

What Is the Most Loving Thing to Tell an Unbeliever?

Jeremiah 28, Acts 13:4–12

In both our Old and New Testament texts today faithful preachers confront false prophets who oppose God's truth. Jeremiah confronts wicked Hananiah, who falsely prophesies that within two years the exiled king and the golden vessels that had been carried away to Babylon would be returned to Jerusalem. Likewise Saul (now called Paul) confronts the false prophet Elymas, who tried to prevent the Roman governor, Sergius Paulus, from putting his trust in Christ. Both Jeremiah and Paul, valiant for God's truth, warn their opponents of impending doom—short-term prophecies that come to pass exactly, proving their divine authority.

The prophet's authority does not come from himself but from the Lord. If the Lord gives a message, and the prophet faithfully delivers it, then his message carries divine authority; anyone who rejects it does so at his own peril. In the Bible, pretending to speak from God is a serious crime deserving capital punishment. The Old Testament contains stern warnings against pretending to speak from God. Deuteronomy 18:20 says, "The prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, ... that prophet shall *die*."

The church's greatest weapon is truth. Christ himself is "the way, the *truth* and the life." A church or Christian ministry that does not tell the truth is doomed. The exalted Christ does not need to deceive his people in order to accomplish his purpose.

Hananiah tried to deceive God's people. He told people what they wanted to hear, but it was not true. Jeremiah confronts him right to his face. He says, "Hear now, Hananiah, the LORD has not sent you, but you make this people trust in a lie. Therefore thus says the LORD: 'Behold, I will cast you from the face of the earth. This year you shall die, because you have taught rebellion against the LORD'" (Jer. 28:15–16). The very next verse records what happened: "Hananiah the prophet died the same year in the seventh month." Within a few months the false prophet was dead, just as Jeremiah said. God's truth was vindicated. The difference wasn't because Jeremiah was better at predicting the future than Hananiah. The difference was that the LORD knows the future and revealed it to Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a true prophet and spoke only the message that God had given him.

So it was also in our New Testament text. Saul and Barnabas, presenting the gospel to the Roman governor of Cyprus, experience opposition by a false prophet whose purpose was to dissuade the governor from believing in Christ. The false prophet Elymas wanted Sergius Paulus to continue following him as his teacher. He did not want him to turn to Christ. He did not want to lose his influence over the Roman governor. What this meant in the starkest terms was that he didn't want Sergius Paulus to learn the truth and go to heaven. He did not really care for the

soul of Sergius Paulus. He would rather see him go to hell than learn the truth about Christ. So Saul (hereafter called Paul), filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke to the false prophet sharply and pointedly: “O full of all deceit and all fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease perverting the straight ways of the Lord?” Some people would be offended by such pointed language. How impolite! How unloving! Is not “diversity” the highest value? No, it’s not! The most important thing is *truth*. People desperately need to hear the truth, and if it’s disturbing, then so be it. The most loving thing to tell an unbeliever—a man, woman or child on his or her way to hell—is the truth, no matter how offensive it might be. It is the truth which sets us free. The church’s greatest weapon is truth: “Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with *truth* ... take ... the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:14, 17). The Christian’s greatest weapon is *truth*.

It has recently come out that President Biden talked on the phone with the then-president of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, on July 23. The two men spoke for fourteen minutes. The audio was later leaked to Reuters. In the call Biden presses his Afghani counterpart to “change the perception” that the Taliban was winning the war even if it was not true: “The perception around the world and in parts of Afghanistan, I believe, is that things are not going well in terms of the fight against the Taliban,” Biden said to Ghani. “And there is a need, *whether it is true or not*, there is a need to project a different picture.”¹ What was the president saying? That the fight against the Taliban had to appear as a success, whether true or not. The public must not think that the Taliban was winning. For 20 years both Republican and Democrat presidents, along with military generals, assured Americans that “significant progress” was being made in the war in Afghanistan. The Afghan government would be able to contain the Taliban after the war was over. We know now that it was all a lie. Less than a month after Biden’s phone call, Afghanistan fell to the Taliban almost without a fight. Will our leaders be held accountable for lying to the American public? Likely not. Truth does not matter in politics.

