

We continue reviewing the basics of the Christian message. We have considered that the biblical message is addressed to the whole world and that implies God's claim to have the authority to call the whole world to repentance. We looked at sin in a couple of sermons trying to understand why sin is such a big deal to God and what it means to be a sinner. Last week we considered the heart of the good news which is the very odd message that the crucifixion of a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish peasant is actually the legal basis for the forgiveness of the sins of all who accept the offer as it is published in the Bible and by the church.

This evening we will deal with the question of who makes the first move. Now on the face of it, it is clear that God makes the first move because he has planned and executed the way of salvation in Jesus Christ. And he comes to us with the message of salvation. Jesus sent his church into the world to proclaim the good news that there is a way to be reconciled to God. When we look at it this way it is clear that God makes the first move and no believer would dispute that. The whole plan of salvation is God's idea and not the idea of any human being.

But that is not what I will be addressing in this sermon. The question that I want to address in this sermon is what triggers salvation in an individual person who responds to the gospel. So the gospel comes to an unsaved person. It is an invitation and a command to repent and believe. It would be natural for us to think that, at that point, it is up to that person to either accept or reject the command. On the face of it, the ball is now in the court of the sinner. What happens next is up to him. If that is the case, then the decisive move belongs to the sinner. God makes the first move in giving the offer, but the next thing that must happen is the decision of the sinner. If that is so then there is a sense in which the sinner must make the first move as far as the response to the gospel is concerned. If that is the case, then the response of the sinner is the decisive thing. God makes salvation available, but since the sinner can either accept or reject the offer, his decision is what determines whether he will be saved or whether he will be lost.

This way of looking at it seems to have the support of Scripture. We read, for instance, in John 3:18, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, **because** he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." What makes the difference is whether or not a person believes in Jesus Christ. If he believes he is not condemned. If he refuses to believe he remains in the state of condemnation. At this point the sinner must make the first move. He must believe and if he refuses he will not be saved.

There is a problem with this way of putting it, however. And that problem has to do with what it means to be a sinner. Remember when we looked at that question we saw that one thing that it means to be a sinner is that apart from salvation, we are dead in sin. And the dead are not able to turn to God. The dead do not want to turn to God, and they are not able to make themselves want to turn to God. To be dead in sin means to have a sinful nature and a sinful nature only wants to sin. It does not want to repent. It does not want to believe. And it is not able to make itself want to do these things.

The Bible is very clear about this. Jeremiah 13:23 says, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil." Romans 8:7-8, "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." 1 Corinthians 2:14, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned."

These verses teach that an unsaved sinner does not have the ability to believe and repent. He has no desire to turn to God and is not able to change what he desires. He is hostile to God and he is not able to stop being hostile to God. The things of God are folly to him. Just like a leopard is not able to change his spots, an unsaved sinner is not able to change his desires and his heart. He is dead in sin and a dead person is not able to make himself alive.

Now this poses a dilemma. On the one hand the Bible invites and commands sinners to come to Jesus and be saved. John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Jesus says in Matthew 11:28 "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Isaiah 55:1 says, "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." The good news is proclaimed with an invitation and a summons to believe. And yet the same Bible insists that sinners are dead in sin. They cannot change who they are. They do not have the ability to believe. They do not have the ability to turn from their sins. Sin is spiritual death. Sin is spiritual bondage. Unsaved sinners are not able to change their spiritual condition, so they are not able to believe, and they are not able to repent.

That is the dilemma. Sinners are invited to believe in Jesus for salvation, but they are not able to do so in their own strength. To make the dilemma more difficult, the Bible also makes it clear that this inability in no way mitigates their responsibility. John 3:18 again, "[W]hoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." God holds people accountable for not believing even though they are not able to believe. The reason is that our inability is a willful inability. Unsaved sinners can't believe because they won't believe. They choose not to believe. They refuse to repent. The problem is not that people would love to believe but they can't. The problem is that they can't believe because they are unwilling.

At one point Jesus said to the Pharisees, "[Y]ou refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:43).

So our inability is willful and therefore we are responsible for it. There are mysteries here to be sure, but there is no doubt that God holds us accountable for unbelief and there is no doubt that the reason that we cannot believe on our own is because we will not.

One thing that we have to keep in mind here is the lengths that God has gone to bring about salvation. There are questions in connection with this subject, but the context in which we must think about these questions is the context of God's great plan of salvation which is rooted in his sacrificing his own Son for us. Whatever the

mysteries are, what is overwhelmingly evident in the Bible is that God has gone to great lengths to save sinners and he has done that at tremendous cost to himself and so there is no reason to doubt his love and his mercy.

