

If Anyone Speaks, Part One

1 Peter 4:11

Indianola, Texas, was a rising star along the Gulf Coast. Only ten years after the Civil War, the seaport town was growing steadily. Everywhere one could see churches, schools, theaters, billiard parlors, photography studios—and seafood!

But in 1875 a hurricane came along which devastated that town. Determined citizens began to rebuild, but when another hurricane arrived only eleven years later, the town was completely abandoned. Today there is only one road along the beach, with just a few buildings.

Just a few miles away lay another up-and-coming seaport, this one named Galveston. It had been called the New York of the Gulf. Business was booming and money was flowing. Citizens there began to wonder if a hurricane might devastate Galveston as it had Indianola. With so much at stake, the head of the Texas Office of the U. S. Weather Bureau wrote a column in the *Galveston News*, saying that the fear of Galveston experiencing a similar fate as Indianola was “simply an absurd delusion.” He and others believed that the geography of the Gulf of Mexico made it impossible for a hurricane to hit Galveston the way it had Indianola.

There was some discussion about building a seawall to protect the city from storm surges, but it was never done, since experts didn’t think it necessary. However, in 1900 a hurricane blasted through, killing about 8,000 people. They simply weren’t ready, because they had convinced themselves that such a tragedy could *never* happen *there*.

That Great Storm of 1900 convinced them otherwise, and in 1902 they began a massive building project. First they built a 15-foot seawall which would eventually run for 10 miles. Then they raised the entire level of the town, in some places as much as 15 feet. Buildings had to be raised so sand could be placed under them. It was a colossal undertaking, but one they were all too happy to do and pay for to avoid another devastating tragedy such as the Great Storm of 1900.

They had been convinced that a storm like that couldn’t happen, but when it did, they prepared for it. When another, more powerful hurricane struck Galveston in 1915, only eight people died, and the seawall and raised elevation were given as the reason.

What concerns me about these days in which we live is that though the Bible tells us there will be terrible times in the last days, there are so many people who live as though it couldn't possibly happen here. Other places in the world, perhaps, but never here. Like the dear people in Galveston in the face of a hurricane, we have convinced ourselves that we are somehow immune from persecution as followers of Christ.

When Peter wrote his first letter, he and his readers were facing some terrible times of persecution and difficulty. In the face of that, Peter firmly believed that Jesus was returning soon. Thousands of years have come and gone since Peter wrote these words, and we today are much closer to the return of Christ than Peter was! When Peter writes, "*The end of all things is near,*" in verse seven and then proceeds to instruct his readers as to how they should conduct themselves, we need to sit up and pay attention.

If anyone ever needed to prepare for the return of Christ, we Christians living in these days certainly do. 1 Peter 4:11 must be understood in light of the expectation that the return of Christ is near. It begins with these words, "*If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God.*" So, if we really want to hear what God is saying, and serve Him in the best possible way, we should pay attention to this verse, because it tells us some very important things.

1 **Whoever shares God's Word must be careful about what he says and how he says it.**

As incredible as it may sound, it is possible for a human being in our day to speak for God! It is possible, but it is not simple. God does not visit your pastor or any other pastor at a set time on Sunday morning and tell him exactly what to say. The message does not arrive in the mail. It is not pulled from a book. Instead the process of receiving God's message for a particular congregation at a particular time is sometimes agonizing, sometimes delightful, sometimes extremely difficult, sometimes extremely easy. It always requires prayer. It always requires study. It always requires a heart right with God. It always requires an enormous quantity of uninterrupted time in solitude.

Preaching has been called an "exquisite agony" (*Preaching to Convince, James D. Berkeley, editor. A Leadership/Word Book, 1986, p. 9*). It is just that. It is exquisite because of the sense that overwhelms most preachers on a regular basis, that of knowing that the sermon is

the result of the preacher's communion with God. But it is agony because that message does not always come easily. It is agony because the message is not always pleasant to preach, nor pleasant to hear. It is agony because sometimes the faithful preacher finds himself paying the price of faithfulness at the hands of those who did not want to hear God speaking to them in the first place.

