

SECTION VII

EVANGELISM AND WORLD MISSIONS

*Resources to Encourage Evangelism:
A Four-Sermon Series*

BY JOHN L. HIIGEL

Many pastors would say that their church members, in theory at least, would like for their friends to know the Lord, to be saved, to experience the sure-footedness, security, and well-being that can come from being a Christian. They would also say that, in practice, too few of their members actually tell their friends about Jesus. Moreover, truth be told, their members find the subject of evangelism troubling and distasteful, even though they love the Lord. Why is this?

One reason is that so many of them have noticed how uncomfortable their friends or acquaintances become when the subject of Jesus or Christian life comes up in conversation. Some Christians come to dread bringing up the subject of our life with God for fear it might introduce tension into the conversation or even into the whole relationship with their friend. A second reason is that, both for our members and for those outside, evangelism may have an unpleasant reputation. To many in our society, evangelism means being a jerk, sticking your nose in where it doesn't belong, and being pushy and opinionated.

Then there is the problem that our friends appear to be doing just fine in their lives, so it does not seem particularly urgent to help them know the Lord. This lack of urgency comes, in part, from an inadequate view of God's holiness and greatness, as well as from a superficial view of our friends' actual inner condition. An additional obstacle is that some of our members may have their guard up toward any "evangelism emphasis" because of a scarcity of lasting results from the previous ones.

The proposal here is for a sermon series that chips away at these obstacles and clarifies what we are trying to do when we do evangelism. The first sermon considers that response of discomfort we see on our friends' faces when the subject of Jesus or Christian life comes up. By observing what I call the "exaggerated case"—the wild Gerasene demoniac in Luke 8—we see dramatically what then happens again more subtly in the "normal people" of the town and what is likely happening in the minds of our own friends. All react to Jesus out of fear, hoping he will leave them alone, when in fact Jesus comes to bring them peace and well-being. Jesus does not give up on such people. Rather, his command to the healed man is to stay and live among his home folks and tell them what God has done for him.

The other three sermons in this series come from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. Here we observe a successful case of leading some people to Christ. We have indications from

the letter that, despite daunting obstacles, Paul's evangelistic work in Thessalonica was remarkably effective. In succession, these sermons ask what the marks of successful evangelism were, what Paul's approach was that worked so well, and what it was about Paul's ministry that it produced such lasting results in the lives of the converted.

I remember vividly the testimony of one of my old chums from high school who was explaining at a class reunion how he had become a Christian. He said, "I found my way into this group of people at a church, and they *loved me* to Christ." Those church people had lived out something like Paul's approach in Thessalonica—the loving approach, the long-term loving approach. Such an approach has wonderful appeal for church members, because it so clearly contrasts with the syndrome of impersonal, insensitive pushiness. Another point of great benefit emerges from these chapters as well. Paul's letter will help our members appreciate more fully that it is God who goes ahead of us, God who is doing evangelism, God whose work enables us to be fruitful.

Topic: Afraid of Jesus

TEXT: Luke 8:26–39

I recommend beginning this sermon with an anecdote out of your own personal experience. Tell about an actual conversation you have had. The object is to help the congregation identify with you about that moment that happens when talking either with people we associate with frequently or with a casual acquaintance (the person cutting our hair or the one in the plane seat next to ours). We're chatting away about normal things when, either by our design or by happenstance, it comes out that we are Christian. We have all seen that brief flash of panic on the faces of individuals we are talking to. They freeze for just a moment, squint, or do a kind of double-take, and look slightly sick. It all takes place quickly. And then they gather their wits and shift into their mode for handling religious people.

Many of us are startled by that reaction and become uncomfortable ourselves, so we find that both of us in the conversation start talking faster and beating a retreat to safer topics. To our frustration, our discomfort with a friend's discomfort can effectively deter us from ever moving forward with sharing our faith, whether right then or later on. Thinking about Jesus, talking to him, and serving him may be the most natural thing in the world to us, but that reaction we come to expect from the non-Christian makes us afraid to bring Jesus into our conversations. What is going on in our friend's double-take and retreat, and how can we get beyond it?

