciples share. The Jewish leaders were jealous of the message and the miracles. They were upset that the crucifixion of Jesus implicated them as opposing God and being insensitive to the Messiah. For that reason, they didn't want the message preached. All of the disciples were on trial, and many wanted to kill them just as they had forced Pilate to kill Jesus. Their message disrupted the temple peace, and they thought that the message took people away from the Jewish rites. They put the disciples and the message on trial to stop it from spreading.

The church and the Christian message are on trial in our society. If we speak up for marriage between a man and a woman or say anything against abortion, we are bigots. If we say that Jesus is the only way to heaven, then we are narrow-minded. The world doesn't want to hear the message. It is normal to shy away from the message. To keep quiet in public discussions and not express God's truth. Some denominations have avoided the persecution by silencing the Lord's message and telling the world that they believe homosexuality and abortion are OK. The message gets silenced.

C. Confrontation of the truth v. 31 *The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead--whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.*

Peter will not be silenced. He knows that he must obey God rather than men. He again calls the nation and the leadership to repentance. The resurrection of Jesus shows that the Jewish leaders were wrong about Jesus. God decreed to all that Jesus was the Messiah and servant of all. The disciples could not be silent about the gift that the Lord had given through the death and resurrection of Jesus. He confronted the Sanhedrin not to condemn them but to bring them salvation. If they repented and believed, they could have the eternal life that God promised to all.

Our words must also convey the desire that those who confront the church can be saved and that we desire to bring them to salvation. We don't hate people who see sexuality differently or those who think it is a woman's right to have an abortion. Many of them are ignorant of the truth. Our desire must be to help them see God's ways and to receive God's gifts. Sinful acts will only cause them pain and destroy their lives. Continued rejection of Jesus will make life here on earth agonizing and keep them from the gift of eternal life. We desire to save, not condemn.

D. Avoiding the truth v. 38 *Therefore, in the present case, I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail.*

One man heard the truth and wanted to avoid it. His name was Gamaliel, and he was the teacher of Saul of Tarsus, who would become St. Paul. He thought that he could dismiss the gospel. It was false in his mind, and so it wouldn't last. The Jewish way was the accurate way, and others would disappear. Sadly, he had blinders on. He saw what he wanted from the Old Testament truth and ignored passages like Isaiah 53 or Psalm 2 that pointed clearly to Jesus. He thought these men were fighting against God and didn't realize who was obeying God. His blindness would cause the Jew's demise.

Realize that you can share the truth; some will still be so blind that they can't see the obvious truth before their eyes. They are so sure that Allah is God or that it is up to us to save the planet that they can't see the truth of the gospel. They dismiss it and think that Christianity will just go away. They fail to see that Christianity has been around for centuries, helping people with their lives. They fail to see that Jesus changes lives and brings stronger families and people with character. They dismiss it all; sadly, you can do little to change their mind until a disaster happens. Don't let it stop you from sharing what Jesus can do so they have something to grab in that disaster.

E. Sacrifices made for the truth v. 40 *His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go.*

Instead of accepting the truth, they punished the disciples for sharing Jesus with them. I think many of them wanted to kill the disciples, but they feared that the thousands who had become believers might riot and the Romans would come and punish the Sanhedrin, so they only flogged them. They refused to consider what the disciples said, and so they resorted to physical violence, hoping that flogging, as well as another warning, would silence the disciples. This punishment would be the first of many sacrifices, like imprisonment and death, made by these men for the gospel.

There are sacrifices that we all make for sharing the gospel. Often, people will not speak to us again if we share God's will. We may be passed over for promotions because we won't lie for the boss or find that people hate us for speaking up at the PTA. We may even find divisions in the family as people are uncomfortable when we pray at a meal or talk about our church or faith. We can't let the sacrifices keep us from sharing our faith. Our family and friends will need what Jesus brings when the first trouble comes. Love will make you want to share.

The truth must be told v. 42 *Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.*

The threats and the beatings didn't stop them from witnessing. It may have even made them trust God more and seek His help for their ministry. Daily they witnessed the opportunities God gave them. They returned to the temple because it was where large numbers could learn. They witnessed in the homes and began house churches where Christians could encourage each other and share the love that God had given. Soon, the thousands became millions and spread out around the Roman empire. They all had the joy of having Jesus' blessings now and the gift of eternal life.

