**Acts 13:38-49** January 22, 2017

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*Acts 13:38 “Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. 39Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. 40Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: 41‘Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.’”*

*42As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. 43When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God.*

*44On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. 45When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying.*

*46Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. 47For this is what the Lord has commanded us: ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’”*

*48When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.*

*49The word of the Lord spread through the whole region.*

**Lord, Help Us Hear!**

I. Give Us People Who Tell Us What We Need to Hear  
II. Give Us Ears to Listen

So what does it take to be a Christian? Real simple! It is so simple that someone in the middle of dying can be told and believe the core of the Christian faith and then be told by God himself, “Today you will be with me in paradise.” We have an example of exactly that in the Bible. Being a Christian is about as simple a thing as there is in this world. Believe in Jesus as your Savior from sin.

But if you are a new member of our church—and here I am not talking to you who have been around a few years—but you new members know it isn’t that easy. You have to take part in weekly calisthenics: in our worship service you have to stand up and sit down every few minutes, and at just the right times or else you will be standing when everyone else is sitting. There are the hymns. If you are a person who doesn’t even sing in the shower, well, you probably have doubts about the hymn-singing we do. And there are potlucks –to be a good Lutheran you have to cook well enough to put it in front of other people. Another thing is the lingo, the language: fellowship hall, narthex, redemption, justification, etc. You will find out that getting into heaven was the easy part of being a Christian.

But even if you became a Christian as an adult, you still have an easy transition compared to the converts in our reading. I will get to them in a minute.

The main man in our text is the Apostle Paul, one of the giants of the Christian faith. He had just started his first missionary journey. What we have in our reading from Acts 13 is a part of his first recorded mission sermon. This sermon was delivered in a Jewish house of prayer, a synagogue. Paul preached to ***“Jews and devout converts to Judaism”*** (43). Those converts to Judaism had already experienced big changes in their lives.

Converts to Judaism did not just change how they worshiped. They had to change the food they ate. And the men who were converts, to put it gently, had to undergo another ceremony that was usually performed on Jewish boys on their eighth day. And converts to Judaism had to change their business practices: while they used to work, buy, sell, make a profit seven days a week, now they had one day so sacred they couldn’t even light a fire to cook a meal much less work. The Law of Moses governed every aspect of their lives. Converting to Judaism, meant that they changed their lives in a way that we 21st century Christians can only imagine.

And now Paul stands up in front of these people for whom the Law of Moses defined every aspect of their life, and whose continual obedience to that law was their way to get right with God, and he tells them, ***“My brothers, through [Jesus] everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses”*** (38-39).

The great pursuit of true religion is to be justified, to be right with God. So that when God looks at us at that time after the grave, he will look at us with approval. Paul says that everything the Jews have been striving for in the law of Moses cannot save them. The only way to get God’s favor is not obedience, but through faith. Not rules, but forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Not earning salvation, but the gift of God.

Now Paul didn’t just go in like a bull in a china shop and smash all that the Jews held near and dear. These Jews had invited Paul to speak because he was of Jewish birth. And if we were to read the whole sermon in this chapter, we would see Paul had gently leading up to this point. He said something like, “Brothers, we Jews have been waiting for the Messiah since the time of Abraham. We have heard promises of a Savior given to Abraham, to David, through the prophets. Now I tell you that all those promises are fulfilled in Jesus” (vv.32-33). ***“Through [Jesus], everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses”*** All those rules that are part and parcel of your life – they cannot save you!

We need to be told that time and again. We need to hear it because we tend to one of two positions. Either we feel that there is no hope for us, that we have gotten so morally lost that we have no hope, or else we feel that we are people who do pretty well and therefore God is quite pleased with us. Well, neither of these is true. That is why we repeatedly need to hear what Paul here says.

