

Text: Acts 17:16-34  
Intended audience: Unbelievers & Christians  
Topic: Evangelism  
Theme: The results of evangelism  
My purpose for this message: To encourage believers to evangelize faithfully and let the outcome with God.  
Delivered: August 22, 2004 @ KEFC

[Book Thesis: The Power of God Spreads the Gospel]

## “The Results”

### [Lessons on Evangelism, part 3]

Getting good results is what most of us are after: if we're homeowners we check references and price to select a contractor that will do a good job. Business owners track down previous employers and asks hard questions to get the best employee. Students cram 'til late at night to get a good grade on the exam. Results matter to most of us.

So you probably wouldn't hire me to do your landscaping. I have dreams of turning our backyard into a park someday. Betty and I took the Stauffers of Kissel Hill Pond Tour this summer, visiting 6 homes with exquisite ponds—even waterfalls, and saw beautiful lawns, sprinkled with trees and perennials.

But something stands in the way of our own backyard park: my thumb is not green. I planted 6 trees in our yard. Despite my efforts, 3 of them are still alive. Someone said, “If at first you don't succeed..., failure may be your thing.” I kill trees in ways I didn't know was possible. I planted a sweetgum tree whose roots kept growing in a circle like they had been in the pot, and eventually tried to root themselves in the sky and died!

Don't hire me if you're looking for results. And you are. And I am. Corporations, civic groups and parents, everybody looks for results. Our motto is “Do what works.” Even churches.

If your bottom line is money—or landscaping, perhaps that's how it needs to be. If your bottom line is disciples, I'm quite sure that's *not* how it should be when it comes to evangelism. Let's talk about that. Find Acts 17:16-34.

This is our final sermon on evangelism from this chapter. I want to talk with you next week yet about evangelism, but this is the last from this chapter. We've talked about the content of our message (Jesus died and rose again to save sinners who call on Him), about the people we *contact* with our message (people we have a passion for, people we're like, and taking the opportunities we're given), and today we want to talk about the question of good results in evangelism—people coming to Christ. READ. PRAY.

When I refer to evangelism, I am talking about simply telling someone—or some people, about Jesus. I make no distinction between you or me doing it, between you and the missionary doing it, no distinction between an audience of one and an audience of thousands.

### **Is evangelism any good if the results are bad?**

Paul's stay in Athens lasted about 3-4 weeks. He had preached regularly in the synagogues, in the marketplace, and once at the Areopagus. He had preached to Jews, Jehovah-worshipping Gentiles, philosophers and wannabe philosophers, and city council members. And here are the results. REREAD vv.33-34. A “few men” [which should probably read “a few people”]: Dionysius—a council member, and a woman named

Damaris, + a number of others. Maybe 5, or 8. Not many. Based on market and sales analysis, Paul's effort in Athens was a dismal failure. Billy Graham would have been devastated. D.L. Moody would have moved on. Paul's boss should have fired him or at least chastened him. This is not efficient. Sometimes people contact missions organizations to find out where they can give their money to get the most "bang for their buck." If one ministry generally produces a handful of converts while another one produces dozens in a week, "send my money to the one that produces dozens."

The year before I was born, Samuel Zwemer died. In the late 1800's, he crossed the Atlantic to minister to Muslims. For 39 years, he lived and ministered to Bin-Laden's people in Saudi Arabia, Bahrein, and Egypt. He wrote hundreds of tracts, preached many sermons, and had many individual conversations with Islam's followers. He returned to the States for good in 1939 to teach at Princeton Theological seminary. For 39 years of work, he left in the Middle East less than... a dozen converts. About 1 Christian every 4 years.

Was he a failure because he had so few converts? Was Paul a failure in Athens? Was *Jesus* a failure in his hometown of Nazareth? Results were poor for each man. Graded by capitalism, either the man or his evangelistic method was a failure. But God grades differently because of two facts:

### 1. *God saves people*

You never saved anyone, nor did I. God does the saving. Strictly speaking, we *never* succeed in evangelism. Because what we call success—someone coming to Christ after we tell him/her about Jesus—is actually God's work; his success. I mean, did Jesus say "No one can come to me unless someone does a really good job explaining the gospel to him first"? No. What he *did* say was, "No one comes to me unless the Father draws him." No matter how cold you have your Evangelism Explosion questions, no matter how well you can draw the bridge illustration, or how well I navigate the Romans Road, in the final analysis, it's God who saves.

