

## Sermon 11, What Do We Do About the Gospel?, Acts 2:37-40

**Proposition:** The gospel demands that, taking it to heart, you repent and get baptized because God has promised to give Himself to everyone who does (which is another way of saying everyone He calls).

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### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have spent the past month of Sundays looking at Peter's sermon on the day when the Feast of Firstfruits was fulfilled. Today, we come to the end of the sermon and look at the audience's reaction to it. What does Luke's account teach us about how to respond to gospel preaching? What do we do about that gospel? The answer is that we need to repent and be baptized; that's what the gospel demands.

#### **I. Take It to Heart, v. 37a**

Peter did not end the sermon with an altar call. He ended the sermon with a message of condemnation: You crucified Jesus! That's where he leaves it. But then, with the sermon over, he immediately engages the crowd in conversation, in dialogue after his monologue has come to an end on a climactic point.

What did the crowd do? They took Peter's message to heart. And so we must do with gospel preaching. Our age is, to put it mildly, not an age of sincerity. To be sincere is to be thought simple-minded and foolish, because ours is an age of irony, of sarcasm, of detachment. We are used to the outrageous. We can't afford to get upset about the way things are, because that would cost too much emotional energy. Instead, we hold the world at arms' length. The mark of sophistication is ironical detachment.

But that's not the mark of a correct response to the gospel. True citizens of the kingdom of Christ respond to the gospel with heartfelt interest. We have to believe in our own guilt as well as in God's offered way of salvation. It has to actually affect us, deeply, at the core of our being. That's what the heart is; it is the central organ that directs every part of our human life. And to take something to heart is to believe it and pay attention to it because it seriously affects us.

You have probably shared the gospel with someone who didn't take it to heart. You have probably recognized that you yourself have failed to take certain gospel truths to heart. What's the giveaway when someone doesn't take it to heart, doesn't take it seriously? You know they are failing to believe it from the heart when it is just an intellectual question, just a source of entertainment, just a fun pastime. By the same token, sometimes you meet someone who has taken to heart something totally unworthy--say, the performance of his favorite sports team. When the Broncos lose, he is genuinely down in the mouth. When the Orioles win, his mood actually changes; he treats his family better after successful games.

Well, if you take the gospel to heart then it will affect your mood. It will affect your life. It will change how you think and feel. Particularly, in view of the text before us, I should say that if you take rebuke for sin to heart, it will get you looking for one particular answer: How do I deal with this sin? Clearly I am in the wrong and have offended the Almighty. The question is, what do I do about that?

## **II. Find Someone Who Can Answer Your Questions Accurately, v. 37b**

The preliminary answer is that you need to find someone who can answer the question for you. If you have been a Christian for a long time, then you probably already know how to deal with your sin. You can answer your own questions. But if you are confronting the problem of your own sin for the first time, then it is imperative that, like the crowd that day in Jerusalem, you secure the services of a trustworthy guide who can answer your questions accurately. In other words, you need to find a knowledgeable believer who will be good at explaining to you what you need to know in order to follow Jesus Christ. That person may be a pastor, elder, or church lady. It may be an apostle, as it was for the crowd who was in Jerusalem on that Pentecost day. But the main point is that we as Christians should not be expecting books, tracts, recorded sermons, podcasts, and the like to do the work of evangelism for us. Those things are all good things. But at the end of the day, they primarily service the needs of the already-converted. If you have a new Christian who has been cut to the heart and is eager to deal with his sin, for God's sake don't hand him a book and say "This will answer all your questions." No! He needs human contact, human help. "Twenty pages of a four-volume systematic theology and three chapters of the Bible per day" is not what the apostles said in response to this question. Nor should we. Instead, we as believers should be reading those things precisely so that we can answer the questions of baby Christians who are just trying to figure all of this out for the first time.

We all need someone trustworthy who can answer our questions, even in areas of everyday life like law, finances, medicine, and small gasoline engines. How much more in areas where life and death are on the line, and where what we believe will have eternal consequences?

So find a trustworthy guide, no matter what stage of the Christian life you're at, but most especially if you are right at the beginning of the Christian life.

