

The Gospel Unleashed

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[0:00] Well, people love catchy quotes, don't they? Particularly preachers. So some preachers quote the English writer G.K. Chesterton. So, for example, I'll do the slides right. On this one it says, the Bible tells us to love our neighbours and also to love our enemies, probably because they are generally the same people.

Are there any neighbours here? I think we should ask. He's also got a great hairdo there as well. This one is a bit more, you can ponder this for a while, the riddles of God are more satisfying than the solutions of man. You can ponder that one for a while. We'll just leave it there for a sec, Ryan, I'll do it from up here.

But there's another quote that people, and not just preachers, but Christians have used quite a bit as well. And they attribute it to a man called Francis of Assisi, the Italian Catholic monk who started the Franciscan order. And here's the quote, It's quite a catchy quote, isn't it? It basically means that we should focus on preaching just with our deeds and not use our words at all unless we really have to. But here's the thing, old Francis actually never said it.

The closest he got was to say preachers should back up their preaching by their deeds. He himself preached with his words quite a lot. One biographer said that he would preach up to five different villages in a day. In fact, legend has it that he would even preach to the birds, which is why, I don't know if you can make it out, but most of the pictures have him talking to birds or birds around.

But why such a preacher? Well, because the word gospel refers to news, which by definition is proclaimed words, whether spoken or written.

[2:00] I mean, imagine if the TV news reporters didn't use words. They just had to use charades and we'd have to try and guess what the news was. It might make the news a bit more entertaining, but it's not going to really be helpful, is it?

News, by definition, is proclaimed with words, whether spoken or written. And the reason we liked that quote that was up there is because it often lets us off the hook, doesn't it? It means, oh, we don't have to use words anymore.

But I'm sorry to say that this chapter is all about using words. Chapter 8 is all about proclaiming the gospel, what we call evangelism. We see it in verse 4 and 12, 25, 35 and 40. It's all the way through. In fact, in verse 4, it's a bit hard to tell in the English, but the word preached there is the word gospel.

And Luke has only used that word once in seven chapters, but in today's chapter, in one chapter, he uses it those five times.

In other words, the whole chapter is about evangelism, preaching the good news or the gospel. That's what the gospel means, good news about Jesus. But before we get to see that proclamation, the first thing we realize is that the gospel can be proclaimed because it's now been unleashed from Jerusalem everywhere.

[3:27] So point one in the outlines in verse four. In fact, we'll pick it up that recap that Graham mentioned. Have a look at chapter eight, verse one, the second half of verse one. It says, See, the irony is the persecution.

It actually unleashes the gospel, doesn't it? And this is a good reminder that God can use even persecution to grow his church even today. And we need this reminder because there is some fear amongst our churches about our religious freedom in our country at the moment.

And at one level, it's understandable to have this fear because there is religious discrimination. In fact, the ABC this week released an article based on a survey in July this year where 70 percent of all Australians, religious or not, agree there is religious discrimination in Australia today.

And yet at the other level, there is no reason to fear. Because God can use even this persecution to grow the church.

To help it grow in maturity. Help people stand up for what they have to choose whether they're going to stand up for what they believe in or not. And even grow it in number. But the point here is that this persecution doesn't destroy the church, but actually, ironically, unleashes the gospel.

[5 : 41] From Jerusalem to everywhere. Speaking of being unleashed, our pet Ruby the rabbit was accidentally, accidentally unleashed the other day.

And when she was, we found her in the bookcase and then she was on the couch and then even managed to somehow to get on Tim, my son's shoulder.

She was unleashed and went everywhere. The point of the silly illustration is God deliberately unleashed the gospel through persecution and it went everywhere. Including Samaria.

And here we see that this gospel is also God's true power to save. So point to verse eight. Sorry, verse five. We'll pick it up. Verse five.

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 pay close attention to what he said. For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many and many who are paralyzed or lame were healed.

[6 : 44] So there was great joy in that city. Here Philip preaches the Messiah. That is, he tells people that Jesus is the anointed king. That's what Messiah means.

Anointed king. And the one who died for our sins to save us from judgment and give us life eternal instead. And the one who then rose from the dead, witnessed by many, which proved he was God's chosen king, Messiah.