In fact, Paul recognized this when he wrote the church at Corinth, "*To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life*" (2 Corinthians 2:16). Some will recognize the message as being a word from God and receive it gladly. Others will not. Years ago I heard someone point out that John the Baptist's message in the wilderness was not, "Smile! God loves you!" Jeremiah was not thrown into a miry pit for preaching, "I'm OK; you're OK!" And Noah's message from the steps of the ark was not, "Something GOOD is going to happen to you!"

It is a mystery why Almighty God should choose to use flawed humans as avenues through which His Word is shared with His people, but He does. But because we are flawed, preachers should always take extra care to make sure that the message they have prepared is the one which came from God. It is too important a task to say just anything that comes to mind. Preaching is one man communicating God's truth to others. It is truth lived out in the preacher's personal life and filtered through his personality as he stands to preach. It should always be a partnership between the preacher and Almighty God.

There is one major problem with this divine/human partnership. Pastors are human just like anyone else, and occasionally the pressures of his own life will distort the message from God. For that reason, the one who dares to preach must make sure that he has not been slack in attempting to push aside all the distractions and turmoil which are part of any person's life, in order that he might at least hear the voice of God regarding the message for that day. Why? Because God's Word plainly says, "*If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God.*"

One pastor of a large church, a man of great integrity in my opinion, stepped up to the pulpit one Sunday morning and said, "You look to me for God's message. I have struggled all week, and God has given me no message. Therefore, let us stand and be dismissed." That pastor was almost thrown out of his church. He had done what was honest, but many people were outraged. Many had come that day with

friends in tow, not to hear a message from God, but to hear their pastor. When he didn't perform according to their expectations, they were angry.

The president of one of our seminaries remarked once, "When I was a pastor, Sunday would come and I've have something to say, but then there were other Sundays when I'd have to say something. There's a world of difference between the two."

But really now, if preaching is actually the proclamation of a message from God for a particular group of people, then it must never be done flippantly or half-heartedly. The preaching event is too serious for that, even though most people in our day no longer comprehend the importance of it. Yes, I believe preaching to be important, not just because I am a preacher, but because Jesus obviously believed in its importance. The one who approaches the pulpit is standing between God and man, and sometimes it is a very frightening place to be. The preacher is trying to build a bridge between the truth of the eternal Word and the reality of Now.

That objective is not always accomplished, to be sure. William Barclay has observed that preaching is either like fireworks or dynamite. They both make noise, but fireworks amuse while dynamite accomplishes a purpose. When a sermon is only fireworks, it is nothing more than a spiritual pep talk, or a lecture on the Bible. When a sermon is dynamite, it is because the one doing the preaching and the ones doing the hearing have joined together in a common purpose: hearing the voice of God speaking to contemporary life.

I admit that any preacher who claims to be speaking the very words of God may be flirting with pride and conceit, or at least he runs the risk of having people misunderstand his motives. Yet that is exactly what the preacher is called to do—speak the very words of God. Sometimes that can be misunderstood by the people he's trying to reach. One woman ran up to her pastor at the close of a service and gushed, "Pastor, that sermon was absolutely wonderful!" She went on for a moment or two longer about how brilliant the sermon was. The pastor soaked all this in before responding, "It wasn't me; it was the Lord." The woman replied, "Oh, it wasn't *that* good!"

The best sermons speak to us at the point where we need to be changed the most. The best sermon I ever heard was not one I preached, nor one I even remember. It was the one that challenged me to give my heart to Christ, preached by an 18-year

old. A Scottish lady who sold fruit for a living heard her pastor preach on Sunday. Later in the week when she saw him on the street, she told him what a good sermon he had delivered. The pastor knew her well, and asked her, “If it was so good, what was it about?” The fruit peddler replied, “I don’t remember, but afterwards I went home and took the false bottom out of my fruit basket.”

I’ve told you this story before. Phillips Brooks was a great American preacher who died a hundred years ago. He is best known by us today as the author of the Christmas Carol, “*O Little Town of Bethlehem.*” He so influenced the lives of people through his sermons that when he died, a statue was erected in his honor. That statue depicts Brooks with a Bible in his hand, with the figure of Christ standing behind him with a hand on his shoulder.

Will you join me in praying that that statute might become more and more representative of my preaching ministry? Will you join me in praying that, as we approach the return of Christ, there might be a sense of urgency in my preaching, that I might truly preach “*as one speaking the very words of God*”?

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