

**+ Acts 18:1-11 + Keep on Speaking! + 8th Sunday after Pentecost + 3 August 2014 +**

Last Sunday was an amazing day. In the morning, we celebrated God's amazing grace shown to each of us in our Savior Jesus. We gave thanks for the opportunity to tell so many kids at Vacation Bible School about God's amazing grace in their Savior Jesus. That afternoon quite a few of us trekked up to Watertown with about 80 other people traveling from other congregations to also celebrate God's grace. We celebrated as our daughter congregation welcomed their first resident pastor.

Now what kind of message would you expect to hear at a service like that? Would it be like a motivational speech that if he and the members there just try hard enough, then surely positive results will follow? Would they have been encouraged to make sure they use the right methodology or presentation or that they should find strength in themselves?

Thankfully that's not what we heard. Time and again the young pastor and his small congregation were reminded that the work of Gospel ministry is often difficult, frustrating, and even painful. While there are many souls who desperately need to know their Savior, that doesn't always guarantee that they will listen no matter how impressive the presentation.

Yet they were also reminded of what God in his grace has done, can do, and will do through the Gospel—the good news of our Savior Jesus. It's not about the man, but about the message he proclaims—the good news of the Savior scattered like seed from heart to heart. Some of it never grows. Some of it grows for only a little while or is choked out, but some of it grows abundantly—because that seed of the Gospel can do amazing things in human hearts. So don't give up. Let the Gospel do its work.

You and I also need to hear those same realistic words of encouragement from our Savior God. He's going to encourage us as we see the Apostle Paul visit a city called Corinth. Yes, we'll see that mission work is hard and rocky and thorny, yet the Lord still blesses that work among us. As he encouraged the Apostle, so he encourages us—**KEEP ON SPEAKING!**

It had been a difficult trip for Paul. In Philippi, just as the Gospel was starting to bear fruit, he was beaten and thrown into prison with his co-worker Silas. Now the Lord rescued them, but things didn't get any better when he went to Thessalonica. Those who opposed his preaching started a riot that forced him to flee the city. Eventually, he made his way to Athens—a city where it didn't matter who or what you worshiped as long as you did it faithfully and didn't offend anyone. They even had an altar "**to an unknown God**" just in case they missed anyone (Acts 17:23). Paul didn't seem to get anywhere there since many blew him off for his strange, exclusive teaching.

So when Paul arrived in the city of Corinth, you wonder what he was expecting. The mission work had been rocky at best in all those other places, yet the Lord had also formed little congregations of believers in most of those places. Now Corinth was a large, commercial city in southern Greece. It also had such a bad reputation for immorality that it would've made modern cities like Las Vegas and Amsterdam blush. No matter what Paul was expecting, he knew they needed Jesus just like anywhere else.

When he arrived in Corinth, Paul met a faithful Jewish couple who had just moved there from Rome—a tentmaker named Aquila and his wife Priscilla. They welcomed Paul into their home as he shared with them the good news of the Messiah, the Savior who had finally come. The Lord would later use this faithful couple to bless the mission work that Paul was just starting.

After getting settled, Paul went to the local synagogue to talk to those who already knew about God's promises of a Savior from the Old Testament. You see, these were Paul's countrymen—people who knew the Old Testament as he did, people who spoke the same language and had similar customs, people who were looking for the coming of a Savior as he had. So week in and week out, Paul tried to persuade them that Jesus was the fulfillment of all those prophecies in the Old Testament. "**Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.**" He wanted them to see what he had seen and to know what he knew about this Jesus. Paul was so intensely focused on this task that when his co-workers Silas and Timothy arrived in Corinth weeks later, they found Paul "**devoted...exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.**" Paul was fighting for their souls.

Now when God's Word is taught and preached it always affects the person who hears it. It always has an effect on hearts—either they receive it in faith trusting in their Savior or they reject it in unbelief. Many of Paul's hearers in the synagogue became violently opposed to his teaching. Not only did they resist what he had to

say, but they became abusive—slandering Paul, blaspheming his so-called Messiah, and completely rejecting the Gospel. They had hardened their hearts and tried to silence Paul with their abuse.

