Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:16
A PERSONAL AND ENGAGING WITNESS TO THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD.

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(800) 678-8812 or at ShopMoodyPublishers.com.
The first real sermon I preached was on my first Sunday as the senior pastor of a church in Omaha, Nebraska. Quite frankly, it was very, very forgettable.

I was preaching on 2 Corinthians 4:1–6, and between my inexperience and my high level of nervousness, when I finished I was sure I was going to have the shortest pastoral tenure in history! Fortunately, the congregation was patient with me, and I enjoyed thirteen more wonderful years at that church.

Having been trained at Dallas Theological Seminary, I had the privilege to sit under some giants in the homiletics world. The ones I remember the most are Dr. Haddon Robinson and Dr. Donald Sunukjian. They are five-star chefs when it comes to creating and serving tasty theological morsels to hungry, needy audiences.

Some preachers are fiery and others are quiet. Some are great storytellers and others favor a more direct exposition of Scripture. But no matter what the style or ability of the preacher, God can work through sermons to transform people’s lives.

I consider a great sermon one that is true to God’s Word, relevant to contemporary needs and delivered in such a way that it inspires believers to make life changes in response. A great sermon also begins with prayer. Most pastors will agree that God must speak to them before He can speak through them. As John Stott said, “I have always found it helpful to do as much of my sermon preparation as possible on my knees, with the Bible open before me, in prayerful study.”

The Bible is filled with examples of great, life-changing sermons. From the moment when the heavens themselves declared “the glory of God” (Psalm 19) to Jesus’ hillside delivery of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5—7), we are able to witness God’s eternal truth being communicated in ways that our limited human minds are able to comprehend.

In the great sermons recorded in God’s Word, we see His truth being communicated to believers and to the lost. We hear the prophets warning the people to follow God, and we encounter the Apostles encouraging and admonishing the early church.

These sermons are still applicable to us today because God’s Word is never outdated. Hebrews 4:12 tells us, “the Word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword.”

When we encounter these great biblical sermons, may we do so prayerfully—on our knees—asking God to use His Word to speak directly into our lives. These are the greatest teachings ever given to humanity, with the power to bring about authentic transformation in our lives in response to God’s leading.
The Bible uses several terms to describe ministries of the church that proclaim the Word of God. Three of the most important are prophecy, preaching, and teaching. What is the relationship between these? Is prophecy the same as preaching? Is teaching different from preaching?

Prophecy is inspired speech that is the result of divine revelation. The words of the prophet were to be regarded as the word of God. Although the prophet’s own vocabulary and personality were evident in what they said, the Holy Spirit controlled the outcome so that it was without error. The prophets were “carried along” by the Spirit of God (2 Peter 1:21).

Teaching is speech that explains and applies what God has revealed. The Holy Spirit is also the source of the gift of teaching. But teaching operates differently from prophecy. Teachers provide instruction, not revelation. Their ministry is based on what God has already said. Their words have authority only to the degree that they agree with what God has said in Scripture. The ministry of the prophets, like that of the Apostles, seems to have been primarily associated with establishing the church. Teaching is both foundational and ongoing for the church (Eph. 2:20).

Is preaching in a separate category when compared to teaching? Or does it align more with prophecy? In the New Testament, preaching is usually linked with teaching. A common New Testament word for preaching had the meaning, “to act as a herald.” For instance, in Matthew 4:23 and Acts 28:31 the word is used in this way. Those who preach are teaching.

Many today distinguish between preaching and teaching. Some claim that teaching involves doctrine, while preaching requires application. They also note that teaching is more conversational. But this difference does not hold up in Scripture. Teaching and admonishing are associated in Colossians 1:28 and 3:16. Preaching can include discussion and even incorporate question-and-answer time; Scripture never insists that preaching must be a monologue. And teaching that does not apply to the lives of the hearers is really just weak teaching.

For Further Study

To learn more about the theology of preaching, read Folly, Grace, and Power: The Mysterious Act of Preaching by John Koessler (Zondervan).
Those who are called to serve God through the ministry of pastoring churches have a special place in my heart. I am the daughter of a man who faithfully pastored churches—mostly small, rural congregations—for over forty years. I am married to an associate minister who has preached and taught Bible studies for God’s people year after year. I have seen the work of pastors behind the scenes: late-night phone calls, visitation in hospitals and prisons and nursing homes, meetings with the elders and deacons and boards and congregations, weeping with those who weep and rejoicing with those who rejoice, and the many hours of sermon preparation.

In addition to my father and my husband, God has blessed me through the ministry of other pastors, those who prayed with our family, encouraged my children, and inspired the church to follow Jesus. And the sermons! A series on Revelation that gave me a fresh perspective on the worship of Christ … a study on God’s leading the people of Israel in the book of Numbers that encouraged my own weary heart … an exploration of the book of Ephesians that I never wanted to end. Nothing on earth is like the dynamic moment when the Holy Spirit has empowered the servant of God to proclaim the Scripture in the hearing of the people of God.

October is Pastor Appreciation Month. This is a wonderful opportunity to praise the Lord for the influence and guidance of godly pastors in your life, and to take time to let your pastors—past and present—know how much you appreciate their ministry. The reality is that many pastors love serving the church, but they also often feel lonely, overworked, and stressed. Like many service professions, they hear all the ways that they haven’t met expectations and too seldom hear the ways that God is using them to make a difference in someone’s life.

One tangible way to express appreciation is to sponsor your pastors to attend Moody’s Pastors’ Conference. This event draws together hundreds of pastors from many denominations across the country for worship, refreshment, and support. This conference is hosted by pastors and for pastors; some attendees come year after year because it makes such a difference in their ministry. For more information, see moodyconferences.com/pastorsconference.

Your pastor might also appreciate the gift of receiving Today in the Word. Whether as a resource to share with others who are looking for a quality Bible study devotional or to use as part of their own time with the Lord each day, pastors say Today in the Word is a vital part of their ministry. If you’d like to give this gift to your pastor, let us know at www.todayintheword.org/contact.

As 1 Timothy 5:17 tells us: “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.”
Great Sermons in the Bible

Bible scholars agree that the Sermon on the Mount is the greatest sermon ever preached. In His discourse about “kingdom living,” recorded in Matthew 5—7, Jesus presented to His disciples the way of righteous living for those who are in God’s family.

Since then, Christians have quoted, studied, and wrestled with this section of Scripture. Augustine called it “a perfect standard of the Christian life.” John Donne, English poet and cleric, stated that all sermons find their origin in the Sermon on the Mount. Even those outside the Christian faith, such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jewish scholar G. C. Montefiori, admired the sermon. Our study of the great sermons in the Bible this month will, of course, include the Sermon on the Mount: the dos and don’ts of the kingdom, true righteousness, and the wisdom of God’s Law.

We’ll also look at many other discourses in the Bible, from Deuteronomy to Revelation. We’ll hear King David’s “preaching” from the Psalms and listen to Noah’s silent sermon, we’ll share in the insights of King Solomon, and we’ll marvel at the force of Jesus’ condemnation of scribes and Pharisees. We’ll learn about the unheard sermon from Hebrews, and learn from Joshua about the inadequacy of good intentions alone.

We pray this issue of Today in the Word will help you better understand the question in Micah 6:8: “What does the LORD require of you?” and help you live in God’s grace. Thank you for studying with us!
Today we begin our study of the great sermons of the Bible with the first sermon ever preached. It isn’t a sermon in the traditional sense. It wasn’t preached to a congregation during a worship service. There was no pulpit or sermon outline. In fact, there weren’t even any words. The preacher was God, and the message is His creation: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (v. 1). Creation is a divine monologue that reveals God’s glory. It provides a universal testimony about God’s nature, especially His eternal power and divine nature.

Although the testimony of creation is nonverbal, it reveals truth about God that is accessible to people everywhere. God has revealed something about Himself in every spot on the globe. Unfortunately, sin obscures this universal witness. It causes those who observe creation to “suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Rom. 1:18). This means that we need something more than the evidence which creation offers if we are to understand God.

The psalmist points to the solution. God has also revealed Himself by word. God’s verbal revelation was put into writing beginning with the Law. In verses 7 through 11, the psalmist describes the character and benefit of this written revelation that takes various forms, including statutes, precepts, and commands. This verbal revelation is completely trustworthy and can give us a better understanding of ourselves and of God. But we cannot understand it without help. The psalmist closes with a prayer for protection from hidden faults and willful sins (vv. 12–13).

