

The Gospel to Samaria

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Date: 16 May 2021

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning.

My name is Abby and I'm part of the North Berkeley Community Group. Our scripture this morning comes from Acts of the Apostles, chapter 8, verses 1 through 25, as printed in your liturgy.

And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day, a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.

[1 : 05] Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said.

For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city. Now for some time, a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria.

He boasted that he was someone great. And all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, This man is rightly called the great power of God. They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his sorcery.

But when they believed Philip, as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptized.

And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria.

[2 : 13] When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them. They had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, Give me also this ability, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.

Peter answered, May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money. You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God.

Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin. Then Simon answered, Pray to the Lord for me, so that nothing you have said may happen to me.

After they had further proclaimed the word of the Lord and testified about Jesus, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages. This is the word of the Lord.

[3 : 21] Thanks be to God. Well, Christchurch, we live in a strange world, don't we?

Things that one group of people take for granted can be quite opaque to another. I've heard it said that in Germany, everything is forbidden except that which is permitted.

And in Russia, everything is forbidden including that which is permitted. Meanwhile, in France, everything is permitted except that which is forbidden. While in Italy, everything is permitted including that which is forbidden.

And I've lived in Italy, I can attest to that. In the U.S., of course, everything is either forbidden or permitted. We're just not sure which is which because we're waiting on the federal, state, and local authorities to coordinate their efforts together.

But we live in this strange world. We live in a really confusing time right now. It reminds me of this old joke that I heard. What's the difference between a consultant, a lawyer, and a theologian?

[4 : 32] A consultant borrows your watch and tells you the time. A lawyer borrows your watch, tells you the time, and then keeps the watch as part of the payment for their fee. And a theologian just simply tells you the time and suggests that you adjust your watch.

And my job as resident theologian and pastor here is to tell you the time and help us all adjust our watch. And the question is, what time is it?

And I want to say that today it's time to rebuild Christchurch together. We've had 14 months apart. We have, you know, experienced relentless change, incredible volatility and disruption and losses in our lives.

And it's just time to come together more and more in person, trust these vaccines to do their work, to make us safe. And it's time to rebuild Christchurch one gathering at a time.

Every Sunday we're going to gather. Next Sunday we're going to gather again the Sunday after that and the Sunday after that. Next Saturday we'll be together for a half-day retreat. Our women are going on a hike.

[5 : 39] Some men are getting together for beer. Youth are playing laser tag. We're going to meet on a Saturday morning for prayer. 10 to 15 minutes if you can brave the cold in the side yard for coffee after this.

Every gathering, every encounter, every conversation, every little investment of our time matters incredibly right now in these weeks and months ahead of us as we want to build up Christchurch here again.

If you're following along with us in our Bible reading plan, we're reading through the epistles, the letters of the New Testament. And our reading a day or two ago was from Romans 12. And the Apostle Paul says this.

He says, We have different gifts and functions according to the grace God has given to each of us.

And what Paul is saying there is that every one of us can play. That each of us has gifts that need to be exercised in order for the church to be built up. And that Christchurch really is incomplete without any one of us.

[6 : 43] And that God has things that he wants done and said that can only be done and said by you. That God has needs he wants to meet that he's gifted only you to fulfill.

And so what I just want to affirm this morning is that we need each other. And the more we can be here, be in the flesh, come to these family reunions with the people of God, I think the more blessed we're going to be.

And if you can't be here, if you're at home this morning, know that we love you. We get it. We hope to continue to see you online. But I just want to remind us as we're looking through the Acts of the Apostles, the church has always had this predictable pattern of gathering on the first day of the week to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus.

And to come together in that celebration to focus on what is the primary task of the church. The primary task of the church is evangelism. Of all the things that we do to nurture our interior life, the primary task of the church is evangelism.

And we come then to be filled by the Spirit for that task, sent out in Jesus' name. And then we come back the next Sunday to celebrate the fact that God is building his kingdom in our midst.