Look at 1 Cor.3:5-6. God assigns certain people certain tasks in evangelism. READ. "I planted the gospel seed among you," Paul explained, "Apollos watered it," but—v.6, God made it grow. V. 7, *So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.*

So, if it's actually *God* who does the saving, then we should tread softly in concluding much about whether *we've* been a success or not; based on whether or not *we've* gotten results. Because whether we're evaluating a personal conversation with cousin Bennie about Christ, or an outreach our whole church tried in the community, as Rom.9:16 reminds us, ultimately, salvation does not depend on a person's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. True of both the person hearing the gospel *and* the one sharing it.

This raises the issue of prayer: if we are but tools in the hand of God—the One who saves, then perhaps the most valuable effort to be put forth in evangelism, is prayer. Perhaps *it* matters more than our tactics, choice of Bible verses, choice of the *right* moment, and so on. And perhaps it is prayerlessness that better explains our lack of results than what we most often blame.

## 2. Delayed results are still results

The second fact that seriously influences how God might grade our evangelistic efforts, is that *delayed* results, are still results. Not having an instant decision tells us nothing about the ultimate effect of our witness. If you talk to Teri about Christ on Monday but she doesn't become a Christian for another 2 years, can you by Tuesday conclude that there were no results? Of course not. Some results *are* instant, but most aren't.

Research suggests that for every person who comes to repentance and faith, he/she has heard the gospel 7 times. Yours may only be the first telling, or the fifth. Yet each is as important as the 7<sup>th</sup> because God uses each one as a sort of "divine step" up the stairs to the cross. Yet how often the people who shared the gospel with that person the 1<sup>st</sup> through the 6<sup>th</sup> time, conclude that they failed.

[Careful: some of us want to be able to say, "I led so and so to Christ." That distorts our evaluation of spiritual impact. In those cases, evangelism becomes a spiritual feather in my cap—if I am actually able to lead them into repentance and surrender. But as Paul reminded us in 1 Cor. 3, there's no room for human ego in evangelism; because it's God's work. We're out for *His* glory, and for the other person's rescue.]

Friday night I went to see a used washer and dryer I was trying to buy for my kids. Our daughter and son-in-law are moving to Lancaster this week [YEAH!] and need some appliances. I'm a bargain hunter so I was in my element. When I spoke to the guy on the phone, he told me he was going through a divorce and I thought perhaps God would open the door for a conversation about more than Maytags. He did.

For an hour and a half, we spoke of his divorce after 24 years of marriage, the hole in his heart, of his strict Catholic upbringing, of guitars, and Jesus. In between gulps of his beer, 3 times he asked me, "Are you supposed to be here?" I told him about Eph.1:11 that says God does everything in accordance with his plan. When I saw that the beers were confusing things too much, and that his wavelength was drifting too deliberately from the gospel, I knew it was time to go.

No results, right? He didn't repent and put faith in Christ. But maybe, just maybe, I was one of those steps on the way to the cross. He has my card, a number to call. *Delayed* results are still results. But what if I never know what happened? Don't need to. This is God's accounting. God is grading, and God is overseeing the rescue of men. And He *finishes* what He starts!

### **Concl:**

Whether you are here at the Ministry Center or at the Gate, there are two vases in the front: one contains silk red roses, and the other contains white roses. This is how we observe how God is using us to tell people about Jesus. If on Friday you get to talk about Christ to someone in your math class, on Sunday, you place a red rose (they're provided for you), in this vase or the one at the Gate. If that same person surrenders her life to Christ, you place a white rose in the vase.

Each year we count up the number of each to see how good God has been, and how faithful *we* have been. The red ones reveal our faithfulness for this is what God asks us to do: be my witnesses everywhere. The white ones say *nothing* about us: not about our skill, about our interest, not about our intelligence. Rather, they say how good God has been, for it is *He* who takes our words, and through them changes a heart for all eternity.

**PRAYER:**

Father, it is the year of jubilee and the fields around us are ripe. Streaking from your heart is your salvation to mankind:

- As in the days of Moses, You turn people's hearts from wrong to right.
- As in the vision of Ezekiel, You turn the dry bones of lost people to life.
- As at the end of David's day, you raise a temple of praise to Your glory. To You who save, You who deliver You, who gets results, we glorify You and Your Son, Amen!