

From the Pulpit of Keith Miller
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January 24, 2021

Why Should we Engage Cheyenne with the Gospel? *1 Corinthians 9:19-27*

Introduction

We live in a troubled world; everyone knows it, the movies portray it, and our latest elections were shaped by it. This is nothing new, for generation after generation has experienced this since the dawn of civilization. The cause of humanity's ills has received countless hypotheses of its origins from as early as Socrates to Oprah. The remedies for the human problem is offered from a smorgasbord of ideas... just take your pick from a line of modern thinkers such as Charles Darwin, Fredrick Niche, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, or Dr. Phil. In all that history has taught us, its most glaring lesson is that our problem is not government, family, poverty, public schools, social media, or power... our problem, as the Prophet Jeremiah so clearly put it, is: **"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it"** (17:9). Our problem is as old as the Garden of Eden as well as God's promise to remedy it.

Paul was haunted by something that drove and compelled him to tell as many people as possible that there is a remedy to our sin problem. In fact, Paul went as far to pronounce a curse upon himself if he were to do anything but make the preaching of the Gospel his greatest priority: **"Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel"** (1 Cor. 9:16). In Romans 9:2-3, the Apostle even went as far as to say: **"I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh."** Why would Paul wish such a thing upon himself? The reason why he would wish something so horrific as being cut off from Christ, because he understood what horrors awaited those who without Christ on the Great Judgment Day.

For every human born into this world looms a coming judgment reserved for all who stand guilty before the judge of the living and the dead who is the measure of all that is right, true, and holy because He is righteous, truth, and altogether holy. We are told that concerning the human species that: **"There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.... There is no fear of God before their eyes"** (Rom. 3:10-12, 18). The Bible states that every person born into this world... is born into sin (Psalm 51:5) and by nature and enemy of the living God (Rom. 5:10). We are told that all of us will stand before the throne of God be sentenced for the crime of being sinners who have sinned against Him:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead

who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:11–15, ESV)

The prophet Daniel describes the Day of Judgment this way: **“Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt”** (Dan. 12:2). The Amplified Bible translates Daniel 12:2 this way: **“Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but some to disgrace and everlasting abhorrence.”**

This is not all that we learn in the Bible concerning the fate of all who have not received the forgiveness of their sins through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are told that all who are sentenced to the Lake of Fire at the Day of Judgment will be there forever: **“And the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever...”** (Rev. 14:11). Not only is hell a place that is **“away from the presence of the Lord...”** (2 Thess. 1:9), but Jesus described it as a place of **“eternal destruction”** (Matt. 10:28), **“eternal punishment”** (see Matt. 18:34; 24:51; Luke 12:47-48), **“weeping and gnashing of teeth”** (Matt. 8:12), and **“a place of fire”** (Matt. 18:8-9; 25:41; Mark 9:43).

The reason the apostle could wish he be accursed in place of his fellow Jews was because he understood what waited for all whose faith did not rest in Jesus Christ. Yet, equally, Paul was a partaker of the gift and goodness of the gospel, and was compelled to share the good news of Romans 5 with all his days would allow:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! (Romans 5:6–10, NIV)

It was the apostle's love of God and people that compelled him to preach the gospel of Jesus to as many people as possible. The word for preach literally means, “to announce good news.” This is something that is expected of every Christian to do; this is what Matthew 28:19-20 looks like. It does not mean that you preach in a pulpit in front of God's people; it means that you tell others of the good news of Jesus as you go about living your life in this world.

People Need to Hear the Good News of Jesus Christ (vv. 19-23)

What was Paul's secret for such a fruitful ministry? Obviously God had His hand upon the apostle, but it also had to do with his love for others. Paul's love for those who had not yet heard or received the gospel is seen in his method for reaching such people with the gospel. There are three sets of people Paul lists in these verses: 1) Hebrews, 2) Gentiles, and 3) the weak.

To the Jew, Paul became as a Jew to win Jews. The Law served to point people to their need for the Gospel found only in Jesus Christ. The Law didn't save anyone, but simply demonstrated how far short a person came to meeting God's standard of holiness. Paul understood that Jesus not only fulfilled the Law of Moses, but that He was far superior to it. However, to the Jew bound to Jewish culture and customs, Paul became like them for the purpose of building a bridge into their lives so to bring them the gospel.

To the Gentile whose only religious experience was tied to the paganism of the day, Paul looked for ways to build bridges into their lives without ever compromising his own personal holiness and convictions as a follower of Jesus. If that meant eating meat that had previously been sacrificed to an idol, he would eat the meat so to find some means to bring that person the message of Jesus Christ. Paul became a student of his culture so to learn the language of the culture for the purpose of proclaiming the Gospel to people who would never darken the door of a synagogue or church. A great example of what this looked like for the apostle is found in Acts 17.