[7 : 57] That's what we see over and over in the Acts of the Apostles. And so we've been tracing this out, Acts 1, Acts 2, Acts 3. And now we're going to fast forward today to Acts chapter 8. And the message of Acts chapter 8 is this, that pressure prompts mission with a holistic gospel and the Spirit's power.

Acts chapter 8 says that pressure prompts mission with a holistic gospel and the Spirit's power. And I want to say a word about how pressure prompts mission.

Because our story picks up in verse 1 that Saul approved of their killing of Stephen. And on that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem. And all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

The context is Stephen, who's a deacon in the church, has just become the first Christian martyr. And his execution has caused these Jerusalem Christians to be scattered like seeds throughout the land of Israel.

Until now, the church has been tucked up in Jerusalem. And they've had no task force, no strategy, no grand plan for some missionary movement.

[9 : 12] No idea or vision for how they were going to break down the barriers to take the gospel from here out to Samaria. Much less further beyond Africa and Asia and Europe.

But the resurrected Jesus said that that's what had to happen. Right? His gospel had to break out. In Acts 1.8, he says, You all, to a group of about 120 disciples, he says, You all will be clothed with power from on high when the Holy Spirit is poured out on you.

And you will be empowered to be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and even unto the ends of the earth. I think we all want to be part of something that is growing, something that's expanding and reaching new people and taking new ground.

And so the question is, how does this exciting missionary movement begin? And what we learn here is that it begins in bitter persecution. It begins in ruthless repression.

In verse 3, we read, Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. Saul's described here like a savage wild beast who's just gobbling up his prey for breakfast.

[10 : 24] But what I want us to see is that God's purposes prevail not in spite of persecution, but because of persecution. And the message of the story is that God uses these evil means for good ends.

Because what happens next in verse 4, it says, Those who had been scattered because of the persecution preached the word wherever they went. Now there's no evidence that these Christians enjoying their salvation in Christ had formed a mission task force, formed a committee on evangelism, came up with a plan to conquer the world for Christ.

In fact, they just could not even imagine how it was that they were going to break out over those barriers of geography and religion and culture and race and move out into this hostile pagan world with their crazy message that Christ was crucified and then he rose from the dead.

But what was not done because of the slowness of these Christians was in fact achieved by the bitterness of God's enemies.

If this Jerusalem church had not been persecuted, it's doubtful that they would have scattered so quickly. It's doubtful that they would have been so motivated to share this gospel with new people in new places.

[11 : 49] But that's what happened. This missionary movement of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit began by this effort of Satan and all the powers of darkness to crush the church and to crush the gospel.

And ironically, the exact opposite happened. Now why does that matter for us? We're not the persecuted church, right? We're not the church of North Korea or Somalia or Pakistan or Iran or China.

And so probably this is a good reminder to pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ who literally are being dragged off prison, who are being destroyed. We're not the persecuted church.

We're in fact the privileged church. But we're also the pressured church. We're a pressured church because spiritually we're awash in secularism, right?

The mindset of the secular age in which people are not neutral about Jesus, right? In this post-Christian context, it's kind of cool to be Buddhist.

[12 : 50] It might even be cool to be Muslim. It's definitely not cool to be Christian, especially if you're serious about following in the way of Jesus' truth, the way of Jesus' holiness.

And so we're under pressure as a church spiritually, but we're also under pressure situationally. I mean, don't some of us wonder why God would allow such disruption to Christ's church, right?

In 2019, all of 2020, now into 2021. Why has God allowed our staff to go from 17 people down to 5 people?

We're no longer what Christ's church Berkeley was, no longer what Christ's church Oakland was. We're something new and different altogether. Why has God allowed so many of our friends to move away and left us in this situation?

And I don't have all the answers to that, but what I do know from this text is that God never wastes a crisis. And if He used the persecution to scatter these Christians to a new mission in Samaria, then surely He can use the pressure that we're under spiritually and situationally to do a new thing.

[13 : 57] Because it's these moments of disruption, these moments of pressure that are moments that the Spirit uses to create new movement, to do something different and something new.

