

Lives and Lips

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[0 : 00] The 49th verse of the 13th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, we read this, the word of the Lord spread through the whole region.

The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. Some years ago now, I was sitting in an airplane feeling very pleased with myself because off a dirt cheap ticket I managed to get bumped up into business class.

I was sitting there with a glass of what I'll call for you sensitive Christian folks, squash. Feeling very good about life. And then suddenly this executive looking chap in an expensive suit arrived on the plane.

And he's an American national. And a lot of Americans do this. A good habit actually, it helps people out, especially when you get to my age. Stuck his hand out and said his name. And so I said my name and he put his expensive luggage into the luggage compartment.

And he asked me the question that, trust me, clergy really don't like to be asked when they're in Mufti. He said, what do you do for a living? So I thought about saying, well, I'm in middle management in a large national organization.

[1 : 24] But I knew if I said that, I'd hear the cock crow somewhere in my head. So I told him, and I could see him visibly stiffened when I gave him the dreadful news that I was an ordained clergy person.

And this is what he said to me. He said to me, Mike, I have no interest in religion. But you've got one minute to tell me why it's of interest to you. What would you say?

What would you say if somebody came to you and laid that kind of challenge before you? I mean, I have no idea what I said.

All I can say is it didn't seem to deeply impact his life as he downed the liquid contents of the business class cabin and fell into a coma. But it made me think.

So I went back to my local church and did a little research. I went to people and said, just suppose, just suppose somebody was to walk up to you and say, you know what, Harry?

[2 : 27] You know what, Mary? I would really love to become a Christian, but I got no idea how to do it. What would you do? You know, we discovered that about 85% of the congregation would say, we'll send them to see Mike.

Listen, if you leave it to the guys who wear the Colgate Ring of Confidence around their necks, it's really not going to happen. Because there's only usually one or two of them in a local church and there's a lot of you.

Last week we celebrated Pentecost, remember? Anybody remember? Yeah. This is how it works. So Jesus, in Acts chapter 1, says to his followers, listen, I'm out of here soon.

I'm paraphrasing, obviously. I'm out of here soon. So it's down to you now. You are going to be my witnesses across the whole world.

I have no idea why Jesus would say that, do you? I have no idea why Jesus would choose us to be the people to carry the beacon of the gospel into this world.

[3 : 42] But that's what he does. But notice he says this. Before you will be witnesses, I want you to wait in Jerusalem. And you'll wait there until the promised Holy Spirit is poured out on you.

That's what we celebrated last week. A lot of people are very confused about this. They think the Holy Spirit sent on the church so we can sing a bit louder and wave our arms in the air. And if we're extremely enthusiastic and don't mind looking stupid, we can get on the stage and wave a flag.

No. Why was the Spirit given? It was given to empower the witness of people like you and people like me.

And there's two aspects to this, obviously. One is the aspect of your life. What do people see when they look at you?

Do they see the light of Christ shining in you? Or do they see somebody whose life looks like everybody else's life except that you show up in church on a Sunday for an hour and a half or whatever?

[4 : 55] Let me tell you, of the thousands of people in this town who will not be on church this Sunday, the idea of life that looks like everybody else's life with a bit of church going thrown in isn't deeply attractive to them.

There is tons of stuff you can do on a Sunday. When I was a kid, there was nothing to do on a Sunday. We were so sad in our family.

We would go out for a drive in my dad's car on a Sunday afternoon. Right? I mean, he had a nice car. Okay. And the same thing. You know, there's George Rule Bank.

You know, again. Today, the church is in serious and losing competition with the leisure industry. You've got young children who like sport. When's it happen? Sunday morning. You had a busy week in work and you didn't get a chance to go and do your shopping on a Saturday.

[6 : 00] Well, St. Bruce is open. Listen. We have to step it up. This is not a time for the church to lose confidence in our message.

