

Christmas Presents-Part 3
Sharing Like the Shepherds
Pastor Mike Fabarez

The fourth service, my favorite service of all. Batting cleanup tonight. That is awesome that you are here spending part of your Christmas Eve with us at Compass. It's great to have you. And I know, as we try to look back every December at the scene of Christ's birth, if you have a nativity set, if you sent Christmas cards, you've depicted that scene in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago, certainly if you have that set or you have those pictures it's not complete without these guys, without the shepherds. Strangely enough God chose shepherds to be an integral and indispensable part of the Christmas story. Every year we see them and they look real keen and neat on cards and clean like this, but the real shepherds were a lot dirtier than that. They were dusty, they were dirty, they were callous, they had dirt under their fingernails. They were outdoorsmen. They were herdsmen. I mean, they were stinky, all the things we just referenced this weekend as we were looking at that scene in Luke 2. I mean, that was the shepherds, the shepherds of the first century. Even in the first century they didn't have REI, they couldn't go shopping at, you know, Bass Pro Shops. I mean, these guys had just all the rudimentary tools to make it through the day taking care of sheep, a very important part of the agrarian society as herdsmen. It was super important, but it took a kind of character. You can imagine if you just try to think through what it must have been like. You had, you know, the scholar, you had the, you know, the salesman, the marketplace guy, you had all kinds of different occupations, the teachers, but then you had the shepherd. And even if you were to think in a culture today what that might be like, you can get a sense of their personality because there are still shepherds around the world, in various parts of the world, where they are, you know, those outdoorsman types. I mean, they do have REI and things to kind of supplement and modernize their shepherding, but they're still shepherds, they still have dirty fingernails, calluses on their hands, they're outdoorsmen. And that is a kind of character that you probably, in your own imagination, can kind of slot them in and think, OK, I get it. I see what kind of person we're talking about.

Well, I recognize, as you read the story of the birth of Christ, that each of these figures and all of these people in that scene, they all play a different role. Now the shepherds play a very specific role. Interestingly enough they become the messengers. They become the people who take a message from the country, as it's revealed to them by God, into the city. And you remember the city was crowded. Couldn't find a place for Mary and Joseph, lots of people there, and God gives them a message and assigns them to take that message to Bethlehem. Now you'd think if God has a regal, important message about a king, he would bring it, as we do, when one kingdom or one country tries to speak to another with ambassadors, with some special envoy, with some kind of emissary that comes with all the regalia of important official business and news. But that is not how God chose to do it. Matter of fact, he picked very normal people, the blue collar, the lower rung of the social status in the first century, to bring the most important message of all. As a matter of fact, they were the first Christian missionaries, really the first ones who were coming with the message of Christ after his physical birth. This was a super important group of people that God chose for this task.

Here was the message they were given. We looked at the context of this this week as we thought about the angels and we recognize that this was the very important message God wanted to make sure that the people in downtown Jerusalem, if you will, were going to receive. Here's what they were told to tell them. They were told to say to them that, "For unto you born this day in the City of David," seven miles south of Jerusalem, very important city where David was born, "a Savior has

been born who is Christ the Lord." All those words, very important, all three of those words: Savior, Christ, Lord. Let's start with the word Christ. Christ is the New Testament version, the Greek version, of the Old Testament Hebrew word that we transliterate "Messiah." He was the Messiah.

The Messiah was the ultimate king who was coming, the one who would be the ultimate fulfillment of all of God's Old Testament promises, and here the shepherds were told by God take the message to Bethlehem and let them know that the Messiah, the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies, has been born. He's the Lord. That word is used of God himself all throughout the New Testament. I mean, that he's the boss, he's the king, he's the one in charge. But this is the word I want to zero in on tonight. The message really at the core of what the shepherds were told to bring to the people of Bethlehem was that he would be the savior. The savior. You start taking that word outside of church where we kind of use it without any object or reference or context, we just kind of assume everyone knows what it means, you start using the word savior or salvation or saved and you're not using it in a church context, people are going to want to know what are you talking about? Particularly when you start talking in biblical terms that this is the ONLY means of salvation. Perhaps you remember this verse from Acts Chapter 4 verse 12 where the apostles were talking all throughout the ancient world that when it comes to God's means of "salvation" that there is salvation and no one else. This is the only means to get it. "For there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." That is a big exclusive claim that, if you're going to have whatever this salvation is, you've got to have it in this one person. But we've got to zero in on that word "save." What in the world are you talking about?