And when we're open to that, God does amazing things beyond the horizon of what we could see or the plans that we previously had. And so the question for us today is, how does God want to use the pressure of our moment, of this moment, to do new things in new ways, in new places, with new people?

And are we willing? Are we ready to embrace the new things that God has for us? Are we ready to adjust our watches to His time? Or is He waiting on us to catch up to His plan, His action, His mission that He has prepared for us here in the East Bay?

After a catastrophic global event like the pandemic, with so much seismic and rapid change, it shouldn't surprise us that there's going to be, and there already is, a heightened sensitivity, a heightened seeking after spiritual things, right?

As our global society is going through a nervous breakdown basically everywhere, right? All that pre-COVID crisis of identity, that pre-COVID crisis of belonging and meaning and purpose, that's been intensified among all people everywhere.

[15 : 30] And I believe that God wants us at Christchurch to be ready as a church family to move out to new people and new opportunities and new challenges where people are looking for the truth that they've been built for, which is the truth that has been entrusted to us, right?

So that's the first thing I want you to see is that pressure prompts mission. Pressure is not always a bad thing. Pressure prompts mission. God uses bad things to good ends.

Pressure prompts mission with a holistic gospel, with a holistic gospel. Look at verse 4 again. It says, Those who'd been scattered by the persecution, they preached the word wherever they went.

The church leaders had been taken away from the people of God, but does that stop them from doing the work? No, the mission doesn't come to a grinding halt. In fact, everyone now is engaged in this mission.

Until now, many of these people had been ministry consumers only, and now they become ministry providers. Ordinary, everyday Christians, men, women, and children, just like us, who found a joyful confidence in the truth, and the power and the relevance of the gospel.

[16 : 50] And what do they do with that? It says that they preached the word. Now, I don't think that's the best translation of this word. It kind of conjures the image that you all need to be doing something like I'm doing right now, preaching the word.

But the word here in Greek is euangelizo, where we get the word evangel, evangelism, evangelize. And what they were doing was sharing the good news.

They were gossiping the gospel wherever they went. You know, in their shop, on their street, at soccer practice, at the swim meet, at their supper club. These were just good news people, and that was the most important thing in their life.

And so, every opportunity they had, they were trying to share that with other people. And notice that they expressed the gospel in multidimensional ways, with words, with deeds, with countercultural community.

First of all, they articulated the gospel with words, right? These first Christians, they went into Samaria, and they did the hard work of building trust and relationships, of showing they cared, of earning the right to be heard.

[17 : 56] But eventually, they opened their mouth to talk about Jesus. And when they gossiped the gospel, they had a basic outline of specific content.

And they would share the gospel as a body of truth, a package of information that has to be verbally transmitted if it's going to be heard and understood and believed, right?

And so, that's kind of a question for us. Do we have a quick summary of the gospel? Do we have a simple nutshell of the gospel that we're ready to share? And what we see here is that Philip comes alongside these ordinary Christians, and we get a sense of his gospel nutshell right here in verse 12.

It says that he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God in the name of Jesus Christ. He said that the gospel is about Jesus the Messiah who came to establish the kingdom of God.

And what he meant when he said that is that the creator God saw us. He saw us in our sin and death. He saw us oppressed by sin and in bondage to death.

[19 : 02] And out of his great mercy for us, God the Father sent his son Jesus to be our king, to set up this rule and reign, this kingdom of freedom and of peace, so that we could be free from the oppression of sin, so that we could have power over the bondage of death.

And how did that happen? Well, every time, this is the heart of the gospel, every time it's shared, you've got to know that the way it happened is that Jesus took our place in his crucifixion, and he took our sin upon himself so that he might grant to us the freedom of having his righteousness.

And that in his resurrection, he took our death upon himself so that we might have the power of his life that never ends. And so when we see everybody around us in the Bay Area running after freedom in a thousand different ways, running after power in a thousand different ways, we've got to know that the one thing that they're seeking is the only place they can find that is in Jesus the Messiah who brought this kingdom of God's freedom and God's peace that only he can give.

