

“COME, LET US WORSHIP III.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for the Sermon: Romans 10:13-17

Introduction:

Remember the temptation of Jesus and how after forty days of no food Satan tempted Him. “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.” And Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:3-4).

And then Satan took Jesus up to a high mountain top and in one grand supernatural gesture showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and all their glory in a moment in time.

Then Satan said, “I will give you all this authority and their glory. ... 7 If you ... will worship me, it will all be yours” (Luke 4:6-7).

“You can skip the cross, all the pain and suffering, you don’t have to drink that cup, you can go straight for the authority and glory. Just bow down and worship me once and it’s all yours. Surely God will forgive you. Surely He can get over it.”

And Jesus answered him, “Be gone, Satan. For it is written, “‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve’” (Luke 4:8).

This wasn’t about switching from organ music to guitar music or to putting videos and power point up on a big screen or having drums or dancers in worship. It was about the most fundamental question of all, who will you worship.

And how do we know the one we are to worship? By the Word of God. And how can we know that? By hearing through preachers.

Why preachers and why preaching?

Why does God send us human preachers? It seems foolish to send men like ourselves, sinners to preach to sinners. God could have sent His holy angels to preach to us and shepherd our souls. But think about those times in Scripture when angels did come. People were terrified, the first words out of every angel’s mouth was, “Don’t be afraid, fear not.”

God in His wisdom chooses to send us human preachers to preach to us and shepherd us. Calvin makes this point over and over, reminding us that it's good for us to be fed and cared

for by sinful men because it humbles us to have to learn from and submit to our “inferiors.” I am among you as a chief among sinners, like Paul. God designed it to be like this.

I imagine some of us think it would be pretty cool to have the Apostle Paul as our pastor. But listen to his own clear understanding of his ministry.

I Corinthians 2:1, 3-5 I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ... 3 I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, 4 and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

That is my prayer constantly, that while I preach with much weakness and inadequacy that it wouldn't be about me, but a demonstration of God's grace and the power of the Spirit. If you get anything out of any sermon, it was God and not me.

As I have said frequently, I am just the pipe. When you turn on the faucet at home you don't praise the pipe, you praise the water that comes out. Don't praise the preacher, he's just the pipe, praise God for His Word and Spirit, for His presence with us through the preaching of His Word.

The Gospel does not fall from the sky like rain, it's not proclaimed by angels, it doesn't come through loud speakers from heaven. It's brought by the hands of imperfect, flawed common men. God has one method, to send human prophets and apostles, preachers and teachers to proclaim the life-giving truth of the Word of God.

That's why preachers. Why preaching?

Romans 10:17 Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

I Corinthians 1:21 It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.

Scripture says faith comes by hearing and hearing by preaching. Preaching is God's means of grace, His means of bringing salvation.

Our souls depend on the Word of God. Salvation belongs to God and God delights to save, and your salvation and mine are directly linked to the preaching of His Word by His messengers. We are to receive it from the human vessels God gives us.

We know God through the preaching of His Word. Any nation or community or church or individual that receives the Word is favored by God and the proof of His divine love is seen in the messengers He sends.

Now let me address a couple of practical questions with regard to preaching.

Why preach through whole books of the Bible?

First, it's Biblical. The whole Bible is the Word of God and food for the soul.

II Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

Jesus did it on the Emmaus Road when He started with Moses and all the prophets He interpreted for them all that was said concerning Him (Luke 24:27).

Second, the Bible is written not as a random collection of verses or passages, but as books. They were received and read as books. To preach them as books gives us the best opportunity to understand and be faithful to their context.

If you got five letters in the mail in one day, you wouldn't read a few lines from one and then jump to another letter. You would read each in their entirety.

This addresses a tendency in our culture to be impatient with anything that lasts too long, our tendency to rush and bounce from one thing to another, because of short attention spans. I know some pastors in mega churches cater to this mentality but does it really serve the church well? Does it make for shallow Christians who are ill equipped for the serious challenges of life and challenges to our faith? Patient study of God's Word fits with God's slow and steady way with us. It keeps us from treating the Bible just as a self-help book or a manual for better living.

Third, preaching through the books of the Bible increases our Biblical literacy and understanding of the whole counsel of God. It takes us into books that are left out of preaching. I have a pastor friend who mostly just preached from the Gospels and Paul's letters for most of his ministry. Yes, it's God's Word, but missing is the width and breadth and depth and height of God's counsel. Preaching books helps us get the big picture of God's work and ways in our world.

Fourth, it keeps a pastor from just focusing on his favorite texts or topics. It forces the preacher and the hearer to consider hard texts and hard truths. It stretches us and sharpens us.

Fifth, it enables the preacher and worship planners to plan ahead. This is especially helpful for me. Before I came here much of my preaching was topical and all over the place. I was constantly facing the tension of what text do I preach this week. For the life of me I don't know why I did it or how I did it.

I'm not a slave to preaching consecutive books as I trust you are aware. I have preached a bunch of topics over the years, the parables, the attributes of God, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, marriage, parenting, children, Advent themes, worship and I will continue to.

But preaching through books builds up the church in faith and knowledge, it pushes us toward Biblical stability and spiritual maturity, it equips us to know the Bible and it builds our trust and confidence in the Bible as the whole counsel of God's eternally true, faithful and Holy Word.

