

THE URGENCY OF THE GOSPEL

Fortieth in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *Mark's Story of the Passion* from Mark 16:9-20
"He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.'" Mark 16:15-16

Four seconds. They were inching along bumper to bumper crossing the 35W Interstate bridge that connects Minneapolis with St. Paul. Listening to talk radio. Mindless music pumping from a CD. Going home after work. Taking the fast route to say good-bye to a daughter heading off to camp. Planning to meet a friend who needed a ride. Brain turning over the things learned in a class just concluded. Big rig dragging a load. Two-year-old slumped asleep in the safety seat in back. Suddenly a rumbling, a lurching, and the bridge buckled and collapsed into the Mississippi river. Four seconds, and all the mundane plans and expectations ended. Four seconds and death came for five, perhaps eight, perhaps more. We stir from our own daily preoccupations, shake our heads, and settle back to what we were doing.

Death can arrive suddenly--but not always. Sometimes it announces its arrival far in advance, like the distant blowing of a locomotive's horn rolling down the tracks toward Irmo: A doctor's report, a twinge of pain, another test, the passing of one more birthday. But it's coming. Don't think about it. Keep your ears on the beat of the music. Brush it off like a speck of dust. Yet as we read the final verses of Mark 16, Jesus summons us to the urgency of the gospel.

The last twelve verses of Mark 16 do not appear in the oldest and best manuscripts we possess. Their language and style differ from what comes before. Most scholars agree that Mark did not compose the wrap-up of his gospel. It may be that the original conclusion Mark authored was lost soon after it was written. Or perhaps Mark just stopped with the statement that the women, after encountering the angel at Christ's empty tomb, were afraid to tell anyone that Jesus had risen from the dead. Maybe the rest of the story was so well known to the Christians in Rome through the eyewitness preaching of Peter, that there was no need to say more. For whatever reason, someone very early on decided that Mark's gospel needed a better ending. So what we have in verses 9-20 are things that are recorded in the other gospels and in the book of Acts. Nothing new here, except for the statement in verse 18 that followers of Christ would be immune if they drank deadly poison. We have no record of that occurring. This ending we do have is so ancient however, that by consensus we receive it as the word of God.

Today I conclude our ongoing examination of Mark's story of the passion of Christ by directing us to one last point. Mark, or Mark's editor, leaps from the appearance of Jesus with the disciples in the upper room, to the great commission that is recorded also in Matthew 28 and Acts 1. Jesus says to his apostles in verses 15-16, *"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned."* This is the final command of Christ to his church. This directive has sent Christians on a trek through the centuries to literally every nation on earth. As a result the church of Christ today numbers two and a half billion people who profess Christ. You and I believe this is

what we should be doing. It has been part of the driving purpose behind our activities and ministries at Cornerstone. On the day we stop preaching the gospel in our community and sending missionaries across the world—that's the day our church will lose its reason for existence, and the tolling of death's bell will start vibrating on our eardrums.

Today I want you to pay attention not to the command to preach the gospel, but to the urgency of preaching the gospel. The first reason for the urgency of preaching the gospel is that people need to hear about Jesus. Jesus is talking to his apostles about the choice between believing in him or disbelieving in him. Those who believe in him will be saved. Those who don't believe will be condemned. What about those who have never heard? They can neither believe nor not believe, can they? They are effectively taken out of the equation. Do you remember the words Jesus spoke in John 14:6? "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me.*" Jesus makes it clear that the only way to be reconciled to God is through faith in Him. Jesus died to pay for sins. Jesus rose to prove that he had done everything necessary to save sinners. Every person is a sinner. Every one of us is going to die. Just because people haven't heard about Jesus does not change the fact that they are accountable for their sin. But, if they never hear about Jesus they have no opportunity to believe in him. Think of them—hundreds of millions of men and women and boys and girls with never a chance to believe. Jesus cares about them. Some of them live in America. Some of them may live next door to you. Yes, they could turn on the radio or television and hear. They could come to Cornerstone on a Sunday morning or wander into our office during the week. But they don't, do they? Notice the wording of Jesus' command: "*Go...and preach the gospel.*" It's no excuse that they *could* take the initiative. They won't. We are to go. Give them a chance to believe, Jesus says!

