



Series: FOUNDATIONS:  
Standing Firm – Moving Forward  
Sermon: “Doing the Gospel – Where?”  
Scripture: James 1:19-27; Luke 10:25-37  
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We have been working this summer to try and firmly plant an understanding of the mission of our church – this mission of our church is to develop fully-devoted followers of Jesus Christ. We have also begun to try and cast a picture of what a compelling vision of the future might look like – the day will come when everything that we do will glorify God, grow disciples and change the world one person at a time. We are ending this series of sermons with the theme “Doing the Gospel” because the mission and vision are useless unless we take action. The first week of this closing portion of this series we talked about WHY we ought to do the Gospel. The answer to that question is we want to do the Gospel because faith in Jesus without works is dead. On the other hand, works without saving faith in Jesus is nothing more than hollow religion. When faith and works come together in dynamic discipleship, there is potential to change the world one person at a time.

Last week, we talked about HOW to do the Gospel. Toward the end of the message, I talked about a process where we should, pray, look, listen, plan and – most importantly – act; because those who fail to plan, plan to fail. Plans without actions are useless. We believe that we can do together what we cannot possibly do by ourselves. This last portion of the series is centered on one verse in James chapter and verse 22 – “Don’t just listen to the word, do what it says.” The question we want to ask and answer today is WHERE should we do the Gospel?

Once upon a time, there was a good church member – like many of us – who was walking along with Jesus. This good church member knew a great deal about the Bible; but there was a question he wanted to ask Jesus. He asked Jesus, “What must I do to live forever?” I want to point out that this is a really good question to ask. It is a really good question to get answered at some point in your life. Well, Jesus looked at him and said, “What did you learn in Sunday school? What did you learn when you were reading the Bible? How do you read and understand it?” The good church member thought for a moment, and he remembered the lessons of some time in his past and said, “Oh, we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, all our strength, and we should love our neighbor as ourselves.” Jesus must have been so pleased. He looked at him and said, “You’re right. If you do those things, you will live.”

This good church member – who knew a great deal about the Bible – this religious person wanted to know who his neighbor was. Really, he wanted to know what the extent of God’s love was – how much he needed to do to make God’s love real. Did loving his neighbor mean that he should be talking to just his friends, or does it mean loving the stranger down the street? Does loving his neighbor mean those who are just like him, or does it involve people of a different race, culture or class? Does loving his neighbor include those he likes, or does it include those who are pretty unlikable?

So he asked, “Who is my neighbor?” And Jesus replied, “Once upon a time, there was a man walking down the narrow, winding, treacherous, steep goat path called the

Jericho Road."This was the road from Jerusalem to Jericho that winds seventeen miles from Jerusalem down to Jericho – the oldest city in the world on the north end of the Dead Sea. The elevation drops four thousand feet in seventeen miles. It is not a straight shot. It is not a super highway. It is a very treacherous place to walk. You could fall off on one side, and it also provided plenty of places for robbers and thieves to hide on the other side. As this man was winding his way down the road, he fell among some thieves and was ambushed, beaten, robbed and left for dead.

As he was lying on the side of the road, gasping for every breath of his life, three people came his way. The first person who came his way was a religious priest. He was a religious leader – surely he would help. Jesus said that he had passed by on the other side. He was so caught up in practicing his religion that he forgot to show God's love to this person who was broken and laying on the side of the road. He was in a hurry to get to church and did not want to get his hands dirty or get involved. Here was a religious leader who had every opportunity to make God's love real, but he was so caught up in his own agenda that he passed right by the broke and beaten man. Do we ever do that? Probably more likely than we care to admit.

The second person who came along was a Levite. This was a leading lay person who was a good church member. He could have been a member of the church board. Surely he would help; but Jesus said he also passed by the side of the road. He was busy and in a hurry – after all, this problem was not going to be easy to fix. So instead of trying, he kept moving. Here is a church member who was so preoccupied with the stuff of his own life that he does not have the time or the inclination to get involved in the messy stuff of somebody else's life. He walks right past the opportunity to make God's love real to a broken and beaten person and moved on. Do we ever do that? Probably more often than we care to admit.

The third person who comes along is a Samaritan – the natural enemy of the Jewish victim. Jews and Samaritans hated each other. They had hated each other for over seven hundred years. Now, this was the worst kind of racial bigotry and prejudice. The Jewish word for Samaritan literally meant 'dog.' They were the most likely people not to help one another. He had every cultural reason to not only pass by on the other side, but to even spit on this guy along the way or push him over the edge to finish the job. Surely he would not help the injured man – but he did. Jesus tells us that he took pity on the beaten and broken man. He bandaged his wounds. He put him on his donkey and took him to the nearest inn. He helped to heal him, and he even paid the bill! This Samaritan overcame his cultural animosity with a broken heart. He took concrete action. He did not just throw money at the problem, he got involved. He saw the opportunity to make God's love real and he did it – he did the Gospel. Do we ever do that? Probably not as often as we would like to admit.

