

Spread the Savior's Salvation Message!

1. Not by our works, but by faith
2. Not for our people, but for all people

It happens every so often in many churches around our country right as the service is about to start. Everyone loves to have visitors. But this is different: *that* kind of person stumbles in. A woman fallen on rough times, a man whose reputation everyone knows about, or maybe a person whose lifestyle makes everyone a bit uncomfortable. The Sunday best clothes are lacking. Not even just a nice pair of jeans. They have the deer in the headlights look. It's clear they've never even remotely come close to stepping in a church before. As the greeter closest to the door, how's your conversation going to go with *that* person? Instead of the conversations we naturally have with our friends, or the friendly small talk we'd offer to any other visitor, everyone just pretends they're not here. The visible double take we pretend we didn't actually do is quickly followed by the audible whispers: "How'd they find out about us?" "Aren't they in the wrong place?" "What exactly do they want, anyways?" Is anyone going to shake their hand? Probably not. Sure, they're welcome, I guess, to come to worship ... but they should probably sit in the back. Sure, I guess it's good they're coming ... but why can't we get anyone a little more like us, the people I invited and actually want to come ... a people a little more normal? Right in that moment is where it gets real. Whom is Jesus really for, anyways? Did Jesus appear to take away the sins of just our target demographic, of those like us? Well, no, but they should at least be sat down and explained how things operate around here. It's not worth upsetting the fellowship we already have.

This might help us understand what was really going on behind the scenes among the conversations in the narthex corners and gossip outside the synagogue doors in Pisidian Antioch. Paul, the guest preacher in town, had a radical new message for the Jewish audience that day. The Gentiles have always been welcome ... if they do their best to become Jews first. They were constantly "the other," like visitors who come every week like everyone else, but treated as visitors nonetheless. Paul spread the Savior's salvation message. But what is it ... really? And whom is it for ... really?

In Pisidian Antioch, Paul gives perhaps his most Jewish message recorded in Acts. It's clear there are many fellow Jews present. He reviews the sweep of Israelite history from the greatest event that forever impacted the Jewish people: the Exodus from Egypt as the Lord freed them from slavery. He quotes passage after passage from the Old Testament to point to Jesus and his work. But then the rubber hits the road. The Jews took it personally to be the protectors of God's glory. He had given them the Law of Moses. That was such an all-encompassing covenant it determined how they were to live. It defined their entire society. They were jealous to protect God's law from outsiders, as they were supposed to.

But Paul upsets that idea. **He proclaims the Savior's salvation message not by works, but by faith.** *"Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses. Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: 'Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.'"*

Everyone who believes is justified from everything they were unable to be justified from the law of Moses. That word “everyone” hits them where it hurts. Yes, that Gentile sitting in the back row. Yes, that visitor you made become as Jewish as he could. The Savior’s salvation message comes to them directly and personally.

Paul even warns them judgment is coming if they reject that salvation message. The passage Paul quotes was used by the prophet Habbakkuk to warn of God’s judgment on Judah by sending the Babylonians. Paul applies it here to warn of those who reject Jesus, even if someone would tell them. Just like those Old Testament people rejected the Lord and his salvation, and so faced judgment and captivity at the hands of the Babylonians, Paul warns his fellow Jews to take care it doesn’t happen to them as well by rejecting Jesus.

Rejection of the gospel by us? Never! But it can really have some good motives. We are the sole guarders of God’s honor. God’s honor and forgiveness can be cheapened if people don’t shape up. It can destroy God’s gift of our fellowship we already have! Slowly the gospel, even among us, has turned into “forgiveness and ...” Forgiveness + becoming like us. Forgiveness + understanding the protocol. Forgiveness + your intentional response to not turn it into “cheap grace.”

The proclamation of the forgiveness of sins started with God’s Jewish people. Thank Jesus it didn’t stop there. None of us are Jews by birth. None of us are God’s people by birth. We are all Gentiles. Jesus certainly doesn’t add anything to forgiveness, since he knows there’s nothing else to add. Throughout his whole life, he fulfilled everything the law could ever demand. It is now powerless to require our own fulfillment. The gospel is the only message which can forgive, not forgiveness +. It’s the only message that can declare us innocent of everything which the law condemns. Your sins are no more, gone, forgiven! You are free of condemnation! It has no more power!

Paul first spreads the Savior’s salvation message by explaining what it is: not by works, but by faith. After his sermon gets done, he then quickly has to explain whom it is for.

Paul’s message, and really the message of the whole Old Testament, has two very different reactions. On the first Sabbath, many were imploring Paul and Barnabas to speak more the next week. But on that next Sabbath, the Jews were filled with jealousy and spoke against Paul and his biblical message.

Paul grounds his actions and message in Isaiah’s prophecy from our First Lesson. **The Savior’s salvation message is not just for our people, but for all people. “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: “I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”** The Jews, as God’s chosen Old Testament people, were rightfully the first people Paul would and should go to. However, since they rejected Jesus’ free salvation, they showed themselves to be unworthy of eternal life. No Jew would possibly have ever said this in such stark terms. They were the most worthy of anyone! But their adding on to the pure gospel in essence turned into a rejection of it. Paul now turns to the Gentiles in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. In Isaiah, it was a prophecy of Jesus as the light for the Gentiles to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. Jesus allows his church – here, specifically his called apostles Paul and Barnabas – to share in his epiphany work of spreading the gospel to the Gentiles. So Paul rightfully can apply the prophecy to his work as well.

Are we as quick as Paul was to go outside the box and put ourselves out there to go to the Gentiles? Our reservations and hesitations to take the gospel to “the other” are really rooted in

pride. We are a little closer to God. We are a little more holy. We are a little more inherently receptive to the gospel. Our sin is not as bad as theirs. Thus my church, my culture, my congregation, my people become just a little bit more “Christian,” a little bit better, than all *those* people.

The gospel humbles us by saying that we are not any more of a superior class or race than anyone else. His love, not our love or our actions to him, motivate his salvation. Jesus saves all people only because he wants to. In the Gospel and in our theme for today, Jesus was the Lamb of God ... for whom? There you see him taking away the sin of the world. There he makes no difference between people. He calls disciples from Bethsaida, up there in Gentile Galilee, a place which could bring the shivers and mild, stand-offish disgust of any self-respecting Jew. Jesus appears as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and proclaims salvation to the ends of the world. You see how that’s the greatest comfort of all? It doesn’t say “to take away the sins of John and Jane Smith, Joe Smo, Jacob Haag.” There could be many people in this world with those names. You are in the world. That “other person” who stumbles into church is in the world. Jesus appears for them. Jesus’ salvation is for them.

**Spread the Savior’s Salvation Message!** Joyfully take part in Christ’s work of proclaiming the gospel to the ends of the earth! Like Paul, you get to be part of a prophecy about Jesus and be part of its fulfillment. Yes, it might take you out of your comfort zone. It might mean embracing your nervousness as you approach someone instead of letting it conquer you. It might mean talking to someone new before church instead of going to your friends. It might mean replacing that double take with a smile when you see someone different.

Cherish that Jesus takes away the sins of the whole world! He destroys our inherent preference only for things like us. He lives for us, “the other.” The gospel had the power to accomplish a feat impossible for centuries: unite Jews and Gentiles, people who had faced dissension and hatred, into one. Today it has that same power. It transforms our selfish preference for ourselves into an undying love to spread his salvation to all peoples. Amen.