

New Life Comes by Hearing

Sent: Ambassadors for Christ on Mission for God Sermon 2

Romans 10:1-17 | October 15, 2023

A sermon given by The Rev. Dr. Samuel D. Ferguson, The Falls Church Anglican

[See page 10 for small group discussion questions](#)

We are in a sermon series considering the theme of missions. Our starting point is Jesus' powerful statement in John's Gospel: "as the Father sent me into the world, just so, I am sending you" (John 17:18; 20:21). The Christian mission is modeled by and flows from Jesus' mission.

Last week, I said we'll consider three new realities that Jesus' mission brings: New Life, a New People, and a New Kingdom. We started, then, by looking at New Life through Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John 3. We saw that New Life begins with the New Birth: "No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3), where "entering the kingdom" is akin to having true, eternal life.

Today, we ask how Jesus plans for us to carry out this mission of new life through the new birth—as Jesus is enthroned in heaven, and we are here as his ambassadors, on mission for him. To answer this question, we turn to the greatest missionary, the Apostle Paul, and his greatest letter, Romans.

We'll be in Romans 10, but before we turn there, let me show you that Paul has been dealing with, in Romans 5-8, the same reality of new birth that Jesus was in John 3. Recall that I pointed out last week that the new birth was not an immediately new physical body, but a new spiritual nature—a new heart, made by the Spirit. Notice the parallel in Paul.

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you (Romans 8:9).

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (John 3:5-6).

The question we must ask today, is how does this new birth, bringing a new spiritual reality, happen to people who never meet Jesus in person, like Nicodemus did? How is Jesus carrying out his mission of the new birth today through those he sends out in mission?

Paul lays out the process in Romans 10 [turn there]. In this section of Romans, Paul is wrestling with why many of his fellow Israelites haven't embraced Jesus as Lord. Perhaps they haven't had the opportunity to, one might wonder. Paul uses this tension to lay out the process by which God carries out the mission of new life today. It involves four steps, which are detailed in Romans 10:14-15:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" (10:14-15).

These are the four steps that must happen if others are to be brought to new life:

1. Preachers must be sent.
2. Preachers must preach the good news.
3. The good news must be heard, understood.
4. The good news must be believed.

Paul then emphasizes two aspects of this in verse 17: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

Here, then, is the main idea:

The ongoing mission of new life requires a word going into someone's ear, settling into their heart, and being ignited as living and breathing faith.

The biblical image is that of a Sower who sows the word and then waits to see if the word takes root and grows in the hearer's heart (see Mark 4:13-20) My desire today is that we'd see our mission as Sowers, and gain confidence to be sowing. To accomplish this, we'll first ask two questions: (1) What is the Word that is sown? What's the Word's content? (2) Who are the Sowers? Who are the Word's

messengers? After asking these questions, we finally reflect on (3) the Word's power, with several practical words of application and encouragement for would-be messengers of the Word.

I. The Word's Content

New life requires belief, faith. But what is this faith believing in? Paul says, "faith comes by hearing the word of Christ" (10:17). What, then, is "the word of Christ?"

The "word of Christ" is the word about Christ or the Gospel. Notice that Paul brings up the Gospel in the preceding verse:

But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" (10:16).

Faith, then, comes by hearing the Gospel. What is the Gospel? Gospel literally means good news—it is the good news about what God has done for us in Jesus. A friend recently challenged me to state the Gospel in 25 words or less. Here it is in 36:

By Jesus' death and resurrection, God conquered every obstacle to our happiness—sin that separates, passions that enslave, justice imbalanced, even death. Turn to Jesus in trust, you'll become God's son, daughter—forgiven, freed, forever loved.

Here in Romans 10 Paul shows us the Gospel involves these three realities: God, Righteousness, and Faith.

God: The Gospel proclaims that there is one true God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ. The Bible never uses the word atheist. It knows people have their gods. The Bible calls these idols. They're whatever is at the center of our existence, what's most important, what gives us ultimate meaning, hope and direction. Jesus calls these things "our treasure," and says they control our hearts: "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21).

The Gospel is news about God.