So what did Paul do? Did he give up? Did he give in? He had worked so hard. It was such intense, difficult work trying to get their focus on Jesus. Now it had become painful work as they verbally abused him and his Lord, but Paul didn't give up and certainly didn't give in. **"...He shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, 'Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.'"** For the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of his own soul and the souls of those who did believe, Paul had to leave his beloved countrymen behind. He had to take the Gospel to others who would listen, even if they were unbelieving pagans.

Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the home of a faithful **"worshiper of God"** named Titius Justus. There he began to teach about Jesus—the Savior who brings forgiveness for guilt, the Savior who breaks the chains of sin and gives sight to those lost in darkness, the Savior who changes lives not just on the outside, but on the inside, the Savior who gives something that lasts long after this life comes to an end—and the Lord blessed the work. Even Crispus, who had been in charge of the synagogue services, and his entire household believed in the Lord Jesus and were baptized. Plus **"many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized."** Paul planted the seed and God made it grow!

Yet Paul still had his doubts. "They're such new Christians. They're very gifted, but they're so immature. What will happen if the Jews oppose them and their faith in Christ? Will they give in? What will happen if the temptations of this wealthy, immoral city try to choke their faith to death? Is it really worth all the effort, all the difficulty, all the frustration? What if my enemies rise up against me again? What if my work here is in vain?" Paul was focusing a little too much on himself and his own troubles when he should've been focused on the powerful Gospel message entrusted to him.

Paul needed his Savior. So one night the Lord in his grace came to Paul in a vision and gave him the encouragement he needed to hear. **"Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city."** So much comfort and assurance in those words! What did Jesus want Paul to do? **"Keep on speaking, do not be silent.** I've got your back. You don't have to be afraid, because I'm with you and no one is going to come after you. I have many here who will learn about me through the Gospel you will proclaim." The next morning Paul set aside those doubts and **"stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God."**

Doing the mission work that God has entrusted to his church—to you and me—is certainly not easy. It's hard. It can be a lot of intense work with what seems like very little result. It's difficult when you try to plant the seed of the Gospel in hearts that are as dry and hard as the clay soil around here. It's frustrating when you try so hard to get someone to care about Jesus when they don't care about their spiritual life now or where they'll spend eternity later. Mission work is thorny and rocky when you try to connect people to Jesus who have had bad experiences with church or have just bought too much into the secular mindset of our culture that they don't see the pay-off in being a faithful, active Christian. It's painful when you see your own loved ones reject what you have to share with them, but even more so when you see your own shortcomings and failings, when you recall how you've kept your mouth shut or failed to give a clear witness with your life or words. Mission work isn't easy. If it were left to us, we'd fail miserably.

Yet our God in his grace blesses that work—not because of who we are or because of our particular congregation or church body, but often in spite of us and always because of his grace shown through the good news of our Savior Jesus. You and I need to hear that good news ourselves first—to hear how Jesus sacrificed his own life to forgive your guilt for those times when you didn't speak or when you gave up or gave in. You and I need to hear how Jesus strengthens us and enables us to carry out that difficult task called mission work through the hearing and studying of his Word and through receiving his own body and blood in his Supper. Above all, we need to hear that no matter how challenging, how difficult that work might be, Jesus has an eternity of rest waiting for us in heaven purely out of grace.

...But don't forget about those promises he gave to Paul! Those are for us too. Listen to what Jesus has to say to you. **"Do not be afraid; keep on speaking** about me and about why you have hope in this hopeless world. **Do not be silent, for I am with you.** I have your back. Whatever difficulty, frustration, or hurt you might experience for following me and for speaking about me, don't let it fill you with fear. I'll protect you and I have heaven waiting for you. Besides **I have many people in this city**—including people who don't even know

about me yet. Just **keep on speaking**, because I'm going to use you and my Gospel that you're going to proclaim to bring those people to me. So don't give up. Don't give in, **for I am with you.**"

My dear fellow missionaries, it's not about you. It's all about Jesus. It's all about the precious Gospel message he's entrusted to each of us to proclaim—the message that has the power to change hearts and lives here and for eternity. That's the message we heard last week and the message we get to take to every corner of central New York. So with Christ's help, don't give up, but **"keep on speaking"** about your Savior. Amen.