

“Apostolic Witness”
Acts 13:13-43
April 11, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

In our series on the mission of the church, we’re looking at four different sermons in Acts to answer the question, “What did the early apostles understand their mission to be?” We’ve considered two sermons from Peter and want to conclude by looking at two delivered by Paul. Luke, the author of Acts, accompanied Paul on many of his missionary trips and heard him deliver many sermons. He selects three of them as samples because they are delivered to three different audiences. The one we are looking at today is the first one, and it was delivered to a largely Jewish audience in a synagogue. The second one was delivered to a group of idolatrous pagans (14:15-17) and the third to the urbane philosophers of Athens (17:22-31). Paul approaches each group differently, showing us that there is no “cookie-cutter” gospel presentation that works in every situation. But there are also commonalities in each of these, and we are going to consider four of those today.

I. Respect

We have probably all had the experience of being the target of someone’s sales pitch, in which it becomes clear that the salesman has one purpose and one purpose only. That purpose has nothing to do with our needs and everything to do with his needs to make a sale. Such an approach is disrespectful. Unfortunately, many people outside the church view all evangelistic efforts as disrespectful, as trying to sell something to someone because of a need within us rather than a need within the person being evangelized. The evangelism we see in this passage counters this common misconception by being marked by a respect for those being evangelized.

Paul shows great respect for those to whom he is bringing the good news of the gospel, and we can see this respect in several ways. First, he trusts God for an opportunity to speak before he does so. God provided that opportunity through the weekly synagogue service in Antioch. When Paul first entered a city, it was his common pattern to seek out a synagogue because he knew that this setting would often afford him just such an opportunity. He was a well-known Old Testament scholar, and his credentials almost always led to an invitation to address those gathered. But he still waited for such an open door. So his pattern was to pray for open doors to speak of Jesus (Col. 4:3), to put himself in positions where such openings might be provided, and then to wait for God to open the door before speaking. Such a pattern shows respect for people. It is the opposite of the pushy telephone solicitor. Perhaps an application for you might be to ask

God to give you a venue where such an open door might be provided you. A hobby might afford you just such opportunities, which cycling does for me.

A second way Paul shows respect for his hearers is by honoring their history. Notice that Paul begins his sermon by tracing the broad outline of Israel's history from Egypt through King David. This was not uncommon in sermons preached to Jewish audiences, and Paul did so for several reasons. But one of those reasons was to show respect. When we take the time to learn the history, culture and values of others, it shows them respect. How can you care for people without taking the time to understand them? Part of such understanding is to know their history, and then to find parts of that history to affirm.

William Carey understood this. He was a missionary to India and the founder of the modern missionary movement. He devoted himself not only to learn the languages of the people of India, but also their religion, Hinduism. He went so far as to translate the Hindu Scriptures into the common languages of India. He believed that opportunities to bring Jesus to them would come through knowing and respecting them.

The third way Paul shows respect in this passage is in the way he addresses them in verse 26. **“Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God.”** He is acknowledging the presence of two groups: children of Abraham (Jews) and God-fearers. This second category is referring to Gentiles who had an interest in and some level of commitment to the God of the Jews. Notice that Paul refers to these Gentiles as “brothers,” a designation that would have been uncommon for a Jewish man of Paul's day to use.

Jack Miller, the founder of Serge mission agency, was a very fruitful evangelist. His two youngest daughters, Keren and Barbara, announced that they were no longer interested in Christianity. Barbara had a short-lived marriage that ended in divorce. She then brought home another boyfriend who served as a bartender in the restaurant where she worked as a waitress. Jack's biographer describes Angelo as “a confident young man who had a weak moral center.” Their relationship grew and they began talking of marriage. Barbara asked her father for his advice about the marriage and was surprised to hear that he was in favor of it. He had noticed that Angelo was a good counselor, a good teacher, an able public speaker, and a genuine people person.” Barbara joked, “Sounds like he would make a good pastor.” Jack had obviously taken the time to get to know him and to affirm him. He had respected this young man, though at first he was far from the Lord. By God's grace, both Barbara and Angelo eventually came to know the Lord and Angelo actually did become a pastor.