Righteousness: Paul uses this word seven times in this passage. It's equivalent to being saved, to having life: "with the heart one believes and is made righteous, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved" (Romans 10:10).

Righteousness may seem like an old, outdated word. It's not. In his book *The Righteous Mind*, Jonathan Haidt says "an obsession with righteousness is the normal human condition" (xix-xx). We are hardwired for righteousness—meaning, rightness. We want to be right, in proper alignment, with good and evil, and in proper alignment in our relationships with others and with God. To be righteous is to be just, pure, and acceptable to God and God's people.

The debate unfolding in Romans 10 is between making your righteousness by your own strength, or God making your righteousness through God's strength. The Gospel is the latter: "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (10:4). Meaning, Jesus completed all the requirements for righteousness through his perfect life. Jesus took upon himself all the punishments for our lack of righteousness through his death. And Jesus now clothes those who trust in him with his perfect righteousness.¹

The Gospel is news about God making us right through Jesus.

Faith: Lastly, Paul speaks of faith, believing, in this passage. This simply means that the Gospel is not a mountain you climb up and conquer, but a message you receive and hold onto. The Gospel is not what you do, but what Christ has done—you simply trust Christ, you believe in him, and you call upon him: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13). This is the image of someone crying out to God for help, for rescue, for guidance, for life.

The Gospel is news about receiving what God does for us. Faith comes by hearing...hearing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

One implication to this. You may be familiar with the often-quoted line, that is wrongly attributed to Francis of Assisi: "Always preach the Gospel, and if necessary, use words."² The sentiment here is partly good; the lifestyle of Christians should not undermine the Gospel, but adorn it. But the logic of the statement is tragic: You can no more preach the Gospel without words than you can feed your

children dinner without food. The Gospel is news, a message, and it can only be conveyed by speaking words. We'll say more about how this shapes our mission below.

II. The Word's Messengers

In verses 14-15, Paul speaks of preachers who are sent to speak: "And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" (10:14). Does this mean speaking the word in this way is reserved for the professionals?

There are those called and uniquely gifted at evangelism. Paul speaks of such persons in Ephesians 4.³ Paul writes to Timothy, the young pastor, "do the work of an evangelist" (2 Timothy 4:5). However, consider Jesus' commissioning of his followers in Matthew 28:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

This seems to be directed to all Jesus' followers. John Stott concludes of this passage:

[This] commission ... is binding upon every member of the whole Church.... Every Christian is called to be a witness to Christ in the particular environment in which God has placed him. Further, although the public ministry of the Word is a high office, private witness or personal evangelism has a value which in some respects surpasses even that of preaching, since the message can then be adapted more personally.⁴

The mission of bringing the word of the Gospel to the ears of others is shared by all Christians. And just think about how much more powerful this makes the ministry. Our church, for example, has about six or seven clergy, but close to two thousand members. What would be more effective for bringing the word to ears in Washington D.C., seven messengers or two thousand?

Who are the Word's messengers? All of us. We all have a role to play.

Finally, let's turn to the Word's power, and with this offer a few practical words of guidance to encourage our own evangelism. I have seven.

III. The Word's Power *and encouragement for a fearful evangelist*

1. God is at work before we go to work

Once when Paul was beaten down and afraid in the city of Corinth, the Lord said to him one night in a vision,

"Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people." And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them (Acts 18:9-11).

I love that phrase from Jesus, "I have many in this city who are my people." They were Jesus' people before they even knew it—he had his eye on them and was bringing his word to them, through Paul. Jesus has people in your family, school, neighborhood, workplace, gym, city, who are his people. And he will use you to invite them home, into his arms.

2. Don't confuse evangelism with its results

One of the most helpful images for evangelism in the Bible is that of a Sower sowing seeds. You sow the word, but you cannot make the plant grow. Paul, in speaking about the birth of the Corinthian church, writes:

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6-7).

Do what you can to bring the word to the ear, water it with prayer and encouragement, but leave results in God's hands.

3. Pray for boldness and opportunities

But in the book of Acts, new believers pray that the Lord's servants would have boldness to speak the Gospel:

And now, Lord, ... grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness...
.And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:29, 31).