This is a time to step it up. And what I want to do today, in the brief time apportioned to me, is to try and inspire you to leave this church today, determine that you will do something to add to the church's ministry in this wider world.

I want you to be personally responsible for setting off a chain reaction. You have no idea what kind of an influence you could be if you're willing to submit to the Holy Spirit and allow the Holy Spirit to use you to be the bearer of the light of Jesus Christ.

What do people see when they look at your life? You know, I have this view. When people know that you're a churchgoer, as they somewhat patronizingly call us, they're looking at your life just a little more closely.

They want to know what it is you say when the lift closes on your fingers. They want to know what you're going to do when everybody else in the office is fiddling their expense account.

[7 : 30] And do you have a choice? Do you pitch in or do you not? They want to know what happens when you're at the photocopying machine or in the staff room or at the nurse's station and the gossip starts.

Are you going to pitch in or are you going to sit out on that stuff? Because, you know, I hate to tell you this, but some people will make up their minds about God on the basis of what they see in your life.

You ever thought about that? Some people will make up their minds about God on the basis of what they see in your life and in my life. Sorry, in my life.

So what is it? That we need to think about. Well, there are three things from this passage I just briefly want to draw your attention to. The first thing is the message that those early followers of Jesus Christ brought was extraordinary.

Let me give you a flavor of it. And before I give you a flavor of it, let me just say that up until this point in human history, the chosen people of God, the nation of Jews, thought that the only way that you could become righteous in God's eyes was by keeping the law.

[8 : 55] Basically, that was the Ten Commandments, but as we know, the rabbis built and built and built on top of that. There's pages of this stuff in the Old Testament.

You can go and read it if you ever suffer from insomnia. You know, stuff that's unbelievable to our ears. It's like, thou shalt not boil a kid in its mother's milk.

You know, hands up when that was the last of temptation for you. Right? But, what about envy? What about lust?

What about lying? These are the kind of things that dig deep into our souls, aren't they? And sadly, too often, they find us out.

This was an extraordinary message. Let me just tell you the way Paul brilliantly summarized it. He says this, Therefore, brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus, the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.

[9 : 58] Through Him, through Jesus, everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from, from the law of Moses.

In the Church of England, in the Church of England, there are a lot of souls who are very confused about this. They still think that what they do will save them.

If you are in this church this morning, and you just hope, your mind is like this, you are hoping, I just hope I've done enough in my life to kind of cancel out the stuff that's not so good, then I have to politely suggest to you, you do not understand the gospel.

The gospel is not about what you do, it's about what God has done for you on the cross of Calvary. Bearing shame and scoffing root, in my place condemned he stood.

Seal my pardon with his blood. Hallelujah, what a Savior. What you need to do is to accept what God in Jesus Christ has done for you, not think that you will earn your salvation by trying to do your best.

[11 : 20] Because trust me, if God is 100% holy, how much would you have to do to make yourself acceptable to him? It would be impossible, would it not?

That's why you need to trust Christ and his work upon the cross, because our God is a God of grace. Someone say hallelujah. Good.

Our God is a God of grace. He loves you, even though you don't deserve it. And the evidence of that love is cross-shaped. It's where Jesus hung so that we could be forgiven.

It is an extraordinary message. And you need to know it, because that gospel is your ticket into eternity. A little more about that in a moment.

It was an extraordinary message. The second thing is, it's a message for everyone. See, up to about Acts chapter 12, everybody assumed that the gospel was only for Jewish people.

[12 : 31] The early Christians used to meet at the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, and they'd do their own thing down there. And it just felt like from the outside, this is just a queer sect of Judaism, of Jewishness.

Until Peter, in Acts chapter 12, has this unbelievable dream. I mean, if I had a dream like that, honestly, I'd change my medication. But this is what he gets.

He gets that from this dream. You know, that nothing is unclean. And therefore, the gospel is for everybody. This was a big argument in the early church.