We need God’s written word to interpret the silent message of creation. We need the ministry of the Holy Spirit to understand and apply God’s written Word. To aid us in this task Jesus Christ has given those who preach to equip the saints (Eph. 4:11–12).

Apply the Word

Take a walk and examine the message of creation. What does it tell you about God? What does the drama, beauty, and sustenance of nature reveal about the Creator? When you are finished with your walk, read the first chapter of the book of Romans. Which message is clearer? Creation is a great gift—but the gift of God’s Word is even greater.

Pray with Us

We pray today for our Educational Ministries faculty: Gina Behrens, Timothy Downey, Dennis Fledderjohann, and Nancy Kane. Pray that, as they minister to their students, they would also be open to God’s guidance for their lives.
Noah’s Silent Sermon

Last year director Darren Aronofsky released a film that recast the biblical story of Noah for modern audiences. In an interview in Christianity Today, Aronofsky said his aim was to portray the psychological toll of the Flood on Noah and his family. In the movie Noah is portrayed as a good man and an environmentalist. But Scripture describes him as much more: he was “a preacher of righteousness” (v. 5). This description might be a surprise. We know Noah built the ark that saved the remnant of humanity from divine judgment. Did he also preach to any who came to watch during its construction? If so, what did his sermons sound like?

The account of Noah in Genesis 6 through 9 does not include a record of any sermon that Noah preached. It does say that he was “a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God” (Gen. 6:9). Noah’s life was a testimony to the righteousness of God.

The context of our passage today may also provide a clue about Noah’s preaching when it compares Noah’s behavior to Lot, who is described as “a righteous man, who was distressed by the depraved conduct of the lawless” (v. 7). This description of Lot is even more surprising! Lot’s reluctance to leave Sodom makes his obedience seem half-hearted at best.

The New Testament reveals that both men stood out among their generation as testimonies to God’s righteousness. Both are praised for their faith in Hebrews 11. Both were grieved by the unrighteousness around them. Both are portrayed in the Bible as flawed human beings. They were righteous—but they weren’t perfect. They were people who “found favor in the eyes of the Lord” (Gen. 6:8). In other words, they experienced the grace of God.

Apply the Word

Noah and Lot are proof that God can use ordinary sinners to communicate His message about the grace and forgiveness that comes to us through Jesus Christ. Their example also reminds us that this task of preaching involves more than words. Our whole lives are a sermon. Why not ask a neighbor or coworker to describe what they think you are saying with your life?

Pray with Us

As we continue to keep in prayer Moody’s undergraduate faculty from the Educational Ministries department, please mention Robert MacRae, Mary Martin, Michael Milco, Elizabeth Smith, and Peter Worrall during your time with God today.
In its broadest sense, to preach is simply to proclaim. In the life of the church sermons often take a particular form. But anybody who proclaims the good news about Jesus Christ is “preaching.” Job provides an early example of someone who “preaches” the good news about Christ’s incarnation.

Job’s testimony of faith follows on the heels of complaint. Profoundly disappointed at the cold comfort offered to him by his three friends, Job cried out, “How long will you torment me and crush me with words?” (Job 19:2). After asking them to take pity on him, he expressed his confidence that he would one day see God with his own eyes. According to Job this will take place “after my skin has been destroyed” (v. 26). Job’s hope was not only that he would see his Redeemer but that he would see Him face to face (v. 25). Job expected this Redeemer God to “stand on the earth” and speak in his defense.

The New Testament clarifies the hope that Job first describes. It also supplies a name for this Redeemer who is also an advocate. It is Jesus Christ. He was with God in the beginning and He was God. He is the Word who became flesh and lived among us (John 1:2, 14). He is also the one who is coming again to judge the living and the dead (2 Tim. 4:1).

Jesus enables us to put a name to Job’s hope. He is the object and capstone of our faith. Like Job, we look forward to a day when we will stand in the presence of Christ. And even now, we know that Jesus serves as an advocate for us in heaven with God the Father (1 John 2:1).

Thanks to the Scriptures, we know more about God and His plan than Job did. Yet we are like Job in one important respect. We are trusting in a Redeemer that we have not yet seen. Jesus promised us a special blessing for this when he told Thomas: “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

Dr. Junias Venugopal, provost and dean of Education, leads a phenomenal group of Moody’s faculty and students in the study and teaching of God’s Word. Will you take time today to ask for the Holy Spirit’s power in this pursuit?
“Prayer sermons” are sermons disguised as prayers. Some people use public prayer as an occasion to scold the church. They supposedly address the prayer to God—but everyone knows that the congregation is the real audience.

In today’s passage, Abraham uses prayer to scold, but the audience is God. He protests to God when he learns that Sodom is about to be destroyed. You might say that Abraham preached to God when he lectured Him about doing the right thing.

The Lord appeared to Abraham in human form near the great trees of Mamre, a location where pagan worship was common among the locals. After reiterating His earlier promise to give Abraham and Sarah a son, the Lord disclosed His plan to judge Sodom. Abraham was alarmed at the news because his nephew Lot lived there. The sequence of events, however, suggests that the God’s agenda all along was to prompt Abraham to intercede. Throughout this encounter, God showed patience and grace.

Abraham’s boldness may have been prompted by the exchange of verses 17 through 19 that seems to have taken place within his hearing. The Lord had two reasons for drawing Abraham into his plan. First, Abraham’s descendants were destined to become a great and powerful nation and a means of blessing to all the earth. Second, Abraham needed to teach his children to do what was right and just.

This emphasis on justice gave Abraham the courage to demand: “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (v. 25). Rather than an accusation, this is a confession of faith. Abraham expected the God who demands righteousness to act justly. God responded in faithfulness to Abraham. Although He did not spare the city, in which not even ten righteous people could be found, He did spare Lot and his family.

The boldness and familiarity reflected in Abraham’s negotiation with God can be found in many psalms. We cannot bully God into getting what we want, but we can be bold and specific when making our requests, confident that God will do the right thing. Do you know someone who needs the grace of God? Follow Abraham’s example and pray for them today.

Moody’s Planned Giving staff—Eric Beckman, Crystal Davis-Landrum, Stephen Kott, and Kimberly Pickett—request your prayers today for the families who have supported Moody through the years. We thank God for the generosity of our donors.
Preaching is both an oral and an aural experience: oral because it is communicated by the spoken word; aural because its message is received by means of hearing. Some of the earliest preaching was also based in the home. God’s people were commanded to teach their children the truths that had been revealed to them though Moses.

Today’s passage begins with an invitation: “Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of?” (v. 32). The remarkable event is God’s revelation of Himself by word. He spoke audibly to the people of Israel at Horeb (cf. Ex. 20:22; Deut. 5:24). Most of the time, however, He spoke through others. All preaching and teaching is grounded in God’s self-revelation. Those who speak to the church on God’s behalf do so because He spoke first through His Word. He revealed His Word through chosen instruments who put it in writing. They were empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit so that they recorded only what He wanted written (2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:20–21).

God expects His people to take Him at His word. This means that we will believe what He has said. If we believe God’s Word, then we will obey and teach it to others.

God’s motive in revealing His Word was to bless us. He did not give it so that it would be a burden but “so that it may go well with you” (v. 40). We do not need to hear God’s audible voice to know His mind. He has put it in writing for us.

The earliest recipients of God’s Word probably did not read it. They listened to it. The Gospels and Epistles were read to the congregation as part of public worship. The experience of listening to God’s Word enables us to see themes and patterns we miss when reading. Many audible versions of the Bible are available online, including the dramatized NIV, at biblegateway.com.
The Bible reveals what God wants from us. In this address to God’s people, Moses not only summarized their experience but also encapsulated what God wanted from them. This reminder provided a kind of re-commissioning after Israel’s great sin with the golden calf. Moses had interceded for Israel in much the same way that Abraham did for Sodom.

God’s expectation of Israel was more comprehensive than a simple list of do’s and don’ts. God expected Israel to show Him reverence and make obedience a habit of life. But their obedience was not meant to be slavish devotion. It was to spring from love. Driven by love, God’s people were to serve the Lord by keeping His commandments. God’s most basic command is to love. Furthermore, this love is itself a response to God’s own love that was first shown to us (v. 15). A failure to obey is ultimately a failure to love.

We should not be surprised that God expects us to respond to others out of love. Our treatment of others should reflect God’s love for them. Israel was told to love those who were foreigners because they themselves were once foreigners in Egypt (v. 19). More importantly, they were obligated to love the foreigner because of God: “He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigners residing among you, giving them food and clothing” (v. 18).

