

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Epiphany 5 -- February 2nd and 5th, 2012

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

16 Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! 17 If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. 18 What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it.

19 Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. 20 To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. 21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. 23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

Dear children who are running the race by God's grace alone,

Every time we have a Super Bowl winner, or any other major sport for that matter, we hear the same kind of comments. "We were driven to win." "We knew that everyone on the team would do whatever it takes to get to this point." Most of us do not understand how athletes can be so single-minded; working without looking to the right or left in an effort to achieve that overriding goal. Sometimes that drive to win isn't so admirable, however. Athletes have been known to try to physically remove their competition. Some sports have a reputation for being dirty and un-sportsman-like conduct.

Despite some of the poor examples in the sports world, we are usually impressed with tales of athletes who were driven; who had a passion to win. Christians are often guilty of the exact opposite—apathy, indifference, lukewarmness. It shouldn't be that way, though. Certainly none of us would sanction the "do whatever it takes" attitude which is so willing to compromise our doctrine and beliefs, but the fact remains: those who have heard the gospel of Jesus Christ are compelled.

Theme: We are Compelled to Preach the Gospel.

- 1. Because we have a sacred trust.**
- 2. Because we can see a desperate need.**
- 3. Because we have a gracious reward**

Some people say: "Religion is a personal thing for me. Sometimes I would like to talk about God, Jesus, my salvation with other people, but my legs begin to feel like rubber and my throat chokes up and I can't go on. Surely you understand if I don't bring the Gospel to others myself. I give my offerings so that other people will do all of that for me." Some of that sounds pretty good, doesn't it? After all, humility is a good quality in a Christian. You might think that a Christian who does not feel comfortable speaking to others about Christ is humble, but I submit to you today that such a Christian is more likely plagued by sinful pride.

Pride? Pastor are you crazy? No, I'm not. Many times when we will not speak our faith to others it is not because we are humble Christians, but rather proud human beings. We are proud of our own self-worth. Admitting dependence on Jesus might diminish us in the eyes of our friends or co-workers. That's the real problem, isn't it? We don't want to face the ridicule of callous and worldly people. We don't want to be thought of as one of those Bible-thumping, born-again do-gooders.

A joke is often told of a person who went away to a camp for several months in the summer. When he returned he told his friends with relief: "Nobody up there even suspected that I was a Christian." It's a joke that makes us chuckle, but how true it is of us. Even among Christians we in the WELS tend to

be apologetic of our faith. We are labeled as “that ultra-conservative synod.” We would rather crawl in a hole than speak up for God’s Word and tell other Christians that we simply believe that God’s Word says what it means, and anyone who says otherwise is in danger of eternity in hell. Yes, we like to make excuses about why we don’t want to display our faith. The fact is, however, that preaching the gospel is not optional. Look around you in this church. You won’t find anyone here who doesn’t need to hear the message of salvation, **“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23)**. Sin makes no distinction by racial boundaries. Sin does not confine itself to any particular social group. All people are affected. The universal condition of sin demands that we preach the gospel.

Paul says in **2 Cor 5:19** **“God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them.”** Christ has paid for the sins of the homosexual, the prostitute, the murderer—the sins of the average and the sins of the elite. This universal redemption for all people by the death and resurrection of Jesus insists that preaching the gospel is not optional. All have sinned and the sins of all have been paid for. “Therefore go,” says Jesus, “and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The commission of Jesus to his disciples includes all his disciples. The universal commission of Jesus requires each of us to preach the gospel.

Preach might sound intimidating, especially after we’ve just said that preaching is not optional. But to preach can simply mean to tell. Any one of us can tell someone about God’s love for us; how his love affects us personally. Anyone can speak about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Each of us can speak knowing that **“we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:23-24)**.

Not everyone we speak to will believe. Some may ridicule us; **“For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength” (1 Cor 1:25)**. Preaching doesn’t have to be intimidating! We are simply God’s instruments. We are just the messenger. God promises: **“my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isa 55:11)**.