How different with God! Dear congregation, your God is a God of *truth*. The Psalmist could say of God, “Therefore I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be *right*; and I hate every false way” (Ps. 119:128). God will absolutely *not* deceive his people! He doesn’t have to. His kingdom rules over all (Ps. 103:19). In the end, “the kingdoms of this world” shall become “the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 11:15). “Let God be true, but every man a liar” (Rom. 3:4). Though “all men are liars” (Ps. 116:11), God is a God of truth and will never deceive his people. Your God is a God of truth. Not one of his words will fall to the ground (1 Sam. 3:19).

¹ <https://dailynewsbreak.org/leaked-phone-call-shows-biden-instructed-ghani-to-change-perception-in-afghanistan/> accessed 9-14-21

And so we learn in our text today that Saul and Barnabas “being sent out by the Holy Spirit ... went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. Seleucia was the seaport of Damascus. Saul and Barnabas walked the sixteen or so miles down to Seleucia and caught a ship sailing to Cyprus. Cyprus is one of the largest islands of the Mediterranean, about 148 miles long and 40 broad. It is located about 60 miles from the Syrian coast.² Barnabas was a native of Cypress (Acts 4:36). A dear friend of our son’s has recently relocated to Cypress, which is also the home of the Middle East Reformed Fellowship.

Saul and Barnabas’s goal was to reach Cypress for Christ. The Holy Spirit had said, “Separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” The elders of the church complied: “having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.” Barnabas and Saul went out as missionaries of the Antioch church, no doubt supported by the sacrificial giving of God’s people. Here was a church that not only wanted to reach its own local community for Christ but had a vision of seeing men and women in distant lands come to Christ as well. Here was the vision of Isaiah 42, where God’s Spirit brings forth justice to the Gentiles. There we are told, “He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth: and the isles shall wait for his law.” With hearts prepared by the Holy Spirit the “isles” (NKJV: “coastlands”) would wait for God’s “law”—that is, for the Holy Scriptures. Island nations such as Cypress, though cut off from the mainland by sometimes-treacherous waters, would hear of Christ through the missionary efforts of faithful churches.

But Christian missions was not just the work of the church alone. The writer of the book of Acts makes the point that Saul and Barnabas were “sent out by the Holy Spirit.” Once again we are reminded that the Acts of the Apostles are really the acts of the Holy Spirit. Gospel preaching will never be successful without the empowering of the Holy Spirit, breaking down men’s natural resistance and opening up hearts to the good news of Christ. By nature “no man seeketh after God” (Rom. 3:9). The natural man runs from God. He wants to run his own life and doesn’t want to surrender to God. He doesn’t want to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord. In fact, he *cannot* say that “Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). Do we want to see our loved ones and neighbors come to Christ? The only way that is going to happen is through the powerful working of the Holy Spirit breaking down barriers, giving men and women a new nature which gladly submits to Christ. How we need “the work of God’s Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely

² Easton’s Bible Dictionary (Logos Bible Software).

offered to us in the gospel.”³ How we need to pray for the Spirit’s empowering of the preaching of the word. In the words of the hymnwriter: “Brethren, we have met to worship and adore the Lord our God; will you pray with all your power, while we try to preach the Word? All is vain unless the Spirit of the Holy One comes down; brethren, pray, and holy manna will be showered all around.” Yes indeed, all is vain unless the Spirit of the Holy One comes down. It is the Spirit of Christ that empowers the preaching of the word of God.

So Barnabas and Saul, sent by the church in Antioch, are sent out by the Holy Spirit. There is both a divine and a human agency. Wherever they went they would preach Christ and depend on the Holy Spirit to produce results. After the pair arrived in Salamis, they “preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews.” This was only natural. Both Barnabas and Saul were from Jewish backgrounds. They were familiar with the ways of the Jewish synagogues, where people gathered to hear the reading of the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) and to sing the Psalms. Often, they would be asked to speak to the people. In any case they would make contact with faithful Jews and be invited into their homes, where they would have opportunities to share Christ with families and their friends. Much later Paul would write that “I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house” (Acts 20:20). This method of teaching publicly (whether in synagogues or out-of-doors) and from house to house was the way the gospel was spread in the early church. It is a method that works, and it is a method that sorely needs to be implemented today.