Then Jesus asked the good church member, who is like many of us, "Who was the neighbor?" The neighbor was the one who had mercy on the beaten and broken man; Jesus tells us that we are to go and do likewise. In other words, don't just listen to the word, do what it says.

WHERE should we begin doing the Gospel? There are three arenas of our lives in which we might want to start doing the Gospel. The first one is going to sound somewhat counter-intuitive – especially given some of the conversation we have had as pastor and congregation these past few weeks. As I have been praying about this message, I have been led to tell you that I believe what I am about to say is a word for some of us – the first place that we need to become intentional about doing the Gospel is at home. I think some of us have neglected our families and homes as a place where faith and works need to be blended together in doing the Gospel.

We need to refocus and recommit ourselves to living our faith. People need to see the power of the resurrection of Jesus making a difference in our lives or it will not have credibility. The place where people are most likely to see whether Jesus is real in our lives is in our home with the people who know us best.

Early in His ministry, Jesus was walking along and some of his younger brothers and sisters from the marriage of Mary and Joseph were following along after them in the crowd. Some of the people in the crowd went up to these brothers and sisters and they wanted to know what they thought of their older brother Jesus. They effectively said, "We think he is nuts. He has been out in the sun too long." They were not buying what Jesus had to sell. Then something happened after the resurrection. One of those brothers was named James, and he experienced Jesus after the resurrection. He grew from skeptic to follower. He began to follow Jesus after the resurrection, and history tells us that James became a leader in the early church in Jerusalem; in fact, he became the bishop of the church in Jerusalem. He was later to become the one who penned the Book of James in the New Testament who wrote the words we read earlier – "Don't just listen to the word, do what it says."

People all around us are watching to see if our faith is real. Will they hear the story and the talk of Jesus from our mouths? Will they see the power of the resurrection and the ethic of Jesus in our lives? When our faith and works are combined, our discipleship has credibility. The people who live with us ought to have the privilege to see this first-hand. They ought to be able to see our faith as the 'real deal' in our homes. What can you take with you to heaven? Can you take your house? Can you take your 401K? Can you take your car, your job or the prestige that you have? The only thing we can take with us to heaven is other people – people that we love into the kingdom of God. That is the only thing we can take with us. Let us start doing the Gospel in our homes for our families. Let us make God's love in our homes for our families. Let us make God's love real to them so they will be most likely to love Him in return and go with us.

I am a 'preacher's kid,' so I am a resident authority to tell you what I am about to tell you. I know many preacher's kids who – in their adult lives – live very far away from God. There are two reasons for this: the first one is there has been dissonance between the public and private lives they have seen in their parents. Publicly, parents say and do one thing – and tell everybody else to say and do one thing – and, privately, they live a different life. The children cannot handle the discrepancy. They do not believe that God is real, and they do not have any confidence in the church so they move far away.

The second reason is equally troubling because pastors and their families have not been able to build a firewall between appropriate discipleship and addiction to discipleship. That means the parents have put everything that they do for God in front of their children, and the children do not understand the balance that has to come with life. I know many other 'PKs' – that is, 'parishioner's kids' – and they deal with the same two things. They grow up and they move far away from God.

When I was younger in my ministry, part of my portfolio was youth ministry; and we had a great youth ministry. I had to recruit other people to be part of that team. There was one couple that I recruited to be part of that youth ministry who had two small children. They were stellar volunteers. They did everything with the youth group. I soon learned and saw that not only did they do everything with the youth group, but they showed up for every Bible study and every community event. I watched as the sparkle of joy in the lives of their children began to dull over the years; it became fairly obvious that they were not teaching their children to connect

their faith with their life, and their children were drifting farther and farther away. Twenty years later, both of those children live so far away from God it is an entirely different zip code. I wish I knew then what I know now. I would have called the parents in and said, "Listen, we love you volunteering here, but you don't have to come to everything at the expense and development of your kids. You don't have to be at everything at the expense of letting your kids know how precious they are. You don't have to do everything at the expense of living a balanced kind of life because the first place that you have to do the Gospel is in your home."

Our kids and our marriages should not be a consequence of our failure to do the Gospel at home – we should be doing it at home before we do it anywhere else. Who will tell them about Jesus if you do not? Who will teach them how to pray if you do not? Who will teach them how to read the Scriptures if you do not? Who will teach them what unconditional love is like if you do not? Who will show them the way into heaven if we do not? So, do the Gospel at home.