II. Conviction

There is no possibility of salvation apart from conviction of sin, for the simple reason that salvation must be *from* something. The salvation Jesus came to bring is first of all a salvation from sin. So there is no possibility of biblical salvation without a growing awareness and sorrow for sin. I don't know the origin of this familiar quote, but it expresses the heart of biblical truth. "In the gospel we come to see that we are far worse than we ever imagined and far more loved than we ever dared hope."

Let's consider, then, the first half of that statement, that we are far worse than we ever imagined. How bad do people think they are? Most people I come across readily acknowledge that they are less than perfect. Some sins are so obvious that they are plain to see. Haven't all of us been guilty of such sins as dishonesty, boasting and gossip? Our default perspective is something like, "I may not be perfect, but many people are far worse. Overall, I'm a pretty good person." Such a perspective reflects a self-salvation strategy that is unaware of our true need. The pride of this perspective must be challenged because it will keep a person from salvation. Remember that Paul's sermon was addressed to religious people. Such people must come to see that their problem lies deep within their own hearts. Sin is not a matter of an occasional mess-up, but of a heart that is opposed to God. The natural human heart is a polluted spring that always brings forth polluted water.

Paul seeks to bring about a conviction of heart sins by speaking to them of their righteousness. It is natural for a person to believe that he or she is basically a good person who occasionally falters. The biblical perspective is far darker than that, portraying the human condition as possessing a venomous heart. This is best seen in the areas we think are our strengths, our best points. What did Paul's Jewish audience regard as their strongest points? They took pride in their devotion to the Scriptures and in the law of Moses. Paul makes the point that they had not understood the Scriptures they take such pride in. These Scriptures are read every Sabbath, and they prophesied that God's anointed must suffer and die. Those in Jerusalem at the time inadvertently fulfilled these Scriptures by asking Pilate to execute Jesus. Those who prided themselves in possessing the Scriptures completely misunderstood them. They took pride in the Bible but had not understood it and had ended up being against God. In other words, they had used the gifts of God against God. Their venomous hearts were best seen not in their failures but in their successes.

The same thing happens with the law of Moses. They took pride in possessing this law and thought of themselves as being faithful to it. But Paul tells them that this law cannot do what they are looking to it to do: to justify them. Again, they were using the gift of God, in this case the law of Moses, so that they wouldn't need God. This is the heart of sin possessed by us all. We use the gifts of God against God. The person gifted with wealth uses the wealth so they won't have to trust in God. The one with a good sense of humor uses that to win the approval of others. I remember when my eyes were first opened to this in my own life. I have

been blessed of God to be able to get a lot of tasks done. That is a gift from God. Then I realized that I was using this gift to replace God. If I was feeling a little down about something, I would address it not by taking it to the Lord but by accomplishing some task.

Though it is the Holy Spirit who must reveal this to people, there are things we can do to further this conviction in others. We can be aware of how this works in our life and confess that before others. We can ask heart-probing questions of people. “Is there something in your life you just can’t imagine living without? Would you say you trust in that instead of in God?”

III. Christ

The center of every gospel presentation is the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15 that the basic gospel concerns four central events. Jesus died, was buried, raised from the dead and appeared to witnesses. The same four events are described in this sermon. Paul speaks of the death of Jesus as carrying out what was written in the Scriptures of him. And then Paul says that **“they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb”** (v. 29). God then intervened and **“raised him from the dead, and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people”** (v. 30-31).

These four points can be divided into two categories. There are two events, the death and resurrection of Jesus, and two proofs of the historical fact of those events, the burial of Jesus and his appearance to witnesses after his resurrection. The burial proves that he died, and the appearance to witnesses proves that he was raised. There is a finality to burial. If you’ve attended the funeral of a loved one, you know that when that body is lowered into the grave, there is a visceral sense of finality. You’ve known for several days that the person was dead, but the burial brings a fresh feeling of loss. Jesus was gone. Things looked as bleak as they possibly could. And that is the precise moment when he was raised. Christianity is a great reversal. Just at the moment when it seems that all is lost, hope is born and deliverance comes. And then the appearance of the resurrected Jesus to many witnesses, over five hundred according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, shows that Jesus really was raised. It wasn’t simply that his followers loved him so much that they wanted to think of him as still alive. It was that he actually was alive.