The second reason for the urgency of preaching the gospel is what happens if a person hears and does not believe. Jesus says he will be condemned. Condemned not because he hasn't believed, but condemned because he is a sinner and has not taken advantage of the opportunity to have his sins forgiven. Make no mistake, God's judgment surely will come upon all who die in their sins. Human thoughts and actions matter. What is this condemnation that Jesus refers to? We have a clue in what Mark has told us Jesus did. His body and human soul bore the wrath of God. He experienced death in the place of sinners. So the condemnation must be both physical and spiritual. Jesus warned about hell. It is so horrible that if it were not Jesus who told us about it, we would never dare to believe it. Hell will be a place of never-ending physical suffering. Jesus compared it to worms gnawing away the flesh and flames burning, but nothing is ever consumed. Hell also involves emotional and spiritual pain—rejection, loneliness, terror. If you have ever been ground down by the sorrows of life and felt the horrible, crushing anguish of disappointment and betrayal so that you could hardly bear to face another day—that's what hell will be like, except it will be a thousand times worse. There won't be a second of relief—ever! For some it will be worse than others. But every person who refuses to believe in Jesus will plunge into hell with no possibility of escape. Day after unrelenting day, not for a year, or ten years, or a hundred, but forever. Sometimes people try to escape their despair by taking their own lives. But the truth is,

you cannot really commit suicide. You can kill your body, but not your soul. Hell is a real place. It's a real danger. Some will enter there today. There's urgency in the gospel.

The third reason for urgency in preaching the gospel is so that people may escape from condemnation. Jesus says, "*He who has believed and has been baptized will be saved.*" Baptism is not a condition for salvation. Baptism is the public sign that a person has entered into the covenant with God where God promises to save those who place their faith in Christ alone. Faith isn't something you do. It is something you have. We were on vacation. Ashley, my granddaughter who is three, stood on the edge of the pool. Her daddy said, "Jump!" She said, "No, I don't want to." He said, "Jump! I'll catch you." She crouched down and thought about it, then stood up. "No," she said. "I don't want to." He said, "Jump! I'll catch you and I won't let you go under water." She crouched, and then leaped. It wasn't much of a leap. She barely cleared the edge of the pool. Her little body splashed into the water. Her daddy's strong hands caught her under the arms. He lifted her upward. She laughed! That's faith.

What does it mean to be saved? Again, we gain a clue from what Mark tells us Jesus did. He died to pay for sin, bearing hell for us. The person who believes in Jesus never will experience any judgment. Then Jesus rose from the grave. He rose to save our bodies. So, salvation means not only that our souls are preserved. Our bodies will be restored. They will never be sick or grow old. Those who are saved will live in a physical world in the perpetual bloom of young adulthood. For some of you that doesn't mean much. For me it means a lot! There will be no sorrow, no tears, no fear, no loss, no disappointment, nothing to mar the beauty of love and happy friendships and family intimacy. And it will never end. Many of us treasure the blessings we've received, but we fear that something will happen to take them away. Recently Barb and I have been looking at pictures of our children growing up. We've shed a tear or two because those happy days have passed. But in eternal life they will never fade or diminish. You may have all of this if you want it. It is real. It's not religious pie in the sky or the dreams of pious self-deluders. Come to Christ. Jump into his arms. He'll catch you. You won't go under and you'll come up laughing!

But do you see how urgent it is that we do what Jesus told us to do? We're to preach the gospel. We're to tell people good news. That's what the word *gospel* means—good news. Don't be obnoxious or overbearing. Tell it gently. God does the moving in the other person's heart and enables them to believe. So the pressure is off us. But we must never forget that death is coming. The bridge we're on is "structurally deficient." For some today, the span will collapse, and then it will be too late. So we must hurry. As we approach the Lord's table and recall what he did to save us, and many others besides, thank God for your salvation. And please pray for someone you know who needs to hear, who needs to decide. Ask God to help you draw that person one step closer to Jesus. Ask him to open their hearts so they will believe and be saved forever.