And that's what they were doing. They were articulating the gospel with words. But they were also demonstrating the gospel with deeds. They were demonstrating the gospel with deeds, and we see that in verse 6.

It says, When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. Our friends, neighbors, and co-workers here in the East Bay are not going to pay close attention to what we say unless they experience and they see the power of God behind our words.

[20 : 50] And if they experience that, then they're going to want an explanation of what it is they're experiencing. And what are they experiencing in this Samaritan city? They're experiencing the power of God in the problems of their lives.

They're experiencing heaven breaking through into the mess and the muddle and the misery of their lives. Verse 7 says, With shrieks and evil spirits were coming out of them, and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed.

And this is crazy supernatural stuff. It's because the gospel is moving into a new place for the first time. But basically, what this says is that people who were troubled in their souls were finding spiritual help.

And people who were broken in their bodies were finding physical help. And if our city were to see us pouring out our lives for the poor and the sick, for orphans and immigrants, if they were to see through us change lives because of God's power on people's bodies and souls, right, people would pay closer attention to what it is we have to say.

They would want to hear the explanation for their experience. And what I'm convicted by here is that I need to, and maybe you need to pray more and expect more, that heaven would be poured out on the earth, that God's power, maybe we should pray more boldly that God's power would break through.

[22 : 25] Wherever we're seeing spiritual needs, which are all around us, wherever we're seeing physical needs, which are many, that God would come and put people right, that God would come and make people whole.

They were articulating the gospel in words. They were demonstrating the gospel in deeds. But they were also embodying the gospel in countercultural community. And that's what we see in verse 12.

When they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. And I can't explain to you adequately how amazing this is because there had been hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans for a thousand years up to this point.

Not 10 years, not a hundred years, a thousand years of hostility. The Samaritans were despised as these mixed race, half-breeds, despised as people who were, you know, desperately confused about God and the scriptures.

And Jews and Samaritans were sworn enemies in bitter conflict. They hated one another with a passion. Samaritans were excluded others, excluded outsiders.

[23 : 40] But what's happening here is that because of Jesus, Jews are taking the gospel to Samaritans. And Samaritans are being baptized with Jews and they're all somehow becoming one family under God the Father.

And this dividing wall of hostility between them because of ethnic and cultural and religious differences are being torn down and they're being made brothers and sisters in Jesus. And friends, this can happen among us.

Jesus has the power to tear down the walls between the rich and the poor, between the educated and the uneducated.

Jesus has the power to tear down walls between Europeans, Africans, Latinos, and Asians. He has the power to tear down walls like he's doing here between men and women.

Jesus even has the power to tear down walls between Democrats and Republicans. And what they're doing here is they're embodying the gospel in radical countercultural community that respects, honors, and loves one another across their differences.

[24 : 53] And what happens when they do that, it says in verse 8 that there was great joy in that city. Not merely among the converts, but among the whole city.

People who were on the outside looking in saying, I don't believe what they believe, but I am so glad that they're here. I'm so glad they're doing what they're doing in Christchurch.

Isn't that what we want Berkeley and Oakland and the Bay Area to say about us? Isn't that why we have in our mission statement that we are for the city? And I just want to invite us to pray that we would so articulate the gospel with words, so demonstrate it with our deeds, so embodied and radical countercultural community, that there would be great joy in our cities.

Amen? You guys listen? All right. So pressure prompts mission with a holistic gospel and the Spirit's power.

And I want to end just by saying a little bit about the Spirit's power because you might be wondering, you know, what's up with these Samaritans is having to wait for the Holy Spirit, right? The typical pattern is that the gospel is shared, people receive it, they repent, and forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and baptism come as a package deal.

[26 : 13] But that doesn't happen here. In verse 14 it says, when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria, and when they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might finally receive the Holy Spirit.

What's going on here? I think because this is the first time that the gospel is reaching over this barrier to a non-Jewish people, God withholds the giving of the Spirit so that these apostles, trained by Jesus, would come and they would inspect the work and verify their faith and see that these are true, apostolic, real Christians, right?