### **III. Follow the Apostles' Teaching, vv. 38-40**

That trustworthy guide may be defined as anyone who will tell you to do (and show you how to do) what the apostles said to do. Peter answered the question of the crowd by telling them both what to do and why to do it. Again, he is answering the question of "How do I deal with my sin?"

#### **A. What to Do, v. 38**

##### **1. Turn from sin to God (active), v. 38a**

His first answer is to repent. "Re-pent" in Latin means "think again." You think that adultery is okay? Think again! To repent in biblical usage means to turn — to turn from sin to God. It means to stop what you're doing and make a 180-degree pivot toward what you ought to be doing. It is an active thing, a step you take. Later Luke will tell us that repentance, too, is a gift from God. But here, Peter emphasizes the other side of it as a human activity.

The first step toward following the apostles' teaching is to repent. You do this, brothers and sisters, by turning away from sin. Don't say "Well, I sinned and I will try to stop but I'm not going to make any promises." I agree that it's not about promising; what it's about is making up your mind that you will no longer engage in the kind of thinking, talking, or acting that you now know to be sinful.

In other words, repentance isn't easy. But it's necessary.

##### **2. Be Baptized (passive), v. 38b**

The second thing you and I need to do is to be baptized. Notice that though repentance is something you do, being baptized is something someone else does for you. It is parallel to the third and fourth elements Peter mentions, for to receive baptism is a passive activity with active overtones. To receive a present is not simply to sit there like a corpse while this gift is pressed into your uncaring hand. No; to receive something demands that you be awake enough and aware enough to claim it as your own. God delivers the package, but you need to open it. Yes, in one sense it's still yours even if you don't open it. But you are not getting the benefit of what's inside unless you open it up and engage with it.

So be baptized! Let yourself be washed in water in order to signify your being engrafted into Christ, partaking of the benefits of His covenant, and committing yourself to belonging to God.

Peter didn't say to be baptized because baptism saves. Repentance doesn't save either. No. Christ saves. And He saves us by giving us repentance, baptism, forgiveness, and His Spirit, along with Himself. To ask, therefore, whether you are saved if you have only one of these four things is to miss the point. Of course you're not saved if you only have one; but if you only have one, then you don't have even that one anymore. Forgiveness without repentance, the Spirit, and baptism is not forgiveness. Put better, we could say that when God gives you salvation it's a total package. He will never forgive your sins without giving you His Spirit too.

Hence Peter's demand: repent and be baptized. Already the church is necessary, for you can't baptize yourself.

### **3. Receive Forgiveness, v. 38c**

Then, you will receive forgiveness. That's what baptism is for. Now, for the ten millionth time, Baptism does not forgive sins and save. Jesus forgives sins and saves! But He does use baptism to do those things, in a very important sense. Baptism is not the efficient cause of salvation and forgiveness; Jesus is. But Baptism is an exemplary cause of those things, because it shows very graphically that you have been united into Jesus in His death and resurrection. His life, death, and resurrection are what save you.

Forgiveness is a key part of receiving Jesus. It means that the pain of your sins has been absorbed by somebody else. God no longer will exact that pain back out of your hide; instead, He took it on Himself in the person of His Son at the cross. Now you are free from condemnation and liability to punishment, because the punishment has already been administered and borne in full.

Would you like your sins taken away? Then embrace Christ through repentance and baptism. Receive the Father's gift of Himself!

### **4. Receive the Spirit, v. 38d**

Because that is the fourth thing listed here. Repentant believers who are baptized into Christ receive two enormous benefits. The first is forgiveness, such that God no longer threatens to punish them for their sins. The second is even greater; it is the gift of the Holy Spirit, who reveals Himself to those who repent and are baptized in Christ.

Notice that Peter lists only one thing you actively do: repent. The other three items are gifts, things that God supplies to His children: baptism, forgiveness, and the Spirit. And as I said, repentance too is a gift. When you hear the gospel, respond to it by seeking the gifts of God. As you turn from sin, ask for baptism, for forgiveness, and for the Holy Spirit. And when you do, God will give them to you — baptism through His church, and the other two immediately, without the intervention of any man or church.