I. *The exaggerated case.* The story in Luke shows, at an exaggerated level, what is going on in miniature in the normal friend who is startled to run into Jesus through conversation with us. Do our friends have problems in their lives? This man trumps them. Do they feel alarm in encountering Jesus? This man expresses outright terror.

The most obvious point about the man who meets Jesus in Luke 8 is that he is demon-possessed. (As a matter of strategy in the sermon, it is probably not advisable here to spend time discussing the nature of demon possession or whether it is a demon rather than the man who cries out.) His life is utterly out of control, and he has become a fearsome nuisance to those he knows. The parallel story in Mark's Gospel speaks of unsuccessful attempts to chain the man down and of his utter incapacity to function among normal people. He lives

in terrible loneliness and distress. Something evil and destructive has gotten hold of him so that he has lost all his relationships and has become only marginally human. He is captive, body and soul.

So this man encounters Jesus. We notice two things immediately. First, Jesus spots what is controlling and ruining him and orders it to cease. Jesus “had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man” (v. 29), which is to say that Jesus went straight to the core of the man’s problem and was already intervening to fix it. The other thing we see—and here is the surprise—is that as the man is approached by the one person who could relieve his horrible burden, instead of greeting Jesus with open arms and relief, he starts screaming in terror, “I beg you not to torment me!” The guy’s life is a wreck, and he desperately needs release from the demons that own him. Clearly, he will be vastly better off if Jesus can do his transforming work on him, and yet he is screaming at Jesus to leave him alone.

II. *Normal people.* Normal people’s slavery to what is dehumanizing and isolating and evil in their lives is more miniature. The bondage that harms their lives and damages their relationships with others is more moderate. But they would clearly be better off if they could be set free. Just as with “Legion,” when Jesus encounters a person, he goes straight for the person’s needs and problems and seeks to relieve them. Normal people don’t scream, “What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you not to torture me!” But in a more moderate and subtle way, that is likely how they are responding. We who are familiar with Jesus know that he comes not to torment but to heal and restore, to forgive and set free, to bring balance, richness, meaning, and fullness to life. He comes with all power and authority and with his capacity to overturn and disrupt—characteristics that *would* terrify us if he were not also the author of love. But people *need* for him to come with all that power and authority if he is to tackle the forces that get hold of their lives.

In one sense, normal people’s instinctive fear of Jesus is right on target. Jesus does throw things into upheaval as he draws near. Our man “Legion” is, of course, utterly changed, clothed and in his right mind, now able to live peaceably with others, whole and fully human. It is a massive upheaval for good.

But his is not the only life that Jesus has disrupted. We have a sea full of dead pigs. These pigs were presumably significant to the economy of the town and countryside from which all the normal people pour out in fury and fear. Jesus provokes fear because his priorities are right, and the people’s are not. Jesus sees that this one human “discard” is more valuable than the temporary financial stability of the town, but for the people of the town, his intervention for that man is enormously disruptive and costly.

Who are possessed by fear at the end of the story? Who are unable to rejoice at the healing of this man, who had been so troubled and so difficult? Who have isolated themselves from human compassion and from God for fear of being tormented? The normal people! The evidence that Jesus has come to bring relief and joy to hurting people is right before their eyes: the formerly desperate man sitting at Jesus’ feet, clothed and in his right mind. Yet they are “afraid,” and they ask Jesus to leave.

III. *Declare what God has done.* It is striking, then, that Jesus insists that the man go “home and declare how much God has done for you.” Home is the city (v. 27), the same city from which these fearful “normal people” have come who are sending Jesus away (v. 34). This is significant in two ways. First, we see that, despite their fear—despite that expression of discomfort we observe on our friends’ faces—Jesus wants fearful people to be told about

God's goodness. As the newly healed man tells what God has done, his words will be reinforced by the change his home folk can see in his life. That flash of fear on people's faces that their defenses may soon be penetrated can become an incentive rather than a disincentive to share our faith. However fine our friends' lives may appear to be in general, we are saddened to glimpse their fear, and we realize they need Jesus, who can remove their fear and bring deep well-being. Second, Jesus' command tells us what to say. "Tell people how much God has done for you." Our testimony to God's mercy in our own lives can be what he uses to lower people's defenses, ease their fears, and open their hearts.