Maybe this will help. Next time you're up Long Beach way, the Port of Los Angeles, or maybe you're going to take a cruise, when you see that big ship and you're all amazed at how big it is and that's interesting, maybe you're going on the cruise, you're going through the, you know, the gangway to get in it and you look on the side of it, you'll see these orange boats on the side. Right? These little boats that are appended to the side of your cruise ship are very important and they are there to save you. Now when you say that in your own mind, you say OK, they're there to save you and you get there, situated in the boat, the ship rather, and they tell you, "Hey, we're going to go through a drill. We're going to go to the muster station so you can figure out which lifeboat you're going to get in." You get the idea of what you're being saved from. The reason those boats are there is when this happens you'll have a place to go. If you start to sink in this big ship, they provide these lifeboats for you so that you can be saved. Saved from what? Well, of course, from way out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean I'm saved from drowning. I'm saved from dying out there in the middle of the sea. I don't want to be in the middle of the ocean, have the ship go down and not have a place to be saved. That's the means, the mechanism of salvation. The ship starts to list and it's going down, you better get to the lifeboat. Go to one of those orange boats and get in it. You've got to climb into it.

And when the Bible talks about being saved and that there's only one name given under heaven that men must trust in and we've got to believe in and have this confidence that he is going to be the salvation that we have, it would be important understand what the mechanism is. How do I get in that? Right? We know what it is to go to a muster station and try and get into a lifeboat. They'll teach you how to do that. But when it comes to being saved in Christ, what are we talking about? It helps reveal what it means to understand what it is to say that we get in this. Well how does that work?

The Bible says this in Romans Chapter 10 verse 9. It says when it comes to us getting into this



salvation, having this salvation the Bible talks about, that we've got to confess, there's another Bible, church word that we need to define. Confess means that I'm agreeing, I'm saying the same thing that God is saying. And I'm confessing in not just in some private way, but I'm confessing it with my mouth. It's coming out of my life that I'm agreeing with God about something that's very important. That Jesus, this one who is to be the savior of the world, is, here's the word, Lord. Now that can be a theological statement and certainly the theological statement is made in the Bible that Jesus has a certain nature that's not just human but he's also divine and that's true. But more than that, when you're talking about God, that is a definition of the one who is boss, he's king, he's in charge. And it can mean much more than that, but at a minimum, that's what the concept is presented to us as in Scripture. Jesus is in charge and you've got to agree with that, that Jesus is the boss. He's the king.

Everything about the Old Testament prophecies regarding Jesus was that he was going to come and everyone was supposed to submit their lives to him as the king. The king, the one in charge. And to confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord or the boss or the king is just, by means of exclusion, means that you're not, which is a really hard message for us to confess in our day. We'd all like to be in charge of our lives. We'd all like to be the captain of our own destiny, master of our own fate. But the Bible says you've got to get off that position in your life and recognize that when it comes to God and his leadership in your life, he wants you to recognize and confess that the one who should be in charge is Jesus, sent 2,000 years ago.

Now maybe more significant than that is getting underneath why he should be the one in charge of my life. Here's the next phrase in Romans Chapter 10 verse 9. "You ought to believe." And again, there's another church word, a Bible word that sometimes we just give short shrift to. It's a definition we don't fully grasp. And that's because believing in our minds often is just assenting to the facts, agreeing that the facts are true. And certainly it means that but it means much more than that. In the Bible to believe in something is to put my trust in it. Not just to believe it but to believe in it, to put my complete confidence and trust all the way down to my heart, the inner core of who I am, that God raised him, Jesus the Lord, from the dead. Now that's a pat theological statement.

One of the first verses you may learn if you go to Sunday School as a kid or you send your kids to church, they'll learn this verse: "That the wages of sin is death." Now that's true, but we've got to figure out what that means. Back in the Bible when it says that men and women first sinned, they disregarded the leadership of God. They said, "God, I know you're making rules but I'd like to be in charge of my own decisions. I'd like to do my own thing." The Bible promised that when we sinned we would die. Not just die biologically, which certainly the clock started ticking there in Genesis Chapter 3 for them at that moment. But we die relationally, to be separated from God. Isaiah 59:2 says that that's the problem with our moral decisions, they put a barrier between us and a holy, perfect God.