As we will see in our text today, some, hearing the message of the gospel, will receive it and some will reject it. But it is the gospel that needs to be preached, not some self-improvement method. When we deal with people we are apt to look on the present problems that they are encountering, whether they be health problems, financial problems, relationship problems, problems at work, and so forth. We might be tempted to propose some solutions, some measures they could put in place that could help alleviate those problems. We might suggest a certain doctor or a certain treatment. We might suggest that people struggling with finances set up a budget, curb wasteful spending, or look for a better job. We might suggest family counseling, conflict resolution or other interventions, all of which may help a person live a better life. But all these good things ignore the central problem: man’s *sin*. The sin problem is the central problem. As our Shorter Catechism, summarizing Scripture, puts it, “The fall brought mankind into an estate of sin and misery.”⁴ When Adam sinned, he brought sin upon the whole human race. All of

³ Shorter Catechism 31

⁴ Shorter Catechism 17

us, natural sons and daughters of Adam, inherit Adam's sin. We also sin of our own volition. And sin brings misery; all the miseries of this life are the result of sin. There is no sin in heaven, consequently, there is no misery. The saints in the presence of Christ enjoy happiness and fulfillment. At the final day the curse will be lifted. There will be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying. There will be only perfect bliss in the presence of the Lamb who was slain for all those who have put their trust in him. Faith will be sight, and our joy will last eternally. "He that believeth on the Son *hath* everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John 3:36). "The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God" (Ps. 9:17).

Barnabas and Saul went all the way through the island of Cyprus from Salamis in the east to Paphos in the west, preaching the gospel. Paphos was the capital of Cyprus and the residence of the Roman governor. Providentially, when Barnabas and Saul got to Paphos, they got the opportunity to meet the governor. It would be interesting to learn the details of how the meeting came about. Barnabas and Saul were essentially "nobodies." Saul, born a Jew, had Roman citizenship, and Barnabas was a native of Cyprus, but how did this pair meet the Roman governor? We don't know. But they, faithful to their calling, wanted to meet anyone and everyone and tell them about Christ. This brings home the lesson that all people everywhere, whether high-born or low-born, have need of Christ and need to hear the message of Christ. The gospel is "for the Jew first and also for the Greek" (Rom. 1:16). The Bible tells us that "not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence" (1 Cor. 1:26–29). Yes, not *many* wise, not many mighty, not many noble, are called—but there are *some* who are called. As was the case with Christ himself, "the common people heard him gladly" (Mark 12:37), but the Holy Spirit is not impotent; he does not lack for power. The gospel is "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth," whether high-born or low-born. We should never write off any person as being beyond the reach of the gospel. As long as there is life, there is hope. Today is the day of salvation. After a person dies it will be too late to receive Christ.

Some people, hearing the gospel, receive it, and some reject it. Those who hear are those whose ears have been supernaturally opened by the Holy Spirit of God. As Paul would later express it, "But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered" (Rom. 6:17). The only way a person will obey "from the heart" is

through the Spirit's work of regeneration. Unless a person is "born again," he cannot even see, let alone enter, the kingdom of God (John 3:3, 5). Blinded by sin, he cannot see any benefit in submitting his life to the lordship of Christ. He thinks that by following Christ he will be the loser, he will be giving up all hope of happiness and fulfillment—he will be relegated to living a dry, dreary, miserable, joyless existence. Blinded by sin, he is unable to see that in him is life and light and liberty and joy inexpressible. He cannot "see"—that is, see with understanding—the kingdom of God, the rightful rule of King Jesus over the lives of men. He thinks that submitting to Christ would be a virtual death sentence.

