

Recovering the Gospel #2

By Henry Mahan

Bible Text: Acts 17:24-31

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Acts 17:24. And what I am contending today in these messages that the trouble...I hear preachers and they are...they are just so hard on the people out there in the pews. They are so hard on the people in the pews.

But, my friend, the trouble today, the major problem and trouble is not in the pews. That is not where it is. It is in the pulpit. It is in the pulpit. Now that is so. That is where the major problem is today in churches. It is in the pulpit.

Now, listen to this man preaching here. In Acts 17:24, “God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth. He dwelleth not in temples made with hands. Neither is he worshipped with men’s hands as though he needed anything. Seeing he giveth to all life and breath and all things.”

God is...when you read that do you think about these statements? God has no hands, but your hands. God has no feet, but your feet. Not worshipped with men’s hands. He doesn’t need anything.

God said, “If I was hungry I wouldn’t ask you.”

“And he hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth.” We all came from the same man, Adam. “And he hath determined the times before appointed and the bounds of their habitations, nations and men, that they should seek the Lord if happily they might feel after him and find him though he be not far from every one of us. For in him we live and we move and we have our being as certain, also, of your own poets have said. For we are also his offspring. For as much, then, as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the godhead is likened to gold or silver or stone, graven by art and man’s device. And the times of this ignorance God tolerated.” That is what that means. It says, “God winked.” That...God tolerated. God is in his longsuffering and patience put up with man’s ignorance. “But now God commandeth all men everywhere to repent because he hath appointed a day in the which he shall judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained, Jesus Christ, whereof he hath given assurance unto all men in that he hath raised him from the dead.”

Oh, that we might hear preaching like that today because today's religionist in the pew, today's religionist, those people you work with, those neighbors who live around you, those religious people are products of what they have heard preached.

That is exactly right. You get kind of provoked. Their talk is so shallow, so empty. And you think, "Don't they know anything?"

No. They don't know anything. What the average religionist church member is and what he believes or what he doesn't believe is a result of what he has heard from the pulpit.

How shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? In our day there is no fear or reverence for God almighty, not like the fear that men of old had for God.

When you read Isaiah and he said, "I saw the Lord and I fell on my face. I cried, 'I am cut off. I am a man of unclean lips.'" You read David saying, "Come and I will teach you the fear of the Lord." You read the prophets saying, "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord." Where is the fear of the Lord today?

I will tell you the reason church members today do not fear God. It is because the God of the Bible has not been preached. They don't know him. They can't fear him.

Job saw the Lord and fell before him in fear and trembling. God is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him.

People today, religious people, and this is distressing and I don't mean to offend anyone, but anyone here, but people joke about spiritual matters. That disturbs me. Preachers are the worst offenders in this matter, but they joke. Everybody has got to have something funny or smart to say about spiritual matters. Did you ever notice that? They make light of, the trample with, the joke about spiritual matters, eternal matters, salvation, the new birth, heaven, hell, God, the devil death, judgment. They joke about it.

And I tell you. The only people that will make light of and joke about matters so serious are those who do not see the seriousness of it. And that's right. And I will tell you this. And I tried to tell the young preachers this and the preachers who will listen to some of the things I do have to say. A man or woman is not going to listen to you deal with these serious matters unless he believes you are serious about them. If he or she detects a foolishness or the least lightheartedness where these things are concerned, they are not going to listen to you. You are not going to spend your time laughing and cutting up and then come here and get serious and then step out of here and act the fool.

Oh, I have told you the story of the young man that bounced up in the pulpit and he literally fell on his face and he stepped down out of the pulpit weeping. And one of the old men there said, "Well, if you had gone up there like you came down, you would have

come down like you went up there.” We have got to approach these things for the seriousness that is there. We are talking about eternal matters.

And I will tell you this, the third thing. There is no fear or reverence for God demonstrated today like men of old feared God.

You know, the word “worship” at one time was synonymous with fear, fear of God. You read about the old timers. Jacob feared the Lord. That meant he worshipped God. He worshipped God. And then...and nobody loves humor more than I do. You know, the Word of God says, “A merry heart doeth good like a medicine. A bitter spirit drieth the bone.” I don’t want to be bitter and hard and long faced and...we have a joyful message, but these matters are not matters for lightheartedness. They are serious.

But the third thing is this. Preachers and churches today have made a beggar out of God. They leave the impression that God is a beggar. All of these appeals for money and these telethons and this sort of...this sort of approach gives the impression God is a beggar. They leave the impression that God is sort of waiting over here in the wings for us to do something, to help him out, that he is in love with everybody and he is powerless to do anything about his will unless we supply the means or let him. We have God waiting on men instead of men waiting on God.