Topic: A Successful Case

TEXT: 1 Thess. 1:1–2:2

First Thessalonians, perhaps the oldest surviving Christian document, is exciting because of the wonderful insight it gives us into some early Christians' endeavors to lead people to Christ. We see from the letter and from Acts 17 that the visit to Thessalonica by Paul and his companions was necessarily short, because persecution by locals forced them to leave early. Nevertheless, we find that they were able to establish a community of new believers who remained steadfast and vital Christians. This letter is Paul's enthusiastic response to the first news he has received about their progress since he was forced out of town. He is overjoyed that "our visit to you was not in vain." Part of the strategy of the rest of this sermon series, beginning with this sermon's introduction, is to draw your congregation into the drama of that successful visit. Invite them to imagine a congregation in which, after Paul has left, no one in the whole church has known the Lord for more than a few months, yet they soon become well known for their faith in Christ throughout their region and beyond. What does it take to get people off to such a great start?

Our purpose in this sermon is to see what counted, for Paul, as evidence that his evangelistic work among these people had been a success. What are we trying to do when we share our faith? Knowing how to proceed depends on having a clear view of the goal. If our goal is to get people to say the right salvation prayer or to agree to a series of propositions about sin and salvation and Christ, we will adopt one strategy. If our goal is an enduring change in people's lives—real, heartfelt, lasting love relationships with God—we will adopt a different strategy. Paul's goal was the latter, and he can now say that goal has been met.

I. *They have turned.* Paul uses a vivid expression to describe the Thessalonians in verse 9: they have "turned." Their lives were headed in one direction, but now they have turned and are headed in another direction altogether. They have turned from idols to serve the living, true God and to wait for God's Son from heaven. The fact that they have turned reveals that Paul was seeking far more than what people often settle for as "evangelism." How many in our day have come forward at a meeting or "prayed the prayer" without a real turn happening in their lives? They may have responded with sincerity in a moment of emotion and conviction, fully intending to change, but it only ends up being a momentary deviation from the general course of their lives lived independently of God.

In verses 9 and 10, Paul sees the turn these Thessalonians have made in their actions (they are now serving the living and true God) and in their new frame of mind (Christ is on their minds as they await his return). Verse 1:3 reinforces the point. Something new now drives them, namely the three-fold characteristic of the Christian heart: faith, hope, and love. Again,

what emerges from their Christian hearts now is action. TNIV and NIV capture this, translating the genitives of origin, “your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope.” In Paul’s view, then, the success of his evangelistic visit is displayed by the turn in their lives. (Our term *conversion* expresses this idea of turning.) Old motivations have been replaced by faith, hope, and love (ideas worth lingering over in the sermon), and a sustained energy of action is the result.

II. *The Word rings out from them.* Perhaps the most satisfying evidence for Paul that his visit to the Thessalonians had not been a failure was that these new believers had become evangelists themselves. Their work of faith and labor of love has taken the particular form of telling others the good news. They have not merely followed the example of Paul and his cohort, but they themselves have become examples to everyone else. They seem as eager as Paul does to lead others to Christ, and they are gaining a wide reputation for their combination of personal faith and words of witness (vv. 7–8). This is especially impressive because it has come about while these people were under persecution (v. 6). The passage, incidentally, puts aside the notion that evangelism is something only for apostle-types and super-mature Christians to do. These are all novice Christians.

Notice what their reputation is not. It is not that they have made pests of themselves in Achaia and Macedonia. They have not become known for their pushiness or aggressiveness. What has become known is the Lord’s message, confirmed by their genuine faith. Evangelism does not have to have a bad reputation. These are people who received the Word in the joy of the Holy Spirit, and they are passing it on in that spirit. Presumably, because they consciously imitate Paul (v. 6), their message has come in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction. This leads to the third point.