And Philip, we're told, also did some amazing miracles which caused people to pay close attention to his message. But it seems Philip had some competition for the people's attention.

Because we read in verse nine that 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 that all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, This man is rightly called the great power of God.

And they followed him because he amazed them for a long time with his sorcery. And so do you see this kind of competition for the people's attention here? On the one hand, in verse six, they pay close attention to Philip, who boasts about Jesus.

[8 : 03] But on the other, in verse 10, they pay close attention, exactly the same word, actually, to Simon, who boasts about himself. And people think Simon is the great power of God.

And they follow him until that is they hear God's true power, which converts them. You see verse 12? 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. Yet the people he end up believing in Jesus and are converted, aren't they?

And that's part of what baptism symbolizes, a conversion from one to another. They converted from following Simon to following Jesus. And as we've seen earlier in Acts, this means they are saved from judgment for our sins and given life eternal.

Though interestingly, we're told in verse 13 that Simon follows Philip everywhere and seems more interested in the miracles than in Jesus.

[9:23] We'll come back to Simon later. But here we see that the gospel message is actually greater than the great power of Simon. The gospel message is the true power of God to save.

Greater than Simon, greater than even Philip's miracles. You see, the miracles got people's attention. That's what we're told, aren't we? They are like pre-evangelism, if you like, that inclines people's ears to listen.

But it's the gospel that is actual evangelism and actually converts people's hearts. See verse 12 again, when they believe Philip as he did a miracle.

No, as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom. Miracles don't convert them. It's the gospel. That's God's true power.

It's what Paul says in Romans chapter 1, that the gospel is the power of God to save all who believe. And this ought to be a great relief for us because, I don't know about you, but I can't do any miracles.

[10:31] I mean, I can pray and sometimes God intervenes and things like that, but I can't do what Philip did. Can you? But we can all speak the gospel in small ways, just in little ways, or some of us in big ways.

And that's what matters because that's what saves. That's God's true power. Now, of course, don't mishear me. We need to back it up with our lives, as Francis of Assisi did say.

And we are to do good things, which is part of loving people and caring for people. That's good and right to do. And we also to do good deeds because it might help people pay attention when we speak as well.

In fact, Paul writes to Titus to teach the people to be good so that they make the teaching of our God and Savior, Jesus, attractive.

But it's the gospel that ends up saving. Some churches focus on the pre-evangelism stuff, whether it's having fun at kids clubs or running soup kitchens or teaching English.

[11:33] Those are good and loving things to do. But they are not evangelism. It's not what saves in the end. It's the gospel that is God's true power to save.

I was talking with a friend last week from another church who was at a youth group leaders meeting. And two youth group leaders were having an argument with each other. One was saying, look, we need to make sure we keep teaching the kids about Jesus as well as having fun and games and so on.

And the other youth group leader said, no, we don't want to open the Bibles. We just want to make sure they have fun. And the irony was that youth group leader, the second one, was the daughter of the senior minister.

Of course, we need both. But one is loving towards people, which is good and helps people pay attention. The other is actually what saves.

Even the Samaritans, which shows us that this gospel can save anyone. So point three, verse 14. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to Samaria.

[12:39] When they arrived, they prayed for the new believers there that they might receive the Holy Spirit. Because the Holy Spirit had not yet come on any of them. They had been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus only.

Then Peter and John placed their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. Now, some Christians will use this passage, those particular verses, to say there are two classes of Christians.

There are those who believe in Jesus. They are like the economy class. And there are those who believe in Jesus, but also have this second baptism of the Spirit. They are like first class.

In fact, sadly, we've got some friends who even told Michelle and I that unless we had a baptism of the Spirit, we were not real Christians at all, which kind of hurt us actually.

But they use, they all of them use these particular verses to justify it. This two stage kind of thing, you know, believe in Jesus first and then get the Spirit second. And you can kind of see why they get that from here, can't you?

[13:40] Until we look closer at the text. And we can tell that this is actually not the normal experience. At first, if you look at verse 14, we're told that the apostles are sent from Jerusalem to check out this situation.

