

~ *The Privilege of Evangelism* ~
Clayton Fopp

I wonder if when you hear these words “the privilege of evangelism” there’s a part of you that thinks that’s a phrase on par with “the joy of root canal,” “the pleasure of childbirth,” “The simplicity of Centrelink,” or “The happiness of a funeral”?!

Why would we call it that, when so often evangelism feels like a chore not a privilege?

Something we feel guilty about.

Something that weighs us down because we often find it difficult and disheartening, rather than a privilege we throw ourselves into with enthusiasm.

And my goal is absolutely not to make any of us feel guilty if we haven’t been active in evangelism .

I am keenly aware of the danger of sounding like I’m trying to pressure you to do evangelism, or to do more evangelism.

That’s not my goal.

It is my goal that we’ll see evangelism the way God sees it - as part of his mission in the world that he graciously draws us into.

But if we’re going to understand this privilege of evangelism, there are 4 lessons from chapter 5 of 2 Corinthians that we need to be clear on.

To really see evangelism as a privilege, we need to understand:

- 1) The message of evangelism.
- 2) The motivation for evangelism.
- 3) The perspective for evangelism, and
- 4) The ministry of evangelism.

I honestly believe that if we get a handle on these four points we'll be much more able to think about evangelism as we ought, as God sees it: As a privilege.

Last week the two Simons challenged us about the proclamation of the gospel. Simon Jackson in the morning and Simon Potter in the evening spoke about what the gospel is, what the message of Christian evangelism is.

So let me recap that as our first point - the message of evangelism - and then we'll move on to the next three.

The Message of Evangelism

Last week we heard about what the gospel is. The word "Gospel" itself simply means "good news." Originally it wasn't a religious term, it just meant any announcement of good news. But it developed a more specialised usage, referring to the good news of knowing God in Christ Jesus; ***the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus*** as Paul says in chapter 4.

This Good News includes forgiveness for sin and rebellion against God.

It includes peace with God even though we were God's enemies.

It includes a new heart in place of our hard hearts.

Eternal life when we were condemned to death.

The indwelling of the Spirit of God even though we turned away from God but most of all, as Paul says to the Christians in Philippi, the ultimate promise held out in the gospel is that we gain Jesus Christ. ***"I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ"*** Philippians 3:8

Or put it another way: 2 Corinthians 5:21 ***God made him who had no sin to be sin for us ... but of course that's the means not the end ... so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.***

The gospel is about a relationship with God which is made possible through the death of Jesus in our place.

Now evangelism is simply the act of “gospelling” someone. The word for evangelism is based on the same Greek word as “gospel.”

To evangelise someone is to tell them the good news! To share with them this message of a relationship with God is possible and to call on them to respond to what God has done for them in Christ..

I think if we understand that as the message of evangelism - telling people God’s good news, it sounds a lot more like a privilege and a lot less like a chore!

Now there are lots of things that sometimes we think are evangelism that aren’t evangelism.

Personal testimony isn’t evangelism. Don’t get me wrong, personal testimonies are great! I hope everyone here can share with others what God has done for you.

But evangelism says to someone that they are sinful and need to repent.

That they were far off but can be ushered into God’s presence.

That it’s because of their sin that Jesus died.

That although they ignore God and reject him they can enjoy God and all his blessings for eternity if they repent.

Can you see the difference? Again don’t hear me saying personal testimonies have no place, but without speaking of Jesus’ death *for* my friend of *their* need to be saved, it’s not evangelism. Think of the episode in John chapter 9 and the man born blind.

He gives his testimony.

He speaks of what Jesus has done for him.

He gives glory to God, but he doesn’t even know who Jesus is!

Similarly, social action isn’t evangelism. Are we called to show mercy? Yes.

Showing mercy in practical ways might commend the gospel to someone, but only if they’ve heard the gospel.

Apologetics is not evangelism. We can argue with people about the reliability of the Bible and whatever, but that's not telling them that ***Jesus died once for all the righteous for the unrighteous to bring them to God.***

So if we're clear on the message of evangelism, doesn't that help us see how evangelism might in fact be considered a privilege? To be bearers of such good news, life-saving news, that is a privilege!

The Motivation for Evangelism

So having made sure we're clear on the message what's Paul's motivation for evangelism?

Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade people. (verse 11)

And if you look up at the previous verse, verse 10, you'll see what it is that Paul has in mind when he speaks of the fear of the Lord. ***For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that everyone may receive what is due them for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.***

Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade people.

Because we know that every person is going to stand before Christ on that last day.

Because we know that Jesus will call everyone to give an account of their life.

Because we don't want anyone to face that day unprepared, we try to persuade people.

It might be that those in the Corinthian church who were opposing Paul, were using this word "persuade" in a negative sense to describe his ministry.

"We come with eloquence and polished perfection. Paul will just try and persuade you!" And Paul picks up that term intended as an insult and says, "You bet I try and persuade people! I know what's going to happen to them!"