The Bible says that what we've got to recognize is that when Jesus came he came to reverse all of that. If the wages of sin is death and Jesus came to reverse that problem then we should see, verifying that whole work that he did, that our sin problem should be reversed. And that's exactly what happens in the New Testament. Jesus comes and says I'm going to take your sin upon myself so it's like it's my sin. I'm gonna let the Father, the perfect judge of the universe, treat me like I was the sinner and I'm going to now take all of my perfect life, the only human life that ever earned the qualifications of God's favor, the only person that could ever be acceptable before God, think that through, the only human life that ever earned the favor and approval of God, I'm going to have all



of that then attributable to you. I'm going to have that be credited or imputed to you. That's a biblical concept too, that Christ came to live a life that I couldn't live and didn't live. Right? The childhood, the teenage years, the adult life, all of that then credited to me and then all my sin that I deserved to be punished for, that spiritual death and separation, God's going to put that on Christ.

That whole exchange, his life for my life, my sin on his cross, that is the solution, the Bible says, that allows me to have hope that one day when I meet my maker, the perfect God of the universe, that I will have no condemnation. I'll have no judgment. I'll have no consequences for my sin before a perfect God. That's the good news of the Gospel. The Bible says if that is part of your heart, if you are thinking and embracing that and confessing and agreeing with God that Jesus is Lord, the Bible says you will be, and here it is, you'll be saved. You will no longer bear the consequences of your sin.

Now all this is super unpopular, I get that. Jesus, for most people, at least in our day, certainly in our culture and Western society and particularly in California, "You want Jesus? We're going to pitch Jesus to you at Christmas as some life improvement process." Right? It will help your life, it'll give you peace, maybe God will answer more of your prayers, I mean, you'll age slower, you'll have no acne, your skin will be great. I mean whatever they're promising to you these days, Christ is going to be some positive solution to you. But of course the Bible says the real issue is that he's saving you from the consequences of things that really, in your moral life, get God really angry. That God, unfortunately, as a holy and righteous judge, at least unfortunate to us, he can't approve our behavior, he can't approve our decisions.

Now this kind of salvation was clearly given in that statement that Jesus was going to be born, he's going to be a savior, he's going to save us from the consequences of our sin. He's in charge, Jesus the Lord, and there's no other way, there's no other religion, there's no other name, there's no other prophet, there's no other mechanism, there's no ladder to climb, there's no salvation in anyone else, "there's no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." That's the message of the Gospel. It may not look real exciting as we're in this lifeboat headed toward the kingdom. That's the problem with people looking at us as the Apostle Paul said, when you see our lives as Christians, it doesn't look like much you want to sign up for. But the Bible is really clear, what we are going to become has not yet been seen. The reality of where I'm headed to a place where I have no consequences for my sin and all the unmitigated, unreserved blessing of God, that's the Christian life. It's looking forward, it's hope, its future, it's not here and now, it's then and there. And I'm looking forward to that based on the confidence that Christ 2,000 years ago lived in my place and that he died in my place so that I can be fully acceptable to God. And I get to the end of the road in my life, I step across the threshold of this life into the next with no consequences for sin and all the favor that Jesus earned for me. The good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It's nothing new when it comes at least to the image of salvation that is built into that picture of Noah and the Ark. Back in the Old Testament in Genesis Chapter 6 through 9, you have a picture of God looking at the world and saying it's a mess. Talk about a listing ship of humanity. This generation looked a lot like our generation which Jesus said would happen. The end times are going to be like the days of Noah. Everyone is going to do their own thing, do whatever they want, and Genesis 6 says it grieved God's heart and as a righteous judge he had to respond. He's going to respond in a temporal way by flooding the world. I mean, that's a horrible image. And yet you buy wallpaper for your kid's nursery that depicts the scene, which I don't fully understand, but I guess the idea is all those cute animals remind you, I hope at least on some level, that God is a gracious

God saying this: though you guys deserve the punishment and justice that comes from a holy God in light of morally fallen and rebellious creatures, I'm going to give you an option, I'm going to give you an out. And of course, Noah was providing to humanity by God's direction a way for you to get into this barge, this Ark, this ship, this floating barge, so that you wouldn't have to suffer the temporal consequences of sin. That's a great picture of what Jesus came to do and it's not about temporal consequences it's about eternal consequences. He prepares us for the next life by making sure that we recognize, if we would confess with our mouth, that Jesus is Lord, he's the captain, he's in charge, he's the boss, and believe in my heart that God raised him from the dead, that he's solved my sin problem, I will be saved. I will be confidently saved from the consequences that are to come.