Jesus likewise grounded His call for obedience on love. In John 14:15, He told the disciples: “If you love me, keep my commands.” He said that the two great commandments of the law were to love God and our neighbor (Matt. 22:37–40).

What does God want from you? He wants your heart. If He has your heart, He has everything else.

Today’s passage singles out the fatherless, widows, and foreigners as a special focus of His loving concern. How can you show the love of God to those on the margins of society? You can volunteer at a homeless shelter, get involved in a program that teaches English as a second language, or contribute to an organization like Samaritan’s Purse.

Janet Mitchell, Holly Motta, Paulette Phillips, Lindsey Reimers, Diane Sergeant, and Catrina Weinum serve at Treasury Operations on Moody’s Chicago campus. They appreciate your prayers as they oversee student accounts and student health insurance.
Professor Taylor was widely known among the students for his difficult tests, which were so hard that every exam had to be graded on a curve. When students asked him about these excruciating exams, he admitted that he did not really expect anyone to pass. It is tempting to view God’s commands in a similar light. The problem of sin makes it impossible for us to be saved by obeying God’s law. Instead, according to Romans 3:20, the law makes us aware of our sin.

This view of God’s commands poses two dangers. We may underestimate God’s expectation of us. Like a student who is given an impossible test, we may conclude that God does not really care whether we obey or not. We also might overestimate our own ability to meet God’s standards.

Today’s passage contains Joshua’s farewell sermon to Israel, and he called them to make a choice: “But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (v. 15). They responded with this resounding commitment: “Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods!” (v. 16).

Instead of commending them, Joshua called for a reality check. Their own history should have told them that they were being too optimistic. Even the law itself, with its system of sacrifices, implied that forgiveness would be needed. If God’s law is a test, it is a litmus test intended to show us our need for the grace and forgiveness that comes through the sacrifice of Christ. Our obedience matters to God, but obedience is impossible apart from grace.

Apply the Word

Have you given up on obedience because of past failure? Or have you overestimated your performance? You are not able to serve the Lord apart from the grace of God (see Rom. 8:3-4). Instead of focusing on your own success or failure, focus on the Lord’s mercy and grace. He freely bestows this on all who call to Him for help!

Pray with Us

Eleanor Ehresman, Moody’s Treasurer, oversees the Payroll department on our Chicago campus, and today she requests your prayers for this team that works so diligently behind the scenes: George Palmiter, Julie Vinlasaca, and Carol Walters.
A common saying goes, “Be careful what you wish for; you just might get it.” It seems to apply in today’s passage. Near the end of Samuel’s ministry, the people of Israel demanded that he appoint a king to lead them. The problem they present was practical enough—Samuel’s sons were not following the Lord. But the real motive behind the request is more sinister. They wanted a king “such as all the other nations have” (v. 5). This was ultimately a rejection of God’s authority.

As directed by God, Samuel’s sermon warned the people about what it would mean for them if God granted their request. The word that best describes what these human rulers would do for them is take—note how many times that word appears in verses 11 though 17. Israel would eventually come to regret this decision and plead with God to revoke this “gift.” By then it would be too late (v. 18).

Despite this stark warning, God’s people demanded that Samuel comply with their wish. The language of their response reiterates their desire to be like the other nations. They wanted an earthly king to go before them and fight their battles. God was no longer enough for them.

Interestingly, God intended all along to appoint a king over Israel, and He had already made provisions for it in the Law of Moses (see Deut. 17:14–20). The problem wasn’t with their request per se, but it revealed their rejection of God.

It is possible to desire the right thing for the wrong reason, and it is also possible to desire something from God more than we desire God Himself. When God says “no,” we can be sure that it is for a good reason. He knows that we don’t always need what we want.

Everybody feels disappointed when they don’t get what they want, especially when it is something we asked for from God. Make a list of your disappointments or prayer requests that God has not yet answered or has answered with a “no.” As you bring each one before Him in prayer, express thanks to God for His wisdom. Ask Him to help you accept His will in these matters.

Greg Thornton, senior VP of Media, directs the vision and the message of Moody’s ministries through Moody Radio and Moody Publishers. Praise God for providing a willing servant and trusted leader for this position.
The book of Ecclesiastes might be one of the most famous and puzzling sermons in the Bible. It is ascribed to “the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem” (Eccl. 1:1). The Hebrew word that is translated “teacher” seems to refer to someone who speaks to the assembly.

The book’s strangeness may be partly attributed to the author’s goal. His aim was “to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens” (Eccl. 1:13). More than this, his goal was to understand these things in light of their apparent futility. Life and all that accompanies it is like a smoke or vapor. Its pleasures are fleeting; its pains universal. One generation gives way to another, and all they seem to leave behind are dust and ashes. How are we to find meaning in such a world of shadows?

Today’s passage contains the Teacher’s summary and conclusion based on these matters. He boils the “big idea” for this sermon down to a single thought: “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind” (v. 13). Fear in this context does not mean “to be terrified” but “to reverence.” Only God can give meaning to a world that seems to be futile.

After exploring the pleasures and pains of the world at length, the Teacher’s conclusion is that we must have a higher regard for God than we do for the world around us. This does not mean that we ignore the world—just the opposite. In this sermon we are urged to take delight in our spouses and enjoy our work.

This is a spiritual strategy for the real world. The actions we take in this life are loaded with meaning. God evaluates everything we do, even those things that nobody else can see.

The author of Ecclesiastes was wiser than anyone who had ruled before him (Eccl. 1:16). Yet we know something that the Teacher did not. We know that God will bring every deed into judgment, and we know that Christ is the judge (see 2 Cor. 5:10)! Pray that the Spirit of God will help guide your thoughts and actions so that you will please the Judge, our Lord and Savior.

God’s Reluctant Preacher

Research shows that more people are afraid of public speaking than of dying! That was probably not the case for Jonah. He was a prophet from Gath Hepher who predicted the restoration of Israel’s boundaries from Lebo Hamath to the Dead Sea by Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:25). He also engaged in one of the most successful preaching tours ever described in Scripture. You would hardly know it from his response.

Jonah was commanded to go to Nineveh, one of the greatest cities of the ancient world. It was ancient even in Jonah’s day, with a history that went back to the days after Noah’s Flood (see Gen. 10:11). Jonah had good reasons for being nervous about such a trip. Nineveh was a major city in the Assyrian empire, fierce enemies of God’s people known for their cruelty. The journey to Nineveh was long. Additionally, Jonah’s message was a single, threatening sentence: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown” (Jonah 3:4). Yet none of this was the root cause for Jonah’s initial unwillingness to go. He was reluctant because he was afraid that the people would repent and God would withhold judgment.

We might understand Jonah’s anger over God’s compassion if we’ve had the experience of someone who threatened and mistreated us suddenly proclaiming that he or she is now a Christian. We do not know whether Jonah eventually overcame his anger. The emphasis in the conclusion to the book of Jonah is on God’s compassion rather than on Jonah’s recovery. Jonah’s story is a sobering reminder that the messenger is not always worthy of the message. But it is also a great encouragement because it shows that God can use imperfect servants like us to accomplish His purposes.

For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!
1 Corinthians 9:16

Apply the Word

Is there someone you are afraid to talk to about the gospel? It might help to write out a brief outline of what you would say if you had the opportunity. Is there someone you find hard to accept as a brother or sister in Christ because of past treatment? Ask God to give you His heart of amazing forgiveness and compassion.

Pray with Us

Keeping our prayer focus on Moody Publishers Operations, please put Gregory Miller, Duane Koenig, and Sandy Kleinans on your list. Praise God for the difference they help make in people’s lives with quality Christian publications!

Read: Jonah 3:2–4:1 Saturday, October 10
On October 7, 1893, journalist and humorist Finley Peter Dunne wrote the first column featuring the character known as Martin Dooley for the Chicago Evening Post. Mr. Dooley made observations about the political and social scene. One of his most famous had to do with newspaper industry: “Th’ newspaper does ivrything f’r us. It runs th’ polis foorce an’ th’ banks, commands th’ milishy, controls th’ ligisla-chure, baptizes th’ young, marries th’ foolish, comforts th’ afflicted, afflicts th’ com-fortable, buries th’ dead an’ roasts thim afterward.”