### **B. Why to Do It, vv. 39-40**

So why did Peter demand that these people repent and accept the Father's gifts? He provides two reasons.

#### **1. Because God Has Promised to Give Himself, v. 39**

The first of these reasons is the Father's promise. What is the promise? It is the promise that's been under discussion throughout this whole chapter — the promise of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament frequently refers to the promise of God to save His people and give His Son and pour out His Spirit as simply "the promise." It is the whole promise of salvation. That's the promise. You can summarize it as the promise of the Holy Spirit, for to receive the Spirit is to receive everything that God has to give. He can give nothing better or greater than Himself.

##### **a) To the Judeans**

Peter lists four groups to whom this promise is directed. The first is his audience of Judeans from many lands, "World Jewry" as we called them a few weeks ago. God's promise is first of all for

them. If you are a descendant of Abraham according to the flesh, this message about salvation in Jesus Christ through repentance and baptism is for you. You are the church's original target audience. That's why Jesus commanded that the message first be preached in Jerusalem and why the church began in Jerusalem.

**b) To their children**

But the second group is intimately linked to the first. It is the group of all the children of the first group. God's promise is for Jewish children from all over the world. Ultimately, of course, Peter will find out that the promise is for all believers and their children, whatever their ethnicity. But here, on the church's birthday, he emphasizes first the invitation to Israel and Israelite children.

Why does he do this? Because this is how God works. Historically, He has worked in families, calling the parents and children to Himself as a unit. Our evangelism should focus on families as often as possible, because that is where God has announced His preference for working. If you are a child of believers, the promise is yours in a special way.

**c) To the geographically distant**

But the promise cannot be limited to Jewish folks and their children in Jerusalem. Peter goes on to say that the promise of salvation is for those who are geographically distant, thereby mirroring Jesus' command to be witnesses even at the end of the earth. The rest of Acts will tell how the promise went to the end of the earth. Even now, the good news is proclaimed all over the world, to Jewish communities and non-Jewish communities alike.

**d) To everyone He calls**

Peter concludes by saying that God's promise is for everyone He calls to Himself. Not all the Jewish people who heard Peter believed. Not all of their children believed. Not all of the geographically distant believed. But all who have been effectually called have believed. Peter is already proclaiming, side-by-side, the free offer of the gospel and the truth of election. The gospel is for everyone, and everyone called to God will come. There is a general call, and not all who hear it will believe. But there is also a special, effective call — and all who hear that rise from spiritual death and follow.

Peter and Paul saw no contradiction between election and evangelism. Neither should we. Indeed, we already saw that most of our response to the gospel message has to be focused on God's gifts that we receive. Here we see further that God's call is universal, but the effectual call is particular. The promise will be kept only to those whom the Lord our God calls to Himself.

**2. Because our Generation Is Perverse, v. 40**

But Peter provides an additional reason to accept God's promise. That is the character of our generation. It is, or should be, well-known that the time in church history to which our present experience most closely corresponds is the first century. There is tremendous growth, and much of it is ignorant and syncretic. There is tremendous cultural misunderstanding and opposition in the world around us. And there is widespread exhaustion and need for some renewing current to come and spread life to those who are weary of it. The collapse in birthrates alone tells us that our fellow citizens of the Earth see little to live for and less that they would want to share with their children. They are too enervated even to beget and bear children.

Peter's generation was perverse! So is ours. So, indeed, is every generation of fallen human beings. But you do not have to passively accept your generation's fate. Instead, brothers and sisters, save yourselves from this perverse generation! How do you do that? By repenting and accepting God's gifts, especially the supreme gift, the gift of the Spirit.

How does having the Spirit rescue you from our corrupt generation? By giving you an eternal perspective. By giving you something to live for. By giving you an unchanging standard by which to reckon up the perversity of your own culture. When you have Jesus and His Spirit, then you have what you need to evaluate your world. You have deliverance from evil and perversion. Brothers and sisters, repent. Be baptized. And if you've already been baptized, keep repenting, monotonously, every time you sin. Turn away you will; every time, come back. Every time. The Christian life is one of daily repentance. And then embrace the gifts God has given you in your baptism, above all forgiveness and His Spirit. Be saved from this perverse generation! The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.