It is why we still need to witness. We see people struggling around us and want to help. We see people in destructive behaviors or those who have just lost their way. Jesus has answers for them and can change their lives so they can be filled with joy. They are hurting, and Jesus can help. And if enough people find the joy and peace of Jesus, communities change. People start caring about each other and live with godly character instead of selfishness. Getting out the gospel is the heart of ministry because it is the one thing that heals and helps. It is worth the sacrifices we make.

6 Using God's opportunities.

Acts 8:26-40

Big idea: If we have courage, God will work miracles.

Acts 8:26-40 26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road--the desert road--that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." 27 So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. 29 The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." 30 Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. 31 "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. 33 In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." 34 The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" 35 Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. 36 As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" 37 38 And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. 40 Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Hearing, but not understanding v. 28 *and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet.*

He was seeking but needed help understanding. We are not told whether he came to Jerusalem on business or seeking answers from the true God. Yet, he is riding on his way home with an expensive copy of Isaiah and does not understand what he is reading. The truth about God and salvation in Jesus were in his hands but did him no good. Paul will later say in Romans 10 that people like this man can not believe in the Lord without hearing about and having someone explain the gospel to them. The gospel is all around but does him no good.

One of the fallacies this series of acts has shown me is that just because people have the word doesn't mean they understand it. The Sanhedrin knew the Old Testament better than we do but didn't understand it. People around us have heard the Christmas story and Easter, but it does them no good. There are many today who are religious, but they get no comfort from the Bible. They seek answers but don't know Jesus and find no comfort in His words. Some are very sincere, but they are lost, for they don't know Jesus and don't put their trust in Him. They need someone to show them the way.

God's saving process

He gives the opportunities v. 29 *The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."*

God has a plan. It begins with an opportunity presented and accepted by Philip. God tells Philip to leave his ministry and travel to a barren stretch of land along a highway. Doing this strange act will put him in the path of the Ethiopian and his entourage, whom God has prepared for this moment. God tells him to go near this royal chariot and speak to the man dressed in gold and fine garments. That takes boldness, for this is a man of power. His words show his concern as he offers to help him understand what he is reading. Philip sensed that the Lord had given him an open door, and he took it.

We may complain that the world doesn't understand Jesus, but we miss the doors God is giving us to share his message and change lives. If we look, we will see God regularly giving us changes to help people seeking answers and even seeking Jesus but don't understand the basics of salvation. Our call is to

listen to God to see opportunities and be bold enough to use them. When you are with others, do you listen to them, ask questions, and offer help? Do you speak the truth kindly, or are you afraid of telling people about your faith if asked? God gives doors. What do you do with them?

B. He opens their hearts v. 31 *"How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.*

The Lord had prepared him. He had a hunger for the truth and had even to spend a small fortune to have his own copy of the book of Isaiah. Yet, the book was useless to him without someone to explain what it said. God had prepared him for this moment and had even given him someone to open the truth. You can hear the frustration in his voice. God was so near and yet so distant. Traveling to Jerusalem had only piqued his interest, but the truth about God was just as distant as it had ever been. God had given him the desire of this moment and a need for the answers that Philip could provide.

People all around us in this time of great struggle are seeking answers. They are struggling financially and wondering why God doesn't help. They wonder about the gruesome war that they read about or the greed and selfishness in Washington and wonder why God doesn't do something. Sometimes, it just takes a question to help them see that things won't change unless we change. Sometimes, asking them what they know about God or how they think God should act requires a question. God has prepared them. We need to listen and help them see God's answers.

C He provides the words to say v. 35 *Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.*

God provided Philip with the words to say that day. He began with the passage that the Ethiopian was struggling with and added others so the man could have a complete answer and know what Jesus had done for him. He listened, answered, and opened the scripture to a hungry man. God had provided him with the opportunity. God would now give him the words that would touch the heart of the Ethiopian so that he could understand the rest of the book of Isaiah and fully understand Jesus. It was not Philip who spoke that day but God speaking through him.