Something similar has been said about preaching: the preacher comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. In the previous chapters, the prophet Isaiah warned of God’s coming judgment. In this beautiful section that begins Isaiah 40, the tone shifts from warning to comfort, offering hope with the promise that God will rescue Israel from exile and restore them to the land.

Today’s passage not only describes Isaiah’s ministry of hope but also foreshadows the ministry of John the Baptist (Matt. 3:3). The comfort that Isaiah offered is fully realized through the ministry of Jesus Christ. He is the only one who can save us from sin. One of the highest points in the book is the promise of a coming Messiah who will suffer for their sins, found in chapter 53.

Comfort was not Isaiah’s only theme. Much of what he said must have made his listeners uncomfortable. He denounced sin and threatened judgment. He did not try to entertain his audience. Often we can only experience the kind of comfort Isaiah writes about after we have been made uncomfortable by the truth about our sin. The gospel is good news—but only to those who see their need for forgiveness that comes through Jesus Christ. Preaching does not have to make us feel comfortable in order to provide comfort.

Apply the Word

This is a helpful corrective in an age of religious marketing. Pastors often feel pressure to entertain their listeners. Don’t forget to pray for your pastor today, and ask God to provide the courage to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Whether the sermon this week provides comfort or affliction, tell your pastor about it with thanks for the ministry of preaching the Word.

Pray with Us

Engineering Operations’ Al Campa, Thomas Drost, John Fraats, Jaime Ixcaragua, and Gerald Malozienc maintain heating and air conditioning systems at Moody. Pray that their expertise and humble service would be a powerful witness on our Chicago campus.
Christian Smith, the author of Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers, coined the phrase “moralistic therapeutic deism” to describe the religious views of Protestant youth in the United States. One of the discoveries Smith made during his research was that the prayers of American youth lack repentance and adoration.

We find a very different attitude in the congregation described in today’s passage. The exiles who had returned to Jerusalem gathered to hear the law of God read and explained. It was the first day of the Feast of Trumpets, a celebration that usually began with a time of repentance. From dawn until midday, Ezra read from the book of the law as the Levites explained the meaning to those who stood to listen. As their understanding grew, so did their sense of conviction. Those who understood the gravity of their sin wept in sorrow, but Ezra urged them to celebrate instead (vv. 9–10).

Grief is an appropriate response when we become aware of our sin, but it should not be our only response. Knowledge of sin without the corresponding hope of the gospel will lead to despair. The gospel wounds when it points out our need for forgiveness through Christ—but the same message also binds up those wounds. When preaching causes sorrow, it is so that we can experience the joy of forgiveness.

Sound preaching produces a sorrow without regret. When that sorrow points us to Christ, it opens the door to the joy of the Lord. This preaching does not manipulate the emotions of listeners. God’s Word is powerful enough to move the heart to true repentance!

And beware of guilt that does not point you to the hope of forgiveness through Jesus Christ. That kind of sorrow does not come from God.

One way to express your sorrow over sin is by praying the psalms. Psalm 51 is a prayer of confession, and Psalm 32 describes the blessedness of those whose sins have been forgiven. Read these two psalms aloud as part of your own prayer asking God’s forgiveness. Notice that these psalms not only mention sin but also describe the assurance of God’s forgiveness.
Members who can recall a time when their church was more crowded often lament the passing of the good old days. “I can remember when these seats used to be filled,” they say. It is normal to miss those times when things were better. But it is also fruitless. We can be so focused on a past time that we miss what God is doing in the present.

This was the problem God’s people faced when the exiles who returned from the Babylonian captivity saw the foundation that had been laid for rebuilding of the temple. Some people rejoiced, but those who could remember the former temple wept (see Ezra 3:12–13). The sound of those who lamented a lost past was as loud as those who rejoiced over a new future.

Today’s passage shows that things had not changed sixteen years later. Many were still disappointed. To those who recalled the glory of Solomon’s temple, this new structure seemed pitiful in comparison (v. 3). Blinded by the temple’s former glory, they could not see God working in their midst.

The Lord promised to make the glory of this new house surpass the glory of the former. This was an astonishing claim, since the old temple was the place where God manifested His presence in the Holy of Holies. Haggai’s contemporaries could not have imagined that the glory would return to the temple precincts in the most magnificent way when Jesus came preaching peace. Those who encountered Him saw “the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). God was at work in new and exciting ways. The past is a reminder that God has been faithful, and should never be a trap that keeps us from participating in His present and future work.

We usually view the past through the soft glow of memory and the present in the harsh light of reality. If you are discouraged with your present, make a list of current opportunities for ministry that you see. Ask God to show you where He is at work today. Learn the lessons of the past, but forget the “good old days.” God is working here and now.

Missions Conference begins today. Many of our students plan to dedicate their lives to serving God through missions. Would you pray that their hearts will be encouraged and they will clearly discern God’s calling for their lives?
Sermon to the Vipers

Some churches practice “felt-needs” preaching. This kind of preaching begins with a problem or concern of the audience and attempts to solve it, and it can be helpful for some listeners. But this was not the approach used by John the Baptist. He came with a message of repentance that called his listeners to be ready for the kingdom of God.

John’s ministry was unique, but his message was virtually identical to the one that Jesus would later preach (see Matt. 4:17). Both called for repentance and announced the advent of the kingdom. Both emphasized baptism, though John’s was intended to anticipate the ministry of Christ. John was not a peer or a competitor with Jesus. He was the forerunner of Messiah who had been foretold by the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 40:3).

John did not soft-sell his message. He issued a direct challenge to the religious leaders who came to hear him. The Pharisees were deeply interested in religious practices like tithing, ritual purity, and Sabbath observance. The Sadducees were a smaller religious group who recognized only the first five books of the Old Testament as authoritative. They did not believe in resurrection. The Pharisees had more popular support, but the Sadducees had greater political influence. John called them “a brood of vipers,” accusing both groups of hypocrisy (v. 7), language Jesus later echoed (Matt. 23:33).

These rebukes seem harsh to modern ears. But John’s aim in preaching was to show people their sin and to point them to Christ. Like a doctor who delivers bad news in order to prescribe the proper treatment, we need to feel worse before we can feel better. Preaching that minimizes the reality of sin does not help anyone. Those who do not think they have a problem with sin will see no need for a Savior.

Apply the Word

When we minimize the Bible’s teaching about sin, we alter the gospel message. The seriousness of our sin can be measured by the extreme measures required to deal with it. Salvation from sin required nothing less than the death of Jesus Christ. If you have not yet done so, ask Him today for the free gift of forgiveness and eternal life.

Pray with Us

Dr. Larry Davidhizar, vice president and dean of the Undergraduate School, asks for your prayers for the duration of Missions Conference. May all the messages enhance the students’ growth during this important week.
Sometimes biblical stories are hard to figure out. In the case of the story of the Samaritan woman (John 4), why did she respond so quickly to Jesus, especially since there had been bitter feelings between the Jews and Samaritans for a long time? And why, given the kind of woman she was, did people believe her when she ran back to tell them about what had happened?

First, I commend you for thinking so carefully about this story. Too often we have a tendency to read Scripture without thinking deeply, as though it would be wrong to ask the things that come to mind. To ask questions allows us “to taste and see,” as the psalmist writes (Ps. 34:8).

Jesus’ encounter with this woman is unusual, which in itself is a guide to how to answer your question. He would not have had to pass through Samaria, yet He chose this route, even though the racial, cultural, and theological barriers were seemingly insurmountable. The conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans had many layers and a complicated history. When Jesus asked for a drink, He refused to accept the familiar stereotypes and problems between these two groups. As commentators note, not only was Jesus asking for a drink from a Samaritan, but He was also asking for a drink from a woman. A rabbi might not even speak to his wife or daughter or sister in public. Furthermore, this was also a woman with a bad reputation. Jesus’ actions amazed even the disciples (4:27–30). As William Barclay writes, “Here was the holiest of men, listening with understanding to a sorry story, breaking through the barriers of nationality and orthodox Jewish custom. Here is God loving the world, not in theory, but in action.”

Christ’s unique posture opened up the conversation that followed, culminating in showing the woman how well He knew her, a knowledge so profound that she believed He was the Messiah He claimed to be. Christ lovingly brought her to her senses and challenged her to face herself and the emptiness of her life. And then, naturally, she wanted to tell everyone about the man who told her, “everything I ever did” (v. 29). The change in her was so great that she went to the very people who had rejected her, her excitement overcoming those barriers. Why did these people believe her? One must see the supernatural wooing power of Christ in every life, and we know that her testimony was so powerful that many of them believed quickly (v. 39). We should never underestimate the power of a changed life, a reminder that compels us to live in that power.