2. Because we can see a desperate need

We need not be afraid to preach. God will accomplish exactly what he wants to do through us. We are not afraid. Instead we are compelled to Preach the Gospel. We are compelled to preach because we can see a desperate need. Preaching is a necessity. Paul says: **“I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!”** Paul tells the Romans why he is so compelled to preach: **“How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (Rom 10:14)**.

God has established preaching as the way the message of salvation goes out to the world. Paul was compelled to take the message to the Gentiles. As for us: **“you are...a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet 2:9)**. Peter leaves no doubt that God expects us to preach; we are compelled to share what we have received. When you look around you it is obvious that the fields are white for harvest. There are plenty of people right in our own area who have little or no exposure to the gospel. There is no time to waste. For each of us, preaching the Gospel is a necessity, for we can see a desperate need.

Pray the Lord not only to send workers into the harvest field, but pray also that he would use you in whatever capacity he will. Do you think you’re too old for full-time service? God called Moses into service at the age of 80. In my Seminary graduating class we had a couple of men who were over 40 and many graduating classes have had at some that old and some were even in their 50’s. Just because you’re not in high school or college any more doesn’t mean the Lord can’t call you into full time service. Consider the full time work of the Lord for yourself and encourage someone you know to consider it also. We can see a desperate need to preach the gospel. Preaching is a necessity. That necessity means becoming all things to all people.

Listen again to what Paul did: **1 Cor 9:19-22** “**Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the ²⁰ Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹ To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.**” Paul’s method of operation did not always remain the same. We, too, must become all things for all people.

This means meeting people where they are with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Should we avoid mentioning that living together is a sin just to get people to become members? No! Should we refrain from using some parts of the Bible, like those condemning homosexuality, just because it is politically correct? Never! These things are not meeting people where they are with the Gospel, these things are compromising the gospel and that puts our own salvation at risk. We cannot assume, however, that everyone whose shadow crosses the threshold of our church will be coming here initially for the right reasons. Would it help those who have never heard the gospel if we could find ways to make their visit less intimidating and we can do that by helping someone who might seem lost or out of place. We could help people find their way through the liturgy. We can personally invite people to come with us to Church so that we can help eliminate some of those hurdles and obstacles. We could introduce ourselves to people and welcome them or find something out about them that we could use to knock down barriers and obstacles, even if it is hard for us to do. These are just some example of many things we might do to meet people where they are with the gospel.

3. Because we have a gracious reward

We are Compelled to Preach the Gospel -- because we have a gracious reward. Paul writes: **“What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it.”** One of the rewards Christians receive is the fact that we are included in the work of saving souls. God does not need the help of anyone, yet he has determined this to be the way his gospel is spread— by preaching.

Paul had an additional reward: as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul had a right to expect support — to make a living off of his preaching. Yet Paul does not have to make use of this right. For this he gives thanks and considers it his reward. Those who preaching God’s saving message have the same opportunity and the same reward: sharing the gospel message without cost to others.

Paul closes with the words: **“I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”** Our additional reward for preaching the gospel is that we ourselves have received its blessings. We certainly deserved none of God’s goodness and love, yet we have been promised the very salvation of our souls. We are Compelled to Preach the Gospel. That very phrase presupposes that we are concerned about the salvation of our own souls. We can hardly have a healthy concern for the salvation of others unless we are concerned about our own salvation at the same time.

We live in a society which is driven. We revere athletes who are driven to a high level of competition. We admire business men and women who feel driven to over-achieve. We have the utmost respect for their commitment to excellence. How is our commitment to excellence? We are Compelled to Preach the Gospel. Fear of an angry God does not compel us. We are not forced into service as a necessary step to earn salvation. We do not open our mouths to speak the gospel message reluctantly because of fear of the world’s retribution. We are not driven, but led. We are led by the Spirit and therefore we preach. We are compelled to preach. We are compelled to preach the message of Christ crucified and risen to pay for the sins of the world. And what compels us? Paul writes in **2 Cor 5:14-15** **“For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.”** Amen.