How do we listen to a sermon?

Faith comes by hearing so how do we improve our hearing?

Preaching is most effective where there is much preparation and prayer both on the part of the preacher and the hearer. Both must do their preparation and come to the task filled up and equipped. So I beg you and urge you to pray for me and to pray for yourselves.

Jesus in His parable about the four kinds of soil was talking about the condition of our hearts. The problem is not the seed or the sower, the problem is the condition of the listener's heart.

For the sower's seed to even take root, the soil must be prepared. You farmers don't just walk out into a field and start throwing seed around and then expect a good crop. There is serious preparation. The seed only bore fruit in one soil, the soil that was prepared to receive the seed.

Jesus' admonition and warning in **Luke 8:18** should be taken very seriously, "Take care then how you hear." Take great care how you listen to the preaching of the Word of God.

Don't come casually or carelessly as if nothing much will happen, but expectantly with a sense that this is God's holy eternal Word and that the Holy Spirit is present to apply God's Word to expectant, open, hungry hearts. The work is not all up to the preacher, but to all of us, praying and asking God to make our hearts fertile plowed soil ready to receive the seed and not hard paths or rocky ground.

Is anyone thirsty? Is anyone hungry? Come and eat and drink from the living water of Jesus Christ. Come and feed and nourish your hungry souls. Don't fill up all week on the junk food of the world, on the cotton candy and Twinkies and coke, on the temporal pleasures, on the things that make promises but never deliver. Think about the condition of your soul.

What if the sermon is a dud?

I have been married 36 years and my wife has prepared something approaching 20,000 meals. There have been a few duds. She had a famous one back in our first month that we still smile about from time to time. And then she had another one last month that didn't turn out very good. That's going to happen. I don't remember most of her meals, but she has been faithful and we have been well fed.

How many of you can say that every day on your job or every day in your parenting is better than the one before? None of us, we are sinners being used by God, it is only by His grace. And He delights in keeping us humble.

Since I have been here at First Church I have preached almost 700 sermons. There have been some duds. Sermon duds are an inevitable result of having human pastors. They humble us by reminding us of our need for His grace and help.

What do we do when some sermons don't seem to work for us as well as others? Even the greatest preachers have bad days, sometimes because of the demands of the week before or because of life at home or because of prayerlessness or because God wants to keep him humble or a myriad of other factors. No one here is more aware of my inadequacies and shortcomings and failures and sins and weaknesses than I am. No one wishes they were better at what they do than me. One good way to get better preaching is to pray for the preacher, he needs it.

But it is possible the reason a sermon is a dud could also be in our own hearts, so we should examine ourselves in the process. Was I prepared? Did I pray? Is there unconfessed sin? Did I stay up too late? Do I have a critical spirit or unreasonable expectations? Worship is spiritual work so there is spiritual work to be done as we come to it.

I have mentioned my experience in chapel at Wheaton College. Freshman year all the chapels were great, fresh, interesting. Sophomore year I got too cool and all the chapels were boring. Junior year I got over myself and ask God to give me one thing, make one thing stick and the chapels got better. This is spiritual work for all of us, preachers and hearers alike.

This morning we are having two sermons, one verbal and one visual.

Preaching Made Visible, The Lord's Table

Acts 2:42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Historically the church has called preaching and the sacraments a "means of grace." A means of grace is something God promises to use to bless His people and help them grow in His grace.

The Canons of Dort (Part 5, Art. 14) says it this way: Just as it has pleased God to begin this work of grace in us by the proclamation of the gospel, so God preserves, continues, and completes this work by the hearing and reading of the gospel, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises, and also by the use of the sacraments.

The sacraments are when we make what we preach visible. When we come to this table we are preaching the gospel to ourselves as we remember Christ's sacrifice for us in the broken bread which symbolizes His broken body and in the cup which symbolizes His shed blood.

In the gospel God promises to save us from our sins and in this sacrament we see that He really means it. When we are weak and struggling or having doubts, we need only look here to be reminded of God's favor and acceptance. I am a great sinner and Jesus is a great Savior. This is God's way of comforting the downcast, strengthening our faith, and conquering doubts. He never forgets who He is or what He said, and here we remember that. God is faithful and true to His Word.

These means of grace, preaching and the sacraments, are God's holy vessels, His consecrated vessels for salvation and life, for grace and truth. Tonight we are going to read about King Belshazzar who treated the holy vessels of God with contempt. He was a modern man. Many today do the same. The question today is what are we doing with the holy vessels of God? How do we think about and treat and handle the means of God's grace given to us in preaching and the sacraments. We don't live by bread alone, but by the bread of God's Word and the bread broken for us. Come hungry and thirsty for the things of God.

Prayer: Oh Lord Jesus, shepherd of our souls. You have given us so much, more than any other people. You have sent so many shepherds and messengers to us over all our years. You have given us your Word and we have multiple copies. You have given us messengers on TV and radio, in countless books and magazines. And yet there is still a famine of hearing your Word in our land. Jesus we beg you not to let that famine extend to our own hearts or our own homes or our own church. Don't take your Holy Spirit from us and don't take your Word from us. Jesus, wake us up, shake us out of our stupor, speak to us again and again. Give us ears to hear, let us hear your voice.