

Being Under Control

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

- [0 : 0 0] I'm going to Newfoundland tonight to talk to a renewal conference in Cornerbrook, Newfoundland for the weekend, so I would value your prayers.
- It's impossible for me to imagine how anything I could say to them would have any bearing on anything that's true for them. And communication is a very difficult thing, and I don't know whether...
- It's going to be very interesting. It's interesting to contemplate who on earth will be there and how we will ever establish a basis of conversation. And I'm feeling fairly sensitive about that problem this morning because I phoned a local merchant with whom I was involved in a business transaction in which I was required to pay him some money, and he was required to provide me with a service.
- And the service that he was providing for me, I felt that there were some things that he didn't really understand, and he felt there were things I didn't understand, and I communicated my misunderstanding to him.
- And he said, well, I'll go and look it up. So as he went and put down the phone, I could hear him say, how the hell do I get customers like this?
- [1 : 2 9] Now, he's a nice guy, I know. I mean, I don't think he knows who I am, but I know who he is. But it's that kind of breakdown in communication that happens all the time.
- How do you get communication going again? I spent most of the morning composing a letter to him to try and help him figure out how the hell he gets customers like this.
- But reestablishing communication with him is going to be a little difficult. However, I just give that to you as an illustration because this little passage we're looking at today has a lot to do with how you establish communication.
- And it has to do with it in how it happens. You know, communication is such a relevant problem, isn't it, to me?
- I think I told you I was on a buffalo ranch. They don't call them ranches in Saskatchewan because nobody's wealthy enough in Saskatchewan to have a ranch.
- [2 : 4 7] They only have farms. That's how it was explained to me. And a wonderful place. And the father and his eldest son have great difficulty communicating.
- Husbands and wives often have great difficulty communicating. Neighbors who live just across the back fence often have great difficulty communicating.
- There's a lot of sign language goes on between them. But to just communicate heart to heart is a considerable achievement. So that our world is narrow and confined by reason of the fact that we have great difficulty communicating.
- And I suppose all our multiculturalism and all those kinds of things are a kind of monument to our aspirations to be able to communicate with all sorts of people with whom basically we can't or don't communicate.
- So I was thinking about that and how difficult it is. I was thinking about this passage which starts with Apollos was at Corinth and Paul took the back road and arrived at Ephesus.

[4 : 19] Now we've talked about Ephesus a great deal, I know, but it's a wonderful place and wonderful things happened there. And, you know, it was such a wonderful mixture of things into which Paul came.

Paul had been there the year before and he promised that he would come back. It was in the intervening year that Apollos, of whom I talked to you last week, came and taught there and was taken aside by the two leading lay members of the synagogue there, Priscilla and Aquila, and told more perfectly, more accurately, remember, what the gospel was about.

These two took them aside. These two took them aside. And then they sent Apollos on to Corinth and Paul, who had been in Corinth, made his way to Ephesus. So that's how the story begins.

And if you look at the text which is in front of you, you will see that he found some disciples. If you look at the last verse, you'll see that there were about 12 in number.

And so he had a kind of nucleus to work on. Now, that nucleus of disciples were there because they had heard from Apollos, presumably, and had begun to understand what this great thing that was happening was all about.

[5 : 57] And they were, in a sense, open to it. I was given two wonderful words this week that struck me as something by which we can measure the condition of our own hearts when we confront something.

Willfulness and willingness. Willfulness is where we impose our will on somebody else. Willingness is where we submit our will to somebody else.

These disciples were presumably willing to hear Paul. Others in that congregation were willful.

And as you know in the story, spoke evil of the way and had Paul thrown out of the synagogue in due course. So that was the small nucleus of people who were, within the whole complex of this amazing city of Ephesus, willing to hear.

And I suppose that one of the basic ingredients of communication is when we become willing to hear.

[7 : 08] And most of us have to learn how to do it. It's extremely difficult, isn't it? To be willing to hear. Because as soon as a person opens their mouth, you know how much they don't know and how much you do know that would be a help to them.

And so you shut them up and pour on them the blessings of all you know in a torrent of words from which they can barely escape. So that willingness to hear was what characterized presumably these 12 men.

And there they were in this amazing city of Corinth. In the synagogue in this amazing city of Corinth.

Things seem to change so little, you know, that you get certain ideas putting on new clothes in every generation.

But once you strip away the clothes, you find it's the same basic idea. And so while Ephesus at least had the temple of Diana of the Ephesians, the Roman Empire, the Greek philosophy, Hebrew influence, while they were part of a great commercial trading block in the Mediterranean, a significant seaport, they had Ephesus was past its prime.

[8 : 48] It was going downhill so that there's virtually nothing there today. But that had started by then. But all this was happening. And into this mix comes Paul and finds these disciples and begins to work.

That work, which in our 20th century AD, makes Ephesus an important city where, like hundreds of other cities, I presume, are totally forgotten because the gospel never got to them.

So there he is with these 12 disciples and he's talking to them and he asks them the question, did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?

Now that was because, presumably, he looked at them and he realized that something of the fullness of Christian faith was not apparent among them. They had a certain willingness, but somehow they hadn't been taken hold of by the reality of the Christian faith.

And Paul began his delicate inquiry to provoke them to answer him by this question, did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?

[10 : 04] which is a great contemporary question because many of us are baptized into a faith which we don't really grasp sometimes and don't really understand.

And it's very difficult when that happens to us and how we deal with it.

But Paul asked them the question and they said, no, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit. And that wasn't that they were ignorant of the Old Testament, ignorant of the many references to the Spirit in the Old Testament.

But it's thought to be that what they were saying to Paul was that though they had been instructed by John the Baptist and they were to believe in someone who was to follow John the Baptist and with that someone was to come a work of the Holy Spirit that they didn't know yet whether that had taken place.

So that they were a little out of step with what was happening in terms of the gospel. They knew that Jesus was coming. They knew that the Spirit was coming.

[11 : 24] And, but they had not yet experienced it or known of it, or even they were ignorant of the possibility, which of course is, is the thing that marks our faith so much is there's so much we don't know.

And they didn't know that the Holy Spirit had been given. And so Paul asked them, well, what baptism did you receive?

And they said the baptism of John. And I talked about that last week where the baptism of John was the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

But, and it was, I mean, baptism was used for different things. Proselytes to the Jewish synagogues who were Gentiles were baptized, but they weren't circumcised.

You know, that they were baptized as a kind of outward invisible sign of their joining in the company of the synagogue without the benefit of coming under the covenant.

[12 : 32] So baptism was used for that. Baptism was used in the ministry of John the Baptist.

It's, you know, I mean, part of the influence of a great North American evangelist like Billy Graham, you know, who has the sacrament of a call at the end of every one of his sermons.

And if you are willing to give your life to Jesus Christ, will you make your way out of the stands and will you come down here? You know, that became almost sacramental.

You could almost see Paul saying to these disciples, well, did you ever go forward and make a decision? He says, what were you, what baptism did you experience?

And they said, well, we did make a decision insofar as when John the Baptist called on us for repentance, we went forward and were baptized for, as a sign of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

[13 : 36] So that was something like the question that Paul is asking here. They answered that we were baptized with John's baptism. Paul said John's baptism was a baptism of repentance.

He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.

Jesus Christ. You know, that he doesn't fit. He is not the result of philosophers.

He's not the sort of concept of idealism. He's not the Superman of the comic books. He's none of those things. He is an historical person in whom and by whom God has chosen to reveal himself.

And so to come to the place of faith in Jesus Christ when he asks them, that is really a very difficult thing.

[15 : 19] I was telling, I was reading this week about the difference between average and normal.

Now, you could presumably get some statistical computer in here and we could figure out who the average person is that's in this room right now, you know, what color of hair they have, what age they are, how much they weigh, where they are.

We could put together a composite picture of the average person. But Jesus is not your average person. He is the norm.

He is the norm of all humanity. He is the one who describes in himself what humanity is all about.

And he is not. He is an historical person. He's not the conjecture of faith or philosophy. He is a person.

[16 : 25] And he lived at a certain time. Now, this is trying to escape from this. I mean, I've told you before, and I keep being terribly impressed by this.

This is the inescapable reality which seems to be at the heart of the Christian faith is that you cannot escape from the person of Jesus Christ as he is portrayed in the New Testament.

There is no escape. You have to discount the New Testament almost to zero in order to escape from the reality of that person. That's what you've got.

That's the one you've got to encounter. And that's why Paul says, John the Baptist says, you're to believe in one that is coming, that is Jesus. And then Paul says they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

And now, what that means, you see, when it says that they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, it means that after that baptism, they were to see their lives no longer in terms of their own willful individuality, but they were to see themselves in Jesus Christ.

[17 : 49] They were baptized into him. His life is my life. Who he is is who I am. That's what it means.

No other identity is significant to me. Now, when you come to life in the city, we identify ourselves by our income, by the community we live in, by the job we hold, by the honors that have been conferred upon us, by the achievements we've made.

All those things are measures by which we are known in the city in which we live. But our basic identity is that we are in Jesus Christ.

That's who you are. You see, that identity, you can't lose. All the other, I mean, honors can be stripped away.

Dignity can be stripped away. Income can be stripped away. Residences can be stripped away. All those things you can lose. But the profound reality of your identity with Jesus Christ, you can't lose.

[18 : 58] It can only come to mean more and more to you. And that's why, for the most part, when you go to see people who are dying, they want to hear about Jesus Christ.

There's no good conferring medals on them or giving them large checks and things like that. Those things don't matter. They want to know who they are when all that's gone.

And who they are is who they are in Jesus Christ. And so they are baptized into Jesus Christ. They come under the obedience of or under the control of the dominant reality of Jesus Christ.

Paul baptized them, placed his hands on them. The Holy Spirit came on them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. They were about 12 men in a row.

And so here's, you know, that wonderful thing. That first you were baptized into Jesus Christ. And then you received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

[20 : 07] You know that the whole Protestant Reformed Church is split on this issue. Can you be baptized without receiving the Holy Spirit? Can you receive the Holy Spirit without being baptized?

Do you have one experience and then have another experience? And perhaps another and another and another. Well, it's not an easy question.

I mean, because, but a lot of the source of the question comes from this passage. And the commentaries that I've read on it all agree that you can't split baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

That they're together. They're one. And I must say that I am convinced that that is true. But when people come along and look you in the eye and tell you there's a fullness to the Christian faith that you know nothing of.

There's an insight and there's an understanding and there's an experience which you haven't yet had. There's something more to it. There's something more to it. Now, it's hard not to believe them because, well, people like me and perhaps some of you, not all of you of course, but some of you.

[21 : 25] You have a heightened awareness of your own total inadequacy. And when somebody comes along to tell you that this adequacy which you long for couldn't be yours, then it's hard not to buy.

But I think the adequacy is not in your experience necessarily.

The adequacy is in Jesus Christ. That you are baptized into Jesus Christ. So that you get four things emerging out of this passage about what happens when you receive the gospel.

And the four things are repentance. Repentance is like this, you see. Here you are right here.

And here is your world right here, you see. And you look down on it. Repentance is when you look over the shoulder and find that your world is actually up there.

[22 : 38] And that this is only a figment of your imagination. And instead of being big and this is small, you suddenly realize you're very small and this is very big.

And that's basically what repentance is. It's turning around and finding out that the great reality is a reality that we try and forget.

We try and ignore. And so that's what happens in repentance is that you turn around. We have a wonderful fellow who's staying with us.

I shouldn't tell you about him, I guess. But besides, he's a Roman Catholic. I do that to get at dawn mostly.

But he's blind. He's been blind most of his life. He went blind as an 11-year-old child.

[23 : 46] And, uh... But... The reality of his world.

I mean, you just... I just feel destitute as though my life is without content. Because though I can see everything that's going on, it doesn't make a lot of sense to me.

He can't see anything that's going on. But the reality of God and Christ and the Holy Spirit is so real to him.

You know, and... I live a life of constant distraction, you know. I do this and then do that and then do this and then do that and keep busy at this and keep busy at that and go here and go there and always, you know.

And if I ever have to stop, I have a book to read so I don't have to think. And, uh... So that, you know, or I flip on the radio or flip on the television and do something to distract myself.

[24 : 49] He can sit there by the hour with nothing to distract him, you know. And, uh... I have become very envious of him because of this wonderful reality in his life.

The reality of... I mean, that repentance is something which he is always experiencing in his limitations, in his smallness.

He sees the greatness of God, you know. But... And the contrast, I mean, that I see in myself is that, you know, with my understanding and my visual abilities and so on, I see, uh...

I see the, uh... The smallness of my world and, you know, the world is my marble or something like that. That, that, that's...

So it's, it's amazing, isn't it? That, that if we could be given the gift of repentance in a way so that we contemplated constantly the, the wonder of the God who has created us and redeemed us.

[25 : 57] That's the first thing, is repentance. The second thing, which is, is part of the, which is part of the, uh... thing is faith in Jesus. And I've talked about that, uh, a little bit.

But it's, uh... The, uh... The, uh... The thing that makes it, I think, uh... Something that we need to emphasize, really, is that, uh...

Uh... That, uh... That Jesus is... Is the one in whom God has chosen to reveal himself. Remember the Ephesians had trouble with, uh...

With Paul when they started that riot. The Ephesians that had made the, the little silver shrines that they sold to the tourists. You know, and their great indignation when they went before the governor of the city and said to him, This man, Paul says, that gods made with hands are not gods.

What a preposterous idea. Yeah. And, uh... And yet, you know, that's, that's our world, isn't it? You know, we, we have the inalienable right to make our gods in whatever image we want them to be in and to treat them as gods even though, you know, they're made by us.

[27 : 22] We've created them. And, uh... And that's why this stranger, Jesus Christ, who always confronts us, in a sense, as our adversary.

You know, we talk about him as a friend, but he's, he's always an adversary because he stands in the way of our own willful ambitions and says, No, wait a minute.

Let's look at this. And so, we are brought to repentance. We are confronted by the person of Jesus Christ. And that's got to be a continuing relationship.

But it's, it's not all by itself, in a sense, a continuing relationship. That identity with Jesus Christ has, in obedience to the scriptures, been, it's been, it's been marked by baptism.

That you are baptized with water. And that is the outward sign of an inward and spiritual reality. that that, that baptism is, is prescribed by Jesus Christ.

[28 : 41] Go into all the world and make disciples, baptizing them in the name. So there is, there is a decisive beginning point. You weren't born into this faith.

You come into this faith by your own willing submission to it. And baptism is the sign of that willing submission. And that's why it's there.

And that's why if you bring your children to be baptized, you should be very careful that you explain to them what, what it means and bring them up in, in the recognition of what it means.

The, the, it's the, the willingness to, uh, in a world which neither knows nor honors Jesus Christ, a willingness to mark yourself as one who believes in him.

so that repentance, faith in Jesus, water baptism, and then the gift of the Spirit. And the gift of the Spirit as it was given in this passage is, I mean, this is so important because the gift of the Spirit is the presence of Jesus in the heart of the believer.

[29 : 51] and that the basic reality of communication in the life of every individual is his communication with Jesus Christ through the ministry of God's indwelling Holy Spirit.

So that is what's happening in your life. You are living in touch with God the Holy Spirit. And if you get out of touch, then you've got to seek to get back into touch.

You've got to spend time in meditation. You've got to spend time in reading the Scriptures. You've got to spend time in fellowship. You've got to encourage and strengthen one another constantly to be brought back to the ongoing experience of the Holy Spirit.

And I, you know, committed my life to Jesus Christ a long time ago. And I can't go back to that every day and try and relive that experience.

I can only sustain that experience by a continuing encounter with Jesus Christ by his indwelling Holy Spirit. So we've got to spend time with that most important person in our life, restoring and renewing contact and communication with God through the Holy Spirit which he's given to us.

[31 : 13] And when these men were baptized, suddenly communication instead of being an enormous problem was wonderfully facilitated and it says they spoke in tongues so that people heard in their own language.

and you know what a delight it is when you meet somebody who perhaps is an old friend or somebody you haven't seen for a long time and often when that happens you find that you have very little to say.

But then sometimes you can pick up and communication is established and you can open your heart and life to them and they to you and communication really moves.

And that's what our communication with God in Christ by the Holy Spirit is meant to be. That communication is what is to sustain us and keep us in this faith into which we have come by putting our faith in Jesus Christ by being baptized into the name of Jesus Christ having turned to him in repentance and faith.

that that communication is established by the work of the Holy Spirit. We begin to listen. You know I mean there's so many things about it.

[32 : 41] Let me just conclude with one. The thing that I think we need to be most aware of I think every human being there is is in touch with the Holy Spirit.

Now before I burned burned at the stake for that statement. Let me just tell you this. It may be by resistance to rather than willingness to submit to.

And that when you're talking to somebody you don't measure the conversation by whether they have got hold of some of your better ideas and have grasped the significance of your own great wisdom and intellect and understanding what's happening is you're seeking to discover how their conversation with God through the Holy Spirit is going on.

You're listening to them in terms of their conversation with God. It may be a conversation of resistance or a conversation of rejection or something but you know that that's happening and if you can get through to the point where you can help them to identify that conversation then you can really say something to them that might be helpful but you need to listen until you hear how that is happening and what that means and that repentance faith in Jesus Christ baptism is a sign of your belonging and the gift of the Holy Spirit that opens up the channel of communication between you and others and between you and God.

Those are the marks by which we are known or to be known as the disciples of Jesus Christ.

[34 : 41] Let me pray. God our Father we thank you for the wonder of your grace and mercy in reaching out and communicating with us in spite of our willfulness and our rebellion and our terrible self-centeredness so our God be with us each as we continue in that dialogue in which you have engaged us and bring us to a place of continuing repentance a place of trust and confidence in Jesus Christ a willingness to be identified as those who belong to Jesus Christ in a world that neither knows nor honors him and the ability to listen to you in order that we communicate to others we ask this in Christ's name Amen Amen minusc N