We often fear witnessing because we don't know what to say. How about starting with the person's question and answering it the best you can? Trust the Lord to give you answers based on a recent sermon or evening devotion. Let God speak, and don't get worried about how they will react. Continue by speaking about how Jesus impacts your life. Let them see what salvation means to you and what it can do for them. Let God be in control and speak from his teaching and not just your wisdom. Let the Holy Spirit be in control, and He will accomplish great things you can never do without Him.

D. He brings faith v. 36 *As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?"*

The words were powerful, and the Ethiopian man believed in Jesus and wanted to be baptized in front of the servants and soldiers that would have been with him. He was unafraid to let all those around him know what the Lord had done for him. He came to faith and wanted to have a closer relationship with Jesus. The seeker was found. God worked a miracle in his heart as Philip opened the word of God. The man who had not known who Jesus was now wanted to commit his life to Jesus as he received the salvation that only Jesus could bring into life. Saving faith was now his.

Sometimes, it takes time; other times, it comes right away. A person hears the message of Jesus, and God creates faith. The person who was struggling lets you ask questions and provide answers to their questions, and the Holy Spirit does what we can't do. He brings a person to faith. You accepted God's opportunity and were bold enough to speak to a friend or a stranger, and the impossible happened. God saved a soul and brought joy and answers to someone who had only known struggle and sorrow. God's plan was complete, and a new life was given.

Touched by God, they rejoice and share v. 39 *When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.*

The eunuch found answers and acceptance by God. He could not help but rejoice. As a eunuch, he would have been excluded from the temple, but the experience showed him that God still loved him and that the blessings of faith would be his. It brought joy to his heart. Legend says that he went home to Ethiopia and told others about Jesus. It was the beginning of the Ethiopian church of today, according to their traditions. If that is true, many in a pagan nation came to faith because of this one opportunity answered. God indeed worked a miracle that day.

God still brings miracles and joy when Christians use the opportunities to share their faith. One person, a whole family, or an extended community eventually comes to faith because we listened and shared. At that, the entire church rejoices as well.

If we have courage, God will work miracles.

The Bible is filled with miraculous conversions, like the two men on the way to Emmaus and Cornelius or the Roman soldier who comes to Peter. Most happen because someone has the courage and is willing to talk about Jesus to someone who has questions. God gives opportunity, and miracles happen. It all starts by taking advantage of the opportunities God gives so that you can be there when someone is seeking and struggling. God will provide opportunities. You don't have to search for them. You have to be open to the opportunities that he gives around you.

You watch the people, listen to them, and are bold enough to engage them. You will start with their questions and share the answers God has given you in worship or devotions. Then, you let the Lord work on their hearts. You speak, and God converts a soul and gives life. Our task is to learn from the Lord in our study, be patient with others who don't know the truth, and be willing to ask questions that help them to see what God is trying to share. If we have courage, God will work miracles, even miracles that are larger than we ever imagined could happen.

Pentecost

The ordinary becomes extraordinary.

Acts 2:1-21

Big idea: God can do extraordinary things with ordinary people.

Acts 2:1-21 1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. 5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. 7 Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome 11 (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs--we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" 12 Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" 13 Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine." 14 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. 15 These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! 16 No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 17 "'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. 18 Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. 19 I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. 20 The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. 21 And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

They were ordinary men.

Who were these men in the upper room? You had a group of fishermen like James and John. You had a tax collector named Matthew and a zealot named Simon. All were second-rate Galileans; the only Judean had been Judas. None was remarkable in the way of the world. You would have thought that Jesus would have asked people like Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea to be one of the disciples. Yet, he chose ordinary men that no one would have noticed if they were not His disciples. Maybe that was on purpose so we would see His power, not theirs.

Maybe, that was so we all might realize what God can do with us if we let him. For you see, Pentecost is about ordinary men who can do extraordinary things through the power of God. They would birth a church that day by God's power and not theirs. That is why I want you to put yourself in their position today. Don't think of them in lofty terms but think about how you might have been Peter or Mary on that first Pentecost and what God could have done through you. God can do extraordinary things with ordinary people – even you.