And is this not the case? We have a weak God pleading with me to accept mercy instead of an almighty God being approached by men pleading for mercy. We have a weak God pleading with me to accept mercy instead of men pleading with an almighty God to show them mercy.

Let me...I want to present to you some questions and you can write them down. You can study them later. You can...this is what I want you to do. I want you...would you consider these question sin the light of these Scriptures? I am going to give you some Scriptures and I want you to consider these questions in the light of the Scriptures I am going to give to you.

Now, I will ask you to turn to the Scriptures, some of them, not all of them, just some of them. Now, here is the first question. Is salvation, eternal life, redemption, deliverance, is that a gift or is it an offer? Now how do you answer that in the light of these Scriptures? First of all, Romans six, verse 23. Romans 6:23 says this, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Now, back to the book of John. John chapter 10, the 10th chapter of John, verse 24. Now listen. “Then came the Jews round about him and said unto him, ‘How long do you make us doubt? If thou be the Christ tell us plainly.’ And Jesus answered them, ‘I told you and you believe not. The works that I do in my Father’s name, they bear witness of me, but you believe not because you are not of my sheep. As I said to you, my sheep here my voice, I know them, they follow me and I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.’”

Don't turn to this. Just write it down. 1 John 5:11. What does that say? "This is the record. God hath given us eternal life." This life is in his son.

What about John 17:2? Write that down, John 17:2. Christ said, "Thou hast given me power over all flesh that I should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given me."

Now, is salvation a gift or an offer? It is a gift.

All right. Here is the second question. Now, think about this. Is salvation a reformation of character by faith? In other words we believe and we reform our character and that is salvation? Now is that true or is this true? Or is salvation a new creation which produces faith? I am asking this. Is a man born again because he believes or does he believe because he is born again? Now, think about it. Is a man...this is what is preached today: He is born again because he believes.

I am saying the Bible teaches that he believes because he is born again. He is regenerated and regeneration produces life and faith.

Now, turn to 1 John 5, 1 John 5:1. Now listen to this, 1 John 5:1. "Whoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ..." Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ? Do you fall at his feet? Do you worship him? Do you see him in all of his glory, his incarnate glory, his righteous glory, his resurrected glory, his exalted glory? Do you see him?

Well, I will tell you why: because you are born of God. Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God. A man who is not born again does not have eyes to see Christ or ears to hear Christ or a heart to love Christ.

See, the first act in salvation is not...is not on the part of the sinner, we choose God because he chose us. We love him because he loved us. We call on him because he called us. We seek him because he sought us.

Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. The Lord didn't find grace in Noah's eyes. Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord.

Well, here is the third question. Is salvation by choice or by chance?

Well, nobody here would say salvation is by chance. You would say it is by choice. Salvation is by choice. I think even the most Arminian man would say salvation is not by chance it's by choice. By my question is: Whose choice? Our Lord said in John 15:16, he said to his disciples, jot that Scripture down, read it later. He said, "You didn't choose me. I chose you. I chose you." He said this. He said in John 6:36 he said to these religious people. He said, "You have seen me. You have heard me. But you don't believe me." In the next verse he said, "But all that my father giveth me will come to me. They will come."

2 Thessalonians 2:13, whose choice? “We are bound to give thanks for you brethren, beloved of God because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation.”

Salvation is by choice. But it is God’s choice. And Acts 13:48 says this, “As many as were ordained to eternal life believed.”

Ok, here is the third question. Now listen to me. And think about these. Are sinners truly dead spiritually? Are they really dead in trespasses and sin?

You know, one day...and I believe this is for our learning and in the book of Ezekiel. The Lord came to the prophet Ezekiel and he said, “Ezekiel, go down here to a certain place. I want to show you something.” And Ezekiel went down a valley. There was a great valley. And there had been a battle fought there years before and he looked over the valley and the valley full of dry, bleached, barren, parched bones. There had been many slain in that valley and the bones were lying there. They have written a song about that, “The ankle bone joined to the leg bone, the leg bone joined to the hip bone and so forth.” So you have heard that song. But there they were. And God said to Ezekiel, “Can these bones live? Can these bones live?”

And Ezekiel replied, “Lord, thou knowest.”

And the Lord said, “Well, preach to them. Preach to them, thus saith the Lord.” And he told them to preach to them what God would do. God said, “I will bring flesh upon you. I will bring life into you. I will do this.”