So we come back to the question that we are considering and the dilemma that it raises. Who makes the first move after an unsaved sinner hears the gospel? The Bible teaches that sinners must believe and repent in order to be saved and it teaches that sinners are not willing to believe and repent and they are not able to make themselves willing. That dilemma is resolved by what is known as the effectual call. That is the term and I will spend some time explaining it and demonstrating it from the Bible.

The best way to understand the effectual call is to think of it in the light of the miracle of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus was already saved and so Jesus' command to the dead Lazarus was not an effectual call unto salvation, but what happened when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead is a very helpful illustration of what happens when God calls sinners from spiritual death to spiritual life.

If I were to walk up to a coffin and tell a dead person to sit up and climb out of the coffin, nothing would happen. But God's words are very different from man's words in terms of what they are able to accomplish. Jesus did command a dead person to come out of the grave, and since Jesus' words are able to accomplish whatever Jesus wants them to, the dead Lazarus was brought to life by the very power of Jesus' word. On his own the dead Lazarus was not able to make himself alive, but Jesus' command is so powerful that he is able to call a dead person to life and so enable him to obey.

That is what happens spiritually with the effectual call. When God is going to save someone, the command to believe and repent comes with such power that a dead sinner is enabled to believe and repent. That is the effectual call. God calls a sinner to faith and repentance and when God decides it will be so, that word is effectual – it comes with the power to bring dead sinners to life and so enable faith and repentance.

Let's look at the way the word "call" is used in the passage that we read in Romans 8. Verse 28 says, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." Paul is talking about believers here. And he refers to believers as those who are "called according to his purpose." And then notice how the word "called" is used in verse 30, "And those whom he predestinated he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified." Those who are called, in the sense that these verses are using that word, are actually called into a state of salvation. Those who are called in this sense are also justified and glorified. They are true believers. And the link between them being predestinated and justified is the call. The call here is the life-giving call. It is a call that comes from God with power so that it produces faith and repentance.

We will look at a few more examples. In 1 Corinthians 1:9, Paul writes "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." The people addressed here are described as being

in the fellowship of Jesus Christ. That is a way of saying that they are saved. And the way that they were brought into the fellowship of Jesus Christ is through God's call. The call in their case came with power. It actually changed the people to whom it was addressed and gave them the power to believe and to repent so that they were united to Christ in salvation.

Another good example is 1 Peter 2:9, which says, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Clearly these are saved people. They have believed and repented. But the reason that they have believed and repented is that God's powerful call as actually taken them out of darkness and placed them in God's marvelous light. Again we have an instance in the Bible in which the word "call" is used to refer to the powerful call of God that actually changes the one who is called so that they are enabled to believe and repent. This kind of call is possible because God is able to change people's hearts by his words. The same God who spoke the creation into existence, speaks life into dead souls and affects the desire and the ability to repent and believe.

One more example. This one does not use the word "call," but it speaks about the same thing using different language. This example of the effectual call is found in the story of the conversion of Lydia which is told in Acts 16. Paul and his missionary party have travelled to the city of Philippi to preach the gospel. One Sabbath day they find some people praying at a riverside and so they sit down with them and tell them of the way of salvation through Jesus Christ. In Acts 16:14 we read of one Lydia who was among the listeners and the text tells us, "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul." That is another way of speaking about the effectual call. Paul was speaking, but something supernatural was going on at the same time in the heart of Lydia. "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul." The text does not say anything about the other people there, but it is possible that there were some there who heard the same words, but the Lord did not open their hearts. And the difference between the two is what the Lord did with his word. To Lydia, the Lord spoke in such a way as to change her heart and to others the word did not have the same effect.

So that answers the question about who makes the first move when it comes to the response to the gospel. I guess you could say that God makes two first moves when he is going to save someone. First he sees to it that they hear the gospel and then he attaches transforming power to his gospel so that the dead sinner is brought to life and thus enabled to believe the gospel and turn to Jesus. James reflects this reality in the first chapter of his epistle when he says of God in verse 18, "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth...." When God wants it to, the "word of truth" brings people forth. When God decides it will do so, his word causes people to be reborn into a new life. This is just another way of referring to the effectual call.

So God makes the first move when it comes to our salvation. It has to be that way because apart from salvation we are dead in sin and dead people cannot bring themselves to life. We do not have the power to

believe and repent on our own. And when we do believe and repent it is because God's word has come to us with creative power to change our hearts and give us the desire to trust in Jesus and turn from our sins. And that is why Paul in Ephesians 2:8-10 says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works, so that no one may boast."