Second Peter Chapter 3 says very clearly this is the concern and should be of every person that our conscience testifies to, that nature testifies to, that I can be ready to meet my maker. Luke Chapter 2 verse 15, they got that message and the good news is they said we believe it, we're going to respond. The shepherd said, look up at the screen here, to one another, "Let's go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened," this thing, I love this, "which the Lord has made known to us." Now I would have loved to have been there and so would you out there in the fields to see that scene that we studied yesterday and the day before here at church, to look at this picture of an undeniable revelation from God. God gives the manifestation of these angelic messengers something of the authority of heaven so that these outdoorsmen, these rough and tough, leather-neck guys, were scared. They were greatly afraid. And yet God says you should know because of this manifestation that what I'm telling you is true. And we all say wouldn't it be great if I had a message I could be that confident in.

Well, the good news is, when we think about the Gospel that we're supposed to take to our generation, like those shepherds were to take to their generation, God has made that message known and very clear to us. As a matter of fact, if we would just take the time to study the book that God has given us, the most popular book in the world, the best-selling book of all time, the Bible, given to us, the Bible says, speaking of itself, as a direct revelation from God that can be tested and verified, the veracity of which is unquestionable, if you just spend time looking at the distinction between Old Testament prophecy and New Testament fulfillment, with a 400 year gap between the two, to prove to us that these things that God had planned and promised in the Old Testament all came true in the New Testament. Among other things throughout the Old Testament even in the New Testament, the idea is God is a faithful God who has revealed this to us. That's the good news. It's the kind of confidence that we have to bring a message to our generation. Romans 16 says the Gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ "has been disclosed through the prophetic writings." I just challenge you here, a lot of people dismiss the Bible as irrelevant or has been rewritten many times or you can't trust it or it's full of contradictions. Go to your local university classroom, they'll tell you that all the time. As I sat in those university classrooms I would often raise my hand and ask the question: "Tell me about even your experience in reading the book. Have you even read it? Have you read the whole thing?" It's amazing how many people will pontificate on the Bible without even ever researching it.

Matter of fact, some of the greatest apologists, and by that I mean the people who defend the Christian faith, are people who have simply been challenged to study this book that they seem naturally inclined to disparage. And when they do, they research the fact that this is an undeniably verified book that speaks of things that only God could speak of. Things that are going to happen in the future that were recorded hundreds of years before they happen. And all these things, "disclosed through the prophetic writings they have been made known to all nations." Talk about the influence



the Bible has had all throughout the world and all of this was "according to the command of the eternal God." There's one thing about the New Testament that it makes very clear that God, even though the Old Testament, has been trying to get this message out through messengers throughout the entirety of human history. I mean even places like Egypt and Assyria and Babylon.

Let me talk to Jonah about taking a message, even to places he didn't even want to go, to talk about a God who forgives, a God who brings repentance to people to see their guilt and to have that guilt forgiven. God is a God who has made this known through the prophetic word. And you start reading it, particularly the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, you'll find the connections always made, starting even from the naming of the baby Jesus, when it says that "she," Mary, "is going bear a son, and call his name Jesus," which is the Greek form of the Old Testament name Joshua, in Hebrew, Yeshua, this savior, which means "the Lord saves." We're going to have this baby who is going to be born "is going to save people," it says, look at this line, "from their sins." That's the point of Jesus' life. I have consequences because of my moral decisions that God is going to somehow deal with through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. And I need to recognize that, as he starts even in the first chapter to say, let's start looking at the way this fulfills biblical prophecy.

He starts here by quoting Isaiah and saying, "This took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet," and you can add an "s" to that because as the chapters move on, all he continues to do, as does Mark and Luke and John, is show us that Jesus' life is the fulfillment of all the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament, a book that I think deserves our attention. And we ought to spend more time studying it. I don't know what your relationship with the Bible has been in the last 12 months but let's make the new year a time where we give ourselves to biblical study to recognize that the Word of the Gospel of salvation through Christ has been made known to us beyond the shadow of a doubt, if we just objectively come to the Word and study it.

Well, I love the fact that being convinced of something you will be motivated to respond in taking a message when God asks us to take it, and they did, "with haste," I that love those words, and they went into the town where everything was filled up, there was no place to sleep in there, all the inns were filled up, and all these people were around and certainly they found the hub of all this attention that God had called attention to this birth of this baby in a feeding trough in a manger. And "they find Mary and Joseph and that baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told concerning the child." I love that simple act of obedience. Guys with dirt under their fingernails, the smell of the field, have been told to take a message, they take a message, not a popular message, it's a message that says you've got a problem but God's going to solve it in this person, and they obediently become the delivery system of a message that I would hope would become a template and a pattern for your life and mine.

That's what I've been trying to do the last few weeks here at Compass Bible Church is saying look at the Magi, look at the way they sacrificed for Christ. Look at the angels, look at how they served Christ, and then look at these shepherds, look at how they spoke for Christ, they shared the message that God had asked them to share. Very simple, a very simple thing but a simple act of obedience that greatly pleases the Lord. The whole point of the last couple of weeks here Compass has been to think about how we can bring presents to Jesus Christ at Christmas. The one holiday where we buy a lot of presents for each other, we don't think often, at least often enough, about what we can give to the Lord who's supposed to be honored in our Christmas celebrations. Well, I want to bring him the sacrifice of the Magi. I sort of like to bring him a heart of service like the angels. And tonight I

just want to briefly say we certainly need to be obediently bringing the message that he's having us hold out to our generation.

Luke Chapter 2 verse 18 says, when they heard it, they wondered. "All who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them." Now we can use that word in a positive sense as we did in some of the songs we just sang, to wonder in terms of astonishment and it's wonderful and it's great as though we agree with it. But I certainly think there were plenty in Bethlehem who didn't agree with it. I mean, anytime you start talking about a need for a savior you recognize people say, "I don't like it. I don't believe it. It makes me feel like I'm guilty or I've done something wrong. Everyone does stuff wrong. I don't understand why I would need a savior." I realize you're going to get a lot of bad response. As a matter of fact, I think the wondering of the crowds, even if it wasn't the majority response in the first century in Bethlehem, it certainly is the majority response now.

As a matter of fact, throughout history, whenever anyone stands up and says, "Here is the exclusive way for you to have God forgive your sins. Here's the one way you can get out of the penalty of your moral decisions." You're always going to have people who respond with ridicule. Matter of fact, this famous painting, if you look closely, the people in the painting, the whole point of it is, they're mocking and their jeering and disdain Noah who's basically saying, "You've got a sin problem. God is just, it deserves punishment but here's the solution." We should all be amazed that God would love us enough to provide a solution. But the response of so many is to say, I don't believe it, to respond with negativity regarding the Gospel of Jesus Christ and we ought to get used to that, we ought to understand it.

One of the reasons I think God chose shepherds to have this message and bring it to this crowded village of Bethlehem is because they're the kind of people, I think you would understand, compared to Sadducees or Pharisees or scribes, who probably didn't care that much what you thought of them. Right? I mean if you think about those kinds of people, I can see even Pilate, with all the regalia of being a Roman governor, he cared a lot about what people thought of his decisions and he was manipulated by the crowds. I love the fact that God brought this to very simple shepherds, who probably didn't care much how they looked, how they smelled, they didn't care. They just wanted to be obedient when they were convinced of a message and certainly they were convinced of this message, that God had provided a savior in Jesus Christ.

Verse 19 shows us, and the reason I want to at least open your mind up to thinking that maybe the wondering of the crowds wasn't always positive is because of the contrasting conjunction at the beginning of verse 19. In Luke Chapter 2 verse 19 it says, "But Mary..." In other words, there is something different about how Mary responded. A lot of the people may be wondering about it all, wondering not just in a positive sense like astonished, but wondering like, "I don't know. I don't know about this." Mary, on the other hand, and you know this phrase, "she treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart." Now it's one thing to think about the fact that you're going to be the mother of the Messiah. All the promises of the Old Testament are going to be there in your lap and you're going to be nursing this Messiah. That's one thing. But it goes much deeper than that for Mary. As a matter of fact, if you study Mary, not by modern church standards but by biblical standards, you'll find this about Mary. She had a soft heart, not just toward Christ, but toward God, knowing that her conscience was seared and pricked in terms of its conscience just like ours is. As a matter of fact, people in churches who have venerated Mary to a place of saying that she's sinless, they just don't read their Bibles carefully. The Bible is very clear, when Mary responded to the news that she would carry the Messiah, she magnifies the Lord, the Bible says, and she praises him, her



spirit is rejoicing in God but it doesn't end there. She adds these two words, which I think are super important to understand her heart, "My savior." The only person that really lauds God for being a savior is someone who knows they need saving. Right?

No one cares about the salvation of a lifeboat unless they recognize the ship is going down. Mary is godly but she's godly in part because she recognizes her sin problem and realizes that God is providing a solution for that sin problem. The great news is when it comes to people who we're going to share the message with, there may be a lot of people who wonder about it, there may be a lot of people who jeer us and respond in a very negative way to the message of the exclusive salvation that's found in Christ. But eventually you're going to hit someone like Mary. You're going to give the message to someone who has a conscience that soft toward God and they are going to respond the way that Mary does. They're going to take this message and they're going to embrace it. They're going to treasure it. They're going to bring it into their heart and ponder it. As a matter of fact, I could open up the mic and pull people up on the platform here who someone shared the message of the Gospel with you, which was only good news because you understood the bad news that you and God had a problem, that your sins separated you and God, but that God provided a way out. That he loved you so much that he sent his Son so that you didn't have to perish, though you deserved to, but that he gives you everlasting life.

That becomes good news and that is the message that we present to our generation even though they're often offended by it. The idea of bringing good news. That word in the New Testament is the word we transliterate evangelism or evangelical. We are an evangelical church, which means that we are bringing the good news of God's salvation through the person of Christ confessing that he is Lord believing in our heart that God raised him from the dead to solve the problem of our sin. And we're holding it out to our generation even if 99% of them think it's bad news, and it's no good, and it's bigoted and narrow-minded and exclusive, we're going to say, you know, here's how exclusive it is, that God is offering this message of salvation to everyone in our generation. He's commanding that this message go out to everyone.

And I love the fact that it doesn't matter who you are. It can be as simple as a shepherd in a field who had no high education. If you bring that message, the vehicle of that message becomes one that elevates that person, you don't have to be a scholar, you don't have to be a preacher, you don't have to be articulate, you don't have to know deep theology or doctrine. What you need to know is what it means to be saved, to have your sins forgiven in Christ. And if you do, the Bible says, you become then someone in Scripture who is held in high esteem.

There's a weird way to say that in the New Testament and it speaks to the person's feet, which is a strange thing, which is an image in the Bible of someone who brings a message obediently to someone who needs it and it starts to speak of how pretty and beautiful their feet are. Now there's an Old Testament precedent for that. But about the 5th century B.C. certainly this is something that is known to everyone, the idea of a messenger bringing good news. It is about 50-60 years before the Peloponnesian War, if you're into Greek history. This is the period about 490 B.C. when the Persians were the dominant force in the world, the Medo-Persians, the Persians were expanding their empire and they came around through what is Asia Minor in the New Testament, and modern-day Turkey today, and they come into Greek territory and, of course, the Sparta down south. I mean, they're warriors and the Athenians, they do their best to be warriors. They had good implements, good weapons, they had bronze shields and all of that, and they seemed to be a formidable force, but, I mean, the Persians outnumbered them 100 to 1. Matter of fact, they showed

up on the shores of a place called Marathon Bay with about 600 fighting ships. The navy of the Persians was formidable. It was something that scared everyone in Athens and they said, "Well, we'll do our best to defend our country."

So they make their way up about 26 miles away to Marathon and Marathon Bay, and they do their best to push back the invading forces of the Persian army. And it's a consequential battle. Matter of fact, it is the determinative battle that kept Greece independent from the Persian influence in the 5th century B.C. It's chronicled and it's written about by separate historians, there's artwork that depicts the battle and it was a critical, critical battle. As a matter of fact, if the shores of Marathon Bay were to fall and the city of Marathon was to fall then the Asians should just cut bait, run into the hills and scatter, because the Persians were coming and they would be the dominant power from that point on. So everyone was concerned about what went on in Marathon. And yet there were no cell phones, no Internet, no one could get on the phone and relay a message, there was no telegraph. They relied on messengers. Messengers were critical. To get a message from Marathon down to Athens, which was critical depending on which way the war went, I mean, that was the difference between conceding defeat or celebrating a victory.