You know, is it just for Jews, or is it for Gentiles and Jews? What's Paul saying? He's saying, in verse 46, Paul and Barnabas answered, we had to speak the word of God to you first, since you reject it, and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life.

We now turn to the Gentiles. See, what was happening here was, when Paul went to a new town, he was going into the synagogue, and he was starting with the kind of God-fearers.

[13 : 43] You know, Jews, monotheists, they believe in God. So Paul was starting with that. He only had the Old Testament scriptures. Remember this. Paul never had a New Testament.

And from the Old Testament scriptures, Paul was preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. And when they chucked him out of the synagogue, which they nearly always did, he went out into the marketplace and preached the gospel to the Gentiles.

Paul had a plan, and he carried it out faithfully. You can read about that through the central chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. This message is for everyone.

God forgive the Church of England and its middle class list. You know what sociologists of religion said about the Church of England in the 1960s? They said it is one of the few vehicles of class transition.

You know what that means? It means that if you perceive yourself not to be a middle class person, all you need to do is join the Church of England and people start thinking you are one. Right?

[14 : 54] What a terrible commentary on a gospel as for everybody. You know, we should welcome into this place the poor and the unacceptable.

You know, my... I need to tell you this. You know, I have a cleanliness obsession. Really, you know, it's not great. Although it does mean I smell nice. But here's my point.

People like me find it very difficult to hang out with dirty people. Right? It really, you know, it stretches my... So one day, I was feeling self-righteous in the extreme.

I was down with this guy. How about this for an act of Christian witness? This man forks out 800 pounds of his own money every week to give Sunday lunch to the homeless in this greasy spoon cafe in the center of Bristol.

So I'm down there with the homeless people feeling, you know, you're such a cool guy, aren't you? You know, the Bishop of Bristol deems to come down and hangs out with these poor people here.

This guy goes from table to table.

[16:02] He kneels at the end of the table. He reads the Bible to them and he prays with them. So he said to me, perhaps you'd like to do that. Kneeling down praying. There's this man who to me, honestly, was disgusting.

He had a beard that was full of... I don't know whether he'd been sick or something, but it was horrible. And he had kind of scum in the corners of his mouth and he smelt to high heaven.

I was feeling so good about, you know, here you are praying with your feet. But God said to me clearly, if this man collapses, will you give him the kiss of life?

The gospel's for everybody. It's not just for folks who dress like you, talk like you, wear the same aftershave as you. Sorry, if you're a man, obviously.

It's for everybody. And that's why if you just leave the witness of the church or explaining the gospel to people with a Colgate ring of confidence around their necks, it's going to be very limited, isn't it?

[17:18] And the third thing about this message is, and this is a challenging message into our culture, which is a culture of the now.

You hear what Meghan Markle said, you know, her big thing is, I live in the moment. Well, fair play. You know, you were going to marry the next six in line to the monarchy.

You probably would want to live in the moment a bit, wouldn't you? But actually, our culture lives in the now. Bob Geldo said, the only moment I can relate to is now.

Isn't that strange for human beings who hope they have a future? But what kind of future will that be? Let me tell you what Paul preached to these dear people.

He said this, when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. That doesn't mean that it's all sewn up, that you're either in or you're out.

[18:32] Calvin seemed to imply that, but that cannot be true. Because when the Philippian jailer said, what must I do to be saved? St. Paul didn't say to him, nothing you can do, pal, it's all sorted.

He said, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. Some of you need to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, not just for now, but for eternity.

And that eternal life begins now in your soul. I sat here moved as we listened to Wendy's testimony of, you know, that terrible kind of chapter of things that had gone wrong in her life over a two-year period, right?

She wanted to tell you that the reason she's still hanging in together and is courageous enough to come and stand up behind that thing and tell you her testimony is because of what God has done in her life and is doing in her life.

Why don't we do this? Why aren't we more excited about it? What is it that means that the church is like the St. Lawrence Seaway in winter, frozen at the mouth?

