

How Make Yourself Popular

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on February the 14th 1999. The preacher is Phil Meulman.

His sermon is entitled How to Make Yourself Popular and is from Acts 13.44-14.7 Our God, we pray that you would give us attentive hearts and minds and that we would put aside all distractions and that we would hear what you have to say to us.

And may it be inspiring and uplifting for your sake. Amen. Well, I have to confess that there was a stage in my life where I was desperate to be popular amongst all my friends.

And there was also the desire, at some stage in my life, to be famous. And the reason is, I thought that this was the way to make it in and throughout life.

Well, that was very short-lived. And one of those experiences became short-lived, I realised, was that when I became school captain in 1980-something. I can't remember.

[1 : 22] I realised at that time that life wasn't easy when you were placed in positions of authority. You had to take the responsibility of the job that you did seriously.

I thought it was a great thing at first. I was really excited. But the other thing I discovered with this job was that this job of high esteem did not give you the greatest sense of popularity either.

There were people who might have feared me, but I wasn't very popular amongst my peers around the school. And I found that people of all ages, including teachers, gave you a very hard time.

We're almost saying all that. It's because tonight we're looking at the topic of how to make yourself popular. Well, that's the title that's been given to this sermon, not as printed on the top of the pew, which says how to be set free from sin.

We're looking at the notion of how to make yourself popular. And what I want to start off by saying is that Paul and Barnabas did not set out to make themselves popular when they headed out on their first missionary journey.

[2 : 28] And in Acts chapter 13 and 14, we're looking at the first missionary journey of Paul, Barnabas, and for a short time, a guy called John Mark. But we discovered that last week, that after Paul's first recorded sermon, which is in the chapter I looked at last week, after his first sermon, they have a lot of popularity amongst the people of Pisidia Antioch, which is the town that he's in.

So popular was his message that he preached that the people there beg him to come back the next Sabbath and tell them more about the things that they know.

Why have they become so popular? It's because they have preached the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He has used the scriptures, he's used the Bible or what he had at that time, to point to who Jesus is. He has offered hope to the people, to the people that were in that town. But he hasn't drawn the attention to himself. What he's done is he's drawn the people's attention to Jesus Christ.

Jesus being the Messiah, the one that is chosen by God. Now that's hardly the way to become popular in the world's eyes today, is it?

[3 : 51] I mean, everybody says do this and do that, look after yourself, put the right face cream on and all those sorts of things and say the right things and you become popular. It's everything that you do. Now popularity is something that we all crave from time to time.

We all desire to be noticed among our peers. It's a natural human thing, I think, to be desired and to be popular in some respects. But if we feel like we have to entertain those around us to be popular, then there's going to be disappointment for us somewhere down the road, just as I discovered about being school captain.

Paul and Barnabas' popularity, as I just said, is brought about due to the gospel that they preach. The gospel they preach is liberating for those who receive it.

It's a message of hope for the people because it talks about God's grace being poured out on every believer who turns in faith to Jesus Christ. Now we read here in verse 44 that the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.

Now Paul obviously knows his Bible and he knows how to preach it and gain the people's appeal. And so good is he that almost the whole city comes to hear.

[5 : 19] But what did they come to hear? They gathered to hear the word of the Lord. Paul was the instrument who was speaking it but they gathered to hear the word of the Lord that was to be preached.

And it was the word of the Lord that almost this whole town came to hear. Now the place that they met is probably in the Jewish synagogue or near the place and so on.

And you can be sure that this audience is made up of largely Jews as well as Gentiles and so on.

And the Jews that are gathered there on seeing the crowds we read are filled with jealousy.

Now they were jealous I think for two reasons. Firstly, they were jealous of Paul and Barnabas and their missionary efforts. Perhaps because their own missionary efforts had been much less successful.

They just probably built up a happy little enclave and things were just sort of meandering along. So they were jealous for that reason. And secondly, they were jealous because they disagreed with the message that Paul and Barnabas had preached.

[6 : 32] Because the message that they preached contravened everything that they ever thought. So we read in verse 45 they blasphemed and they contradicted what was spoken by Paul.

In other words, they denied that Jesus was the Son of God. They denied that Jesus was the Son of God. They denied that he was the one who could forgive sins. They denied that Jesus, this Jesus rose from the dead.

And denying also, probably, that they were responsible for the death of Jesus. Essentially, all the elements that is preached in Paul's sermon which we looked at last week, they are denying here as Paul and Barnabas speaks to the crowds.