All the things the Jews were doing – observing the Sabbath, circumcision, dietary restrictions – all could help them live more godly lives, but none would get them right with God. We, we can turn the channel on the inappropriate television show. We can stay away from drugs. We can come to church. We can help the poor. These are all good and godly things, but Paul would say to us, *“My brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus… everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by [going to church, helping the poor, staying away from drugs and immorality.]”*

It is every bit as easy as our Gospel reading: *“John was there with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God [who takes away the sin of the world, v.29]!’ When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus.”*

When Paul declared Jesus as the end to the old ways, something amazing happened. ***“As Paul and Barnabbas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath.”*** Do you invite people back to your house who tell you that you are doing things all wrong? How would we feel about a visiting preacher who came and said, “You guys are completely lost!” Would we ask them to come back? It takes a strong person to listen to that kind of message. In fact, when it comes to spiritual matters, it takes God’s Holy Spirit speaking in our hearts, wearing down our pride, teaching us to despair of self and trust in God.

Oh, may God grant us spiritual ears to hear what he tells us. First and foremost, let us keep Jesus as the only way we can be saved for eternal life.

But I also talk about much else. Are you going to listen to God’s Holy Spirit when he speaks? When God confronts me with the fact that I don’t pray as often as I should, or pray for as many people as I should, am I going to listen to his direction? When God talks to me about evangelism, about offerings, about kindness, about self-control, about using his name in a proper way, am I listening? Am I hearing? Dear God, open my ears and my heart!

I pray this because of what happened when Paul came back the following Sabbath day: ***“On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying…”*** (44-45). The beginnings of faith these people had the first Sabbath, evaporated.

What changed? ***“When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy.”*** We don’t know exactly the focus of their jealousy. We can make some guesses. Maybe they were jealous because Paul achieved in a week what they had failed to do in generations – crowds were coming to hear God’s word. Few things will excite jealousy like success.

Or maybe they were jealous because of how easy Paul was making it for people to be saved. Jews and converts had lived for God. They gave their offerings. They discerned between pure and impure food. They rested on the Sabbaths when they could have been making profits. They had given up so much. And now Paul tells all that they have forgiveness in a moment! All the irreligious people of the town who had heard this message for only a week. They surely could not be given an equal place in heaven.

Or maybe they were jealous, in a sense, for God’s honor. Maybe they were so invested in the law of Moses that they just could not stand to think of Jesus as a Savior. Probably all of the above.

Years ago a famous Christian preacher was walking with a friend through the streets of Chicago. As they walked, the preacher’s friend saw a man lying in the ditch. He had drunk so much alcohol that he had passed out. The friend pointed out the drunk to the preacher. Looking, the preacher said, “There, but for the grace of God, am I.”

When I look at these Jews in the city of Antioch, I can easily imagine myself. Their jealousies made sense to them, and they make sense to me. I realize that if God’s Holy Spirit had not worked faith in my heart, I would have been there maligning the name of Christ. How I thank God that he has kept me from being a person filled with jealousy, speaking abusively against the Gospel. When I look at myself, I find no reason in me that God should have made this choice. There is none, none other than his undeserved love, his grace. And when I look at each of you, I realize that God has worked this same miracle in you, and I am so grateful for that, that he has opened your ears to hear the message of our Savior.

I pray that God will continue to open our ears to what his word says. That when God’s word challenges what we think is right, that we will humble ourselves and listen. That when our actions are proved wrong, we will have a desire to change. That when you or any other Christian speaks to me about these things, that I will take you seriously.

Returning to the reading… Because the Jews rejected the message, Paul said, ***“We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.”*** Which sounds like Paul was done talking to the Jews. And yet he was not. Perhaps in this place, but in every other town Paul would visit – and there were many – Paul continued to preach the good news of Jesus to those Jews. And even though in nearly every single one of those towns, Paul was rejected by the children of Abraham, yet he continued to speak this good news to them as long as they would allow him.

***“When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.’”*** Look at the joy of the Gospel. My sinfulness causes me sorrow and frustration. But God’s continual, free, generous forgiveness gives me hope and joy. As long as I stand in his grace, I am justified.

Dear God, may our fellow Christians, especially our spiritual leaders, have that tenacity to say what needs to be said from your word. Dear God, may each of us have ears to listen when your servants speak. Amen.