

REAL WORLD WITNESS 7-13-15

(Acts 18) This morning I come to you with a very serious sermon on the subject of evangelism and thought it might be good to at least start with some humor. As we in leadership at North Park Church have talked about how we could be more effective in our outreach, someone has suggested using a voice mail program to reach those who call our church by phone. This is known as Voice Mail Evangelism. In our office we call it VME. The key to an effective VME program is to make it obvious which option the caller should choose. So, when the caller rings the church he hears something like this: “Hi, if you want to spend eternity in heaven press 1, for other options press 2. And when they press 1 our voice mail quickly explains the plan of salvation. When it is decision time, VME once again uses the obvious-choice method. If you would like a poke in the eye, press 1. If you want your neighbors to hate you press 2. If you want to convert to Christianity, press 3. It’s a great system, so much so, that by the end of the call we have callers choosing whether they want to be a deacon or lead a Bible Study. Option 3 is “wallpaper the pastor’s house.” The only bug in the system is the one that plagues all evangelism methods. How do you keep folks from hanging up? Well, that is the big one isn't it? Any impulse we have to be soul-winning witnesses for Jesus gets squashed when we encounter indifference or hostility from those we are seeking to lead to life. The occasional story of the man who approaches you in the park, who asks if you could tell him the way to eternal life, who repents and trusts Christ then and there, who goes on to lead his whole family to Jesus and enter the mission field, that kind of story does not seem real to most of us. It does not jive with our own experience. Frankly, the Scriptures do record some remarkable stories of folks, like the Ethiopian eunuch, who were set up for an instant and glorious conversion experience. But those same Scriptures remind us as well that the attempt to be a witness for Jesus is not one that will bring guaranteed success and satisfaction. Nope. Even if you are a famous apostle.

So, let's look together at the book of Acts, and the early days of the apostle Paul's gospel witness to the city of Corinth in Greece. Acts 18:**1-11** *After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth. 2 And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them, 3 and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers. 4 And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. 5 But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began*

devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. 6 But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." 7 Then he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next to the synagogue. 8 Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized. 9 And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; 10 for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city." 11 And he settled there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

A very instructive story. Let's look together at five things we find in Corinth and in the apostle. The first thing we see is a busy man. You could even say a "business man." His business was making and selling tents. This is why even today, a pastor who has an occupation outside the church is called what? A tentmaker -- even if his occupation is selling insurance. The term harkens back to Paul who was a worker, a laborer. So what? Here's what. There are two primary reasons that we who desire to be a witness for Jesus to the world around us so often are not. One reason is fear. The other is busy-ness. And among the things that make us busy, work, earning a living, ranks very high. As I am fond of saying, *work gets in the way of a great deal.* Ahh, but what do I know about it - I am a pastor who only works one day a week right? Well, I may have a pretty full plate myself, but I will admit there is a certain advantage to being a church professional. Part of my vocational responsibility is to evangelize, to share the gospel with others. But that's not your world. You put in forty, fifty, maybe sixty hours a week on the job. When your pastor exhorts you to invest in reaching out to lost sinners some of the precious hours of your week not spent sleeping or working, he is asking a considerable sacrifice. I get that. Finding time to build a relationship with an unchurched neighbor or share Christ with a co-worker is not easy. It requires a disciplined lifestyle that is a by-product of love. Love for our Savior or love for lost people compels us to look for opportunities, to mine those periods in our week that we can reserve for outreach. Few of you will be able to make gospel witness a daily exercise and not even Paul did that, not while he was working as a tentmaker. But he did make time. And, early on in Corinth, his time was the Sabbath. Verse four tells us that every Sabbath he would go to the synagogue and share Christ with the Jews who gathered there.

Now, what time can you offer to the Lord to fulfill his charge to be a witness? Maybe your sabbath? Maybe a weeknight or a Saturday morning. Maybe it is an hour here or a lunchtime there, but will you, as a busy lawyer, or programmer or mother find a segment of your calendar that can be devoted to being a witness for Jesus to a dying world?

