

WHEN PREACHING ENDS

John 8:21-30

Rev. Richard D. Phillips
Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, Oct. 19, 2008

“So he said to them again, ‘I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come’” (Jn. 8:21).

Nazareth is one of the best-known place names from the New Testament. Nazareth is noteworthy for two things: it is the place where Jesus grew up and it is the place where no one was saved. Nazareth is where no one was saved, not because the gospel was not preached there. Jesus returned to Nazareth at least twice to preach his gospel. But because of unbelief, so far as the Bible records, no one was saved, at least no one outside of Jesus’ family. And because of unbelief there came an end to preaching. The epitaph over Nazareth comes in Luke 4:30. His former neighbors tried to stone him to death, but “passing through their midst, he went away.”

This calamity was played out again on a far greater scale in Jerusalem. John 8 records the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees when they rejected his preaching. He had declared, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12). For his trouble, the Pharisees came to repudiate him. Just as in Nazareth, they wanted to put him to death. They disputed his claims and his right to preach; they wanted it stopped. Jesus replied with what Martin Luther called “a dreadful sermon, an appalling and dreadful word of farewell.”¹ Jesus said that there would be a time when his preaching would end, and that it would be a time of darkness and despair for those who do not believe.

¹ Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, Chapters 6-8*, Luther’s Wordks, v. 23 (St. Louis: CPH, 1957), 354.

WHEN PREACHING ENDS

The Pharisees and the other religious leaders dearly wanted Jesus just to go away. He replied that they would get their wish: “He said to them again, ‘I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come’” (Jn. 8:21). It would not be long, he assured them, until they would not have to put up with Jesus and his preaching.

The same is true now. Preaching is not a popular activity today. To say that someone is “preaching” is not a compliment. “Stop preaching at me,” people complain. They will get their wish, because just as God appointed a brief time for Jesus in Jerusalem, after which he was gone, he has also appointed a time for the preaching of his gospel. When the preaching ends, the gospel will have gone, too. How much is lost when the preaching of Christ ends! Luther writes: “For when He goes away... then we will not know what God is, or what life, righteousness, and salvation are, or how to be redeemed from sin and death. Everything is gone with Christ.”²

A study of the Gospels will show that whenever Jesus is rejected, one of two things will always happen. Either the people will depart from Jesus or Jesus will depart from the people. Here, Jesus threatens his departure, and with it the most disastrous consequences.

The first consequence is that when Jesus departs, those who do not believe are left in their darkness. He promised, “Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12). It follows that those who do not follow remain in darkness. This is just what we find with the Pharisees: “So the Jews said, ‘Will he kill himself, since he says, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come’?’” (Jn. 8:22).

When we studied John 8:12, we noted that darkness involves ignorance and folly. The Pharisees depict this in their stubborn unbelief. Because they did not believe in Jesus, they were simply unable to follow his teaching but were left in the dark. The Son of God stood among them and referred to his return to the glories of heaven. But in their carnal minds, the unbelieving leaders could only think he spoke of suicide. They assumed that since Jesus was going

² Ibid., 355.

where they could not go, he must be going to hell. They mistook Jesus for Judas; anyone who could do that is living in great darkness.

The moral and spiritual aspects of darkness are in play here as well. Jesus summarized their darkened condition: “You are from below; I am above. You are of this world; I am not of this world” (Jn. 8:23). Men and women were made in the image of God to participate in and reflect the glories of heavenly life. But because of unbelief, mankind remains “from below” and “of this world.” When preaching ends and sinners have not believed, they remain in the darkness of this world despite the shining of God’s bright light.

But that is not all; there is a second consequence to unbelief. Not only does unbelief leave us in darkness, but it is a darkness that gets worse and not better. Jesus added, “I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come... I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins” (Jn. 8:21, 24).