I know the Lord they're going to face as judge, and so I'll bring every fibre of my being to bear on trying to persuade people, to accept the gospel of Jesus Christ."

Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade people.

Paul is clear in verse 10 that everyone, Paul himself, the Corinthian Christians, anyone with whom Paul might ever have a conversation about Jesus, *everyone* will have to give account for their lives.

That spurs Paul into action so he can stand before Jesus with a clear conscience, and so that through him others might also stand confidently before Jesus.

Imagine I said we're all going on one day "evangelism helper course," absolutely guaranteed to help you share the gospel with your friends. Where do you think we might go to get the greatest motivation to speak to our friends and family about the gospel?

Maybe we go to Sydney and have a day face to face with John Chapman, one of Australia's most gifted evangelistic preachers.

Maybe we go to North Carolina and sit at the feet of Dr Billy Graham.

Maybe it's to London and to All Souls Langham Place, the home of Christianity Explored.

But do you know what I think would give us the greatest motivation for evangelism?

A day spent beside the judgment seat of Christ, as every person, Christian and non Christian is brought in to give an account for everything done in their life.

Wouldn't the reminder of that certain future event spur us into action?

Wouldn't the sure knowledge that *we* must give an account to Jesus, wouldn't that persuade us to persuade others?

Paul says the fear of the Lord.

The certainty of the coming judgment.

That fact that even he, Paul the apostle, will have to give an account to Jesus for the way he's lived his life, that's the first reason that he tries to persuade people of the gospel, despite how foolish that might look to those around him.

The second part of Paul's motivation for evangelism couples with the fear of the Lord and that is the love of Christ.

Verse 14 ***For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again***

It's not only the certain knowledge of giving an account before Jesus that leads Paul to throw himself into evangelism it's also because he's just overwhelmed by Jesus' love.

Jesus' love for him and others.

This love causes Paul to risk his own personal safety so that others might know it too.

This love leads him to ignore the dreadful opinions that people have about him.

This love drives him to say "I'll forget everything except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

This love led Jesus to lay down his life that we might enjoy God forever.

In the words of Charles Wesley: *Amazing love ... how can it be ... that thou my God ... shouldst die for me?*

Little wonder then ... that in considering the amazing love that Christ has for us Paul says ***I am compelled*** I can do no other than overflow with the story of this love, for the benefit of others.

There is no longer any room for self fulfillment, self-promotion, or self-indulgence. Everything changed when the light of Christ's love shone into Paul's life illuminating even the darkest corners and driving out any last vestiges of his own agenda for his life.

If you're a follower of Jesus think with me for a moment about how Christ's love shapes our evangelism. The love of Christ drove him to the cross in our place, and in place of our friends and family and neighbours **one died for all.**

If somebody died for me, I think I'd want to know about it. And if I knew that someone died for my friend, I'd want my friend to know about it.

If we truly grasp Paul's motivation for evangelism here, a right fear of Christ on one hand and an overwhelming sense of his love on the other, that actually makes me feel that evangelism is something I want to be a part of.

It's a privilege to be involved in the process by which we and others can stand before Jesus with a clear conscience. Imagine on that last day and one of your friends is called before Jesus and your friend says to the judge of the world, "I have looked forward to this day with confident assurance since I responded to the gospel after my friend explained it to me for the 27th time!"

What a privilege to respond to Christ's life-changing love, in a way that means more people enjoy that love.

The Perspective for Evangelism

It continues. If we're to think of evangelism as a privilege, we need a new perspective.

Look at Paul's words from verse 16 ***So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!***

Can I get you to think for a moment about your friends, your family, people you work with?

When they come to mind, what sorts of categories do they fall into in your head?

Rich or not so rich?

People you get on with and people you don't get on with?

The beautiful and the not beautiful?

People you wish you were like and people you're glad you're not like?!

We so easily assign people into categories don't we? Sometimes helpfully, often just as a way of making us feel good about ourselves.

And Paul says he was exactly the same, using unspiritual worldly standards to judge others. In the context here that must mean outward appearances as in verse 12 ***regarding people according to what is seen rather than what is in the heart.***

But because we know that everyone must one day give an account before Jesus.

Because we've experienced the depths of Christ's love.

Because we know that Christ died for all.

All those human, selfish, unspiritual categories go out the window and there are only two states in which we can now see people:

Those who *have* been reconciled to God and those who have not.

If we ignore all worldly points of view, that's the way we'll see people, because that's the way God sees people. There's no other category and no middle ground.

People are either reconciled to God, or dead in their sins and in need of that reconciliation.

You can see how that perspective might sharpen up our evangelism can't you? When I see my neighbour, not as a successful businessman who seems to have everything he needs, but as dead in his sins, I'm far more likely to tell him that Jesus paid the price for his sins.

If I look at the young couple across the road who are so busy with their kids and think, “Wow, what they need is a day off!” then anything I do for them will be about trying to give them a break, but if I think “they need to be reconciled to God,” well, I know the message reconciliation so that can be part of what I do for them.