III. *God is making it happen.* Here is the most reassuring part of the first chapter. God preceded Paul and his companions to Thessalonica and empowered their ministry. God similarly empowers the testimony of these new converts.

A key insight comes from Paul’s use of the Greek word *eisodos*. When preaching, I am generally sparing in referring to Greek terms, but this one is genuinely helpful. The word comes twice in the text, first in 1:9, where NRSV says “people of those regions report about us what kind of *welcome* we had among you,” and second is in 2:1, where it reads, “our *coming* to you was not in vain.” The word *eisodos* appears today in any shop in Greece where one door is the entrance (*eisodos*) and the other is the exit (*exodos*—a word people will find familiar). Paul is saying we had “entrance” to you, entrance to your hearts. God gave us an opening into your hearts and lives. People all around report how open you were to us and to our message (1:9). God prepared an entrance into your hearts, and we did not miss it (2:1). So says Paul. What we today are looking for as we grow in desire to share our faith is those openings into people’s hearts that God has gone before us to create.

The whole first chapter is a thanksgiving to God. God is the source of these new believers’ faith, hope, and love (v. 3). God has chosen them and loved them (v. 4). God’s Holy Spirit empowered the preaching of the word in their midst (v. 5) and inspired them with joy (v. 6). God has shown himself in their story more than ever to be the living and true God (v. 9).

Why are the Thessalonians the “successful case” of evangelism? Paul credits it to the work of God, in which he and his companions were merely cooperating and fulfilling an opportunity.

The sermon could conclude with a dual invitation, first, to turn fully to God as the Thesalonians have, and second, to become people sensitive and eager to spot those openings God has prepared in the lives of our friends to hear God's word from us. God grant our members courage so that those openings—those entrances to people's hearts—may not be in vain.

Topic: The Loving Approach

TEXT: 1 Thess. 2:1–12

In the previous message, we will have noted that for some, both outside the church and within it, evangelism has acquired a bad name because of the way it has been done. Here we want to offer a way of evangelism that avoids this syndrome. In introducing the sermon, it might be helpful to point out some less ideal approaches to evangelism, perhaps using a bit of caricature and humor, in order to set up a presentation of the loving approach modeled by Paul.

What starts out as a desire to care about people sometimes descends into something less loving. Some approach evangelism as a *moral watchdog*. They develop an acutely sensitive nose for sin and nastiness in others. They are interested, not so much in inviting people to freedom and joy as in imposing a set of scruples. Others approach evangelism as a *warrior*, not, alas, doing battle against the devil and the powers of evil but against the evangelism "target." Speaking of God descends into winning arguments and a contest of wills. If the person being evangelized ever becomes a Christian, it will have to be because he admits he is wrong and our warrior is right. Others approach it as a *salesperson*. The gospel becomes a commodity to sell, and it is to be brought to people's attention any way possible as often as possible, using guile and manipulation if necessary to force the subject into view, hoping that in a moment of weakness or restlessness they will buy into our gospel. Still others do evangelism in ill-considered bursts as *guilt downloaders*. We're having another evangelism emphasis, and I'd better do it to somebody soon so I won't feel guilty for never doing it. No wonder evangelism has a bad name. What all these approaches have in common is the scarcity of actual love shown toward the person who is hearing.

I. *Our conduct was pure, upright, blameless.* Paul says what he *did not* do in order to affirm what he *did* do. What he and his companions *did not* do was manipulate people. Verse 3 focuses on purity of *motives*, verse 5 on nonmanipulative *words*, and verse 10 on blameless, upright *actions*. In verse 7, which continues this theme of integrity, the NRSV ("we might have made demands as apostles") probably best captures the idea of burden: we could have thrown our weight around—we could have pulled rank—but we did not. So Paul, the effective evangelist, used no flattery, no deception, no power games, no putting on airs to be impressive, no slipping in under people's radar and then springing the gospel on them. The helpful cross reference here is 2 Corinthians 2:17: "We are not peddlers of God's word like so many, but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity." You may have an anecdote or two about manipulative methods you have seen people try.