Not only does this demonstrate the necessity of faith in Christ in order to be saved, but also the most tragic consequence of unbelief. People in darkness seek for light. But since Jesus is the light, they will not find what they seek apart from him. Everything good that the world seeks is found truly only in Jesus. Why do people immerse themselves in pleasure, but because they seek satisfaction? But satisfaction is found only in a relationship with our Maker – which only Jesus gives – so that when preaching ends and Jesus is gone, they will seek but not find. Why do people crave for glory? Because they were made for the glory of God. But the light of God’s glory is found only in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6); our desire for glory is never fulfilled in money, worldly power, or earthly praise. Why are people caught up in false spirituality? Christians can say to the world today what the apostle Paul said to ancient Athens – “I perceive that in every way you are very religious” (Acts 17:22). People are always religious in one way or another. But what they are seeking – the purpose and meaning and acceptance that can only come from God – is gained only through Jesus. When preaching has ended and Jesus has gone, all will seek but none will find.

Without Jesus, life in the darkness does not get better but worse. Our souls become hard, our personalities are washed out, and our life is

narrowed. A famous example is Charles Darwin, the author of the myth of evolution. After Darwin rejected Jesus, he admitted that he lost his appetite for things like poetry, music, and beauty. The darkness always gets worse until finally we die. Jesus said, “I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin” (Jn. 8:21).

In John 8:21, Jesus says that unbelievers will die in their “sin”. By speaking in the singular, Jesus refers to the state or condition of sin in which we die without Christ. But in verse 24, he changes to the plural: “You will die in your sins.” This refers to our many actual transgressions of God’s law. Together, sin and sins describes the tragedy of a life that ends without Jesus. Unbelievers die unregenerate, corrupt, and in a state of sin that is unfit for heaven. But they also die guilty of sins that demand punishment from Almighty God. The Bible says, “It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Heb. 9:27). When that judgment finally comes, unbelievers will desperately seek the forgiveness that only Jesus can give. But having rejected Jesus when he was preached, they will seek forgiveness without finding it.

Many people speak boldly against Jesus during their lives, but we should always inquire how they fared on their death bed. Thomas Paine was a famous intellectual during America’s Revolutionary War and his anti-Christian writings led many to unbelief. But these were Paine’s final words: “I would give worlds, if I had them, that *The Age of Reason* had not be published. O Lord, help me! Christ, help me! O God what have I done to suffer so much? But there is no God! But if there should be, what will become of me hereafter?” With such thoughts, the once-proud Thomas Paine perished in darkness. His contemporary, the great Christian hymn-writer Isaac Watts had a different end. As he lay dying in the light of Jesus Christ, Watts said: “It is a great mercy that I have no manner of fear or dread of death. I could, if God please, lay my head back and die without terror this afternoon.”³

This shows the preciousness of the preaching of Jesus Christ, both from the pulpit and from the lips of every Christian. I noted that

³ Cited from R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1999), 236.

preaching is not popular today, and this is true even in the church. Neither pulpit nor pew is to be “preachy.” To speak fervently and frequently about Jesus is receive the epithet of “proselytizing.” Yet the preaching of Jesus is nonetheless precious; we should value preaching above all things. Martin Luther remarked, “If I could today become king or emperor, I would not give up my office as preacher.”⁴ John Calvin insisted, “If the Gospel be not preached, Jesus Christ is, as it were, buried.”⁵ J. C. Ryle adds: “Let us beware of despising preaching. In every age of the church it has been God’s principal instrument for the awakening of sinners and the edifying of saints.”⁶

The time will come when preaching has ended. Then it will be seen to have been precious by all those who did not believe, as they face death and judgment without Jesus and have died in their sins.

WHY PREACHING CONTINUES

The good news for the Pharisees was that Jesus had not yet ended his preaching. He tells them that despite their opposition and threats, he would go on preaching until the appointed time. John recounts: “They said to him, ‘Who are you?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Just what I have been telling you from the beginning. I have much to say about you and much to judge, but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him’” (Jn. 8:25-26).

We should not take the Pharisees’ question as an honest inquiry. They had heard Jesus’ preaching many times: they knew who he said he was. What they meant was “Who do you think you are? What gives you the right to preach at us?”

