

Romans 10, Pt. 2

Shana and I have a friend that grew up with me in my home church. She was, even as a teenager, radically committed to Jesus. After attending college, she spent two years as a missionary in a majority Muslim nation, mostly working with women. She had often expressed the desire of spending the rest of her life doing mission work. However, at the end of her term of service, she decided to come back to our hometown. She wanted to spend time with her family, especially with a young niece. She got a non-ministry job. She met a man. She got married. They had a daughter. They bought a house in a subdivision. They are faithful members and servants at my home church. Did she lose her radical commitment to Jesus? Did she settle for an ordinary life when she had been called to extraordinary ministry? I will let these questions hang in the air as we jump back into Paul's words in Romans 10.

Last week, we covered the issue of profession. What does Paul say about those who have not yet believed in the gospel? He wants them to hit the reset button. His desire for them is that they would believe in their hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead and confess with their mouths that Jesus is Lord. They can be born again. No one is entitled to God's mercy. Indeed, as Paul writes in Romans 3:23, all fall short of the glory of God. As Paul writes in Romans 6:23, the wages of sin are death. If there is any entitlement, it is not for mercy but for judgment. But those who do not believe can believe. The way is clear. Submit to Jesus. Listen to Moses, who taught about faith. Believe in God's promises - everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

This week, we cover the issue of mission. What does Paul say about those who have believed the gospel? Remember the background problem of this section of Romans. Paul is thinking of Jewish men and women who have not believed in Jesus. We rightly expand this problem to include anyone who has not believed in Jesus. What should we who believe be doing considering the continued unbelief of those around us? Only two thoughts today. We need to get to work, and we need to believe that God is already working.

We need to get to work. Verses fourteen through fifteen of our passage contain a series of rhetorical questions which lay out a pathway to belief. If these dear people are going to call on the name of the Lord, then they must believe in him. And if they are going to believe in him, then they must hear about him. And if they are going to hear about him, then someone must preach Jesus to them. And if someone is going to preach Jesus to them, then someone must send the preacher. Paul celebrates the heralds of Jesus by using the words of Isaiah 52:7: “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the herald, who proclaims peace, who brings news of good things, who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’” In context, the prophet is speaking of one who announces peace and comfort to Israel after the devastations of exile. Paul knows that the full meaning of Isaiah’s vision would be accomplished by the work of Jesus. We normally do not think of feet as beautiful things. They are useful things, but not beautiful. But even these mundane things such as feet become beautiful when they move people for a beautiful cause. And what is more beautiful than the peace and joy which comes through Jesus?

Of course, when the preachers go out, there are some who do not believe. Paul turns to Isaiah 53:1 to acknowledge that reality: “Who has believed what we have heard?” Yet, nonetheless, people do not receive the opportunity to believe if no one goes out to preach. And so, Paul concludes: “Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes from the message about Christ” (10:17). This may raise some theological questions in our minds. Doesn’t God have the power to reveal Jesus to people directly? In a straightforward sense, the answer is yes. God does have the power to reveal Jesus to people apart from preaching. It is also true to say that no one believes in Jesus apart from a direct action of God in the human heart. Regeneration is monergistic, meaning it is worked by the power of God. But, nonetheless, God has chosen to call forth our responsibility and agency, to entrust us with real work. The normative pattern is that faith accompanies the preaching of the word. God does not despise the work of those who bear his image. He wants us to work. He wants us to do things that are significant and which matter. He values the integrity of his creation and his creatures. God didn’t just make the plants of Eden grow; instead, he gave Eden a gardener. So, God wants his people to preach. Therefore, by God’s design, faith is given with the preaching of the word.

We need to believe that God is already working. When we do this work of preaching, we can never slip into the idea that we are on our own. God wants us to work, but he wants us to work with the full knowledge that he is at work before and around us. This is especially important to remember when we are in seasons of discouragement, when people are not responding. The remainder of the chapter has a realistic tone. The people to whom we are preaching - specifically for Paul, the Jewish people of his concern - are resistant to the message. But, the preacher must believe that God is on the case. Look at the ways in which Paul discusses God's mission in this passage.

1. *Nature declares God's glory.* Paul quotes Psalm 19. That psalm begins with the statement, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the expanse proclaims the work of his hands." It is the heavens and the expanse which proclaim a message to the ends of the earth.
2. *The history of Israel declares God's power.* Paul next quotes from Deuteronomy 32, a passage known as the song of Moses. Moses is incredibly forthright with Israel in this passage. They were on the verge of entrance to the Promised Land, and yet Moses already knew that they would fail in their faithfulness and face great calamity as a result. And yet Israel would through its failures be provoked to jealousy. Israel would again turn towards God and seek him, and he would vindicate her from her enemies. Paul believes that the going forth of the gospel to the Gentiles will stir the remnant of Israel to pursue God again.
3. *The persistence of God shows forth his mercy.* Next, Paul returns to the words of Isaiah. By the way, three of the most quoted Old Testament books in the New Testament are Psalms, Deuteronomy, and Isaiah, the books that Paul uses in these few verses. From Isaiah, Paul speaks of God being found by Gentile nations, even as he continues to extend his hands towards a disobedient Israel. God is persistent in his offer of mercy. He is persistent in offering mercy to Gentiles, and he is persistent in offering mercy to his own people Israel. Next week, as we turn to the eleventh chapter, we will see how God is not yet done with Israel. He will accomplish his purposes. As Timothy George reminds us in the excellent little book *Amazing Grace*, God's grace is an overcoming grace which breaks down the resistance of resistant hearts.

So, what does Paul want for those who already believe? He wants them to go out and speak Jesus to those who have not believed. He wants us to be people who stand on the mountains and proclaim good news. People may be resistant, but we can trust that God is at work. He is at work in nature. He is at work in history. He is persistent in his extension of mercy to sinful people, be they Jew or Gentile. And considering that mercy, we preach the gospel of Jesus as an atoning sacrifice, dying for our sins and rising for our salvation.

What of the question from the beginning of the sermon? Did my friend exchange an extraordinary call to ministry for a merely ordinary life? Absolutely not. Let's turn back to one little detail in verse 15 - "How are they to preach unless they are *sent*?" It may be easy to assume that the idea here is only that the church needs to send out preachers. The church needs to call and equip ordained pastors and missionaries. And certainly, the church needs to do these things. Healthy churches produce people who go into full-time service. But I think this is a narrow reading of the text. We are not the ultimate senders. *God is the primary sender.* God is the one who sends people into the mission fields of the world. Once we remember that, we can remember that there are many kinds of mission fields and many ways that God can send people to share Jesus. Sure, God may call someone to follow in the footsteps of Paul. But he also can send us by leading us to a house in a particular neighborhood, through a promotion at work, or by our joining of some club or organization. God sends his people - all his people - into the mission field of the world. He calls all his people to be ambassadors of Jesus. Therefore our friend has not left an extraordinary call for an ordinary call. She is now sent to be a wife. She is sent to be a mother. She is sent to be a co-worker. She is sent to be a neighbor. Our perception of being called and sent by God does not hinge on what we are doing so much as on the quality of our relationship with the God who sends.

1000 Spiritual Conversations is an opportunity to put into practice these ideas as they flow from Romans 10. People need to hear about Jesus, and people can hit the reset button. God sends us into the world to do the perfectly extraordinary work of speaking with those around us. Would you follow the Lord by looking for the "next one" today? That's all you and I need to do. We need to trust that God is leading us, and then speak to the people around us. How beautiful are the feet of those who announce the good news of Jesus!