

Sermon for Sunday, September 26, 2010
The Mission
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Romans 10:14-21 and Isaiah 53, 65

Context: In Romans 10:9, Paul states the gospel in crisp, memorable form: "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." This salvation, Paul continues, is readily available to everyone: No one who trusts the Lord will ever be put to shame. Rather he will honor us. This is true for Jew and Gentile, men and women, rich and poor. The Lord richly blesses all who call on him, for [Scripture says] "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

This seems straightforward to anyone who has heard the message of Christ. It seems to us that the gospel is readily available. There are lots of churches in every city, Bibles, books, various media. But in Paul's day the same offer immediately raised a great question: "How can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?"

Yet Jesus himself told his disciples "You are my witnesses.... Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...." (Acts 1:8, Matt. 28:19).

Question: What good is the offer of salvation through faith in Christ if you never hear it? In Paul's day, it seemed that most people had not. In fact, today two or three billion have no solid contact with the church, the Bible or a Christian. In short, the promise of Romans "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" leads to an urgent question: How will they hear and so call on the Lord? Paul has a plan.

Calling on the name of the Lord (Rom. 10:14-15)

Paul runs through the chain that runs from the conclusion to the starting point: If anyone calls on the Lord they will be saved. But to call, you first have to believe. Before we believe, we have to hear. But we cannot hear unless someone proclaims the gospel. And before anyone proclaims, God must send them.

"The main point is that the saving relation to Christ is not something that can occur in a vacuum; it occurs only in a context created by proclamation of the gospel on the part of those commissioned to proclaim it. Paul wants to do this with the help of the church in the great city of Rome. Consider each step briefly."¹

We call after we believe

Paul separates believing and calling. Belief requires knowledge of the claims of Christ, conviction or agreement – assent – that those claims are true, then trust in him. We believe in the heart, then express faith by calling on Jesus. A Christian calls personally: "I am a sinner and a rebel, unable sufficiently to reform myself. You came for me, Son of God, save me." You must say this privately and when the time comes you should say it publicly as well.

We believe after we hear

But "how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?" No one will *call on* Christ if they never *hear about* Christ. This hearing has to be a proclamation of essence of Christianity. But most

¹ Murray. Romans, 2:58.

Americans have heard enough about Christianity to build up a certain resistance. It takes time to break through that resistance; to push through deep enough to engage the mind and to bring conviction in the heart. In most cases, that requires patience.

But ultimately it's the work of the Spirit that allows someone to hear. Look again at (10:14), "How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard." The way it reads we think Paul says we must hear about Christ, about Jesus.

But there is more and it hinges on the original Greek. There is some ambiguity in the original and it could mean we should hear "of Christ" or "about him." But the original literally reads "how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard." That is, it is not enough to hear of Jesus, we have to hear him. The hearer has to have a sense "Jesus is speaking to me." Paul says, "God makes his appeal through us" (2 Cor. 5:20). Yes, a preacher is in the pulpit or on the radio, but we must sense that God is speaking, Jesus himself is calling.

Do you know what I mean? I hope you have heard of Christ, but more, that you have heard Jesus himself, speaking to you, and that you have answered and still answer. If you hear, soften your heart, receive the word and believe in him.

We hear when someone proclaims Christ

Our translation says, "How shall they hear without a preacher?" You may think "That's easy, people can hear through a friend, through a book, a teacher, neighbor, or lecture via internet." True. So let's be sure we follow Paul in regards to preaching.

First, the word "preacher" can mean *preacher* or *herald* or *proclaimer*. Herald's were important in the Roman Empire. They traveled to cities and villages to declare important news. Preachers or heralds were vital to early Christianity, too. The apostles preached in Jerusalem and thousands converted. Acts shows that the gospel typically came to a town through public proclamation by an apostle. Not always. The churches in Rome and Syrian Antioch were started by ordinary Christians who traveled there. Still preaching was essential.

Preaching or proclamation still is essential. Books, dialogue, and classes – these are vital. Some communication experts say monologues are passé, lobbing objections, wearing them on brow. But let's not be wiser than God. There is something to a sustained message, one that presents a case to the mind yet appeals to the will and emotions, and that has a unique capacity to challenge convictions, lead us to consider half-buried thoughts and think about things we have long neglected.

We proclaim Christ when God sends us

Consider politicians. I hope you're preparing to vote wisely. But we know: some good politicians are bad speakers and some bad politicians are good speakers. Churchill was a great speaker, but Hitler was a good speaker, too. It's not enough to have a message, a desire to deliver it, and the capacity to speak. It's all too easy to want to speak in order to be important by becoming a spokesman for a cause.²

Thus Paul says "How can they preach unless they are sent?" The church at Antioch, led by the Spirit, sent or commissioned Paul and Barnabas to go to the Gentiles. He did not appoint himself as a preacher. No one can. God appoints. Men discover – alone and with the body of Christ. That applies first to preaching per se, but then to all teaching and leading, in groups large and small.