Jesus answered by stating that he intended to continue preaching. “I have much to say,” he replied. What an understatement! Indeed, since they had rejected his gospel, Jesus had much to say about their judgment. The other Gospels contain many harsh denunciations of Jerusalem and the Pharisees as the end of Jesus’ ministry drew near. But even in John 8, Jesus had much to say about both life and death. At one point he describes the Pharisees as children of the devil (Jn.

⁴ Fred W. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983), 39.

⁵ John Calvin, *The Mystery of Godliness* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1999), 25.

⁶ J.C. Ryle: *Luke* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986), 61.

8:44). The point is that by spurning his gospel the Pharisees would not silence Jesus, for he had much yet to say.

This ought to be something of a motto among Christians as well: “I have much to say.” Christians are too easily daunted by opposition, which the Bible tells us to expect. When the world tells us to stop preaching, we act as if we have no reply – as if we cannot preach the gospel without its permission. But God has given us our message, so that we have much to say to the world. We have the Bible’s message about God and man, life and death, truth and error, and salvation and judgment. When the world scorns us, saying, “Who do you think you are to speak that way?” We must reply, “I have much to say because I serve the Lord Jesus and follow his example. Your rejection of God’s truth will not stop me from speaking!”

Jesus said, “He who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him” (Jn. 8:26). Jesus was not daunted because he knew where his message came from – it came from God himself. This is why we must know our Bibles and we must know the Bible as the very Word of God. When the world says, “We are tired of your preaching and we want you to stop,” we must reply, “I cannot stop preaching because it is God’s Word that I preach. He has commissioned me to speak what I have heard from God in the Bible.”

If this conviction is important for individual Christians, it is doubly important for the Christian church. In large measure, churches have stopped preaching God’s Word. And they have done so because of the situation described in this very passage. The world has said, “We will not come to church if you seriously preach God’s Word and focus on the message of Jesus. We will only come if you make us laugh, if you tell stories about yourself, and if you provide the kind of entertainment we enjoy.” The great tragedy is that the church is agreeing to these demands. Today there is an end to preaching because the church has lost confidence in the Word of God. Some of the largest and most influential evangelical churches today were started with questionnaires asking unbelieving people what they wanted to hear and do in church. The surveys showed that they did not want to hear the Bible and its themes! So the church replaced biblical language with the language of psychology. The result is that

Christians no longer speak the language of the Bible to the culture; we speak the language of the culture to the Bible.

Neither were the Pharisees interested in Jesus' teaching, but that did not stop him. "I speak just as the Father taught me," he explained. Who is teaching us to speak? Listen to how Paul answered: "We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4:2). That was Jesus' way as well. Had Jesus followed the advice of church-growth consultants today, who insist that the audience must determine our message, there would have been no gospel for us. And if we follow their advice there will be no gospel for the generation of our children.

WHEN PREACHING IS PROVED

But what is the point of preaching, you may ask, if people don't want it? Would it not be better to adjust our strategy rather than simply alienate worldly people? If we are interested in the example of Jesus, the final verses of this passage are instructive. John says that the Pharisees simply "did not understand that he had been speaking to them about the Father" (Jn. 8:27). They didn't get what Jesus was saying. He was frustrating and alienating them. So we might expect Jesus to say, "Look, I'm really interested in winning your approval so why don't you suggest a topic." But nothing could be further from his intention. Instead he pressed on: "So Jesus said to them, 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority'" (Jn. 8:28).

Jesus was saying that there would be an event that would prove his preaching. Three times in John's Gospel, Jesus speaks of the Son of Man being lifted up, and in each case he referred to his atoning death on the cross. The cross would prove his preaching! When that time came, later in John's Gospel, Jesus exulted, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (Jn. 12:23). The Pharisees might sneer at Jesus' preaching, but they had no answer when he was lifted on the cross. "Then you will know that I am he," Jesus said. They would no longer say, "Who are you?" but they would know that he is

the Messiah, who conquered death and hell by dying for sin in our place.

