

What Shall We Do?

Acts 2:37-39

This really is the best possible response any preacher could have to any sermon. The people who heard Peter's great sermon on this day of Pentecost responded so appropriately, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" In other words, How shall we respond? We have heard the word of God preached, now what do you want us to do in response to that word?

One of the many lessons I learned from the man who taught the introductory classes on had in seminary on homiletics, or preaching, was this. He would tell us all as we began to learn how to preach in that class, "Every time you finish preaching, I want you to imagine me asking you this question, 'What do you want me to do?'"

The idea of that is simple, that preaching demands such a response. It demands your response. You can't just listen and remain unaffected, untouched, unmoved. So there must be a response of some kind or other. What you must do might be an action, it might be to stop doing something, it might mean something that you are to believe, but in every case, a sermon should call upon you to respond. There must be an application in some specific and well-understood way.

And surely there is no greater response that what Peter heard on that day of Pentecost. "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" "We have heard the word of God. How shall we respond?" Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Peter answered that question and Luke recorded it for us here in Acts 2.

Remember what Peter's sermon was all about. He begins by explaining the great miracle of tongues, the ability of so many to

speak the words of the gospel in foreign languages so that all the people from all the nations could hear the gospel in their own language. And by hearing it, come to believe it! Thus that gospel would be preached to all the nations. And, quoting from Joel, we read in,

v.21 "And it shall come to pass That whoever calls on the name of the LORD Shall be saved."

And then Peter proclaims Jesus, both a man and God, delivered up unto death for our sins. But raised from the dead. And Peter uses the example of David in Psalm 16 to proclaim the truth of the resurrection,

v.27 "For You will not leave my soul in Hades, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption. 28 You have made known to me the ways of life; You will make me full of joy in Your presence."

Then we read,

v.32 "This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. 33 Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear."

And last week we studied Peter's triumphant conclusion,

v.36 "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

Jesus is Lord! Jesus is the Christ, the anointed Messiah. That was my focus and emphasis in preaching last week. Peter is preaching Jesus, him crucified and then raised from the dead. Thus we come today to the response of those who heard and received this preaching.

v.37 "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart,

and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?”

That question clearly emphasizes,

I. THE PROPER EFFECT OF BIBLICAL PREACHING.

You can’t just take it or leave it, when you hear the word of God. You can’t just receive some measure of information or knowledge. You can’t simply go through the motions when it comes to preaching. In the best sense, you can’t even sit in judgment on it. God would have you to respond.

Now, I need to qualify that. You do need to test what you hear, to be sure that it is truthful. And faithful to the Bible. Remember how the apostle Paul himself praised the Bereans,

Acts 17:11 “These were more fair-minded [or noble] than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.”

So they tested the preaching they heard by the word which they read, and so they believed! That’s a good thing. But what isn’t good is when you become a judge of the word itself that is being preached, when you decided for yourself whether or not you will believe it, and whether or not you will heed what it says! The proper effect of biblical preaching, faithful biblical preaching, is what Paul writes to the Thessalonians,

1 Thes. 2:13 “For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.”

So that question becomes obvious and evident, “What shall we do?” “How shall we respond?”

A. Preaching should elicit a tangible response.

“Men and brethren, what shall we do?”

I can tell you my goal when I preach, and with that goal, the sort of comment about any particular sermon for which I am most thankful. While I am appreciative of personal encouragements that have some reference to me, that is absolutely not the goal or the response I most desire. Rather, what is most encouraging are comments that reflect your great understanding or appreciation of the word itself. The best response I could receive would be the expression of your greater awareness of the truth of God’s word. And, in that context, that you are not merely hearers but doers of that word, as James puts it so well.

As I mentioned, what you “do” in response to the word could be any variety of things, but the point is that you do not remain untouched. Your life, in some way or another, does not remain unaffected. And the worst response to a sermon, it would seem to me, is that you come away appreciating the skill or eloquence of the preacher, or even the wisdom and insights of the preacher, while having no impact upon your lives from the word of God!

Now, that gives me a definite responsibility to do what Paul says so bluntly to Timothy,

2 Tim. 4:1 “I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: 2 Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.”

Preach the word...with careful instruction. But preach the word, Paul says, not the wisdom and knowledge of any man, least of all yourself. That is the idea of his words to the church in Corinth,

1 Cor. 2:1 “And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come

with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. 3 I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. 4 And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

And when you hear and receive the word of God, you are to respond. Which is the context for Paul words in,
v.37 “Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart.”