The gospel is about these significant events. Jesus died as the sacrifice for our sins, and he was raised that we might live with him. I like what the New Testament scholar N. T. Wright says about this.

Christianity, you see, isn’t a set of ideas. It isn’t a path of spirituality. It isn’t a rule of life. It isn’t a political agenda. It *includes*, and indeed gives energy to, all those things:

but at its very heart it is something different. It is good news about an event which has happened in the world, an event because of which the world can never be the same again. And those who believe it, and live by it, will (thank God!) never be the same again either.

IV. Consequences

Paul concludes his sermon by letting his hearers know what's at stake. Two possibilities lie at polar opposites. On the one hand, **“through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you”** (v. 38). This is God's promise. Jesus' death is the offering for sins that is approved by God. No other offering is sufficient. We can have confidence that this one is because it is God's approved offering. For the believer in Christ, Judgment Day has been moved from the future to the past. Your sins have already been judged in Christ. Then in the next verse Paul says that **“by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.”** The word translated “freed” is actually the word that is normally translated “justified.” It means to be declared righteous or innocent. Jesus supplies us with the gift of righteousness.

This promise of forgiveness and righteousness comes with a warning of judgment. **“Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish; for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you”** (v. 41). This quote from Isaiah 49 is about the judgment God brought upon Israel in the form of the Babylonian nation. Israel was defeated and taken into captivity by that nation, a judgment that Isaiah characterizes as unbelievable. It was worse than they could have imagined. The gospel includes this sobering thought. God has provided in the death and resurrection of Jesus the answer to our central problem of sin and rebellion. But those who reject God's solution will suffer unimagined horror in standing on judgment day before a holy God.

CONCLUSION:

When the choice is between unimaginable joy and unimagined horror, why would anyone not choose to receive the joy and life that comes through faith in Jesus? Notice the results of Paul's preaching. We're told that many received his word and begged him to come back with more the coming Sabbath. They must have told their friends and neighbors about it, because on the next Sabbath, **“the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord”** (v. 44). But some of the Jews saw the crowds and were filled with jealousy and began to oppose Paul and his gospel message. Their response of jealousy-filled opposition indicates a heart of self-trust. They were all committed to “looking out for number one,” to self-salvation. Self-trust or Jesus-trust are the two options still before every man, woman and child.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Acts 13:13-43

1. In his synagogue sermon, Paul shows respect for his hearers in several ways. First, he waits for God to provide him with an opportunity or an open door. How is it disrespectful to speak without an opportunity? Have you ever experienced this kind of disrespect, whether it's in a gospel context or something else like a sales pitch?
2. Can you think of a time when God has given you an opportunity to share the gospel with someone? Can you share that with your group?
3. Paul also put himself in the place where such an opportunity was likely to happen. He knew that he was likely to get an invitation to address the gathered synagogue assembly, and so he made it his common practice to take advantage of this opportunity. What kind of situations might afford you an opportunity to present Christ?
4. Paul also shows respect by honoring their history. What are some ways we might honor people's history?
5. Conviction of sin is an essential part of the gospel. One of the ways Paul does this is to help them see that they had used God's gifts (the Scriptures and the law of Moses) in order not to need God. Can you think of ways you have used God's gifts in order not to need God?
6. If conviction of sin is an essential part of the gospel, and if we can't produce such conviction in people's hearts, what is our role in this and what is the Spirit's role?
7. In this sermon, Paul highlights the same four facts that he says in 1 Corinthians 15 are of first importance: the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, and the appearance of the resurrected Jesus to witnesses. Why do you think Paul emphasizes the burial and appearance to witnesses in this list?
8. Paul concludes his sermon with a warning of unimaginable judgment on those who refuse to believe in Jesus (v. 41). What are some ways we can be faithful to this truth and still come across as respectful and loving of our non-Christian friends?