Now, in January, I was down at Phillip Island at the CMS Summer School. And on the Sunday night, three or four weeks ago, there was an open air service held in the park down near the pier. And it was quite a good service at this particular service. The gospel was presented in a gentle and a very creative way. There was music, there was drama, there's some quite humorous sketches and so on.

[7 : 46] And there were passages of scripture read with explanations told along the way. A guy called David Beals, the evangelist in this diocese, he spoke, and he spoke very well.

And it was during this presentation of the gospel that was done in an open air setting, there came a very angry voice from the crowd.

Remember that? And his very angry voice from the crowd using all sorts of very colourful language. I'll leave you to decide what sorts of words.

And he was also denying the claims in the Bible about Jesus. And someone started talking to him and eventually things settled down.

But it was a little bit scary just for a few moments there. Well, a similar thing, I think, is going on here in Pisidia, Antioch, except that there was, there are a few more people denying the claims of Jesus.

[8 : 47] This person down at Phillip Island was just one person. There would have been quite a few more people denying the claims of Jesus that Paul and Barnabas were speaking about. And it is a group of Jews who have not received the message that Paul preaches.

And in turn, as they deny these claims, they in turn reject the offer of eternal life that Paul has been talking about. And so it seems then that official Judaism, as represented here by the synagogue, has rejected the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And that's not to say, however, that some of the Jews present didn't convert to following Jesus.

They did. And we read that these people are told to continue on in the grace of God, which is verse 43, talks about.

Now, the result of this Jewish opposition, though, to the gospel led Paul to turn to the Gentiles and find warrant from scripture that the gospel should also go to the Gentile world.

Gentile world, that is, it should move out from the Jews and go to the Gentile world. And the Gentiles are people, of course, who were not Jews, anyone else who isn't a Jew. Now, God has

already appointed Paul to this call, if you like, this position in chapter 9 of Acts.

[10:13] And in chapter 9, verse 15, it says, the Lord is speaking to a guy called Ananias. He says, he, speaking about Paul, Paul is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.

Paul, being a Jew himself, didn't necessarily want this to happen because he loved his people and he wanted to give them every opportunity to join him in proclaiming God's salvation.

Sadly, many Jews did not recognize Jesus as Messiah and they did not understand what God was offering or did not understand that God was offering salvation to anyone that is Jew or Gentile who comes to faith through, comes to him in faith through Jesus Christ.

So Paul says to him in verse 46 here of chapter 13, after all this blaspheming and contradictions that's going on by the Jews, he says, it was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you, speaking to the Jews.

Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us saying, I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles so that you might bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

[11:42] Well, what's going on here? In the history of Israel, I'll try and explain this, in the history of Israel, it was God's plan that Israel would be a light to the Gentiles as this verse says, as verse 47 says here.

But Israel failed to serve God. What they did is they turned to idols and other forms of worship. They failed to serve the true God. And rather than drawing people into a relationship with God by the lives they lived, their lives turned away from God and to sin.

They followed sin, turned to sin. And in the end, Israel is meant to be a people serving God and drawing people into a relationship with God.

But in the end, it came down to Jesus who is what we call the true Israel. God's suffering servant, the Messiah. It comes down to this person, to this Jesus who would be a light to the nations as verse 47 says here.

And through him, his light would spread out and enlighten the Gentiles. Now Sue, if you could turn this overhead on. I'll try and explain it in a better way.

[13:04] We have here two big circles and let's have a look at this. This is Israel in the olden times before Jesus came along. And the example is that through the nation of Israel and the way they lived their lives, they are to draw, this is the rest of the world out here, they are to draw people into a relationship with God and so on.

And as they do, as they lead by example, this circle is meant to get bigger and bigger. But it doesn't. They turn away from sin, they turn away from God and they turn to sin and idols and this circle gets smaller and that's part of the history of Israel as you look at it in the Bible.

And eventually it gets down to just one person who is able to free people from sin and this person of course is Jesus. And through Jesus he's going to be a light to the nations.

Israel is meant to be a light to the nations but they aren't and it's through Jesus that they are a light to the nations. And so through Jesus then the gospel again comes in Jesus' death on the cross and rising and so on he draws people into God's kingdom and so we see Paul who was against Jesus at first he becomes a Christian.

He converts to following Jesus and we've seen through Acts how people are drawn into the kingdom and this circle gets bigger and that's kind of what's meant to be happening and through Jesus we're meant to be a light to the nations and a light to the Gentiles.