Remember those magic eye puzzles that were all the rage a few years ago? You stared and stared at the page, which just seemed like a mess of coloured dots and you got more and more annoyed! And then something just clicked and the picture jumped out. And every time you looked at it after that you couldn't see anything but that image.

In my first lab classes at university as we were supposed to be looking at various bacteria. I remember putting this chemical and that dye and who knows what else on the slide and staring down the microscope only to see just a purple blob up very close!

Then the professor comes over and says if you lay it out differently, if you look at it this way, it will all become clear. Suddenly the view is one of amazing colour and abundant life that was there all along I just hadn't see it. With the right perspective, the thing that I had thought was just keeping me from my Friday afternoons, suddenly became a privilege.

A right perspective can make all the difference.

The Ministry of Evangelism

Finally we come to the ministry of evangelism. A ministry that Paul says is our ministry.

Verse 18 ***All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God***

In 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks about people who have the gift of mercy, but of course *all* Christians should *show* mercy.

He talks about the gift of faith, but all of us are called to have faith.

Similarly, although some Christians *are* evangelists all of us have this ministry of evangelism.

The fact that there are some who are especially gifted for evangelism doesn't mean that the rest of us are absolved from this responsibility.

Look with me at the 3 statements about the ministry of evangelism in verses 18 - 20.

Firstly, God acts for reconciliation. ***All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself*** The good news that we share is news about what God has done. God is the one who is at work.

Secondly, God acts for reconciliation *in* Christ. ***God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them.*** Eternity with God is open to us, because of Jesus' death and resurrection. The king is punished for the servant's sin. This is why evangelism must include the message of the cross of Christ.

And thirdly, God acts for reconciliation *in* Christ *through* us! ***he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.***

God acts through those he has already reconciled to himself!

It's not just a ministry for "evangelists" or the apostles, evangelism is a ministry for all who have been reconciled to God.

An ambassador is the public face and representative of the sovereign. We might ask ourselves, "Who could possibly represent Christ as his ambassador?" Surely that's a role reserved for most spiritual high-achievers.

Jesus says to you and to me "you are my ambassador. When you speak the good news, you speak for me." Even to the point that when you call on

someone to consider Christ, it is as though God himself was making that appeal to your friend.

When you share the good news, God considers that he has just personally extended an invitation to your friend.

Have you ever heard someone say they want an encounter with God? Here's the way to do it: Tell them the gospel. That is God making a direct appeal to them. That is Christ appealing to them, through you, his ambassador and representative.

Every now and then I hear people say things like "You need to earn the right to share the good news with someone.

You have to spend time developing a relationship."

And that sounds fair enough. That sounds caring. I's all very sort of post-modern, but it's just not true!

God has given you the right. He has entrusted his ministry of reconciliation to you.

Now, of course, we want to be careful.

Of course, we don't want to see people just as "preaching targets."

But in all honesty I think "we have to earn the right to evangelise" is most often simply code for: "I'm too worried about what that person will think of me. I don't want to look foolish. I'm afraid"

Not always, but mostly. Next week we'll read Paul's words to the Thessalonians about sharing life along with the gospel and we know that's what Paul did. But we also know that he would just roll up into a town and start talking to whoever would listen.

A couple of weeks ago I was in Sydney for 28 hours, and while I was there I had two conversations, in which within minutes, I was able to share the gospel with the people I was talking to; my taxi driver and a lady at a bus stop.

Now, don't just think "that's Clayton, maybe he finds that easy." I don't find that particularly easy, but before I left home I had prayed specifically that God would give me opportunities to talk to people who don't know him, about what it means to know him through Jesus.

Those conversations were measured in minutes. I didn't earn the right to share the gospel

Or maybe you've heard the famous story of John Harper, the Scotsman who drowned with the sinking of the Titanic. Reports exist even to this day of him sharing the gospel with people as he clung to a piece of wreckage in the freezing waters of the Atlantic.

Did he earn the right to evangelise? No, he just understood people's predicament!

It's so easy to think "I don't have the right to tell people what I believe.

I need a special sort of relationship if I'm to try and persuade my colleague of the truth about God.

I have to invest and invest and invest in making my friendship secure, before I can even think about telling someone what God has done for them."

But you already have that right. You are Christ's ambassador. You do his business. You speak his message. His words. Anyone here feel comfortable telling Jesus he hasn't earned the right to talk about what he's done for people?

God gave us the ministry of reconciliation:

What in the world could be a greater privilege than sharing in God's own ministry, the work that God has been about since before the creation of the world?! He says to you and he says to me "I'm sharing this with you"

You've got a part to play in my work.

The message.

The motivation.

The perspective.

The ministry.

I'm convinced, if we understand these rightly, we'll be much closer to seeing evangelism as God does. So to get us ready next time we'll look at the how-to - The Practice of Evangelism from 1 Thessalonians..