For this reason, the cross is always the center of true preaching. It was at the cross that Jesus secured our deliverance from judgment, dying for the sins of all who believe. The cross is likewise the key to the Christian life. It is there that we find that God loves us in spite of our failures. A lantern is hung high to shed its light over a great darkness, and Jesus was hung on the cross to bring the light of God to the darkness of the world.

Naturally, the world does not like to hear about the cross, because to preach the cross is to talk about sin and divine judgment. It is to call people failures and tell them that they have no hope unless they trust in Jesus' saving work. People today don't like to hear these things, just as the Pharisees did not like them. But the church must not fail to preach the cross, just as Jesus did not fail to place it at the center of his own controversy. Paul likewise said, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:5).

Neither Jesus nor Paul nor any of the apostles agreed to stop preaching the cross. They did not replace it with cute stories or with tips for doing better without repenting of your sins. They spoke of the necessity of blood sacrifice as the only way to avoid divine punishment in hell.

We, too, must place the cross at the center of our message and as the proof of our preaching. We must do so out of concern for the world's true and greatest need, the forgiveness of sin. But we must also do so for our own sakes, since it is only a life centered on the cross of Christ that truly enjoys the blessing of God.

The geographical center of London is Charing Cross. It is said that from Charing Cross, you can find your way to anywhere in London. A little boy was once lost and a policeman, wiping away the lad's tears, asked if he could have him taken home. The boy replied, 'Oh, no, sir, take me to the cross and I'll find my way home.'⁷ Let that be our plea: "Take me to the cross." For that is the way home to God.

⁷ Hughes, 241.

Jesus concluded, “And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him” (Jn. 8:29). When Jesus died, the world saw him forsaken by God as he bore our sins. But God was in fact with him. The resurrection demonstrated to every eye that the crucified Jesus is the true Son of God and Savior. “Then you will know that I am he,” Jesus said, “and that I do nothing on my own authority” (Jn. 8:28). God will be with everyone who comes with their sins to the cross, and they will speak and preach with divine authority because they preach what they are taught by God’s Word. In order to be saved, people must believe in Jesus not merely as a guru or social activist or personal trainer. “Then you will know that I am he,” Jesus said – that is, the one Messiah and true Son of God. If we want people to know and believe this, then we must preach the cross and the precious blood of Christ.

HOW PREACHING IS REWARDED

Luther described this passage as “a dreadful sermon,” and it was. Jesus spoke of his opponents seeking but not finding and dying in their sins. But its result was glorious, just as the preaching of Jesus is mighty and glorious today. John tells us how: “As he was saying these things, many believed in him” (Jn. 8:30).

Jesus did not seek the approval of the world as the reward of his preaching. He sought the faith of those given to him by the Father before all worlds. Though it seemed that every worldly power stood against Jesus’ preaching, yet “many believed in him.” So it is today. Preaching Christ will not make us successful with the world. But it will be blessed by God with power to save many. As Paul taught, let us affirm: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16).

Have you believed on Jesus? Do not resist him. Do not be like those in Nazareth, who were not saved, or like the Pharisees in Jerusalem, who stubbornly opposed Jesus, for at any time there may be an end to preaching. Rather, embrace him by giving a believing answer to the Pharisees’ questions. In verse 19, they demanded, “Where is your Father?” You can say, “His Father is the true God of heaven. Jesus is truly the Son of God.” They asked, “Will he kill himself?” You can say, “No, but he did offer himself up to die for the punishment of my

sins.” Then they asked him, “Who are you?” You can answer the way Peter did, that Jesus is “the Holy One of God” (Jn. 6:69). You can say, “Jesus is the Christ. Jesus is the Savior of my soul.” If you give those answers, taught by Jesus in this Gospel, then you have believed. And then, having believed, if you follow him, Jesus promises, “You will not walk in darkness, but you will have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12).