And he said, “As I preached they stood up a great army. And I cried to the spirit of the Lord, Oh, spirit, come upon these dry bones. And they lived.”

Now, what is that all about? Well, here is what it is all about. Turn to Ephesians two. Ephesians chapter two, Ephesians the second chapter, verse one. Now, is this true? Ephesians 2:1. “And you hath he quickened...” What is the word quickened? I know that is in italics, but it is repeated later on. “You hath he quickened who were dead in trespasses and sins.” We were like these bones, very dead, lifeless, without God. We have been dead a long time.

And he goes on and tells what we were in times past. We walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience among whom also we all had our conversation, citizenship, behavior in times past in the lust of our flesh, the desires of our flesh and of the mind. We were by nature children of wrath just like everybody else. But God...and that is this valley of dry bones. They...Ezekiel didn’t have any power to give them life. They didn’t have any power to give themselves life, nobody else but God who is rich in mercy. Listen. For his great love wherewith he loved us. We didn’t love him. He loved us. Even at the same time when we were dead in sin he quickened us together with Christ. By grace are ye saved.

That is what I am asking. I am saying do sinners retain some spiritual ability to which we can appeal? In other words when Ezekiel is preaching to these bones was there in every bone left a little life, a little amoeba or something that when he preached he set off something and it stirred and it responded and it developed and grew and the character came out and they lived?

That is not true. Lifeless.

And I am saying when we go forth and preach we are preaching as...I know men are not dead physically or morally or mentally, but they are dead spiritually just like those bones. And God, but God has to move upon me. And God's spirit is the agent in regeneration and God's Word is the seed.

He says this. Now listen to this Scripture in James 1:18. "Of his own will begat he us with the Word of truth." It says we are begotten or born again not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible seed by the Word of God. Now, is that...do you answer that question in the affirmative? Are sinners really dead, dead, dead, dead? The Word say they are. If God moves on them like he moves on God bones.

So there is no need for me to give a 20 minute invitation hymn at the close of the service. What...what I do is what Ezekiel did. I preach the Word of God and life is in the hands of the Lord so he is the Lord of life.

All right. Here is the fifth question. The obedience and death of Christ, now when I was growing up I grew up like nearly all here in church. And when you live in the Bible belt—and Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia or even Kentucky—you just go to church. Now, church is a way of life. And I grew up in church. And I heard about Christ died on the cross. Christ came to the earth born of a virgin. I knew he was...I believed in the blood, the book and the blessed hope before I ever knew the gospel. I knew Christ was virgin born. I would have fought you for it before I knew why. I knew he died on the cross, was buried and rose again before I ever knew why. That's right. I was preaching before I ever knew why. And what I am asking you is, does everybody here know why he died on that cross?

"Well, he died for our sins."

Well, I know that. But let me ask you this. His blood and his dead, was it toward us or was it toward God? Now think about that for a minute. Was his death on the cross...I know it was for us. He was wounded for our transgressions and for our iniquities and for our chastisement. But his death, why is it necessary? For your sake alone?

Oh, no. For God's sake. The offering of his blood was toward the Father, not toward you at all. Christ didn't die to win your sympathy or your friendship. He died to enable a holy God to save your soul. That is exactly right. He died to enable God to be just and justify you and me. Now, that is true. His death was not a pattern. It was a payment. His death was not an example, it was an expiation.

Now, this is important. This is the heart of the gospel. His death was not to revive us. It was to redeem us. We were in bondage to the law and the law wouldn't let us go until somebody came and paid the law. We were in the clutches of justice and justice wouldn't let us go until somebody came and satisfied justice.

There is a bum sitting on skid row in Chicago. You walk by and look at him. You can buy him for a quarter. He will kill for a quarter. He is not worth anything. I mean, you could hire him to do anything for a dollar. He would cheat his own mother for two dollars. He is cheap. But you let him commit a crime and the police come and pick him up and put him in jail. Now you try to buy him. You try to buy him now.

You try to...you say, "I want that man to serve me."

The law says, "He is ours."

"But I'm willing to pay for him."

"I'm sorry. He's ours and he is going to be ours until this debt is paid."

And that is the law...and God's law and God's justice held us in captivity. We weren't the captives of Satan. The average preacher sounds like that we are in captivity to Satan and God is over here wanting us to come to him so if we come to God Satan will let us go. No. We are in captivity to the law, to the justice of God and it won't let us go until somebody pays a bill we owe. See what I'm saying? And then God can righteously and justly let us go. In fact, he has to let us go because he is willing to...