But in the providence of God the Roman governor Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence and understanding, heard of these two traveling evangelists and called for them. Here was something totally unexpected—an audience with the most important man on the island of Cypress, the Roman governor. Later the apostle Paul, as a prisoner for the gospel, will meet with other Roman dignitaries: Felix, the Roman procurator of Judea; King Agrippa, Porcius Festus. He may have even met the Roman Caesar, to whom he had appealed. Agrippa had a lukewarm response to the gospel ("Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian," which was actually a rejection), or an outright rejection. All of them were idolaters, valuing the pomp and splendor of Rome, with its worship of Caesar as god-walking-on-earth over the true God of heaven. But they also valued their position and power and job security in the Roman government as well. All of them apparently died without Christ and went to hell. But Sergius Paulus was genuinely interested. This was clearly the Spirit's work, making this intelligent and thoughtful man a seeker after spiritual things.

What about you? What do you value most: the security and comfort and approval of this world, or the praise of Christ? Will you, like the Thessalonians, turn to God from idols, to serve the living and true God (1 Thess. 1:9)? In the case of the Roman governor (called the proconsul), the Lord not only worked in his heart to give him a desire for Christ but also gave him an object lesson for what ultimately happens to those who stubbornly reject Christ. Sergius Paulus had apparently had a desire to know more about spiritual matters for some time. He himself was a Roman—a pagan. But he had come under the influence of a Jewish teacher named Elymas, also called Bar-Jesus ("son of the savior," but not the true Savior, Jesus the Messiah). This man Elymas wanted to keep Sergius Paulus as his own disciple. He wanted to keep the money flowing in. So he "withstood" Barnabas and Saul. The word for "withstood" means *set oneself against, oppose, resist*. This Jewish false teacher became Barnabas's and Saul's opponent, debating them, arguing with them, seeking to refute them. But Saul, "filled with the Holy Spirit," looked intently at Elymas and said (in the words of the English Standard Version), "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit

and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time.”

Is this perhaps an impolite thing to say publicly, to call a man a “son of the devil”? Yet Jesus himself had said, “The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one” (Matt. 13:38). Jesus saw all men as divided into two groups: the children of the kingdom (that is, Christ’s kingdom) and the children of the wicked one (the devil—the slanderer, the accuser). The apostle John later described the same twofold division when he wrote, “In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother” (1 John 3:10).

All of you hearing my voice this morning are in one or the other of these categories. You are either the child of God, gladly doing the will of your Father, or the child of the devil, “taken captive by him to do *his* will” (2 Tim. 2:26). You can know which category you are in by asking yourself the question, Whom do I want to follow: Christ or Satan?

As one commentator wrote, “The confrontation between the missionaries and Bar-Jesus was intense. Perhaps you think Paul’s resulting curse on the man isn’t very nice. Know that the fate of Sergius Paulus’s soul was at stake in this situation, and Paul—out of deep compassion—wanted him to believe.”⁵

Paul didn’t hate Elymas. He wasn’t trying to put him down just to show himself the better debater. No! What Paul spoke was the truth! Elymas Bar-Jesus the personal spiritual trainer was a false teacher. Though he claimed to see and have spiritual insight, he was actually blind—a blind man leading the blind. Paul warned him that he would be blind, not seeing the light of day for a time. And that happened—instantly. Elymas became blinded, prefiguring what will happen to all Christ-rejecters in the end. In the words of the same commentator, “His judgment was a foretaste of what will happen to all who fail to bow the knee to Jesus: they will be thrown into utter darkness (Matt 8:12; 25:30).”

O my hearer, come to Jesus, the light of the world.

So what is the most loving thing to tell an unbeliever? *The truth*—the truth about Christ, the light of the world. Sometimes that involves speaking to him pointedly. Sometimes that might involve hurting his feelings. But ignoring an opportunity to speak for Christ is not loving, and the Lord might use a loving rebuke to bring a lost sinner to himself.

O follower of Christ, do not shirk back from your duty to tell the truth about him who *is* the truth—the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

⁵ *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary*, Olive Tree Bible Software