Next, we see in the apostle a devoted witness. Initially it was each Sunday, later it would be more than that. As we read in verse five, once Silas and Timothy joined him in Corinth Paul was freed up, possibly by their labor or a financial gift they brought to him, to preach the word without the encumbrance of other employment. And wow! What an impact this brother was to have on Corinth! But the impact was not immediate. The story of gospel work in Corinth was not one of instant success. Verse six tells us how the apostle's efforts were met with resistance and hostility from the Jews. Now really, if you go to a friend and invite her to a chili cookoff or even a big event at Consol Energy you aren't likely to be met with hostility, but take a step further and you just may. You may. When you read through the story of the early church's missionary endeavor you find that the responses are very mixed. I'm not going to kid you, some will not appreciate your attempt to talk about eternal matters. You may lose a friend. You may get a reputation. May be. Love takes that kind of risk. And, get this, love for souls calls us to persevere. Paul is a great model of this. He kept going back to that synagogue. He kept preaching Jesus in Corinth. I find that a number of Christians develop an attitude about witnessing that says, "Yea, well I tried that once. It didn't do any good." Maybe you conclude you don't have the "gift." Maybe you conclude that modern times are no good for evangelism. And so you quit. I can relate. The first several times I went fishing as a boy I caught nothing. I developed a disinterest in fishing and never really tried again. That's okay for fishing for fish, but not okay in the fishing for men department. One activity matters little, the other matters greatly. Don't give up. Don't give up. I remember when I entered the pastorate. I was 25 and had read about revivals and had been a part of a fast-growing youth ministry and a fast-growing church. I heard stories of church-planters who experienced explosive growth. It did not happen for me. It rarely does, but I was hoping I would be one of those exceptions. I was hoping I would be a preacher who would hold the hell-bound spell-bound and our church would become the talk of the town. When it didn't happen that way, I faced a crisis. Was I going to quit or give up hope? For me, it was a matter of accepting that instant success was not God's appointment, but that the Lord may still use me if I just plod on, if I cling to Jesus and keep going and keep preaching the word. Not Dan the Superstar, but Dan the Plodder. Perseverance was key, lasting faithfulness was the goal. Fruit from that was the desire and that desire eventually was

met. I appreciate Paul's devoted witness that was marked by perseverance in the face of resistance and hostility which we will say more about under our next heading.

Thirdly now see in Paul a rebuffed witness. The great apostle had given it his best shot. He had reasoned with these Corinthians. He had testified of the glory and grace of Jesus. He had preached the great news about the resurrection of the Messiah. He had done it week after week and then day after day. And the majority of those he preached to were unresponsive. Verse six says they resisted and blasphemed. They resisted and blasphemed. Now, it is easy to understand how a message like we preach might be heard with incredulity. Nothing strikes me as unusual about skepticism regarding someone being the Son of God and rising from the dead. But hostility? Why is that? But, you look at the history of the church and this rises again and again. The Jews wanted the early Christians put to death. The Romans often obliged them and later did it even without the Jewish appeals. Just this month we read about the murder of believers in Iraq. It is still going on. There is something in the gospel message that provokes a visceral negative and extreme reaction in some folks. What might that be? Well, for one thing, the gospel declares news of a King who has come to establish His kingdom and demands the allegiance of every heart. That is not a message designed to win self-centered men and women, especially if they know something of this King's laws. Allegiance to the laws of the Biblical God would not be a popular notion in a place like Corinth. Corinth was a major city known for its moral depravity. It was sort of like the Amsterdam of its day. The Greek Las Vegas. The city landscape was dominated by a temple of Aphrodite where they had a thousand prostitutes who came out each evening to go to work. There was a saying that *not every man can afford a trip to Corinth*. Similarly, to say that someone was *playing the Corinthian* meant they were given over to lustful debauchery. My point is that this was not a culture waiting for news of a Messiah who would impose His laws on the society. There is very little different in our day. Those who bear witness to the worthiness of Jesus vis-a-vis the popular idols of our day truly can expect some reactions that are less than favorable. Faithful witnesses will be rebuffed, will meet resistance and opposition.

So, because Paul was a rebuffed witness, he also became a frustrated and fearful witness. Verse six concludes with Paul, maybe, losing his patience with the Corinthians. There he says, *your blood be on your own heads!* What does that mean? That is a way of saying, *I have fulfilled my responsibility to tell you the truth, now you will pay the price for rejecting it.* If you read the third and the 33rd chapters of Ezekiel you will understand the apostle's point. There the word of God says that if you know the truth about a coming judgment you are responsible to warn others who

may not know. Make sense? If you do warn, and they don't listen, their blood is on their own hands, but if you don't warn others, their blood, the responsibility for their doom, lies somewhat with you -- because you failed to lovingly warn them. Got it? The implication for us here is that a failure to be a witness, a failure to care and to express that care means that we bear a certain guilt for the judgment coming upon our generation. Still, however, even though your duty may be done, even though you have been faithful to speak and warn and invite, when your efforts are met with rejection it can be frustrating. We don't reach out to our neighbors just to discharge a duty to God, just to avoid judgment on ourselves, we are longing for their salvation. When that goal is blocked by the hardness of our neighbors' hearts, then there is a natural frustration that occurs.

Then too there may be fear. In verse 9 the Lord tells Paul to stop being afraid. So apparently the great apostle struggled with this himself. Do you get a little fearful when you think about moving a conversation with someone toward eternal matters, toward ultimate questions? I know I do. So, we are in good company here with Paul. In I Corinthians 2:3 *I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling*. Fear has always been a major barrier to faithful witnessing - maybe the most formidable barrier. But listen, you can't be courageous without fear; you can't be bold without fear. Courage or boldness involves a recognition of danger combined with a love sufficient to overcome it. Courage or boldness involves a recognition of danger combined with a love sufficient to overcome it. Paul, the apostle, was one to pray for boldness. In Ephesians 6 he requested prayer in a way that I would as well. He said in Ephesians 6:19-20 *pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak*. As I ought to speak. Why ought he to speak? Because that is the calling, the requirement, the necessary manifestation of love. Love for Jesus. Love for lost people. Love for truth. Love for eternal glory. Some of us don't mind admitting that we are chicken, but it may disturb us to admit our lack of love. For me, the prayer to have a loving heart for lost people and the prayer to be bold in witness is one and the same. One and the same. Please pray this for me. Consider praying it for yourself. Why don't we pray it now together: *Father, give your servant a loving boldness*.