How does God send us? We can be sent without traveling. This summer I was your missionary to Africa. I didn't go there. That would have created more exciting stories, but I sat in my office at home and

² Corbett. When Helping Hurts, p. 65

wrote lessons on Romans for the Rafiki Foundation. The lessons are for senior African leaders who will adapt them for use in churches, schools and orphanages in ten west African nations.

Rafiki's method stresses partnership, not paternalism. My task is to write concise, dense, fairly advanced exegetical and theological notes. I need to excise every illustration, every application, because national leaders will adapt my lessons to the African situation. Local leaders will go further, by inserting their own illustrations, explanations, and applications.

The book *When Helping Hurts*, explains that Western assistance is most effective when we collaborate and so develop leaders, instead of merely giving aid or charity.

Mission trips can be very effective, but I can be most effective bringing the gospel to the wider world this way. You fund missions when you “send” me to Africa as your missionary when you let me concentrate on this project for six weeks. How can you be most effective? You also support missions when you receive the strong preaching, teaching, and pastoral care from our pastors when I'm away.

You do missions when you send other mission teams. We send Randy, Clay, and Josh to Lebanon next week to help establish Christian schools, from kindergarten to seminary. Through them you go to the world.

Some of you are glad to hear this. And some of you are ready to jump out of your pew: What about us? Do we just give money, send others? No.

Every one of us has something important to offer to this world and God's Kingdom. Sometimes we have a strong sense of what that is. If you do, stay where are, go deeper! Sometimes we don't know. If not, ask God to show you your place of service. Keep listening – as you pray, read, and listen to others.

Here's how it might work: You have some **undefined** sense of a gift, an interest. You keep your ears open until something intersects with that interest. Then someone, someone you trust, offers a specific invitation. You say, “Yes.”

In my case, I've long had an interest in missions. In mid-1990s, I became friends with Dr. Sam Ling, a Chinese American missiologist. He invited me to go to China with him, but his real passion was transfer of theological expertise. His message: You want to serve China? Write things that apply to the whole church and are easy to translate.

He convinced me. Since then whenever I write, I have the other 2/3 of world in view. Several of my books have been translated - into Spanish, Portuguese, Korean, Chinese, Hungarian, Russian, and Thai. I never heard of Rafiki until early 2009. I got a cold invitation to write for them – the invitation cited a fellow pastor-scholar who supported the work. I was reluctant, but he persuaded me: "This is a great project." In short a trusted friend invited me.

So it goes with you. You have an idea of what you contribute to the world, but you don't know how to do it. So pray, keep your ears open, listen to a friend who says, "Will you join me." As we join self-knowledge with a willingness to listen to godly people and to the Lord himself, each of us can find a place to serve. If you don't know where to start, listen to friends and leaders and listen for an invitation. The personal invitation works at many levels.

Don't forget that you are an inviter. Time after time, when an unbeliever comes to faith, when a wandering believer returns to the church, the root is an invitation. It is the same with areas of service. But we must not merely recruit people to fill holes. We need to pray, look, and consider the best place *for them*.

Beautiful are the feet of those who proclaim Christ (Rom. 10:15)

Paul quotes Isaiah and says, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" This statement is counterintuitive. People typically wore leather sandals in Isaiah's and Paul's day. Travelers' feet were rough and dirty, not beautiful. Beauty is important and the Bible notices physical beauty many times: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Abigail, among women; David and Daniel among men. The Bible also says physical beauty is fleeting; it soon passes (Prov. 31:30, Jas. 1:11). And Jesus "had no beauty." Yet God is beautiful because his character is beautiful (Psa. 27:4).

Here is an old story from West Africa. A certain man had elephantiasis, a painful condition that causes great swelling in the limbs, especially the lower leg. This man became a radiant Christian. He could do nothing but tell of the grace of God, who sent his Son for him. Painful as it was for him to walk, he went to every hut in his village to tell them what Christ had done for him.

When he had finished in his home village, he resolved to go to the nearest village, walking about five miles a day on those bloated feet. When he had covered that village, he went to another. Soon there were no more villages close by, so he thought of a village, ten miles away, one he had visited as a child. He asked his doctor if he could go. The answer was "No!" But he could not rest. One day, without telling anyone, he left early in the morning. When he arrived at that village around noon, his misshapen feet were already bruised and bleeding. He spoke to the villagers all day, but he had nowhere to sleep, so he headed home, although it was getting dark.

Around midnight the missionary doctor was awakened by a noise from his front porch. The man had arrived, barely conscious on his wounded, bleeding, elephant-like feet. Such feet are always painful to behold, but if we add wounds, blood and bruises.... Yet the doctor bent over the man's wounds, cleaning and dressing them, his tears mingling with the ointment he put on them. He said, "My heart was so drawn to this man, and I kept thinking of the verse 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.'"³ Are you willing to take such a journey?

You don't have to be an evangelist or highly trained to have beautiful feet. Three years ago, a man moved back to St. Louis, his childhood home. He rekindled old relationships, made new friends. The man was a tennis player and an agnostic. He had a friend from Central who answered some of his objections, but not all. He had a friend from this church who told him that I play tennis and like to talk to agnostics. So he showed up at church one day, hung around afterwards, introduced himself, and asked if I'd like to hit a tennis ball and talk afterward. I said, "Of course." His friend had beautiful feet!