And sure enough, if you study this battle, though they were outnumbered, I mean in some cases 20 to 1, some cases 50 to 1, it ends up, because of a lot of different reasons, and historians debate the strategy of this war, and it was very interesting, but when it comes down to it, the Athenians won, the Greeks won. They held off and staved off the Persian army. That battle in Marathon was critical. Now they had to get that message to Athens and they had to get it fast because the Persians could go back to Marathon Bay, get in their ships and make their way around the south end of Greece and they could attack Athens from the other direction. And so they had to get a message there fast, and they did, at least as the story goes, there was a messenger sent those 26 miles from Marathon to Athens. Pheidippides, he's called, at least that's how the story goes, ran that 26 miles without stopping from Marathon, thus the name of our race that's 26+ miles that you crazy people, some of you, have run. I don't understand, never will, but you do that really in the historical wake of Pheidippides who went out and gave his very life, at least the legend says, he runs into Athens and there are famous paintings of this where he falls down and actually gasps, breathes his last with the message that we won in Marathon. Now we can fortify our troops and we can celebrate a victory. There are pictures of the Athenians in the background with their hands up saying, "We won, we won, we won. The enemy has been defeated." And there lay the messenger who came.

And thus it was that it was not really a big stretch for the people to know how critical those running feet of the messengers were who would bring good news and I don't think it was a first century person in Rome in particular who knew their Greek and Roman history who wouldn't say, "I get what you're saying, Paul," as he quotes the Old Testament passage about "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news," which was the motivation in Romans 10 for you and I to say let's get serious about bringing the message of the defeat of the problem of our sin to our generation. Let's get excited about that. And God says, "I don't care what the world says. I don't care if 99 times out of 100 it's rejected or scorned." When it comes and hits a heart that's ready to receive the message of the Gospel it becomes the best news, it becomes the most beautiful feet of a messenger to spend, as Paul said, and be expended for the souls of some in their generation. That's great news. And you know when it was that kind of news, it elevates that position, no matter who you are, even if you're a simple, leather-neck herdsman of the first century, you become, and here are the words we learn in Second Corinthians 5, that simple messenger who's doing obedient work bringing the good news of the message of the Gospel to people, earns this title, talk about a special envoy or an



emissary of a kingdom, we become in God's eyes "ambassadors for Christ," now, I love this next phrase, "God making his appeal through us."

I want to talk about what we can do in our lives to get serious about giving Christ a gift that he will love, it's to be faithful, as he did with his first century apostles, to draw us to himself to experience the joy and forgiveness of a clean conscience with all of our sin appended to the cross. Then he says to a bunch of Syrian, Sea of Galilean fishermen, "Hey, go out now and become fishers of men." Go out and share this message with others. When you do, it's like you become this high-level diplomat, you become an ambassador for Christ as though God now, getting involved in all that you say to your non-Christian friends and neighbors, God making his appeal through you. It's an urgent message. It's done with respect and kindness. It's done with diplomacy, it's not cramming our religion down anybody's throat, but it's being very clear and very urgent that we implore the people in our lives and in our generation to be reconciled to God.

I wonder how often we fail to do what we ought to do in that regard. But I'm asking you this Christmas if you want to give Christ a gift, not only sacrifice like the Magi, not only should we serve like the angels, I'm just challenging you this Christmas, let's start it tonight. If you've got non-Christian people around the table tomorrow, the next day and certainly as we enter into the new year, if you want to give a gift to Christ then you need to share his message. It's a message of exclusivity but it's a message of great inclusivity. It's a message that says there's only one way off this boat. You may want a jet pack, you may want a helicopter, it's a lifeboat. Here it is, and God has graciously provided it. But share it and tell people they can have their sins forgiven. That Christ, if you confess him as Lord, if you would believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

When you're obedient at that, I know some of you have experienced that, you've gotten through the sweaty palms and you've said I'm going to share the message with the Gospel just like someone shared it with me, I think you can be like the shepherds in finding great joy in that. As they left there was no place to stay. I guess they could have curled up in the manger somewhere, but they went back to their jobs, they had flocks out in the field, they had to get back to their work. But when they did the Bible says, "They returned glorifying God, praising God for all that they had heard and all that they had seen," I love this, "as it had been told them." Exactly as God said, they did it, they recognize the veracity of the message, they came back and they said we did what we should have done. If you get out there this year and say I'm going to be the kind of person who speaks more frequently about Christ, I going make sure my co-workers, my neighbors, my extended family, understand my commitment to Christ. I'm not going to be an underground Christian. I'm going to make my mouth the kind of instrument that God can use to appeal to people in a lost generation. Holding out the words of life and saying we've got a message that can change your life. It may not make everything in your life between here and your departure perfect. And it certainly won't. But I'll tell you what, you'll prepare yourself for the eternal kingdom where all the things that God promised and all the unmitigated force of heaven will be lavished upon us. What great news that is. And that's something that we should get excited about.