[19:49] Well, I think for some of us it's just darn apathy. For some of us it is we've had bad experiences of other people trying to convert us in the past.

You know what I mean? People who carry a Bible the size of a paving slab and beat you around the head with it until you finally submit. But I also think that fear plays a part.

We're kind of frightened that somehow if we get it wrong, somebody who's been a friend might not be a friend. I think that's, you know, I can understand that fear but listen to me.

You know the most common phrase in the whole of the Bible is don't be afraid. You know, God promises us that in the moments when we're feeling fearful if we lean on Him, to put it in Mr. Tozer's words, if we lean on the wind, we'll find the strength to cope and to carry on.

Listen, I need to land this aircraft because you need to go get lunch. But I want to end with a story. At one night, Enthea, my wife, and my children had gone down to stay with Granny in Sussex saying, I had been watching American football with my church warden on the television in our home.

[21:19] He had gone home. I was going to bed and suddenly the front doorbell rang. I opened the door. There's a kid, be 18 or 19 years old, covered in tattoos and on his knuckles he's got love and hate which is usually a sign the person's been done time in a prison.

So he said, I need a bed for the night. So my mind is going in overdrive like, here are 36 reasons you cannot possibly cross the threshold in my home.

And the Holy Spirit just kind of confused me. I couldn't think of one. I was like, so, I said, come on in. Put him up in our sitting room on the sofa, came down the next morning wondering how I'd ever

explain to my sweet wife that we no longer had a TV and a video player. And he was still there. And we had breakfast together. And in that time, I told him my testimony. Turned out, he worked for a group of very bad people in Aylesbury. Rick is his name. And when he came to leave, he got his stuff and he went out. Incidentally, he needed a bed for the night because he'd been living with his girlfriend's parents and he'd beaten his girlfriend up and they'd rightly shown him the door.

[22 : 51] That's why he needed a bed for the night. So he goes off, he said, I guess the difference between you and me, Mike, is he said, you've found Jesus. I thought, that's a very fair summary.

So he disappears. I didn't hear anything about him at all after that until about 10 years later, I was at a large conference. And out of the wings, this guy appears and says, do you remember me?

I said, yeah, I do. He said, I'm a Pentecostal pastor. And he said, I want you to know that you started the chain reaction which has got me to where I am.

I'm married. And he said, just so you know, I've never hit a woman since. He said, I'm also running a film company that's making the kind of movies that you'd be happy for your children to watch.

I'm not suggesting next time somebody knocks on your door, you ask them in for the night. I'm really not. What I am saying is, don't underestimate your ability to set off a chain reaction.

[24 : 09] You need to do some things, friends. You need to pray. Pray for opportunities. It's one of the prayers that God will pretty quickly answer. Two is, you need to be able to work out what your testimony is.

grace. You know, Wendy had written it down and come and shared it with us. She'd given thought to it. You need to do that.

Somebody ever says to you, you know, why are you a Christian? What would you say? The third thing is, it really helped you if you just had a thumbnail sketch of the gospel so that you could tell people that they can stop earning.

Grace means the end of earning, but it doesn't mean the end of effort. Because Paul says in Ephesians 2, verses 8 and 9, we are saved in order to do the good works that God has prepared for us to do in advance.

And the fourth thing is, you could do something by way of an act of service. You could give some money to tear fund. Or you could volunteer to do a ministry in this church.

[25 : 18] They've got some great ministries going. But like most ministries, they always need more help rather than less help. Listen to me. You've been very gracious and mostly conscious.

I need to pray with you. But listen to me. If the Holy Spirit has whispered in your ear this morning, here's my advice, do something sooner rather than later.

Every educationist will tell you, if you don't act on a stimulus, it will soon disappear because you get back to what's called your life. Your marriage, your job, your mortgage, all that stuff, and it will dissipate.

Do something so that the word of the Lord can be spread across this region. In the name of our amazing God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the people who agreed said together, Amen.