Eliminating the slick salesman image will bring relief to many in our congregations. If what we are being asked to do is be real in the presence of our friends, *that* we can do. This way we are free to be caught in the act of struggling to live out our faith rather than trying to put on some sort of smudge-free, plastic perfection for public consumption. We are not

260 THE MINISTER'S MANUAL FOR 2007

seeking praise from people; we are living to please God, who tests our hearts (vv. 4, 6). Rebecca Manley Pippert's experience, narrated in her classic book *Out of the Saltshaker and into the World*, was that it was only when her friend saw her honestly struggle and fail that there was the first flicker of actual interest in her words about Jesus.

II. *We loved you so much.* Paul's model for sharing faith in Christ, which was evidently picked up by the Thessalonians for their own evangelism (1:6), was to love people. Verse 2:8 is the centerpiece. It begins, "So deeply do we care for you [we loved you so much]," and ends "you have become so dear to us." There is a bit of the Golden Rule in this. We would all rather be loved than manipulated, so that is how we treat people whom we want to know Jesus.

Paul says, "Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well." Sharing our lives means sharing our life story with words, and it also means sharing ourselves in caring actions. For Paul, that meant working hard not to be a financial burden to them (v. 9). For others it might mean helping fix their friends' car or watching their kids so they can go out. Our members know instinctively how to love their friends, and it is remarkable how all that is forgotten in some attempts at evangelism. Even a big-event evangelist like Billy Graham depends mostly on people who have already built a loving friendship with people they have brought with them to the rally.

Paul's images for loving are worth drawing out. In verse 7, he pictures a nursing mother with her tender infant. We were gentle among you, says Paul. Think of a mother so eager to meet the needs of her baby that she weeps when she can't. Who is more attentive than she is? Who listens more carefully? She pours herself into knowing and understanding her child and is sometimes the only one who can decipher its utterances. In turn, she adjusts her vocabulary to what the child can understand. Then we have the image of the father involved in long-term nurture of his son or daughter (vv. 11–12), urging, encouraging, pleading with his young one to live a life worthy of God. These parental images highlight sustained, heartfelt, dedicated love, not seniority or authority over the person being loved.

III. *We had courage in our God to declare the gospel.* We have to press on to this point. Paul says we loved you so much that we shared the gospel of God (v. 8). We had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel (v. 2). At the right time, with sensitivity, our members must have the courage to *speak* the gospel. Verse 8 is not, "We loved you so much that, though we never actually told you the gospel, we shared our lives *instead!*"

To reinforce the point made in the first sermon, what God would have us do is to tell people what he has done for us. That will take the form of personal anecdotes of times when we saw God most clearly at work in our lives. But it will also include telling the New Testament's message of what God has done for us.

Paul is aware of how scary it may be for some Christians to share the good news. He speaks in verse 2 of his own temptation to be intimidated into silence but says, "We received courage *in* our God to speak the gospel *of* God." As God has provided the opening into people's hearts and has given us much love for these people, he can also give us the needed courage to speak up. God is never more with us than at that moment, however clumsy or inadequate we may feel. We may picture him standing beside us, encouraging and helping. Courage *in* God to speak *of* God: this is our empowerment from him. Along with Paul (v. 4), our members can say—they really can!—"we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, and so we *speak*."

Topic: The Drama of Follow-Through

TEXT: 1 Thess. 2:13–3:13

Drama is a useful image for what is happening in today's text. Among the fine arts are forms that freeze a moment in time: painting, sculpture, or photography. But there are also art forms that unfold through time: music, dance, theater, and film. The Germans have a colorful term for what is needed in order to appreciate the longest such art forms, such as long operas or symphonies or movies. They say you need *Sitzfleisch* (sittin' flesh)—a well-padded rear end. Evangelism takes plenty of *Sitzfleisch* (pronounced zits-flysh). Evangelism is a long drama, not a moment in time. Despite our "instant society" in which we expect everything to be accomplished and resolved quickly, we have to abandon the pray-the-salvation-prayer-and-it's-finished mentality in favor of long-term caring that attends carefully to the drama of follow-through.