And that having seen that these people believed in that body of truth articulated in the gospel, that they would then pray and with joy they would affirm that there is not now one Jewish church and one Samaritan church, but there is a church of Jews and Gentiles, one in Christ.

There's not a Samaritan church up here and a Jerusalem church down there. It's all one together. And the Holy Spirit is the sign of God's power that creates that unprecedented unity.

And it's so impressive, particularly to this one man named Simon, right? It says, when Simon, in verse 18, when Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.

[27 : 44] Why is this included in the story? Because it's trying to point out the difference between a true Christian and a false Christian, between a real disciple and a counterfeit disciple, right?

In verses 9 through 11, we meet this guy who's not a smoke and mirrors, sleight of hand magician. He's the real deal, right? There are powers at work in this world besides the power of God, and he's figured out a way to harness and leverage those powers to great effect.

And people are wowed by him. But then Philip comes along with the wiser words, the mightier deeds of the gospel, and Simon is converted, right?

It's headline news. Everybody's like, man, can you believe it? Have you heard even Simon? Even Simon, and they're all excited. And it says in verse 13, Simon himself believed and was baptized, and he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

And that's the cautionary note for us. It's the deeds of the gospel that amaze Simon. It's not the words of the gospel about the Savior who's come for sinners, right?

[28 : 53] Simon does not sense in his conscience his self-centered, self-promoting, self-interested sinfulness and his need for forgiveness in his heart.

He's merely dazzled by the power of the Holy Spirit. And this warns us that he's not a real disciple. He's a counterfeit. And the way we know that is because he reaches into his pocket and digs out his wallet, right, and makes an all-cash offer for the Holy Spirit so that he can use the power of Jesus to his own ends.

And what does Peter say? He says in verse 20, May your money perish with you because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money. This is the same Peter who said last week, silver or gold I do not have, but I have something far more powerful than that.

He says in this place, literally, to hell with you and your money. And why does he say that? This is not a Christian leader speaking to a Christian who's making a terrible error in judgment.

This is an apostle talking to a man who's not a Christian but who thinks that he is. And so he's exposing his heart and saying, Simon, your whole outlook is unconverted because your heart is unregenerated.

[30 : 13] And that's why Peter says in verse 21, you have no part or share in this ministry. Repent because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart.

For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin. Why am I talking about this? Because we read every day about foolish, wicked, non-Christian things that church people do.

And it saddens us, but it shouldn't surprise us because it's been that way from the beginning. Right? The church has always had people that are not real disciples. They're counterfeit disciples.

I love this from Will Willeman this week. He's a professor at Duke University. He said, what do we make of an evangelism which while including even the Samaritans does not hesitate to exclude those like Simon who do not fit the lifestyle or the theology of the community of the spirit.

In a time when the community was fighting for its very life, it fought not by reducing its witness to the lowest common denominator, but rather by carefully defining itself and rebuking and excluding those like Simon who did not change their heathenish lifestyle and attitudes.

[31 : 28] Rather than baptizing the status quo, the church demanded repentance. And that's the question for us. Will we be a church that reduces our witness to the lowest common denominator of our secular age, our post-Christian culture?

Or will we be a church that defines the doctrine and ethics that repentance requires of us and that God's grace demands of us?

Friends, this is a gut check for me. It's a gut check for every professing baptized Christian to ask themselves, am I the genuine article? Have I received the free gift of the Holy Spirit?

And is the fruit of the Holy Spirit being produced in my life? Love, joy, peace, patience, and all the rest. Is the spirit of him who raised Christ from the dead living in me?

And if so, what is the evidence? Is the spirit causing me to cry out continually, Abba, Father, my Father, and attesting to me that I am a son of God, that you are a daughter of God?

[32 : 40] Because that's what the power of the Holy Spirit that cannot be bought does for real, genuine, true disciples.

Pressure prompts mission with a holistic gospel and the Spirit's power. And I pray that more and more we would see God doing this among us.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen.