

Set Apart For What

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Date: 23 August 1986

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[0 : 0 0] But it ain't gone either. And he felt that it represented what we're trying to do here is just to have a kind of grapevine.

And there's all sorts of clusters around the downtown area. And into that downtown area we have a specific kind of role. And the specific role we have is the thing I want to talk about in these first three in order that you, who by turning up today, I think have demonstrated your loyalty to the cause.

And the implication we take from your being here is that you're not only loyal to the cause, but that we're sort of counting on you to help make this undertaking work.

And so that my job on these three weeks before, these first three weeks, is to set before you what it is I see us trying to do.

Okay. There we are. Well, this is what I think we're up to.

[1 : 1 7] It has to do with the gospel. Later on in the six weeks that follow, I'm going to work on the book of Ecclesiastes.

The book of Ecclesiastes is generally famous for being totally devoid of any gospel. But in one sense, it's a kind of negative approach to it.

But I find that very stimulating, and I hope that you'll find it stimulating when we begin to work on it. But the gospel is, as somebody said to me, which I found extremely provocative, is that we now live in a day when everybody talks about church growth and planting churches and getting churches going.

And that seems a worthy undertaking. And I guess I can't but hope that some of you are involved in some way in church planting and church growth.

But the point that he made when talking about it to me was that what we're really concerned is with gospel growth.

[2 : 3 6] Because the church is the result of the proclamation of the gospel. The church doesn't get together and decide what the gospel is, though some people, I think, are working on that principle in this day and age, that they're trying to find a gospel that is acceptable to the community we live in.

The reality which underlies the New Testament is that it is the gospel that gives rise to the church. And that when a community of people are confronted with the gospel, their corporate response to that gospel is what churches are built out of.

It's a group of people, maybe very few, who are seeking together to respond to the gospel that creates a church. If you get it the other way around, and you have something like the Anglican establishment looking for a gospel to preach to this day and age, you get terribly confused and mixed up.

And so what we need to do is realize that the fundamental activity, which I hope this group will serve in the downtown, is not to create churches, but to make clear what the gospel is, so that people in ones and twos and threes and fours and in wherever they're gathering together, are seeking to respond to that gospel.

And it's out of that that the church comes into being, the church of Jesus Christ. So that's the thing I want to talk to you about. Now, the thing I want to tell you about the gospel, though, is that it is highly destructive.

[4 : 31] It does an enormous amount of damage. Only in a kind of controlled sense, though. And the best illustration I know is the building next door, wherever that is next to it, which a few months ago stood proudly among the skyscrapers of downtown Vancouver and in a moment of time was dissolved into a pile of rubble.

Now, the gospel has the same effect on all sorts of people, that the sort of proud structure of our self-sufficiencies stand proudly among the other proud structures of men, and the gospel comes in and collapses it.

The gospel can well come into your life and collapse your life. You suddenly discover that by hearing the gospel, the whole substructure of your life comes tumbling down.

All the value systems you have, all the goals and ideals that you have, all the things that you've built into your life, they no longer have any sort of substance to them.

They tend to break down. So that people, quite rightly, are wary of the gospel because of its destructive effect, that it will destroy the proud castles of our own building that we have built ourselves based on the thing.

[6 : 02] And so I think you have to understand that the gospel is very destructive in that way. It's destructive in the same way, I think, that air transportation has just about destroyed via rail, you know.

Via rail, which is full of memories and full of romance and full of the early history of Canada and constitutionally and historically important to our whole nation is in danger of going out of existence because something entirely new has come along.

And in exactly the same way, when people are confronted with the gospel, the old pattern of their lives breaks down because it's no longer of any value to them.

And I think it's that that I think you need to, we need to understand about the gospel and why it's a very considerable threat. Now, to tell you things that I'm sure you all know, but I'm going to tell you anyway, this word, this is because I have a son-in-law who's in Old English.

He tells me about things like this. He says that in Old English there is this word, which is, this isn't God, it's good, because there's a sort of long O over there, and it's good spell, and it means good tidings, and it's two words, and he says that the opposite to it is this, which is a last spell, which is bad tidings.

[7 : 42] So you see somebody coming and you determine whether they're bringing good tidings or bad tidings. But when in the course of history, the Greek New Testament came to be put into English, the way they translated this one Greek word, which is evangelium, that Greek word was translated by these two words being contracted into a single word, and that's where the word gospel comes from, and it means basically good news, good tidings.

I think good tidings in a very special kind of sense. That is, I think it means, I think we have to understand it in terms of what we're coming to Ecclesiastes, you know, which says, vanity of vanities, all is vanity, there's nothing new under the sun.

I think you've got to recognize that the understanding of the gospel is that it is something entirely new.

You know, the way people will amble along and say, well, buddy, what's new? And then he tells you something that isn't new at all. Because, in fact, in the whole sort of realm of human experience, there is nothing new.

And the book of Ecclesiastes will assure you that there is nothing new. And philosophers will tell you that there is nothing new. But the gospel is presented to us as, in fact, being something new.

[9 : 22] A brand new dimension in terms of human existence and human meaning. It is a brand new thing that breaks in.

And you can put, I mean, it's like the missing part of a jigsaw puzzle. You can't get the picture unless this piece is there. And you may have all the pieces, but you can't put them together until this one thing is there.

And this is what the gospel is. So when you turn to Romans chapter 6, as you have it in front of you, you'll see that it says that Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, separated for the gospel of God.

He is set apart for this one thing. And, of course, when you consider that he wrote most of the New Testament, you'll see the significance of what it means when it says that God comes down and takes hold of this man Paul and sets him apart in order to make clear not only to his own generation and to his own time, but within the whole scope of recorded history to set forth that which is new, the good news that comes into a world where there is nothing new.

You know, we know it. We're jaundiced. We're apathetic about it until we discover that there is really a whole new dimension that breaks in upon our human life and history in the person of Jesus Christ.

[11 : 02] And Paul says, I am set apart for that. Well, now, when Paul says that he's set apart for the good news, there's a very interesting connection between that and our whole experience of the New Testament.

This word set apart is the same root word as Pharisee. Now, Paul prides himself saying, I am of the tribe of Benjamin.

I am an Israelite. I am a Pharisee. That's the way I have been trained. That's what my education has taught me. That's the group I belong to. That's the training I've had.

That's the school I went to. That's who I am. I am a Pharisee. I am a man who is set apart. Well, what was he set apart to?

He was set apart as a Pharisee. He was, you see, in this, in Romans 1, it says, Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, set apart for the gospel of God.

[12 : 13] And the implication is that, as I was formerly set apart for the law of God. He was trained in the law of God as a Pharisee.

He's now a new kind of Pharisee set apart for the gospel of God. Now, when you think of him, then, as being set apart for the law of God, he was set apart not for the good news, but for the bad news.

Because the law was what, was the means by which God brought us the bad news. And if you want to know the bad news about yourself, just read the law, look at yourself, and the bad news is right there in your lap.

It's an easy thing for anybody to do. And that's what Paul was doing. And the law of God, and I just looked this up this morning in order to refresh your minds and mine of it, the Pharisees had taken the Old Testament and had reduced it to 613 commandments.

Not 10 commandments, as we try and get by with, but 613 of them. Of those 613, 248 began, Thou shalt, and 365 began, And thou shalt not.

[13 : 47] So that that was the thing. And the Pharisee was the person who conducted his life, the whole of his life, his business dealings, his eating, his sleeping, his walking, his drinking, his thinking, his consumption, everything he did was subject to those 613 commandments, plus 39 principal species of prohibited acts, which he knew, and 31 customs of immense age that dated way back, had always been part of the, since, since Moses met God on Sinai, these things happened.

And so you see, what happened is that, that Paul was a Pharisee set apart for the law.

And that was the law he was set apart for. The, the interesting thing about this, I think, is that, is that, if you are a church member, and if you are a professing Christian in the society we belong to, the expectation which is laid on you by our society is that you will be a good Pharisee, that you will know the 613 laws, you'll know the positive ones, you'll know the negative ones, you'll know the prohibitions, and you will know the customs of ancient usage, and you will live according to them.

Now that is what most people think joining a church means. It's what most people think a Christian is. Somebody who lives by the law.

And Paul was set apart to teach and enforce the law. And because, of course, he was called to teach and enforce the law as a Pharisee, when one day in Jerusalem, he found himself at the trial and subsequent execution of St. Stephen, he could see very clearly that the whole structure which he was set apart for would collapse if people believed what Stephen was saying.

[16 : 07] And so, the first introduction we have of Paul, the Pharisee, set apart for the law, is that he was standing there witnessing the stoning of Stephen and consenting to it.

He knew it had to happen. Not only was he consenting to it, but his zeal burned more vigorously and he could see what the impact of what Stephen had said was going to have and what the Christians were teaching was going to have on the thing that he, his whole life, was set apart to build.

That is, this structure. And so, St. Paul zealously persecuted the Christians until Christ met him on the road to Damascus and said, not why are you persecuting the Christians, but why are you persecuting me?

it's an amazing statement that Christ says that to him. And that becomes the turning point for Paul when he ceases to be a Pharisee of the law and he realizes that God is calling him to something else.

Instead of being set apart as a Pharisee for the law, he now is set apart, that is, a Pharisee for the gospel.