God thinks big

He took men wondering what to do next v. 1 *When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.*

The disciples started the day as they had begun the last nine. They gathered and prayed. They recalled their life with Jesus and tried to figure out what it was all about. After their time of prayer, they would go to the temple and participate in Pentecost, the celebration of the grain harvest. But after that, what would be next? Jesus' command to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and the world seemed

overwhelming. Where would they start, and how could the 12 or even the 120 in the church do such a great thing?

It is just another average Sunday for us. We have programs for evangelism and education, wondering what the Lord has in mind for us. We have gathered here to pray and worship the Lord. Indeed, little seems to happen. What are we going to do as a church in the future? We still have the call to be God's witnesses. We have tried several things in the past and have yet to see the results for which we had hoped. Will the future be different? Will we be ready when the Lord has us reach out to the world? Will they listen in these troubled times?

He empowered them with the Holy Spirit v. 4. *All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.*

Yet, amid their prayer time, something extraordinary came. The first thing that the Spirit did for these ordinary men and all who would be servants was to bring understanding to the mind. Things that they had been pondering and praying about came into focus. The second thing that happens to all who would serve is a change of heart. These men huddled in the upper room with fear now became bold. The final thing that occurred was that the bodies were equipped with the power of God. In the text, they begin to speak in other tongues.

Every church needs to pray for the lost. Do we really understand what it is to be lost without God's help or values? God wants us to feel His heart and see what He has in mind for the struggling people around us. We need to see what we have to offer because of God's gift. That means that we need a change of heart as well. It is easier to be comfortable with what the Lord has given us. It is hard to change, so gospel witnessing is a priority. God will equip those ready to witness because He wants the lost to know Him just as we do.

He set them boldly before the world v. 14 *Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say.*

And it was God's timing to bring them before the continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa. Peter, who denied his Lord less than two months before this, now stands in front of the world. He wants them to understand that this is a day predicted in the Old Testament. Peter wants them to know the salvation that has come from Jesus Christ. Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord today will be saved. Come, see the cross, and bow down before it so that you may have its power and live in peace with God in this life and the next.

The world is still waiting for us to share the message of salvation. The church could be in an area of one group or have a melting pot of many people. Our job is to tell what the Lord is doing for us so that God might bring the same blessings into the lives of people around us. We will not convert them. That is the job of the Holy Spirit. Our task is to tell them about Jesus. Many claim they can save people from inflation, violence, and racial divide. Only Jesus tells them that He can do all that and give them eternal life as well. Tell them about Jesus, and you change everything.

We need to think big

Think of what God will make of you, not what you are now.

Everything begins with us thinking of what we can be if the Lord wants to use us. Too often, we think of ourselves without the Lord. I am just a fisherman. I am just a tax collector. The disciples could have focused only on what they were without Jesus. We could too, but we shouldn't. Think of what you can do if the Lord empowers you. You could visit others and show them that someone cares. You could lead a small group. You could change lives and even be part of miracles. We are talking about what you can do with the power of God, not with your puny resources.

God wants every congregation to start thinking like they already have 100, 200, or even 1000 members. Please think of the lives we could change around us. Think of what it would mean for those who walk in those doors. All of that is possible if we pray and follow God's plan. We may feel like we are too small and can only do a little. That is not the point for the group of disciples was small on Pentecost. They were effective because their God was big, and that big God will lead us to become the church that He wants us to be. Are we ready to follow Him and change the world?

Will you be an extraordinary person? Will this be a remarkable church?

It is often said that those kinds of things happened in Bible times but cannot happen today. I would disagree with that. God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. He still works powerfully, and I want to share three ordinary people who were extraordinary in his power. Such saints still exist today. I knew a simple farmer who had raised his kids on the plains of Nebraska. He was a man who taught me the generosity of the Lord. He gave generously to his church, and the Lord gave even more to him. He never could outgive the Lord.

I knew an editor at CPH who started as an ordinary teacher in a Lutheran school and became one of the best editors that CPH ever had. She was a woman of faith who taught the people whose work she edited, touching people with her faith and her love for the Lord. They were each simple people who lived in the power of the Lord. Each was bigger than the people around them because of the power of the Lord that lived in them. Each has a legacy that will continue to cry out for many years. God can do extraordinary things with ordinary people.