Turn to Romans. In Romans chapter three, now listen to this. This is what most preachers do not see, Romans three, verse 24. "Being freely...being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, Christ Jesus whom God hath set forth, foreordained, to be a propitiation, a mercy seat through faith in his blood to declare his blood and his death and his righteousness was to declare God's righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, even for the sins of those in the Old Testament who were already dead when Christ died. But God through his forbearance and through his longsuffering, through his patience, looked to the death of Christ even to pay for their sins to declare, I say, Christ Jesus came to this earth and lived and died to declare I say at this time God's righteousness that God might be just and the justifier of him who believes in Jesus Christ. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself."

Let me see if I can put that right down where we live. Because of Adam's transgression, because of our transgressions, because of our sins, sinful nature, heart, mind, everything about us, sins of omission, commission, whatever. We are in bondage. God has a law that is unchangeable and must be obeyed. God's justice must be satisfied. We are held in captivity to the law, to the justice of God. Christ came down here and as a man in the flesh he perfectly obeyed every law. He did what we can't do. He did what God commanded us to do. He did all that the law required representing a people. And he has

honored that law and there the very...the justice and wrath of God fell on him and slew him and he was buried and he rose again. And as...

And you say, "Well, how could one person pay the sin debt of so many? Because of who he is." He is infinite. And his blood is infinite. And now God almighty can accept us, receive us and forgive us because Christ paid it all. There is nothing against us and God can be just and justify. And do you understand that?

You say, "Well, how is that mine?"

By believing him, by believing him. That is what he says there that he might be just and the justifier of them that believe. Now, here is the next question, the last question and I am going to comment on it a little more, a little more fully. All right salvation is a gift. It is a gift of God.

And here is the sixth question. Is the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ, then, a bare invitation or is it a command? In other words are you invited to believe this gospel or are you commanded to believe it? Does God invite men to repent or does he command them to repent? Does God invite men to believe his Word or does he command men to believe his Word? Is the glory and preeminence of Christ, the fact that we shall bow to the Lordship of Christ, is that an invitation or a command?

Now, I know today it is insinuated that it is strictly an invitation.

Turn to Luke 14. Now, this is very important here, Luke chapter 14.

While you are turning let me ask you this. Noah built an ark. Was that by invitation or command, Bob?

Abraham came out of his father's house by invitation or command?

Moses offered a passover lamb by invitation or command?

"Matthew, follow me." Was that an invitation or a command?

"Zacchaeus, come down." Is that an invitation or a command?

It depends on who is speaking, doesn't it? I can invite men to come here me preach. I persuade men to look to Christ. I beseech men to be reconciled to God, but I am saying my Lord doesn't invite anybody to do anything. He commands them to.

Listen to this. You have read this 100 times, but let's read it again. Luke 14:15, "And when one of them sat at meat, one of them that sat at meat with him heard these things he said to him, 'Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God.' Then said he unto him," here is Christ speaking, "A certain man made a great supper and bade many."

I looked up that word “bade” or “bid.” It means invite. That is what that word means. He invited men. “And he sent his servant at supper time to say unto them that were invited, ‘Come for all things are now ready.’”

Now, here is the results of a bare invitation. “And they all...” These are the results of a bare invitation. They all without exception, with one consent, in total unity... This is the only time sinners are in total unity, against God. “Began to make excuse and the first said, ‘Well, I bought a piece of ground. I must needs go and see it. I pray thee have me excused.’ Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen. I go to prove them. I pray have me excused.’ Another said, ‘I have married a wife and therefore I cannot come.’ So that servant came and showed his lord these things. And the master of the house being angry said to his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and the lanes of the city.’”

Now here is why you read that psalm tonight, brother Ronnie. “‘And bring in the poor and the maim and the halt and the blind and the needy and the weary. Go bring them in.’ And the servant said, ‘Lord, it is done as you have commanded and yet there is room.’ And the Lord said to the servant, ‘Go out in the highways and the hedges again and compel them to come in that my house may be filled.’”

He filled his house, but not by invitation, by power and by compelling them, by commanding them.

And now, you know, the first time I looked into this years ago when somebody looked at me and asked this very question, they looked at me and they said, “Is the gospel an invitation or a command?” And I wanted...I want to be right on this. So I began to think about some Scriptures.

Now, I went to the concordance and the word “invitation” is only in the Bible three times and never in the New Testament. The word “invite,” “invitation” is in the Bible three times. That’s all. Look it up. And every time it is...and I will give you where it is found: 1 Samuel 9:24, 2 Samuel 13:23 and Esther 5:12. And every time you find the word “invitation” or “invite” in the Bible it is somebody inviting somebody to a dinner, never a gospel preacher inviting people to believe God; never, never, never.

