

The Heart of Evangelism

Matthew 5:14-16

We are starting a sermon series on evangelism this morning because it's an important part of being a disciple of Christ and our mission as a church, but also because there's a lot of misunderstandings and bad ideas out there about what evangelism is. The topic of evangelism often dredges up feelings of dread and guilt among Christians. It can feel like there's a slave master's whip hanging over our heads. And the practice of evangelism often ends up pushing people away from Christ rather than drawing them in.

Evangelism has become a negative thing to a lot of people – Christians and non-Christians alike – and I hope we can turn that around in this series because the Bible gives us a much different perspective – one that brings hope, encouragement, and joy. We're going to have to wade through a lot of misconceptions and faulty ideas to get there during this series, and because of the prevalence of those kinds of things in Christian teaching, we're going to have to keep doing that in our lives in order to keep holding on to the truth.

The study guide we're using for this series is just a tool to keep us on topic together and spur on discussion in small groups. It's not a perfect or comprehensive tool and shouldn't be thought of in that way. There are parts that I agree with and parts I don't. As with any Bible study tool, we need to realize that it has flaws and shortcomings and we need to remember it's just a tool and rely primarily on the Bible itself.

This week, the topics before us are: What is Evangelism? and, Who Should Evangelize? So those are the two questions I want to dig into today. If you're going to go through the study guide, you need to know that this sermon is going to go in a different direction – just be aware of that. I hope it will lead to deeper thinking and good discussion.

How should we think of evangelism? What image or idea should we have? I have a few pictures that I think might be common ways people think about evangelism:

- Billy Graham preaching
- Sidewalk preacher with a Turn or Burn sign
- People serving at a soup kitchen

- Two people drinking coffee
- Two neighbors talking
- Jehovah's Witnesses knocking on doors

Are any of these evangelism? I think all of them capture someone's idea of evangelism and probably most of our ideas. The study guide defines evangelism as "telling others the good news about what Jesus Christ has done to save sinners and calling them to repent of their sins and believe in Jesus." I agree with that, but I also think there's a whole lot more to it than that.

This morning I want us to think about: What is the heart of evangelism? What is God's heart for evangelism? I think it's a lot more than just telling people gospel truths, and this morning I want to try to capture that from the Bible. When it comes to evangelism there's a metaphor that I think God would want us to see and embrace because he used it repeatedly with several different bible authors when he breathed out his Word to them by the Holy Spirit.

700 years before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah spoke these words to the people of Israel:

- Isaiah 9:2, 6: *"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone... ⁶ For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."*
- Isaiah 42:6-7: (This is from the perspective of God speaking to his chosen Messiah) *"I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, ⁷ to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."*
- Isaiah 49:5-6: (This is from the perspective of the Messiah) *"And now the Lord says, he who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him— for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord, and my God has become my strength— ⁶ he says: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."*

What did you notice about all three of those prophecies? What was the Messiah referred to as? Light... a light shining in the darkness. A light for the nations – to give hope and to bring salvation to the ends of the earth – to people trapped in darkness.

It says in Genesis 3 that after God created the world and brought mankind into being, the first humans quickly turned to sin. Adam disobeyed God and sin entered the world. Romans 5:12 says, *“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.”* The biblical authors often describe sin and its pervasive effect on the world as “darkness.” It says in Psalm 107:10-11: *“Some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, prisoners in affliction and in irons,¹¹ for they had rebelled against the words of God, and spurned the counsel of the Most High.”* Proverbs 4:19 says, *“The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble.”* Isaiah 60:2 says, *“For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples.”* In Colossians 1:13 Paul describes the sinful world as the “domain of darkness.”

A veil of spiritual darkness has covered the earth bringing misery, destruction, and death. We are born into it and its even part of our nature, and the consequences are visible all around us – violence, immorality, greed, murder, sexual immorality, slavery, fighting, brokenness, agony, discord, lying, and stealing. The darkness has settled like a thick fog covering every area of this world.

But God looked upon the darkness and sent us the Light. When Jesus came into the world to carry out all that his Father called him to accomplish, he came as the light of the world. The book of John begins this way – John 1:1-5: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.² He was in the beginning with God.³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men.⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.⁷ He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.⁸ He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.⁹ The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.”*

Later on in John's gospel, Jesus described himself in this way – John 8:12 says, *“Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”* And in John 12:46 he says, *“I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.”*

Jesus came as a light in the darkness. Have you ever been stuck in the darkness, trying to find something or trying to find your way around? Maybe you've been trying to find something at night – groping around in the dark. Maybe you've gone down into a cave when they turned the lights off. Darkness brings confusion, disorientation, and lostness. It's oppressive; it's heavy, crushing. And when you're in that darkness, there's one thing that brings great hope, clarity and direction – the light.

Most of us have smart phones and one of the handy features on a smart phone is the flashlight. I don't know how many times I've ended up using that little flashlight to be able to see something. How good does it feel when you're in the darkness to grab your phone and turn on the light? How freeing is it to finally be able to see clearly and know your way around? Light is a wonderful thing for people caught in darkness. And that's who Jesus was – the light in the darkness.

We were lost and desperate in our sin, groping around in the darkness of this world, but God had mercy and compassion and sent us the Light. And many of us have experienced that light in our lives. In describing what happens and what it's like to become a Christian, Paul says this in 2 Cor. 4:6: *“For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”* God turned the light on in our hearts and we were born again. 1 Peter 2:9 says, *“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”*

We who are Christians have come out of the darkness and into the light and experienced the freedom, clarity and joy that it brings. It's a whole new life – eternal life, full of hope and meaning. The darkness is pushed away and the light is now inside us and we have become children of light. Eph. 5:8 says, *“For at one*

time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light.”

And that brings us to the heart of evangelism. (Picture of light shining in darkness) The heart of evangelism is light shining in the darkness – bringing the hope of Jesus to people who are lost in desperation and sin. God has been doing that for thousands of years and we are partakers of that incredible blessing. And now, having become children of light, God’s desire is that we would join him and let our light shine to the people around us, that they might see Jesus and come into the light.

We do that in many ways. The study guide puts all the emphasis on telling people the truths about Jesus, and that’s very important, especially in places where there are no churches or existing gospel witness. But in our context where the church has already been established, we have to see it as much more than that or I think we are going to miss the heart of evangelism in Scripture and many of us are going to be discouraged and feel like a failure.

Telling people the truths about Jesus is very important and each of us needs to be ready and willing to do that when God gives us the opportunity and a conversation opens up and goes in that direction. But far more common and just as important is the way we live our lives every day. We are to be a gospel witness in our community by the way we live our lives and treat one another in the church. And that’s by far the greater emphasis in Scripture. In all Paul’s letters to established churches, he doesn’t tell them to go out and preach the gospel, but he’s constantly telling them to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel and to love one another and pursue unity in the church. And then, when people wonder why they’re so different, they should be ready to share. So I believe in our context, the primary way we let our light shine and carry out evangelism and our gospel witness is by living as children of light so that people see a difference in our lives and take notice.

Paul says in Php. 2:15: “Do all things without grumbling or disputing,¹⁵ that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.” And Jesus said to his disciples in Matt. 5:14-16: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a

basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

The heart of evangelism is letting your light shine in the darkness. I hope that brings hope to all of us – especially if you’ve been discouraged about evangelism in the past. It should also be a challenge, because honestly, Christians and churches haven’t done a very good job at this and even though we’ve preached the gospel, we’ve driven a lot of people away by the way we’ve conducted ourselves. May the Lord empower us to turn that tide in our church and our community as we let our lights shine with the hope of Jesus.