Now, I am happy to announce that our story in Acts 18 does not end with the apostle being frustrated and fearful. It ends with him being a refreshed witness. A busy worker. A devoted witness. A rebuffed witness. A frustrated and fearful witness, but, in the end, a refreshed witness. He is given new energy and courage for his labor and the Source of this energy and courage is the One who promised that as we go to make disciples He will be with us. He will be with us! 9-11 *the*

Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; 10 for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city." 11 And he settled there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. That is glorious! Paul was ready to retreat and shut up, but the Head of the church refreshed his frustrated servant by telling Him three things. He told him about His presence and His protection and His people. First, he reminded him of His presence. He says, *Paul, you keep right on preaching my word for I am with you.* How many times does God say that to us? Over and over. Probably more than anything else. I am with you, so don't be afraid.

The second thing he says to Paul in this night vision is that He will protect him. Sometimes, the Lord promises to go with us into and through our suffering. But this time, probably to Paul's great relief, the promise was protection from harm. In verse 10 *no man will attack you in order to harm you.* It's like God was going to build a pocket of protection around Paul like an offensive line builds around a quarterback. Far better than the Steeler's line. God could promise that no harm would come. How did God know that? Huh? How could God know that? Because God planned that. God wrote the story. It is His-story so He knows what is on the next page and He can infallibly tell us about it on those rare moments when he chooses to do so. Normally we don't know what the Lord has planned for tomorrow. We just rest in the fact that He has a plan. But in Paul's case, in order to help him past his discouragement, the Lord decided to let His apostle in on one little aspect of His future. Our Lord is so good to His servants isn't He?

The third thing He says to Paul is that He has people in Corinth. Presence, protection, people. Verse 10 again says *I have many people in this city.* What does He mean by that? Paul had just come into Corinth as the first-ever Christian missionary. If folks had responded to the gospel there it would have been through Paul. Paul would know. When I was twenty-two and on staff of my hometown church, I was called to jury duty. Ever done this? Yea. During the examinations of jurists I was asked by the judge if I knew either of the attorneys and had reason to be biased for or against them. In this case, I was familiar with one of the attorneys who was also on the city council. I told the Judge I knew Mr. Green and that I had nothing against him personally, but I was aware that he had just voted against our church in a zoning case. The judge said to me, "how do you know Mr. Green isn't a member of your church?" I replied, "Well, I know all the members of our church and I can assure you Mr. Green is not among them." The judge seemed incredulous that I would know all the members of our church. But, I was a charter member of that church. I was on staff of that church. And it was no longer real small, but it wasn't yet that big. I knew all the people at

Grace Presbyterian and Paul knew all the people in the First Church of Corinth and there weren't that many. Not yet. So, when God said he had many people in that city, what would Paul have understood Him to mean? He meant that there were many in Corinth who were appointed by God, chosen by God, predestined by God to become Christ-followers. It was like Paul was a fisherman who had been getting few bites, but the Lord could see that a large school of fish were just arriving under near his boat. If Paul would just persevere, there would be a great catch. *I have many people in this city.* Again, I ask, how did God know? God knew because God planned. Yes, this is one of a hundred verses that point to the sweet mystery of predestination. There are out there, among those sleeping off hangovers this morning, some who will be worshippers of God in the next year or two because to this they have been appointed by God. God is going to send some North Park member to invite him to a concert in Pittsburgh and there he will be shaken out of his dogmatic slumbers and begin to pay attention to the matters of the soul. He will check out a church. He will be convicted of his sin. He will learn of Jesus and discover that he is indeed the Son of God. And all of this will happen because, even though he is not a believer today, he is one of God's people, his name is in the book of life, he was chosen before the foundation of the world. He has an appointment made by God. In Acts 13 Paul is preaching Jesus in the city of Antioch, to a bunch of Gentiles this time and here is what it says in 13:**48** *When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.* What comes first, the believing or the appointing? Clearly, necessarily, the appointing. The belief follows the appointment. God knew men and women would respond to gospel preaching. It was His gracious electing choice. Praise Him! Praise this sovereign God with me! And after you praise Him do as Paul did and persevere in reaching out in your city. The Biblical doctrine of election, rightly understood, does not oppose motivation to witness, it encourages it. We know God has some of his people around us here. His people who have not yet come in to join the church, but will as we are faithful to invite them in.

So, when you consider your calling to be a witness and you grow fearful or frustrated, when you are rejected or rebuffed, remember that our God is with us, and He has people in this place, lost sheep who have yet to come in to the fold and it is our privilege to go and find them. II Corinthians 5 includes this awesome word: **20** *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.* Not all will respond to that appeal; but, praise God, some will. For their sake, and for our joy, let us not keep silent. Amen?