And that's not normal because we don't see the apostles running all around Palestine or the Middle East checking up on everyone's evangelism. They're not run off their feet following people up like that.

They don't check on Paul's evangelism. They don't check on Philip's evangelism next week. And so verse 14 already tells us something unusual is happening here. Second, if you look at verse 16, Luke has to explain why the apostles have to pray for the Samaritans.

And this tells us it's not normal for them to just be baptized without receiving the Spirit. If it was normal, then Luke wouldn't have to explain in verse 16, would he?

But because he does, verse 16 also suggests that this is not the normal situation. And third, you think that what is normal would have been prescribed or described when the Spirit was first given on the day of Pentecost.

[14:54] And on that day, we do see Peter reply, repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And then the apostles will come and lay hands on.

No, you will receive the Holy Spirit all in one go. This is what is normal. And so why is it not normal here?

Why is something different going on? Well, because the gospel has just crossed a massive boundary. You see, for centuries, the Jews did not like the Samaritans.

The Samaritans originally were Jews from the northern kingdom who intermarried with the Assyrians and all these other nationalities, as far as I know. I mean, they even had their own temple.

And so the Jews were considered the Samaritans like a mixed or mongrel race and they disdain them. It's what makes the story of the good Samaritan who helps a Jew so extraordinary.

[15:57] It's why the Samaritan woman on the next slide here is so surprised that Jesus, a Jew, would ask her, a Samaritan, for a drink. In today's terms, it's like us pure Victorians and those mongrel New South Welshmen.

I can say that because I'm from New South Wales. Or more seriously, like the Serbs and Muslims in Bosnia. Or the Protestants and Roman Catholics in Ireland.

The Catholics and Protestants in Ireland have hated each other for centuries, haven't they? It would be such a big deal then if all the Catholics suddenly became Protestants.

It would be such a big deal that the Archbishop of Canterbury, the head of the Anglican Church, might just come across to check it out, mightn't he? Well, that's why the Apostles seem to check this out.

Because even though Jesus had told them in our key verse of Acts 1-8 that they would be witnesses to Samaria, it's still hard to comprehend that the Samaritans would believe.

[17:03] It was such a big deal that the Apostles come and check it out. But more than that, if the Archbishop of Canterbury did see all the Catholics of Ireland becoming Protestants and Anglicans, then he might pronounce a blessing on them and welcome them to show that they are equals, that they are not second-class Christians.

And that's why it seems God withholds the Spirit in this case, so that the early church leaders, the Apostles, might come and pray for them to receive the Spirit and show that these Samaritans are accepted by the leaders of the church.

They are not second-class Christians. But the point is, if even Samaritans believe and receive the Spirit, then the Gospel can save anyone.

Yet Luke gives us a warning that not everyone will truly believe. You see verse 18? When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying of the Apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, Give me also this power or authority, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.

Here Simon wants to buy the Apostles' power, doesn't he? So that he can do what they can do. It seems that his belief in the beginning was not genuine.

[18:30] Luke hints at this, I think, in verse 13. You know, despite Simon believing and being baptized, Simon followed not Jesus, but Philip everywhere, and was, well, he seemed to be transfixed by the miracles.

So even in verse 13, his belief seemed to be in the wrong person and for the wrong reason. And now it's exposed. So pick it up at verse 20. 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. Peter doesn't pull any punches, does he? But that's because Simon's eternity is at stake.

And Simon's eternity is not looking good because we're told he's still captive to sin. And notice, by the way, that Peter calls the spirit the gift of God. And if the spirit is a gift, then anyone can receive it.

[19:41] You don't have to earn it or be a certain person or pay certain money. Anyone can receive it, even Samaritans. But the spirit cannot be bought with money nor used to boast one's own glory.

And so I take it Simon is a warning to those who want a part in ministry for their own fame and power. In fact, in church history, when leaders sought positions of authority for their own fame and glory, it was actually referred to as Simonry, based on Simon here.

And sadly, there's examples of that in church history. I don't think it's too much of a problem these days because the church is less respected.

And so, you know, climbing the church ladder is not as appealing. But I wonder if Simon is also warning to us all about whether we truly believe. To use a quote from the man with the hairdo again, he says, just going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than standing in a garage makes you a car.

