

by ***Richard Van de Ruit***

“Preach the Gospel at all times. *When necessary, use words.*” This is, perhaps, the best known and most commonly quoted statement made by St. Francis of Assisi.^[1] I hear it often in church circles, all over the world.

We must ask whether this is a *biblical* position we should aspire to? Before I expand on this, I would like to share about my mum. She died last year at the age of 87. She was raised in an orthodox Dutch Reformed church and struggled with assurance of salvation most of her life. When I gently challenged her on her relationship with Jesus, she would answer me quite sharply that her faith was a personal issue between her and God and that she did not need to share about it with others. I should respect her privacy! Thankfully she did come to faith in Jesus and she died in the full assurance of salvation. she expressed this with her favourite song, ‘Safe in the arms of Jesus’ by Fanny Cosby.

To unpack the above quote, it is important to have a proper understanding of what the Bible teaches on the spiritual condition of the lost:

1. They are dead in their transgressions and sins (Eph 2:1 & 5)
2. They are dead in their sins and in the uncircumcision of their flesh (Col 3:13)
3. The wages of sin are death (Rom 6:23)
4. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23)

If those who have not been saved by Jesus are spiritually dead, how then can they respond to Christians who are ‘showing them’ what it is like to follow Jesus? Don’t get me wrong, we know that God does use the good deeds of the righteous to challenge the lost in their ‘lost-ness’, “In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Matt 5:16). But even this statement by Jesus must be understood in the context of all the instructions Jesus gives to his disciples. The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus *teaching* and training his followers in how to reach the crowd that was following him. Jesus could have just said to them, ‘Just watch how I relate to people’, but instead he *taught* them. At the end of his ministry on earth, he made it very clear that they were to be *verbal* witnesses, testifying about him, using words! Peter, Stephen, Philip, Paul, Timothy and others all *preached* the gospel.

This may be obvious and you may ask how this relates to the quote by Assisi. It has everything to do with how you understand the message of the Gospel entrusted to ALL who follow Jesus. This really hit me when I was reading through Paul’s letter to the Romans, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.” (Rom 1:16).

Paul was absolutely convinced of the amazing power contained in the gospel. Not just a ‘Wow, that was an awesome service!’ or a ‘He is a really powerful preacher.’ This, I think, misses the point completely. Paul understood the gospel to be the *ONLY* message able to penetrate death. The only

sound capable of being heard by the dead. He knew it contained power to raise the spiritually dead to spiritual life. He was so convinced of this, that he could not stop talking, sharing, proclaiming, arguing, persuading, *preaching* this message. It was in its *verbal declaration* that the power of God unto salvation flowed.

Just think of all Jesus' healing encounters. All have a spoken aspect to them (except for the woman who touched his cloak).

Do you believe that the good news about Jesus contains God's power to save the lost, to raise the spiritually dead to new life in Jesus? Do you believe that God can use *your words* (or better, his words spoken by you) to reach across the divide between life and death?

Let's remember Paul's instruction to the church in Rome: "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not *heard*? And how can they *hear* without someone *preaching* to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Romans 10:14-15).

It is important that our deeds match our words, but they can never be a substitute for sharing the message of salvation with the lost, nor can it be an excuse for why you are not witnessing to them.

Can you imagine the colleague at your work or your neighbour, who always thought you were a really nice person, dies, and you meet him at the proverbial heaven's gates? You are allowed to enter but he is denied entry. He turns to you and says: "Why didn't you ever *tell* me about this?" The rich man who died, asked Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers. "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' "No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'" (Luke 16:29-31). Just remember, every believer is 'someone raised from the dead, by Christ', but through this parable Jesus makes it abundantly clear that it is through hearing and responding to the spoken (or written) word of God that man can be saved!

Let's follow the example of the disciples, who, after they were filled with the Holy Spirit, *spoke the word of God boldly* (Acts 4:31), for it contains the power of God, to save the lost!

[1] <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-misquoting-francis-of-assisi/>



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard has been married for 28 years to Sue. They have 3 children: Rachel, Hannah & Caleb and have worked in Uganda for 22 years doing kingdom work but now reside in South Africa.

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