So that is the effectual call. It is a call that contains in it the power to produce the faith and the repentance that it is calling for. And that is the way that dead sinners are enabled to respond to the call of the gospel. So God must make the first move when it comes to the response of a sinner. There can be no faith or repentance unless and until God produces it in the heart by means of the effectual call.

But we're not done yet. If we left it here, you might get the impression that an unsaved sinner who hears the gospel has no choice but to wait until the effectual call comes. We need to deal with how this truth is to affect our practical response to the gospel.

And here we have to pay close attention to the way in which the gospel is addressed to sinners. Think of the story of the Philippian jailor. The jailor asks Paul and Silas what he had to do to be saved and the answer was "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved...." No mention here of the effectual call. No waiting for the effectual call to come. The man believed and was baptized.

The gospel message comes with a promise. If you believe and repent you will be saved. Romans 10:9 says, "[I]f you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." That is a promise. It is a promise that comes from God. It is therefore an absolutely trustworthy promise. And anyone who takes God at his word and believes in Jesus will be saved. That promise is part of the gospel message, and there is nothing more certain in all the world that those who take God at his word and believe in Jesus will be saved.

And so what are people to do who hear the gospel message. They are to respond to it. They are to accept it and believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins. They are to do that without delay. They are to take God at his word. Think of John 3:16 again. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Whosoever! Every single person who hears the gospel message has the absolute assurance that if they believe in Jesus they will be saved. That is the promise of God who cannot lie.

You see we have to distinguish between the explanation of what happens and the experience of what happens when a person believes. The biblical truth of effectual calling explains how a person who is dead in sin is brought to life through the powerful call of God. That does not mean that the effectual call is felt as a distinct experience. Occasionally it might be when a dead sinner is brought to life through the gospel in a dramatic way, but usually it is not experienced as a distinct experience. The effectual call is what God does. We are called to believe and repent because God tells us to and we are just to do it in response to the gospel offer.

It is helpful for us to know how it is that God brings dead people to life through the effectual call. But we are not to allow the explanation to get in the way of a spontaneous response to the gospel offer. The great incentive for us to place our trust in Jesus and receive the offer of forgiveness in Jesus is the trustworthiness of God. What God promises he will do. If we believe we will be saved. And so we are just to believe. No waiting. No hesitation. Whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but have eternal life.

The way to tell whether we have experienced the effectual call is by believing. If we have trusted in Jesus which includes repentance and submission – if we have truly trusted in Jesus, we have experienced the effectual call. If we wait to experience the effectual call before believing we will never believe. So we must not confuse the biblical explanation of how a person comes to faith with the experience of faith. The gospel is addressed to us with an invitation and a command to repent and believe. We are faced with a choice. And we are called to choose the way of life in Christ rather than the way of death and eternal suffering apart from Christ. The gospel comes with all kinds of motivations and assurances to encourage us to believe and we are do so trusting in the reliability of the promises of God.

Near the very end of the Bible we read these words: Revelation 22:17, “[L]et the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.” And presentation of the gospel which minimizes the freeness and unfettered-ness of the gospel offer is a distortion of the gospel. Here again Jesus’ warm invitation in Matthew 11:28, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

But if we do, we will come to realize more and more that behind our coming was the quiet work of God in our hearts making us willing to come and giving us faith and repentance. As people of God we confess with a depth of conviction that comes from the bottom of our hearts that apart from God’s grace we would still be in our sins. Apart from God’s grace we are dead in sin. Apart from God’s grace we can do nothing expect sin. We know that if God had not made the first move we would still be in our sins. And to celebrate the saving grace of God in the gospel is our great joy and delight. We love those words from Ephesians 2:8 “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” With the saints in heaven we delight to confess that “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

And yet we know that we must be active. That we must respond to what God tells us to do in his word whether it has to do with believing or obeying. The Bible is full of commands and exhortations and invitations and we must obey them and respond to them. And yet when we do, we give glory to God because we know that without him we can do nothing.

We are dealing here with God. And God is so great that he is able to work in us in such a way that we become active responding to his word. He does not violate our wills. We never become puppets on a string. We are profoundly involved. And yet at a very deep level God is at work changing us, empowering us, enabling us to do what we could not do with out him. And so at the end of the day we delight to do what Paul tells us to do in 1 Corinthians 1:31, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”