When we first met, the man tossed a bagful of questions on the table. He offered his views, listened to my replies, and countered them. He didn't come to church every week, but he loved the "Agnostics Lunch" that Robbie and several elders organize about fifteen times a year. He came week after week, asking questions, raising objections, meeting later one-on-one with several people.

After about a year, he told me, "You can't call me an agnostic any more. I believe in God." I said "Good, but you must know that believing *God probably exists* is not enough." He understood. About a year ago, he stopped saying "you believe" and began to say "we believe" and "I believe." At the agnostics' lunch, he began to quote the Bible and explain it, in his distinct way, to others who were now asking the questions. He changed from "I have a problem" to "I believe" and people noticed changes in his life. The Lord completed his quest and completed the natural virtue that was always in him.

³ Boice. p. 1200.

How did it happen? Because his friend sent him to church, he came, and because God was drawing him. He heard answers from two pastors, three elders, a deacon, and at least two others. Every person in the chain has beautiful feet.

Not everyone believes, yet God holds out his hands (Rom. 10:16-21)

Romans 10:16 says, "Not all obeyed the gospel, for Isaiah says 'Lord, who has believed our report.'" We obey the gospel by believing in Jesus. Not all do.

Every preacher, teacher and evangelist has failures. Paul was beaten, jailed, and driven out of city after city. Elijah said, "The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left" (1 Kgs. 19:11).

Paul quotes Isaiah 53:1, "Lord, who has believed our report." Paul just quoted Isaiah 52:7 He speaks this lament right after the verse he quoted: "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news [and] peace...who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'" Isaiah charges Israel to shout for joy, burst into song. "But who has believed our report?" Not all.

So it was with the prophets. So also for Jesus: he announced the coming of the Kingdom, and they eventually killed him. So it often goes today. Why? Why don't people believe? Paul's great concern is the unbelief of Israel. Their unbelief causes him "great sorrow and unceasing anguish." It's his "heart's desire and prayer" that they be saved (Rom. 9:2, 10:1). We too have anguish and hope for our family and friends. Why don't they believe, we wonder?

Why not? Paul's first move is to cut off excuses. In Rom. 10:18 Paul inquires, "did they not hear?" Yes they did hear, Paul says, quoting Psalm 19. "Their voice has gone out to all the earth, their words to the end of the world."

The secular person objects that this is not so. Indeed, it's one of the common complaints against Christianity. People say "How can God hold people accountable for failing to believe in Jesus, when they never even heard of him? How can he be Savior of all, given that many never heard his name?"

Paul says, "They have heard" and this is true in several ways. First, nature itself declares to the world the existence and power of God. That is the original point of Psalm 19, which Paul cites.

Second, the gospel does go to the world. Paul uses a word for "world" that means the inhabited or civilized world, especially the Empire. Even by 57 A.D., when Paul wrote Romans, the gospel had reached the chief provinces of the empire. His claim seems like hyperbole to us, but he makes a serious point: Every region has heard, and if the people responded as they should, the gospel should spread. The point: not every individual has heard, but the nations have heard. (Cf. 1 Pet. 1:1-2, for church in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, Bithynia.)

Two lessons: we should take the gospel to every person, yet every nation is responsible, for all have some contact with the gospel – some Christians, some churches, some media.⁴

Verse 10:19 proposes another excuse: Maybe they heard, but didn't understand. But Israel did understand. The proof is that they are envious of the Gentiles, who are receiving God's gracious redemption. If they are envious they must understand: The Gentiles are receiving grace, forgiveness, and status as God's people. Listen: Even today, if someone is upset about Christian teaching, it typically shows they hear it, at least to some degree. So they are responsible.

But it's not a total disaster. Many do believe. Isaiah 65 said "I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me." This applies broadly. The context in Isa. 64-65

⁴ Moo. P. 667

clarifies: God presents himself unexpectedly, to hypocrites, to people who pray and worship falsely, to people who avoid him (Rom. 10:20).

Paul concludes, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people." Powerful image: God has a relationship with Israel and the world. But people disobey, contradict, rebel. They say he does not exist. Or if he *does* exist, he is indifferent to us. If he cares, he cares about the wrong things. They accuse him, excuse themselves, and curse him, to their own harm. And God keeps holding out his hands.

He holds hands out to all who are here today, still far from God. To you, O Christians, who have strayed from God – through persistent sin, through pursuit of your own life-style, doing "whatever seems good in our eyes." He keeps holding out his hands.

To those with "gentle indifference," the biblical worldview says the opposite. The universe is not indifferent. God cares passionately about us. Our sins, our outrages, our aimlessness, grieves him, makes him angry, moves him to compassion, to action, and he stretches out his hands to us, even if we disobey and contradict: "Come to me" he calls to us, one by one, nation by nation.

If you have come, he says you can and should join his project, in the way that suits your calling – perhaps yes, a missionary or minister of the gospel. Certainly by speaking of Christ as you can, wherever God sends you. "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"