The second arena in which we need to do the Gospel is to learn how to do it in church. My image of the church is like a big puzzle. When you build a puzzle, you first take a look at the picture on the box and – in our case – the picture is in the Bible. You take a look at the picture that the church has in the Bible, and then you begin to turn over all of the pieces and begin to put in the border. If you are building a puzzle, you know that every piece of the puzzle is unique – every piece of the puzzle has a place where it fits. The puzzle is not complete unless every piece finds its place in the grand picture that is on the cover. The church is not complete until every individual person – every piece – finds its distinctive place to fit into the picture of God's dream for the church.

I believe that God has given our church every gift, every grace, and every person necessary for us to do all that God is calling us to do. Our problem is that many of us are like the priest or the Levite in the Good Samaritan story – we see the need, we move over to the other side and we pass on by; when, in reality, we need to be more like the Samaritan who finds the need, finds the niche and plugs ourselves in. Some of us have dulled ourselves into becoming conspicuous consumers of religious services when, in reality, we not only need to receive the ministry that God has for us from other people, but we need to be a part of God's great dream of sharing ministry with other people as well. You cannot just take – you have to give away.

During the last several months, the staff and I have been talking about what it will look like when a person is a fully-developed follower of Jesus – what some of the competencies that we are looking for from a person who really centers their life around Jesus and really lives it out. There are five of them. First, we believe that a fully-devoted follower of Jesus is in worship whenever they are in town. Second, we believe a follower of Jesus is practicing the spiritual disciplines on a personal basis daily in order to have the character of Jesus formed in them. The third is we believe that a fully-devoted follower of Jesus is in some kind of small group in which they grow in their discipleship – that can be a Sunday school class, a Bible study or an Emmaus share group – it does not matter to me, except that there has to be some place in which we are known fully and fully-known so that the character of Jesus can be formed in us and we have accountability with other people.

The fourth characteristic of a fully-devoted follower of Jesus is that they understand that tithing is God's standard for stewardship and they are willing to grow toward that tithe. The fifth characteristic of a fully-devoted follower of Jesus is that they find a place for ministry – they find their distinctive place in the puzzle and help us complete the picture of God's great place for the church. As we do the Gospel in

the church, we all have to do our part. We all have to take our place as a piece of the puzzle. If we are not doing the Gospel, we are not doing our part – something is missing. Are you willing to do the Gospel as a part of the Body of Christ?

Who is our neighbor? Is it the person who is living next to us? Is it the stranger down the street? Is it the healthy person that we see all the time or is it the sickly person? Is it the widow and the orphan? Is it the ex-offender and the addicted person? Is it the broken, the hurting, the beaten, the marginalized – the people the world has left behind? If we will reach out to them with the love and forgiveness of God, and if we will bind their wounds, and if we will feed and clothe them, if we will accept them as they are, making them feel at home and meeting them at the place of their social, physical, emotional, relational and spiritual needs, we will change the world, one person at a time.

One of the darkest periods in United States history was in the 1970s when Richard Nixon resigned from the presidency. Do you remember what you felt like as an American? We were ashamed corporately as a country when he was impeached and resigned and left Washington in disgrace. He went into anonymity for many years. Several years later, in the late 1970s, Senator Hubert Humphrey died. Humphrey and Nixon had run against one another for the White House and had been bitter political enemies. But in the time of death, Nixon was invited to make his first return to Washington, D.C. for that very public funeral. Just before the funeral, there was a gathering of all of the dignitaries and people who would be attending. Nixon was brought into the White House for the first time since he left in disgrace.

People who were in the room said that, when he walked into the room, immediately the buzz started to occur. People started covering their mouths and pointing at Nixon. They were sneering and said that Nixon began to wall off inside of himself and would not look anyone in the eye. This broken, humiliated former president backed himself into a corner of that room. He wished that he could have dug a hole and buried himself into it. Across the room, the current president, Jimmy Carter, saw him. President Carter had a great love for God and a great love for the people that God loves. He started walking across the room and made a beeline through everyone else toward the former president. When he arrived at Nixon, the former president held out his hand and Carter reached out his arms and embraced him. In a very public way, he was saying, "Welcome home, Mr. President," and he restored him.

You see, Carter was willing to make God's love real. Carter was willing to risk all of the political capital that went with loving someone that the whole nation did not love. He met him at his point of need, and he was willing to draw him close. Are we willing to make God's love real? Are we willing to do the Gospel in our community to help restore the lost and the hurting, the battered, the bruised and the broken by meeting their needs in the name of Jesus? That Samaritan who was the natural enemy of the Jews stopped, reached beyond himself, and he did the Gospel for a broken man. Will we go and do likewise?

Once upon a time, a good church member much like many of us who came to Jesus and said, "Jesus, how can I live forever?" And the answer was, "Love the Lord, your God, with all of your heart, with all you soul, with all of your mind and with all of your strength; and love your neighbor as yourself in your home, in the church and in our community. Don't just listen to the word – do what it says!