It's believing in Jesus that makes us a Christian, isn't it? So it's worth pausing for a moment and asking ourselves, do we really believe in Jesus that he died for our sins and rose again as Lord?

[21:04] Do we believe in what he did for us so much so that we want to serve him out of thankfulness? Or do we only sort of believe in him when it suits us?

And if he makes our life easier here and now, and if not, then we kind of walk away. Do we truly believe or not? Well, in Simon's case, in verse 24, he does seem to repent.

That's a bit hard to tell if he's genuinely sorry or just wants to escape judgment. A genuine Christian would do both. I would be remorseful and want to escape judgment.

Perhaps it's meant to be unclear because in the end, only God knows our hearts. Either way, the apostles now returned to Jerusalem, but this time preaching the gospel to many Samaritans.

Do you see verse 25? 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.

[22:13] You see, if the gospel can save anyone, even Samaritans, then they're going to proclaim it to them, aren't they? And that's what we see.

Now, I realize that you know this. I'm pretty sure you know this. But I wonder whether we sometimes actually don't think this. I was talking with a Christian from church last week.

We were talking about some of the anti-Christian politicians and journalists. And he said, oh, they can't possibly be saved. Really? Or perhaps sometimes you might look at someone at work who is really anti-Christian.

Or people on the streets who look a bit rough or dress differently to us. And you think, nah, they can't possibly be saved. But the gospel can save anyone, even Samaritans.

And so while not everyone will truly believe, we ought to do what we can to see this gospel proclaimed as a church, as individuals. We ought to do what it says on the front of your bulletins.

[23:18] If you've got your bulletin there, just have a look at the front cover and look right down at the bottom. The white writing on the blue background there. And our mission statement is there to go, gather and grow in Christ.

But look at the sentence underneath it. What's to say? By prayerfully proclaiming and promoting God's word, God's gospel in love. That's what we ought to do.

We ought to be prayerful for those who proclaim it, like we did last Wednesday night at our prayer night. For those of us who have non-Christian family.

You know, it's very hard to talk to family about Christian things, isn't it? Then pray that God would raise up other Christians around them who can talk to them, as well as keep praying for them.

That's why it's been great to have those prayer sessions after church a couple of times to pray specifically for our non-Christian family and friends. And we're to be prayerful for opportunities ourselves to proclaim it.

[24:17] And then proclaim it when it comes up. For example, Christmas is coming up, which is the easiest opportunity all year. Christmas, everyone likes Christmas still, I think.

And so if you're sending Christmas cards, then why not write a verse to do with Christmas that shares a bit of the gospel, like those on the screen?

It's very easy to do. You just pop it in the post, off you go. Or, as Vijay said before, invite people to Christmas cards. I think he even gave you a strategy of sticking it to your keyboard.

You can't type in those. So do you mean your screen or? In the keyboard. Okay. Stick it in your keyboard so people can see. We've got the Christmas Eve for kids coming up.

If you've got grandkids, it's very easy to bring them along. For another person I know, when they visit the doctor, the doctor asks them how they were feeling. They explain their health, but then say, I'm not too worried because my church family is praying for me and I'm trusting God.

[25 : 17] The doctors don't generally know what to do with that comment, so they kind of just ignore it. But sometimes they don't. So another guy is actually having little conversations. Not much, just little conversations with his Muslim cardiologist at the moment, bit by bit, sharing his faith.

And if we don't get opportunities to proclaim it, then we can promote it by giving and serving, which helps others to proclaim it. And we need to do it all in love that people might pay attention.

For the gospel has been unleashed. It is God's true power to save anyone. So let's pray that we as a church and as individuals might do what we can to proclaim it.

Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly father, we do thank you so much for the message about Jesus who died for us and rose again. Because you love us so much that you want to see us forgiven and welcomed into your family.

We pray father, you would help us to have confidence in this message so much so that we would take the opportunities we have to share it. Help us to be prayerful for those who proclaim it.

[26 : 30] And help us to live lives of love that people might notice we are different and ask us why and then pay attention to us when we share it.

Help us in these things for Jesus sake. Amen. Amen. Amen.