And every time you think about doing something that's risky and sharing the message of the Gospel, please be motivated by the fact that all of this is a response to his gift to us. If I think about the fact that I'm going to do something hard this year, whether it's sacrificing, serving or sharing, I just want to make sure that I'm realizing this is not just some duty and drudgery. This is a response to a God who gave everything for me. I've already quoted John 3:16. What a loving God we have to provide

his Son to solve my sin problem. And for you to think about the fact that he's given himself for you, which is an interesting turn of events in the way he takes shepherds and uses them as these highly esteemed ambassadors and emissaries of Christ, but he himself comes now and identifies himself just three decades later in his ministry as a shepherd. He says, "You know, I'm a shepherd." John Chapter 10, he says so much about it, here's two phrases: "I'm the good shepherd." "I am the shepherd of your life. I will lead you through this life. And one of the reasons I can be qualified as good," it's a great line in John 10, "is because I've laid down my life for the sheep." God died for us in Christ, think of that. The divine and human, all that we need as righteousness, all of God's justice and eternal value in that moment, in that transaction, laying down his life so that I can be accepted before the throne of a perfect God. That's an amazing gift. And when it is given to us in that light, I hope that you recognize a little discomfort, even a little rejection, even a little exclusion from people because I'm willing to talk about Christ, is well worth it in the new year.

Maybe you're not even ready to be an ambassador of Christ because you need to respond to the message. I would challenge you to do that, to think through what it means to get right with God through the means that he's provided in Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago. And if you are in the place where I'm at where we know that we have on our names written in the Lamb's Book of Life, we've responded rightly, we've confessed Christ as Lord and we believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead and solved our problem, then I'd reflect, just as we close, at least the sentiment of that old hymn that talks about my life being fully his. We've used that theme throughout this series. Right? My life, a living sacrifice. It says, "Take my life." Remember that old hymn, "Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee." Just take my life and let me be used by you, whether it's sacrifice, whether it's service or whether it's sharing this message of the Gospel. Two great lines in that old hymn. It says, "Take my feet and let them be Swift and beautiful, Lord, to thee." Right? The idea of that Romans 10. I want to go wherever God wants me to go, into this conversation, into that group, into this family dinner, I'm going to go and hopefully have the beautiful feet that bring the good news of the Gospel. And then the next verse says and "Take my lips, and let them be Filled with messages for thee." That idea of me thinking about my life tonight, tomorrow, next week and in the new year, about a mouth that's ready to speak the message of reconciliation, of God who has provided to us in Christ. What a great opportunity we have. We don't have to be highly educated, don't have to be greatly articulate, we don't have to have super deep knowledge, what we have to do is have a willing heart, ready, swift feet and a mouth that says I'm willing to talk to others about the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Want to give Christ a present this Christmas? I hope you do. Let's tonight, at least, focus on the fact that we want to share his message with a lost world that needs to hear the Gospel.

Let's pray. God, this Christmas help us please to see the opportunity that we have as Christians to be useful to you in a way that offers ourselves, our words, our lives, that says God I want to be a useful messenger of the good news of the Gospel. That today, right now, my non-Christian friends and neighbors, they can be completely forgiven, they can be saved, they can have their sins completely wiped off their account, just by putting their trust in Jesus Christ, confessing that he's in charge, not us, and that he died and rose again because God had accepted his life and his death as a complete and full payment for all the wrong that I've ever done. God, thank you so much for the grace of the Gospel that you loved us so much to give your only Son, that if we believe and trust in you we'd never perish but have eternal life. Let that message be part of our conversation tonight, this week, and all through the new year, as we give ourselves and even our words to you this year. God, make us useful. Let us have the joy that the shepherds had rejoicing because we've been obedient as emissaries of the greatest news the world could ever hear.



In Jesus name. Amen.