[14:38] First of all the gospel went to the Jews and then it goes to the Gentiles as well. Thanks. Paul being a Jew himself sorry so Paul has taken the gospel to the Jews most of whom have rejected it as he starts preaching the gospel about the truths of Jesus and so he then moves out to the Gentiles and here we are seeing now how he extends the offer of God's grace to the Gentiles.

So what happens? We read in verse 48 when the Gentiles heard this that is that salvation was for them as well they were glad and they praised the word of the Lord and as many had been destined for eternal life became believers.

Friends it is God who chooses us for eternal life. Some people often think that we choose God when it comes to matters of faith.

It's like going into Maccas and deciding what sort of hamburger we're going to eat tonight whether it's a big Mac or a quarter pounder and so on. It's not. It's the reverse.

God chooses us and in doing so we are set apart for God's work here on earth and in eternity. And that's what grace is all about.

[16:14] It's God's undeserved favour shown towards us. And when we understand God's grace given to us through the Lord Jesus Christ and receive it by faith we enter into a relationship that can never ever be destroyed.

and we too are set apart for God's work. But it's not the work we do that gets us into heaven. We work for God out of grateful thanks for his generosity shown towards us. And that's what these Jews did and these Gentiles did who were destined for eternal life.

They praised God that he had chosen them and no doubt through their praise they too spread the good news of his saving grace throughout the region.

When we are working for God serving him faithfully then nothing will stop the spread of his work. Nor does it mean though that persecution will cease.

[17:20] Far from it. Sometimes people think now that I'm a Christian life's rosy. Well it's not. we see here that persecution for Paul and for Barnabas increases.

Despite the popularity of Paul and Barnabas which we have seen the previous week and on this day when almost the whole city comes out they still enter into persecution don't they?

The devout Jewish women and the leading citizens of the city stir up a persecution against Paul and Barnabas and drove them out of their region. Well I often find it comforting as a Christian to be reminded from the Bible and throughout life that there are others who have been persecuted for being a Christian.

Hardship and persecution for God's people are part of human experience. And we ought not be surprised then when opposition to the gospel comes our way for being a Christian.

The thing to do I think in those situations is to get on with serving God. Luke tells us here that in verse 51 that Paul and Barnabas after all this persecution they go through they go and they shook the dust off their feet in protest against them against the Jews and went to Iconium to serve the Lord there as we will see in a moment.

[18:50] But first we read we just read that they shook the dust from their feet. Often the Jews would shake the dust from their feet when leaving a Gentile town because this symbolized cleansing themselves from the contamination of those who did not worship God.

For Paul and Barnabas to do this to Jews demonstrated that Jews who reject the gospel are not truly part of Israel and are no better than pagan Gentiles.

though Paul and Barnabas may have had problems with the gospel being accepted we read on that the disciples are filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

And there is a lot to be thankful for isn't there? The gospel as we've seen has been proclaimed. people have received it by faith and the news of the gospel has spread throughout the region.

And this gives them much joy. Now joy is a fruit of the spirit as Galatians chapter 5 talks about. And I wonder if joy is a characteristic of our own Christian life.

[20:10] do we display that same joy because it's a fruit of the spirit. Now we don't know how many people became Christians in this region at that time but it would certainly have been quite a number of people.

But the opposition to the gospel is fierce and more considerable in some respects. I mean Paul and Barnabas are actually kicked out of the town.

I don't know anyone in Australia who's been kicked out of a town for proclaiming the gospel. There probably has been but I don't know anyone. They've been kicked out of the town where they were at. But still people came to the Lord.

Now from experience in the secular world and now in full time ministry I know that gospel ministry is hard work. It is very hard work.

Sometimes it seems that there is little or no fruit being seen at all from the ministry that we are involved with. We ought to keep it in perspective though and remember who it is that is in charge of the work that we do.

[21:17] And that is, it is God who is in charge. He is sovereign. And that doesn't mean that we neglect God's command to take the gospel to the nations.

We ought to be praying for opportunities all the time to share our faith. And more than just praying, we ought to be taking risks to proclaim the gospel in relevant and creative ways.

Just as people try to do down at Seema Summer School over the summer break. We should be trying to present the gospel in relevant and creative ways individually as well as corporately. And nor should we be surprised when opposition comes our way. Even if we are popular amongst our peers. Paul and Barnabas didn't give up preaching the gospel after being kicked out of Pisidia Antioch.