Is curiosity a God-given quality, or is it a temptation we should avoid or walk away from?

Curiosity is defined as the desire to know and learn. To be incurious is to be stagnant, even dull. Clearly, curiosity, in its best sense, is what causes us to learn and...
grow and look deeply into what interests us, what causes us to be fully human. It is a divinely implanted instinct. On the other hand, every good and God-given gift can be corrupted and turned into sin. We know that even though Adam and Eve had been given Eden to explore, Eve was tempted by the “crafty” serpent to eat from the one “tree … in the middle of the garden,” which God had forbidden (Gen. 3:3). Eve grew curious about the wisdom she could gain without God’s permission. In spite of the extravagant possibilities around her, she indulged her curiosity, the beginning of sin that broke the relationship between man and woman, between men and women and God, and between man and the earth.

“Idle curiosity,” the corruption of the imagination, may be one of the darkest trails the human spirit travels. Today that is abetted by technology and its endless seductions to spend time thoughtlessly surfing the Internet for bits and pieces of information, entertained with shallow ideas or compromised images, feeding an appetite for trivia and self-promotion, opening the door to sinful habits and addictions. Stories in the Bible tell us there are things we should not know, including the Tower of Babel in Genesis and the account of the Flood: “The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time” (Gen. 6:5).

Curiosity can be a slippery slope, quickly leading one into an obsession with knowledge attained without discrimination. Or curiosity can be the God-given source of our purest and brightest moments.

**Q**

Is it right to find someone to date online? It seems like many people are doing it, including many Christians. I just don’t know how to think about this.

**A**

I don’t think going to good dating sites is wrong, and I have known people who successfully found husbands and wives that way. The most important thing to consider, however, is your motivation and the way the dating site manages the process. One must know one’s theology and one’s heart. We are living in a deceptive time, and we can be self-deceived. Does the dating site seem to come from a sound theological premise, asking the important questions about faith and character and authentic interests? Or does it get into trivial, image-based questions and promote sentimental idealism, making claims about all the perfect relationships and promising you the answer to all your dreams—something that God does not guarantee on this earth. Are you using this venue because you think you can know more about a person this way (that can be true) or because you are desperate to find someone?

Elizabeth Elliot once said, “Let not your longing spoil the appetite of your living.” Having a spouse is a God-implanted longing, but His will and His standard must guide your life and your choices.
The Greatest Sermon Ever Preached: Part 1

What was the best sermon you have ever heard? Sermons are like meals. A handful stand out, but most provide some spiritual sustenance for that moment and then fade from memory. But the biblical sermon we will be considering for the next three days is considered the greatest ever preached. Much of it is familiar to believers and unbelievers alike. It is Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

The sermon begins with eight Beatitudes, from the Latin word for happy or blessed. Each Beatitude includes two assertions. The first clause identifies who receives the blessing, and the second describes the nature of the blessing. The first and last Beatitude provide the context of these blessings and promises that belong to Christ’s kingdom.

Following these blessings, a series of statements clarify the nature of righteousness. Jesus used the device of contrast to evaluate what His listeners have heard with what is actually true. Jesus’ aim in this section seems to be to correct His audience’s view of God’s Law. Jesus’ clarifications show that those who seemed to be most attentive to God’s law had actually lowered the standard. Righteousness, as Jesus describes it, is much more than a matter of external conformity to rules. It is the reflection of a transformed heart.

Jesus’ corrections focus on six areas: murder, adultery, divorce, oath taking, revenge, and love. Jesus does not describe a way of living so much as show us where we have fallen short. In other words, this is not a “how to” sermon; rather, it is one that reveals “how we haven’t.” Jesus shows us that the law is both more and less than His contemporaries imagined. The law’s standard of righteousness is far more than their common practice acknowledged. It is so high that we will need to derive our righteousness from another source.

Apply the Word

If you feel guilty when you read through this section of the Sermon on the Mount, you are in good company. It is meant to show us where we have fallen short. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus Christ has provided us with another kind of righteousness that is available to everyone who has faith in Jesus Christ. Thank Him for this gift today!

Pray with Us

We are grateful for the service of Public Safety officers at Moody in Chicago. Justin Jansma, Ryan Jenkins, and Timothy Kirkpatrick serve with knowledge, skill, and faithful hearts that make our campus safe for ministry.

Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

James 2:10
On December 14, 2014, an anonymous donor dropped seven hand-wrapped gold coins worth $1,500 into the Salvation Army kettle in Libertyville, Illinois. The donor included a note: “Dear Salvation Army staff and all of your faithful bell ringers: You are all an inspiration to us in your care for our needy men, women, and children. God’s special blessing on each one of you.” It was the fourth year in a row that an anonymous donor has put gold coins into that kettle in Libertyville, always with a note of appreciation.

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus provides an example of when it’s appropriate for us to have a secret life, especially when it comes to spiritual practices. We can lose sight of God and focus on the opinions of others when we practice righteousness. We may seem to be helping the poor, but we are really only feeding our ego. We may sound like we are praying, but instead we are performing a soliloquy to impress those who can hear us. When we deprive ourselves in some way, whether through fasting from food or entertainment choices or some other pleasure, we are often tempted either to congratulate ourselves or to discuss our deprivation so that others will know how pious we are.

Jesus says that the solution is to change our audience. We need to focus on our heavenly Father, “who sees what is done in secret” (v. 4). We don’t need to put our acts of righteousness on display. God can see what we do, and He knows our heart.

Prayer, giving, and sacrificial living should all be acts of devotion performed out of love for Him. When spiritual practices are used to attract the attention of others, they are a show for the wrong audience.

Helmut Thielicke writes about the temptation to want to impress others with our spiritual life: “Therefore every Christian who wants to confess his Lord … must again and again enter into solitude with God, into the quietness of prayer, where no man listens to what is said.” Do something for God in secret today, perhaps an anonymous donation or time with Him in prayer.

Please pray today for the rest of the Public Safety team: Jacob Muscat, Beau Pieniak, and Brian Stoffer. Ask the Lord to keep them safe as they ensure the safety of others and to use their work for His glory.
According to C. S. Lewis, we all have an innate sense of justice, to which we appeal in disputes with other people. When we’ve been wronged, we cite a standard of behavior that someone else has violated. But when someone accuses us of wrongdoing, we tend to argue that we had a good reason, arguing for a justifying exemption to excuse our actions. We often hold others to a different standard than we apply to ourselves. Judgment is not always about justice.

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, God’s love is compared to that of an earthly father. If we know how to give our children good gifts, we should not be afraid to persist in seeking the same from God (vv. 7–11). This kindness in turn should shape the way we treat others. We ought to treat others the way we ourselves would want to be treated (v. 12).

Jesus also gives encouragement about prayer mixed with warnings about false prophets, false disciples, and the danger of ignoring His words. The way of Jesus is the only true path, and it requires a willingness to follow Him and not majority opinions (vv. 13–14).

False prophets will try to deceive us. They may look like us, but they are only interested in taking advantage of us (vv. 15–20). We may also be a threat to ourselves. We can be self-deceived into thinking that we have a right to enter the kingdom of heaven in reality we are strangers to it.

The solution Jesus prescribes is to take His word seriously. We are all building our lives on some kind of foundation, and in the end those whose hope is based upon anything other than Jesus Christ will lose all that they have built.

Apply the Word

Jesus’ closing words in this sermon are intended to raise questions for us about our own lives. Are you building your life on the right foundation? The only foundation that God accepts is Jesus Christ Himself. All our attempts at righteous living will fail if He is not the center of our lives. Take Him at His word and you will not be disappointed.

Pray with Us

At Moody, we appreciate each of our faculty and staff, and desire to minister to them through their employment. Please pray for Debbie Zelinski, vice president of Human Resources, as she oversees the programs and people who make this possible.
A Jewish rabbi was asked to describe what the concept of the Messiah meant to him today. He replied, “Years ago, a popular evangelical bumper sticker read, ‘I found it.’ The Jewish version would read, ‘I’m still looking for it.’”

This perspective helps us understand the unique conditions Jesus set for the preaching tour described in today’s passage. Instead of sending His disciples to everyone, Jesus told them to limit their ministry to “the lost sheep of Israel” (v. 6). This was a critical moment not only in Jesus’ ministry but also in Israel’s history. Through their preaching, the disciples invited Israel to accept their long-awaited Messiah and enter into the kingdom.