The idea is that,

B. Preaching should address the heart.

Now let me briefly explain the meaning and importance of the “heart” in biblical language. We tend to think of the heart as a reference to the emotions, and we often contrast that with the mind, or the intellect. Scripture, however, uses the word “heart” to refer to the whole of the inner man, the whole person, which I would emphasize is equivalent to the soul. Human beings have two essential parts, joined together, one which is physical and the other non-physical. The body and the soul. The outer man and the inner. And this non-physical part of man is best described and defined by the word heart!

The heart thus includes the mind, how you think. It also includes your emotions or feelings, or more deeply, your desires and in the older language of Jonathan Edwards and so many of the Puritan writers, your affections. The heart also includes your will—your choices, your decisions. And the point here, with that phrase “they were cut to the heart,” means that the preaching of God’s word did not leave them unaffected or unchanged. To be “cut to the heart” is to be stirred up, in your soul, stirred up to do

something in response. Stirred up to be doers of the word and not hearers only.

So that is my challenge at this very moment. It is my challenge every week as I prepare sermons in my study and preach them in this sanctuary. The challenge for me, the goal that I have deeply embedded in my own soul, is that God would use his word as it is being proclaimed in this pulpit so that you might also be “cut to the heart.” That it would affect you, that it would teach you or train you. Not because of any ability or experience or insight that I might have, but because,

Heb. 4:12 “...the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. 13 And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.”

The conclusion of Peter’s sermon was this,

v.36 “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” 37 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?”

There is one initial and primary response that stands above all others, and obviously, that was evident on the day of Pentecost.

II. BIBLICAL PREACHING PROCLAIMS AN INVITATION TO SALVATION.

That must always be the initial application of biblical preaching, that the gospel itself is proclaimed, including that invitation to believe unto salvation. So it was at Pentecost, as we read,

v.40 “And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation.” 41 Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.”

There are many additional applications that are beneficial for all of God’s people that follow after the invitation to salvation, but we ought never to overlook that most basic, initial and fundamental response to the preaching of God’s word. The response of salvation.

Rom. 10:8 “But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): 9 that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.” 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. 13 For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.”

So I would proclaim all of that to you explicitly. Confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, so that you might be saved. Call upon the name of the Lord, so that you might be saved. And if you have never done that, do it today. Right here and now. In your heart, with your mind and your desires and the determination of your will all together, trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for your salvation, as he is offered to you in the gospel.

Notice how Peter expresses that invitation of the gospel. It is, first of all,

A. A call to repentance.

The first word of his answer to that question, “repent.” That word means to turn from your sins. To confess them, to acknowledge them as sin, as an offense against God for which you rightly deserve the condemnation of hell.

This isn’t a secondary issue, but very much at the heart of the gospel. Repentance is an essential aspect of true, saving faith, for without such repentance there is no promise of forgiveness. Thus Jesus’ own words,

Luke 24:46. “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, 47 and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”

Later on in the book of Acts, again following a sermon by Peter we read,

Acts 11:18 ‘When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.”

Repentance unto life...that’s how God defines the blessing of salvation. Remember also that is how Jesus preached as well,

Mat. 4:17 “From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Thus the proper effect of biblical preaching, the proper application of biblical preaching, is a call to repentance. A humble, sober and sorrowful confession before God, pleading guilty for all your sins. And then, by faith, to seek the blessing of forgiveness, a blessing which is received by faith. And so Peter doesn’t simply say “repent.” He says,

v.38 Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.”

Repent and be baptized. Why baptism? Why is it mentioned here? I believe the only possible answer is that this baptism is the outward expression of faith. It corresponds to what Paul writes in,

Rom. 10:9 "...that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."

Baptism represents here your outward confession. It is an outward act, indeed a sacrament, whose value is in what it represents. And baptism is a washing, a sign and seal of the washing away of our sins, which is the very meaning of the forgiveness of our sins. So repent, and then, let those who believe be baptized!

I ought to emphasize, that the sign of baptism doesn't save you. The water of baptism doesn't wash away your sins. Jesus does. He washes away our sins. And that gift is yours, as a gift to be received by faith.

John 20:30 "And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; 31 but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."

So biblical preaching must call you to believe in Jesus,

B. A call to profession of faith.

Confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord! Trust in him, trust in what he accomplished when he died upon the cross, that by faith, God would forgive you your sins, that he would wash them away as so appropriately represented by the water of baptism.