God’s prophets commanded men to believe God. They never invited him.

So I began to think about these different verses. The first one that came to my mind was Isaiah 45: “Look unto me and be ye saved...” Let’s turn over there and let me look at that a moment. “Look unto me and be ye saved all the ends of the earth for I am God. There is none else.” That sort of reads like some kind of invitation. But I tell you, it is really an instruction.

Watch the preceding verses. Verse 20. Isaiah 45. “Assemble yourselves and come. Draw near together you that are escaped of the nations. They have no knowledge that set up wood, the wood of their graven image and pray to a god that can’t save. Tell me. Tell ye, bring them near. Let them take counsel. Who hath declared this from ancient times?”

Who told it from that time? Have not I the Lord? There is no God else beside me. I am the only just God and Savior. There is none beside me so look to me and be ye saved.” That is the inscription, what God is saying. There is no salvation in idols. If you are going to be saved you have got to look to a God that can save. Pray to a God that can hear. Look to me.

Matthew 11. I thought about this. Matthew chapter 11, verse 27 and 28. Bear with me a minute. Now let’s look at this. Matthew 7:28. “Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.” That sounds like an invitation if you will take it without reading the preceding verses. Go back and read verse 25. And our Lord had just talked to this generation about it. He said, “Woe unto thee Chorazin. Woe unto the Bethsaida. The things that have been done in Sodom and Gomorrha had done in you they would have repented.” Verse 25. “And at that time Jesus answered and said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth because you hid these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, it seemed good in your sight. All things are delivered unto me of my Father and know man knows the Son, but the Father, neither knoweth any many the Father save the Son and he to whom soever the Son will reveal him. So you come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden. I will give you rest. You will find rest in me nowhere else.’” And that is a command. “I am the only Redeemer, the only Redeemer.”

Now, look at Acts 17, verse 30. In Acts 17, verse 30 and Paul said, “The times of this ignorance God tolerated. God patiently, longsuffering, tolerated. But now he what? He commandeth all men everywhere to repent.”

I thought about this. Do parents invite children to obey them? Do policemen invite men to obey the law? Do generals invite privates to obey their word? Or does the King of Kings invite his subjects to obey him or does he command them to obey him?

He said, “This is my beloved Son. If you find it convenient, believe on him. Do you believe him?” It is not optional.

Now, here is my conclusion. Let me sum it up and close. Why is our gospel a command? Why is it a command? Why do we preach it as a command rather than a bare invitation? Well, very quickly, four reasons why I preach the gospel as a command.

I preach it as a command to be in keeping with the character of God. A sovereign ruler does not bargain with subjects. A righteous judge does not negotiate with criminals. It is a command in keeping with the character of God.

Secondly, we preach it as a command because our Lord told us to preach it that way. He said to his disciples, now listen to this Great Commission, he said to his disciples, “All power is given unto me in heaven and earth. Go ye therefore and preach the gospel to every creature. All power in heaven and earth is behind you. You go preach the gospel.” That gives us boldness, boldness to command men. We come in the name of God. Paul said, “I am an ambassador of God.”

Thirdly, a bare invitation without the will to respond will always find rejection. Our Lord said, "You will not come to me." Like that Luke 14 I read to you. They all with one consent refused an invitation, but not the command.

And fourthly, now listen to this. The command to believe the gospel gives encouragement to the genuine sinner that if I am commanded to believe on Christ then I am at full liberty to do so. Do you understand what I am saying? If God commands me to believe on Christ then I am at full liberty to do so.

For example, "Lazarus, come forward." Lazarus does not need to pause for one moment and ask the Lord if it would be all right if he came out. He is commanded to. The man lying on the bed, 38 years he had been there, the Lord said, "Take up your bed and walk." With the command comes a permission.

"Stretch forth your hand." With the command comes not only the permission, but the power. So if God commands me to believe the gospel I have every right to believe it. I have assurance and confidence. If he commands me to come to him, then I have every right to come and every right to believe he will receive me. Is that not correct? That is the reason we preach the gospel as a command. God has appointed a day in which he is going to judge this world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained whereof he hath given assurance to all men in that he raised him from the dead.

Believe the gospel. That is the command of God.

Do we...can we do otherwise? He said to his disciples, "Will you go away?"

They said, "To whom? Thou hast the words of life."

All right. Mike is going to sing for us a great song entitled, "I am. I am."