Although the offer was genuine, Jesus already knew what the outcome would be. His warning in verses 13 through 16 implied that many would reject their message. Jesus warned the disciples that they might be killed by those who refuse to acknowledge Him as their king.

Jesus later expanded the scope of the disciples’ mission, commanding them to bear witness to Him “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). This adjusted mission expands to those who are not part of “the lost sheep of Israel” without excluding Israel. The gospel “is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile” (Rom. 1:16).

Bearing witness to Christ has never been easy. Being wise as a serpent means that we must try to understand those who reject our message. If they misunderstood and rejected Christ, we should not be surprised to find that we are treated the same way. But this also means that we should respond to them as Christ did, not as our enemies but as people God loves.

To learn more about the importance of sharing the gospel with “the lost sheep of Israel,” read To the Jew First: The Case for Jewish Evangelism in Scripture and History, edited by Darrell Bock and Mitchell Glaser. To learn how to respond to many of the questions unbelievers ask, read The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism by Timothy Keller. Both books are available online.
William Willimon, professor of the practice of Christian ministry at Duke Divinity School, believes that some preachers worry too much about being understood. “We preachers so want to be heard that we are willing to make the gospel more accessible than it really is, to remove the scandal, the offense of the cross, to deceive people into thinking that it is possible to hear without conversion.”

This was not true of Jesus. Today’s passage includes a parable about hearing. The disciples were so puzzled by it that they asked Jesus to explain why He used parables. Jesus’ reply was that He did not expect everyone to understand. Because of their proximity to Jesus, the disciples knew “the secret of the kingdom of God” (v. 11). Those on the outside did not. The Greek word that is translated “secret” in verse 11 referred to something that cannot be known apart from divine revelation. Yet even with further explanation, the disciples did not always grasp what Jesus meant.

God’s word is understandable, but it is not always easy to understand. Not everything it says is clear to anyone who reads it. As Jesus’ parable indicates, our grasp of the truth is affected by many factors, including the disposition of our hearts. It is also possible to have a clear grasp on what God’s Word teaches and then choose to reject it. We can be distracted by other things so that it never takes root. We may also be deceived by Satan, so that we dismiss God’s truth or believe a lie.

Understanding involves more than grasping the facts. It also requires faith. Those who truly understand agree with God and act upon what they know. Only the Holy Spirit can enable us to do this.

Apply the Word

Because the Bible was written in human language, we can use some basic rules to guide our interpretation of its meaning. For instance, we can assume that the author intends to be understood. We should pay attention to the genre and the context. To learn more, consider reading Basic Bible Interpretation by Roy B. Zuck. We can never exhaust the riches of Scripture!
Homecoming

After New England Patriots player Malcolm Butler made the winning goal-line interception that won the Super Bowl in 2015, he was honored in several ways. He appeared on the Today show and The Tonight Show. He presented an award at the Grammys. But the highlight of Butler’s celebration was when his hometown of Vicksburg, Mississippi, gave him a parade. “I couldn’t do it without my hometown,” Butler said. “This is where it all started.”

Unfortunately, Jesus’ hometown did not greet Him with a parade. Word of His ministry had already spread throughout Galilee. The people of Nazareth had heard of the miracles He had performed in Capernaum. Despite this, when Jesus returned home His ministry was met with skepticism. Jesus “did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith” (Matt. 13:58).

Events came to a head when Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath. The reading of Scripture was the cornerstone of worship, followed by a sermon. The text doesn’t tell us whether Jesus volunteered to do this or was invited. The text included selected portions of Isaiah 61:1–2, which includes a prediction of the Messiah’s ministry. The Gospel of Luke records only a single sentence of Jesus’ sermon: “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (v. 21).

The initial reaction of the audience was positive. But when Jesus refused to satisfy their skepticism by performing miracles, they grew angry. The examples of Elijah and Elisha further aggravated the crowd because they implied that Jesus would not show favoritism to His hometown.

The people of Nazareth thought they knew Jesus. He had lived among them. They knew His family. But they did not know Jesus as well as they thought. Familiarity did not lead to true knowledge.

A prophet is not without honor except in his own town and in his own home.
Matthew 13:57

Apply the Word

Knowing about Jesus is not the same as knowing Jesus. You may know the facts about His ministry. You may even know that He claimed to be God’s one and only Son. But do you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior? God invites you today to move beyond mere knowledge of facts to the faith in Jesus alone as the way to have a relationship with God.

Pray with Us

As we continue to pray for the Donor Development department, please remember Georgia Joseph, Paul Currie, and Helen Moline who form a vital link between Moody Global Ministries and the people who make our ministries possible with their generous partnership.
Everyone has had the frustrating experience of being ignored—maybe when trying to check in for a flight, or at the customer-service counter. But how do you think you would feel if the person ignoring you was Jesus? That was the case with the woman in today’s passage.

As opposition from the religious leaders grew, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. This would have been considered foreign territory. A woman from the region called out to Jesus to deliver her demon-possessed daughter. Matthew underscores her pagan heritage by referring to her as a Canaanite. When Jesus ignored the request, she persisted to the point of embarrassment. Although she came from a Gentile background, the woman had knowledge of Jesus and His ministry. She addressed Him with respect, addressing Him as Lord and Son of David.

Her reply to Jesus’ initial refusal also gives the impression that she knew something about His nature. Jesus used an analogy that drew on the ancient practice of referring to Gentiles as “dogs.” Jesus’ use of such language was not meant to be an insult but signaled the priority of Israel in this current phase of His mission.

The Canaanite woman used this painful metaphor to her own advantage by comparing herself to a domesticated dog that is permitted to eat scraps from the table. She attested both to the validity of Christ’s current mission and to her faith in His compassion.

She was an outsider as far as God’s covenant with Israel was concerned. But she was not beyond the scope of His compassion. Jesus’ good-humored reaction is proof that He will accept all who come to Him in genuine faith. It also foreshadowed the eventual spread of the gospel beyond Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.

Apply the Word

The disciples didn’t think this woman was a candidate for grace because she was an outsider, but she had more insight about Jesus. Is there someone that you have written off as an unlikely candidate for the gospel because of their background or lifestyle? Ask if they ever think about spiritual things! It could create an opportunity for you to share the love of Christ.

Pray with Us

In conclusion of our prayers for Donor Development this month, we invite you to include Steven Asare and Cherise Wilson in your time with God. Please pray for God’s encouragement through the gifts and prayers of the donors with whom they interact.
In one of his parables, philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote, “It happened that a fire broke out backstage in a theater. The clown came out to inform the public. They thought it was a jest and applauded. He repeated his warning. They shouted even louder. So I think the world will come to an end amid the general applause from all the wits who believe that it is a joke.”

Some treat the Bible’s predictions of the end as if they were a joke. Instead, we should recognize that Scripture includes passages about prophecy for our benefit and blessing. The promise of Christ’s return is an important element of our faith.

In today’s passage we find that Jesus’ disciples were also interested in these matters. When Jesus declared that the magnificent temple in Jerusalem would one day be overthrown, He piqued the disciples’ curiosity—and probably their alarm. When they asked Him for further information about this event and about His coming at the end of age, Jesus warned them both to be on guard and not to be anxious.

On the one hand, Jesus told His disciples not to be deceived by false messiahs and false prophets who would claim that the end had come too soon. He also warned them not to be surprised by the wars, famines, and earthquakes that precede His Second Coming. These global disturbances will be matched by spiritual turbulence, as wickedness increases and many who seem to have faith forsake it.

But at the same time, Jesus also assured His disciples that they did not need to be troubled by such things. The conclusion of this story has already been written, and the church has work to do before the end comes. These prophecies should motivate us to serve the Lord while we have the opportunity to demonstrate our love through our obedience.

Belief in the imminent return of Christ should increase our concern for present needs. William Culbertson, former president of Moody Bible Institute, said: “The second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Word of God has an appeal to our sense of urgency. Our motivation is accelerated because we know that the Lord may come. I am forced to action if I believe He’s coming.”

Steven Mogck, executive VP and chief operating officer, welcomes your prayers for wisdom and God’s guidance in his service to Dr. Nyquist as part of the leadership team and to the whole Moody family.
Sermon from the Cross

When composer Gustav Mahler died in bed, he was conducting an imaginary orchestra. His last word was “Mozart.” When blues singer Bessie Smith died, her final words were “I’m going, but I’m going in the name of the Lord.”