So all these new believers on the day of Pentecost would

proclaim their new faith with the outward means of grace which God has given to his church, the sacrament of water baptism.

With one additional promise emphasized by Peter in our text, that this new life, this gift of salvation and forgiveness, would be accomplished by the power and work of the Holy Spirit himself, the same Spirit who had enabled so many people to speak in all those foreign languages that day.

v.38

The Holy Spirit is not a second blessing that comes later only to some Christians. Rather, it is the very essence of the new life that comes when God gives us a new heart, when God enables us to trust in Jesus himself for salvation. So we read,

Titus 3:4 "But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, 5 not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

And so I proclaim to you today, to all of you, especially to any of you who might not yet have made this very basic promise and commitment.

Acts 3:19 "Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, 20 and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before."

Confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, the Lord of your life, and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead. If you have never done that, then I urge you to do so at this very moment. And if that faith has been yours, and previously

proclaimed, then let this reminder be of great encouragement to you, to the opportunity to renew your commitment both to faith and repentance, knowing that through your faith in Jesus Christ, you have the promise of eternal life.

One additional thought this morning, which Peter emphasizes because of the significance of this day of Pentecost. As three thousand souls were saved that day, from all the nations of the world, Peter goes out of his way to emphasize,

III. BIBLICAL PREACHING IS PROCLAIMED UNIVERSALLY.

And the universal message is consistent, is the same to everyone, every child of Adam, every descendant of Adam and Eve, born after the fall. Peter says that,

v.39 "... the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

As many as the Lord will call! As many as whom God has chosen, but note here, that is not intended to be limiting. In fact, from our perspective, it is the very opposite. From our perspective, there is no one excluded, and thus, no one excluded from the message that is preached. No one excluded from the invitation, "as many as the Lord our God will call." In other words, ALL whom the Lord our God will call. Thus when it comes to preaching, the promise is given to all who will hear, because it is the same promise to everyone. Namely, the promise of the forgiveness of sins. In fact,

A. The essence of the gospel is the promise of the forgiveness of sins.

This is a secondary matter, but at the very heart of the gospel itself. Going back to the reference to baptism as the outward expression of faith, that very symbol demonstrates the fundamental element of what salvation is all about—the

forgiveness of your sins. And the promise of the forgiveness of sins is given to those who repent of those sins, who turn from them.

Acts 3:19 "Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, 20 and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, 21 whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began."

So I return to,

v.38 Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission [or forgiveness] of sins."

The gospel is frequently expressed in this context. For example, this is how Paul describes his calling to preach from God,

Acts 26:17 "I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, 18 to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me."

And this,

Eph. 2:7 "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace 8 which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence."

And for a more descriptive account of the meaning of forgiveness, there is nothing more clear than,

Heb. 9:11 "But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made

with hands, that is, not of this creation. 12 Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, 14 how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"

To cleanse your conscience is to wash away your sins! And that is the essence of the gospel.

1 John 1:7 "But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin."

And in this universal proclamation of biblical preaching, notice one final emphasize that Peter makes plain.

B. The promise of the gospel is proclaimed to present and future generations.

v.39 "For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

Peter includes the children in the declaration of the promise of the gospel, for the children of God's people have always been recipients of the covenant promises of God. It's not that they are automatically saved, for sadly, many have fallen away, but their privilege as children of the covenant is obvious. As it has been since those covenant promises were first made to God's people in the days of Abraham.

Gen. 17:7 "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. 8 Also I give to you and your descendants after you the

land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

All the faithful Jews who heard Peter would immediately make that connection. The promise of the gospel is proclaimed universally, to everyone who would hear, in every language and in every nation. That universality was very new and different in the new covenant. But the universal proclamation is also extended from generation to generation, just as it was in the old covenant, which is why our children also receive the sign of that covenant promise in baptism.

The point is, that all who hear, all who believe in Jesus, all who trust in him for their salvation, all who turn from their sins, all of them, all of you who do those very things, all who do so will be saved.

So what shall we do? What shall you do? If this faith is yours, then renew it! Refresh it! Reinvigorate the exercise of your faith and stir up your love and devotion to God, knowing that your sins are forgiven.

And if that faith is not yet yours, then believe this gospel to be true. Believe this promise of the forgiveness to be yours, by turning from your sin in repentance and proclaiming with your mouth these words as the expression of your heart, Jesus is Lord.