4. Use the Word—it's powerful!

Not using words to share about Jesus is like disconnecting an electrical circuit. From the beginning of Creation, God has determined that His power will work through His word. This surely has something to do with the connection between "breath" and "spirit." God's word is God-breathed, and therefore there is a tight connection between the power of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God.

Notice how in the New Testament, the word is likened to something powerful that is moving all about the Mediterranean world, bearing fruit:

And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).

But the word of God increased and multiplied (Acts 12:24).

We always thank God ... when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus...because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant (Colossians 1:3-7).

Build relationships with people, and in appropriate ways, invite them to study the Gospel of Mark with you. Tell them you want to take them to the primary source—the Gospel itself. Let me read about Jesus with you, learn about Him together. And trust the Word of God to be at work.

5. Your mission field is where you are until God moves you elsewhere

Michael Green estimates that 80% or more of evangelism in the early church was done not by ministers or evangelists, but by ordinary Christians explaining themselves to their oikos—their network of relatives and close associates. People would pay attention to the gospel because someone they knew well, worked with, and perhaps loved, would speak to them about it.⁵

6. Practice evangelism on a friend

You cannot share what you don't have. Before you evangelize, you need to know the Gospel has made it into your heart. Speak with a friend about this. Then, work with a friend on how you explain the Gospel—what God has done for you in Jesus. Practice sharing it with your friend, how you'd explain, defend, and support the Gospel: "always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you," Peter says, then adds, "yet do it with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15).

7. Reflect much on the heart of the sender

One of the greatest obstacles to evangelism lies in motivation; we either don't care about it, or we care about it for the wrong reasons. Evangelism is motivated by more than getting people out of hell (though that's important). Evangelism taps into the Father's heart for his lost children.

In the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus shows us the Father's heart:

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance (Luke 15:5-7).

Remember that the sender's motive is love: "For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son..." (John 3:16). Remember what is so good about the Gospel:

To a world in an identity crisis, the Gospel says, *you are the son, the daughter, of God.*

To a world that cannot hold together their craving for justice, on the one hand, and their inability to meet their own moral standards on the other—the Gospel says, *look to the Cross, there is justice upheld, and there is mercy poured forth.*

To a world whose happiness seems shallow, slipping through their fingers—the Gospel says *look into the eyes of Jesus Christ, he is for you a joy that no circumstances can take away, nor suffering can destroy.*

If God is for us in Christ—if God's son had to die to save us; if God's son was willing to die to save us—it means we were far worse off than we really knew, but also that we are far more loved than we could ever have imagined.

"Faith comes by hearing and hearing the Gospel of Jesus Christ." Be on a mission to share this news.

Questions for small groups:

Members of your small group are encouraged to listen to the sermon if they were not there on Sunday. We also encourage you to begin your small group meeting with prayer and then by reading Romans 10:1-17. The below questions are suggestions for how to have a meaningful discussion about the passage—but you may have better questions that come up in your group.

1. Gospel presentations require two types of news: bad news, and good news. What is the bad news people need to believe today? What is the good news? How should you articulate God's good news in light of that bad news?
 2. Come up with a 25-word summary of the Gospel. Share it with your group. What themes must a summary of the Gospel not leave out?
 3. If you are a Christian, how did you come to saving faith? Were you evangelized? Maybe by your parents? By your Sunday school teacher? By a friend?
 4. What fears or concerns do you have about doing evangelism? How might these be overcome?
 5. Who is one person you'll pray about sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ?
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Endnotes

1. See Paul's comment in Philippians about himself: "For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (Phil 3:8-9).
2. Glenn Stanton, "FactChecker: Misquoting Francis of Assisi," *TGC* July 10, 2012.
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-misquoting-francis-of-assisi/>
3. "And [Christ] gave the apostles, the prophets, the **evangelists**, the shepherds and teachers...." (Eph 4:11).
4. John Stott, *Personal Evangelism* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity, 1949), 3-4.
5. See Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Eerdmans, 2004; referred to in Tim Keller, *How to Reach the West Again*, pg. 18.