The church has traditionally referred to the seven statements Jesus made on the cross as His “seven words.” They were not actually His “last” words. Jesus rose from the dead the third day. But when they are taken together, these statements from the cross show us the extent of God’s grace.

Three of Jesus’ statements are found in today’s passage. The first is Jesus’ prayer asking the Father to forgive those who crucified Him (v. 34). Jesus does not excuse our sin, nor does He minimize His own suffering as a result. Rather, Jesus’ statement shows how blind we are to our sin, and how amazing is the forgiveness offered by Christ.

The second statement is Jesus’ promise to the thief that he would be with Him in paradise (v. 43). Jesus provides hope even for those who are aware of their limited understanding of the immensity of their sin. The thief knew that he was sinful and Jesus was sinless. That acknowledgement gave him the courage to ask for mercy from the One who could offer him eternal mercy.

The third saying is the prayer Jesus uttered before He took His final breath on the cross: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (v. 46). Jesus’ life was not taken from Him: He laid it down of His own accord. He chose to die on our behalf. Because Jesus willingly gave His life for us, just like the thief we may boldly go to Him to find mercy and forgiveness.

Apply the Word

Spend time meditating on what Christ has done for you on the cross by reading the other four sayings from the cross. They are found in John 19:27, Mark 15:34 (also in Matt. 27:46), and John 19:28, 30. After you read these beautiful words, thank God for the amazing mercy that He has offered to you, no matter what your history or background.

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me.
Galatians 6:14

Pray with Us

Collin Lambert, vice president of Moody Radio, requests your prayers for the ministry of Moody Radio that’s extending into new territories and partnerships around the globe. We’ll keep praying for specific teams during the next several days.

Read: Luke 23:26–49 Friday, October 23
The Sermon at the Tomb

Last April and June, the Cathedral of Turin placed the fourteen-foot linen cloth on display that many believe was the burial shroud of Jesus. The shroud has only been put on public display eighteen times in the past. The last time, in 2010, 1.5 million people came to see it. Those who visit hope to see the mysterious image on the cloth of a man with wounds that resemble those of someone who was crucified. They want to see Jesus—but they are looking in the wrong place.

The women who came to the tomb early Sunday morning after the crucifixion were hoping to see Jesus, too. They came with spices to complete the burial ritual. Jesus’ body had been prepared for burial in haste because of the onset of the Sabbath. When the women arrived at the tomb, however, the body was gone (v. 3).

As they puzzled over this, two figures in gleaming white suddenly appeared and chided them with these words: “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” (v. 5). When the women told the eleven apostles and the rest of the disciples about what had happened to them, they dismissed it. Their words seemed like nonsense—despite the fact that Jesus had told them to expect this very thing (v. 6).

Peter seems to have had second thoughts. He ran to the tomb to check on their story. The Gospel of John notes that the apostle John also accompanied him (John 20:3–9). Although Jesus was not in the tomb, the linen wrappings that covered His missing body were (v. 12). Peter left the tomb astonished at what he had seen. He left, wondering what to make of what had happened. He should have listened to the testimony of the women rather than searching for Jesus at the tomb.

God raised him from the dead . . . because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.
Acts 2:24

Apply the Word

The angels in the tomb directed the attention of the women to the words of Christ for assurance of the resurrection. Those who make a pilgrimage to Turin may see a shadow, but they will not find Christ. He is not there. He has risen. His Spirit indwells each believer, and His Word is living and active and pointing people to Himself.

Pray with Us

Today, uphold in prayer the talented team at Moody Radio Indiana—Linda Yeager, Joel Wright, Tom Winn, and Ray Hashley. Pray that their programs will continue to encourage listeners in their walk with Christ and introduce new listeners to salvation in Christ.

Read: Luke 24:1–12

Saturday, October 24
A normal heart beats from 60 to 100 times per minute while at rest. Anything below 60 beats is considered abnormal, but a slow heart is not always a problem. People who are fit sometimes have a low resting heart rate. But for others, a slow heartbeat can signal a problem with the heart’s electrical system, a condition sometimes remedied with a pacemaker.

While a slow heart does not always mean that we are unhealthy physically, in today’s passage being “slow of heart” is evidence of a lack of spiritual insight. When the scene opens, two disciples were traveling from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus. We know the name of only one of them: Cleopas. Church tradition has identified these two as having been among the 70 that Jesus sent out to preach, though the text doesn’t say this explicitly. Others identify Cleopas with Clopas, the husband of one of the women who stood by Jesus as He hung on the cross.

The passage tells us the subject of their conversation: “They were talking with each other about everything that had happened” (v. 14). As they were conversing, Jesus approached—but His true identity was hidden from them. When He asked them what they were discussing, they hung their heads in sorrow and replied that they had placed their hope in Jesus, but He had been crucified. Now reports of His resurrection had come to them.

His identity still hidden from them, Jesus chided the two travelers for being “slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken” (v. 25). His explanation of the Scriptures ignited a fire in their hearts. The identity of Jesus was finally revealed to them when He took bread and broke it before them.

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand.

Hebrews 5:11

Apply the Word

Even those who know Christ need the illumination of the Holy Spirit to help them grasp the full significance of what is written in God’s Word. Do you know someone who is blind to the truth of who Christ is? Pray for them by name today, and ask God to open their eyes so that they will see their need for Jesus.

Pray with Us

Continuing in prayer for Moody Radio Indiana, please lift up Kelli Thompson, Amber Cummings, and Darcey Christianson to the throne of God. Praise the Lord for their ministry of spreading Christ’s love through radio.
The Church’s Birthday Sermon

Self-described “seeker” churches design the service with unbelievers in mind. The atmosphere is intended to make those who don’t usually attend church feel comfortable, and the sermon is primarily focused on evangelizing the lost. “Teaching” churches believe that the main purpose of the church service is to build up believers. Interestingly, the sermon in today’s passage had both audiences in mind—the church as well as unbelievers.

Jesus had commanded His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they received the promise of the Spirit (Luke 24:49). Some consider this event to be the birth of the church. In that case, today’s passage describes what might be considered the first sermon ever preached in a church meeting. But it’s also important to see that those who were not part of the church are the primary focus of the sermon. Peter’s message explained what onlookers saw when the Spirit was being poured out on the church (v. 14).

Peter pointed out that the coming of the Spirit had been predicted in the Old Testament by the prophet Joel. Jesus Christ, Israel’s crucified, risen, and exalted Messiah received the Spirit from the Father and bestowed Him as a gift to the church. This was proof of Christ’s resurrection, providing tangible evidence that Jesus was both Lord and Christ.

When the listeners asked Peter what they should do, he told them to repent and be baptized. That day, some 3,000 people believed the gospel and received God’s gift of forgiveness.

The church is the community of those who believe in Jesus Christ. It is also the community of the Holy Spirit. Because of Jesus’ work, the church is a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit (Eph. 2:22). Today’s passage reminds us of the powerful witness the church provides by simply being the church.

Apply the Word

Are you discouraged by flaws you see in your church? The early church was not perfect either. They struggled with ethnic tension, self-centeredness, and false teaching, just as the church does today. Still, empowered by the Spirit, they spread the gospel and manifested God’s power to those who needed to know about Christ. Ask God to do the same through your church today.

Pray with Us

Moody Radio Quad Cities, broadcasting from East Moline, IL, is bringing the Word of God, Christian music, and news to their listeners. Would you pray for the station’s staff: Jason Crosby, Deborah Gustafson, and Ken Brooks?
Sermon to the Philosophers

Research by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life recently confirmed what many have been suspecting. The number of those who say they do not affiliate with any particular religious faith has been growing. This is especially true of people between the ages of 18 to 29. The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey reported, “Religious affiliation in the U.S. is both very diverse and extremely fluid.”

Something similar might have been said about the religious climate in the apostle Paul’s day. Paul came to Athens, an ancient center of culture and philosophy in the Greek world, not as a sightseer but as a refugee. He fled there from Berea when his life was threatened by those who opposed his ministry. While in Athens Paul went to the marketplace and debated with the philosophers.

At that time Stoic and Epicurean philosophy were popular. Many of the points Paul emphasized in his sermon contradicted important teachings in those philosophies. His teaching resulted in being brought before the council known as the Areopagus so that they could evaluate what he was saying (v. 20).