I. *The drama up to the moment of decision.* Here we remind the congregation about the drama that led up to a decision for Christ, first in the story here about the Thessalonians and then in their own stories. In Thessalonica, it was a drama God was involved in before Paul and his friends arrived. There was plenty of drama in the evangelists' story, as they were coming to Thessalonica (Acts 16–17; 1 Thess. 2:2) and then in the dramatic opening of the Thessalonians' hearts so that they turned to God (1:9–2:1). In today's text, Paul recounts it again in 2:13. But the drama does not end with their decision to turn to God. People in our own congregation will be able, likewise, to remember the drama of their having come to faith, whether it was eventful or gradual. It was not a moment-in-time thing, even if their story involved a dramatic event of decision. That moment had a context in their life story, and God will have been leading up to that moment for some time. Thanks be to God for that time of decision. Then what? It is like a marriage. The event of wedding day is the culmination of a decision to enter into a permanent relationship. But at that point, the drama is only beginning, and everyone knows that just because a marriage begins is no guarantee that it will last. Or it is like a birth. There is plenty of drama in the lead-up and day of birth, but the drama of the new life is just starting, and attentive care is needed, especially at first, because of the child's great vulnerability.

II. *The new believer's vulnerability.* The letter points clearly to hindrances faced by the Thessalonians. They encountered fierce persecution from their compatriots, which Paul says is the common experience of new Christians (2:14–15; the point of these verses is not to make a slam at Jews but to say that converts experience persecution from their own group—the people among whom they used to circulate easily). Also see 3:3–4. The drama of establishing the Thessalonians firmly in Christ is portrayed as a spiritual battle, with Satan hindering them from being with the people who could most effectively nurture them in faith (2:17–18) and with the Tempter trying to trip them up (3:5). So, far from being over, the drama intensifies when a person begins to follow Christ. We may see this three-fold dilemma of the Thessalonians' as a warning regarding new converts we care about: pressure from their previous associates who are nonbelievers; insufficient interaction with mature Christians, and general temptation to disobey God can all imperil new believers. Each of the three dangers may be worth illustrating. New believers are vulnerable and need our support.

III. *The evangelist's zeal for follow-through.* Precisely because the drama intensifies for the new convert, Paul's zeal for follow-through intensifies as well. We highlight here the strong

262 THE MINISTER'S MANUAL FOR 2007

language in 2:17, Paul's feeling "orphaned" from them as he was forced out of town by persecution—in person, but not in heart—and his great eagerness to see them again face-to-face. When he could no longer bear the lack of news about them (3:1, 5), he sent his last companion, Timothy, to strengthen them and to bring him a report. The exceedingly intense language continues in 3:7–10, where he says, "We *live* if you continue to stand firm in the Lord," and he tells them of his earnest prayer night and day. The passage ends with more prayer, as he beseeches God that he might be able to come himself to build them up and prays that they would increase in steadfastness and Christ-like love (3:11–13). (That Paul depends so much on prayer, not just on his preaching skill, suggests that we must do the same!) Paul's loving approach extends well beyond their conversion, and he can only point to them as a successful case of evangelism many months after their initial decision to follow Jesus. You may have anecdotes about people this zealous in their follow-through. I remember the testimony of the great Christian leader, John Stott, who said that the man who led him to Christ wrote to him weekly for years thereafter to encourage him.

We may point finally to the evangelist's joy. Having said, "We live," if these loved ones remain firm in their faith, he expresses overflowing joy, both in the anticipation (2:19–20) and in the receiving (3:6, 9) of the good news about their progress. The letter's whole first three chapters are an extended expression of thanks and joy. Perhaps Paul's testimony of personal joy from doing evangelism is the richest incentive to our members to make Jesus known.