

Our mission as a church is to be faithful: We have been exclusively selected by God for salvation, and our goal is to preserve that salvation in our hearts by separating ourselves from the world, insulating ourselves from sinners, and to ensure that the riffraff keeps its distance. I'm joking. This morning we're beginning a series of sermons which will address the call of God's people to change the world, and we're going to talk about what this has to do with our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

ROMANS 1:1-6

Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ²which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, ³concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, ⁴who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name's sake, ⁶among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ.

In the reading, Paul identified himself as a “**bond-servant.**” Other translations use “**servant.**” But the more accurate translation is “**slave.**” It is the word that was used by the Greeks to designate a person who had been bought and paid for and was owned by another man. And so it was that Paul identified himself: Jesus bought him and paid for his sins with his blood, and he belonged to him as his apostle, his ambassador.

So too, you and I have been bought by Jesus; we're his slaves (1 Corinthians 6:20); we do his bidding. That is our call.

And this is a good thing! For it means that God is in charge; he's the one with the plan; he's got it all figured out. When I was in high school I remember facing the torment of not knowing what I was going to do after graduation. I think a lot of kids face this problem. That's why many of us go to college! But along the way I realized how close the Lord was to me, and that he had a plan. I didn't know what

it was, but I knew that he did. That realization was a ray of light; it was an ah-ha moment. From that time forward I knew that for as long as God was the master of my life, I would find myself in that place where he intended for me to be.

Paul wrote that he was **“called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God” (Romans 1:1)**. Paul was passive; this call happened to him because God acted; God chose him. He didn’t have anything to do with it. And I’m so glad the Lord chose Paul, for Paul had been an enemy of God, tearing apart his church, and it was very clear that the Lord took the upper hand in calling him. And if God can call such a one as Paul, he can call anyone!

As I look around our neighborhood I reflect on how you and I have a call from God to make a difference, to touch it with the Gospel. We didn’t ask for this call. I’m not even sure that we want this call. But there it is: God has set apart Faith Lutheran Church for the Gospel of God in Whittier, California.

Now you’re thinking, “Well, you’re the pastor, so get on with it; do your thing.” And you’re right, I do have a responsibility. And so do you; we all do. As Paul explains later in this letter, **“we, who are many, are one in the body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Romans 12:5)**.

Paul wrote that he was called **“to bring about the obedience of faith” (Romans 1:5)** or in other translations, **“the obedience that comes from faith.”** **“Obedience”** was a very unfortunate choice of words by the translators; they make it sound as if Paul was saying that if you have faith, you’re going to knuckle down, put your nose to the grindstone and start obeying the law of God! But this kind of thinking is entirely contrary to everything he writes elsewhere about the difference between the saving grace of Jesus and the futility of our obedience to the law.

A better translation reads that Paul is engaged in the ministry of the Gospel in order to bring about a **“responsive hearing of faith.”** The difference is this: Instead of striving to obey a law which we can never fully comply with, we respond to God’s call on our lives because we have realized how much he loves us. Indeed, we’re so thankful for the opportunity to give up our enslavement to the devil and the world that we have turned our lives over to him.

Paul wrote that he was on a mission to deliver the “**Gospel of God.**” “**Gospel**” in the Greek is *euangelion*, which literally means, “**Good News.**” And it is very good news, indeed!

Paul wrote that the Good News was “**promised beforehand through (God’s) prophets in the Holy Scriptures” (Romans 1:2).** The Good News was not new news, but it was God’s original word of hope, his encouragement to a world swallowed up in the darkness of sin, regret, sorrow, and self-condemnation. Brothers and sisters in Christ, despite the power of this word of hope and love, why do so few receive it as their own? For many, pride is a problem; the idea that they would have to admit that they need help from God is too much. However, for others, the church itself has been the problem. Perhaps it’s cold and exclusive; perhaps it’s mean-spirited; perhaps the leadership has said and done things which were inappropriate, immoral, or unethical. Whatever it is, it is our responsibility to change for the better; we don’t want to get in the way of God’s mission to bring his saving grace to our neighborhood.

Paul wrote that this Good News was “**concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, ⁴who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of Holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 1:3-4).**

The Spirit of Holiness revealed God’s Word to us, and he revealed his power on Pentecost as a sign to the world of a new beginning. But that was just the start. Each one of us received the Holy Spirit in baptism. We are not alone! The Spirit of the Living God lives in you and in me. And he’s gifted us; he’s gifted us richly to touch our community in unique ways, to make a difference in the lives of the men and women and children in our neighborhood.

Paul wrote that “**we have received grace and apostleship to bring about *the* obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name’s sake, ⁶among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ” (Romans 1:5-6).**

Brothers and sisters in Christ, you and I have been bought and paid for by Jesus, and we belong to him. And he has called us; he has set us on a mission. Each one of us has a different part to play; there are many members in this body, indeed.

This week let us pray that the Lord would show us what our part is in our call as a church to bring his Good News to Whittier.

This week let us think about creative ways the Lord might use us as individuals to stimulate this movement.

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.