Instead of asking them to accept Jesus as one of the many gods who were worshipped in Athens, Paul boldly declared that there was only one God who created everything. This God does not need anything from us—but He does seek us. He has made Himself known through Jesus Christ, whom He raised from the dead and through whom He will also one day judge the world.

Paul’s sermon was certainly not welcomed by everyone. Those who viewed the physical body as inferior to the soul scoffed at the mention of the bodily resurrection of Christ—but God still brought some listeners to faith in Jesus, including Dionysius—part of the council that judged Paul’s message—and Damaris.

The gospel was first preached in a culture where the majority did not know the Bible or identify as Christians. We can learn from Paul’s example: first, he looked for points of common ground with the philosophers; but second, he did not change his message to suit them. Even in changing times, the gospel is still the power of God for salvation.

To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it.
Deuteronomy 10:14

Apply the Word

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Pray with Us

Once again, join us in prayer for those who serve God at Moody Radio. Our prayers go to God for Paul Martin, Jason McKaig, and Kate Rhea broadcasting from Chattanooga, TN. Pray that they “may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 15:13).
Churches use many titles to refer to their pastor—some prefer “reverend”; others use “pastor”; some choose to call their pastor by name. One of the most descriptive terms the Bible uses is “shepherd.” In fact, pastor is actually the Latin form of the word shepherd.

Today’s sermon is Paul’s farewell address to the leaders of the church at Ephesus. While on his way to Jerusalem, the Apostle made a stop at Miletus and invited the elders of the church of Ephesus to meet him there. He probably did this to save time, the way we might ask someone to meet us at the airport during a layover. It may also have been too dangerous for Paul to visit Ephesus at this time.

Paul charged these leaders to “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (v. 28). Each of the three terms used to describe these leaders provides some insight into the nature of their ministry. Elders (v. 17) identifies them as the church’s spiritual leaders. Overseers (v. 28) emphasizes their responsibility of exercising spiritual oversight. They exercise a ministry of the word and “take care of God’s church” (1 Tim. 3:5; see 1 Tim. 3:1–10; Titus 1:6–9). The term shepherd (v. 28) underscores their role as those who nurture and protect God’s flock.

Pastors are not employees of the church; rather, they are servants of God. They are Christ’s gift to the church (see Eph. 4:11–12). Although congregations might be involved in selecting their particular pastor, the authority to lead comes from God. Even with different models of leadership today, the word that best describes the church’s spiritual leaders is shepherd.

Apply the Word

This is Pastor Appreciation Month, as we noted in our “From the Editors” column. Prayerfully consider how you can encourage and support your pastor, whether by sending a letter or email, volunteering to serve on an understaffed ministry, or doing something special for the pastor’s family. This is a practical way to acknowledge their service as shepherds of God’s people.

Pray with Us

As we continue to pray for the staff of Moody Radio Chattanooga, you can encourage Brent Manion, David Morais, and Juanell Rice. We praise God for the fruit of their faithful service—changed lives of our listeners.
In the days before microphones and speakers, churches used sounding boards to amplify the voice of those who preached. A sounding board was a structure that was placed behind the pulpit to project the speaker’s voice to the congregation.

In today’s passage, Peter reminds us that our lives function as a sounding board for the gospel. Many people do not listen to sermons on a regular basis. Some have never even been to church. For those people, our lives can echo the good news and display the transforming power of Christ.

Peter uses several phrases drawn from Israel’s history to show how the church stands out from the rest of society. Among these are “chosen people,” “royal priesthood,” “holy nation,” and “a people belonging to God.” The church is the community of those who have received mercy from God. By our lives we “declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (v. 9).

In other words, we are preaching a sermon every day by the way that we live. Peter emphasizes two important characteristics of this message. First, it causes us to stand out from the crowd. Most of the images that Peter uses in these verses suggest that something should be different about the church. Their lifestyle is notable for its goodness. The gospel has made a change in their lives. Because they are empowered by the Holy Spirit, they are able to “abstain from evil desires” (v. 11).

Second, this visible sermon is lived in the context of ordinary life. Beginning with verse 13, Peter provides a picture of what this lifestyle looks like in a variety of contexts. Ordinary citizens, slaves, wives, and husbands can all amplify the truth of the gospel with their lives.

Apply the Word

Does our walk match our talk? Think about the particular contexts of your life, whether at home or at work or in your community. How are you different in those places because you are a follower of Jesus? Is your life an example of declaring praise to God? In your prayer time, ask the Lord to use your life as a testimony—a sermon—about His saving grace.

Pray with Us

Christine Gorz, vice president of Marketing Communications, leads several teams at Moody who share the message and the values of Moody Global Ministries with our constituents around the world. Christine will be grateful for your prayers today.

God’s Sounding Board

In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:16
Henry Varley was a British revivalist who ministered with D. L. Moody. Despite his own call, gifts, and service for God, Varley was a pastor who struggled with jealousy when members of his church were drawn to another pastor’s preaching. He wondered if God still wanted to use him, and questioned his effectiveness in preaching.

Thankfully for all of us, the effectiveness of the gospel message is not dependent on the skill of the preacher. God has used a variety of oratorical styles, personalities, and sermons to accomplish the work of proclaiming the Word.

Today’s passage tells of a time yet to come when angels will preach. This will take place during a time of great tribulation, when God’s judgment will take place on the earth. John’s vision depicts three angels with three related messages. The first angel appears flying in midair and proclaims “the eternal gospel” to people all over the earth (v. 6). His message includes a call to fear God and worship Him as the creator. The second angel announces the judgment of Babylon. The third angel preaches a message of warning for those who are tempted to worship the beast and receive his mark.

These three heavenly messengers might make us wonder why God ever entrusted the gospel to the church in the first place. We do not seem to be very effective. Wouldn’t angels have been a better choice? Angels can preach, but God did not make them the primary carriers of His message. He has entrusted the gospel to the church. One reason for this is to show that the power of the gospel comes from Him. We do not need the eloquence of an orator or the majesty of an angel to be effective. We only need the simple gospel and the power of God’s Spirit.

**Apply the Word**

You can become more confident when you share the gospel with others. One book that may help is entitled *Evangelism: How the Whole Church Speaks of Jesus* by J. Mack Stiles. Another is *Living Proof: Sharing the Gospel Naturally* by Jim Peterson. Remember that God can use any of us, empowering us by the Holy Spirit, to be effective communicators of the gospel.

**Pray with Us**

Frank Leber, vice president of Information Technology Services, and his staff facilitate the ministries of Moody with today’s computer technology. Please pray that God would give them the strength and wisdom for the everyday challenges at the workplace.
Have you ever wondered why some people respond differently to the same sermon? Sometimes when the sermon seems dull to us and we scan the congregation, we see that others are listening intently. On other occasions, we find ourselves deeply moved by the sermon but discover that others were not as affected by it. What are we to make of this difference?

At one point in His teaching Jesus warned His disciples: “Consider carefully what you hear” (Mark 4:24). Hearing does not always mean listening. In today’s passage the writer to the Hebrews points out that most of those who came out of Egypt with Moses did not benefit from his teaching. Even though they had a messenger and a message from God Himself, they did not benefit from it—because their hearing was not combined with faith (v. 2).

How do we know whether we are truly listening? The proof is in the heart, not the ear. Those who refused to listen in Moses’ day hardened their hearts. As a result, they were disobedient and missed out on God’s promise.

You should be grateful if you have the privilege to listen to a skilled preacher. But the experience of hearing a good sermon delivered well does not in itself mean that the teaching of the Word has been applied to your life. It is possible to enjoy the message and appreciate the skill with which it was delivered while missing the point.

We should evaluate how we hear the message. Are we listening with faith? Are we willing to submit to the searching scrutiny of God’s Word? Will we allow it to wound us where necessary?

Preaching is hard work, but so is listening. Without a receptive heart of faith even a preached sermon can go unheard.

**Apply the Word**

As we conclude this study of some of the greatest sermons in the Bible, reflect on your church’s ministry of preaching and its impact on you. Are the sermons based on the Bible? Is the gospel being preached clearly? How well are you listening? If your church’s sermons are not biblically based, consider trying a church which makes the Bible the focus of its preaching.

**Pray with Us**

In conclusion of our study of Bible sermons this month, let’s ask God by His Holy Spirit to help us live by the “kingdom principles” of the Sermon on the Mount. And may the Spirit continually open our eyes to Christ’s work in the world.
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