They go on to a place called Iconium and they proclaim the gospel over there. And again, we read that they went, we see the formula for Paul's ministry. They went to the Jewish synagogue first where both Jews and Greeks became believers.

[22 : 28] So Paul doesn't abandon the Jews altogether, not at all. He still goes and preaches the gospel first to the Jews and to the Gentiles as well. Now Luke doesn't give us the details of the sermons he preached in Iconium but we can safely presume that it is the same gospel that he preached when he was in Pisidia Antioch.

And to this gospel there are those who accept it and again there are those who reject it, both Jews and Gentiles. As in Pisidia Antioch, there is great division to the gospel Paul preached.

Verse 4 of chapter 14 says, some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. The reason being is that the gospel both unites and divides.

It is good news for those who receive it and it is an offense for those who reject or ignore it. Even with the signs and wonders that accompany Paul and Barnabas in Iconium as verse 3 tells us, we still see there is great opposition to the gospel.

Now today people demand signs and wonders in order to come to faith. faith and we may often wish that we could perform a miraculous act that would convince everyone once and for all that Jesus is Lord.

[23 : 59] But we see here that even if we could perform a miracle, it wouldn't convince everyone. Rather than waiting for a miracle to happen, and sometimes they do, I'm not going to deny that they don't, we do well getting on with the job of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ and leaving the convincing of God's salvation up to the Holy Spirit.

With the signs and wonders that are performed here, there also appears to be an even greater opposition for Paul and Barnabas within this region. They learn of the town leadership's attempt to mistreat them and to stone them, and so they flee from the city to other townships throughout the region of Laconia and the surrounding country.

Now these towns of Derbe and Lystra, I didn't bring a map with you, I'm sorry, are hardly important or strategic sites for evangelism compared to Jerusalem and these other two cities of Antioch that we've heard about in sermons in recent weeks.

They're not strategic sites at all, they're small places. But we see that their proclamation of the gospel continues on wherever they go. And the point is that for evangelism to occur, you don't need to be in what some would call a strategic place.

Wherever we are, we can serve God. Now applying that to ourselves then means that wherever we are, we can serve God.

[25 : 39] We don't have to wait for the right time to be telling people about God. We can be doing it right now, whether it's at Don Val Christian School, Doncaster Secondary College, Ivanhoe Grammar, Blackburn High School, Holy Trinity Kew, Melbourne University, here at Holy Trinity in Doncaster.

The list is endless. We don't have to wait. God can and he will use us if we are willing to let him to take charge. And of course, there is going to be opposition to the gospel wherever we go.

But it is hardly going to be life threatening here in Australia at this present time anyway. There is of course the risk that in telling others about Jesus, we do become unpopular.

We go down in someone's esteem. It's a risk that we might have to take. And I suggest to you that it's a risk that is worth it as well.

For the goal of a Christian is not necessarily, is not to necessarily make our own names popular among people. In the long run, that is all folly.

[26 : 53] The only legacy that comes from that is having our name entered into some history book or some plaque or something like that. The goal of a Christian is to enter into a mature relationship with Christ through Bible study, prayer and fellowship with other Christians.

In other words, keeping Christ central in everything that we do. And it is also to make God's name known so that we may enter into that heavenly prize that is made available to everyone who has

faith in Christ Jesus.

believers. Well, Paul's ministry was one that brought popularity and it was one that also brought great persecution as we will see as we continue through Acts in the times to come.

And we've seen both aspects of Paul's popularity and persecution in Acts chapter 13 and 14. But the reason he was able to press on in ministry in the powerful way that he did was because Christ Jesus had made him his own.

Christ had made Paul his own. For him, for Paul and for Barnabas, Christ was central in everything that they did.

[28 : 22] And before Christ, Paul was counted as popular. Before the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul was counted as popular. Because of Christ making him his own, Christ has made him his own.

He now shares in that heavenly reward that waits for all of us who trust in him. And friends, all the popularity that we ever need is found in our significance before Christ.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your gospel. We thank you that it has the power to change lives.

We thank you that you have called us out into your marvellous light. Lord, we pray that we would serve you faithfully, that we would take risks, that we would seek to be popular before you, no matter the circumstances we are placed in this world.

Give us faith and endurance, perseverance, to press on toward the goal which you have made for us and given to us through Jesus.

[29 : 41] Amen. Amen. Amen.