[17 : 35] His total life is taken up with the gospel. The working out of it, the proclamation of it, the dissemination of it to all parts of the world to share it, and wherever he goes, he goes to take with him this gospel so that people will understand it.

Well, that's how, that's how the, how the thing happens. And you'll see that when the, the man set apart for the law brings the gospel, then the whole of this structure collapses.

That's what, you know, like the building next door, the whole structure of the law by which Paul thought men should live, he saw that it just didn't hold together at all.

It just collapsed. And that anybody who tried to keep it from collapsing was acting contrary to the good news which was, which was, he says, concerning Jesus Christ.

Well, Jesus himself, you see, he really exploded this Pharisaical approach when he, he gives that poignant picture in Luke chapter 18 where two men went up to the temple to pray, the one was a Pharisee, the other was a Republican, the Pharisee spoke thus with himself and said, I thank God that I am not an extortioner, I am not a robber, I am not an adulterer, I am not like this man here, I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.

[19 : 13] And the reason Pharisees wouldn't go from one house to a non-Pharisee's house to eat is because they figured they would be poisoned by eating the food in that house if the tithe had not been paid on it and they didn't want to run the risk so they wouldn't go to the house to eat.

So that Jesus takes that picture of the Pharisee and says, that's it, you know, we're done. It's all over.

The man who goes down to his house justified is the man who beat himself upon the breast and says, God be merciful to me, a sinner. And that's what the, that's where Jesus, in a sense, destroys the Pharisee.

The whole structure of religious life of the community of Israel is destroyed. And I think a lot of people, you know, I mean, in a sense, have heard the gospel in our society in that they know that the Pharisee in our society is a hypocrite, you know, that what he's trying to do can't be done.

And when Jimmy Swaggart or one of those guys falls from grace, they say, yes, indeed. I knew it all along. It inevitably had to happen because they see Christian faith in terms of 613 commandments and laws and all sorts of things that once you break them you're dead.

[20 : 47] The fact that they might have done infinitely worse than Jimmy Swaggart ever dreamed of doing has no effect on them whatever. But it's just that this whole structure collapses in that way.

Well, that's what happened to the Pharisee set apart for the law and he becomes the Pharisee set apart for the gospel.

And then the gospel concerns Jesus Christ and the gospel then is the business that Paul sets out to proclaim. When he writes the epistle to the Romans, he is presenting them with or confronting them with the gospel.

And they have to learn how to respond to it. Give me one minute more and I'll just show you what Romans says about that. Romans says, this is the gospel.

And I just want to focus your thinking about it. Paul says, this is the gospel. Okay? He says, now, you might say, well, where do we find it?

[21 : 55] Where do we go looking for it? What mountain do we climb? What river do we cross? Where do we confront it? Paul says, this word is very present to you, even on your lips and in your heart.

And he said, if on your lips you can confess that Jesus is Lord, and if in your heart you believe that God has raised him from the dead, then he says, you will be saved.

That's the good news. And that's how you appropriate the good news. And it's hopelessly simple. It should be much more difficult.

It should be much more complicated. There should be some much more elaborate ceremonial that goes with it. But there isn't. It means, in fact, that if you have never confronted the gospel before in your life, and you're walking from Georgia and Burrard to Georgia and Granville, and you say to yourself, I believe Jesus as Lord, and want to acknowledge him, and I believe that God has raised him from the dead, then the whole of the kingdom of God is open to you.

It's just there. Now, that's a simple thing to do, but you've got to remember that it might be destructive of a lot in your life.

[23 : 23] You might tremor to say that Jesus is Lord, and God has raised him from the dead. Jesus is Lord, has to do with your relationship to him.

The fact that God has raised him from the dead has to do with your accepting the testimony of the apostles to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. So it's putting that gospel in place in downtown Vancouver that we have to work at, and having put it in place, persuading people that even though it may have a profoundly destructive effect on their life, the effect is only to clear the way to build something far more significant in terms of their eternal life than anything they could ever do by themselves.

And we come to that when we confess Jesus as Lord. And I suppose it wouldn't be wrong for any of us to ask ourselves as we go from here, am I prepared to confess with my mouth that Jesus is Lord?

And if I do, will that give expression to the faith in my heart that he is the one whom God has singled out to be the focus of the good news by raising him from the dead, confessing with our lips and believing in our hearts.

prayer and I'll quit. Father, this has been hard work talking today and I suspect it's been hard work listening, but I do pray that you will ground us and establish us in the reality of the gospel with which we are confronted by St. Paul and we ask that you will show us what it means in the circumstances of our life together and in the circumstances of our personal and family lives to be able to say, Jesus is Lord, and to believe in our hearts that God has raised him from the dead.

[25 : 33] We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.