While in Athens, we are told that Paul's spirit was "**greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols**" (Acts 17:16). So, Paul didn't hold a sign on the corner telling all who walked by to repent, but engaged the culture around him, which required more courage than track bombing the city: he reasoned in the synagogues with the Jews, he also reasoned in the market place among the residents of Athens, and then he engaged the thinkers of Athens in the Areopagus. While in the Areopagus, he knew enough about the culture of Athens to engage the "men of Athens" with language they understood. Paul was able to quote the poetry and philosophy of the day as a bridge to explain the Gospel. Not once did he insult those within Athens by pointlessly mocking them for their beliefs, nor did he give the idols of Athens any credibility as being anything more than the creation of someone's imagination. At the end of the day, some were offended by the gospel, others were convinced of it, and some wanted more time to think about it.

Thirdly, Paul was sympathetic to those whose bondage to the superstitions and idols of the day held a strong grip upon their lives. In other words, Paul loved the weak person enough to give them space and time as he engaged them on their playing field without ever compromising the Gospel. If not eating certain foods, or going into certain places, or engaging in certain cultural practices meant that he could have a better opportunity to share the gospel with the "weak" then he made the concessions he needed to make without ever compromising the Gospel.

Paul understood that the world he lived in required him to understand his world in such a way that he could find ways to relate to unbelieving Jews and pagans without sinning or compromising his own convictions so that he could tell them about Jesus. To the Jew, Paul looked like a Jew whose treasure was Jesus Christ; to the gentile, Paul looked like a gentile whose wisdom was Christ; to the weak, Paul looked like the weak whose strength was Christ. Paul gave himself to a world that needed the Christ who died so that all who hope in Him could know the love of a holy God instead of His wrath.

We Must Engage the Mission of God Because it Matters (vv. 24-27)

Finally, Paul devoted himself to the work of the Gospel because there was no greater prize to be had. The biannual Isthmian games took place in Corinth; like any athletic competition, those

competing to win had to be disciplined in how they trained and ate in preparation of the games. Engaging a Christ-less world with the gospel requires hard work such as your time, energy, responsible study of the culture that surrounds you, and diligent study of the Word of God to communicate the full Gospel to a world that needs the greatest news ever to fall upon human ears.

People are dying every day and those who have not heard the gospel or who have rejected it will go to hell. People who die who do not believe who Jesus claimed to be because they have not heard or cannot bring themselves to agree with him will go to hell. So what did Jesus say about himself? He said:

“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.” (John 6:35)

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live...” (John 11:25)

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

Listen to me. All who reject Jesus will go to the place where, “...**the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever...**” (Rev. 14:11). It is a place that is “**away from the presence of the Lord...**” (2 Thess. 1:9), a place of “**eternal destruction**” (Matt. 10:28), “**eternal punishment**” (see Matt. 18:34; 24:51; Luke 12:47-48), “**weeping and gnashing of teeth**” (Matt. 8:12), “**a place of fire**” (Matt. 18:8-9; 25:41; Mark 9:43), a place where, “**their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh**” (Isa. 66:24; Mark 9:48), hell is a place that all of scripture refers to as the second death (see Rev. 21:8).

The only hope of the nations is the only solution to our sin problem, and that hope is found only in and only through Jesus Christ who lived the life we could not live for the purpose of suffering the wrath of almighty God while on a cross... a wrath that you and I deserved. The Truth of a real hell and a judgment that really is coming is fact checked and found to be true by an empty tomb that Jesus walked out of after he defeated death by rising from it. We only have this one life God gave us, and it was never given to us to be wasted; the apostle Paul understood this.

Conclusion

We exist to develop followers of Jesus by prayerfully engaging Cheyenne and our communities with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The place we have been called to reach with the Gospel is statistically one of the more unchurched and regions in our nation, and although spiritual, wants little to nothing to do with a faith that claims that there is only one way to heaven and only way remedy to our sin problem. So, Paul concludes:

Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one

beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9:25–27, ESV)

In America, the church is now further on the margins of society than she has ever been in the history of our nation. The moral majority in our country does not share a Christian world view, is convinced that anatomy has nothing to do with gender, and that a Christian world view is intolerant, bigoted, and dangerous. Today, less than 9% of Americans claim to believe what the Bible defines as saving faith. What this means is that for us to engage God's mission requires us to go into the world instead of hoping that they will come into ours.

I learned this week that out of the 65,000 people who made Wyoming their home in 1890, only 13,000 of them claimed to be a Christian as defined in the Bible. A staggering 80% of those living in Wyoming were considered "unchurched." In 2019, it was estimated that the total population of Wyoming was 578,759 people with little change in its religious landscape with the exception that 66% of people living in Wyoming believe in some form of a higher power with about 53% who claim that they pray regularly. The unchurched, although more spiritual than they were in 1890, is still about 80 percent. Which leads me to ask myself and you a very legitimate question: If we really believe what we say we believe, why is Wyoming still 80% unchurched and why is the state's suicide rate still, as of June 2020, ranked third in the nation?

Cheyenne cannot afford the Church to be complacent or comfortable. This is why the apostle Paul wrote, "**How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!'**" (Romans 10:14–15). What Wyoming needs most; what Cheyenne needs now, is to see some beautiful feet.

We exist to develop followers of Jesus by prayerfully engaging Cheyenne and our communities with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In light of the God who called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light through Jesus Christ, we need to wake up and engage the mission God has called us to participate in. God has called us to the work, He has promised that he will produce the results.

"Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen." (Ephesians 3:20–21, ESV)